Smith: First of all, obviously, thank you for doing this.

The afternoon of August 8th, 1974 was your confirmation hearing. How did that come about? How did the offer of the Council of Economic Advisors come about and what is the Council of Economic Advisors?

Greenspan: Well, let me start with telling you what the Council of Economic Advisors is. It’s a very small economic consulting operation with one client, the President of the United States. And its power is wholly proportional to the extent to which the President has relationships with the chairman of that council.

During the years of, say, Walter Heller and even Herb Stein, there were close relationships with the president. I was fortunate to have a very close relationship with Gerald Ford so our organization had a lot more influence for a lot of the reasons than I thought was generally historically the case.

Herb Stein, who had been my predecessor, had to leave for some reasons while the Nixon administration was in its last days. I recall getting a call from Bill Simon, then Treasury Secretary, saying that, “Herb was leaving and it was the consensus of those of us down here that you’re the only one that could possibly replace him.” And I said, “Bill, I purposely did not choose to take a position in the White House because I’m a private sector person and I much prefer to be in the private sector. I can give you several suggestions for that and I would suggest you look elsewhere.” And I did indeed give him several suggestions and I thought I was out of the loop. A couple of weeks later, he calls back and he says that, “We’ve given this considerable thought and it’s the conclusion of Arthur Burns and myself and the president” (which was then Richard Nixon) that I was the only credible source. I said, “Bill, I really can’t.” And that was the end of that conversation.

Smith: And Arthur Burns at this point was?
Greenspan: He was the next call. Arthur Burns then calls me with this, “Harrumph, harrumph, harrumph.” You have to understand that Arthur Burns had a very significant role in my life in the sense that I met him first in 1950 when he was on the faculty of political science in Columbia University where I was enrolled in graduate classes. I got to be very appreciative of his insights and the like, and in subsequent years we kept in touch as he went into government and out of government. And he and his wife and I often would get together for dinner at times and the like. And so there was a sense, a family relationship there, in which, when Arthur Burns spoke, “Yes, sir,” I would listen.

So he called me immediately after I turned down Bill the second time and he said, “Alan, you don’t understand. You’re not going to be working for Richard Nixon, you’re going to be working for the United States. We have very serious problems as you well of course know with the president and the functioning of government, and with all the political problems that exist. The country must run and it needs to have oversight of the economic system wholly independently of what’s going on in the rest of the world and in the White House and in the political system.” He said, “You’ve got to come down because we definitely do need you.”

So I said, “Arthur, really, I’m having great difficulty because I’m doing very well in the private sector. I’m enjoying immensely what I’m doing, my business is expanding.” And he says, “Well, would you at least speak to Al Haig?” So I said, “Of course, I’ll speak to Al Haig.” And so Al, maybe a day later or so, calls me up and says, “Could you come down and see me at Key Biscayne?” I said, “Alright.” The next day or the next day when I said I’d be going, one of the – I’ve forgotten what it is – but one of the larger private planes that were turned into the sort of VIP section which now runs out of Andrews Air Force Base was sent up to meet at La Guardia Airport with a steward, pilots, and the navigator. I mean it’s like all the pomp that you can imagine was set up for me, a single passenger, to fly down. I got on the plane and I said, “Now, seriously, what do you have in mind here?” I knew obviously what they were doing. So I met with Al and he said to me –
Smith: Can you put a rough timeframe on this? Was this July or—

Greenspan: It would be several weeks before Nixon resigned, but clearly he was in serious difficulty and I believe Gerald Ford was then Vice President at that point, obviously. And I get down and I see Al, whom I’d known over the years for many relationships which we had, and I said, “You know, I really have no interest.” And I said, “Look, Al, let’s understand what you’re dealing with here. If I had been in the administration when wage and price controls were set up in August of 1971, I would’ve felt the necessity of resigning. Not in indignation essentially in this ethical or moralistic sense, but I don’t know how that economy runs. I don’t know what you do and I wouldn’t be able to add very much to economic intonation.” And I said, “If that’s the way this administration is going to behave, I would feel very uncomfortable and I’m telling you, it’s very likely you’ll be confronted with a resignation from me if I were to come down in very short order.”

Then Al said, “Look, you would be a significant player in such decisions and, as far as we’re concerned, we’re willing to take the risk that you’ll quit.” I said, “Let me think about it.” I knew I had been weakened immensely and the main force there was Arthur Burns. I mean, Al was relevant. Before I left, he said, “Would you like to see the old man?” I said, “No, that’s not necessary. There’s nothing that he can say to me that’s going to make any difference” and one does not like to turn down the president of the United States, I just as soon not be in that position.

So I go home and I think about it and I called about two or three days later. I called Al back and I said, “I will agree to come down as an interim pending your ability to replace me in short order. I will be taking out a one month lease and, figuratively and maybe not so figuratively, I will have my luggage near the door ready to go,” because one of the reasons you don’t leave things, is it causes a lot of – I’m planning for a quick exit. He said, “Fine.” And they put my name up for nomination to the Senate and, I believe, August the 8th was my hearing. And August the 8th, of course, was a very famous day.

Smith: During those last days, to what extent even implicitly could you factor in the increasing likelihood that you might never be working for Richard Nixon?
Greenspan: I didn’t, because the smoking gun had not yet been discovered. It looked as though he was going to just struggle his way through because I knew that it is a very big deal to have a president resign. Knowing American history, that would utterly be unprecedented. And there were far more potential cases of where presidents were utterly dysfunctional and they stayed around for awhile. So it never quite entered my mind, but largely because I thought that my tenure there was going to be shorter than Richard Nixon’s. So that issue didn’t come up.

When I was called up before the Senate Banking Committee, I remember Bill Proxmire, who was then chair said, “It’s understood that the President is planning to resign today and this hearing may in fact be wholly moot.” I said, “I understand that.” I went through the hearing. It was very interesting in the sense that Proxmire and I disagreed on lots of things. I remember basically that, before the Committee, there were two votes potentially against me even though it might be moot, but they were very complimentary in the sense that Proxmire said, “I wouldn’t vote against you if you weren’t so intelligent. What we don’t want with the President is an effective sitting chair.” And Joe Biden said very much the same thing.

So, I was sort of in an odd position where I was being complimented in a very adverse way and the reason is that I just stuck to my guns. I could answer all of their questions. I obviously knew all of the subject matter exceptionally well because that was really my day-to-day operation. Essentially, moving from my offices in New York to chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors gave me a different boss, gave me a different geography, gave me a different environment, but the work was scarcely different. What I did at the CEA was almost 85 percent what I would’ve done in my private business. So that wasn’t a big transition there.

In any event, what occurred subsequent of course was Nixon resigned and Ford was sworn in as president. I’m told that Don Rumsfeld, who I had worked with periodically on occasion, had recommended to Ford that he essentially renew my nomination for chairman of the CEA. And indeed I’ve forgotten, but probably before then, when he was still vice president, Ford
asked, when I had been discussed as being the CEA chairman, asked me to come by and see him and we spent for the first time, an hour together. I’d never met him before and I found him really quite extraordinarily interesting and a remarkably calm personality for a politician and we got along well.

When the issue came up of my coming down to work with Gerald Ford, it was a wholly different set of circumstances and a wholly different view because I didn’t go to the White House in 1969. I had seen Nixon because I worked with him fairly closely in the campaign and I felt very uncomfortable with him. He was really an extraordinarily intelligent person. In fact, when you look strictly at IQ, Bill Clinton and Richard Nixon were, as far as I could judge, at the top, but there was an odd psychology there which I didn’t quite grasp and made me very uncomfortable. Ford was very different. Ford was open, straight, never varied as long as I knew him. And, as I’ve said on innumerable occasions, I’ve spent 20 years in government, two and a half years at CEA and eighteen and a half years at the Fed, and Gerald Ford is my favorite president for many, many reasons. The irony is that some of them are those reasons which he would have had very considerable difficulty being elected president on his own.

Smith: You mentioned the calmness, I think the critics would equate that with colorlessness. I mean that there’s an almost condescending use of the word ‘decent’ as if somehow being ‘decent’ in a Midwestern sense is a euphemism for lack of sophistication, intellectual or otherwise. In some ways his virtues were turned into –

Greenspan: I think that is blatantly condescending and utterly misplaced. Let me give you an example which I think is interesting. I would watch Ford dealing with Henry Kissinger who is, in himself, very interesting in many respects. Ford would in no way conceive himself as intellectually superior to Kissinger nor have an insight into global forces the way Henry has evolved over the years and still does. Yet there was never any question that Gerald Ford was president and Henry Kissinger was not. And it wasn’t handled in a way that “Henry, you haven’t been elected” surly. He would just basically calmly say, “Henry, I see where you’re coming from, but it doesn’t strike me just right. I
think we ought to be going in a somewhat different direction…” and he’d say a few words. “Yes, Mr. President.” And it was very interesting, in that that there was never any tension which in any way implied that there was an inferiority complex. So what you saw in Gerald Ford is a psychology which, I hate to use the word ‘normal’, but it’s as close as to what one would term ‘optimum human psychology’ in the sense there were very few hang-ups.

Smith: David Broder famously said he was the least psychotic president he’s ever known.

Greenspan: That’s faint praise indeed.

Smith: No, it is, especially when you consider the competition.

You got there and inflation was the immediate dragon that needed to be slayed, which of course gave rise to Whip Inflation Now. What was the origin of that and what was your immediate reaction to that campaign?

Greenspan: Well, I arrived at my desk in the old Executive Office Building two or three weeks after the administration was in place. Herb Stein actually spent a couple of weeks as chairman of Gerald Ford’s CEA. So I arrive and one of the very first meetings I get called into – I think it was in the Roosevelt Room – and I’m sitting there in the back of the room along with maybe 20 or 30 other people when this plan, of which there had already had several discussions, and was already being developed, I’d never heard of it before. I’m sitting there, I’m saying, “Oh, my God, what do they have in mind here?”

What the problem was is that they were setting themselves up for failure. And so all I could do in that meeting was to suggest a few obvious problems which were going to arise if you induced somebody “voluntarily” to hold their prices. For example, cotton fabric manufacturers, they could do that only so long as the price of cotton didn’t go up. And no one was suggesting that farm products were in any way being constrained by this voluntary price movement, which is essentially what it was. And I suggested, “Mr. President you’re going to have to be aware that there’s an awful lot of small textile manufacturers, people who would very much like to join in to your very desirable approach against inflation, they may not be able to. And that as
time goes on and half the economy is voluntarily price frozen and the other half is not, the system will break down and I think that we have to be very careful about that occurring. Well, Whip Inflation Now got undermined not by its own internal problems but by inflation becoming rapidly a nonexistent issue as the economy began to gather negative steam, if I may put it that way.

Smith: I’m fascinated, because I think you wrote that the whole WIN campaign actually originated in the speechwriters’ shop in the White House, which is revealing in and of itself.

Greenspan: Yes, indeed. I learned later that the origin was how can Gerald Ford be perceived as being essentially anti-inflationary, show basic concern about the nature of the problem, and words were put together without any notion of whether they applied to reality or not and it was a very good speech. The only problem was that it didn’t reflect any practical, conceivable policy that could be implemented. And, fortunately, it died and perhaps the last remnant that I have of it is some Whip Inflation Now button which I suspect may be worth a lot of money at this stage.

Smith: That raises a broader question. It’s sort of, and I don’t mean to pick on Bob Hartmann, but Bob Hartmann in some ways became the face of this notion that Ford, having spent a lifetime on Capitol Hill, came into the White House with pretty much a congressional mindset. [He] originally wanted to organize the Oval Office - the spokes of the wheel - which has the feel of a congressional office. Related to that was this complaint that he was surrounded by people from Grand Rapids. How much of that was relevant? And how much do you have a sense that he outgrew some of that during the two and a half years that he was president?

Greenspan: Oh, that was inevitable. You must remember that Bob Hartmann, I presume, wrote that wonderful line “Our national nightmare is over.” Now, that was so significant a phrase and the way he wrote was so effective in certain respects that it was natural for Ford, in my judgment, to lean on Bob to approach this. Now, the difficulty with it is that he did not have a back-up policy, it was a rhetorical policy, basically, and rhetorical policies are great if you don’t have to implement them. They’re wonderful for campaigns. The one thing about a
campaign is that reality need not interfere with what you're saying. And I think there was still that element in there.

What happened over the years, inevitably, as issues became more and more complex, and the focus of the Grand Rapids coterie, which had some very good people in it, was a local type of focus on the types of issues which president of the United States goes far beyond. It was inevitable that he would have many, many individuals which would gradually augment and, in many cases, supercede the congressional structure or even the Minority Leader structure that he had on the Hill.

Smith: What was the Economic Policy Board?

Greenspan: The Economic Policy Board was a formal means that was set up by President Ford to organize the flow of information that coordinated and presented options to the president. My recollection is that Bill Simon was chairman as Secretary of the Treasury. It included Roy Ash, it included me. Arthur Burns was a visitor, so to speak, and Arthur used to say to me, “When you think the agenda is interesting, or will be interesting to me, let me know and I will come.”

He was advised of every meeting but he didn’t choose to show up at all of them. And it included all those cabinet secretaries who had some form or other of an economic interest. Bill Siedman, obviously of Grand Rapids, was the executive director of the board, meaning, essentially, the coordinator of policy under the chairman, which was Bill Simon.

The group met very often, filtered all various different types of recommendations coming down from the Hill, coming from other places, and essentially trying to debate within our group ideally to present the president with a series of options on a lot of policies. But we also thought it was useful, when there was essentially consensus within our group to say that, “This we think, Mr. President, that we may be giving you two or three different options, but we all strongly believe this is the correct thing to do.”

The reason that was important was that for lots of reasons the general economic philosophy of the Economic Policy Board closely approximated
that of the president. And the important thing about economic policy is that every economist has got a fundamental view as to the way the world works. The vast proportion of us believe the same thing about many things like free trade, free prices. The vast proportion of economists are against price control and against protectionism, irrespective of whether they’re Republican, Democrats, or anybody else.

Ford’s general position was largely as a free trader, believing in market competition and economic freedom, and the Economic Policy Board had very much that same overall philosophy. It meant that the differences amongst us were not on the fundamental goals, but on the tactical implementation of specific strategies and it, therefore, was useful for us to say to the president, basically that, “We know your philosophy, we know where you want to go, we know various things, and while there are alternate ways of going there, this is the best.” And it worked rather well. In fact there was only really one major fundamental difference within the policy board which I will always remember.

That was, the issue came up about whether or not the United States should sell its gold. Now, the reason that was important is that interest rates were relatively high at that point. Gold has got zero interest on it, and indeed, it’s got a carrying cost, so really it’s a negative interest. So, the US Treasury was foregoing a very substantial amount of revenue by basically holding non-interest bearing assets rather than interest bearing assets. Now, Bill was a strong advocate in getting rid of most of our gold stock. Arthur Burns was absolutely adamant in the other direction. As a central banker, his essential view is that gold is and was the final means of payment.

I mean, it was always evident, for example, that in 1944, for example, Germany could not purchase goods outside of Germany unless payment was made in gold. So, gold always sat there as, elitist as it is today, that ultimate means of payment. The board could not come together on that. And with Bill Simon and Arthur Burns going at each other, the rest of us sort of sat back and were amused. So, Ford sat in on that meeting and –

Smith: With the two of them haggling this—
Greenspan: With the two of them arguing together and I just sat there and I sort of like—

Smith: Neither one of them was exactly a shrinking violet.

Greenspan: Hardly. And they’re very good friends, but they went on each other with remarkable ferocity. And I sat bemused, saying, “The poor president, he can’t conceivably understand what these guys are talking about,” in part because I’m not overly certain that either one of them knows what they’re talking about fully. So, the meeting’s adjourned, I go back to my office, I’m sitting there for about two minutes and the phone rings and it’s the president’s secretary saying, “Could you come back to the Oval Office?” I said, “Certainly.”

So, I go back there, I walk in and Ford says to me, “What was that all about?” And I said, “Mr. President, you are just seeing a really major important economic issue of profound significance being debated in front of you. The problem is that no one knows for sure that, if you sold off the gold supply, what would happen. That you would get increased revenues, that is a factually accurate statement. But what the cost of that is, and the more fundamental aspects of what a market economy is, and its stability, and the willingness of people to accept the currency, is an unknown factor. Bill Simon cannot in truth say it has no effect and Arthur Burns cannot say in truth it has a huge effect.

“My own judgment,” as I said to him, “is probably it’s too high a risk to take. Frankly, if you want my advice, I’d forget the conversation.” And we still own precisely the same amount of gold today with a few little wrinkles here and there that we did back then. Nobody in the White House or, as far as I can judge, in government in the United States has really seriously thought about selling our gold stock. And indeed, when the Europeans in recent years - 1990s for example - decided that for exactly the same reason they’re going to sell off their gold stock, they did.

But even though we were a member of the G-10, which is the organization whose board are on the board of the Bankers for International Settlements - which is the vehicle which coordinated the gold sales - I very explicitly, as a
board member, opted out for the United States. In other words, I actually at one point was the host of the meeting in which that was discussed and I essentially said the United States will not participate in these gold sales. And we didn’t. And that’s the only other time I recall it coming up in this country.

Smith: Now, what does this say about Bill Simon?

Greenspan: Well, Bill Simon was a very strong supporter of Milton Friedman at the time. As I recall, Milton had very much similar views and others had similar views. It gets down to an issue where you have to make a judgment, as we are indeed observing today - which is December in 2008 - we’re creating a huge amount of fiat money claims and in a sense doing something which the gold standard would not have enabled anyone to do. But we are doing it, at least at this point, creating huge amount of dollars without a significant impact on inflation or very much on the exchange rate as well. That’s the type of view that I believe Bill Simon thought of, but it’s now at a point in the discussions today where it’s a very crucial unknown issue, and it is reminiscent very much on a much larger scale clearly of the discussions that that economic policy board had on that particular extraordinary day.

Smith: But the story is implicit in what you’ve already said about Henry Kissinger and now about Bill Simon and Arthur Burns, that President Ford was comfortable with, for lack of a better word, a vigorous back and forth conducted by people of stellar IQ and significant ego.

Greenspan: Unquestionably. I mean, I agreed probably, I would say probably, with 98 percent of Bill Simon’s views. We’re very close in that regard. Actually less with Arthur Burns, because remember he was in favor of incomes policies, prior to the imposition of wage and price controls by President Nixon. Indeed I’m a private citizen, and Nixon at the time, through Chuck Colson, who called me and said, “The president would like you to talk to Arthur Burns about this.” I said, “Chuck, the president does have a telephone, does he not? He knows Arthur’s number.” And he says, “He’s not speaking to Arthur.” So it’s very interesting, but what was very attractive about that group of people was we all held the same views. I mean, how the world works, except on this
particular issue, it was a very effective operation and Ford was clearly president of the United States in those discussions.

Smith: Let me ask you, just so we get it on the record: what was the fund of economic knowledge and economic assumptions that he brought with him from those 25 years on Capitol Hill?

Greenspan: He had a lot of related economic issues. He was on the House Appropriations Committee, and very knowledgeable about the federal budget over all that period. You cannot become knowledgeable about the federal budget unless you know a good deal about how the American economy works. And so, he was subject through various hearings, through all sundry types of things, that he got a very practical education on how the American economy functions. And, in that regard, he was remarkably knowledgeable about lots of things. And you could teach him because he had an underlying set of relationships where he could draw analogies and understand how things work, and he did grow in knowledge very clearly through the period.

Smith: I’m thinking, coming from Michigan and of course the auto industry, wasn’t there an approach initially from, was it Chrysler, that not long after the whole New York City business, wasn’t there an approach from the auto industry about government loan guarantees that were initially turned down?

Greenspan: Well, remember, Chrysler did get a loan.

Smith: Eventually they did. Yeah.

Greenspan: My recollection is that – I forgot what the year was, it not during the Ford administration – I think it was subsequent to that.

Smith: I know the loan guarantee came during the Carter years, but I thought that there was an initial approach from Detroit toward the end of the Ford years.

Greenspan: I don’t recall that.

Smith: Let me ask you, you sort of had this whipsaw. You come into office and inflation is clearly a significant and growing menace and yet within a matter of months you almost have to turn on a dime to confront radically rising
unemployment. Was there a moment when it sort of dawned on you and/or the president that you were fighting a multi-front war?

Greenspan: Oh, indeed. One thing I recall is that you could see that the economy was weakening in the latter part of 1974, but it didn’t appear as though there were large inventory accumulations, which is usually what then was a critical triggering point. Then the Department of Commerce revised its numbers and I said, “Oh, my God, we have a problem.” At the same time, the economy was beginning to sag and I and the Economic Policy Board were telling the president that things were in the process of changing fairly rapidly.

Smith: How did you explain that change?

Greenspan: Well, basically, that the underlying forces of demand had been essentially suppressed by rising inflation. One thing about inflation is, people pull back when they’re confronted with rising prices. They save more, they’re uncertain. And that fairly significant inflation - which incidentally comes in part out of the aftermath of wage and price controls - that was beginning to grip the economy and you could see the erosion going on, but it wasn’t rapid. And so, we were communicating to the president and in writing my book I had to go back and look at some of the documents and it was there, we were saying that things are beginning to deteriorate and that it wasn’t a point in which I recall when somebody said, “Whip Inflation Now has now been rescinded.” It sort of gradually died from lack of mention.

And so it faded away and we were confronted with essentially what was a very tricky State of the Union message as we were coming up to 1975. And, unlike what you have today, where your word processors or such that you can change the State of the Union in the last twenty seconds, back then, we were still cut and paste and type, you had those old things called typewriters. And the speech continuously got revised, revised, and revised and by the end of it, I thought that he delivered a really thoughtful speech.

Smith: Remember, he did something no president before or since has ever dared to do. He said, “The State of the Union is not good.”
Greenspan: Precisely. And, strangely, it was so normal for Ford to be saying that. It wasn’t the “Oh, my God,” that he would say otherwise sounded utterly improbable and inappropriate. I’ve always said that there was sort of a Mayaguez incident type view that, in other words, instead of the president – remember when, I recall visibly because I was there, basically, Brent Scowcroft, I think he was then the National Security Advisor, came into an economic meeting and had handed a piece of paper to the president. He looked at it and he handed it back to Brent and says, “Just make sure that we don’t shoot first.” And I’m saying, “Now, what in the world was that?” Subsequently, I obviously learned that that was the first note that he’d been told that Mayaguez had been essentially boarded. I said, “You know, that was pretty, like, ____________ like your wife just called and said that dinner reservations have been changed.” And I had that same attitude with respect to: the economy is running up against potential significant problems and we’re likely to see some pretty awful early months of 1975.

Smith: Originally there was, by modern standards, a relatively modest tax cut that had been proposed by the administration. How did that evolve? I assume you came on and as the problem increasingly came to be defined as unemployment rather than inflation, presumably you were under growing political pressure to respond with Keynesian stimulation?

Greenspan: In fact, it’s always very useful to go back and read the current reporting on what was going on. One of the great values of writing a book is you’re forced to go back and to actually see what was said, not what your memory left with you, but what was actually said. The economy was weakening. It was moving down rather rapidly and unemployment was clearly moving up and there was a great deal of uncertainty. George Meaney came out with a proposal to run a hundred billion dollar deficit. Now, back then, a hundred billion dollar deficit was big stuff. There was general talk of just expanding, you know, doing all sorts of incredible programs and the pressure on Ford to respond to what was scaring everybody in the United States, it was phenomenal. His basic view was very cautious.
I recall his saying to me essentially, “How deep is this going to get? And how bad is this going to get? And what do we do about it?” I said, “Mr. President, we don’t do too much at this particular point, but let me tell you, the best I can judge, we are in a classic major inventory recession, the nature of which is that production falls very rapidly as you move from inventory accumulation, which is basically meaning production is above the level of consumption, down to well below it as you begin to liquidate.

The critical determination, however, of how this is going to materialize is whether what economists call ‘final demand.’ That is consumers, purchases, home building, capital investment, government expenditures, as differentiated basically from inventory fluctuations which, back then, were really quite expensive because we did not have just-in-time inventory, which has essentially changed it very importantly in recent years. So, inventory fluctuations were always a major part of a business cycle. But what you didn’t know is whether ‘final demand,’ that is consumer spending, is falling as well, and at that particular stage we didn’t know very much. So, what I did actually is—

Smith: Is GNP quarterly? You had quarterly GNP estimates?

Greenspan: Quarterly data which, at the time, came out quite a number of weeks after the quarter close, which is way too late. We did have the Industrial Production Index which the Federal Reserve produces every month, roughly two weeks after the close of the month, and that was far more current and you could tell what was going on. What I decided to do at the Council of Economic Advisors is to sit down with all of the people who are very good statisticians and economists and see if we could set up a whole series of real-time indicators which were either weekly or monthly and try to get an update, not necessarily on the exact numbers, but on where the critical question of this decline was. Whether we were dealing with an inventory contraction, which we surely were doing, but whether that was the whole business.

In other words, were we dealing with not only an inventory contraction but a fall off in so-called final demand? And so we set up a weekly GNP system which was not something I would want to show in public, but it worked. It
essentially told us week-on-week what we needed to know: namely, whether in fact, this was very substantially an inventory adjustment which meant that when it turned it would come back very rapidly. Because if, for example, production is above consumption at the top, if it slips below, at some point you’re continuously liquidating inventories, you’re going to get to zero. And when you get to zero, or the lowest you’re going to get to, then you cannot liquidate anymore so that production must come right up to where the consumption level is and that’s precisely what happened.

We knew as best one can know in those types of circumstances that this is what we were confronted with and President Ford essentially says, “How confident are you that that is indeed the case?” I said to him, “Mr. President, clearly we’re dealing with fragmentary data. We’re dealing with data which are delayed or late, but as best we can all judge, we have not seen a major weakening in final demand which means, of necessity, that this thing will pop back.” And he said, “In that event, we’re going to do as little as we can get away with”

What he chose to do is accept a proposal which had been floating around at that time of doing a quick rebate and it was such that it had no long-term impact. It basically probably did some good with respect to final demand, but it was *de minimus* and he was excoriated by all those who either are in the press or the political system. And the fascinating thing which I’ve seen time and time again is that not only did that pressure disappear when the economy came back with a roar, but collective amnesia came over the whole political system in which those who had argued that we should’ve done much more, it never happened. And I have seen that time and time again and I think it’s a sad commentary on, I would say, the recollection capabilities of the American public.

Smith: But it also hints at a reason why he, in some ways, didn’t get the credit that perhaps a more flamboyant or self-dramatizing president would have gotten. I mean, in effect by *not* doing things, that’s the inverse of what we’ve all been led to believe as swashbuckling presidential leadership.

Greenspan: It’s called activism and sometimes activism is running in the wrong direction.
Smith: So, he was a true conservative.

Greenspan: Oh, indeed. He truly believed, he fundamentally believed in the Constitution, the rule of law, and the way a market economy operates and why it operates as effectively as it does. And while he could not get up and give you a lecture on the changing economics and all that stuff that we teach in school, and the pros and cons of economic multipliers and the like, he had a common sensical view of the way the world was working and in many respects - I mean, I’m an econometrician, I deal with mathematical stuff all the time. I sometimes look at all this complex stuff that we got with its presumed exactitude and I say, “You know, on occasion, if we were to just push this stuff aside and just take a look at what’s going on out there.”

And that’s what Ford did. You know, he had all sorts of contacts, especially in the business community, and he was up to date remarkably with what was going on, had a good sense of what appropriate policy was, and he had enough of a history to realize that cycles come and go. And while this was by far the most severe since the Depression, he basically recognized that we would come out of that in a way.

Smith: How much of all of this, in the background at least, was energy an issue?

Greenspan: Energy became a critical issue obviously largely because we, in the United States in 1970, finally created a level of consumption of oil, crude and products, which was exactly equal, net, to our productive capacity. Remember, we used to have the old Texas Railroad Commission which had quotas on crude oil production in Texas in order essentially to keep control over prices. Up until 1970 with the Texas Railroad Commission, they could control world oil prices and they kept quotas down until consumption finally inexorably rose up to our capacity at which point the pricing determination moved from the Texas Gulf to the Persian Gulf. And they didn’t know it, basically, until the Yom Kippur War caused a huge increase in prices which then lead to the endeavor to keep controls of oil and gas, which induced the long lines at filling stations. And it was a disaster. And indeed we have to struggle with that with all the various different grades of war and the
complexity. Fortunately, the Reagan administration finally unwound the whole thing.

Smith: There’s a story that, at one point, the president respectfully urged, I mean, they put together this massive energy program, a 143-page document or something like that, and he asked his former colleagues on the Hill to create in effect an ad-hoc committee to address the emergency. And back came word that, “Well, that wouldn’t work because that would upset the existing jurisdictional elements,” and so on and so on. “It might be an emergency, but we couldn’t change the way we did business.” And, I guess the debate went back and forth, the president seeking decontrol of at least some energy prices, the Hill resisting. And eventually a deal was worked out, a handshake deal. I believe Mansfield and Albert came back a week later and said they were embarrassed, but they couldn’t sell it to their own membership, which raises the issue of post-Watergate.

You had that whole influx of the so-called Watergate Babies, people came in with a much more aggressive view vis-à-vis the White House and congressional relations and you were in the middle of all this and here you are trying to make policy. And the great irony is, here’s Gerald Ford who is a child of Capitol Hill, who finds himself in many ways defending executive prerogatives.

Greenspan: Well, the reason basically there was a problem was that we got ourselves in such a complex structure of various different types of oils and various different types of things that were going on that we brought on, remember, Frank Zarb as the “Energy Czar,” my tennis partner. And it was a complex mess. I mean, if you really want a lesson on what’s wrong with regulation, go sit yourself in the middle of that type of thing. And it worked very poorly, and indeed, it created the huge gas lines and very negative reaction there. In fact, the one interesting episode that I always remember with respect to this is that Nelson Rockefeller, then vice president, had this big, big hundred billion dollar project. Now, a hundred billion dollars back then was real money.

Smith: The Energy Independence Corporation.
Greenspan: Yes. And Zarb and I actually pounded on Ford, and Cheney was with us, who was then Chief of Staff, and we got him to the point he said, well, he’s not going to support him on this issue. Two or three weeks later, I get a call to come to the Oval Office and Ford says to me, “Remember my promise about saying ‘no’ to Nelson?” I said, “Yes, sir.” And he says, “The pressure’s too much. I’ve had to cave.” I said, “I understand that.” And he said, “You know, I want you to know I really apologize for that.” I said, “Mr. President, you’re president of the United States. We are your advisors. You have to make those decisions. You don’t have to tell me that you can’t do everything I think is the right thing to do. I would, frankly, be very uncomfortable if that was indeed the case.” But that, to me, tells you something very important about the man. In other words, there’s a sense that even if it remotely entered your mind that Richard Nixon would do it, I would suggest you dismiss it immediately. It was not conceivably credible.

Smith: A sidebar to that is a story I picked up from a couple sources, that in fact, Bill Simon was doing exactly what you were doing for the same reasons in arguing with the president - and I’m not sure what point in the process - but I think it had been a formal cabinet discussion about all of this. And the president had indicated that he would support the vice president’s proposal. And Secretary Simon, not willing to leave it at that, was renewing the argument. At which point, the president turns to him and says, “Bill, you and I both know Congress is never going to pass this. I don’t want to embarrass Nelson.”

Greenspan: I hadn’t heard that story.

Smith: You had not? Isn’t that a great story?

Greenspan: No, I didn’t. It was very interesting.

Smith: It was difficult for Rockefeller, wasn’t it? I mean, given his temperament, in New York you got elected by creating programs, never mind what they cost. I mean, that’s how you governed. And at some point, I think fairly early in the Ford presidency, the decision was made that we were going to at least
suspend any new domestic spending programs until we got a handle on the budget, on the deficit. Does that ring a bell?

Greenspan: Oh, yes. No, Jerry Ford was a fiscal conservative amongst all of his other attributes and a firm believer in the fact that fiscal responsibility was a crucial aspect of maintaining a viable economic system. And largely because of his knowledge of how the budget worked and the like, he knew what you could do and what you couldn’t do. And, you remember, one of the rare things that all of us, we were very pleased with was when, I think it was in 1976, no, the 1977 budget presentation was done by the president of the United States. And we were all proud of the fact that our president knew enough to get up in front of the press corps and handle all the very detailed questions. It was very impressive. It was very interesting to watch the system go.

Smith: It’s never been done since.

Greenspan: No, for good reason. He fundamentally was a conservative in the fiscal sense more than any other way. You know, it’s hard to recall, but I remember Dwight Eisenhower apologizing for a four billion dollar deficit. Now that was before, kind of, the revolution, you know, where Walter Heller came in and said, “We have fiscal stagnation going on here” and all this various sort of things. But Jerry Ford was a throw back basically to Eisenhower in that regard.

Smith: Yeah. Someone once referred to him as Eisenhower without the medals.

Greenspan: Well, that’s probably not far off.

Smith: A couple of things. apropos the whole New York City fiscal crisis. There was a famous speech at the National Press Club. I’d been told that there was a real debate within the administration in terms of how tough the president ought to sound in terms of even considering federal assistance to the city. And a very legitimate case could be made that the city wasn’t taking seriously enough its own need to do some fairly radical pruning. What’s your recollection of that whole issue? And then, of course, you have the vice president who is presumably in a somewhat awkward position, but obviously arguing for the city and the state.
Greenspan: The problem basically was that they actually had the financial resources to solve the problem in part. Remember there was a very large pension fund which, as I recall and my recollection is a little vague on this, but I recall that the real issue is that the city government did not want to do the hard stuff and, as a consequence, essentially wanted just government payment. Ford was not happy with that. Bill Simon was Bill Simon, you can imagine. And you know that famous headline *Ford to New York City: Drop Dead*. Of course, it was never actually stated, it was a fabrication of the media. The issue was a very clever set of negotiations. Ford knew that at the end of the day, the city would have to cave because they did not have real ______. But the question is, how much of it seemed reasonable?

It’s very much similar to the negotiations currently going on with respect to the Big Three automakers. That their initial view is just, “Give us cash and we’ll solve our problems.” There was a real serious concern that if that was done with New York, they’d be back again. Because what was wrong with the fiscal situation in New York as I remember it, Mayor Lindsay issuing huge amounts of short-term credit and then all of a sudden being unable to sell short-term New York City notes in the markets. And that is sort of the scariest of all situations. And the reason, essentially, is it went into ever increasing fiscal profligacy and the well finally shut down. Now what basically New York City wanted was for somebody to bring water to substitute for the well. And what Ford wanted to make certain is that you basically got a system which would function in and of itself. Eventually New York City got bailed out because of the fact that the stock market which was then low, ran up for numbers and numbers of years and the revenues just poured in, so it solved their problems.

Smith: Hugh Carey told me once, “Jerry Ford has never gotten the credit he deserves for the tough love approach he took which forced New York City…

Greenspan: And he was governor at that point.

Smith: Yeah, he was.

…it to face reality.
Greenspan: Hugh Carey said that to me once, too, I recall. I was wholly accurate in my judgment that the presumption that that particular set of negotiations were essentially a disaster is utterly untrue. That was a very clever set of programs to recognize economic reality which the New York City government did not wish to do.

Smith: Can you talk about what he wanted to do in a full term? Did you have a sense, I mean, did you have an agenda in-house, in terms of what you hoped to do if he had been elected in ’76?

Greenspan: I think basically the principles that he enunciated in his shortened term would go forward. I don’t recall any sort of planning of this type that you invariably get in Democratic administrations. In other words, there was a really fundamental difference. In Democratic administrations, you plan everything. In Republican administrations, at least up until recently, you believe that the vast proportion of decisions are made by the market and that that’s the most effective way, and that to try to plan it is futile, and that to indeed implement plans is counterproductive. So there is no sense of, “Well, we’re going to have this program or that program.”

Now, there’re always things, I mean, the Energy Independence Act and all the various other things that go on, but there is a really seriously important difference between beliefs that there is a self-adjusting mechanism which essentially creates the highest standards of living, rapid economic growth, but has aspects of instability in it which is more a reflection of human nature than it is of economic policy. And the question is, how much do you want to control that? And the evidence is pretty clear that, the more you control it, the slower the rate of growth and the lower the standards of living, but the less volatility in the markets.

The more you allow the markets to function, as indeed coming out of the Ford administration, even into Carter and to Reagan, and thereafter and on to Clinton, we had a massive change, a removal of regulation where the Reagan administration with the air traffic controllers ultimately changed more fundamentally some of the whole structures of labor relations in this country.
Smith: But deregulation really began in the Ford years.

Greenspan: It did and it was an odd bipartisan combination in which you had Ted Kennedy as chairman of the ____________ Committee and Steve Breyer as basically his chief of staff in that committee. So that, the same time that Breyer was very much, and you can hear him now, he still takes that as an important period of his life – he was one of the key elements in the deregulation of airlines and rails and all that sort of stuff. And so it was essentially a bipartisan movement, but fundamentally driven by Jerry Ford with a lot of it starting to be implemented during the Carter administration.

Smith: That goes to the heart of something I’ve argued for a long time. That people who see the Nixon-Ford administration as a continuation, almost see Ford as a coda for the Nixon presidency, overlook something very fundamental. A lot of things changed. I mean, you could almost look at Richard Nixon as the last New Deal president. Someone who grew up in the shadow of FDR and whose political calculations being what they were, and Ford in a lot of ways is a more conservative, classic conservative than Nixon. Things began in the Ford presidency that bore fruit in later presidencies. But it’s a mistake to see the two as philosophically joined at the hip. There’s more of a break in some ways, a turning of the page.

Greenspan: Oh, indeed. Indeed, if you just look at the numbers, the size of government under Nixon grew immensely and his reasoning was always, “Well, if we don’t do it, they’ll do more.” And Ford didn’t quite buy onto that, as you know, with his very slim minorities in the Congress, he vetoed an awful lot of bills and prevailed in a remarkably large number of cases. All he needed was a small part of the Senate and he could render a lot of legislation from occurring.

Smith: This is hypothetical, but can you think of one or two things that, historically looking back, you think would have been different had he been reelected?

Greenspan: Yeah. I don’t think that the underlying inflationary forces - which were coming off basically the early parts of the 1970s, partly Nixon, partly coming off the Vietnam War - I don’t think that severe inflationary process could
have been suppressed under Ford. The forces were fundamental and Jimmy Carter got being in the wrong place at the time and it’s essentially what brought Reagan in a good light many years. It is conceivable to me that, had he been reelected, he would’ve struggled with that and may have made it less than it ultimately turned out to be, but not enough to actually alter what went on. It would’ve meant in some way, Reagan would have never been president of the United States.

Smith: That’s interesting, because by ’76, the administration was running on a record of having, in effect, broken the back of the inflation. Unemployment was clearly headed down and indeed, for all the people who said Ford lost because of the pardon, I’ve always thought a strong case could be made that just before… There were numbers that were released, literally just before election day, which suggested a pause at least in the economic recovery.

Greenspan: That was my term.

Smith: I think that, by that point, there was a perception that this would become a very close race. And I think there were $x$ number of people who sort of stepped back even that last weekend and said to themselves, “Well, do I really want four more years of this or will I take a chance on Carter?” And it was just enough to push Carter across the finish line. How did the pause come about?

Greenspan: Well, the pause came about largely as a consequence of the ’75 recession. Because what happened was, you may recall that early 1975, the gross national product is what we used then, was going down very sharply. But when, because inventory liquidation was so huge that, when it turned around, it came back and we were up close to a ten percent annual rate of growth in the early months of 2006.

Smith: Or ’76.

Greenspan: I’m sorry, ’76. 1976. You had this momentum going forward and you can’t maintain that because inventories were building up and so what ordinarily happens in such a period is you have a pause. Meaning that it went from close to ten percent annual rate and sunk down to close to two percent or whatever
it was, and the two percent happened to coincide with the election date. But, as you may recall, when Carter got into office, he had a number of fiscal stimulus programs to deal with the pause, but by the time he was inaugurated, the economy was rolling back again. And so that, for Ford’s point of the view the election was held on the wrong date.

Smith: Two other things and I’ll let you go. One, in 1980 - you were in the middle of this effort and I’d like to just have you describe it - about Ford possibly joining a Reagan ticket. There’s been debate over the years as to where it originated, what Ford really expected. I would love to have your account of that.

Greenspan: Well, I think it emerged because the early polls showed the gap was not very large between Carter and Reagan and that the polls showed that if Jerry Ford were vice president, they would put an additional two or three percentage points on what was a very close race. And my recollection was that in the Reagan campaign staff, they decided to approach Ford and they essentially asked Kissinger and me, as old Ford people who were now involved in the Reagan campaign, to go approach Ford. So, we approached him.

Smith: Was this at the convention?

Greenspan: At the convention. Oh no, at the convention.

Smith: In Detroit.

Greenspan: Yes, indeed. And it was very obvious very early on that he, Ford, was very content with his Rancho Mirage, and his golf, and his new lifestyle.

Smith: And, of course, Mrs. Ford had gone through the intervention and she was recovering and that obviously affected their lives.

Greenspan: I’m sure that was probably the case. And they were settling down there and what was being proposed was a real upheaval in their very… Because, remember, they never had an affluent life in that Ford was one of those people who would, you know, if you tried to bribe him, he would probably bite you or tried to stamp you into the ground. And so, you know, he was never wealthy, but he didn’t become wealthy as such, but at least the pressures of
living on very tight, you know, began to ease obviously as he went back into the private sector and he was enjoying that, I’m sure.

You could tell the pressures were off him and I would play golf with him and, you know, he was a happy man. What then tended to occur is a real resistance to going back. And what they tried to do with the Kissinger meeting phrase to redefine the office of vice presidency in ways which raised very constitutional questions and there was a bit of – Ford was really quite reluctant. And then he got on, I think it was a morning show, television show—

Smith: It was with Walter Cronkite.

Greenspan: Oh yeah, okay. And he suggested a lot of the — and apparently Reagan said, “You know, no way,” because in the sense these were a private conversations and Jerry Ford opened them up and, at that point, it ended. There was never any real possibility of that happening as far as I could judge. In other words, there was reluctance on day one and reluctance all the way along and, to this day, I don’t know whether Jerry Ford consciously did [that] to suggest to Reagan or give him a way out, I don’t know that. But it’s the Cronkite interview which, as far as I can see, ended the conversations.

Smith: When was the last time you saw him?

Greenspan: You mean at his funeral? You mean before the funeral.

Smith: Yeah, before the funeral. Because you obviously would see him every year at the reunions.

Greenspan: Oh, yes. I would say within maybe a couple months of his death maybe. Maybe less than that.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction when he died? By the public reaction?

Greenspan: I was an honorary pall bearer and so I was in the entourage and you could see the crowds on the streets and this is when the general state of optimism was not obvious. But there was an out flowing of “Here’s an extremely decent man” and nostalgia for that type of presidency.
Smith: The civility that he represented. And yet, I mean, God knows, it’s a misplaced nostalgia to suggest that the ’70s were some sort of era of good feeling.

Greenspan: They sure were not. But, in the context of going back historically, you tend to forget the bad, and more often than not, tend to emphasize the good. For example, we look back in the 1930s with some degree of nostalgia because we knew that, in the end, we came out okay. But, you read the literature at the time, it was basically fear of where we were going. There’s a fear of fascism. Fear of communism. Undermining the Constitution. All sorts of really very scary episodes. And since none of that ever materialized, it’s not that we all recognize the 25 percent unemployment, bread lines, but there were still the movies, there’s still Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers and all of that stuff. I think the same thing occurred here. That, to be sure, it was a pretty scary period, but we knew we came out okay. And by the time Jerry Ford died, there was a degree of nostalgia for his presidency which I think is growing year by year. It’s not dissimilar to the way Harry Truman got himself resurrected.

Smith: It’s interesting, because I was wearing two hats that week. I was with ABC the first half of the week and then with the family the second half. And I can tell you, in the media, there was astonishment that, as the week went by, it seemed to grow and grow and grow. And my theory was, in particularly seeing the number of young people in the crowds, that they were seeing this man for the first time in a lot of cases. They were being introduced to him. And he looked awfully good compared to kind of the politics in both parties in recent years. And I think the country needed to feel good about something at that point, too. In some ways it almost foreshadowed Obama’s appeal as a, we’ll see whether it holds up or not, but the appeal as kind of post-ideological bringer of civility.

Greenspan: Yeah, it’s that view of America which Ronald Reagan sort of brought forward, but more importantly it was a view of the civility of the Ford administration, not in the politics _________. You did, I don’t know maybe you did, you remember that Tip O’Neill and Jerry Ford used to come
at each other, *boom!*, from 9 to 5pm and then Tip would end up at the White House with a bourbon with his old friend Jerry. That’s the nostalgia that I think really mattered, that the bipartisan sense that the Senate was a club, that people worked together for a national purpose, because by then, Ford’s death, there was just huge partisan breakdown.

Smith: And he also was lucky, he lived long enough to know that most Americans had come around to share his view of the pardon. And that even those who still disagreed with the pardon at least accepted his motives and even acknowledged his courage, political courage, in doing it.

Greenspan: I don’t have as much of a feel of that, but I am aware that the polls did show that. I have no firsthand experience, so I don’t have that much of an insight into it. But the general view towards Gerald Ford has clearly, since his administration, been going straight up. And, as best as I can judge, since his death.

Smith: That brings me to the final question. How do you think he should be remembered?

Greenspan: I think as a very important turning point in American life. I think that the fact that we came as close with the Nixon resignation to potential chaos in this country. Now, remember, there were Secretaries of Defense making certain that no orders came out of the Oval Office. That Hartmann speech was a very critical turning point. It defined a change in the spirit of the country which is quite similar to this last election. And I think that the American people have a certain unrealistic view of political civility and they liked people like Howard Baker, for example, or a lot of those now still around but no longer in power. Senators who talked to each other. I mean, Pat Moynihan was sort of, to me, an extraordinary senator. And you had five or six of them who really defined. We don’t have that anymore and Jerry Ford was part of that general view. We, as Americans, would like to have far more civil politics than we get. The problem, unfortunately, is that negative advertising does work. We do find that the old notion that good economic policy is good political policy has been discarded.
Smith: And the media is so fragmented and so dedicated to fanning the flames. I mean, talk radio, and cable,…

Greenspan: Cable is… I sit and watch my wife dealing with… She gets out in the morning with the *Today Show* and then she’s got her own cable show in the day. She’s got the evening news and then she’s got to prepare for the *Today Show*, and what you’re coming up with is that the old notion that there are two sources to every story, you never bring it up, and how we don’t have the bloggers back then. Jerry Ford would have been very uncomfortable in this type of environment. And I think the American people are uncomfortable with it, but they don’t know what to do and, indeed, there’s a conflict here. It’s their views which basically.

Smith: In that sense, it’s an electronic democracy and the results aren’t always pretty.

Greenspan: It’s not always pretty, but it still works.

Smith: It still works!

That’s perfect. Thank you.
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Smith: Thank you for doing this. Tell us something about Betty Ford that might surprise people.

Cullen: She loves dirty jokes and he did not.

Smith: Was it that he didn’t get it, or he just didn’t want to?

Cullen: No, I think that’s just not the way his sense of humor worked. There would be times that Mrs. Ford and I - like if they would be getting ready to go to a dinner party or something - and I would be there helping her get ready and pick out jewelry or whatever. We would be in her dressing room just in hysterics about something, and he would be across the hall in his dressing room and he would come in and say, “Okay, girls, what is so funny in here?” And Mrs. Ford would tell him the joke and he would just kind of stand there like, and then the two of us would try to explain it to him and then our hysterics would become more so that we could never explain it. And he was just like, “I don’t get it.”

Smith: He had a sense of humor.

Cullen: Oh, he had a sense of humor, but it wasn’t a joke-related sense of humor. I think he saw the humor in the things that happened around him, but I just don’t think, telling him a joke, his mind just didn’t go that way. He was thinking of much more serious things.

Smith: One of the things I found early on that surprised me about him - because most pols love gossip, not just political gossip, but they love gossip. And at first I just sensed it and then I really sensed it that he wasn’t a gossip and, in fact, would politely find a way to steer the conversation away from personal gossip.
Cullen: Yeah, he didn’t want to chat about people. I think you’re absolutely right. I guess from my view, he always wanted to find the finer qualities about everybody he knew. And it was demeaning to the person that was doing the gossiping, I guess. He didn’t want to have suspicions about other people, I guess. So it wasn’t something he was happy with.

Smith: Do you think that at all, in some ways, fed a notion that some people had that he was maybe a little naïve?

Cullen: Yeah.

Smith: And I don’t mean that in a negative way, I mean, it can be in many ways an admirable trait.

Cullen: I think because he was so honest in his own dealings with everybody and so trustworthy, he kind of assumed that everybody he dealt with would be the same way, and in that way he was naïve about it. I don’t think he ever saw that people were nice to him because they were going to use him two weeks later for something. He just genuinely enjoyed people, he liked meeting new people. I think he was naïve about the fact that there was a lot of stuff that went on behind the scenes that he just either didn’t see or chose not to see.

Smith: Well, see, that’s what’s fascinating to me. Because someone who’d been in DC as long as he was at the levels he was—

Cullen: Yeah, and to maintain that naiveté.

Smith: Yeah, you’d have to work to at it almost.

Cullen: Yeah, and I guess his theory that you can disagree without being disagreeable, it’s all maybe part of that mentality that, maybe at the end of the day, everybody’s a friend and you have your disagreements, but if you like a person, you like them. You get over those disagreements.

Smith: But you wonder if that quality - for example, whatever you think of Bob Hartmann - made a Bob Hartmann necessary, in the sense that—

Cullen: Somebody had to be the bad guy.
Smith: Yeah. Someone had to do the mistrusting for him and the suspicion about people’s motives. Clearly at the time of the Haig-Nixon pardon business—

Cullen: And, I think maybe Mrs. Ford played a little bit of that role, too, in that I think she saw that in people before he ever would be willing to recognize that maybe there was something going on. She was a much better read on personalities.

Smith: It’s funny, I never thought about this, but that’s kind of a parallel to the Reagans.

Cullen: Mhmm. Oh, yeah, the guardian at the gate kind of thing with the women.

Smith: And it puts the wife in a very awkward position, difficult position.

Cullen: Yeah, it sure does.

Smith: How did your paths first cross?

Cullen: I was working in Delaware for Pete DuPont when he was governor of Delaware. And a friend of mine who was working for Pete – you know Dick Wennekamp.

Smith: I know the name.

Cullen: Well, Wennekamp was in the White House, in what capacity, I’m not sure at the moment, but anyway he worked at the White House and he was casually going out with this friend of mine on occasion. Mrs. Ford needed a new assistant, so, Dick called Marian and asked her if she’d be interested in the job. They were interviewing three or four people or something. She said, yeah, she would be. She went to New York, interviewed with Mrs. Ford, was offered the job and took the job and moved to California.

Smith: So this was post-White House.

Cullen: Yes, this was like a year after they’d left the White House. In fact, she had just come out of treatment, I think, when all this happened. Marian went to California, quickly moved to Vail. A couple of friends and I went to Vail and spent a week or so, just visiting, you know, because we had a friend who was
working for Betty Ford and this was a big deal when you’re from Dover, Delaware. And, then in September, Marian called me and said, “You know, it is really expensive to live in the desert. Why don’t you move out here and we’ll share a house?” Which I thought, “This is perfectly nuts. I’m just going to pack up and move to California?” But the more I thought about it, the more I thought, “Well, it might be a pretty good opportunity and it will get me out of Delaware,” and quite frankly, I’d sort of dated all the eligible bachelors in Delaware, which is a small pool.

Smith: It’s a small state.

Cullen: It was a fairly small pool. And I went and talked to Governor DuPont and said, “What do you think if I would go out there?” And he said, “I think you should do it and if it doesn’t work out, you have a job here you can come back to,” which kind of made it risk-free. So, I moved out to California the end of September of 1979 and kind of hung out for a few months, started looking for a job and realized – I was working in urban planning work at that point – that to find a job, I was going to have to go to L.A. So, I started interviewing in L.A. And, at that point, President Ford was thinking about running again. I had done some campaign work for Pete and President Ford and Bob said, “We can’t pay you to stay on, but if you can hang around for a little bit, there will be a job on campaign staff for you.” So, I thought, “Oh, well, this sounds pretty cool.”

Smith: So that sounds like this talk had gotten pretty far advanced.

Cullen: Yeah, and then I think it was in March that he decided that he was not going to run and at that point, I thought, “Okay, L.A., here I come.” And about three weeks later, Marian decided that she was getting married and moving, at which point, President Ford said, “Well, you’re either going to work for me or you’re going to work for Mrs. Ford. We want you to stay here.” And Mrs. Ford was not particularly sure that she wanted me to work for her. I think she thought I had too much experience and I might try and run her and she was not looking for someone to run her because she’s a little bit of a control freak. And so I really thought I would end up working for President Ford, but she
finally said, “Well, let’s try it. Let’s give it a couple of weeks, see how it goes” and seventeen years later, I finally left.

Smith: Now, clearly, you, even just hanging around as you put it, must’ve made an impression.

Cullen: Well, I wasn’t very good at hanging around totally. I needed something to keep me out of trouble, so the Fords had all these photograph books that they had brought from the White House of pictures that had been taken of people, you know, state visits and parties at the White House and they were not in any kind of order. No one knew who any of the people were in the pictures. Some of them, they did. So I was given the project of putting the books together, which I spent a couple of months trying to figure out dates and knowing a couple of people that I could identify and going back and researching it and putting it together. And now, you know, in the breezeway of their house in California where all the elephant statues are, there are a bunch of photograph albums from the White House. If you go through those today, there are still my handwritten notes of who the people are in the pictures. I never got any farther than that, but I identified a lot of people and ended up with a job.

Smith: Tell us how the office functioned just generally, because that was pretty early in their post-White House years. What kind of coordination went on between her activities and his?

Cullen: There was still a little bit of the East Wing/West Wing syndrome that went on in that most people sort of figured that her work was not as important as his work. At that point, I worked for her. I had someone who worked for me, and that was it. There were the two of us who did what five or six people who worked for him did. I was pretty much an independent agent. I didn’t report to anybody else other than Mrs. Ford, and the thing that was kind of interesting about the position I had was that when President and Mrs. Ford traveled together, particularly for social events, I would be the person that traveled because I guess they thought I could help Mrs. Ford do things, but I could also handle some press issues if it was necessary. I could do some things for him as well. And I guess the other side of that was when Penny
became Chief of Staff, he was very leery about traveling with a very attractive blonde. So, the fact that I worked for Mrs. Ford made it a little easier. You know, there was an explanation for why I was along and the explanation for Penny would’ve been much more difficult for him. He was uncomfortable with that.

Smith: Which is revealing in and of itself.

Did you ever meet Phyllis?

Cullen: Phyllis.

Smith: His old girlfriend?

Cullen: No, I know the name. I think I saw pictures once upon a time, the girlfriend from New York.

Smith: Yeah.

Cullen: Yeah. No, never met her.

Smith: There’s a wonderful story. Was it Jim Cannon who told us this story? Yeah, Jim Cannon. One of the last times he saw the President, the President said, “You ought to go see Phyllis,” who, I think at that point, was in a condo in Las Vegas. And Jim went and was going in from the airport and thought, “Oh, how do I sort of introduce myself and ingratiate myself?” So he stopped and he got flowers and went up to the apartment and rang the bell and she opened the door and he said, “President Ford wanted you to have these.” And she said, “Oh no, he didn’t. He never got flowers!”

Cullen: She knew him fairly well, then, huh?

Smith: And at the end of the conversation, she told Jim, “Would you take a message to him for me?” And the message was, “I still think about him. I still dream about him. I still love him.”

Cullen: Oh, wow.
Smith: And Jim dutifully passed the message on over the phone. There was a long, long pregnant silence and he finally said, “Well, that’s very nice, and Phyllis, she was a lovely girl, but I’ve had such a wonderful life with Betty.”

Mrs. Ford’s tardiness, was that—

Cullen: You mean “the late Mrs. Ford”? That’s how we referred to her.

Smith: Really?

Cullen: Yes.

Smith: Was it always a problem?

Cullen: Always. And I don’t know if it was based on insecurity and wanting to be perfect when she walked out the door or if it was, again, her control mechanism of ‘I can do this, therefore, I shall do this.’

Smith: And he was a stickler for—

Cullen: Oh, he was. When the schedule said “7:15 motorcade departs,” 7:15 he was at the front door ready to open the door to walk out so the motorcade could depart. She had exactly the same schedule that said, “7:15 motorcade departs,” but at 8:00 maybe, if she was ready to leave. And he would fuss a little bit but not much because he knew his life would be uncomfortable if he fussed too much.

Smith: Was that the biggest source of friction? I mean, were there habits that one had that the other had to put up with?

Cullen: There was some friction over her tardiness, but I think after all those years, he had to come to expect—

Smith: They were acclimated to it.

Cullen: Yeah, and I think if it was something that was really, really, really important to him, he would talk to her about the fact that, you know, “Now, dear, we really need to leave on time.” And she would make an effort and she could do it when pressed. And, you know, if we were on foreign trips and a plane was leaving or something, she could absolutely be ready, but she liked to take her
time and make sure that every hair was in place and that her purse was perfectly put together

Smith: She’s a perfectionist?

Cullen: Oh, yes, very much so. She wanted everything, you know, clothes were, if there was a crease in something, she wasn’t sure, because she was so used to having people judge her by her appearance that she wanted that appearance to be judge-able.

Smith: Did she enjoy clothes?

Cullen: She loved them, loved clothes. She loved to shop. She loved to go to the designer salons and, well, you know, she’d been a fashion buyer at Herpolsheimer’s, so it was kind of in the blood, I think.

Smith: That leads to the other question. Was weight ever a concern?

Cullen: Never.

Smith: Ever?

Cullen: Never, ever. The only time it was a concern for her was when she had heart surgery and she lost a lot of weight and she was too thin. I remember, one day we were sitting out in the garden area around the pool at the house in California and there were a couple of women on the golf course. And they were not stout, but they had a little bit of meat to them. And she looked out there and then said, “Oh, I wish I looked like that.” I said, “Oh, no, you don’t. I’m going to hold that over you when that happens.” And it never did. I mean, she gained the weight back. She got right back to her same size.

Smith: What was her size?

Cullen: She wore a size 8 forever and always as far as I know, and at the point that I worked with her, I was just a little bit too small to wear her clothes and now I’m way too big. Because there were a couple of items that I’d said, “When the time comes, I want that, I want that, I want that.”
Smith: How would you define her preferences in clothes? Were there things that she was particularly drawn to or shied away from?

Cullen: She loved well-made suits of, I’d say, kind of the classic Chanel suit, well put together. She was always well coordinated. She was not into a lot of froofroo. She was a very classic dresser. I think Albert Capraro, who designed clothes for her in the White House and for years and years afterwards. I mean, she has closets full. I have a closet full of Capraro clothes, I think, that I was fortunate enough that were either passed on to me or when she would go buying, I would get to buy a couple of things, too.

Smith: And jewelry?

Cullen: She liked jewelry and I would say right now she has quite a bit of jewelry simply because over the years since they’ve been in the White House, it’s been something that President Ford’s enjoyed giving her for gifts.

Smith: Any favorites stones or…? Some people are partial to pearls or…

Cullen: I think she has some pearls that she really likes. It’s a long strand that comes apart into two so that it becomes a double strand. I think she’s always been very fond of that. There’s a ring that Leonard Firestone and Dee Keaton gave her when we were in Hong Kong and it’s a star sapphire with diamonds around it. I’ve always told her that I wanted that ring. There’s no way I’ll ever get it, but… And I never liked star sapphires, but this is a lovely ring and the star sapphire is approximately the color blue of President Ford’s eyes. So it really meant a lot to her. And the fact that Leonard was involved in the gift.

Smith: Tell me about that relationship, because I’ve heard it said that it’s no exaggeration to say that she saved his life.

Cullen: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, I’ve heard Leonard say that. He was very indebted to her for that.

Smith: Now they had been friends, he was apparently instrumental in their decision to—
Cullen: To move, yeah. The property that their house is on, I think he owned originally. So they lived right next door. And they lived right next door in Beaver Creek. Now that’s got to be a pretty close friendship if you have two houses that are next to each other. And he was one of the loveliest men I’ve ever known. And, admittedly, I guess I did know him before he was completely sober, but I never—

And, in fact, my husband’s name is Leonard and the only reason I went out with him the first couple of times was because his name was Leonard because I figured there was good karma there, that I’d been so fond of Leonard Firestone that, “I’ll give this a try.”

Smith: What was it about him that clearly endeared him to the both of them?

Cullen: He was just a kind, considerate man who, if you didn’t know he was Leonard Firestone, you wouldn’t know he was Leonard Firestone. He never held that up for people to take note before they knew him. It was something that, you know, if people knew, fine, but he didn’t really care about it. And he was so generous to people. I mean, he was really kind to me over the years. There was one time we were on a trip, I know we were in Japan and Leonard Firestone and Nicky Firestone and a couple others of us had gone shopping in a camera store. We’d gone pearl shopping and I had made my big purchase and was wiped out for the rest of the trip and we went into a camera shop and he was looking at cameras and I said something about, “Oh, well, my little sister had said that when I was in Japan, if I was at any place to buy her a camera, but we’ve got another two weeks on the road or something, and so I can’t afford to do that” and he said, “I’ll loan you the money.” And I said, “Well, no”, I really didn’t want to do that. And he just absolutely said, “I will loan you the money. You’re buying the camera for your sister.” And I bought the camera and when we got home, I gave him a check I guess to pay him back for the cost of the camera and I got it back with a note that said, “I can afford this. You can’t.” So, he was just a sweetheart. And his wife, Nicky, I was very fond of, too. She was just a lovely woman.

Smith: And his involvement with the Betty Ford Center grew out of his own personal experience?
Cullen: Yes, I think after Mrs. Ford got sober, and I don’t know how long she had been sober, but not a whole long time, I don’t think. And I don’t know if Nicky came to talk to her or if Mrs. Ford just went and talked to Leonard on her own and just said, “You’ve got to do something.” President Ford may have been involved, too. And Leonard just kind of said, “Oh, okay, if you think so, I will.” And he got sober and they started talking about the fact that the desert would be the perfect place for there to be a treatment facility and he said to Mrs. Ford, “If this is something you want to do, I’ll help you raise the money for it.” And, so the two of them, you know, people came to be very afraid of seeing them approach.

Smith: I think it was John Schwarzlose who told us this story. They were on Frank Sinatra’s plane flying to Las Vegas and coming back she had this captive audience and so the first pledges to the Betty Ford Center were written on cocktail napkins on Frank Sinatra’s plane.

Cullen: And then, every time she went out to dinner, she had pledge cards in her evening bag. They’d be nicely folded up in this little, tiny jewel encrusted evening bag and whoever she was sitting next to, she’d say, “Oh, and by the way, I have something here I’d like you to take a look at.”

Smith: So, she was a lioness when it came to fundraising?

Cullen: Oh, yeah. I mean, the Betty Ford Center was paid for when it opened because she and Leonard went out and beat the bushes. And she did things like, I mean, she hated public speaking, she was always a nervous public speaker, she didn’t like it at all, but she knew she could raise money for the Betty Ford Center by going out and making speeches. So, she did it.

Smith: Do you think that factors at all into her late in life sort of reticence, withdrawal maybe, from the public eye? That, among other things, she doesn’t have to go and give speeches anymore?

Cullen: Well, she doesn’t have to do it. I think as soon as she felt that she didn’t have to do it, it was like, “It’s got to be something really wonderful for me to want to do this,” because she would always, I mean, we’d be standing backstage and she’d say things like, “Oh my God, I think I’m going to throw up.” And,
you know, she wouldn’t. She’d get out there and she was always fine, but she
would be really nervous doing a speech.

Smith: Why do you think that was? Because, here’s a woman who was a performer,
you know, who had aspired to be on the stage.

Cullen: Dance is one thing. Having words come out of your mouth was something
different, I think. Because she did okay and she was much better. Having her
stand there with cards that had a speech prepared on it, she was kind of a little
bit stilted. She was not comfortable with it, but when it came to the Q&A
session afterwards, that’s when she really shone, because the personality came
out. She was funny. She would just say things that people would kind of go,
“I can’t believe she said that!” So, it was the prepared speech kind of thing
that set her on edge. Just talking to people, she was fine.

Smith: It’s amazing. When you go back even now and look at the famous Morley
Safer interview on 60 Minutes - we had it on display at the time in the
museum - and she was saying things we couldn’t say today. Not that there
wasn’t controversy generated by Mrs. Ford saying them, but I mean, it was
more on the Right. I think the country was changing in ways that some of the
political types in the White House never anticipated. They’re always fighting
the last war, but the fact there was this Cub Scout den mother from Grand
Rapids…

Cullen: Yeah, who shouldn’t have opinions like that.

Smith: Exactly.

Cullen: But I think the fact was she was a much more independent, liberal thinking
woman than anybody realized until that point. I think her husband knew it,
but she had a mother that worked because she had to because her father had
died.

Smith: Did she ever talk about the circumstances of her father’s death?

Cullen: Not really, except that he passed away when she was 16. I think she said to
me that she kind of always felt that it was a suicide, but never really sure as to
what happened. The things she said in that interview with Morley Safer, I
think things were changing in this country for women and she was on kind of the progressive edge of that, unbeknownst to a lot of people.

Smith:  Exactly, and I think that’s why it made such an impact. We now know, and it’s almost tragic that we didn’t know then, we now know that Pat Nixon had opinions of her own and a life of her own.

Cullen:  And just thought she wasn’t allowed to have, or had been told she wasn’t allowed to have them, perhaps.

Smith:  Did you have a sense of Mrs. Ford’s relationship, or his for that matter, with the former presidents and first ladies? I mean, obviously there were ceremonial occasions when they got together, funerals or library openings, but was there a—

Cullen:  There was a real friendship there with Lady Bird Johnson. I was able, I think on two occasions, to spend a night at the ranch with Mrs. Ford and Lady Bird and it was really wonderful. And I think there was one time, I think, it was just the three of us and another time it was Mrs. Carter. I’ve got a picture somewhere, I was trying to think if there was someone else in there, but I don’t think so. It was something they were doing, an article that was being done for *Good Housekeeping* or some magazine that everybody got together there for the interviews. And President Ford and Lady Bird were fairly close and I think he had enjoyed Lyndon Johnson.

Smith:  Which, again, runs counter to the popular impression.

Cullen:  Yeah. But when they first went to Congress, the Johnsons were in the Senate, I guess.

Smith:  Had just gone.

Cullen:  Just gone. Okay. And since the Johnsons had been in Washington for a few years, how they really met in the first place, I’m not sure, but I know that Senator Johnson and Mrs. Johnson at that time were very kind to the new kids on the block. They kind of took them under their wing. They introduced them to people. They made sure they were invited to some social things, so I think that really clicked a relationship there.
Smith: Plus, Lady Bird, I mean how could you not love Lady Bird?

Cullen: Oh, she was just such a sweetheart. And then in the later years, President Ford was on a board with her for a bank in Texas. So, she saw her like once a month for years. And she and Mrs. Ford stayed in touch and the girls at the museum at one point there was a First Ladies’ conference or something and Lynda and Luci came out for that and I think they always felt close to President and Mrs. Ford.

Smith: There is a fraternity of sorts that people don’t realize that’s bipartisan, transcends political rivalries.

Cullen: Oh, absolutely. And you know I think a lot of people kind of look at the relationship President Ford and President Carter had and think, “You know, how can you be that friendly with the guy that beat you in the election?” But there’re so few people that have ever worked in that office and walked in those shoes that it’s a very small little private club and they are very supportive of each other when they need to be.

Smith: You know, it’s funny, when you really sort of boil it all down, they may have spoken with different accents and belonged to different parties, but they had a lot of similar values and their upbringings were in many ways reflective.

Cullen: Sort of basic, honest human beings who were not from the big city.

Smith: Plus, they had shared in common running against Ronald Reagan.

Cullen: Well, they also had military backgrounds that they could share.

Smith: One of the most touching things I’ll never forget was flying on Air Force One back to Grand Rapids from Washington after the service at the cathedral. And President Carter scooped up one of the great grandchildren and was walking up and down the isle with this baby. You wish people could see that side.

Cullen: That must have been Joy, Tyne’s daughter, because I think she was maybe the only baby because Tyne was the only one who had a baby-baby on the plane at that point. But I mean there’s a real fondness that, as you say, transcends
party because you know what they’re going through. I mean, if it’s somebody that’s currently there, it’s a life experience that very few of us can relate to.

Smith: And clearly there’d been a long-standing relationship between the Bushes and the Fords.

Cullen: Yeah.

Smith: Really going back to Prescott Bush in the Senate.

Cullen: And George H.W. - all kinds of years they were kind of intertwined and so, yeah.

Smith: You know, it’s funny, before I forget, I’ve heard that afterward from very good sources, you know, it’s interesting that both Johnson girls and the Carters, after the funeral, substantially revised their own plans because they were so impressed with the kind of intimacy and sort of family feel to this big ceremonial.

Cullen: My personal experience with that was, at Blair House, the reception that was there for ambassadors and the pallbearers and the other former first families who were there, when people came in, they went and saw Mrs. Ford. And I think you were there, weren’t you? So then there was tea and wine and whatever, so people were standing around talking. And Luci Johnson who I’ve known casually over the years for a long time, came up to me and we were talking about stuff and she said something to me about, “What have you all done to get ready for this? What was the most important thing that you did?” And I said, “Well, you know, the services were important, but one of the things that we really worked really hard on was the guest list for all the services.” And she kind of said, “Guest list? Oh my God, we haven’t even thought of that.” And I think based on talking to a few people at that point, they did go back and say, “We’ve got to get on this.”

Smith: I don’t mean to jump all around like this, but what were your memories of that week? Because I remember I was wearing two hats. I was with ABC for the first half of the week and I remember the very, very beginning out in the church, I think at Saint Margaret’s, and we’d been tipped off. Basically the
media had been told, “Don’t be surprised if you see Mrs. Ford in a wheelchair.” And, of course, we never did until very briefly at the end and then very dramatically—

Cullen: And we kept saying to her, “Mrs. Ford, if you don’t think you can walk, we have a wheelchair at every location. Please use them. Don’t wear yourself out. This is going to be a long, grinding week for you.” She was so determined that she was walking everywhere. No one was going to see her in a wheelchair. And she pulled it off. I mean, I think going down the isle at the cathedral President Bush may have been carrying her part of the way. And that was one nice thing about General Swan. He was so big that we figured, “If necessary, one arm under an elbow and one arm around her and he could just scoot her down and no one would ever notice.”

Smith: The story was told after she came back here very shortly afterwards, someone had said how impressed they were particularly at that last long walk to the gravesite where she got out of the chair and walked and they had expressed sort of their admiration for her.

Cullen: Yeah, she was a real trooper through that whole thing.

Smith: And she said, “Well, that’s what my husband would’ve wanted.”

Cullen: Yeah, you know, again, when we were at Blair House, the first night we got there, because I had traveled on the plane with the family coming back from California and we were all having dinner there. And then, I don’t know if you’ve heard the story about Air Force One losing my luggage.

Smith: No.

Cullen: Yeah, I’m halfway across the country and I get a phone call from Richard Wennekamp in California saying, “I don’t know how to tell you this, but your luggage is still here.” Fortunately, I was the one person on the plane that lived here. So, my husband came and picked me up and I came home. I spent the night and I got other clothes, I went back. So it wasn’t any big deal, but I was going to be coming back home that night because I had to get a change of clothes so I could proceed. And I went over and I sat at the table with Mrs.
Ford and we were chatting a little bit and I said, “Now, I’m going to be going home for the evening, but I’ll be back tomorrow morning. If you need anything, Susan knows how to get a hold of me. Just call.” And she said something to the effect of, “Do you think this is going okay?” And I said, “Well, I’ve got to tell you, I think you are doing absolutely a magnificent job.” And she got tears in her eyes and said, “Well, I have to because I’m doing it for him.”

Smith: They must have been touched by the crowds that came out in Alexandria.

Cullen: I’ll tell you, when you said what was in my view of the whole series of events, the crowds just blew me away, because he’d been out of office for how many years. He’d been President for two and a half years. You know, he didn’t have an eight-year history of people and all that. And the crowds at the church in California, when the motorcade went through Alexandria, I mean, we were all sitting, I was in the fourth car back or something, sitting there with tears running down our face because they were six and eight deep in some places and people with little kids and with their dogs with signs around their necks. It was just unbelievable. And the same thing happened in Grand Rapids.

Smith: Well, I was told the morning when you went up to the cathedral because that was the morning – I couldn’t go because ABC wanted me up there – remember, when we were planning from the very beginning, the one thing he was adamant about was no caisson through the streets of Washington. But I was told from a number of people, including the media, that they were amazed, a lot of people were amazed at the public reaction and it seemed to grow as the week went along. But they were amazed that, even though there was no caisson, at the number of people who just turned out on the streets of Washington.

Cullen: Just stood silently and watched the motorcade go by. It was really unbelievable.

Smith: She was touched?
Cullen: I don’t think she ever expected an outpouring like that. A personal example I’ll share with you. I take riding lessons here in town and my riding instructor, I had a horse out at the barn and I was going to be gone for x number of days, so I was kind of staying in touch and, you know, called to say, “I’m not going to be home until this day. Will you make sure somebody rides my boy so that he’s getting exercise?” And my riding instructor said, “Yeah, we’re standing here in line.” And I said, “You’re in line? What do you mean you’re ‘in line’?” And he said, “We’re waiting to go in to the rotunda.” I just couldn’t believe he and his wife and their two kids drove into town, got in line, and walked through. And I was so touched by that because the only relationship they had with him was through me kind of.

And there was another, on the drive out to the barn, there’s a house that has a big flagpole in the front of it. And when I got home, the first day I drove out there, the flag was at half-staff. And I kept driving down and the day that the official mourning was over, the flag went back up. And I was traveling with some of those, I’m not sure what you call them, but anyway, you know the cards that were given out at the rotunda and at the viewing and I stopped and I went up and I knocked on the door and the man came to the door and I said, “I know you don’t know me and I’m sorry to disturb you, but I’ve been watching your flag at half-staff and the fact that it’s back up today. I know it was at half-staff for my former boss and I thought you might like to have this.” And he was just astounded, “Oh, I can’t believe this. This is so neat!”

Smith: And then of course when you got to Grand Rapids, I remember that night because I rewrote the end of my eulogy, which had to reflect the reality that we were experiencing. And the fact that I went out that night and the line was two miles long at midnight.

Cullen: My husband went out. He said, “I’m just going to go out,” because we could see out the hotel window and he said, “I want to go out and see what this is really all about.” And he was gone for the longest time and he came back and he said, “You won’t believe it. They are four and five abreast and it goes on forever and there are kids in strollers and,” and he said, “people just stop and talk to you.” It was just an incredible experience.
Smith: And obviously that got back to her.

Cullen: Oh, yes.

Smith: I mean she saw what was going on. And then of course in the rotunda with the kids and then they did it again in Grand Rapids, when the kids appeared.

Cullen: And greeted people.

Smith: That made a real impression.

Cullen: That was a very nice touch for them to do that. And I guess maybe it was probably a help for them, too, because that had to be a really tough stint for all of them going through day after day after day.

Smith: In public.

Cullen: In public and trying to keep it together. Be the perfect child mourning for your father and to go and be able to talk to people and have people share experiences with them. I think that was probably helpful for them. And the people that they talked to were just so overwhelmed that the kids were there and sharing that with them.

Smith: You know, I have a theory that I think explains some of what happened that week. First of all, it was a time when the country desperately needed to feel good about itself. But, more than that, there was a whole generation that weren’t alive during the Ford presidency who were being introduced to him. Inevitably they were comparing it with more recent times. And he looked awfully good.

Cullen: Yeah. And it was like, “Wow. And people didn’t reelect this guy? What’s the matter?”

Smith: Here’s a guy who was going to stake his reelection on a point that was unpopular at the time.

Cullen: Who did what he felt was right. Unpopular at the time, but I think we all sort of agree now that it was what had to be done. Everyone outside our little
circle has come to that conclusion too. And, well, you know, getting the award from the Kennedy Center for Public Policy—

Cullen: I’d gone out to California and we were doing funeral planner, and I think we were out there doing maybe updating some stuff of his but working on her plan. Susan was there, so it, well, I still don’t know which one it was, and Mrs. Ford asked me and Susan to come over to the house and have lunch. And Sue went over, the four of us sat there. We had a very nice lunch, chatted about stuff, but it was at a point where he was starting to not get around real steadily. And he got up from the table in the dining room and was headed back down to the sitting area and suddenly felt a little woozy so Susan and I grabbed a chair and put it down out in the hallway so he could sit down. And then he would get up and take a few more steps. At this point, Susan had him on one arm, and I had him on one arm and Mrs. Ford would kind of jockey a chair along and then he’d sit down and we got him downstairs and we got him into the bedroom and he said, “I really think I’ll stretch out on the bed for a little while.” And Susan left the room to go maybe get a glass of water or something and I was there by myself and I said, “Is there anything I can get for you?” He said, “Well, I’ve got some eye shade things I like to wear during the day and the quilt that’s at the foot of the bed, would you pull that up over me?” And I pulled the quilt up and he took my hand and just kind of held it between his two hands on the side of the bed and said, “This is nice. It’s just like you never left.”

Smith: The Kennedy imprimatur, it’s funny, he said, “For twenty years everywhere I’ve gone, people asked the same questions and now they don’t ask anymore.” It was almost like flipping a switch and it was a gutsy thing on the part of the Kennedys to do. It really was.

Cullen: Oh, it was. Well, and that’s another friendship that people probably weren’t aware of. His office and John Kennedy’s office were right next to each other for a few years anyway, when he first went into Congress. And Edward Kennedy has always been so kind and respectful to the two of them that, you know, like the first couple of times I was around him, I was like, “Where is
this old buddy stuff coming from?”, but I think it kind of stems from the relationship they had with his brother.

Smith: And of course Carolyn came to the library rededication and her brother interviewed President Ford for the magazine.

Cullen: It was one of the first interviews, wasn’t it?

Smith: I think so.

Cullen: Yeah.

Smith: And I think at that point, too, President Ford was one of the dwindling number of people who really had known his dad, so I think he was really interested in coming back for the personal level, but they seemed to really hit it off. But, you’re right, the one thing that appeared at the time of his death that I took exception to - and I’ve since talked to Jon Meacham about it - in *Newsweek* and, frankly, it was a very nice story, but it left the suggestion that he had deliberately cultivated liberal historians to sort of shape his legacy.

And, you know, there was no one in the world who gave less thought to how he would be portrayed in future history books.

Cullen: I think he definitely was, “I am what I am. You all interpret it as you will, but I’m not going to try and color it one way or the other.”

Smith: Part of it was he was accessible to pretty much anyone who wanted to see him. There weren’t a lot of conservative historians. I mean, by that point, they were all sort of Reaganites and they weren’t interested in writing about Gerald Ford. But the fact that people like Bob Woodward, who in some ways was a precursor to the Kennedy library, the fact that Woodward would come around. And Richard Reeves in the mid-1990s, who wrote a piece for *American Heritage* called *I’m Sorry Mr. President*. He had written a very unflattering book during the Ford presidency. But anyway, to counter that notion that he somehow was orchestrating this, he wasn’t going to go to the Kennedy Library. He truly was not going to go and I remember getting a call from Ken Duberstein on behalf of the family, saying, “Is there anything that can be done?” And I said, “The one person who can persuade him is Mrs.
Ford. She will realize right away in a way that he might not just how significant this is.”

Cullen: How significant, yes. That he was asked to do that. I mean, I’m so glad he did.

Smith: You know, it’s funny, because she got the Medal of Freedom before he did. I mean, she got a lot of public recognition and yet he seems to have been delighted by this.

Cullen: He loved it. He loved the recognition that she got. He was so proud of what she did. I mean, their relationship, they were so in love through all those years and all the ups and downs that when she was getting the accolades, he was more than willing to stand back and be Betty Ford’s husband. I mean, and he used to joke about the fact, “Well, I only made it to President. She made it to Chairman of the Board.”

Smith: I’ve heard stories about the annual reunion event at the Center, he could be seen cooking hotdogs. I mean, he supported her role.

Cullen: Oh, yes. He definitely was the dutiful supporting husband at those things and as I said more than willing to take a step back and let her have the spotlight. He had no qualms about that. He glowed from the reflective glow, I guess.

Smith: But then you wonder if she was in turn pleased when late in life strings were pulled with the Clinton White House to assure that on the 25th anniversary of his inauguration, he received the Medal of Freedom. And it coincided a couple of days before the op-ed piece in the Times about affirmative action citing his black friend at the University of Michigan and all of that. There were a bunch of people getting the award that day, but in ways that hadn’t been predicted, he sort of was lionized.

Cullen: The centerpiece.

Smith: Exactly, because of his recent activities. I assume she was as pleased by that as he was by her.
Cullen: Oh, yeah. I think she really liked the fact that with those more recent accolades, proving that he had not been forgotten. That, you know, being President for a short period of time did not mean that his service wasn’t worth what other people’s were. And I think as we’ve looked back over the years, the time that he was there, there was a lot that went on. And there is a lot that has happened since that the players are a reflection of his White House.

Smith: What were her politics?

Cullen: Well, President Ford is dead now, so she’s not voting the way he told her to, but she didn’t then either. He was very dutiful in his support of the Republican Party throughout his entire life. And I came out there as a dutiful registered Republican and she was a dutiful registered Republican. We always voted absentee because we never knew what was going to happen with the schedule and where we were going to be so we always got absentee ballots. And before we would do our ballots, he would sit down with the two of us and go over in great detail why this Republican candidate we should vote for and we would go out of the room and kind of go, “Pfft.” And vote the way we wanted to. And we never told him about it, but I think we probably had a majority of other ticket votes in a lot of cases. But we’d listen, we nodded our heads, we said, “Oh, yes, thank you so much. We appreciate your advice” and then we would go and do what we pleased.

Smith: Do you know if she voted in the last year’s election?

Cullen: I have no idea. I have no idea.

Smith: She once told me, it was interesting, we were just chatting and out of the blue, she said, “You know, I don’t know why people thought it was surprising,” almost as if it was something she wasn’t allowed to talk about, but just as a matter of course, she always had huge admiration for Eleanor Roosevelt. And she went on about why she thought she was such a great lady.

Cullen: Big deal, her husband was a Democrat. So what?! Yeah, I think she really didn’t break things down into party lines very well.
Smith: It’s interesting because, of course, the party moved to the Right, particularly on cultural issues and all of that.

Cullen: Boy, you aren’t kidding.

Smith: And they were marooned and long before he died every four years they would be a lonely kind of outpost.

Cullen: Yeah, that moderate Republican that had no base anymore.

Smith: And, you know, there was the abortion issue and also he’s the only President ever to side sign a gay rights petition.

Cullen: Mhmm.

Smith: Now, did he change? Did she influence his change? Or how much of it is just by contrast with where the party went? Or is there some mix of the three?

Cullen: Well, maybe a mix of the three. I guess I mean, the party changed and they were where they were and they stayed where they were. They did not choose to change with the way the party went. And I think she did influence him to a degree, you know, particularly with women’s rights issues, maybe even gay rights, but I think they both were people who saw people as people. Who didn’t see them as this person goes in this category and this person goes in that category. And they had friends who were just they were their friends. It didn’t matter where they came from, where they’re going, what they were sexually, professionally, politically. They just enjoyed people and I think they just had that respect for other individuals that it didn’t matter to them.

Smith: I also have thought, the older I get the more I realize ideology matters less than generational. Generational factors trump everything. And he was a conservative of a certain generation where he was clearly fiscally conservative, I mean, he was tight fiscally. Let’s face it.

Cullen: Professionally and personally.

Smith: Yes. But obviously an internationalist, but then there was this whole host of what now are called social issues which basically people had a decent reticence about. You didn’t talk about abortion. You didn’t talk about sexual
preference and maybe we should’ve. But nevertheless, he was a consistent conservative in that he had a healthy skepticism of the government being involved particularly if it was the boardroom or the bedroom.

Cullen: Yeah.

Smith: Unlike today’s “conservatives” who hate the government, but they’re perfectly willing to enlist it in their cause.

Cullen: Yes, absolutely and I guess those were issues, you know, it’s like the whole pardon thing. You do what’s right. And that’s the way they both were about abortion and gay rights. You do what is the right thing to do. You don’t question your own feelings. If your feeling is that people deserve their individual rights, if women deserve the right to choose, then, by God, speak up for it. You can’t just have that and tiptoe around it and have people think you think something else, perhaps, because you’re not speaking up. I think it was what they believed, so it was what they said.

Smith: Were there issues on which they disagreed or subjects, humorously or otherwise?

Cullen: I’m trying to think. I mean, I’m sure there were things like how much time he spent on the golf course, but if he won, she got the money, so that kind of eased it off.

Smith: Really?

Cullen: Yeah, when there would be bets on the golf course, if he won, he would come in and say, “Okay, here, this is for you.” And, believe me, it wasn’t much. It wasn’t like they were playing $1,000 a hole or anything.

Smith: That gets back to the frugality.

Cullen: Yes, I mean, he and Bob Hope bet maybe 50 cents a hole or something.

Smith: By the way, I wonder how much of a cautionary tale there was for them in seeing Hope in his last years, and how he was dragged out in public at a time when—
Cullen: Oh, it was painful. I guess President and Mrs. Ford - their feeling was, “If that’s what the Hopes wanted to do, more power to them.” And I think, you know, maybe for Delores Hope it was that Bob had always been so in the public eye, he still, even though he was not in the best condition to be in the public eye, she knew that he still enjoyed it. But, yeah, President and Mrs. Ford, I think, were very aware of the decline and not wanting to have the pictures and the press gathering. You know, the deathwatch kind of thing.

Smith: That’s fascinating you say that because I can’t tell you how many conversations I had with Penny during those last few years. Once was I actually able to use some contact with ABC to get one camera crew out of the neighborhood. You certainly can understand their feelings, but they were kind of public property. How do you balance?

Cullen: Yeah, how do you balance it? But there needs to be a degree of respect, I guess, for when people get to a point in their life where they don’t view themselves as there for public consumption anymore. And I think that limit is when you are in your declining years. There should be the respect and the dignity afforded you that you get to choose how you go out. That it’s not gory details and helicopters hovering over, hoping they’re going to see you fall out of your chair on the back porch or something.

Smith: Well, and let’s face it, talk about ethical - apparently sources at the hospital who would tip off the media.

Cullen: Oh, yeah, “He’s here!” Yeah.

Smith: That must’ve been frustrating.

Cullen: I don’t know if they’ve ever figured out who that was, but there’s all sorts of stuff that goes on now. So that whoever that person is, they’re not going to know if she’s ever over there.

Smith: Maybe I shouldn’t bring this up, but remember Father—

Cullen: Certain?

Smith: Yeah, whose 15 minutes were kind of—
Cullen: Oh, his 15 minutes were expanded as far as he could expand them. Yes. You know, it’s such a shame because he is such a good priest. I mean, he was such a good priest and he did such a nice service, but he just didn’t understand when he was told, “Keep your mouth shut.” He just, “It does not apply to me somehow.” I think he understands now. So, yeah, that was really uncomfortable for everybody. “Quick, turn on the news this morning! He’s there again! Didn’t someone just talk to him yesterday??”

Smith: They valued their privacy? Or maybe a better way of saying it was they valued their dignity.

Cullen: They valued their dignity. I mean, I think they both really understood that their privacy was something that they had pretty much given up. I mean, they had Secret Service for all those years. They had me running in and out of their bathrooms. You know, stuff that regular people would be going, “What are you doing here??” So their privacy had been shot, but their dignity - and I think everybody gets to have respect - and that’s all that they were asking for in those last few months of his life. That he had given so much to this country that, you know, let him decide how this is going to end.

Smith: I take it that must have really been her life at that point, caring for him.

Cullen: Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. I don’t think she really left the house much at all. I mean, she might have gone once a week to get her hair done or something so that she would look nice for him. But that became her job, to make sure that he was taken care of, that he was comfortable, that he had a companion there to talk to, play gin rummy with, you know, watch television with, eat his meals with. That was her role.

Smith: And they insisted on going to Vail.

Cullen: And no one could talk them out of it. I mean, everybody tried. But, you know, they loved the house up there. They both loved the house. They loved the people up there. It was a wonderful life up there.

Smith: And by all accounts, they were loved, beloved.
Cullen: Oh, they were the mainstay of that community, pretty much. And they loved being there. I was very lucky in that, you know, I got dragged up every year. You know, I went up there. Penny and I would go and spend the summers up there. It’s not a bad duty to live in Rancho Mirage part of the year and Vail the other part of the year.

Smith: What was the house like?

Cullen: The house was - I’m going to say - a traditional Alpine house that grew like Topsy. It started out, I think, with maybe four bedrooms on the second level and then, when they realized that if they put a pool in the back, they were going to have to dig into the mountain. And once they had opened up the mountain, they might as well blow the back of the house out, so then there was a theater room and another bedroom and another bedroom. It probably was twice the size as they originally intended it to be, but it served their family very well because everybody could be there at Christmastime and eventually the families got big enough that they kind of only overlapped for maybe one or two nights, but they could all be there. And I think that was important to all of them. They had done it since the kids were high school age or something, whenever Vail first started, and they had had a condo in town.

Smith: And did they as late as ’95 for example, did they still, did the family gather?

Cullen: Well, I left in February of ’96, so yeah, I mean, Christmas of ’95—

Smith: Forgive me, I meant literally 2005, the year before he died, would they still be trying to assemble?

Cullen: 2005… You know, I can’t answer that question, but I sort of think so, because that summer was when they went up and they had a limited time. You know, I’m just not sure because the couple of years that they didn’t go out there was like the year that she had her heart surgery which was right before Christmas. Everybody came to the desert.

Smith: And how, I mean obviously it was serious, was it something that had been in the works for awhile or something that presumably could not be put off any longer?
Cullen: Her surgery?

Smith: Yeah.

Cullen: Yeah, it was at the time that her second book came out and I was with her doing a book tour and we used to say that the book tour was a death march with room service. And the book tour ended and we came back to the desert and she started to not feel great and, you know, didn’t think anything really seriously of it, but went in and had a check-up and they said, “Oh, wait a minute, there’s some blockage here.” And it was like, “You’ve got five days and you’re going to be in the hospital.” So she went in and they had to go in a second time because she had some, I don’t know if the stitches didn’t adhere properly or something, but all of a sudden, she started bleeding at the dining room table one night while everyone was there at Christmas, I think, because I was in Vail skiing for Christmas and suddenly got this phone call saying, “Mrs. Ford’s gone back to the hospital.” And it was taken care of but then she got a staph infection which was quite lovely.

Smith: How did he handle that?

Cullen: I think he was scared to death and he didn’t quite know what to do. He wanted to make it better, but he knew he couldn’t make it better; so therefore, it just was not a good place for him to be.

Smith: I can’t imagine him imagining life without her.

Cullen: Oh, yeah.

Smith: He always assumed that he would go first.

Cullen: You know, and I think she, because of her health issues, thought that perhaps she would go first just because her body had been damaged by other things. But I think she also knew that he wouldn’t function very well without her, so it was best that it happened the way it did.

Smith: I’ve heard her quoted since as saying to someone, I guess not surprisingly, “I don’t know why I’m still here.”

Cullen: Mhmm. She doesn’t have a job anymore.
Smith: Now she’s told people she’s retired. That it’s her choice, which sounds voluntary. Must be an enormous amount of satisfaction. I mean how many people create an institution and then have the satisfaction of knowing while they’re still alive that’s its future is ensured, because Susan is doing what she’s doing?

Cullen: Absolutely and Susan’s doing a fabulous job with it. I mean, it’s been really interesting to watch Susan step into that role.

Smith: Very big shoes.

Cullen: Scary shoes, I would think.

Smith: Well, sure. Does Mrs. Ford follow the progress of the place?

Cullen: Yeah. Now, I’m not sure today if she’s following it on a day-to-day basis, but when she was chairman, she knew everything that went on at that place, much to John Schwarzlose’s chagrin on some of the occasions, I’m afraid. And after Susan took over, her mother still stayed very actively involved in what was going on. And then she tried to back off a bit. I think some people kind of wanted her to stay involved and were shuffling Susan aside, as you know, “She’s just a little girl. She can’t do this.” So, Susan had to kind of get a ramrod back and step up and say, “Wait a minute. I’m the one that’s doing this now. My mother is not and if you don’t believe me, you can ask her, because this is what she wants me to do.” And it’s worked out nicely, but it took some doing on Susan’s part, I think, because for a long, long time, she was just the Ford’s little girl and she’s not anymore.

Smith: What kind of grandparent is Mrs. Ford?

Cullen: Doting. She’s the kind of grandmother which I understand today, having a grandchild of my own, that when the grandchildren were there and she had had about enough of the noise and the commotion, she would retire to her room. She would just disappear and there were times I thought, “Don’t you want to be here playing with the kids?” But now it’s something I understand fully, it’s like, “Oh, please, quiet! Peace!”

Smith: Was the President like that as well?
Cullen: Well, he always had the office, you know, so it was, “I have to make some calls,” you know, “I’ll be back.” So he could plan his escape and everyone accepted that a little more. But she had a system and I don’t remember how it worked now, but from the time the first grandchildren were around, where they got so much money a month from grandma, and, like, half of it they could spend and half of it had to go into the bank. And as they got older, it increased and then, you know, the new grandchildren came up and then I think it got to be a pretty healthy chunk of change she was handing out there, but she thought that would be good for them to have their own money and to know that they had to put some of it away, they couldn’t blow it all.

Smith: Was she the kind of grandmother - you know, there are some kind of grandparents who could talk to grandkids about things that parents can’t.

Cullen: I would imagine that she is one of those grandmothers because I could always talk to her about anything. I mean, there was stuff I’d think, “There is no way I’d have this conversation with my mother, but having it with you is perfectly okay.” So I think, yeah, she’s very open and, you know, I think if anyone came to her with a question or concern, she certainly would not be the type to say, “Oh, no, you have to talk to your parents about that.” She would be, “Oh, you came to me. Okay, well, sit down right here and let’s chat.”

Smith: Mary Fisher told us that I think she may actually have told Mrs. Ford before she told her own parents—

Cullen: That she was HIV positive.

Smith: Yes, and they cried and they laughed and then she said, “Now, you’ve got to tell the President.” And she said, “Oh, no, I can’t do that” and so on and so on. Finally she prevailed on her to do so. And it’s good because I asked her, “Did you ever see him angry?” And she said, “There were two times and one was a professional thing back at the White House” and this was the other time. She said, “He was so angry” and it’s the sort of reaction you would expect from a father, not from a friend of the family.

Cullen: Yeah. Well, when I was leaving and moving back to the East Coast, Susan had called me and said, “Hey, since you’re going to drive back, I’ll fly out to
the desert and I’ll drive back with you.” Well, after President and Mrs. Ford found out that we had this plan, I mean, neither one of us was a 20-year old little innocent. I was 50-years old, I think, at the time. Well, maybe not quite that old, but I was getting close. And the intercom rings and he says, “Ann, would you come into my office?” “Okay, what have I done now?” And he said, “Sit down for a minute.” So I sit down across from him at the desk and he says, “Now, I understand from Susan that the two of you are planning to drive across country. It’s not going to happen. There are axe murders,” and, I mean, he went through this whole tirade of, “You girls cannot do that. You can’t.” And I finally said, “Well, sir, okay, I guess you can tell Susan that she can’t do it, but I’ve got a car and a couple of cats and I’m going to have to figure a way to get across country somehow.” So, and this is off the record, Susan and I drove across country and he never knew.

Smith: Do you think he was sensitive, I assume she was, to this public impression about his clumsiness - you know, the whole Chevy Chase business by contrast with his real athleticism?

Cullen: I think it ticked her off. I think he just kind of was, “Pfft.” It was no big deal. And I remember one time there was some event in LA where Chevy Chase was there and they ended up sitting up at the same table together or something and he gave him a hard time about the hard time that Chevy Chase gave him about falling down. You know, I think he just kind of thought, “Well, the photographers were there, they took the pictures, you can’t refute that. I know what I’m capable of doing.” But I think she hated the fact that people always brought that up.

Smith: He was astonishingly comfortable in his own skin.

Cullen: He was. He knew himself so well and was so comfortable and just, you know, “Take a pot shot, I know who I am. It doesn’t bother me.” I mean, that always was my read on him - he didn’t care what people thought because he knew who he was.

Smith: Just a couple other things and we’ll wind up.
Do you have any other memories of that last week either at the cathedral or Grand Rapids? For example, I’m sure you’ve done this when you were in a position like that, I remember when I was talking, just being in a fog. You know, I was just focused. They were sitting right in front of me, which in some ways makes it harder.

Cullen: But the rest is just a blur.

Smith: Exactly. But I remember that for some odd Roselyn Carter was weeping. And I thought to myself, “Talk about coming full circle. That says it all.”

Cullen: Well, I thought President Carter, the way he started and ended his eulogy with the line from his inaugural address, that was so touching. And when President Bush, Sr. went up to do his eulogy and he walked by the casket and tapped it, I thought that was—

Smith: And you knew he didn’t want to break down.

Cullen: Mhmm. And there were a couple of times he kind of—

Smith: Exactly. Yeah.

Cullen: Yeah, the evening in California with the public viewing, I went over late one night with Greg Willard. We had heard about the crowd that was there and we wanted to see it. And we walked over. The Secret Service was around the side, and we walked into the church, where a huge line of people was waiting. And there was a Marine standing in line. I remember this exactly correctly. There was a rope across so that people could just walk up near the casket, and then they had to move off to the sides. Greg went up to this young Marine in uniform and said, “Sir, why don’t you come with me?” And I walked up with the Marine and Greg. Greg took the stanchion down and walked us right next to the casket. The Marine stood there for a moment, then came to attention and snapped a salute. I thought I was going to fall down with emotion!

Smith: What kind of relationship did they have with the Secret Service?

Cullen: Love/hate.

Smith: That’s an honest answer.
Cullen: For the most part, I think they really liked the people that were in the Secret Service. They respected the job they were doing, but there were times they just wished they would get lost.

Smith: Just because of the intrusion?

Cullen: The fact that they had to know every second of their lives. But they also recognized that how would they have gotten around without them? Neither one of them had a driver’s license, and having been on a golf cart with him once when he was driving, it was a good thing.

Smith: What do you think they’d think about Squeaky Fromme being released?

Cullen: You know, I wonder if Mrs. Ford’s even aware of it. I mean, I’m sure she reads the paper and watches the news.

Smith: And, of course, Sara Jane Moore recently.

Cullen: Yeah, uhm, I don’t know what she would think of it. Maybe, “You’ve served your time” and I’m sure at the time she was scared to death when all that was happening.

Smith: That gave her a particular - I don’t know how you would ever fully shake - that sense of vulnerability.

Cullen: Yeah.

Smith: Having been through it twice. So that even long after you’ve left office, there’s still this lingering.

Cullen: That fear. And, you know, there are always nuts out there. And, you know, at the time that I guess when the first sort of terrorist attacks were going on and suddenly out in front of the office there were the concrete buttresses and all that stuff going on and you thought, “Boy, it just kind of never ends.”

Smith: The other thing is I’ve heard stories about how every week, one day a week, he’d set aside for autographing.

Cullen: With Lee and they would just sit there and sign and sign and sign.
Smith: And people have no idea. And on occasion, she would go in. He would be the goad, “Now, mother, you’ve got to…” and they would be at the opposite ends of the table with their piles and I’ve often thought about that as a metaphor because once he was removed, once that goad disappeared, if her life would change in ways more than most. I mean, most widows have the luxury of living a private life.

Cullen: Yes, and I think she tries to live and fairly successfully to this point has chosen to live a private life. She kind of dedicates herself now to children and grandchildren and that’s the visiting that she does.

Smith: And I assume there’s just the fundamental fact that when you’re 91, you’ve probably outlived most of your friends.

Cullen: And there is that. I think that’s got to be a hard thing for her because like Lee Annenberg has just died recently. Delores Hope is still around, but I certainly don’t think they see each other because Delores is not able to get around as much and certainly Mrs. Ford is not going out to parties and out for dinner. And so, yeah, they both had outlived a large, large percentage of their friends.

Smith: I had a sense and I don’t want to exaggerate it, but in the times that I was around them - that they really made an effort to surround themselves with younger people.

Cullen: Well, I don’t know if they really made an effort or if they just liked people and it just got to a point that the younger people who were the ones who were kind of filling the spots that were available. You know, if you’ve got 20 friends that you’re going to have around you, you want to keep those spots filled, so younger people came in and they enjoyed that. I don’t think they really necessarily sought out, “Okay, we need younger friends, because that’s going to keep us younger” but it was, “We’ve lost so much of our group.” And, I mean, they did so many social things. They went so many places where they could meet and get to know younger people, so that they could bring them into their group.

Smith: And all of the trappings didn’t get in the way of making new friends?
Cullen: No, because I think at first, the first time you met them it was kind of, “(gasp) This is a former President and First Lady,” and “Oh, I’ve heard so much about them,” and then after you’ve been around them a couple of times, you realize that, “These are really just genuinely nice people. I don’t have to worry about what I’m going to say. I don’t have to worry about whether my tie is straight or using the right fork or whatever. These are just people who like other people and I can be myself.”

Smith: What would make her angry?

Cullen: Me. I’m trying to think what would make her angry. What would make her angry was that she had agreed to do a speech and then she had to do it. And therefore we had to come up with the speech and therefore she had to have me give her something that she could start working on and she didn’t want to do it and so therefore I became the bad guy there for a while. But she didn’t get angry at a whole lot of things.

Smith: What would disappoint her?

Cullen: If her children, not that they failed, but if something went wrong with one of the kids that they hadn’t gotten something that they wanted, she would be disappointed for them, not in them. I don’t know what else. I guess she would be disappointed that perhaps her husband in a certain circumstance didn’t get the respect that she thought was due because, you know, she knew what a great guy he was and thought that everybody else should know what a great guy he was.

Smith: I love the image: We were told when we were out there at Rancho Mirage in the summer that on occasion they would go to the movies. And they remember she walked out of Titanic I think right after the ship hit the iceberg because she didn’t want to see the rest. And so literally she was out in the lobby.

Cullen: I’m not aware. That was after I was gone.

Smith: There’s a wonderful story someone told us, one of the gals working out there. It wasn’t Penny.
[Other]: Marie?

Smith: No, one of the women on the staff. They’d gone to a movie over the weekend and he came back from some romantic comedy and he came back and said, “You’d really like it. It’s a chick flick.”

Cullen: I’m sure he got that term from her. A ‘chick flick’. Yeah, not exactly his terminology.

Smith: Did they enjoy going out like that or was it problematic?

Cullen: It was problematic in that they couldn’t just go out and be themselves and just spend an evening enjoying being out with each other because there was always somebody that would come up and say, “Oh, can I have your autograph?” You know, they would be in a nice restaurant having dinner, just the two of them, the Secret Service discreetly over somewhere trying to be unobtrusive, and there would be someone who would come up with their napkin or something and say, “Oh, Mr. President, can I have your autograph?” And for the most part, he was pretty good about it. Every once in a while, it would just be, “Enough.”

Smith: Tell me about his temper.

Cullen: It was there and it was gone.

Smith: Summer thunderstorm.

Cullen: Yeah, it was white light and then it was calm, but you didn’t want to be in there when it was white light. Well, we used to - I don’t know if anyone else has told you that we used to - call them ‘God damn it’ days. And it would be, you know, “Oh, this is a seven ‘God damn it’ day” or “This is just a two ‘God damn it’ day.” So, when he was really upset about something, it would be “God damn it” this, “God damn it” that, and “God damn it” the other thing. And you know you wouldn’t want to go in the office if it was a seven.

Smith: That was the worst language you heard?

Cullen: Yeah, that was the very worst.
Smith: One sensed that he was genuinely offended by the Nixon tapes as much as anything else because of the language.

Cullen: Yeah, I think he just couldn’t believe that there would be that kind of talk because he just didn’t do that. I mean, as I say, “God damn it,” that was pretty much it for him. She, on the other hand, might have had a couple of other words in her vocabulary, but we won’t go into that.

Smith: One of the most moving of all of our conversations has been with Lorraine, the cook. What an extraordinary story. She never had been on an airplane and was scared to death and the President convinced her that everything was going to be fine. And then, of course, she’d never seen snow and he took her to the ski school and, you know, it’s almost a paternal feeling.

Cullen: Yeah, all of us who worked for him I think he kind of took, I mean, he and Mrs. Ford referred to themselves as my second parents to me. So I think they really felt that. There may have been people that worked for them that they didn’t have that relationship with, but there were a lot of us that they did. They felt very protective and, you know, if we were dating someone that they didn’t quite like, we heard about it.

Smith: Did you have to introduce—

Cullen: I mean, on occasion, I introduced them to people and, you know, when I would be going out with a Secret Service agent or something, I would get this look like, “Oh, you can do better than that.” But I had a good friend that I’d grown up with in Dover who was a priest at Grace Episcopal in Grand Rapids while we were doing a lot of traveling back and forth to Grand Rapids. So, when I would go to Grand Rapids with the Fords and we would be staying in the hotel, I would get in touch with John and say, “I’m going to be in town. Let’s go have a drink. Let’s go have dinner” or something. And he would come to the hotel to get me and the only deal was he had to come in full regalia, big cross, dog collar, black suit, the whole bit. And the agents would be, “What?! She’s dating a priest? What is this?!” And John and I just thought it was hysterical.

Smith: You still talk with her?
Cullen: I do on occasion. I write to her now more than I talk to her just because I think, I mean, I like to talk to her, but I think sometimes it’s tiring for me to be on the phone with her and keep asking questions and, “How are you?” and “What’s been happening?” I can tell her more about what’s going on with me if I put it in the written word and send it to her and then I call every once in a while and we just have a chat. It’s amazing how much a part of my life they both were, are.

Smith: We asked everyone how they think the Fords should be remembered historically, but in a more personal way, because you’re in a position to answer that question in a much more personal way than most, how do you remember them?

Cullen: Very kind, caring, thoughtful, just really good friends. I mean, they opened their lives to me without reservation and I think I kind of gave that back to them and we spent a lot of time together over the years I was out there and we did become very close. And I can’t believe that I had that opportunity to be with them and to do the traveling I did with them and to meet the people that I met through them and it was amazing.

Smith: Were they fun to travel with?

Cullen: They were. They could be very interesting in that he always wanted to get on the plane first and she always wanted to get on last, so it was always this big discussion in the car and then it would be, “Well, okay, God damn it. I’m getting on. You come when you’re ready.” You know, things like that, but it was fun and, yeah, I would drag cats back and forth to Vail in private planes.

Smith: You must have met lots of interesting people.

Cullen: I met lots of interesting people. Brent Scowcroft taught me to drink Saki in Tokyo. Stayed with the sultan of Oman’s cousin in Oman in his house and, you know, just amazing people that I got to meet.

Smith: Were you with them when the Clintons visited them in Vail?

Cullen: Yes.
Smith: How was that?

Cullen: That was very cordial and, you know, they stayed in the Firestone’s house next door, so, you know, it was terrace to terrace, they just had to walk across a little piece of grass to get from house to house. I do remember there was a dinner party one night that may have been down at the Betty Ford Alpine Garden and it was something for the ballet that was in town. And Mrs. Ford sat next to him, to President Clinton, at dinner and I had gone to the dinner and I rode back up to the house with them afterwards. And we were sitting around talking and I think she was getting undressed and I was in the dressing room with her and we were just sitting there talking about the evening and she said, “That is the most charming man I have ever met in my life.” So, she saw what was there apparently. And, well, Mrs. Clinton had been an intern in the Ford White House and she brought the picture, I think, to show him that had been taken. They got along very well.

Smith: Perfect. That’s perfect.
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Smith: First of all, thank you very much for doing this.

Holkeboer: This was a surprise to me to be interviewed after thirty years. I can’t remember that much.

Smith: You might be surprised what you remember.

Holkeboer: Yes, things come back to you, I guess. It used to be that once I started I couldn’t quit. But now – that’s many years ago.

Smith: We’ll test that theory. First of all, when did you go to work for Congressman Ford?

Holkeboer: I started in 1963 until 1977, I worked thirteen years.

Smith: And you were located where?

Holkeboer: First we were located in the Cannon Building, and we were ready to move to the Rayburn Building. He was made Minority Leader, and he was Minority Leader for many years. I’d have to review that, I can’t remember how many. Then he became Vice President, then he became President. So I worked with him through all those years.

Smith: What were you doing before 1963?

Holkeboer: I was a school teacher.

Smith: A school teacher where?

Holkeboer: Kalamazoo and then Grand Rapids. In school teaching they always ask you in March, are you going to come back? Now that’s the only job that does that. Are you going to come back? And every time you say, “Do I want to?” And so another girl and I decided to go Washington, D.C. No job, no place to stay
– nothing. Just our cars full of clothes and we went to Washington, D.C. We found a furnished apartment and she found a job, and I finally found a job. I had a hard time finding one because everybody wanted me to teach school. In September, there are many Jewish holidays, so they thought I should substitute. They didn’t want to hire a teacher.

But finally I found a job, and during that time Frank Meyer, who was Mr. Ford’s assistant, administrative assistant, went to the same church I did and one time I said to him, “If Mr. Ford ever needs another person, let me know ’cause I can sharpen pencils.” He called me and asked if I were interested, and then I started. This was right after Kennedy was shot and the Warren Commission. Mr. Ford was put on the Warren Commission and he needed more help in the office.

Smith: Did you have a job interview?

Holkeboer: With Mr. Ford? Yes. It was very fast.

Smith: Had you met him before?

Holkeboer: Well, only by pictures in the paper. Because I was from Grand Rapids and I saw his picture. But I had never met him personally. It was very early because he had a lot of appointments that day, and I think it was like seven or eight o’clock in the morning. I found a parking place, which was illegal, but I didn’t know that. He just said - well, I can’t really remember all the words he said, he said something like, “When can you start?” and “Even if you have a headache, you have to be nice.” I remember that. So I was a receptionist for many years, but I never had a headache.

Smith: His office was in the Cannon Building,?

Holkeboer: Cannon Building, yes.

Smith: Can you describe the office?

Holkeboer: You walked in, it was only two rooms. This was way back in ’63. It was only two rooms and there were five of us in one room, with a really tiny kitchenette. Really, it wasn’t even that. His room was a nice size and he had a
nice closet, but we were all in this one room and we were ready to move to
the Rayburn Building, which was really going to be a treat for us because
we’d have more room. When he became Minority Leader we moved to the
Capitol and we had lots of room, but we had to hire more people.

Smith: But see, that’s interesting, because in 1963 he’d been in Washington at that
point for fourteen or fifteen years.

Holkeboer: Yes, that could be.

Smith: And he had risen in the Republican hierarchy and yet, you said he still only
had two rooms.

Holkeboer: He only had two rooms. Well, everybody had two rooms, because the
Rayburn Building was just built, and when you got the office, you stayed
there. After a while, once they let him in the Rayburn Building, he had his
pick because he had been there so long. So he could pick a nice office. Also
that’s all done by numbers. I can’t recall how it’s all done, but if you come
that year, then you draw a number and then you have a choice.

Smith: With seniority factored in there somewhere.

Holkeboer: Something like that, yes.

Smith: Tell me again, you said there were five. Who were the five? What were their
functions?

Holkeboer: There was Mildred Leonard, who has passed away. Frank Meyer has passed
away.

Smith: What was Mildred Leonard’s role?

Holkeboer: She was the executive secretary, or his personal secretary. Then there was Jim
Bersie.

Smith: What was his function?

Holkeboer: Well, I really can’t describe everybody’s function because we all worked
together. So if one had a job to do, we’d all work at it. I really can’t describe
everybody’s job. I do know that Ruth Kilmer - Frank Meyer dictated to her every afternoon and she typed the letters the next day.

Smith: Was there a lot of constituent mail?

Holkeboer: Yes.

Smith: I assume it was very important to answer constituent mail?

Holkeboer: Oh, yes. He answered every one of them. Then he, himself, signed them. No machine at all. He signed his mail. Who beside Jim Bersie and myself? Like I say, giving us each a job – except Ruth, she was the secretary because she took the dictation. What Jim and I did, I don’t know. Every day just flew – I don’t know what we did.

Smith: In addition to constituent mail, there must have been constituent services. People from the district must have wanted things.

Holkeboer: We had somebody in Grand Rapids. You know, I don’t know who they were. I can’t remember. Elaine somebody, Gordon Vander Till. Elaine handled that office alone for quite some time. Then when it was election time, one of us or two of us, would come to Grand Rapids to help her. I did that a couple of times and I loved it.

Smith: What did you like about that?

Holkeboer: I don’t know, I guess just being back home for a little while. He would have these town meetings and I would go along with him, try to get there before he did and lay out all the paperwork or whatever he wanted. Then the people would come in to see him. They really didn’t have appointments, they just knew he was going to be there. As soon as our time was up he would get in his car and I’d have to first gather all that material and take it to the next spot. I don’t know, it was kind of challenging, kind of adventuresome. It was different than being in the office in Washington.

Smith: Did people come looking for things? People who wanted favors, wanted help from the government?
Holkeboer: Oh yes, people wanted everything. People thought that they could get everything from their Congressman. I often said to people, “Don’t go to a lawyer, go to your Congressman. He’ll help you,” because they asked for everything. I can’t remember the things they asked for, but I was sometimes just amazed what they asked for. And so, since then, I’ll have to admit, I’ve been a little bolder about things, too.

Smith: You never really had a tough reelection campaign. He was from a reasonably safe district.

Holkeboer: No. He never did, but he worked hard to let the people know he was there for them. No, I don’t think he ever had a hard election.

Smith: The story is that he tried to get home as often as he could.

Holkeboer: Yes he did, almost every weekend. Of course, Betty didn’t like that too well. So one time he decided to stay home that weekend. The kids all had plans, so there he was, the kids were gone. So he says, “I stayed home and the kids all had their own activities.” It was kind of funny. No, he got back here as much as he could, and as often as he could.

Smith: Did you get to know Mrs. Ford?

Holkeboer: Yes, quite well.

Smith: Tell me about that.

Holkeboer: She was taking care of the four kids. When I was there the kids were young, six, eight, ten, twelve. They were young and sometimes she’d have her hands full. One of them liked animals and she found a snake in somebody’s bedroom. She about hit the ceiling, and so she called the office, “What am I going to do? There’s a snake in the bedroom!” I don’t know if that was Susie’s – Susan loved animals –

Smith: And Steve, too –

Holkeboer: Maybe it was Steve’s. One of the little kids liked animals and she found a snake in the bedroom. She was very upset.
Smith: Politics is a lot of snakes in the grass, but not usually snakes in the bedroom.

Holkeboer: This is a REAL snake. I don’t know what she did after that but we tried to calm her down. She’d come to the office often, all dressed up to go to an event in the evening because they always went out at night to something.

Smith: She liked clothes, didn’t she?

Holkeboer: Oh, she loved clothes. Oh, yes. And she went to somebody named – she went to a special shop, but I can’t think of the name of it. Frankie’s? I can’t think of the name of it. She loved clothes and she always looked nice, very nice.

Smith: Maury Dejonge was in here earlier today and he had a photo, it was so funny, because it was emblematic of the era. It is 1975 and he is talking to the President. He was wearing this plaid jacket and striped trousers and it was pretty clear that Mrs. Ford from time to time would put her foot down and say, “You’re not wearing that suit.”

Holkeboer: He wasn’t that clothes conscious, I don’t think. But she was. But of course he left home before she got out of bed, because he was at work at seven or eight in the morning. He was there early and stayed late. We had somebody in the staff come in about ten or eleven and leave at seven or eight so that there would be somebody there when he was still there.

Smith: I take it most weekends he would travel?

Holkeboer: Most weekends. I would say most weekends. Yes. There was a time, and this time was before me, I think, that the Congress got out in June and didn’t go back in again until January, but I’m not quite sure of the facts. The whole family would move back here, kids and all. They had a house. The first part of the school year the kids were here, the second part they were in Alexandria. But after awhile they found out that wasn’t too good for the kids. So then they just didn’t come here again. And Congress didn’t get out until August and started right away in September, so it doesn’t have that long recess it used to. But that was before my time.

Smith: After the Kennedy assassination, the Warren Commission must have consumed a fair amount of his time.
Holkeboer: Yes, it did.

Smith: How much of a factor was that in your daily existence? Did he have any extra help because of that?

Holkeboer: No, but the whole committee had help. The help was within the committee. They had their own help, but thinking back – see, I was hired right around that time, so it was a whole new thing to me. And if we didn’t see him, I wasn’t too aware of it because there was so much to do and so much to learn.

Smith: Did he talk about it at all?

Holkeboer: No, not very much. No, not to me. He might have talked to his AA, administrative assistant, but not to me, no.

Smith: There is this legend out there that LBJ said awful things. It is interesting, if you do the math, he asked Ford to be on the Warren Commission long before Ford was Minority Leader, when he was just another Republican Congressman from Michigan. There had to be something that Johnson saw in him.

Holkeboer: He knew he was an intelligent man and I think he wished that he was a Democrat instead of a Republican.

Smith: Did you ever see them together?

Holkeboer: No. One time the President called, so I said to Mr. Ford, “The President is on the phone,” and all of us were kind of shocked. What’s a president calling Mr. Ford for? I never did find out, because that’s all their business and not mine. Secret business. We were all kind of shocked that Johnson called Mr. Ford.

Smith: Now I assume that began to change. In ’64 we had the Goldwater disaster and that’s really what set up the whole race for Minority Leader against Charlie Halleck.

Holkeboer: Yes, that’s right. But he only won by a few points, a few votes.

Smith: What was the view of Halleck?
Holkeboer: I don’t know because I just came at that time. All I can remember is he was an older man; I don’t how old he really was; he was not doing his work like he should. But I don’t know.

Smith: Almost a generational thing, as much as anything.

Holkeboer: I think so. I think he was getting tired and worn out. But I don’t know because that’s when I came.

Smith: Do you remember when Ford, he obviously had to let you all know, that he was going to run for this?

Holkeboer: Yes, we were all excited and when he won we were all excited. But, what do you do? Jump for joy! But we also knew that it was going to be more work and more of a burden. It was a busy life.

Smith: He also took a risk, because if he lost, let’s face it, the guy he ran against probably wouldn’t forget it.

Holkeboer: No, he wouldn’t. Yes, you don’t think of those things, do you? I think I’m going to win!

Smith: Do you think he was an ambitious man?

Holkeboer: Oh yes. Yes, he wanted to be Speaker of the House. That was his one job – that’s a job he wanted, but he never got it. But he got to be President. But he always wanted to be Speaker.

Smith: How did things change once you moved into the Minority Leader’s office – where was it?

Holkeboer: It was bigger. It was in the Capitol, in the corner and we had one room for the reception and Mildred and Frank and I were in that room next to his. In the back there was Dorothy and Charlene and Ruth and Jim and Jo Wilson, and then in another room was Paul Miltich, because he was the Press Secretary, he wanted a room of his own. And then in another room was George, George something. He opened the mail, and just took care of a lot of things for us.

Smith: Did he still sign every letter.
Holkeboer: He always signed the letters. Because he had a limousine he signed them to and from work, from home. Yes, he signed them. In the limousine he was busy signing letters. Yes, he always signed his own letters. Until he became President, then I don’t think he did anymore.

Smith: And of course there was the famous Ev and Jerry Show. Everett Dirksen.

Holkeboer: Yes, Everett Dirksen. But that was always on the Senate side. We just had to help Mr. Ford gather material so he would have it for it - but I never saw it because that was during working hours that he was doing it. And it was on the Senate side.

Smith: I guess I didn’t realize that it was exclusively on the Senate side.

Holkeboer: Yes, I think it’s because Ev was there, Ev Dirksen was there longer and he was older…

Smith: He was a bit of a character, wasn’t he?

Holkeboer: Yes, he was.

Smith: Let me ask you something, and I’m not looking for names, I’m just trying to get a sense of the House culture of those days and maybe a little bit of the contrast that Jerry Ford represented. You hear stories about a lot of drinking that went on, and there was a certain amount of skirt chasing that went on. A lot of things that didn’t get reported, and he clearly stood apart from that culture, and yet he was able to get along with them all.

Holkeboer: He got along with everybody. Betty told us when she married she knew she never had to worry about another woman. The only thing she had to worry about was that he was a workaholic – and that he would work too much. That was true. He worked all the time. But, no, I worked for Mr. Ford and then after I lost that job, I worked for Jim Leach, and I was really blessed by working with two great men. Both of them were good men, and honest men, and fair. And thoughtful, both of them. I don’t know how I was so blessed to work with two good men. I don’t think I could stand it if I worked with a Congressman who ran around.
Smith: Were there Congressmen who ran around?

Holkeboer: Sure there were. We knew it, and the secretaries – you know, they played the field, some of them. They dressed up, they were gorgeous, you know. What can you do?

Smith: And a lot of drinking?

Holkeboer: I think there was, but not Mr. Ford. If he had one drink, maybe two, I think that would take him all evening. Only because he knew he shouldn’t have more. No, no, I never thought Mr. Ford, shall we say, drank too much, never.

Smith: Now his counterpart, was it Hale Boggs? I think the Democratic -

Holkeboer: Yes, he was killed in an airplane accident. We never heard…they never found them, did they? They never found them.

Smith: And then there was Tip O’Neill.

Holkeboer: Oh, yes.

Smith: Now that clearly was a very special relationship.

Holkeboer: Yes it was. He got along real well with Tip O’Neill, but you know, I never saw the two together, but maybe they were together in the House. I never really saw them together, but I knew they got along real well.

Smith: Can you explain, because I think people, in today’s political culture, would find it hard to believe that there was a time when people could be very partisan, and very loyal to their party, and go hammer and tongs all day long, and after dinner adjourn and become friends.

Holkeboer: Yes, I don’t know, I can’t explain that either. I think it is the character of the person, their self. Mr. Ford was one that always wanted to stay friends, didn’t want arguments and after something was done where they had big disagreements, he would come and shake the person’s hand and discuss it with him. But he never was one to hold a grudge, never was one to say, “I’m never talking to you again.” But lot of these things happened on the floor of the House and you don’t see that in the office.
Smith: And of course there was no television in those days.

Holkeboer: No there wasn’t. Sometimes those were the good old days.

Smith: I want your opinion – I wonder what television has done to the Congress.

Holkeboer: Well, I really don’t know. I think it is good to have. They may have it so that you can see what is happening on the floor. You really don’t have to go to the floor until it is time to vote. Which, I don’t know if that’s good or bad. I don’t know.

Smith: One also senses that in those days, before all the Watergate reforms, people were more loyal to their party. There was more party identification. The seniority system was stronger, there was handful of old bulls who called the shots.

Holkeboer: Yes, I think so. Mr. Ford had three or four real strong friends.

Smith: Who were some of his friends?

Holkeboer: All I can think of was Arends, Les Arends. That’s the only one I can think of. Do you know some of them?

Smith: Les Arends was from Illinois.

Holkeboer: I can’t think of another. I can see them, but I can’t –

Smith: Mel Laird.

Holkeboer: Oh, Mel Laird, of course. Yes. Anyone else? You know them better than I do. As soon as you say the name, I say yes. Mel Laird became Secretary of Defense, I think, when Mr. Ford was president.

Smith: There was Don Rumsfeld.

Holkeboer: Yes, he was another good friend. And so was Cheney.

Smith: And Bob Dole.
Holkeboer: Bob Dole, yes, but he’s on the Senate side again. We got to know Mel and Rumsfeld and Cheney quite well and, all I can say is, they are changed people. They’ve changed.

Smith: Did he have any enemies?

Holkeboer: If so, we didn’t know about it. There might be people who disliked him, but as far as an enemy is concerned, I don’t think so. I don’t think he gave people a chance to be an enemy.

Smith: When the Warren Commission came out with its report, almost from the beginning, there were people who doubted it. What was his reaction to all that? Was there a lot of mail, for example?

Holkeboer: As I said, I just started when he was chosen for the Warren Commission. I just started, so everything was so new to me, everything he did or said was, “huh?” like that. If I had been there for a few years maybe I could answer that question a little better. Because right after he became Minority Leader we had to move and then he was on the Warren Commission, and he was gone all the time. You know, I don’t know where they met. I really don’t. He had the full text, I know, in his bookcase there, right in our room. And we each got a book, signed by him about the Warren Commission. I still have it. I still have things he gave me. They are very valuable to me.

Smith: What was he like as a boss?

Holkeboer: Oh, I think he was wonderful. But, you know, look at it this way, the AA is really the boss, is really the one who tells everyone what to do, and if they’ve done a good job. Then Mr. Ford would tell us, you’re good, or glad to have you here, or you did a good job. On the whole, it was Frank Meyer who was our boss. The AA is the boss. But Mr. Ford knows what goes on because the AA tells him all about it.

Smith: Tell us about Frank Meyer – what was he like, how did he do his job?

Holkeboer: He was another workaholic. They met in Grand Haven. He was a school teacher there, and Mr. Ford brought him in. He was my boss as soon as I came, Mr. Meyer was. Like I say, he was a workaholic, he expected you to
get your work done. But he was very nice about it, and very helpful. What more do you say? You know yourself you had to get your work done. If you didn’t get it done today, there would be more tomorrow.

Smith: With all of these increasing demands on his time, it must have been harder for people to just walk in off the street to see him.

Holkeboer: Yes, they very seldom did. Once he became Minority Leader he wasn’t in the office that much. We saw them, we made them as comfortable as we could, showed them the office. In fact, I took pictures of people in Mr. Ford’s chair. They thought that was the berries. We showed them the Prayer Room and little things like that and that helped a lot. Showed them our offices, but he very seldom saw constituents that walked in, because he was always at committee meetings or on the floor or somewhere.

Smith: Now, Mrs. Ford, I know at some point, maybe it was earlier, but she would take constituents on trips to Mt. Vernon and that sort of thing.

Holkeboer: No, she didn’t do that when I – I don’t think she was too well when I was working there. And I’m not sure if it was her back – she wasn’t too well. In those days you could help out and I sometimes took the kids to get haircuts or to get this or to do that, because she couldn’t drive. I think it was her back. I’m not too sure it was her back.

Smith: We also heard the kids talk about on weekends, their dad would take them in, when he’d go into the office. And they would play with stuff,

Holkeboer: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

Smith: Remember that?

Holkeboer: Yes, we do, because they would take all the things off the top of our desk and hide them, or exchange names, we had name plates, so my name might be in somebody else’s desk and all the little items that you just kind of keep on your desk – they were gone. So we got quite used to putting the things in our drawers, so the kids couldn’t exchange them. Mr. Ford would come in on Monday and say, “I had Susan and Steve with me here on Saturday,” and go right into his office. He knew that they had been up to something. But it didn’t
take us long, but the kids would come and they kind of liked fussing at
everybody’s desk.

Smith: Was he good with the kids?

Holkeboer: Yes, he was good, very helpful and very patient. And the kids loved him.

Smith: Now tell us the story that we’ve heard about the bribe.

Holkeboer: Winter, Winter, what was his name?

Smith: Winter Berger.

Holkeboer: Winter Berger, oh yes.

Smith: His name would surface later on.

Holkeboer: Yes, it surfaced. Oh, yes. He would come in and,

Smith: Who was he?

Holkeboer: I don’t know, I think he came from New York. He was recommended by
somebody who was a good friend of Mr. Ford, so we had no idea that this
man was going to do what he did. He had an appointment with Mr. Ford. I can
see him sitting on the couch.

Smith: What did he look like?

Holkeboer: Short, kind of dark hair, and long face. He was short. Then he came again and
he gave all of us girls something. I have a little compact, but I’m not the one
that had to go to the hearings of Mr. Ford to become Vice President. Esther
Dukov was that, and he had said that he gave Esther Dukov a billfold with a
hundred dollars or something in it. I don’t remember the amount. So she had
to go to the hearing and swear that there was no money in her billfold. I know
he gave me a compact, I wonder what I was supposed to do with that. I don’t
know whether I still have it or not. Then he disappeared.

Smith: The bribe story, what happened? He went in to see the Congressman?

Holkeboer: I don’t know. I don’t quite know the story about it.
Smith: The way Maury Dejonge reconstructed it, this guy came in and basically tried to bribe him. It took 15 seconds for him to tell him to get out of his office and never show his face again.

Holkeboer: That must have been the second visit, because this opportunity to give us a gift was another time. It wasn’t the first. So he must have come again. Then it came up again when he was sworn in as Vice President. Then Winter Berger came to the hearings, or he had to testify. That’s when poor Esther was caught.

Smith: The lead up to his nomination as Vice President, there must have been sort of speculation in the office.

Holkeboer: Yes, yes.

Smith: Agnew was in trouble.

Holkeboer: Yes, but we didn’t think he [Mr. Nixon] would choose Mr. Ford because he needed Mr. Ford in the House. He needed him there for the Republicans. So we thought it would be Rumsfeld, and we thought – Rumsfeld, I think at that time was in England or something or abroad – and we were quite shocked that night. At least I was, when it was announced about nine o’clock at night.

Smith: You found out from TV?

Holkeboer: Yes, we found out from TV. I think it was about as as it could be. So the next morning I come to work and it’s full of security people and I thought, oh what’s happening? This was all so new to us.

Smith: The next day he went to the Red Flannel Parade in Cedar Springs.

Holkeboer: That’s right. He said I promised and I do that every year and I’m going to do that again. So he did. I don’t know what happened there, but he insisted that even though he was Vice President, he was going to the Red Flannel Parade. I don’t know what happened at the parade.

Smith: How did things change?

Holkeboer: Well, we had to move.
Smith: I assume he didn’t change.

Holkeboer: No. We had to move and I was in his office in the Senate side because he was also President of the Senate. He had an office. So two or three of us were put in that office. Charlene and Jo and me, and we were with Walter Mote. He was the boss and we stayed there for a while. Then he became President and then I went to the White House and we were put into a small room with no windows and I think two of us were put into this small room. I about went crazy. It was too small, I needed windows! So every couple of hours I would go for a walk because I couldn’t stand it. Because, you see, in Nixon’s day all their people wanted their own rooms, with their names on it. So that’s why there were all these old cubby holes.

So then I was transferred to the Executive Office Building. A beautiful building. Just George and I were there, and we had one big room with lots of windows. We had a fireplace and we had another room where we could put our equipment. It was wonderful. We enjoyed that room. But we had to keep our door closed. We could not keep it open. I like open doors, I don’t like closed doors. We could not look out the window because then the security people would think I was going to shoot somebody, I guess. I went to a lot of these, what do you call them, official welcoming’s on the grounds. I could not watch them from my window – they wouldn’t allow it. So then I just went over there. But that was security already, before we had this shooting - he was shot at twice.

Smith: Let me back up to the transition in August – we’re observing the anniversary today.

Holkeboer: Is it really?

Smith: Today is the anniversary of the Nixon resignation.

Holkeboer: Is it really? How many years?

Smith: 34.

Holkeboer: You expect me to remember that?
Smith: Your life, obviously, was transformed along with a lot of other folks. When did you begin to think that you might be working for the President?

Holkeboer: Well, I was one of these innocent people who believed Nixon. I thought the newspapers were just after him. I really did. I thought this would soon be over because they know they’ll be wrong, and I think Mr. Ford believed Nixon, too. I think we were led to believe that he was right. Then all of a sudden he said, “I’m resigning.” I couldn’t believe-

Smith: But in between, remember, the tapes came out, and my sense is that Ford was really shocked by the language. Was that your sense?

Holkeboer: Yes, oh yes. That’s true. Yes. I heard that Nixon did have a vocabulary. I think that’s not something Mr. Ford did – his words were never like that. Yes, I think, all of a sudden, we began to realize that this was not true. Right after that I started reading every book I could about it, because I had ignored the newspapers. I thought, they’re not right, they’re just after him. I’m not reading that stuff. Boy, after that I think I read every book I could about Nixon and what he was doing.

Smith: And at the end, when it crumbled, and when the so-called “smoking gun” tapes, were released, it became pretty clear that Nixon was going to resign - did he ever come in and say, “We may be moving”? 

Holkeboer: No, he never said a word. I think he kept that for his wife, or maybe the AA, but he never came to the staff and said, “We may be moving.” I think all of us on the staff were quite tense about it. What’s going to happen now? Are we really going to be working for the President? No, no, no, we’re not going to be. We just really didn’t believe it. I think it was kind of unbelievable. Then when he resigned, I think all of us were quite shocked. But that’s thirty years ago.

Smith: The day after Nixon resigned, Ford was sworn into office. Were you at that?

Holkeboer: Yes, yes I was.

Smith: What do you remember then?
Holkeboer: I think that all of this was kind of overwhelming. His kids sat in the front row and a lot of people sat around, and I thought it was kind of unbelievable. It was like watching a movie or reading a book. Is this really happening? I’ve got pictures – I’ve got pictures of the back of my head that I was there. But I don’t think we realized what we were getting into. At least I didn’t. Is this really true?

Smith: Tell us about Bob Hartmann.

Holkeboer: You shouldn’t ask me that.

Smith: Well, he is a somewhat controversial figure.

Holkeboer: ‘Cause I never liked him. So I don’t want to talk about him.

Smith: You are not alone. He was a somewhat polarizing figure in the office, and what contributed to that? What made him-

Holkeboer: I think the original Ford staff weren’t too happy with him. Then he had his own little group of people. So, you see, there was a kind of conflict. There was us and Bob’s.

Smith: When did he come into the picture?

Holkeboer: Good question.

Smith: He was there before the Vice Presidency?

Holkeboer: Yes, he came right after Mr. Ford was Minority Leader. He came in with Minority Leader because we all said, who is that? And we found out who is that. He seemed to take over.

Smith: He was a speech writer who wanted to be more than a speech writer?

Holkeboer: I guess. A speech writer who thought he was going to be President. I don’t know. You shouldn’t ask me about him because I never really liked him. I had nothing to do with him because I was on the Ford staff and he was on –

Smith: We know from history that he had a lot of talents, but he was a divisive influence.
Holkeboer: Yes, yes he was. You have an interview with him, or is he dead?

Smith: I interviewed him for another project. Apparently he liked to drink.

Holkeboer: Yes, see I don’t know that part. I don’t know his personal life at all. I do not know – that might have come afterward, too. I don’t know.

Smith: A much, much tougher day must have been grafting the Ford staff, a lot of whom were from Grand Rapids, onto a White House staff that were all Nixon people.

Holkeboer: Yes.

Smith: What was it like?

Holkeboer: That was a conflict because Mr. Ford said we had to try to get along. They weren’t excited about getting along because they wanted to say, that’s not the way we do it, this is the way we do it. And they wanted to do it the Nixon way. We knew Ford’s way and they were entirely different. But they wouldn’t let us.

Smith: How were they different?

Holkeboer: I think they still believed in Mr. Nixon and I think they wanted it to continue and they were going to continue it. His ideas, his ways. But one by one they started getting other jobs elsewhere. One by one. In some rooms like the mail room, it doesn’t matter who you’re for or against, because you open mail all day. But one by one I think they started to leave, but we did have a conflict. It was his ways or our ways, or Mr. Ford’s ways or Mr. Nixon’s ways.

Smith: How about Al Haig?

Holkeboer: I never met him. The only thing I know about him is what I read in the paper. But I never met him.

Smith: Were you surprised by the pardon – the Nixon pardon?

Holkeboer: Yes and no. I knew that he wanted to get rid of the whole thing. Let’s not discuss it anymore, it’s over with, get it out of the way. But people didn’t want that. People wanted it to continue and I think the pardon was on a
Sunday, September 8th. I think he knew he had to do something. Otherwise it is going to continue and he couldn’t get anything done if that continued. So, I think it was more or less one or two that agreed with him and he did it. He said, I may lose the election, but I’ve got to do this. And so, yes, I was shocked. I didn’t know about it. I was shocked.

Smith: Were you surprised by the ferocity of the public’s response? The intensity?

Holkeboer: Yes, because it lasted through election – he didn’t get re-elected. Yes, I think that’s one reason he didn’t get re-elected. Because who ever heard of Carter – what did he do? I think the people were mad at Mr. Ford. They really wanted to, what shall I say, get even with Nixon. And once that was over with, it went away – as far as work and business was concerned. People’s thoughts were still there, but as far as business, Mr. Ford could get back to work. Otherwise he just had a hard time getting things done, because it was all Nixon. So, the two years that he was there, he did a good job. I’m sorry that he didn’t do four more, but then again I’m not – who wants to be President? Who wants to be President?

Smith: Then, of course, just three weeks after the pardon came the news about Mrs. Ford’s breast cancer.

Holkeboer: Yes.

Smith: It must have come as a shock.

Holkeboer: Yes that was a shock, too. She had a friend, no, not a friend, but somebody who came every day, talked to her, helped her, etc. – I don’t know the lady’s name – I can’t think of it, anyway. She was going to have a test; every year she does this. She says, “Come on, Betty, go with me.” This is how we heard it. And Betty went and found out that she did have spots. But, again, I saw Mr. Ford. He was so kind and thoughtful and he just sat at her side. Well, during that time it was her first. That was sad – it hit us all kind of sad. But, look at her, she’s living now and she’s how old?

Smith: Ninety.

Holkeboer: Oh, ninety. So, if you get it in time…
Smith: One senses then people didn’t talk about breast cancer.

Holkeboer: No, oh no. But she came right out and said so. She told people about it and they were all kind of shocked, but it was the best thing. She did a lot of little things like that. She was quite open.

Smith: Sometimes her candor got her in trouble.

Holkeboer: I think so. Sometimes I think Mr. Ford wished that she wouldn’t talk so much. But she was honest. She said what she thought.

Smith: Remember, there was the famous Sixty Minutes interview, when she talked about Susan having an affair, and her kids smoking marijuana, and her pro-choice views.

Holkeboer: Oh my, folks were so upset about that.

Smith: Tell us about that.

Holkeboer: Well, I think that was the first time we all heard about it. At least I, I didn’t know. But I think everybody got the wrong idea. She said if they do this, I will - if my daughter moves in with somebody. But immediately people thought, she has, okay, that’s wrong. In those days it was wrong – she could get away with it now days. And I think that she would talk to her boys and do whatever she could if they were taking marijuana. And that’s what she said, but people just took it as “that’s what they’re doing.”

Smith: What was the response? You must have been dealing with mail.

Holkeboer: I think we all said, “Don’t those people understand? Didn’t they listen? Didn’t they hear?” We blamed the people. But that blew over, too.

Smith: Eventually, her candor became a very appealing part.

Holkeboer: Yes, people liked it. She was quite outspoken. Poor dear, now I feel sorry for her.

Smith: Do you know anything about any of her problems while she was First Lady?
Holkeboer: No, we knew she was taking something – I can’t remember what her ailment was – was it her back? Back problems?

Smith: She had back problems. She had some arthritis.

Holkeboer: She had to take pills for that. Now I don’t know what kind of pills they were. But, maybe they led to it. I do think she got kind of lonely when she was in her house with the four children and he was gone all the time. And maybe she thought, “I’ll have a drink.” I don’t know, but she kiddingly said, “Yes, he was never home before, when the kids were growing up and now he’s home all the time.” That’s when he was President, because they would have dinner together and maybe – not breakfast because she slept in – but dinner. “Now he’s home all the time,” she said. So she had to get used to that.

Smith: Did he sign his own mail?

Holkeboer: Oh, yes, but when he became President, yes, then we had a machine. But before that he didn’t have a machine. When he was to and from his office in his limousine, he would sign it and read them. Sometimes we’d get one back.

Smith: Sometimes you must have got nasty letters, or at least some unfriendly ones.

Holkeboer: Oh yes.

Smith: Did he read those, too?

Holkeboer: He would want them, too. He would write a nice letter back. Sorry you are disappointed, but this is what I thought, and I hope that you change your mind and agree with me – and that sort of thing. Then we never heard from them again.

Smith: Did you sense that Mrs. Ford was enjoying her life in the White House?

Holkeboer: Well, I really don’t know because I was in the Executive Office Building and she lived on the second floor of the White House. I think she loved it that somebody else took care of clothes for her – and made her meals. I think she loved that part.

Smith: Did they enjoy entertaining?
Holkeboer: I think so. They did a lot of it in the White House. I don’t know how much they did at home. It was all their old friends.

Smith: But particularly with the bicentennial – there were a lot of State dinners and formal functions like that. Remember when Queen Elizabeth came?

Holkeboer: Yes, I have a picture of Mr. Ford and Queen Elizabeth. That was exciting, too. The only part I saw of it is, they had a big tent in the back yard and the dinner was outside, so I, nosey I, had to see what it was all about, and I went down there and the tables looked just beautiful – oh, they were decorated just beautiful. Loads of tables with tablecloths and decorations – oh they were beautiful. I have some pictures of it [taken by the photographer].

Smith: Do you remember any other state visitors, or visitors that made a real impression? Jack, of course, had a couple of Beatles.

Holkeboer: Yes, see that wouldn’t interest me. I’m not a Beatle fan.

Smith: What about the kids?

Holkeboer: I think the boys were very annoyed with the security that they had. And I think that Susan was just at the age that she loved it. She had her Senior Prom in the White House. She loved it. I think she loved all this, I think she loved it because ever since she was a little girl she was included in a lot of the dinners. So she got to know a lot of these men, women, and I think she loved it. I think the boys were annoyed because - and I think that’s why Jack went away. Mike was already in North Carolina, and I don’t know what kind of security he had, but I don’t think it really fazed him. But Steve and Jack didn’t like it, so they both went to California at that time. I think they got used to it, but didn’t like it.

But now my question is, do they still have security after – up to a certain age is it? Up to eighteen, isn’t it?

Smith: Now they have it up to a certain age, but they did not.

Holkeboer: Now Carter had a daughter, she isn’t eighteen yet is she?

Smith: Oh, yes, she is considerably older, they are all older. She was little then.
Anne Holkeboer  AUGUST 8, 2008

Holkeboer: Oh, I just wondered who was President and still having security.

Smith: When he was President you were in the Executive Office Building. How frequently would you see him?

Holkeboer: Not very often. The security was too tight. If I wanted to see him at that time, I would have to talk to my boss, who was Mildred Leonard, and then Mildred Leonard would go to him with all her things that she had, and then mention what I also needed.

Smith: Now, what was Mildred Leonard’s background? She had worked for him?

Holkeboer: She worked for Halleck, was it Halleck? No, when he became a Congressman, then Mildred had worked for Jonkman. Yes, Bartel Jonkman, his predecessor. And I think Mr. Ford said, you stay, you help me because I need you. She was a good secretary – excellent.

Smith: What was she like?

Holkeboer: I thought she was very nice, but very businesslike. But very nice, we did a few things together. She was older than I was, but we had this in common - that we worked for Mr. Ford, so we went to things together. She knew everything about Mr. Ford – where he was and what he was doing. A good secretary.

Smith: What kinds of things would you need to see her about, or see him about?

Holkeboer: You know, I can’t remember. I don’t know.

Smith: What kind of things were you doing over at EOB?

Holkeboer: Well, they told us we were on his personal staff, so we got a lot of letters that said, “Dear Jerry.” It got to the point that everybody in the United States was addressing him as “Dear Jerry.” We had to really pick out his friends, or the people that we could help, and then the others went to other places to be answered. But, it got to the point where everybody said “Dear Jerry.” They knew him as Jerry Ford.
Smith: Then the re-election campaign – obviously there was a Reagan challenge which was very tough.

Holkeboer: That was the first one. That was before - then Reagan became President. I don’t that Mr. Ford ever had his mind set on being a president. I don’t think so.

Smith: What makes you say that?

Holkeboer: Because he wanted to be Speaker, He wanted to be Speaker of the House – he had that in his mind. The Presidency was way over there as far as he was concerned. And he loved legislation. He loved that. He loved the bills, he loved to be on the floor. He loved his work. No, he didn’t want to be president. But he wanted to be Speaker. But he didn’t get to be Speaker.

Smith: He didn’t hesitate to veto bills.

Holkeboer: When he was President – no. That, again, was a different field than I was into, so I don’t know. But I think he always thought he had to do the right thing for the people. His two years in the presidency were not easy. But I think he did a wonderful job.

Smith: Do you remember the days around the fall of Saigon, the end of the Vietnam war?

Holkeboer: That was very disappointing. No, I think that was a big disappointment to him. That’s about all I can say. To a lot of people, too, but he had really planned on that, and really thought that this was the right thing. And then he got the little children here on the plane. I think they have steps or something right here in the museum. I think that whole thing was very – well, first disturbing, and disappointing to him - but it worked out okay.

Smith: Were you ever afraid he was going to lose to Reagan? It was close. In the spring of ’76 he won in New Hampshire, President Ford, but then in North Carolina Reagan- 

Holkeboer: But before that time, see, he wasn’t really running for the presidency. This is something that all of a sudden came up. Reagan was a wonderful speaker. Mr.
Ford could be if he practiced a long time, but he wasn’t always the best speaker, and when you have to speak at every little town - Reagan really had the gift. I think he was disappointed, like everybody else was disappointed when you lose something. But he still had a job.

Smith: Did you see any of Henry Kissinger around?

Holkeboer: No, I never saw him. I know where his office was in the White House, but I never saw him.

Smith: What about other members of the Cabinet? Were there any who stood out?

Holkeboer: I very seldom saw them. I saw the Cabinet Room, could tell where everybody sat, but I never saw the full Cabinet.

Smith: How about the Vice President, Nelson Rockefeller?

Holkeboer: Yes, I saw him. He was in our building. He also had an office in our building. I think on the second floor and I was on the fourth. Of course, when the elevator door opens, here he is, waiting for the elevator. All of us are waiting for the elevator, but we back up, because he goes first. And only him, goes into the elevator alone. So he went into the elevator and he says, “Come on girls, come on girls.” He got us all into that elevator, and I thought that was so nice, because we weren’t supposed to. And I always liked him for that.

Smith: He was very approachable?

Holkeboer: Yes, he was. If he saw you, he’d say, “Hello.” I kind of liked him. But it didn’t work out.

Smith: In the fall election, did you remember election night? Remember Ford had closed the gap, most of the gap with Carter, coming out of the conventions, and right at the end, no one really knew what was going to happen.

Holkeboer: No, no, all of us just kind of trembled. This is close, what is going to happen. Something is going to happen. That Carter won was a surprise and a shock, but yet we knew that the race was always so close.

Smith: What was the mood in the White House the next day?
Holkeboer: We were all very quiet. We had to move out! And we were very quiet, I don’t think anybody said anything to anybody.

Smith: Do you remember where you were election on night?

Holkeboer: I was home. I stayed home.

Smith: Were your fingers crossed?

Holkeboer: I thought if there was a disappointment, I want to cry alone. One time I went to the Capitol Hill Club for an election, or something, and it was so close I said, “I can’t stand it. I’ve got to go home and see this by myself. I can’t see it with all these crazy people talking and trying to decide who is going to win. I don’t like that – I’m going to go home.” So every election night, I’d just stay home. I just didn’t like all that fuss of the other people.

Smith: Do you remember the first time you saw him after the election? Did he take a little time to bounce back?

Holkeboer: Mr. Ford, no. But I saw him. He couldn’t talk anymore, so Mrs. Ford conceded for him. And I thought that was the saddest picture I ever saw. And all the kids around him and he couldn’t talk because he had laryngitis. Oh that was sad, I thought. That was a sad part, too. But, in the long run I think maybe it was for the best. But I don’t know what kind of a president Carter really was.

Smith: It is interesting, he made it very clear, that despite his own feelings, that there was going to be a better transition than he had experienced.

Holkeboer: Yes, oh yes. That would be Mr. Ford. And he would be very friendly and very cordial. Some of them aren’t – the outgoing and the ingoing aren’t very friendly. But that’s the kind of person he was. See, he really didn’t hold a grudge. He just thought, I’ve lost.

Smith: What were your plans at that point? Were they just up in the air?

Holkeboer: Yes, I had to find a job. I went from door to door because we had the names of all the new congressmen coming in, and I wanted to go back to the House of Representatives, I liked it there. So, I went to all the new congressmen and
I left my resume, and they said, thank you, you’ll maybe hear from us. I think the thing that kind of took them was that I worked for the President. So it was kind of hard to find a job after working for the President. But I got a real good job with Jim Leach, and I want to tell you the way I got it.

When we were with Mr. Ford, there was somebody in Iowa who wrote him almost every day, because this person knew how to handle everything and he could take care of the whole world, if only Mr. Ford would read his letters. He knew everything. And then he would call us sometimes. He would talk for a long time because he knew how to handle everything.

Smith: How do you handle people like that?

Holkeboer: Very nicely. Okay, fine, sure, we’ll tell Mr. Ford all about this. And we’re glad you called, and if you want to call again, we’re right here for you.

Sometimes you write down all they say, but with him we knew – so he had said to somebody, it was Dotty, any of you girls need jobs, I’ll find you jobs. Now how is a person in Iowa going to find a job for people in [Washington]?

Dotty said she was going to work for the transition people and Mildred was going to retire, so that left me. Okay, I’ll send you the resume of one of the girls who works here. So, he got my resume. Then he went to Jim Leach of Iowa, who had just won the election and he said to him, here’s a resume of a girl and you have to hire her. So, I got the job.

Smith: I bet they were glad you were nice to him.

Holkeboer: Yes, but then he wrote Mr. Leach letters forever and ever. We had a whole file full from this man who wrote all the time. So then one time this man had his birthday, and Mr. Leach was going to his birthday party. This was in Iowa. And I saw that on the schedule, and I said, “Oh Mr. Leach, would you thank that man for getting me my job?” and he said, “How is that?” He had forgotten all about it. So Mr. Leach had to make his speech and the first thing he said is, “The only good thing so and so did was get me my secretary.” So it got to be kind of a joke, but isn’t that an unusual way to get a job?

Smith: It’s a very unusual way to get a job. I was an intern in the Ford White House. The summer of ’75 and I worked in the personnel office, which meant, of
course, going through all of the deservedly dead letters and deciding what goes to the central file. But at the same time, dealing with people who would say, meet me as such and such a place Thursday at five o’clock and we’ll discuss my interest in being Secretary of the Interior, or words to that effect. And I wasn’t as nice to them as you were.

Holkeboer: I always remembered when I was interviewing, “Even if you’ve got a headache, you’ve got to be nice.” So, yes, yes, so and so, yes, sure, we’ll tell him and we wrote it all down. But after a while we didn’t write anymore because we got letters from him and that told everything.

Smith: Did you have any contact with him after the White House years?

Holkeboer: No, but I got a Christmas card every year. But, no, no contact at all. No he passed away just before – I did not get a Christmas card last year. And I won’t anymore, I don’t think, because I don’t know if she even sends out her cards anymore. I don’t know. But I always wrote a little note in there, so that whoever opened the mail would think, hey, this is personal, we’ve got to show him. If he saw it or not, I don’t know. But I was on their mailing list, so I got a Christmas card. That’s the only time.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction at the time of the funeral?

Holkeboer: Yes, yes I thought it was overwhelming. I stayed home because I can’t stand very well, so I stayed home and I watched everything. I think I watched all day long. First Washington – and then here – I just thought they did a wonderful job, a wonderful job. Whoever did it, did a wonderful job.

Smith: If you were to tell people something about him, that they may not know – something about Jerry Ford that might surprise people?

Holkeboer: I don’t know what I’d say.

Smith: Or a generation that didn’t know him? What’s important that they know about him?

Holkeboer: Well, I don’t know. Just like here, once you get me talking, I can’t quit. I haven’t talked about Mr. Ford for years. I don’t know if people aren’t
interested or – what do I say? People say, “Was he a nice man?” Sure, he was a nice man. We all know that. They say, “Was he as nice as everybody says?” Yes, he was. This sort of thing. But what I would just say, “This is what I want you to know about Mr. Ford…” I don’t know what I would say. I would really have to think about that.

Smith: Were they fun years?

Holkeboer: Yes, looking back it was fun years. But you have to remember, it’s work. We worked, too. So I don’t want people to think that we were just partying all the time or whatever. It was work. And we worked eight-ten hours a day. Then you go home exhausted and go back the next day. It was work, but looking back now, it was wonderful. I can’t believe that I really worked for Mr. Ford. I can’t believe that – the President of the United States, I can’t believe that. But while you’re there, it’s work.

Smith: It’s less glamorous than people on the outside think.

Holkeboer: Yes, people think it’s glamorous. I don’t know what they think, but we worked. But anyway, it was wonderful years. I had a good life, and I don’t know how I deserved it, but I did get it.

Smith: Can you think of anything else?

Smith: I’m curious, he said even if you have a headache, you have to be nice. But did he ever get upset?

Holkeboer: One time. And it was one of his boys, I don’t know what his boy did, and he heard about it. I don’t know what he did. I don’t know if he took the car or if he did something at school, but he was mad. And I think it was the second boy, Jack. Mike was such a good kid, and Jack was a little fire ball. And Steve, well you didn’t notice it, but Jack – he did something and Mr. Ford heard about it and boy did he slam the door. That’s all I know about it. I don’t know how he calmed down, but he slammed that office door and all of us – I remember that. Those kids were teenagers by then, because when I started they were six, eight, ten years old, twelve years old, something like that. All of a sudden they are teenagers.
Smith: Was Susan sort of the favorite, I don’t mean favorite, but the youngest and the only daughter.

Holkeboer: Only girl, yes.

Smith: Kind of a special status.

Holkeboer: I think so, but they loved their boys, too. I mean it wasn’t that - but here, they finally got a girl. I think she was home longer than they were, because as soon as they got out of high school, they went on to college in other places and she stayed home and went to all their dinners, their parties with them. So she learned, what shall we say, etiquette quite soon and she loved it. She loved the attention.

Smith: There is an extraordinary photo when Mrs. Ford was, of course, in the hospital. Susan, who was sixteen at the time, stood in for her mother at a State dinner.

Holkeboer: Yes, right.

Smith: With long gloves and flowing gown.

Holkeboer: And she knew how because she had been to so many. Not State dinners, but dinners of – and I think because she stayed home longer than the boys, she was such a part of the family that they took her all over. I think she loved it.

Smith: She’s actually in a photo with Chairman Mao. She went with them when they went to China and I think Chairman Mao was paying her more attention than he was the President.

Holkeboer: She was a pretty young girl. And she knew how to handle all that, too, because they took her along all over.

Smith: Do you think she was mature for her age?

Holkeboer: Yes, I really do. I think she was very mature for her age.

Smith: You mentioned the time that President Johnson called when Mr. Ford was in Congress. Did other Congressmen call regularly, were you picking up the phone and having Senator Dirksen, or someone like that on the line?
Holkeboer: To talk to Mr. Ford? Yes. And a lot of the times Mr. Ford wouldn’t be there and we’d have to take their name and number, and then he would call them back. But yes, a lot of Congressmen would call.

Smith: Did you have certain favorites that you heard from and others who just weren’t as polite on the phone?

Holkeboer: When you came down to it, they were just names. Important names of people that he knew, so we would – Senator Dirksen was about the only one who called from the Senate side. About the only one.

Smith: Did you ever see Congressman Ford and Nixon together?

Holkeboer: No. Except TV or pictures. Once he became Vice President – President, he had lot of security and we just didn’t see him as much. The best years were really Minority Leader, or when he was Congressman, because then we were a big family. But once he became President, all these important men were around him all the time. Then the security people – no you couldn’t get at him.

Smith: How do you think Mildred handled that transition?

Holkeboer: Not too well. Because she was getting older, and I think she felt she was being forgotten. Bob Hartmann took over, so it was difficult.

Smith: When did Dorothy come into the picture?

Holkeboer: Dorothy?

Smith: Downton.

Holkeboer: Downton. She came in as a young girl right out of business school, I think. And she signed up to go to FBI. She was going to work for the FBI – that was a big thing – she wanted to go to the FBI. She signed up to work for them and they called her that they had a job for her. She came in our office with her dad, I think – something like that. Then I guess Frank Meyer was impressed with her because a couple months later he called her and said we have a job for you. And she said, “No I can’t take it, because I promised FBI I would be here for a year.” So he said, okay, we’ll wait, and we’ll see what happens and
then we’ll call you again. And so she came to us after a year at the FBI. She was his secretary and Frank Meyer dictated to her, because we were getting so much mail. He dictated to her and to Ruth Kilmer.

Smith: This is still on Capitol Hill?

Holkeboer: This is on Capitol Hill. And then Frank Meyer died and Mildred became the administrative assistant and Dorothy became the secretary. That’s how she got into seeing Mr. Ford, and then when he got to the White House, she was still his secretary. Then Mildred was kind of pushed aside, maybe by Bob Hartmann, I don’t know. I don’t think she was too happy. But she retired.

Smith: But she in fact took the job that Mildred had –

Holkeboer: Well, if Frank hadn’t died – but see, Mildred was the administrative assistant and then when Mr. Ford became President, Bob Hartmann kind of made himself whatever, Chief of Staff or something, I don’t know. So I don’t think she was too happy. I think that she wanted Dorothy’s job and Dorothy got it. A continuation of what she was doing, so it was to be expected.

Smith: Were you aware at all of a - conflict may be too strong a word, of a rivalry between Rumsfeld, and then later Cheney? And Hartmann?

Holkeboer: That I don’t know, that could easily be. I didn’t see much of Rumsfeld and Cheney after Mr. Ford was President. But before Mr. Ford was President, he was Minority Leader, they would walk in the office quite often. So we got to know them that way. They were very friendly, very kind. So we liked them. Personally, I think times have changed, people have changed. Maybe it went to their head. I don’t know. I’m very disappointed in them. Of course you don’t hear about Rumsfeld anymore, but Cheney is a disappointment. But, but, but-

Smith: Yeah. This has been great. Thank you.

Holkeboer: My husband’s going to say, “You talk too much!”
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this. We really appreciate it.

Bakshian: My pleasure.

Smith: You were in the Nixon administration?

Bakshian: Yes.

Smith: We’re interested in your story before the Ford story, but also in the larger context. One of the themes that we are exploring is the degree to which – particularly early in the Ford administration – there was or wasn’t an integration of the Nixon holdovers with the incoming Ford staff.

Bakshian: There was some, but that was pretty quick. I was the only Nixon speechwriter who was actually kept indefinitely. When I quit, it was in the autumn of ’75 because I’d been offered a fellowship at Harvard at the Institute of Politics and it was my idea. But within a few weeks, maybe less, I forget now, it’s been a while, of the turnover, most of the writing staff was leaving or was planning to leave, or was told they wouldn’t be there. There was one other writer, John Coyne, who was kept for more than just a pro forma courtesy period, but then left. And one by one, or several at a time, the Ford staff came in. When I left there was no one left who had been a Nixon speechwriter, and there had even been some shifts in the power balance of the Ford dynamic – Hartmann and so on.

Smith: It is interesting – maybe I’m biased, but I sense that the speechwriting operation is in many ways a metaphor of the Ford White House, its strengths and weaknesses.

Bakshian: The factions, too.

Smith: The factions and the trajectory, which you may or may not accept, of seeing someone thrust into this position and having not only to learn the job, but in
some ways unlearn the congressional mindset - the distinction between leading in Congress and leading as an executive.

Bakshian: Oh, very much so. And just having an office of a handful of handpicked people that you’ve worked with for years and a much bigger bureaucracy – nothing like the vast federal bureaucracy – but the White House is a much bigger machine than a congressional office. Actually, my impression was that Jerry Ford made the transition very well and became a very good president very quickly. The problem was a number of people, especially those who were about his age, sometimes a little bit older, who had for years been working in the small town on the Hill with him; who came in and they were sort of eaten by the machine or weren’t up to it. In some cases they were up to it and in some cases they weren’t up to it. And in other cases they just butted heads.

Gradually, as happens with most administrations, Washington regulars and power types are more in charge. Even the first year that starts to change. It happened in the Reagan White House, it happened in the Nixon White House. There were friends that each in their own time had had in California, for example, or had known on the Hill, in the case of Nixon, who were in the campaign and were in the administration briefly, but were marginalized. The same thing happened with a vengeance with Jerry Ford because it was such a tough time. I had nothing but respect for him, and I also think he probably got one of the most bum raps of any of our presidents thanks to the media, and also not just the media – the temper of the times because of what had happened before him. It was like taking over a sinking ship that was also in rather ill-repute at the time.

Smith: When you think of the popular culture, it’s almost a parallel if you look at Britain in the late ‘50s, early ‘60s, with That Was The Week That Was. Harold Macmillan was the perfect target for that kind of humor. Here it went beyond irreverence - Saturday Night Live represents a wave in the culture.

Bakshian: It was a very adolescent age, and there was no check on it. Eventually, even some of the people who were doing the most nasty stuff felt badly about it and grew up. But also I think the public [got sick of it].
Smith: Some of them wound up at the Betty Ford Center.

Bakshian: This was like dumping drugs into the water system. The public had never seen all that before, so it was swept away with this massive cynicism, sarcasm. Then it got its balance as the American public usually does, but it takes a little while. And, I mean, here you had economic dislocation, the Vietnam mess, and then the Watergate thing – all piled one after the other. The country has never been through those sorts of crises of confidence. The one other president that had the whole world falling on him was Herbert Hoover, but that was a different age and a different set of circumstances.

Smith: Let’s go back – tell me about how you came into the Nixon White House, and how that operated.

Bakshian: I used to say I got it through a want ad in the *New York Times*. It wasn’t quite that. I’d worked on the Hill for then-Representative Bill Brock, and I’d also been a speechwriter for Bob Dole as chairman of the Republican National Committee, not on his Senate staff. So I had a background in speechwriting and in Republican matters. Those are just two of the various things I had done in that department.

But it happened that at the very beginning of ’72, I wrote an OpEd piece as a conservative, as a writer, because I wrote pretty regularly for *National Review*, Bill Buckley’s magazine. A group called, I forget whether they called themselves the Manhattan Twelve or what, but at any rate, pushed the Ashbrook candidacy, Representative Ashbrook from Ohio, as a conservative Republican to run against Nixon in the primary in New Hampshire, which was then – well, everything happened a little later then – and it was the first in the nation. I wrote a piece suggesting that it was cutting their nose off to spite their face because Ashbrook would probably do so badly that if anything, it would lead the administration to pay less attention to the squeaky wheels on the right. That, in fact, he would probably be outperformed by Pete McClosky, who was a liberal Republican, who was running and who did get about twice as many votes. So that it was a self-destructive, silly tactic.

I didn’t write this with anything in mind about the White House – that was just my opinion, but as I found out later, at about this time the White House
was getting ready to gear up to add two new speechwriters or three – I think three, to the staff with the idea that there was a campaign coming on and so on. And also that they needed some fresh blood anyway, new blood. Not fresh blood – makes it sound vampirish. But anyway, I don’t know, about a week afterwards, after that OpEd piece ran, I had a phone call from a Mr. Clark in White House personnel who asked me to come in – they were looking for speechwriters. And then I was interviewed by Ray Price, who was in charge of the speechwriting shop at the time; and Dave Gergen, who was his deputy, almost like the office manager for the operation in those days, or the managing editor. And then they decided to hire me.

But it had just happened, and I later found out, I think, as a result of seeing my files when I was leaving the White House at the end of the Ford period – or maybe it was actually the Freedom of Information Act at the end of the Reagan period. I finally, actually, took a look and saw that several people had apparently read the article, including Chuck Colson - that’s the one name that comes to mind, I would have liked it otherwise – who had seen the article and said Price is looking for some speechwriters, here’s somebody… Oh, and the squib on the New York Times thing said, “Has served as a speechwriter to the chairman of the National Committee.” So there is a Republican speechwriting tie.

Anyway, so that’s how it happened. And then as the campaign wound down, and I think the day after the election, everyone had to tender their resignation on the White House staff, but you knew that some people were going to be asked to stay and get a promotion and others’ resignations were going to be accepted. Of the new hires, I was the only one that was kept and they got rid of several other people and so on.

Smith: That must have been a real downer. Here you scored this extraordinary victory, and Nixon himself writes about how he felt strangely unfulfilled.

Bakshian: He sensed, at some point he acknowledged also, he thought it was a mistake to do that, I think. I don’t know if that was in conversations that have come to light subsequently, or what. I just read something recently, I hadn’t heard about it before.
Smith: I mean, was it part of his dream of drastically overhauling the federal establishment?

Bakshian: Very much so, because at that point, he was poised to – Vietnam was being phased out – he was poised to launch a series of major initiatives, some of which might have settled problems like healthcare back there. Or at least taken us a step further down the road to reconciling what the government would be. And that’s what he thought. He also felt that after four years, there are a lot of discardable people – and there were people who hadn’t been carrying their load during the campaign. Some of the people who were let go had it richly coming to them. Those who didn’t, and even some who did, were given a job somewhere in the government if they needed it. They weren’t just kicked out into the cold. But the idea of asking everyone for their resignation was one of those things that sounds like a good shock tactic, but is probably bad for morale. It’s the old Voltairian ploy of shooting one of the admirals to encourage the others or something. [reference to British Admiral Bye]

Smith: During the campaign, of course, the Watergate break in occurs. Were there conversations about this?

Bakshian: Yeah, but early on – remember, first of all, we were in the middle of a campaign, so we were all very busy with other things. Watergate becomes almost an obsession with some of the staffers when it’s in the defense mode afterwards. Also, nobody – only a real handful of people – had any idea, knew about the Plumbers or anything like that. So at the time of the break in, it was an odd news story and that was about it.

Smith: The reaction that we get is everyone said it makes no sense. It’s stupid, it’s too stupid for us to do.

Bakshian: That’s right. You felt it couldn’t possibly involve higher ups because higher ups can’t be that dumb. Ha ha.

Smith: When we asked Pat Buchanan, I asked him, “When did you first hear about it? And when did you first read about it?” He said, “Oh I didn’t read about it. I got a telephone call. And as soon as I heard about it, I knew it had to be somebody on our side, and because, he said, they were getting material out of the Muskie campaign regularly.
Bakshian: Pat was involved much more in the partisan stuff, plus he had been working with Nixon. He had more of a personal line to Nixon and to the senior people that was separate from – he wasn’t writing that many speeches anymore. His office was right next door to mine after I came in. He basically had a staff that put out the news digest, which he was very interested in - media handling - and wrote one or two speeches like Safire. But when Ray Price was made head of speechwriting after the departure of Keogh, because Pat, Safire and Ray had been co-equal senior writers, when Ray was put in charge of the day to day operations, the others were given autonomy and roving commissions. Which meant they also spent more time on campaign strategy and schmoozing with people who involved in these things. I’m happy to say I didn’t know much about it.

Smith: Richard Nixon famously said of himself that he was an introvert in an extrovert’s profession.

Bakshian: Yeah. He was the door to door salesman with bad feet.

Smith: I always said the most remarkable thing about the Nixon presidency is not how it ended, but that it ever happened at all.

Bakshian: That he ever got there.

Smith: Yeah.

Bakshian: Now, he’s not a person one gets sentimental about, but I had two long conversations with him when he was working on his memoirs and I was out there to just help with some of the early years. Had two long, several hour conversations with him where I got to know him better than I had known him in the White House as a fairly late arrival, and his was a very insulated Oval Office. Very different from Jerry Ford’s or Reagan’s. Also I was more senior with Reagan. But, Nixon was a man who went into politics partially out of ambition. You’ve got to have ambition to put up with the aggravation, but who wanted to do good things for the country and also with the world view. He got burnt very early unjustly, which then made him very snappish.

Smith: Was that the fund crisis?
That sort of thing and also where he really became the enemy as far as the liberal media was concerned, was where he was absolutely right. And he was never an acolyte of Joe McCarthy’s, but he is a House member who is investigating Alger Hiss. And he was right about Hiss, and the liberal establishment was wrong. Hiss was a Communist agent, the former Soviet archives have proven that. But at the time he [Nixon] was lumped in with McCarthy, and then was a target forever. And not being the most prepossessing winning personality, not a Reagan personality, and being easily bruised, it fed on itself. The media disliked him more and more; he disliked them more and more. Both sides developed a pathology about each other. It was very tragic because he wanted to be a good president and his motive for doing it – Johnson wanted to be a good president, but he was also an egomaniac – Nixon was not a egomaniac in that sense. He didn’t want to brand the nation and make everybody have a first name that started with L and middle name that started with B and a last one with J.

Rex Scouten told us something I found extraordinary.

There’s a man who has seen a lot.

And he’s very discrete. Very appropriately.

That’s why he was allowed to see so much for so long.

But he did tell us, as a Nixon Secret Service agent in the ‘50s, the family out in California had a room for him. I mean, they were that close. One day, out of the blue, on a plane, Nixon just started sort of pounding the edge of his seat for no reason in particular, and said, “I’ve got to be tougher. I’m not tough enough.” Just a remarkable non-sequitur, but clearly revealing of some kind of inner turmoil.

He always thought he was not tough enough – that he was being ground down by external circumstances and that was because he wasn’t being tough enough, ruthless enough. He needed to be smarter, he needed to get outside of his own head and see things a little more clearly. Ronald Reagan knew that he had press, a media establishment that was largely hostile, but he didn’t let it get to him. The most angry I ever saw him was when he was a bit annoyed about coverage of some Republican fundraiser where they talked about how
many fur coats the women were wearing, as if at Democratic fundraisers there aren’t women wearing fur coats. But it was just a slightly peeved remark and then he was smiling and talking about something else. Whereas, Nixon could brood for days at a time. Johnson also, as Vietnam got worse, became obsessed that way.

Smith: There are people who brood, who need enemies. Willa Cather said there is such a thing as positive hate. And I wonder if Nixon had some of that.

Bakshian: If you look at people who live to a great old age, they are usually very benevolent, or their hate keeps them warm and keeps them going. Their grudges, rewriting their will every other week – writing out this person or that.

Smith: In Julie’s book, remember that wonderful line where not that long after he left office, Pat said to him some expression of astonishment at how he kept going and so on. And he said, “I just get up every day to confound my enemies.” Which, on one hand is a great line, but it’s also sad in some ways.

Bakshian: Well, it wasn’t living well is the best revenge, but simply living is the best revenge. Although I think once he recovered from the basic shock of resignation, he became a more balanced person and took an increasingly more objective view of things afterwards.

Smith: Really? Including Watergate?

Bakshian: Yeah, gradually. And also, as he saw and recognized it. He asked me something when I was out there, because the memoir work was occurring after the ’76 elections, actually before the inaugural. It was late in the year, and then I was back in January. And at one point he asked me, he really wanted to know what people – how with Carter coming in and this election – he said, “How do you think people are going to feel now about Jerry Ford?” I said, “Well, I’ll tell you one thing. I think they are going to feel increasingly better about him as they see more of Jimmy Carter.” Which is exactly what happened. And I also sort of meant, and I think that’s what he was looking for, that once Jimmy Carter started screwing up on his own with that special gift that he had, people would then get a clearer view – especially of Ford – but also just generally.
Smith: Did he offer an opinion on Ford?

Bakshian: He liked Jerry Ford. Now, because he always felt he had to prove he was tough, if he was talking to the boys, sometimes he would say things, I’m sure, somewhere that were a little less than flattering, but he always, first of all, he knew that Jerry Ford was straight and solid - that he hadn’t cut a deal with Jerry Ford – and that Jerry Ford for the good of the nation had done something generous for him. And also, out of compassion for him, had been very kind. And he always respected that. Plus he knew Jerry Ford morally, ethically, and as a man who understood the workings of government. He probably felt that Jerry Ford wasn’t tough enough with anyone, but that would have been what he thought about everybody.

Smith: It’s funny, something just dawned on me. Ford, until he got the Profiles in Courage award, he said, “For twenty years, everywhere I go, people ask the same question. After that they stopped asking.” Which tells you something about the imprimatur of the Kennedys. But it occurs to me, Ford spent the rest of his life being asked that question. I don’t think anyone ever asked Nixon that question.

Bakshian: No. Well, I think first of all, if there was an interesting answer, he wasn’t going to give it, I don’t believe, anyway. And also Nixon was fairly selective about whom he talked to. But, you’re right, for example, David Frost, who probed into all sorts of things, I don’t think even touched on that.

Smith: Isn’t that amazing? For people who weren’t around then, can you convey some idea of what it felt like inside the White House as this thing unfolded? And was there a “Eureka” moment or just a gathering sense?

Bakshian: Toward the end, although even then it seemed unreal that a presidency could be toppled the way it was - but it was a death of a thousand cuts. You were bleeding but you were losing blood very gradually. Yet there were certain moments when you thought, well, another brick in the foundation just crumbled. First John Dean – well, the tapes.

Smith: Were you surprised?
Bakshian: Not entirely, because I had heard – not about his taping – but that there had been various things like that around. And as it turned out, even more than I knew. Ike even apparently always turned it on when he was having a one on one with Nixon, interestingly enough. Because it was something he would activate voluntarily, as opposed to a 24 hour automatic system. And FDR had wiretaps and so on.

Smith: Sure.

Bakshian: But I was surprised, first of all, it was almost a chance question, because I don’t think the committee, unless there is something I don’t know about that they knew about – I think they were just fishing around, and they happened to be talking to the guy who’d been assigned to do that, and who was under oath and who wasn’t about to be a martyr for somebody he probably didn’t even know very well and wasn’t that crazy about.

Smith: I was going to say, was Butterfield regarded as something of a traitor?

Bakshian: Maybe by the fruit of the looms, but he was a man who was there under oath and was asked a direct question. It wasn’t a matter of whether you remembered what happened in a meeting at some point, but was something you’d been in charge of running. So it would be like expecting the head of the motor pool to deny that he had anything to do with the choice of tires or whatever.

Smith: How was the President functioning through all of this? And particularly as it got worse?

Bakshian: Well, I’m sure he had his bad hours and bad days, but there were still vast amounts of governance stuff going through, including large amounts of foreign policy statements; and in the early phase of the second term, of policy initiatives. And I know for a fact that he was focused on – you could see mark ups and questions that would come back about speech drafts on policy and his input. So, he was able to compartmentalize to a large extent. He’d been compartmentalizing all of his life because there was such a conflict between who he was and what sort of personality he had, and wanting to be doing what he was doing. He did have an iron self-discipline, but it ate away at him. I’m
sure that phlebitis, for example, the blood clot leading to that – was stress related to a large extent. But that was an internalizing of the strain.

Smith: Let me ask you something awkward, but for the historical record, much has been written, perhaps too much has been made that suggests that maybe he had a drinking problem, at least at this point. That somehow it was a factor.

Bakshian: I think that’s been exaggerated. I think he may have taken a drink occasionally – at night especially in family quarters. But he was never somebody who – and I know people who had known him since he was a congressman, and have always complained about - if he might call up somebody to give them a deep background during the Hiss thing, for example, [invite them] to his house in Spring Valley and how chintzy he was with booze. Because journalists being journalists in those days, they drank a lot and they thought he had this one bottle of Scotch probably for two years and he might have been watering it. So he had no history of drinking. Maybe there was some midnight drinking once or twice in the last days of his presidency. But a lot of this goes back to one or two episodes that are second and third hand. Kissinger, for example, was a source of one story where it’s not even – I’m not clear how much Kissinger really described and how much is other people’s descriptions of Kissinger’s description to someone else.

Smith: And I guess by most accounts, he was the kind of drinker where one drink was about all he could take.

Bakshian: The sort of people that are found on the pavement on St. Patrick’s Day because once a year they…

Smith: The Agnew thing. We talked to Jerry Jones who had been asked by Haldeman to reorganize the personnel office. And he got a call – Haldeman was still there – so this would be early spring of ’73, and he wanted to know how many people worked directly for the Vice President. And Jones did some figuring and said around fifty. Haldeman said he wanted undated letters of resignation from all of them. Which raises, to me at least, a couple interesting possibilities: one, they were unhappy with the Vice President that day and Nixon gave him one of these off with his head orders; or two, which seems to
be more likely, they knew long before the *Wall Street Journal* ever wrote the story that the Vice President was at the very least, under investigation.

Bakshian: I suspect that they knew that there was a distinct possibility that something might happen. So this was working on that eventuality, and that also raises an interesting question. I don’t know whether the Vice President’s staff received the order right after the election, because that was technically meant for everyone on the White House staff – they were in the Executive Office Building – but they did receive from the President, at that point, a letter asking them to resign? Which everyone had to do – that all of us had to do the day after election. There had been stories going around, plus anybody being a native Washingtonian, anyone who knew anything about Maryland politics, knew that even if he had been immaculate as Vice President, as Groucho Marx once said about Doris Day, hell, there were people who knew him before he was a virgin when he was governor. Even if he’d been a well-intended person, just occupying that office, the way things were done, things would have probably happened. It certainly would be happening all around him.

Smith: Everything began to happen so fast. When you think of Watergate, something that was dragged out over two years, but then you have this acceleration.

Bakshian: It’s like an illness that in the last days the person’s symptoms get worse and worse, faster and faster. Again, it metastasizes.

Smith: It's amazing how quickly Ford was selected for Vice President.

Bakshian: I think the removal of Agnew, by the way, also whetted the appetite, or increased the appetite for both the liberal establishment on the outside and the Democratic congressional leadership to go for the kill because if Agnew had not had his scandal and then resignation, they wouldn’t have been in that much of a hurry, or at least they would have had counter incentives to just pushing.

Smith: That certainly makes sense.

Bakshian: That accelerates the process, too. And that’s an unrelated, yet, in the end, relevant development in a sense.
Smith: But it’s interesting, there is a story, and I think it’s true because in my Rockefeller research I think I can vouch for it. That Nixon, at one point, supposedly tells Rockefeller in the Oval Office, “Can you imagine Jerry Ford in that chair?” Now, Nixon may have been flattery Rockefeller, who wouldn’t, I think, like to have been vice president.

Bakshian: And also he was showing he was tough.

Smith: Yeah. Did you have a sense of what the attitude was? One of the things that Ford did once he became vice president, he was obviously walking a tightrope, he probably could never be sufficiently vocal in defending the President for the President’s strongest supporters; on the other hand, he spends a lot of time out of town. And we’ve picked up a sense that, at least there were some in the White House who thought maybe he wasn’t defending Nixon as he ought to.

Bakshian: They were the same control freaks, who of course thought everybody was there, not to serve the country or even to serve the policies of the administration, but to fall on their sword or lie or cheat, or whatever. I thought Ford behaved well and most people did. Most people had no quarrel there. There are going to be a few that may. Jerry Ford became vice president, not because he needed that job or desperately wanted it, but because: a) he was somebody who was sufficiently respected by the other side on the Hill that he could actually – and who also was much more qualified than Nelson Rockefeller, for example, to be president in terms of experience with the federal executive branch and policy and so on. So I didn’t feel that way. And I saw a bit more of it because I and John Coyne, the other one who was kept for a while afterwards, were detailed – not detailed, we were still writing for the President, but to help the rather nuclear Ford staff with speeches he had to give and draft a few speeches. And I made a point of keeping it – advocate, defend policies, defend the Republican Party, defend the administration – speak out if you think there is unfair criticism or something, but you shouldn’t be walking around being a Rabbi Korf or something. A forgotten name, I’m afraid, for 99% of the public now. He and Rev. Moon were sort of the last two spiritual leaders even after Billy Graham developed a three month head cold, or whatever.
Smith: One quick thing and then we’ll get into the Ford presidency. Was there an attitude in the White House towards Ford’s performance as Minority Leader during the Nixon years?

Bakshian: Well, again, you would have people like Colson and some of the others, and also Nixon in his tough moments, who would say, “The trouble with the leadership on the Hill is they’ve been used to accommodating and they aren’t willing to kick ass,” etc. But that just said more about them than anything else. I don’t think that was a widespread attitude amongst those of us who hadn’t come to the White House as Nixon groupies, although we’d been for Nixon, but who understood it all and spent time on the Hill.

Pat Buchanan was one of the hot heads. A friend of mine, you’ve got to remember that he really had had virtually no political experience. He had written editorials for the St. Louis Globe, or whatever. And then he’d worked with Richard Nixon. He was a groupie. I don’t mean that in a dismissive way. Or he was a personal retainer, who then came to the White House. Even though he was raised in Washington, he had nothing to draw on, no experience to draw on about governance. And then there were other people – some of the California mafia who had never been to Washington.

Smith: Were you in the East Room on the morning of August 9th?

Bakshian: No, I was very fortunate. I had blocked off a vacation six months or three months before because Readers Digest had international editions and the year before I had done a profile, The Last of the Viennese Waltz Kings, about Viennese composer Robert Stolz. He was in his nineties, but I used my vacation to go interview him and so on. So I was in Europe for two and a half weeks or so during the crisis. And I had a new assignment. A year or two before the centenary of the Bayreuth Festival, I was asked to go Bayreuth to do a piece for the world editions of Readers Digest on Richard Wagner, but also to interview Wolfgang Wagner, who just died recently, who was the composer’s grandson and was still running the festival, etc. So I blocked off that schedule.

I actually watched the resignation speech on a small black and white television in the lounge of the Hotel Meurice in London, which later became
Quaglino’s which is still a restaurant, but no longer a little hotel on Bury Street, just off Jermyn Street in London. And then the next day I watched the farewell speech to the staff. I had a sister and brother-in-law who were there, and my old friend Ben Stein was there, who was the only person who actually managed in that East Room to cry and chew gum at the same time while Nixon was making that speech.

So I happened to be overseas for the last few days and I when flew back and came through customs at Dulles, they hadn’t changed the photograph yet, “Welcome to the United States” and Nixon’s picture was still up there. Also, the night of his resignation speech, there was one other guest at that little London hotel. This was a respectable, rather posh, hotel, but small, just fifty rooms or so, and they had a West Indian night porter, and he was watching it along with myself and one other guest. He didn’t know I had any connection with the White House. He said, “I wonder if anything like that is going to happen again soon?” I said, “Not soon, but sooner or later.”

Smith: So, you came back…

Bakshian: I heard stories about people just getting drunk that night of the resignation. It was like VE Day if you were German.

Smith: Or if you were in the bunker.

Bakshian: Yeah, that’s right. But that had all burned out beforehand. I don’t get that carried away, and I was from Washington. I hadn’t come to Washington to be in the Nixon White House. It’s like the tsetse fly – the local Africans have survived it and developed a certain immunity to it. Same thing with Potomac Fever. But I’m glad I wasn’t there in the sense that I think I would have seen a few people I liked being rather silly or maudlin, or making fools of themselves, understandably. But I’m just as glad I didn’t see it. If you know a married couple and you like them both, and you’re glad you’re not there when some scene happens…

Smith: Well put. On the 9th, after the Ford swearing in, there was a receiving line and reception down in the State Dining Room. And you could watch the Nixon people sort of peel off.
Bakshian: I can believe it.

Smith: Which is understandable.

Bakshian: They also knew, if they had any brains, that most of them were going to be history, regardless of how good a job they had done. If they were fairly visible, it just had to happen.

Smith: That’s interesting because that raises a larger question about Ford and whether, in some ways, he was almost too much of a Boy Scout. Whether part of this learning process entailed…Rumsfeld insists, and I don’t dispute it, Rumsfeld urged him early on to clean house, to basically convince the country that this was a different White House. Ford took a much more measured approach. One, because he thought it was unfair to the vast majority of people who had nothing to do with Watergate; two, because he needed some continuity; three, because there were a lot of very capable people working in that White House.

Bakshian: I think he was right on all three scores. And the only one you could fault him for as commander in chief, would be the first one. That’s surely compassionate. The other two were good for good governance. They may not have been good politics, but they were good for good governance and he first and foremost, always saw himself as President, not a candidate for re-election. And that was one of the things I most respected him for. You also have to look at – I’ve known Rumsfeld for years – Don Rumsfeld’s motivation. First of all, Don Rumsfeld was always a, not only take no prisoners, but a don’t worry about killing anybody with friendly fire if it’s going to get you where you’re going kind of guy. He would have loved to mow down everybody that hadn’t been a personal hire of Don Rumsfeld’s. Forget about Jerry Ford.

Smith: Dorothy Downton, the President’s personal secretary, told us he tried to get her fired.

Bakshian: I don’t doubt it. In the same way that Erlichman and Haldeman repeatedly tried to get Rose Woods.

Smith: But that raises another question, because…
Bakshian: But that’s separate from Watergate and everything else. That’s the old power thing.

Smith: Oh, absolutely.

Bakshian: Anybody with an independent mind, or independent loyalty on the part of the President.

Smith: Which explains a lot. But it also raises this other question. There is a school of thought that says beneath the Boy Scout exterior, was someone who was shrewder, more calculating, more ambitious than he let on; someone who was not above using the image that people had of him to his advantage. I mean, the nice guy, whereas, having a Don Rumsfeld, could in fact…

Bakshian: Nice guys almost always have someone like Don Rumsfeld. Reagan was that way. Eisenhower. It’s part of being an effective leader. Jerry Ford was never naïve. He was a nice guy, but he was nobody’s patsy. But I think what he usually did, and it had nothing to do with naivety, was to put the national interest and his duty as president ahead of cynical, political choices. If something might have helped him, but it might not have been in the national interest he wouldn’t do it. He was quite capable of being political, and he was very often. But he never let that distract him from his duty, I don’t think.

Smith: Is the pardon the most obvious example of that?

Bakshian: I think so. Although I’m not sure that it was quite the turning point that people make it out to be. The country, and the GOP even more so, were suffering from mental fatigue. It was a bad brand. People were fed up. Jimmy Carter, had a free ride in 1976, although the media very quickly turned on him, partially because he turned out, I think, in their minds to be a bigger jerk than they thought; but also because having eliminated their favorite targets – that is, the GOP having been routed and Jerry Ford being gone – they needed somebody to punch. Obama is finding that out now. And also the Democratic leadership on the Hill. But I think Jerry Ford was a very substantial guy – and when you sat with him in the Oval Office, or anyone who ever met him, or delegations that came in and talked with him, if they had not met him before, always came away very impressed because they had been going by this outside image and found a fuller, more impressive figure.
And the other problem was that bum knee, even though he was by no means a klutz. In fact, he was probably the best athlete who had ever been president. He also occasionally got tongue-twisted, tongue-tied, and it had nothing to do with the thinking process. I saw that again and again. As speechwriters we were told about keeping the sentences short and so on. I think actually we were over told that. I think there were some people, including old loyalists of his, who almost liked the idea that they had uniquely captured his cadence and knew what he needed. And they were taking care of baby more than baby needed to be taken care of, I suspect. But, who knows?

Smith: You do wonder because that obviously raises the whole Hartmann thing. I assume there is a very thin line, maybe almost no line between being protective and being possessive. Or maybe they are two sides of the same coin.

Bakshian: And the person in that conflicted emotional situation is the last person to be able to see it clearly.

Smith: I’m sure. Why was Hartmann such a divisive figure?

Bakshian: Well, he was an abrasive guy. I have no complaints about him. He was one of the people that asked that I be kept, and I got along with him.

Smith: What did it take to get along with him?

Bakshian: Well, basically, I could write and I could write quickly, and so I guess he felt I served a need. I also was a writer on the writing staff, I was not somebody in a different branch of the thing. So we were not rivals for the President’s ear or anything. He’d been part of a little group, most of whom were at least as old as Jerry Ford, but who had not grown much because they were doing the household work of serving on the Hill and that is a very small town setting up there. And especially if you’ve been in the minority all that time.

They suddenly come to the White House, and whereas Jerry Ford had been a leader and policy-wise and everything was ready for it, these guys, I don’t think, were for the most part. And most of them didn’t last, or were marginalized. Don Rumsfeld is a particularly ruthless guy and I mean that in both the good and the bad senses. So he made a small meal out of most of
them. But I don’t think they were quite up to it anyway. Jerry Ford was young for his age, healthy, plenty of stamina, and also a very positive man – not a lot of bitterness, not a chip on his shoulder.

Smith: Uncomplicated?

Bakshian: I think he was much more complicated than people thought, but I think he saw and felt clearly. He wasn’t labyrinthine. Straightforward, let’s put it that way. Because I think he was capable, for example, about weighing all the pros and cons. But he didn’t have a lot of pulls and pushes going on inside him. And he didn’t have trouble dealing with people or things. He didn’t have little warring voices inside – without citing anyone in particular who might have.

Smith: David Broder said he was the sanest - I think he said, the least neurotic president in my lifetime.

Bakshian: That’s right. I once, as a joke, said to President Reagan when I was leaving, just like a goodbye conversation where we were sitting around talking for quite some time, and I said it as a joke and he knew I meant it as a joke. I would never have said it outside. I said, “Mr. President, I can’t tell you how grateful I am to you. I’ve worked for three presidents, you’re the third. The first one was abnormal, the second was subnormal, and now you’re normal.” What I really meant, and I think he knew it - the first one was a bit kinky, the second one was normal and now you were dealing with a born-natural.

Smith: By the way, did you ever hear Reagan talk about Ford?

Bakshian: Well, it never came up. The Ford loyalists and the Reagan loyalists all hated each other.

Smith: And the wives, I’m sure, was a factor.

Bakshian: Oh, yeah. Because of the ’76 run. And I can remember in ’76, after I’d come back from Harvard, I was helping in the campaign, the actual election campaign. And Lyn Nofziger was there, who of course worked very closely with the President – President Reagan. And at one point we wanted to get a tape. We were doing things for surrogates – statements and speeches – we’d take them and then spread them. And they wanted to get Reagan to do one heartily endorsing Ford and Nofziger said, “Oh, Reagan would never agree to
it.” But someone got through to Reagan’s office, and obviously he supported Ford, and Reagan did it. Reagan didn’t hesitate to do it. It got back to the bad blood. the Hartmanns and the Nofzigers were much more that way than the big guys themselves.

Smith: Who is the guy we interviewed who ran the convention for Ford? [Stanton Anderson] He was a young guy then, he’d been at the RNC. But he’d run the ’68 convention, or ’72 convention.

Bakshian: Not Bill Timmons?

Smith: No. In any event, Ford finishes the acceptance speech and he gave it to him, to this guy. He gave him the speech, he said, “You deserve this.” And then he said, “I’d like to get Governor Reagan down here.” You couldn’t go down on the floor, so this guy, he went down through all the bowels, past the locker room, past everything, then up into the skybox. Pokes his head in, and says, “President Ford would really like to have Governor Reagan join him on the podium.” And before he could finish his sentence, Nancy says, “Don’t do it, Ronnie.” And Nofziger said the same. And Deaver had a somewhat milder version.

Bakshian: Looking to the future…

Smith: But Reagan said, “Naw…” and he did it.

Bakshian: Reagan was smart.

Smith: He was very smart.

Bakshian: Reagan not only was “that’s the sporting thing to do,” and he was, he and Jerry Ford - although they happened to butt heads - both were gentlemen. They were both nice people and treated people individually, treated people well. And so it was the natural thing for Reagan to do, but it was also the smart thing for him to do. Much more so than the soreheads who were much more busy about getting even.

Smith: And who were living in the moment.

Bakshian: That’s right, couldn’t look ahead.
Smith: Did you ever see Ford’s temper?

Bakshian: I never saw him really blow up, but I saw him express impatience once or twice. But it was not to someone in the room, it was when we were dealing with a speech or something. I don’t even remember what, but about someone being such a pain to deal with, or a major road block or something like that. I know he could do it. And God knows it’s a job where there are enough little prods all the time. But I never actually saw him blow up.

Smith: Again, the speechwriting operation as a metaphor for what he had to learn and the degree to which he learned it, mastered the job. It does seem curious that he would tolerate a situation where eventually you had, in effect, dueling speech operations.

Bakshian: Yeah.

Smith: How did that come about? How did it work, and what does it tell you?

Bakshian: Most of that started happening shortly after I left to go to Harvard. But I knew Dave Gergen very well, for example. I think Rumsfeld recognized that Jerry Ford was never going to actually give the gate to his old and trusted friend Hartmann, and in addition, to a large extent, although they shifted – that is Paul Theiss was eventually replaced by Bob Orben – but that you were never going to be able to abolish the speechwriting staff that was supposed to report to Hartmann. This isn’t Russia or the Nixon White House, for that matter. And you’re not just going to execute them all and bring in new troops, or move them all to Siberia. Actually they were sort of moved to Siberia – not moved, but they were allowed to continue, but other things were done. I think that actually showed you that with Jerry Ford, there was a point beyond which he would not go about mistreating old friends. And yet he was convinced he needed better work coming in. Now I say “convinced,” I said was convinced because I’m sure that Rumsfeld was constantly explaining how much, what the “problems were,” sometimes when they weren’t necessarily coming from there. At any rate, Rumsfeld prevailed and Dave Gergen was brought in to run a “shadow” speechwriting operation.

Smith: I think the first real flashpoint is the ’75 State of the Union Address. There are those who believe, and who assert as a fact, that Hartmann was perfectly
capable of withholding work until the last possible moment, so as to make sure that it was his work – it wasn’t staffed out.

Bakshian: That would be in character, certainly.

Smith: And that’s an unaffordable luxury in the White House.

Bakshian: Yeah. Well, also Hartmann before had worked with Jerry Ford, but he worked in a situation where maybe one or two other people were involved in the process and he took it to Ford. And also it was last minute, usually up there on the Hill it is a last minute process. And also, there is no clearance process.

Smith: I was going to say, who cares what the Minority Leader says, to be honest?

Bakshian: Yeah, and to Hartmann, probably even the legitimate clearance process in his mind was enemy forces.

Smith: Did he tend to see enemies?

Bakshian: Well, he was right about Rumsfeld, but then it’s a chicken and egg thing, too. If he came in with an attitude and with certain inadequacies, other people were going to recognize them and as he decided more and more people were out to get him, he would get more and more the way other people recognized as a problem.

Smith: We interviewed Al Haig a year before he died, and it was still not clear to me whether he was simply an emphatic personality given to sometimes extreme assertions, or sort of borderline senile. But he came out swinging.

Bakshian: I’d say one from column A and one from column B.

Smith: I think that is probably very fair.

Bakshian: Plus, he had nothing to lose anymore. He was never going to run for president again, and he was a bit PO’d about a lot of things that have happened. So he was paying back.

Smith: He was nice about the President, very nice about Mrs. Ford, but boy, he came out swinging against Hartmann. Said the Secret Service had come to him and warned him about Hartmann, etc. etc. That he had gone to see the President. And the interesting thing is, I could hear Ford saying this. Haig was going on
about “I’ve seen one president brought down because of so on and so on, and Ford, according to Haig says, “Al, you’ll have to let me handle this.” At which point Haig says he said, “Well, then I know you don’t want me to stay.” And allowing for a little bit of dramatic license, I can envision that scene - Haig having a very large chip on his shoulder.

Bakshian: Oh, yes. That’s more or less the way he was – because, later, he would throw many tantrums in the Reagan White House. I was much more aware of that in a way, because I happened to be on the plane on Air Force One once where Judge Clark had to calm down Al Haig on the phone. This was before he finally was let go. Because as a result of the President, the Vice President, and, I don’t know whether it was the Senate Majority Leader or the Speaker of the House had also needed executive planes, Haig, as secretary of state, had been given a military transport plane that he considered infra dig in the pecking order of airplanes, and was having a hissy fit on the phone. And Judge Clark had to – it was like talking him off the ledge. And everyone was shrugging about it like, “Oh, there he goes again.” And, of course, he did it once too often.

Smith: So, he had that kind of temperament?

Bakshian: Yeah. He’d been in military command. And if you are base commander, you are base commander. Or, for that matter, if you are deputy whatever, there aren’t two, and I think he felt that way. If he was chief of staff, then if he came to the President identifying someone as a problem, and he had done that, it was him or me.

Smith: Doesn’t that illustrate so richly the shortcomings? And in some ways, foreshadowing what happened in the Reagan presidency. It was almost unavoidable.

Bakshian: Although many of us really think that in the meantime, Haig’s bypass surgery aggravated that. Something had to be there to begin with, but that kind of really super-trauma sometimes tends to aggravate the tendencies. There are some people around with that opinion about Dick Cheney, by the way.

Smith: Right.
Bakshian: I’ve known Dick Cheney since he started on the Hill. I don’t know about the medical bit, but I’ve seen him evolve.

Smith: You left, I guess, before Rumsfeld turned the reins over to Cheney?

Bakshian: That’s right. Because when I came back to Washington, Rumsfeld tried to hire me as his speechwriter at the Pentagon.

Smith: Oh, really?

Bakshian: I was dubious in general, but having then gone out to talk to him at the Pentagon and figured out what it would be like to work in that pigsty and what kind of lunches you’d be likely to be get - that did it.

Smith: Nelson Rockefeller went to his grave convinced that Don Rumsfeld did him in. And, of course, no one ever wants to blame the President. But George H.W. Bush clearly believes that Rumsfeld deep-sixed him at the CIA. And it’s fascinating to talk to people thirty years later.

Bakshian: Rumsfeld has always been that kind of an operator. I first knew of him when I was working for Bill Brock on the Hill in 1966, and there were various fights for just little think tank operations and so on going on in there, where all of a sudden – the old thing about Rumanians and revolving doors. You know, all of a sudden, Rumsfeld had got through and was in front of people that he’d been behind, and there is no reason to believe that changed. And he’s a very competitive man.

Smith: And, reputedly, leaves very few fingerprints.

Bakshian: He’s good at it. He loves his work. I’ve worked closely with him and I always got along with him, again, because I’m not somebody running against him. He needed a certain skill set. Also, I’ve never worked for him on a staff. It’s one thing to help with something, and maintain your autonomy with somebody like that.

Smith: Did you have any contact with Rockefeller?

Bakshian: No, just his staff once or twice about something. But, no.

Smith: Was there a sense of tension there?
Bakshian: They were very much in a world of their own over there. They were just – the whole thing didn’t last that long, and he didn’t have a real Washington nucleus. I see this with political campaigns - people talk about you’ve got to raise enough money to run for office. It’s very dangerous when you raise all the money you need and then some, and Rockefeller, he always had more talent than he needed. He always bought more talent than he needed, and some of it wasn’t very talented. And so there were a lot of hacks who were professional Rockefeller people, he thought were very good, who weren’t necessarily. And who also were not an easy fit with Washington or the presidential staff - either used to throwing their weight around or something.

Smith: He’d been governor of New York for fifteen years. He was a Rockefeller.

Bakshian: He was a Rockefeller. He was also paternalistic about taking care of people who had worked for him. And he had a lot of breadline cases, some of whom he didn’t realize were breadline cases.

Smith: Really? The reputation was he had this great staff.

Bakshian: Well, he had it and then he had lots of stale leftovers mixed in. How did he not get the nomination all those times, if money could have bought the best campaign staff? He had other problems, but…

Smith: Oh sure. I realize you left before the campaign per se started. Were they slow to take Reagan seriously? Either the possibility that he would run, and then the fact that he might, in fact, be a formidable opponent?

Bakshian: No more so than just about everybody else was, I mean, other than Ronald Reagan and his core staff. I think, if anything, Ford was probably accepting the Washington, the inside the Beltway, commentary and interpretation of where things were, because I don’t think he underestimated Ronald Reagan any more, maybe a little less, than the liberal press, the Washington Republican establishment and everybody else. So it wasn’t a matter of him uniquely and willfully ignoring it. There was nobody there that was sounding the alarm. Everyone was taken sort of off balance by that. The other thing was – well, Reagan had just always been underestimated.
Smith: It’s interesting because you can argue, in a different way, Ford was underestimated.

Bakshian: But he was a man of Washington. Reagan, to the Washington press corps, was California.

Smith: Actor – right wing, too old.

Bakshian: And also, they just never had to cover him in detail. They hadn’t had to cover him day to day. They’d never taken the measure, because the guys that had didn’t underestimate him.

Smith: Right, the Lou Cannon. What were Ford’s strengths as President, and did you see any evolution in his grasp of the office?

Bakshian: I think he was a quick learner about how the White House worked, but you wouldn’t hear that from the “Ford loyalists” because part of him figuring out how the White House worked meant he had to recognize certain limitations on some of his old friends that he brought in. So, to them, that would have been him being manipulated by the other people.

Smith: Would you include Phil Buchen, for example?

Bakshian: I never had to deal with him in great detail, so I don’t know how he interacted with all that. But the people that were old friends – Jack Marsh and various other people – that came there who sort of talked slowly and moved slowly. And Jerry Ford, I think, didn’t get out of breath going onto that presidential treadmill where you’re running even when you’re standing still, both politically and metaphorically. And a lot of these people did. So I think he was a quick learner, but still it was a stunning change, the most difficult since Harry Truman. Well, come to think of it – well, Lyndon Johnson – but Johnson, first of all, loved being president, even though he shed genuine tears when JFK was shot. Plus he’d had such an unpleasant time being vice president, I’m sure that whoever looked after the presidential dogs had more entry than he did.

But I think Jerry Ford was up to it from day one, and he learned from day one. But I think he was more qualified than most vice presidents are because of his
long experience. I just had a high opinion of him, which the more I saw of him, the more it was confirmed.

Smith: Rod Hills said in our interview, “The older I get and the more presidents I see, the more I think, at least one definition of presidential success is making government work.” Knowing how to make it work and making it work.

Bakshian: And under those adverse circumstances.

Smith: But that is the opposite of the theatrical, self-dramatizing nature of the presidency in the television age.

Bakshian: Jerry Ford was neither an egomaniac nor insecure. Most presidents tend to be a little of both. He and Reagan, temperamentally, were very similar, except that Reagan was a master of the camera and was more aware of the importance of that, I think. Plus, he had more time to do it.

Smith: Was it frustrating at all for those of you who were responsible for the public Ford, at least Ford the communicator. My sense is he was at his best away from the camera. He was at his best one on one…

Bakshian: And around the table.

Smith: Where his knowledge of government and his manner really could be very, very effective. Was there a sense of frustration at all that some of that couldn’t be better communicated in the arena?

Bakshian: A sense of frustration and challenge trying to rack your brains about what’s the way of saying this that makes it come across. But there were only so many major speeches where that really mattered, though, because he comes in and all of a sudden it’s already 1974 midterms, and so he’s saddled with all these crappy speeches he has to give, which can’t be finely tuned. And which also are going to be, if there are film clips of them on the news, standing at an outdoor podium with the wind blowing through your hair and bad acoustics and having to shout. When you think of it, he was quite capable of giving a good Oval Office speech. There just weren’t that many of them.

His first speech as President of the United States couldn’t have been done better. And I think, by the way, that poor Hartmann - who in many ways
failed to measure up - he deserves, he has a niche in history about something important, where he struck the right note and probably was able to do it better than the most brilliant ghost who might have been brought in from the outside, because he also knew the man who was going to give the speech.

But my point is, that down the line, if and when he was well served, that kind of speech, as opposed to the standing up before a live audience, Ford was quite capable of doing that because that was closer to what his manner would have been if you were sitting there in the room with him. With the speechwriters themselves, he actually was much more interactive than most presidents. I dealt with three and I’ll show it to you on the way out, just one of several pictures that were taken of the speechwriters – there were several of us all sitting around, really going over speeches with Jerry Ford. I used to bring the Reagan staff in, or some of them, for an Oval Office meeting because I had one once a week with him automatically. We talked about the upcoming schedule, but we weren’t really going over speeches. He [Ford] did that.

Smith: Again, right before the ’74 elections, when all of these candidates had the burden of the pardon on top of everything else, and he goes to California and everyone said don’t go to see Nixon, and he insists on going to see Nixon. It was the decent thing to do.

Bakshian: He was a man of honor. He was decent, but not necessarily soft. It was being true to your code. That was being tough, by the way, in a way that Richard Nixon might not have understood or appreciated.

Smith: When we talked to Benton Becker - this was during Ford’s vice presidency, and Earl Warren died. And Becker said, “It would be a nice gesture if you went and paid your respects.” And Ford sort of thought, and said, “Well, I don’t think the President would like that very much.” He said he’d think about it. Well, Becker finds out later in the day, without telling him, Ford on his own had gone up to the Supreme Court and placed a wreath at Warren’s casket. Needless to say, Nixon was not happy.

Bakshian: Nixon was not happy, but TS, in addition to which, this wasn’t somebody who just happened to have been a Supreme Court Chief Justice. The Warren
Commission was something that Ford had been involved in, so they had had an association.

Smith: Yes, of course.

Bakshian: And to have ignored that…Richard Nixon visited Harry Truman while he was president and all sorts of other things, so I don’t think there was any real grounds for…

Smith: What were Ford’s weaknesses? Apart from the communications.

Bakshian: Just the actual, physical delivery bit. He didn’t have any impediment as a speaker, per se, but it was almost like a slight handicap.

Smith: Judge-a-ment and gar-an-tee.

Bakshian: He put the extra syllable into judgment. But other than that, if he’d been a little more ruthless, if instead of actually being a nice fellow, he’d mastered the art of pretending to be a nice fellow, but had been a little more of an ass kicker, he probably would have served himself well politically. I don’t know whether it would have improved his presidency. But I think he was a genuinely nice man who was not ruthlessly ambitious; not in it for himself – being an honorable man is the key. Nice implies sort of soft. He wasn’t soft. But he was honorable and he wasn’t going to do something shabby; he wasn’t not going to place the wreath at Earl Warren’s lying in state. Wasn’t not going to when he was in California visit the former president. It’s funny how you still, when you worked for them when they were president, you still tend to say…We’re here to talk about Ford, so I can’t talk about him as Jerry Ford or Ford, but the others I keep referring to as president.

Smith: One other thing, tell me about his intelligence.

Bakshian: Again, I believe that both and he and Ronald Reagan were at least as intelligent as Nixon, but they did not have intellectual aspirations and pretenses. I think they both, to use the J word, they both had a lot of judge-a-ment. To me, leadership effectiveness consists of raw intelligence, judgment and character which really go together, and then experience. But, of course, you can have all the experience in the world and learn nothing unless you’ve got both the raw intelligence and judgment and character. So I would say, I
think he was a bright student, and the amount of stuff he knew and could draw on and deploy intelligently from his experience, proved to me that he was an intelligent man. I have no idea what he would do on an IQ test, but I think those are abstract, to a certain extent, too.

Smith: We’ve been told the decision to have Ford introduce his own budget and to stand in a room and answer every single question until there were no more questions - I think the last president to do that was Harry Truman - and it’s not been done since and probably won’t be anytime soon. But that that was, in effect, a tactic.

Bakshian: Well, first of all it showed he knew what he was doing; and, in fact, it showed him doing something that very few other people could have done in his place; very few other presidents could have done. I agree entirely. I give him top marks. Imagination wasn’t his strong point, but he was not there at a time where imagination would have been much help. He was first of all dealing with an overwhelming pile of things that couldn’t be changed by imagination. It wasn’t a matter of choose your theme; choose what you address today, because they were already there. So I don’t think that was a problem.

Smith: My sense is he was a real fiscal conservative. He was tight, financially.

Bakshian: I admired his use of the veto. And in fact, the thing I have the most, I won’t say contempt, but the thing I felt the most damning about the second George Bush, was that either he was totally heedless of the problem, or was afraid to use the veto against his own party out of responsibility to the nation. And Jerry Ford again and again did it where it didn’t necessary help him politically, but it was the right thing to do and sometimes it prevailed.

Smith: Now, you said you came back and worked on the campaign.

Bakshian: In the last month or so.

Smith: Post-convention.

Bakshian: Yeah, when it was the general election campaign, which I could do while also pursuing my own writing and so on.

Smith: Now, he was gaining ground – clearly – from where they’d been.
Bakshian: I think it’s amazing how close it became. It would have been almost a miracle to overcome the odds, but he came remarkably close.

Smith: What do you think were the factors that – people tend to zero in on the Nixon pardon. I’ve often wondered, because you had some economic numbers released at the very end of the campaign that Greenspan famously said was a pause, and I just wonder whether…

Bakshian: I think it was more than that. I think the pardon thing is something that people can point to a lot, but the people who were the most enraged about that were not going to vote for Jerry Ford anyway. It didn’t help him with anybody. It may have helped him to a certain extent with the conservative base – a little bit. But it hurt him, but I don’t think it, by itself decided anything. In fact, if you start playing that game about well if it affected X percent of the voters, you can do that about umpteen other issues, too.

Smith: And we’ll never know.

Bakshian: We’ll never know. I think he did remarkably well for anybody who was in that situation at that time. It was time for a Democratic president, especially one who came from outside of Washington, and had nothing but cheerleaders in the press corps.

Smith: Again, no one will ever know, although I think Ford certainly gave it a lot of thought at the time and later, what the consequences would have been if he hadn’t pardoned Nixon.

Bakshian: That’s right. Where would we have gone? What sort of due process would have been followed and what would have been dominating the story, not just to the diminution of his efforts as president, but to the detriment of the country? That’s why I think he was so right, both ways.

Smith: A couple of things, then we’ll let you go. The fall of Saigon; that must have been a searing experience for anyone in the White House. And there was a speech at Tulane where he, in effect, I think, overrode Kissinger and said the war is over as far as we’re concerned. There must have been an internal debate over that.
Bakshian: The frustration to me, it’s not a matter of anger, or even sorrow, the frustration was, to this day I believe and I suspect Ford may have, that if it hadn’t been for Watergate and then the irresponsible attitude of partisanship on the Hill, it didn’t have to end the way it did. With the North essentially being able to do a victory parade into the South. It didn’t have to end the way it did, and if it hadn’t ended that way, probably fewer people would have suffered and there would have been a more normal evolution of things over there. That said, under the conditions, it was over and I think that to the extent that Henry Kissinger wanted to do things to prolong the agony, it was at least as much out of egotism about his own policies and his “legacy” or reputation, as it was any realistic chance of changing what had been set in motion some time before. Because of Watergate and because of the total irresponsibility, to my mind, of the Democratic leadership on the Hill.

Smith: Even people who criticize Ford’s presidency acknowledge that he built a remarkable Cabinet.

Bakshian: Yeah. He was secure around talented people. Plus, his first thought wasn’t was he building up a rival? And that was partially because of the time frame and everything else. But also because that was the kind of person he was.

Smith: And apparently the one exception to that appeared to be Jim Schlesinger.

Bakshian: Well, Schlesinger, I think, was one of the less talented members.

Smith: Oh.

Bakshian: If you look at his subsequent career, he was a prima donna. He and Al Haig have certain similar characteristics. And it’s interesting that the two people who are sort of the most – not totally embittered – but who left somewhat under a cloud, they were both prima donnas and they weren’t necessarily the most brilliant, brightest bulbs in the chandelier.

Smith: Yeah, that’s interesting, very interesting. I asked Dick Cheney, “Was it difficult for Ford to fire people?” He said, “Not when it came to Schlesinger.”

Bakshian: Schlesinger probably also had a very high opinion – he was an intellectual in the sense of somebody who was much more intellectual than he was intelligent and who probably drastically underestimated Jerry Ford’s
intelligence, and probably exuded that attitude Jerry Ford, who didn’t miss much – so Jerry Ford would have already known where Schlesinger was coming from. So when the time came, he would not have had to shed a tear and say, “Gee, too bad about that.” Nor should he have.

Smith: At the end of the campaign, did you think you’d caught up?

Bakshian: No. I had a feeling that Ford had done remarkably well, but this was one of those things that was over. And it was over before that campaign started and he had done everything. There is a scene in *A Night to Remember*, an old film about the sinking of the *Titanic*, toward the end, where they’ve rescued the first officer who survives and is on the deck of a ship, the name of which I forget, the *Beringeria*, or whatever it was, that caught up with them and picked up the survivors. And the first officer says to the rescue ship’s captain, “I wonder what I might have done,” and the captain says, “You did everything that was humanly possible.” Jerry Ford did everything that was humanly possible. And he did remarkably well. But it was in the cards. Barring Jimmy Carter actually suddenly having stopped lusting with his mind and starting to lust in a motel two days before the election and getting caught on camera, I just think it wouldn’t…

Smith: Did you have any contact with him in later years?

Bakshian: Alas, no. Because, until the Reagan years, I wasn’t involved in politics, I was doing my own writing and all. And I didn’t ever see him at anything and I didn’t happen to be at loose ends that day in the Reagan White House when he was there on his way to the Sadat funeral. I was busy with something, where I didn’t have time to come over just to, you know, say hello.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Bakshian: First of all, as a man who distinguished himself in every responsibility he ever took on in public life; as a man, especially for a politician, of stainless honor. A man who was up to the occasion, including a number of times, where he was thrown impossible assignments on short notice, under minimal conditions. But most of all, a man who steered us through a very painful time, and I can’t think of anyone who could have done it better, or how he could have done it better than he did. And a lot of that was where he was doing it
from his gut, not because of the most expert people around. Very often they were wrong or giving him conflicting advice. And I think that’s how, with most Americans who paid attention, and with most historians, he will be remembered. And I think that’s justice.

Smith: It’s interesting. I wonder if you were at all surprised – I was wearing two hats the week of the funeral, I was with ABC during the first part of the week and then with the family the second part – and I can tell you, journalists, particularly younger journalists, were surprised, particularly as the week went along…

Bakshian: They were learning about him for the first time.

Smith: They were. And I think there was a whole generation who were seeing him in these old film clips and comparing him to today and he looked pretty good.

Bakshian: Yeah. Absolutely. And, again, especially when they pictured him in the context of the hand he was dealt. As I say, it is sad, but even Nixon, Nixon’s death – when I was talking to him in his retirement, he also was still talking about how do you think history will judge? And I didn’t have the heart to say, “Yeah, but, actually the day after you passed away, that’s when the positive re-evaluation will begin in earnest.” With Jerry Ford, it had already, among insiders, begun. But a whole new generation, not just of journalists, but other people, when they saw his story, I think they gained a fuller appreciation of him. And now that’s more on the record than it was and more than it was before.

Smith: Final thing, did you have any contact with Mrs. Ford?

Bakshian: I didn’t, but my sister, Mimi Timmons, who happens to be married to Bill Timmons, knew her very well from the Hill and then as First Lady, and loved her. As everybody, as far as I know, did. The possible exception is Nancy Reagan, I don’t know. They never were personal friends. To me, I always have had a high respect for those people in public life, especially way up there, who had a real marriage and the husband and wife loved each other and the marriage survived all that stuff. The Reagans, in a very different way, but it was true of them. The Fords in a much more full rounded way, because I think they had a more normal relationship with their children, too. Which to
me was an added plus – just in how you felt about them. So, I loved her from afar, but I didn’t have any real dealings with her.

Smith: After they moved in and she told someone that – I guess presidents have always had separate bedrooms, presidents and their wives – and they shared the same bed. And concerned Americans wrote in to the White House to protest.

Bakshian: Well, in the old days, (in the 50s and 60s) sitcoms, if there was a marital bedroom scene, it always had to be two beds. And, of course, with the Nixons, if it had been a single bed in one bedroom there probably would have been a demilitarized zone.

Smith: Did you have a sense of what that marriage was like?

Bakshian: No, I think Richard Nixon had very little of a private life at that point. He loved his daughters, but I think his whole persona was wrapped up in being “the President.” I’m told by people that saw a lot of him after the presidency that, ironically, or sadly in a way, but better late than never, when Pat Nixon had her first serious stroke, he then started appreciating how she had given up so much of her life for him. She had totally accommodated his career and so on. And there was an appreciation and closeness that then developed for the duration, in the twilight years. I think earlier it had been just something that – also she, probably, probably just withdrew. I think they both withdrew into themselves as opposed to having something going on on the outside or having detested each other or anything. It withered. And then I was glad to hear that toward the end…

Smith: This is great.
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Smith: First of all, thank you so much for doing this.

It’s hard to know where to begin, so let me try to begin at the beginning. Everyone, of course, knows about your significant role in the Ford White House. But your relationship with Gerald Ford, obviously, predates his days in the White House. When did you first meet?

Becker: We first met in a very formal atmosphere in the late 1960s. I take you back to the Congressional investigation about ’66, of former Congressman Adam Clayton Powell. You may recall that the House concluded an investigation without any conclusions and sent their work product to the Department of Justice to determine whether or not there were any violations of criminal law by the Congressman. The subject matter of the investigation was kickbacks amongst staff.

The Department of Justice in those days did what the Department of Justice always did, they sent it to the FBI, and the FBI sent dozens or more agents out to investigate, and the agents came back with empty investigative notes. No one would talk to the FBI agents in the congressman’s district in Harlem, and so we empanelled, we, the Department of Justice, empanelled a special grand jury in DC to investigate.

I was a criminal division attorney in the fraud section for the Department of Justice at that time, and I was given, along with two other gentlemen, that assignment to conduct the grand jury investigation and make some recommendation with respect to prosecutive recommendations to General Katzenbach or General Ramsey Clark. And there came a point in time in the course of the investigation that it was obvious to us that we needed certain documents. If we were to proceed with prosecution, these documents were
essential to successful prosecution and these documents would have been the
documents that the congressman himself signed.

For example, Richard, if you worked for Congressman Powell, under the
prosecutive theory, if you worked for Congressman Powell and you would be
required to kickback a $1,000 every month as part of your employment to the
congressman, you and all other employees would have submitted to the
congressman every month by the clerk of the House, a document that says,
“Richard Norton Smith has been employed by me this month, is entitled to
received $4,000.” And it would be signed by the congressman.

That document would be a material false statement, and thus the violation of
the Title 18 statute in the Federal Criminal Code, that the congressman was
making material false statements to an agency of the federal government. And
that would be the technical criminal violation. So, in order to proceed, we
needed those documents, we needed the originals of those documents.
Congressman Powell, at that time, had been suspended – at the time of the
investigation was in the Bahamas, in Bermuda. There was an office manned
by some staff people, but there was virtually no congressional contact.

The grand jury and the Department of Justice subpoenaed the House of
Representatives to produce those documents – not only for one employee, but
for all the employees that were the subject matter of consideration. Those
subpoenas were predictably responded to by the House of Representatives as
being subpoenas that were violative of the principles of separation of powers.
We are, said the House of Representatives, the co-equal Executive branch and
we cannot be subpoenaed by a co-equal branch. Which we expected.

There were precedents in the past, and the precedent that was employed was,
in that case, was for every subpoena we sent, a special committee of the
House was established, a three-person committee, consisting of the Speaker,
John McCormick, the Chairman of the Judiciary Committee, Manny Seller of
New York, and the Minority Leader, a guy from the 5th district of Michigan, a
guy named Jerry Ford.
And so every time we issued a subpoena, I had to go to that committee, or one of my colleagues went to that committee and had to respond to questions about the pending subpoena – why we wanted it, what it was for, the absence of any political nature, in an attempt to persuade the three members to go down to the floor of the House and for them to recommend to the entire floor – all 435 members of the House, that the House – and here’s the operable word – voluntarily comply. And so, that was our role, to try to persuade the three members of that committee to agree to tell the House to voluntarily comply with the subpoenas. And they did. They always did.

And so my first encounter with Congressman Ford was during that time period across the table. A very formal, Congressman this and Mr. Becker that. And I found, quite frankly, and I commented about it then to friends and family, and I’m happy to repeat it in later years, that of the three members, Jerry Ford was always the most prepared, the most succinct questions, very fair, very logical, and that’s how we first encountered one another.

Smith: Did you have a sense he’d made up his mind on Powell himself? Did he convey an attitude about the congressman?

Becker: Let me answer this way, by saying that if you didn’t know, and you simply read the transcripts of those executive session committee meetings, you’d have no way of knowing that Jerry Ford was a Republican and Congressman Powell was a Democrat. He was as balanced and as fair as possible. His questions about separation of power and whether we were overstepping or not overstepping, and even if they volunteered – showed a real good working knowledge of the constitutional principles, and I thought he was very, very fair. I was quite impressed. I really was.

Smith: Let me ask you about a still more controversial part of the story, and one for which he took considerable heat at the time, and even later on. That, of course, is the whole Justice Douglas investigation. People tend to apply labels in this town. It’s a shortcut and gets around thinking sometimes. People just automatically assumed that Ford was, in effect, carrying water for the Nixon White House. That this was part of a larger political effort to remake the court. And, of course, Nixon had had some serious setbacks with the
nominations, both of Judge Haynesworth and Carswell. That’s the traditional way of approaching this. Tell me about how it came about and how you interpret Ford’s role.

Becker: This is one of those classic lawyer stories where the lawyer opens the conversation by saying, “Why didn’t you call me before you did this instead of after you’ve done this?”

Smith: Is that a reference to Ford’s conduct in the…

Becker: No, the speech on the floor of the House, his speech on the floor of the House with respect about Justice Douglas is what blew the whole thing up, and that’s when he called me and said, “Let’s sit down and talk about this.” And my answer was, “Let me see what you said,” and my first response was, “Why didn’t you call me before you said this, because a lot of this is filled with allegations that are unsupported,” at least at that point in time by real merit.

Smith: By the way, before I forget, it’s important to insert because it wasn’t only that Nixon had lost two Supreme Court nominees, but you’d also had the Fortas scandal. And that’s part of the backdrop, isn’t it, to this effort to raise…

Becker: You correct me if I’m incorrect, but my memory is that, this is after the denial of Haynesworth and Carswell.

Smith: Yes, that’s right.

Becker: That was my memory, because all that played into it. I was told by Congressman Ford that following the Haynesworth and Carswell denial of confirmation by the Senate, the Nixon White House was very angry and there were people in the White House who were very angry. John Mitchell was angry at the Justice Department and he had a criminal division assistant AG named Wilson, Will Wilson, who was particularly angry about all of this. And the congressman, who was a minority leader of the House, was contacted by Wilson, as he told me. And Wilson had made certain assertions to him – telephonically, as Ford described it to me – about information retained in the files of the Department of Justice that was at the very least, embarrassing, and possibly even impeachable evidence with respect to Justice Douglas. And as
Congressman Ford then described it to me, that Wilson made the point that if this were public Bill Douglas could never continue to sit on the bench, and certainly could have not been confirmed with this kind of information public.

Smith: This is hardball.

Becker: And, he, Wilson, would make the records available to Ford.

Smith: This is hardball.

Becker: Yes, this is serious stuff. Now, at this point in time, none of that information, if indeed it existed, which I doubt that it really did, was ever made available to Jerry Ford. But Jerry Ford was, among other things at that point in his life, far and away, and I’ve used the expression in his presence lots of times, a team player. He was a team player. Wilson assured him he would give him this information. Nothing was forthcoming.

Bob Hartmann, who worked on Ford’s congressional staff, wrote a speech based on that conversation as related to Hartmann by Ford, which Ford delivered on the floor of the House. And it didn’t really call for the impeachment of Bill Douglas, the media overstated that – it called for an investigation of his conduct. Richard, as you know, Article Three - judges serve a life tender, including members of the Supreme Court, and that life tender is conditioned constitutionally only by two words in the Constitution, and those two words are, “Good Conduct.” And so, Article Three says you have it for life tenure in good conduct.

So the argument that Ford was making was, “Is this the kind of conduct that falls outside of the constitutional restriction of Article Three judges for good conduct?” Remember, Article Two, executive branch personnel have an entirely different impeachment standard that deals with bribery, treason and high crimes and misdemeanors.

Smith: Let me break that down for a moment, if I may. Long after the fact, sensing that maybe Ford had some regret, or at least embarrassment over his part in all of this…he took pains to make the distinction that you’ve made quite
accurately. He didn’t call for the impeachment, but an investigation. Although in the climate of the day, that was seen as a distinction without a difference. Legally, you are absolutely right. But, again, with everything as politicized as it was…More to the point, he indicated that he had members in his caucus who were gung-ho to get Douglas. To get him off the bench.

Becker: Republican members?

Smith: Yes. And that Ford as he explained it, was taking the ball from the firebrands. In effect, trying to moderate, to some degree, this effort. Now that may be a little bit of rewriting history, or reinterpreting history. Did he feel regret at any point about all that?

Becker: He had a sense of regret about the publicity and the way the media played his speech and his communications to the Judiciary Committee on this subject. And I don’t think there is any question about that – that he felt embarrassed. And I’ll say, too, he was really quite surprised that the media jumped on this so much – that here’s Jerry Ford trying to get rid of an old Roosevelt liberal judge, whose been on the bench for so many years.

Smith: Was that in part because it was seemingly so out of character?

Becker: Was it out of character for Jerry Ford? It was out of character for him to be leading a charge without supportive evidence. But it was not out of character for him to be responsive to a request from the Republican White House, and a Republican AG. It was all team player stuff. But he did not seek, at any time, an impeachment. He simply wanted some clarification, and it bothered him.

We sat over many conversations, and he would say, “I don’t understand how Haynesworth and Carswell are ineligible to serve on the Supreme Court of the United States, and the Senators won’t confirm them because they did this and this, but members of the Court can do this, this, this, and this and they continue to sit.”

Smith: Let me ask you, because that does get us to the heart of the case against Douglas. I don’t want to answer the question before I ask it – but you do wonder, in light of the Fortas resignation, which entailed his receiving a fairly
substantial retainer from the Parvin – no, Douglas, I think, had the Parvin Foundation – but basically, Fortas was being paid…

Becker: By the litigant –he was not being paid indirectly. I think a person who had a pending action before the Supreme Court, paid for, as I recollect, paid the American University Law School a sum of money, and that sum of money was used in the summer for Fortas to teach a course. I think that’s correct. That’s a different story than Douglas.

Smith: Douglas was, I guess, a consultant to the Parvin Foundation?

Becker: A member of the board of the Parvin Dorman Foundation. The Parvin Dorman Foundation had some people associated with it that were highly questionable. Highly questionable. In fact, that’s the only information we ever really got, that we got confirmation of from the Justice Department. And it was an appearance, it was a terrible appearance that he should sit on the board of essentially a furniture company that makes and sells furniture and other equipment, along with other people who have definitely, at least in the Department of Justice, organized crime connections.

Smith: One sensed that, objectionable as that was to Ford, personally, the Justice’s writings, particularly for, I think it was for Evergreen magazine, were perhaps more offensive.

Becker: Yes.

Smith: Or seemed more inappropriate. Is that an accurate assertion, or was a big deal to Ford in terms of how he formulated the case against Douglas?

Becker: I couldn’t call it his case against Douglas, I’d say it formulated in a large part his feelings about this man and his continued tenure on the bench.

Smith: Did that have anything to do with his marital record? The fact that…

Becker: No.

Smith: No, nothing at all?
Becker: I can try to be more responsive to you and I will, and that is that, he was deeply troubled. President Ford was deeply troubled by this diversity of standard. You had to be of such a quality to get on the bench, but once you got on the bench there was this good conduct. Good behavior is so vague and every member of the Senate can affix their own definition to it. And it bothered him.

And I can tell you – I’ll jump ahead on this interview – but at one point, I’ll never forget this. I’ll take it to my grave, Richard. At one point in the vice presidential confirmation proceedings, a congressman from California, a man named Jerome Waldie, not a fan of President Ford, was questioning him about Douglas and the same kind of questions about, “Are you offended by the fact that Justice Douglas has been married to young women? Are you offended by the fact that he writes articles in magazines?” Well, I thought I had a pretty good handle on everything that was at that desk where President Ford was speaking, we had notebooks and questions and answers, but I didn’t.

He went into his briefcase and he took out that magazine, that *Evergreen* magazine, and he opens it up – now this is pre-cable TV, opens it up and he’s showing it to the congressman. He says, “This is *Evergreen* magazine, and here’s an article on this page.” And he says, “Let me turn the page Congressman,” and he did this and you could hear a hush in that place. And there was a semi-nude playmate picture. He said, “I just don’t think that it’s appropriate for a justice of the Supreme Court to write and have an article published in magazines of this type.” He says, “If you do, that’s your affair Congressman, not mine.” And so I don’t know if that is responsive to you, but that happened.

Smith: And what does that tell you about Jerry Ford’s values?

Becker: Oh, that this is a Midwestern guy who, although it’s been twenty-some years in Washington, still has the Midwestern values, and that’s the way he was made.

Smith: That wasn’t politics; that was him.
Becker: That had nothing to do with politics; had nothing to do with – it’s even before what we use today so openly, we use the phrase “Liberal and Conservative” to talk about justices. I don’t think we even used those phrases then. If anything, Bill Douglas was being possibly criticized in some quarters for *Griswold vs. Connecticut* and the privacy right decision that he wrote about.

Smith: But Douglas has to be the personification of what today conservatives talk about as judicial activism.

Becker: I suppose.

Smith: He was the face of creative interpretation of the Constitution – I mean, the penumbra of privacy. He was an iconic figure in a lot of ways.

Becker: Those are your words. I wouldn’t use those words to describe *Griswold*. I think *Griswold* has - for those that watch this and don’t understand, this is a case involving the Supreme Court – doesn’t have to but they decide the case on the basis of the discovery of a new Constitutional right in the Constitution that is not actually articulated; and that is the Constitutional right of privacy, which evolves and eventually gives us *Roe v Wade* and a bunch of other cases. And Douglas writes the majority opinion in *Griswold* and his majority opinion does indeed cite the penumbra of the amendments that suggest that there are other rights. But the Ninth and Tenth Amendments do provide a textural basis for a judge, being that judge a liberal or a conservative judge, a textural basis in the Constitution to conclude that there are constitutional rights reserved to the people that are not articulated and identified by name in the Constitution. That’s my position on privacy.

Smith: Ironically, of course, it would fall to President Ford to name Justice Douglas’ replacement. Now there is a scene in, I think, the *Brethren*, the Woodward book about the Court, a rather nasty scene where Douglas is, I believe, at the White House. The president invited him to a dinner at the White House, and they shook hands – which is all a matter of record. But I believe as this scene has it, the president says some sort of tossed off casual remark about, “It’s nice to see you, Mr. Justice Douglas,” or something – some kind of courtesy. And supposedly Douglas responds very sarcastically, “Oh, yeah, we’ll have to
get together again real soon.” Something like that – suggesting a bitterness. Now, of course, he was also ill. You don’t know really if any of it happened. You don’t know if it was…

Becker: I read the book but I don’t remember it, frankly.

Smith: Do you remember any encounter between Ford and Douglas after the fact?

Becker: No. None at all. Not to suggest that he, President Ford, avoided Justice Douglas, but I think the time period you’re describing, Richard, in my memory, is that Justice Douglas was a pretty ill man at that time. And I don’t know that he was wandering around at White House functions, but I could be wrong. I know this, if this is of any consequence to you, somewhat related. During his vice presidency, when things were getting a little bit sticky between him and the Nixon White House and the staff of the Nixon White House, lo and behold, the nation lost Earl Warren. Earl Warren died during that time period – a great, great loss.

President Ford knew that Earl Warren was one of my personal heroes, and I suggested to him as vice president that, “What are you doing this afternoon? The Chief Justice is lying in state. It would be a very nice thing to do.” He thought about that for a second and he made some remark about the Nixon White House would not like that, they would go crazy with that, and that would be all over the paper. And I said, “Well, I was suggesting that it might be…” because the man had had great, great impact on this nation, and the vice president stopping by his lying in state would not be an inappropriate thing. And he said, “Let me think about it.” And I found out that, without any notice to the media or anything, he just grabbed the Secret Service and ran over there. He put a wreath at the site and went back. He told me later, he said Nixon made some remark to him about it.

Smith: Really – disparaging.

Becker: Earl Warren, he said he went to see Earl Warren.

Smith: That’s fascinating – really, that’s fascinating on multiple levels. We’re jumping ahead but this is perfect. This is where I want to go because clearly,
one of the things that we’re picking up in these interviews, people knew that
Ford, as vice president, had a very awkward job. Terribly difficult. And the
conventional notion is that one way he dealt with it was to get out of town as
much as possible. But clearly there is more to it than that. Dorothy Dowton
told us how unpleasant, in many ways, the Nixon people were. How they
clearly resented Ford’s presence. On one level you can understand it, I
suppose. He’s a convenient target as your world is caving in. Why isn’t he out
there more vociferously defending us? And so on. Talk about that period and
the challenges that Ford faced and how he dealt with them.

Becker: It’s a short period, Richard, for history. It’s December of ’73, December 7th
when he took the oath of vice president, through August 9 of ’74. It’s a very
short tenure as vice president. Actually, it begins somewhat before that. As
you know Jerry Ford is the first person ever to be nominated under the 25th
Amendment of the Constitution, which provides, among other things, that
when there is a vacancy in the office of vice president, the president can
nominate someone for the office of vice president, and that individual will
become vice president upon confirmation by both Houses.

So Nixon nominated Ford following Agnew’s resignation as vice president.
Up until that point in time in the country, something like 27-28% of the entire
history of the country, we had no vice president. Presidents had died, and vice
presidents became presidents and there was a vacancy in the office of vice
president. We had two vice presidents that resigned and at least one that died,
so we had long periods where there is no vice president. This ended with the
25th Amendment. So Ford is going to be confirmed under the 25th
Amendment. I was very honored to be able to represent him during those
proceedings.

Smith: How did that come about?

Becker: He called me.

Smith: Having been nominated.

Becker: Yes, the night before. “I’m going to be nominated tonight…” one of those
kind of telephone conversations. And we put together a team. There were
certain issues that we focused on that we wanted to make certain that we had a
clean, clear record on certain of those issues. There was a book, a horrible
book out on the bookstands called *Washington Payoff*.

Smith: Let me ask you about that. I’ll tell you why.

Becker: We’re jumping around, and I’m not answering your question from ten
minutes ago.

Smith: No, no – this is how it works. We jump around.

Becker: Okay.

Smith: I was reading Nelson Rockefeller’s oral history about the Ford presidency,
which has never been published. It was done for a memoir that he never
wrote. And I tell people – Lynn Cheney came up to me the other night and
asked how the book was going and said, “Well, wasn’t he a little crazy at the
end?” And I always say he didn’t age well, and there’s a number of incidents.
But anyway, after he left office I think he nurtured some bitterness about all
that and how he left office. Anyway, he brought up this, he didn’t have the
book title, but he’d got into his head –

Becker: You talking about Rockefeller?

Smith: Rockefeller.


Smith: Yes. And the way he reconstructed history, first of all, I have to tell you, he
believed that Rumsfeld was blackmailing Ford.

Becker: Oh my goodness gracious. Rocky thought Rummy was…?

Smith: And the notion that Hartmann had something on him, too. And he went back
to the hearings and this notion that, in effect, there was someone who had paid
off Ford, and the committee closed ranks and they sort of kept it off the
record, and somehow he made some connection, and if that had been public it
would have prevented Ford from being confirmed.

Becker: That’s really surprising.
Smith: It is. So that’s the backdrop. I’m glad to have you mention that and explain what it was and how it was addressed.

Becker: It was a paperback book called *Washington Payoff*, and it was written by a man named Robert Winter-Berger, who was a small-time lobbyist I was told, on the Hill. And among other things, that book asserted that at one point in time, he, Winter-Berger, gave the minority leader some cash, $4,000-$5,000 or something of that nature, in return for a vote. Now we were faced with that, knowing that this man is now going to be confirmed by the Senate and then by the House, and to make matters even worse, the committee that he’s going to have to appear before in the House, is the same House committee that is entertaining impeachment resolutions against the guy that appointed Ford.

So, it’s not going to be a very friendly atmosphere. So we wanted to get the air cleared on this Winter-Berger matter once and for all. And, of course, we spoke with him, I spoke with Ford about it at length and there was absolutely no truth to it at all. He couldn’t even describe Winter-Berger to me in terms of what he looked like, and so forth. So I read the book from cover to cover and I met with a wonderful man, a wonderful man, Bob Griffin, who was then the Senator from Michigan, and was a member of the Senate Rules committee that we appeared before. With Senator Griffin and his staff I had provided a whole body of questions to propound to Robert Winter-Berger. I wanted the committee to subpoena Robert Winter-Berger and I wanted the committee to question Winter-Berger. And they did. And it just showed, without a doubt, that it was just absolutely totally fanciful.

He said he met with Ford at times when Ford wasn’t even in the country. He was asked where he got the money that he gave to Ford. He didn’t know, nothing was in his bank account – no withdrawals, it was totally fanciful. In fact, the committee, the Senate committee that interviewed Robert Winter-Berger, took Robert Winter-Berger’s testimony before that committee, and sent it to the Department of Justice for possible perjury prosecution. Winter-Berger was destroyed so badly, was shown to be so frivolous, totally frivolous, the allegation, that, when we got before the House committee, this was after the Senate had voted, and Ford is before the House Judiciary
Committee, quite truthfully in many, many, instances, and many, many, members on that committee, terribly unfriendly group. Really unfriendly group. That group never asked one question of any person, including Jerry Ford who sat there for about seven hours before that group, not one question about Robert Winter-Berger. That’s how much he was destroyed.

Smith: Two different members of the Ford congressional staff reinforce each other indicating that, in fact, Winter-Berger was thrown out of the office. He came once and made everyone feel very uncomfortable. And Ford basically said this guy is bad news and the word was communicated. In fact, I think he tried to come back once and he was literally tossed out of the office.

Becker: That would be consistent with what he told me – that is, I can’t tell you if he’s tall or short, or heavy or thin, I have no idea…and his book drew an entire picture of the great friendship between the two of them. No such thing existed. And let me say on the record that Don Rumsfeld and Bob Hartmann blackmailing – that is wild. Nelson Rockefeller shocks me that he said that.

Smith: There was a streak of paranoia, particularly as he got older, and it runs throughout. I won’t bore you with all the stories, but it’s actually, bizarre as it sounds, it’s consistent with the last few years of his life. He tended to see enemies behind every lamp. No one ever wants to blame the president, so he went to his grave believing that Rumsfeld did him in. That Rumsfeld was responsible for his problems as vice president, for the fact that he wasn’t on the ticket, so forth and so on. And from there I think it just festered and festered, and he couldn’t understand why Ford would have as polarizing a figure as Bob Hartmann around. And so, therefore, there had to be this sort of explanation. A lot of people asked why he kept Hartmann around. You asked if we had talked to Haig, we talked to Haig.

Becker: You ring a bell with me on Rumsfeld. There is another explanation, and that is Donald was unhappy with the appointment of Nelson Rockefeller. Rumsfeld thought that there was another person that would much better serve Jerry Ford and could make a much better vice president in the person of Donald Rumsfeld.
I will tell you a Don Rumsfeld story about – Don would not deny this, I suspect. This is in the early weeks of the Ford presidency, pre any consideration of pardon, I think, and I’m working in my office there and Rumsfeld walks into the office and said, “Hello, how are you?” and we’re chatting, and it was about 6:30 at night. I happened to be involved with some of the considerations for vice president. And he said, “Let’s go have dinner.” So we walked down Pennsylvania Avenue, there was a little Italian restaurant, and we had dinner, the two of us.

We sat across the dinner table and he started a monologue, I would call a monologue, that went on for about ten minutes and it was along the lines, “You know, Benton, government is a strange, strange, thing,” he said. “How much one learns in government. Here, look at me, for example. I started as an aide to a congressman and I learned in that job the work of legislative aides. Then I became a member of Congress. And then Nixon made me chairman of Wage and Price Controls, and then Nixon sent me to the only job that involves military and diplomacy over in NATO.” He said, “I’ve been so many of these things. Government is very strange.”

I was sitting there, having dinner, and I let him finish and I said, “You know, Donald, if we were in a corporate environment, if we were in a large pharmaceutical corporation, or General Motors or something, and you and I were sitting down and you said to me, ‘Benton, I spent two years in advertising and two years in production and two years in this,’ I would say to myself, ‘Look out for that guy, he wants to be president.’” And he understood.

So I don’t think he ever applauded, or supported the Rockefeller nomination and I think history might have been entirely different if Don Rumsfeld had been the nominee, I’m not too sure for the better. The thing that shocks me a little bit about your comment about Nelson Rockefeller is that it was always my observation when, in the presence of both of them together, Ford and Rockefeller, and in a formal environment and in an informal environment, as well, I always thought Rockefeller just got along with him so well, and that Rocky was really a good friend to the president.
Smith: I think he was. Some of the best evidence of that is, even after he was dumped - talk about a good soldier – he produced at a critical moment in those primaries, the New York delegation and was instrumental in turning over Pennsylvania, as well. And that, in the end, provided Ford with his margin of victory. I will tell you a story. It goes to the Rumsfeld/Rockefeller/Ford relationship. Bill Seidman originally told me this, and I think of Bill as a straight shooter.

Becker: Me, too.

Smith: Bill’s not a guy who’s got an agenda. But, Bill, in the White House found himself aligned with Rockefeller in things like: you had the economic issues, Greenspan and Simon, the real free-market types, and Seidman is a different cat. Whether it was New York City, aid to New York, or whatever. Anyway, Seidman told me the story that Rockefeller told him that in advance of the Kansas City convention, at one of their weekly lunches, Rockefeller having delivered New York and Pennsylvania, said there was only one thing he wanted in return. And that was, he didn’t want Don Rumsfeld at the convention.

Becker: He wanted him removed from the convention?

Smith: He did not want him physically at the convention.

Becker: Oh, at the convention.

Smith: Because I think he convinced himself that Rumsfeld wanted to be vice president and Rockefeller wanted to prevent that. Now, the story is, and here’s where it get really interesting because Rumsfeld, as he told the story, was not at the convention until the last day, but put out the word that he’d gone into the hospital for some elective surgery. Fine. Now, when we interviewed Rumsfeld six weeks ago – boy, he’s still good, he’s very good – because I didn’t want like Hansel and Gretel to leave bread crumbs leading up to something obvious, so we were jumping around and out of the blue I said, “Now were you at the ’76 convention?” And without pausing, he said, he sort of laughed to himself, he said, “Oh, that’s another one of Nelson’s stories.”
He’s very good, and I don’t know what the truth is, but I regard Seidman as a pretty good source. At least let me put it this way: I’m sure Nelson told Bill what Bill reports, and from Don’s own words, he, in fact, went into the hospital for elective surgery and missed all but the last day. I think on the last day the whole Cabinet was there. So that whole relationship – and I think that it does not diminish, I think you’re absolutely right - I think Rockefeller had great respect for the president and I think real affection for him. But I also think you could imagine a situation after the fact – he’s talking to his communications director who did these oral histories, and this stuff just kind of spins out and it’s directed less at Ford than it is at his perceived enemies in the administration led by Rumsfeld and with Cheney as number two. The funny thing is, more than one person has told us, Rockefeller was not above walking by the door to Rumsfeld’s office early in the morning, opening the door, poking his head in, saying, “Rummy, you’re never going to be vice president.”

Becker: I could see that happening.

Smith: Things like – Rumsfeld, for example, wouldn’t give his staff parking places. That kind of tit for tat, back and forth. And I assume Ford didn’t know about that, but one of the things that really drove Ford up a wall was internal squabbling.

Becker: Yes, he didn’t care for that.

Smith: Now, was it easier to control when you’re just dealing with a congressional staff, and it was much harder to control because, first of all, it’s not all his staff. The Nixon holdovers – how much of a problem was it meshing a staff that was basically Richard Nixon’s staff with his own people.

Becker: Well, when he moves into all this, of course he’s only given like a 24 hour transition period, and he inherits all of the Nixon staff, including Al Haig as his chief of staff. The events of the first four, five, six weeks of the Ford presidency, demonstrate clearly that much of that staff – this is the Ford White House staff – but that staff is not really serving Gerald Ford, they are serving Richard Nixon. Remember, there is a conflict between what Richard
Nixon in California wants and what Gerald Ford in Washington wants. The staff is pushing Ford to go to what Nixon wants. So that was a problem.

My perception has always been that in terms of White House staff, traditionally White House staffs are difficult animals to live with. I thought that that White House got along fairly well with one another. I thought they got along better when Dick became chief of staff than when Don was chief of staff. We all knew Don was not going to stay there long. We all knew that somebody was going to go, and Don was going to take that Cabinet post.

Smith: Because clearly the Ford/Schlesinger relationship was never good. Just a matter of personal chemistry. Jim Schlesinger and President Ford just very different…

Becker: Totally different kind of animals, and Jim Schlesinger was kind of a by the book, and I don’t want to go into any details, but I was present at some session where it struck me that Defense Secretary Schlesinger was speaking down, as if he were speaking to a Congressman Ford instead of President Ford.

Smith: Well, Ford said to people, he thinks I’m a dummy. And of course, Ford had spent all those years on the Defense Appropriations Committee. He knew his stuff.

Becker: He knew that backwards and forwards. In fact, when Jerry Ford used to say to me that - when we were talking about the budget and so forth - he would say, “Jim Lynn is good, but I know this stuff backwards and forwards.” And he really did know it. Jim Lynn was an OMB person in the administration.

Smith: Let me go back to the vice presidency and the friction between the Nixon White House and the vice president’s people, or the vice president himself, or both. Where were you during this period?

Becker: During this period – I was in the vice president’s office at least once a week for a two-hour conversation with him. That was our agreement and he had given me, after the confirmation proceedings, a corporate box with arrows leading to it at the very top the vice president – a box leading here and this
one – and he showed this and he said, “Do you want to see this box? This is General Counsel.” I noticed there is a straight arrow directly from General Counsel in the vice president’s office, my vice president’s office, to me. He said, “That’s what I’d like you to be, Benton.” I said, “You know, it may come as a shock to you, but the vice president doesn’t do very much and the counsel of the vice president does less.” And I said, “When and if the time comes and you elevate yourself, you take a step up the ladder (I didn’t use that expression), that’s a different story.” But in the meantime, I had so many obligations to the law firm and to the clients that I wanted to wrap them up. But I did want to see him. I wanted to see him weekly because I was concerned that the Nixon staff would take advantage of him.

Smith: What led you to that concern?

Becker: There were certain people on the staff that I didn’t care for. And, typically, Al Haig and I had one very serious confrontation before Ford became vice president.

Smith: Before Ford became vice president?

Becker: Before. And what happened, Richard, this was about two weeks, three weeks before our first hearing before the Senate, post-nomination, before the Senate Rules committee. I came to then Congressman Ford’s office, it was late in the day, and we were talking about how to handle this question, how to handle that question, there were a series of books on how to handle different questions. Votes and campaigns and other matters, and the secretary came into his office and said, “General Haig is on the line.” “Okay, I’ll take it.” So there was a desk between us, and he gave me a minute kind of a sign and picked up the phone and said, “Hello, General, how are you,” and so forth. And then I’m hearing just one side of the conversation. And I’ve got two weeks - in two weeks we’re going before the Senate committee.

I hear him say, I hear Congressman Ford say things like, “Oh my goodness gracious, I haven’t thought about him in thirty years or forty years. They found him? Where in the world did they find him? They’re looking for her? Oh my goodness.” And I hear him say, “The Bureau’s got nothing better to
do?” And it is very obvious to me that Al Haig was getting reports from the Bureau on the background checks that the Bureau was making on the nominee, which background checks and reports were going to be given to the committee chairman only, and not to the nominee.

I got up and walked around the desk. Bill Cramer was with me. Got up and walked around the desk and I said - he was talking on the phone - I said, “Give me the phone, give me the phone.” He saw me gesture that I wanted the phone and he handed me the phone and there was Al Haig was talking, thought he was still talking to Jerry Ford. And I said, “General, General, General.” He finally realized it wasn’t Ford, and I said, “Let me give you my name. My name is Benton Becker, and I’m representing him before the House and the Senate, and before we’re finished before these committees, I can tell you, I guarantee you, he will be asked and re-asked the question, did the White House feed in any information about the FBI reports - the White House prepare him improperly - because the members were not getting the reports, just the committee chairman?”

And I said, “When that question is asked, General, the answer is going to be a truthful answer, and the answer is no. We don’t need or want you to do this anymore. He’s in good hands, he will be confirmed well and it will be fine.” And, Richard, the deadliest silence on the other end of the line continued for about eight to ten seconds, followed by, “May I have your name one more time, please.” That was my first encounter with Al Haig. They never called him again, and, of course, Ford was asked that question several times.

Smith: Was there anything during that period – aside from the typical kind of political jabs – were there any real serious issues in the course of the confirmation hearings? Did anything come up that presented any kind of real threat to his confirmation?

Becker: Well, there were some votes, procedural votes on the ’64 civil rights act, as I recollect. There was absolutely nothing that came up from a standpoint of campaign financing. Nothing at all. With Bill Seidman’s passing last week, we were talking about it, and I remembered Bill Seidman during the confirmation coming in from Grand Rapids to appear before, and spend hours
and hours and hours at a House committee on taxation reviewing Congressman Ford for the past five years, and going back to Grand Rapids. And then when we moved to the Senate, the Senate said we’re going to have a joint committee of the House and Senate go over his finances for the past five years tax. Bill Seidman came in again and went through that again, and we thanked him and he left. And then the House committee decided after two such, they’re going to have a House committee investigation, and they went through that again for five years.

And what they found was always a subject matter of some humor with Betty and the president. It was that in ’72, these confirmation hearings were in ’73, in ’72 the Minority Leader, Congressman Ford was the chairman of the national convention and Betty had made it clear to him, you’re going to go buy some new suits for national television. So he bought two or three new suits and wrote them off as a business expense. That’s the only thing that came of that. So he ended up paying for that and that was the whole thing.

Smith: I want to ask you a couple more things about the hearings because you mentioned Mrs. Ford. And in light of what we subsequently know about her state of mind at that point, that she’s written about herself, did any of that come up in, not necessarily the hearings, but was it investigated? Because they investigate everything else. Did they know, for example, that she’d been to a psychiatrist?

Becker: You’re asking about Betty? Betty’s alcoholic problem was not made public. I was aware of that.

Smith: That early?

Becker: Yeah. I don’t know if it was described as a disease, but she had a bit of a problem, and the psychiatric material, I don’t recollect anything at all about Betty with the psychiatric material information at the House and Senate. There was a little sojourn that dealt with some shrink in New York that had been Nixon’s psychiatrist – tell me if I’m off base here – and that Nixon at one time had recommended him to Jerry Ford, and Jerry Ford once spent an hour with him or words to that effect.
Smith: That sounds right.

Becker: Something like that, but that’s the only thing I remember.

Smith: It’s hard to imagine anyone less a candidate for psychoanalysis than Gerald Ford. You could see Mrs. Ford.

Becker: Very well adjusted.

Smith: Let me ask you, did you have any discussion with Ford at that point in the context of preparing him, or describing the investigation, or whatever, about Mrs. Ford?

Becker: I have given my records to the library, and all my papers and records are in the library. There is a body of records that remain sealed for a period of time. I don’t generally discuss those kinds of things. I understand we are doing this for historical purposes, but I’m not comfortable discussing my private conversations with Congressman Ford about his family in anticipation of the committee hearings, except to say that we tried to be prepared and to be candid and frank and answer all questions. We recognized the American people, in general, did not know him, and that this was their way of being introduced to him. We wanted them to see the open candor of this man.

Smith: Let me try this a different way. The standard way the story is told now is that Mrs. Ford was having some problems by the way, characteristic of a whole lot of women of her generation. She is almost a metaphor for women, sort of middle-aged, who – and she has written, herself – at this juncture in their life where their husbands are doing fascinating things, their kids are growing up, and in some ways they are left on the side. And under those circumstances all sorts of things are possible. Ford was out on the road all the time, perhaps not as aware of some of this as, for example, Susan became. Is that your sense, broadly speaking, that it was not an unusual immersion in his own advancement with all the demands, travel and everything else that were imposed upon him as he rose up the ladder. And it was almost a benign neglect, not seeing some things that perhaps he might have been sensitized to later on.
Becker: I do subscribe to what you said, but not only that, I would make the point to you that as minority leader, when the minority party is in the White House, he was every night, literally every night - and I was amazed during the confirmation proceedings, when we were preparing for the confirmation proceedings and I spent a lot of time in his congressional office during that time - that every night there was some cocktail party here or some function here, or some group – you never bought dinner, that’s where you went every night. I said, my goodness gracious, I could never keep up with this kind of a lifestyle. As minority leader [it was] even more so than as a congressman. He attended a lot of those things and it was not uncommon in those days for this kind of thing to happen. He was, himself, President Ford himself, I would consider a moderate drinker, a very moderate drinker. Before dinner sometimes we would sit and have a cocktail. I might have a glass of wine with the meal, and he would pass on that.


Becker: Yeah, very much so. Oh my goodness, if he would put on a little weight, he would notice it and he had to do this and he had to do that. “I swim every day, you should swim every day. I find time to do it, you should find time to do it.” Oh, God, the Midwestern ethic – I’m a little Jewish boy from Washington, give me a break.

Smith: Did he ever talk about his parents?

Becker: His parents? He talked about his brother and his young years. He talked about Michigan a lot. He talked about the school and his football years and the football games. A little bit about the military. I got to know about his military background. Of course, I didn’t know everything about him.

Smith: Did he tell you about Willis Ward, his black teammate at Ann Arbor?

Becker: The story about how they wouldn’t serve him or feed him? I always thought that was such a poignant story and then, when you go before the House committee, members would go out of their way to try to make something out of a procedural vote on the ’64 Civil Rights Act as though he were against it. He was very much in support of the ’64 act. In fact, Jerry Ford voted in the – I
believe it’s the ’52 act that Jack Kennedy voted against and Richard Nixon voted for – or ’50. I think Jerry Ford – if he would have been a Democrat, they would have probably called him a moderate Democrat.

Smith: But he was certainly a fiscal conservative.

Becker: Oh, very much so. He was quite conservative.

Smith: And that carried over into his personal life.

Becker: We’d have a $2 bet or something, and “pay up, pay up.” We’d play gin on the airplane coming in. I remember going to Tampa with him on Air Force One. We sat and played gin for an hour on the flight down – four bucks, five bucks, or something like that, and we landed and – this is the President of the United States - said to me something like, “I’m going to be pretty busy. I’ve got really a busy schedule here, once I get on the ground. I’ve got a busy schedule. Have to be here and there and we’ve got to be over here and we’re leaving. Why don’t you pay up your debt before…” I said, “I’m going to be here, for God’s sake! Here’s your lousy four bucks.” That’s what he was like.

Smith: Let me ask you, I only heard him speak disparagingly of two people. And I mention that because - and I’ll tell you who they were - but I’m sure there were others. But my sense was that he really made an effort to see the good in everyone. Beyond that, something unusual for a politician - at least when I was around him, I noticed pretty quickly, he would be pretty deft in steering the conversation away from what you and I would call personal gossip. Most pols love gossip. Not just political gossip, but they love to get the dirt. But my sense was that Ford was almost offended by that.

Becker: I think that’s true. He didn’t have a lot time or patience for that sort of thing. But he had a wonderful sense of humor. I’m trying to remember – you can help me, Richard – the wonderful columnist who died a couple of years ago of cancer, a humorist, columnist…

Smith: Art Buchwald.

Becker: Art Buchwald came to some of our dinners. And Art Buchwald would always tell a Jerry Ford story about being tight with a buck. And Ford would laugh
his head off. He told a story, I remember, and I heard Ford repeat it. It was a story about two lawyers in Washington who went on a yacht trip and the yacht crashed and the two of them swam to an island, a deserted island all by themselves and never to be found again. One day the two lawyers are sitting there on the island all by themselves, “One lawyer said to the other, ‘My God the sunlight was terrible and I was just getting to be successful in Washington, and I had this and I had this and I had this, in fact, I recently had lunch with Minority Leader Jerry Ford. I had no money. But I paid for lunch. I borrowed $30.00 from Minority Leader Ford to pay for lunch. I told him I would repay me this week.’ And the other lawyer says, ‘Oh my God, we’re saved. If you owe Jerry Ford $30, Jerry Ford will find us.’” It was very funny. He loved that story, an old Art Buchwald story.

Smith: But there were some grounds for that. You know, the best humor is grounded in reality. He was austere in his approach.

Becker: This is a man who raised four children on a congressional salary, maintained a home back in his own district, and it was tough to do in those days. It was really tough to do. So he really had to watch a buck, and he was honest. He had no side deals, no special deals, he had no radio stations or TV stations or anything like that. Just, what you saw is what you got.

Smith: Do you sense what his relationship really was with LBJ?

Becker: No, no I don’t know. But I do know that he had high regard for Jack Kennedy, and he spoke to me lovingly of those early days when they were both young congressmen, both single, both good looking guys, and how fond he was of him. I think that fondness carried on to the whole family, with respect to Ted and Caroline when they awarded him the Profiles in Courage Award. He was really touched by that.

Smith: During the vice presidency, he obviously – again, he’s in this impossible position – cannot give the slightest public hint that he might, in fact, become president for obvious reasons. Behind the scenes – Tom DeFrank, of course, made a lot out of a slip of the tongue, and actually I’d like to get your view of that.
Becker: During the vice presidency?

Smith: Yeah. But in a larger sense, did he ever say anything?

Becker: Well, we spoke about his relationship with the Nixon staff and with Nixon. And he complained early in his vice presidency to me about how they would book him for speeches without clearing it and they, the staff, the Nixon staff, would write the speech and he wouldn’t see the speech until very late in the game. Sometimes he’d be on the airplane and he still hadn’t seen the speech. There was a conscious attempt, it was pretty clear, to turn him into a Spiro Agnew #2 – a blind defender of Richard Nixon.

This is pre-smoking gun, pre a lot of the tape disclosures, and once the tapes are disclosed, I think we are talking about roughly March of ’74, the smoking gun tapes and some of the other tapes come forward when they were produced, the vice president just cut back altogether. He said, “I’m not going to do these speeches,” and, in fact, at a Cabinet meeting the vice president of the United States, off the agenda, and Nixon’s Cabinet’s were strict agenda, off the agenda, announced to the president and to the Cabinet members that he would no longer publicly defend the president.

Smith: You’re right. That’s at the end, after the smoking gun tape came out, which was, of course, at the end of July, or whatever.

Becker: After the evidence is out, yeah.

Smith: But earlier, at least, say spring of ’74 – depends how you look at it – there always was a Boy Scout quality to Gerald Ford, and I don’t say that condescendingly. Eagle Scout is a real part of his character and he said, more than once, and I think not just as boilerplate, that he literally tried to be honest with everyone, and he assumed that everyone was being honest with him. Now, again, you can look at that with a certain degree of naïveté, or you could say that that’s a very admirable character trait. Was he, in fact, as surprised/appalled that Nixon lied to him as one might be led to believe? Was he really surprised that Nixon turned out to be as involved in the cover up as it became clear?
Becker: Well, you know, there’s not one moment in time when all the evidence is made public. What I thought, Richard, was this: it kind of comes out slowly and you get it piecemeal. We all lived through that period, we make judgments, we see what’s going on in Sirica’s courtroom, and we see what McCord is saying and we see what John Dean is saying, and begin to, who do you believe or don’t you believe, and so forth. And there becomes this documented form of evidence in the form of the White House tapes, and then you get edited portions of that first. Then you get….

Smith: Let me ask you about the tapes, because when the transcripts appeared, one senses that he was, in fact, appalled by the language as much as any revelations. For a lot of people, that was a Dick Nixon that they’d not heard before.

Becker: The final transcripts, you’re talking about? Yes, I agree.

Smith: Was that your sense? That it was as much the style of Nixon’s conversations, plus the fact that he was taping people. Did that offend Ford? That people were being taped without their knowledge?

Becker: Did it offend him? The only way I can answer is saying that one of the first White House orders that he issued was that there would be no taping. No taping whatsoever during his administration. I’ll tell you an interesting story about that. I think he was more disappointed than surprised. I think at one point in time, probably going to ’68-’69, somewhere in that time, that he had great expectations for that presidency. And there was a great disappointment for him that Nixon would use this kind of language and would speak this way of ethnicities and races and genders, and they would even consider using the CIA to cover up this or to cover that, and we’ll claim this and claim the privilege.

We talked about that, yes. And it was rather surprising. We talked about it in the context when that finally came about though, in the context that this is a dynamic system. This is not a stagnant system. This is not going to remain the same. Richard Nixon is going to have to stand trial for impeachment and that is going to happen, or he is going to resign. And then when Hugh Scott and
Barry Goldwater, if you remember, Richard, walked up to the White House and had a conversation with President Nixon and Goldwater told Richard Nixon that he did not have the support of the Republican senators for the two-thirds vote in impeachment, and then told the world, it was pretty clear that he was going to lose that office one way or another. And at that point in time, we began to think in terms of how do you prepare this man for that next move, and how do you avoid any appearance of a coup, or over anxiousness, and how do we communicate the honesty and the fresh candor of this man to the American public so that they know what the quality of the new president is?

Smith: That is, again, post smoking gun tape. Before that he had, obviously, old friends on both sides of the aisle. Were there people advising him in the expectation that this was an increasing likelihood? You stop and think, every single day, how many opportunities he had to put out a foot wrong, and by and large he didn’t. But it must have been – talk about self-discipline – it must have been an incredible amount of caution, watchfulness, dexterity, to go through this period. Be out in front as much as he was, have as much interaction with the public as he was, and yet thread the needle in terms of never saying anything that could be turned against Nixon - knowing that the Nixon loyalists, were dissatisfied with what he said. What was his mood during that period? That must have exacted a certain amount of strain.

Becker: I would answer you by saying that I wouldn’t characterize him at that point in time as a loyalist. A loyalist to me would have been someone who turned a blind eye to any evidence. Just don’t want to see or understand it. But, Jerry Ford, I think, during that time period would better be described as someone who was: A) a team player; he’s the minority leader of the Republican Party, the Republican Party is in the White House and his boss, the head of that party is in the White House, and B) a guy who is a lawyer, who is prepared at all times to give someone the benefit of the doubt until the evidence comes forward. The disclosure of the existence of tape, as you remember, Alexander Butterfield I think was his name, long precedes the actual disclosure of the contents of the tapes. And so he took a position of I’d like to see what was said on those tapes. I’d like to hear those tapes; I’d like to hear them myself.
Smith: Do you know if he ever advised Nixon on what to do with the tapes?

Becker: Not that I know of. I read that Laird had some advice on that score to Nixon. Later we had conversations, not late in his presidency, after his conclusion of his presidency, about why didn’t Nixon destroy the tapes before they were subpoenaed, and maybe he should have listened to Mel Laird, words to that effect. No, I wouldn’t call him a blind loyalist at all. That’s what I would call an Agnew type person.

Smith: No, my point was actually, the real Nixon loyalists would never be satisfied with what he, as vice president, said in defense of Nixon. But he is, literally, suspended in this terribly awkward position.

Becker: I will tell you this, too, listening to this conversation we’re having here brings back some memories. I remember – I don’t know if this is relevant to this point – but I remember him saying to me quite often that he, as minority leader, had greater access to the Oval Office during Lyndon Johnson’s presidency than Richard Nixon’s. He didn’t blame that on Richard Nixon. He blamed that on Erlichman and Bob Haldeman. And so he wasn’t a big fan of the way they ran that White House.

Smith: By the way, this is an appropriate time to say that the only two people I heard him really disparage, and the worse he could say was, “He’s a bad man.”

Becker: Which one?

Smith: One was John Dean and the other was Gordon Liddy.

Becker: Well, I’ll go halfway with you. I don’t think Gordon Liddy was a bad man. I number Gordon among my friends. John Dean is a different story altogether. John Dean, I think, was concerned with his own neck very early in the game, and did what he could to preserve his own neck and sometimes, in my view, concealed his true role in the break in and so forth. There are books – the Silent Coup makes a very strong case of John Dean had pre-break in knowledge of the Watergate break in, and there is considerable evidence to support that.
Smith: Did you ever have a conversation you recall where the issue – not the stupidity of the break in, everyone says they knew right away – but the responsibility for it? For example, did John Mitchell take secrets with him to the grave?

Becker: I don’t think John Mitchell is a secret at all. Ford would agree, I think, and I recollect that’s how the conversation on the subject, that what was in the public domain with respect to the so-called explanation for the break in of the DNC, made no sense whatsoever. Because there is nothing there of any value at the DNC that could be helpful to Gordon Liddy and Howard Hunt and that group of people. They didn’t have a nominee yet, the Democrats didn’t have a nominee yet and the records of contributions were not there. It made no sense at all. There had to be a different explanation or some frolic of others.

You might remember some years later, I don’t know, fifteen years after his presidency was over, I appeared with Richard Nixon’s lawyer and some others at Fordham, a symposium on Watergate. But the original press secretary Jerry terHorst was there and Jerry terHorst made – fifteen years later said what he’d said fifteen years earlier – he said, “I left the Ford White House because I couldn’t live with the fact that the guy who was responsible for the break in got a pardon, and the others went to jail,” – talking about Nixon.

The fact of the matter is, I have never seen anything to suggest that Richard Nixon had any prior knowledge of the break in. None at all. So this business of Nixon being the mastermind has never made much sense at to me. There are other explanations, and they are in the books out there for the break in, by that group. Liddy knew what he was doing, knew he was breaking in to DNC, but I don’t think Liddy knew the real mission at all when they went in.

Smith: There is this theory about Larry O’Brien and the old loan to Nixon’s brother and somehow that may have been what they were looking for. The other problem, of course, was…

Becker: Castro and all those crazy things.

Smith: Yeah, the other problem was they had too much money and…
Becker: That’s exactly right.

Smith: And there is a theory that Nixon you know, Nixon would pop off – and Haldeman, for the most part, knew when to take it seriously and when to forget about it. But, the Magruders of the world, lacking that sophistication, heard the old man say something and took it as gospel. And before you know it, Mitchell sort of signs off without really thinking about it, and the rest is history.

Is there something we don’t know still about Watergate?

Becker: Yes. Sure.

Smith: Including who authorized the break in?

Becker: I think the public does not know the real reason for the break in. You know, there were two break ins. There was one two weeks earlier, before the one where the arrest occurred. They don’t know about telephones being tapped in the DNC. Why the telephones were tapped. They don’t know about two weeks of, following the first break in, of listening to those taps from the Howard Johnson’s. They don’t know the full story of the principles involved. In fact, Richard, did you know that there is an unprosecuted DNC break in conspirator who later became an assistant state attorney in Rhode Island? And they don’t know, the public, I don’t think, really knows who ordered it, who’s idea it was, and what was the ultimate purpose of it. What were they trying to gain?

My view is, I think there were certain people that were trying to gain some blackmail information against Democrats, and use that to their own political advantage. But that said, there were cutouts. I’m confident, I’m personally very confident the Central Intelligence Agency had nothing to do with this break in. That’s craziness. The FBI had nothing to do with it. It’s that group – that group of Plumbers that went out to California and got into Dr. Fielding’s office and broke in there. But will they ever know? I don’t know. I’m not sure there is an interest anymore. For a long time we had a cottage industry in this country of Watergate, didn’t we?
Smith: Sure. And Deep Throat. It’s almost as if, once the identity of Deep Throat was revealed, some of the air went out of the balloon. Let me tell you something – it’s interesting – we have done about seventy interviews so far. One of the most interesting was with Jerry Jones, who told us, among other things, that in the spring of ’73, Haldeman was still on the White House staff. Jerry Jones, at that point, was finishing up reorganizing the personnel office for Haldeman. He got a call from Haldeman wanting to know how many people reported directly to the vice president. And Jones did some quick thinking and said about fifty. And Haldeman said, “Fine. I want undated letters of resignation from everyone of them.”

Becker: This was Vice President Agnew?

Smith: From Agnew, exactly. Now, there are two theories that have been advanced to explain that. One, which I think it is safe to say Jones subscribes to, is that they knew long before the Wall Street Journal published its first story that Agnew had problems. And they wanted to be prepared.

Becker: Quite plausible.

Smith: And the other, more general theory is, well, Agnew wasn’t held in very high regard, and it would not be atypical of Nixon one day to sort of say, just out of the blue, being angry at Agnew. That kind of thing. But Jones believed that it was grounded in the fact that they knew, before the public knew, that Agnew had some pending legal problems. And they wanted to be prepared in case of…

Becker: That, I think, is quite plausible because, as I recollect, Agnew himself, through counsel, very early in the investigation made it clear to the Department of Justice if they wanted to deal exclusively with Elliott Richardson, and they didn’t want it to lead to lower levels, and they didn’t want to deal with some assistant U.S. attorney or USA, they wanted to deal with the AG. And so the AG is brought into this thing. I could see that happening and that’s exactly what happened - Elliott Richardson negotiated the terms of the Agnew disposition.
Smith: We’ve heard varying accounts of Richardson’s initial response to the order to fire Cox. There is something of a debate between – maybe they heard what they wanted to hear, but clearly, there were people in the Nixon White House who believed that Richardson was prepared to carry out that order, and subsequently, obviously, the opposite turned out to be the case.

Becker: Well, the obvious question is, if the order was direct to Richardson, why didn’t he do it? Why did he resign? I’ve never heard that story. But anyway, I would assume that if the AG gets involved in the negotiations involving a criminal matter involving the vice president, I see nothing inappropriate with the attorney general informing the president of this ongoing matter.

Smith: Another source, who probably should at this point remain nameless - the day the Supreme Court handed down its ruling about the tapes, the call was placed to San Clemente and Ron Ziegler, speaking for the president, the initial reaction was, “Can we defy the Court?”

Becker: Can we divide?

Smith: Defy. Nixon’s initial, immediate response was, is this something that we can get away with? And it was made very clear that it was not an option. And you could see, that’s really the beginning of the end of the Nixon presidency. But it’s interesting that Nixon’s initial response…

Becker: Well, what’s interesting about that is that, to me, that option would have been considered while the matter was pending, for goodness sakes. It wouldn’t come out of nowhere – oh my gosh, we lost, we never expected to lose – no, no, not at all. It was an 8-0 decision, I believe, with Rehnquist not participating. No, I can understand, and I can envision Ron Ziegler saying, “Screw them, we’ll do what we want to do…” because that was Ron Ziegler’s makeup.

Smith: Is it possible that Ziegler said that on his own without talking to his boss?

Becker: Sure. His boss would have considered, long in advance, if the court does this, we’ll do this, if the court does this, we’ll do this. He wouldn’t have waited. That’s the way Richard Nixon was.
Smith: One other thing that we found surprising because it’s the portal to the whole pardon story. We talked to Haig. I’ve always assumed, I imagine I’ve read it more than once, but for whatever reason, I’ve always assumed that Haig, at the very least, listened to the smoking gun tape. He denied ever having heard the smoking gun tape. One thing we’ve learned in this is how many roads lead back to Fred Buzhardt. I’ll back up just a minute. Because when we talked to Mel Laird, who had come into the White House staff somewhat reluctantly to lend a hand, Buzhardt had been his counsel at the Pentagon. And according to Laird, he’d been on the job about a month when Buzhardt called him and said, “I’ve been listening to the tapes. Nixon’s in it up to his neck. Be careful.” Laird also acknowledged, somewhat reluctantly, later in the conversation, that Buzhardt also tipped him off to Agnew’s pending problem. So he’d known about that.

You remember, Laird has a conversation with Ford where he says, “If you think things are bad now, wait—they’re about to get a whole lot worse.” In any event, Buzhardt is his source for both of those stories. Haig says, “Buzhardt gave me some very good advice. Namely, don’t ever be alone in a room with a tape.” Now, whether that is a comment on the famous eighteen and a half minute gap story, or what, I don’t know. But I always assumed that Haig, at the very least, as I say, listened to the smoking gun tape. He claims he didn’t. He also claims, by the way, that the whole initiative of the pardon was not his idea; that it originated with Buzhardt, that it was Fred Buzhardt that drew up this list of options. That it was Fred Buzhardt who, he said, gave me (Haig) credit for being intelligent enough to realize what a questionable position that would put me in, etc., etc. That he basically is passing on Fred Buzhardt’s handiwork. What’s your reaction? Is there a little bit historical rewriting going on here?

Becker: Yes, indeed, indeed, indeed. First of all, if you listen to all the tapes during the Nixon presidency, you’re going to hear Al Haig’s voice almost as much as Richard Nixon’s. Al Haig is a frequent participant in those conversations. I find it very difficult to believe that, given that fact, and given the fact that the tapes were such a critical piece of evidence on the question of the loss of the Nixon presidency, that Al Haig wouldn’t want to hear what he said, to remind
himself of what he had said at that time. If he said anything that is arguably obstructionist behavior under the Obstruction of Justice statute. I find that very, very difficult to believe.

Smith: Is there a middle course? Is it possible he would have seen transcripts and been content to see transcripts?

Becker: No, I don’t think that that’s bad advice. Don’t find yourself in a room alone with the tapes. But the chief of staff of the White House can avoid that by having three other people present with him at all times while he’s listening to these tapes. And you don’t listen to originals, Richard, you always listen to dups. You never touch the original, so there are ways of avoiding that. That’s standard behavior. Local police departments are going to operate that way.

My impression always was, in an indirectly related matter, that Al Haig would have been most happy if, most happy if, Jerry Ford did what Bill Saxbe told him to do as AG, and that is to send the tapes to Nixon in San Clemente. Al Haig would have been most happy if all those tapes were out of the White House in the hands of Richard Nixon, presumably for some big bonfire out there in San Clemente. Because, in my view, Al Haig demonstrated, at least to me, in my view, that that’s really what he wanted. Now that, of course, was not in any way in the best service of Gerald Ford or the Ford presidency.

Smith: And presumably that included as well Nixon’s papers which were in storage?

Becker: Yes, sir. Well, all the records, papers, and tapes.

Smith: And I believe they were stored at the Old Executive Office Building?

Becker: They were boxes about two feet by two feet. They were in the Executive Office Building across the street from the White House, across the walkway from the White House. And they were on the third floor and the Secret Service was concerned because there were so many boxes. It was almost five years of records, papers, and tapes – they were concerned about the floor of the EOB. And, of course, that became, within one week, a major issue in the Ford presidency.

Smith: Since we’re there, let’s explore that. You mentioned Attorney General Saxbe.
Becker: Yes, sir.

Smith: How did the issue first come up and how was the decision made to get an opinion from the attorney general?

Becker: Very simple. Without exaggeration, within 24 hours after landing in San Clemente – within 24 hours being the ex-president of the United States – the ex-president of the United States picked up the phone and called Al Haig, his former chief of staff, and said, “You know those boxes up in EOB? Ship them out here. Send everything out here. I want all my records, all my papers and all my tapes.”

Smith: Because – let me interject – historically, papers, in fact, have belonged to the outgoing president. That had been the tradition.

Becker: You are using the right terms, Richard. You are using the right terms. Using the term tradition, and you’re using the term historically, but your sentence did not use the word by law. By custom, by practice and tradition, that was historically correct. Jerry Ford agreed to, at the very least, initially – he was president a very short period of time – make a determination of who owns these records. Who owns them? Does Richard Nixon own them? Does the government own them? And so forth. And so what he did, he asked the Department of Justice to give him an opinion on ownership. In the meantime, nothing leaves the White House.

Smith: There is this – I don’t know where it came from – notion out there that Ford immediately is inclined to let Nixon have his papers and tapes.

Becker: If you were to take a new position in an office, and you had 85 people working for you in that office that had worked for your predecessor, and an issue came to you in the first 24 hours of your new position in that office, and you staffed it out to these 85 people, what do you think I should do? And all 85 of them said, “Oh you should do this Richard,” and they all said the same thing, you might be inclined to go along with that. And that’s what happened with Jerry Ford. Jerry Ford inherited the Richard Nixon staff and within days the issue came up, what do I do with these records, papers, and tapes? And at
the very least, and it took a little doing, at the very least we got him to at least get the legal opinion from Justice.

Smith: Now, what led him to that? Describe that process.

Becker: My gut reaction to that was immediately negative. Strongly negative. Hostile negative. You cannot do that. Jaworski is going to want these, the special prosecutor is going to want these, there are litigants that are going to want these, you can’t part with those. How do you know that they are not the property of the U.S. government? I don’t know – I’m not expert on papers and records. At the very least, let’s get an opinion.

Smith: Were there other people either echoing what you were saying or taking issue? Was there a debate going on?

Becker: There was one other person. That was Bob Hartmann, bless his soul. Bob felt very strongly the same way I did. Saxbe, who was Nixon’s, I believe, fifth AG, had the legal department prepare the memo. Do you know who prepared the memo? A young lawyer in the Department of Justice named Anton Scalia, and it was a wonderful memo. I don’t have any problems with it substantively in terms from a legal standpoint. He’s right, he walks though different presidents over the years. This one had an auction of his papers and tapes. Grant actually had an auction of his papers and tapes. And Lyndon Johnson cleaned out the White House. You couldn’t get a pencil in the White House. By custom and tradition, many, but not all presidents claimed and took their presidential records when they departed the White House. Several presidents simply left their records to the government. What happened with the Department of Justice memo was an interesting set of facts. We’re now about ten days into the Ford presidency, maybe a little less. Bill Saxbe meets with the president. Al Haig is there, as I recollect, Bob Hartmann was there, and I was there, and the formal delivery of the memo was given to the president.

Smith: From the Justice Department?

Becker: Yes, by Bill Saxbe.

Smith: The attorney general.
Becker: Yes, but, Bob Hartmann had learned before the meeting, from a member of the media, that the media had received a copy of the memo before the president.

Smith: Really?

Becker: Justice had given a copy of the memo to the Washington press corps before it was given to the president. I always believed this to be a maneuver to lock the president into the position urged in the memo. Specifically, to send the records and tapes to Nixon in California. It became a very antagonistic meeting in the Oval Office. Not the president. The president was quiet during it. You must send it, you must send it, you must send this stuff. You’re going to get sued, you have no standing, no reason to withhold it. It’s not yours.

Smith: That being, presumably, Haig’s viewpoint or Saxbe’s?

Becker: Saxbe’s making a point and Haig is strongly supportive of it. All I can tell you is that I felt very, very strongly about it; very strongly about it. I wanted to verbally hit President Ford in his gut, someplace that he would really feel it. And my view is that presidents really feel it when you talk about how history looks at their presidency. Once you’re president, that’s the only thing, theoretically, you’re concerned about. And I said to him, “If you send that to Nixon, if you send those records, papers and tapes, to Richard Nixon, there will be a hell of a bonfire in San Clemente – and whatever happens in the remaining two and a half years (meaning the remainder of Ford’s presidency), is unimportant. Historians will write about the Ford presidency and this is what they will say, ‘Jerry Ford committed the final act of the Watergate cover up when he sent those records and papers and tapes to Nixon in California.’”

And, Richard, you know the personality. You could see from the neck up, literally see the color change. I really angered him with that statement, and I meant to anger him. I wanted to shake him – you can’t do that! Red through his neck…Saxbe jumped in and said something like, “I’m the attorney general. You should listen to my advice.” And it was a senator talking to a congressman again. That’s what it was. That’s what I saw. I didn’t see the Oval Office, I saw a senator talking down to a congressman. And that was a
mistake. Ford said, “Those damn things are not leaving here. They belong to the American people, they are going to stay here. They are not leaving.” And of course, I had made the argument that by custom, tradition and practice, outgoing presidents had claimed ownership of their records. But the nation never had a criminal proceeding against a president, we never had White House tape system and so forth. It was a whole different set of distinguishing arguments.

Smith: Here’s where it gets confusing, because subsequently, a deal was arranged to send the stuff.

Becker: Not too quickly.

Smith: But which then had to be, in effect, superseded by a congressional act. How did you get from this very dramatic confrontation to the sequel?

Becker: Okay, there was a decision made, I’m not going to voluntarily send them to Richard Nixon. I’m not going to do that. Let’s find a disposition, let’s find a happy disposition. I considered going to Sirica, saying, “Judge, would you take them?” That was out of the question, he wouldn’t do it.

Smith: Now, wait, you didn’t go – but that idea was floated?

Becker: It was floated.

Smith: By the way, was Phil Buchen in on this meeting?

Becker: Phil was not in that meeting, but in subsequent meetings. At that point in time, concurrently, while all this was going on, Phil and I are meeting with Jack Miller, who is Nixon’s lawyer. And he is talking about, when are the records going to be there? When are the tapes going to be there? Ultimately, we tell Jack Miller that it’s not going to happen. They are not going to go out to be sent to California voluntarily. We’re not going to do this.

But coinciding with all of that, if you can follow all of this at one time, while all of this is pending, these meetings are going on, Phil and the president and I have a conversation about the Constitution and what his powers are under the Constitution, with respect to pardon. He had a series of questions that he
wasn’t certain about the answer to. He hadn’t made up his mind on pardons, but he wanted to know the range of his authority. Wanted to know, for example, wanted confirmation that pardons could be issued pre-indictment, pre-conviction. That pardons could be issued across the board without specification of the statute for which you are being pardoned. That a pardon could be, once issued by the president, could have effect on a similar or concurrent state criminal statute – that the state couldn’t proceed, or what was the status of that? That a pardon would have no possible effect on any residue action that the Senate might pursue against Richard Nixon. Because even though Richard Nixon had resigned, he could still be subject to impeachment because the impeachment clause provides for a loss of office, but also loss of honors and privileges and profits, and so forth. So the Senate could have proceeded, and the President wanted to know if a pardon was affected by a residue impeachment action. And then finally wanted to know if a pardon could be refused. It was pretty clear what we were talking about.

Smith: Do you have any sense of how far into the administration is this conversation?

Becker: Within two weeks, and the President is very clear. He says, “I don’t want you to work on this here. I don’t want anybody seeing this. Go someplace…” “I understand.” So I went to my old law firm’s library and used that. I’d keep books out and I’d mark the page. If it was on page 412, there was a case I was looking at, I would mark it 537 and have a separate code to myself in case some curious little law clerk was curious about what Becker is looking at. I went to the Supreme Court library and I wanted to see some of the original briefs on some of the pardon cases.

And so, ultimately, I came to have what was the answer to all of his questions, and they are, of course, that pardons can be issued pre-indictment and pre-conviction, that a pardon does not have to specify with particularity the statute involved. It can be across the board, and if he was considering, as he was considering pardoning, for any and all federal offenses that would not be a prohibition. All states enjoy sovereignty where they are technically not required to honor a presidential pardon ranted for a federal offense to apply equally against a state criminal offense. Principles of comity and one
sovereign being respectful to another sovereign had come into play in some of the cases coming out of New York. New York had voluntarily granted comity to a presidential pardon.

Break taken.

Smith: Well, we’re obviously mid-narrative in terms of the disposition of the Nixon papers.

Becker: Let me finish those five questions, if I may, so if they become relevant - I think I’ve gone through three of them and the fourth question dealt with Congress. The pardons are specifically excluded in the impeachment clause. One may not pardon an individual for the individual’s impeachment. The pardons had no effect on impeachment trials. But the question that really was a fascinating question was this business of whether a pardon could be refused. If President Ford was considering giving a pardon to Nixon, certainly he didn’t want the embarrassment of granting it and having it thrown back in his face.

And so when I looked at much of the case law on this subject, Article 2 of the Constitution that deals with the presidency identifies the powers of the president to give something called reprieves and pardons. Now, reprieve, we don’t use that word today, we use the word commutation. Commutation is what Scooter Libby got, what Jimmy Hoffa got, it is an executive branch reduction of a judicial branch criminal sentence. That’s what a commutation is. A pardon is altogether different. A pardon is a forgiveness, an executive forgiveness of the criminal act, which certain implications attached thereto.

So, if you follow this logically, it is very simple. Commutation cannot be given until there has been an adjudication and a sentence and a reduction of the sentence by the executive. Since no one has a Constitutional right to be a resident of a federal prison, “I choose to stay here, I want to stay here in this federal prison” – no one has that kind of Constitutional right. A commutation cannot be refused. Commutations, once issued, are effective and can be conditioned, and they still cannot be refused. Jimmy Hoffa, for example. Jimmy Hoffa’s commutation issued by Richard Nixon said thou shalt not run
for union office for, I think, ten years. And Hoffa didn’t like that part of it, and tried to litigate it.

Now, on the other hand, a pardon is an act of forgiveness by the president. Judicially forgiving the crime, as I say, can be given pre-indictment, post-indictment, and so forth. But acceptance of a pardon is an acknowledgement of guilt.

Smith: Is that a legally established point?

Becker: Yes. Let me try to give you that a little more clearly. A pardon can be accepted or rejected. Individuals who are offered pardons have the authority to accept or reject pardons. A rejection of a pardon renders the offered aprdon as void and without effect, but once one accepts a pardon, it’s an acknowledgement of the complicity in the act for which you were pardoned.

In 1914 a journalist in New York named Burdick wrote a series of articles on immigration in the ports of New York, and wrote about bribery occurring in those ports, and identified immigration officials that were accepting bribes. His name was Burdick and he was brought before a federal grand jury in New York. The U.S. attorney made it very clear we have no interest in you, Mr. Burdick, no prosecutorial interest in you, we just want to know your sources and your evidence. Tell us your sources.

Burdick said, “No, I will give you no sources. I invoke my privileges under the Fifth Amendment,” and refused to answer any questions. He simply wouldn’t tell, and this was long before there was any kind of statutory shield or legislation that reporters could invoke. Burdick, a month later, was subpoenaed for the same grand jury and was asked the same questions by the same U.S. attorneys, same grand jurors, and he gave the same answer. Where upon the U.S. attorney, the opinion tells us, went into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper, put it in Mr. Burdick’s hands and Mr. Burdick read it. And it was a pardon signed by Woodrow Wilson, pardoning Mr. Burdick for everything that he’d done from the moment of birth up until that moment in time. It is what we prosecutors used to call a complete bath. And he said,
“Now Mr. Burdick, you have no Fifth Amendment privilege because your answer can’t incriminate you in any way, you must answer.”

Burdick refused to answer, they took him to a federal judge, the judge ordered him to answer, he refused to answer, he was found in contempt, and the case went to the Supreme Court in 1915. *United States v Burdick*. *US v Burdick*, the court said Mr. Burdick is right, he should not be held in contempt, he should be immediately freed from jail because Mr. Burdick has every right in the world to refuse this pardon from Woodrow Wilson, because acceptance of a pardon is an acknowledgement of guilt. Still the law. That *US v Burdick* is a case that I had the privilege of going through in much, much more detail with the President of the United States, in Washington, D.C., Jerry Ford and subsequently, the former president in California.

When I was sent to California by President Ford, one of the three tasks that he assigned to me was: I want to be certain that Richard Nixon understands Burdick. Richard Nixon understands that he can refuse this pardon, and there I cannot force him to accept it. And that Richard Nixon, if he does accept the pardon, the Ford White House’s position - with respect to his acceptance, will be that Mr. Nixon’s acceptance was an acknowledgement of guilt. It was one of the three tasks.

That was difficult out in San Clemente to quiet this man down who had a lot of anxiety at the moment, didn’t like talking about himself being pardoned, didn’t like that at all, interrupted a half a dozen times in the narrative of the case. Said things like, “How are the Redskins going to do this year?” Wanted to talk about anything other than… you really have to understand this, you really have to understand. I really wanted to be able to say to Jerry Ford, in truth and in candor, that I explained Burdick to Nixon and he really did understand it. And I feel that way today, that Nixon understood that he didn’t have to accept that pardon. If Jerry Ford is going to give you a pardon, and it will be across the board for everything that happened during your presidency, during that time period, you have an absolute right to refuse it. Your lawyer is right outside, he’ll tell you the same thing. Jack Miller will tell you the same thing. But if you do accept it, Jack will tell you what the implications of
accepting that are, that it’s a bar against any federal prosecution during the period covered by the pardon, and that your acceptance is an acknowledgement of guilt.

Smith: But from Nixon’s standpoint that’s a blanket acknowledgement of guilt. You don’t even know what you’re, in effect, pleading to. At that stage of the game, particularly if you’re in Nixon’s shoes, because so often it’s seen from the other viewpoint. But if you’re in Nixon’s shoes with all of the emotional strain and trauma that you describe, from his standpoint, he is, in effect, surrendering any realistic claim he could make subsequently that, “I didn’t do it.” Because you don’t even really know what you are being charged with. It’s a kind of blanket acknowledgement, isn’t it?

Becker: I hear what you are saying. Let me change your question a little bit, because you are usually exactly right on line, but consider this from Jerry Ford’s view. At the very least, Richard Nixon knows what he did every morning that he was president of the United States and every day. And at the very least, he knows when and if he violated the law, but we don’t know that. Consider the darkness Jerry Ford is operating in. Is there something out there that the special prosecutor has never even touched?

Smith: That’s what makes this so fascinating in ways that I don’t think have been explored before. Because the fact of the matter is, you have two people, not only on different planets, [but] in different universes, each groping their way in the dark in some ways. That’s what makes this, to me, so fascinating and you’re the bridge.

Becker: Thank you, but you’re right. And at times, before I left Washington and went to San Clemente to discuss this matter, Ford and I talked about maybe should we restrict this to the articles of impeachment that were voted on by committee in the House. Or should we go broader, and if we go broader, what are we buying into? What don’t we know?

Smith: Which is presumably why it became all the more important to get as explicit an acknowledgement of guilt and remorse, for lack of a better word.

Becker: Yes, contrition.
Smith: From Nixon. Contrition. But at the same time, in some ways, it’s the worst possible moment to be asking Nixon to rationally weigh his own conduct. You’re right – it’s one thing to say he knew every morning what he did, but you know better than anyone that people have all sorts of rationalizations or convenient lapses of memory – he didn’t know what else was on those tapes. You know what I mean? Plus, the ingrained refusal to acknowledge what seemed to everyone obvious, up until the end. And presumably he takes that mindset with him to San Clemente and now it’s reinforced, because he’s sitting there in a cloister, stewing with Ron Ziegler telling him, “Mr. President, either you didn’t do anything wrong or…” The traditional way that people look at this is in a sort of almost antiseptic kind of…

People look at things from the outside and through their own interests and fail to immerse themselves in the very uncertainties, the murkiness, the motives, the fluidity of this situation on both sides.

Becker: Indeed. And it’s not altogether black and white in that there are tapes, and there are statutes, and I was recently taken back somewhat. I saw that *Nixon-Frost* movie and I didn’t remember Frost being as aggressive as the film made him. But what I did remember, though, is my conversation with Richard Nixon on this, to the point of confrontation at certain levels. And I had transcripts of the tapes there with me during my meetings with Nixon. I said, “When you said this about the CIA, that you were going to use the CIA, that’s an act of obstruction of justice. Let me read the Obstruction statute. Anything that frustrates the smooth or the clear administration of justice, these are criminal acts. These are chargeable, criminal acts.”

Smith: So you had to argue with him.

Becker: Confront him with his own words on the tape transcripts.

Smith: By, in effect, legal necessity, for lack of a better word, or justification for getting an explicit statement acknowledging his responsibility. It wasn’t just politics.

Becker: Oh, no.
Smith: It was the legal rationale.

Becker: You’re absolutely right. The conversation I just described would have been under the umbrella of getting the statement of acceptance. “Because what should Nixon say? What can Nixon say? Nixon initially wanted to talk about the staff didn’t do their job…” I said, “Mr. President, we’re not talking about that. We’re talking about your acts, you need to acknowledge your acts that are on these tape transcripts. If no other, acts that are on these tape transcripts that show that you considered, took steps, were prepared to proceed with frustrating the administration of justice in this.”

Smith: Is it possible that he was simply, at that stage - and you know better than I what his mental state was, his emotional state - that he was simply in massive denial?

Becker: I’ve described him in the past as being an individual who had a deep sense of depression. He struck me as being deeply, deeply depressed. The elevation from the presidency to his then resigned status occurred so quickly. Jack Miller, who was a talented lawyer, represented Nixon, understood this very well. Jack Miller made it clear to me and told me that he made it clear to his client that this was a wise and proper thing for him to do. To accept the pardon and the legal implications of it as well.

Smith: What was the price of the pardon? It’s one thing to go out there and have your lawyer say you should do this. Was there ever, in fact, a quid pro quo, that unless you do X, there will be no pardon? Was that implied?

Becker: That was more than implied. The first two days in San Clemente, nothing was accomplished at all. The Nixon staff wanted to talk about a pardon, I don’t want to talk about the pardon, I want to talk about the deed of gift that he’s going to sign over to GSA, which we’re using as a holding device, until Congress can act.

Smith: By that time there had been some decision reached, at least internally, about the papers and tapes. Was that part of the larger deal?
Becker: The internal decision was: The Ford White House was not going to send to California, or give to Richard Nixon any of the original record papers, and tapes accumulated during the Nixon presidency. And I had with me a Ford White House prepared deed of gift from Richard Nixon to Art Sampson, a GSA administrator, containing Nixon’s waiver of all ownership interest in the property, reserving Nixon’s rights to write memoirs with copies of the property. This deed of trust is viewed by President Ford, Phil Buchen and I as a little more than the holding device until we can get Congress acts on presidential papers. President Ford told me that he quietly spoke to Tip O’Neill, he’s spoken to this one about it, and we’re going to get an act and it’s going to be retroactive to Richard Nixon.

Smith: Providing for the disposition of the Nixon papers and tapes.

Becker: Providing for governmental disposition.

Smith: You said, the first two days, that’s what they wanted to talk about.

Becker: The first two days nothing was accomplished.

Smith: Did you see him?

Becker: I saw him briefly the first two days. And what I’m getting are drafts of two paragraphs, statements of acceptance. The drafts were just nonsense.

Smith: Did you have a sense of who was writing these?

Becker: Ziegler was writing.

Smith: Was Ziegler the gatekeeper?

Becker: Ziegler was finagling into everything. My impression is that he was not getting along well with Miller and Miller is kind of not happy with having Ziegler’s sort of biting at his cuff every time. But the early statements said things to the effect of “the White House staff made serious mistakes,” or “the White House,” or “we,” and there is nothing of an acknowledgement by Mr. Nixon of his improper acts. And I would say, “This is not a statement of acceptance. This is a political statement issued by a politician about the people that worked for him.” But more important than that, I wasn’t getting
anywhere on the tapes and the records. Ziegler (and I assume Nixon’s) position was “We still want the records. We’d like to have the pardon, we’ll give you this statement, but forget this deed of trust. We want our records and tapes. We know by custom and tradition it’s ours.”

The property was valuable as well, Richard. Some of that had an archival value of millions of dollars in terms of correspondence with heads of state and other unique historical reference. The tapes alone had an enormous value.

Smith: Were you reporting back to the president?

Becker: Yes. Night two I went back to a secure phone and called President Ford and reported to him. I said there is no interest whatsoever in waiving ownership on the records and tapes. And they are adamant and I’m getting that from Ziegler and Ziegler is repeating Nixon. I’m not getting it from Miller. I’m getting it from Ziegler, which says something.

Smith: Well, it can be off the record, because, by the way, we’ll give you a transcript and you can extrapolate.

Becker: I wanted you to know that twenty, twenty-five years later, in litigation, John Dean and Maureen Dean sue St. Martin’s Press for the publication of Silent Coup. A section of the book subscribes a far more detailed role of John Dean in the Watergate break in then is generally accepted by the public.

Smith: The break in, not the cover up?

Becker: The break in. Which litigation Dean never won, it was settled. But during that period, when I was representing the authors and St. Martin’s Press was involved as a co-defendant – Gordon Liddy was a co-defendant because he had promoted the book as well on his radio show – we deposed a lot of people. One of the people we interviewed was Ron Ziegler, and I asked Ron Ziegler questions about the book and words that were attributed to him in the book and so forth. And during the course of a Zeigler interview, he volunteered the following: that when I was boarding a plane at Andrews going to California, Al Haig was on the phone with Ron Ziegler. “Benton Becker is coming out there. He wants a statement of acceptance, he’s, in
effect, got a pardon in his hand — that Ford would issue a pardon if Ford got a letter of acceptance, and Becker’s got a deed of trust whereby Nixon waives ownership interest. Tell President Nixon he does not have to sign that deed of trust. Ford will give a pardon without it.”

And Richard, I’m telling you, for two days, of course I didn’t know this then, I didn’t know about these conversations. Ron Ziegler described three such conversations. And Ziegler said, “I thought it was perfectly appropriate. I am the chief of staff to the former President…” Incidentally, I was present when Jerry Ford was told about that and he was really very angry about that.

Smith: When was he told about that?

Becker: During that same period, twenty-five years later.

Smith: Long afterward. He didn’t know, obviously, until then.

Becker: No, no, many years. So, the second night I called and said, “Nothing is happening. Nothing is happening here. They are just adamant, they are not moving one inch on the papers and tapes.” And Ford would say something very forcefully, “He’s a son of a gun,” or something like that or more so. President Ford said, “What do you think?” I said, “I’d like to really lay into them tomorrow and tell them I’m leaving and the hell with it all.” He said, “Do it. Do it, give them everything you’ve got.”

Smith: Do you think — and I realize that maybe this just calls for supposition — do you think Ford was prepared, in fact, to walk away from the pardon?

Becker: Yes. Yes. The next day I went back to the negotiations and nothing is happening. I said, “I tell you what, fellas, give the Air Force colonel on the phone that’s involved with the plane that we came out here on — the White House plane.” I said, “I’m going home at two o’clock today and the hell with this. I’m not sitting here another minute. I’m going back and I can tell you this,” and I turned to Jack Miller. I said, “Jack, I can tell you this. There will be no more conversations, none at all about pardons. Forget it. It’s off the table, it’s done, it’s over. I’m leaving. You guys don’t want to talk about records, papers and tapes going to the American people, and they own it and
Richard Nixon waiving ownership. It’s over and done with. I’m leaving and I’ll leave this afternoon at two o’clock.” I said, “I’m not going to sit here anymore. And I want you to know, I spoke to the President last night and I’m doing this with his authority, and you can tell President Nixon that.” And I was really serious.

Miller reacted to it as if – he struck me as a very bright guy - struck me as, “I was waiting for this to happen, I knew it was going to happen, I was wondering when it was going to happen, how much patience you had, Benton.” And Ziegler had exactly the opposite reaction – “Oh, go to hell…get a plane, what do we care.” I said, “Goodbye.” Miller said, “I’m going to talk to the president,” meaning Nixon. “Go have some lunch, go take a walk or do something,” and came back 30 minutes later and he said, “We’re prepared to talk about the deed of trust. We had a couple of things we didn’t like here,” and they wanted to tinker with it. And we tinkered with that for a day or two. Nixon wanted to have executive privilege to be able to prohibit journalists from taking some of the tapes that he, the former president, could assert some executive privilege to prevent the journalists from getting them. This is out of the question. Executive privilege can only be asserted by the occupant of the White House. But, again, they never knew what we knew secretly in Washington, and that is, this is an important document and we want this, we want this controversy over where the tapes are going to be. And we want the American people to know that Jerry Ford was concerned enough to protect the papers and records of Richard Nixon for posterity. But nobody really knew, except that we were trying to accomplish this goal and the deed of trust, would serve as the government’s right to retain and own the Nixon’s records and tapes while the legislative process proceeded legislatively.

Smith: Why do you think to this day, that, I’m not sure this message really ever got out.

Becker: Why do you think they gave in on it?

Smith: Well, no. I’ll tell you, to the layman, when I think about Nixon’s tapes and all that, for some reason I just think that Ford was prepared at one point to send them to San Clemente.
Becker: Oh, no, it was a gut reaction – I’m president, I’ll get staff…everybody on staff says I should do it, maybe that’s the right thing to do. Oh, then somebody else gives him another thought.

Smith: His initial reaction, then you and others, in effect, talked him out of it and he takes the position that you described. Let’s just clear up because, then what was the business about the trucks appearing?

Becker: Okay – let me make this very clear – I thought you were asking me this question and I want to answer this on the record. If I had gone home, and that would have been the end of it, would Richard Nixon have gotten the pardon? I don’t think so. As a matter of fact, I’m pretty confident that he wouldn’t have, based on the telephone conversation that night. “You do it. The hell with this.”

Smith: Could the story have leaked?

Becker: There was no leak. When Miller and I arrived and we had a cup of coffee at a bar somewhere, a breakfast bar, and some reporter came over, he recognized Jack. He came over to Jack, “Oh, Jack, what are you doing out here?” And I just walked away. There were no leaks that I know of, nothing I ever saw in print, ever, on it. It was a well-kept secret. I didn’t tell my law partners, I didn’t tell my wife. I told her, “I’m going to San Clemente, I’ve got some important matters that deal with President Nixon.” I just didn’t talk about it.

Smith: We’ll continue on this. Before we finish I want to discuss the trucks, because it’s the third chapter of this.

Becker: After President Ford had made the decision not to send the records and tapes to Nixon, after the Saxbe meeting and before I traveled to San Clemente to so-called “truck incident” occurred. We sought various approaches that would result in government ownership and government retention of the Nixon records and tapes. (Legislation, judicial, etc.). In the mind of Jerry Ford the issue of the Nixon records and tapes became linked with the issue of pardon. The linkage of the records, papers and tapes resolution and the pardon. That was the linkage that he foresaw. Even though he called the pardon publicly,
an unconditional pardon. He referred to it that way, in my opinion, it was not unconditional. All parties involved recognized this.

Smith: Would he have been politically better advised to have called it a conditional pardon.

Becker: Oh, I think one can make really a good case that there were a lot of things he could have done politically before, during selective prior notice, trial balloons, all kinds of ways. Politics is not my bag. Probably the answer is probably yes.

About a week after the presidential meeting, wherein, it was ordered that no records or tapes would be sent to Nixon, none of the 900+ boxes in the EOB were to leave the White House, I was walking from the White House across the little short parking lot that separates the White House from the EOB for some purpose, and there was a truck being loaded by enlisted men under the command of a colonel. It was an open truck – it had sides on it, but it was not totally enclosed – and I could see what was being placed in it. I couldn’t help noticing the truck, it was directly in that parking area. The enlisted men were placing the EOB boxes of Nixon’s records and tapes on that truck. The boxes with the records and tapes were immediately recognizable to me because I had observed them previously in storage in the EOB. I approached the Colonel supervising the packing of the truck. At closer inspection, there was no question, whatsoever in my mind that the boxes being packed in the truck were the EOB Nixon records and tapes boxes. I said, “Colonel, are these the boxes from the third floor of the EOB containing the Nixon administration records and tapes.” He said, “Yes, sir. They are.” I said, “Well, what are you doing?” He said, “We’re taking them to Andrews Air Force Base. We’re shipping them out today.” I said, “Someone gave you that instruction?” He said, “Yes, General Haig gave me that instruction.” I said, “Are you aware that President Ford has issued instruction that these boxes shall not leave the White House?” He said, “Sir, I take my orders from General Haig.” I said, “Very well.”

So I recognized two Secret Service agents at the gate at the White House and I went over to them. They knew who I was and we chatted for a while. Without giving them a reason, I said, “Do you see that truck?” I said, “I’m going in to
see the President of the United States, I’m going to talk to him about that truck. That truck cannot, under any circumstances, leave these White House grounds. And I’m leaving it up to you to see to it that that truck does not leave here.” I said, “I don’t care if you have to shoot the tires out, that truck does not leave here.” He said, “Yes, sir. You may be assured of that.”

I turned around and went back into the White House, went upstairs to the Oval Office. The president was alone and I walked in, I was allowed to walk in immediately. “I’m sorry to interrupt you, but…” and I told him what I just observed and my conversation with the colonel. And before I was finished – I mean, he had a telephone in his hand and his face was as red as a beet – “Get Haig in here,” – get Haig in here. He directed telephonically Haig came in. President Ford said to me, “Tell Al what you just told me.” The calmest, coolest Al Haig you ever saw, feigning surprise, said, “Yeah, the damn colonels, they just don’t know anything. They’re so stupid. I’ll take care of that colonel.” Haig quickly, immediately, put all the blame on the colonel. Haig said, “Of course, I never ordered that.” But as sure as I’m alive, those records would have left the White House. President Ford knew it was an act, that no colonel would undertake such a task without orders from a higher authority and that Haig apparently had personal reasons (beyond service to Nixon) to relocate the records and tapes in California with the former Nixon.

And it wasn’t too long after that, that the decision was made – we’ve got to find someplace for Al Haig that’s far away from the White House, that doesn’t require Senate confirmation. There weren’t a lot a places, but we found NATO.

The story I was going to tell you about, the one with Henry Kissinger, was a couple of months later. You can see this in some of the early photographs and later photographs in the Oval Office. A couple of months later I was having lunch with the chief of the Secret Service, his name was Knight, and just intellectually, I was asking him about how the Nixon White House taping system worked. He almost knocked me off the chair when he said, “Mr. Becker, I don’t have to tell you about it. I can show it to you.” I said, “Show it to me?” He said, “Sure, it’s all still there. It’s all in place.” I said, “What!?”
And we got up and took me my downstairs to a room below the Oval Office and there it was. There was a room with all the Nixon taping system in it.

He said, “Of course, we’ve turned all this off since President Ford took office.” I said, “Are you kidding?” And he said, “It can go back on again.” And then, rather innocently, he said, “You know, those Nixon microphones are still in the Oval Office.” I said, “Where?” He said, “Well, there’s a couple in the walls, and there are two in the president’s desk.” I said, “Come with me, come with me.” And as we walked out of that room, I saw and grabbed a screwdriver. I knocked on the Oval Office door and Henry was seated on the side of the president’s desk. I said, “Excuse me for interrupting you – but – I’m with Mr. Knight of the Secret Service who has just told me that the Nixon microphones that were installed in the Oval Office are still here.” Richard, you never saw Henry Kissinger move so fast in your life, shroom – he was out. Mr. Knight and I entered. President Ford was mad as hell about that, and I said, “There’s two microphones in your desk.” If you look at an early picture of the Ford Administration Oval Office (first 3 months), on both sides of the fireplace you will observe brass light fixtures.

Smith:  Sconces?

Becker: Built-in to the wall – light fixtures built-in to the wall. And Knight informed us, “There’s a microphone behind each one of those brass lamps.” Ford said, “I’m going to get a haircut. You get those things out of here,” or harsh words to that effect. I pulled it free from the wall and put my hand in and said, “You sure there’s a microphone in here?” Knight put his hand in and pulled out a microphone and did the same thing with the second lamp. We inspected one of the brass lamps. The microphones in the president’s desk were retrieved after the President returned to the Oval Office. But I left a hole about the size of a tennis ball in the wall on both sides of the fireplace in the Oval Office. What do you when you have a hole in the wall in your office? You get a big picture and you cover it. And that’s what they did. So if you look at the year two of the Ford presidency, you’ll see over the fireplace there are pictures from the National Gallery of Art and where earlier, the brass lamps were there. But we digress, right?
Smith: No, no, wonderful stories. It’s interesting, when you talk about – I realize politics wasn’t your thing – but for years and years, of course, there were people, even when people came around to saying “he did the right thing, but there must have been a more adroit way of doing it.” People talk about a trial balloon. Mel Laird said he had a plan.

Becker: Mel Laird said that?

Smith: Oh, yeah. Mel Laird is saying he claimed he talked to Ford right before the pardon and said, “Don’t do anything, Jerry, until I get back in town.” His plan: he was going to get a delegation, bipartisan delegation from both Houses of Congress to come down to the White House and ask the president to pardon Nixon.

Becker: Oh, I understand now. Never heard that.

Smith: Now, the problem with that…

Becker: But that’s part of that big package, the pardon decision could have been done more politically.

Smith: But, the thing is, I was much younger then, we were all much younger then, but, if you put yourself back in the supercharged atmosphere of that day, including that first press conference where Ford got so angry because all the questions were about Nixon. I find it hard to imagine how realistically you could have had a trial balloon that would not have been shot down before it got above the trees. People say he could have prepared the country. Well, how could you prepare the country? If you talked about the possibility of a pardon, you would have drawn all of this – you might have made it so radioactive. It’s almost as if you could only do it…maybe there was a more adroit way to do it, but, for example, we’ve been told that Jaworski was indicating that it would be two years till…

Becker: That’s right. That was Leon long before the pardon, and he made it very clear. He said two things: one) grand jury is prepared to indict Nixon for obstruction, prepare to do it; and two) that if they do, it will be at least two years before Leon would walk into a courtroom to prosecute this man. And
Jaworski was talking about pre-trial publicity and, of course you remember, the television coverage of the House Judiciary Committee hearings during the impeachment hearings, where witness after witness, and night after night. That’s what he was talking about. I think what you just said is exactly what Jerry Ford said, because I believe, I’ve heard that comment you made in his presence before, namely that, “You could have done it more politically intelligently,” and so forth. And his answer has always been, “What could I have done? Whatever I would have done would have polarized and polarized and polarized.”

Smith: Were there debates in the Oval Office before the pardon? Were there discussions with a Buchen, or ….

Becker: Yes.

Smith: Were you present for…

Becker: Yes, I was present. I wouldn’t characterize them as debates at the stage where I was listening to them. But this was before I went to San Clemente. And the position that was espoused to me, before I went to San Clemente, was, “I’m not prepared to sign a pardon. I will give favorable consideration to a pardon, if the deed of trust is signed happens.” It was always presented to me that way.

Smith: Okay.

Becker: But I do recall being at one of those meetings with Al Haig and Bob Hartmann, and Phil, and Bob Hartmann said, very clearly, he said - this is the end of August, early September – “We have a congressional election coming up in two months,” (the ’74 congressional election). He said, “Pardoning Nixon is not going to be helpful on a congressional election. It’s going to hurt, hurt us at the House.” There are some key Senate races that he mentioned. He said, “If you are going to do this, if you are thinking about doing this, for political reasons, you ought to put it off until after the November elections.”

Up until that point in time, as I said, I know I had satisfied him legally on his presidential authority and powers to issue a pardon, but he’d always been, in
my conversations, had always been, “I will give favorable consideration toward.” No guarantee of it. And what he said to Hartmann at that meeting is something that has resonated with me, and I remember him saying it very clearly. He said, almost verbatim, as if to look at this room, he said, “For the past five years, too many, far too many decisions have been made in this room based on politics. This has nothing to do with politics. If I decide to give a pardon, it will be because it’s the right thing to do.”

That’s exactly what he said, and, you know, you can’t argue with that. It’s hard to argue with that. “I don’t want to hear about politics. I don’t want to...I’m going to do if it’s the right thing to do.” I remember that. I remember that Ford gesture, because I got a Nixon gesture in California when I was departing. When Nixon and I finished our lengthy conversation, Nixon had signed the deed of trust, we’d agreed on language and the letter of acceptance, and...actually I had left. It was over. I had the deed of trust in my briefcase. Al Haig’s parting words four days earlier to me in Washington were, “You will never get Richard Nixon to sign that deed of trust.” Of course, I didn’t know Haig would be telephoning Ron Ziegler – that he was going to backdoor me.

But I had left – I walked out of that facility – it was single story – walked out of that facility. It was a long walkway from the front door to the car that was going to take me to El Toro, the airport that we flew into. And Miller was with me, was flying with me, and we walked out and I felt really good about this for President Ford. And literally I had my hand on the door of the car to get in the car, when Ziegler opened the front door, maybe back twenty or thirty feet on the walkway, and hollered to me, “Mr. Becker, Mr. Becker, don’t leave. The president wants to see you again.”

I had just been in the office with Nixon for an hour, an hour and a half or something like that. My initial reaction was, Nixon has changed his mind. I walked back in and I made some gesture like, are you coming in too, Mr. Ziegler? “No, no, he just wants to see you.” So, I went in – that’s the way it had been before Nixon was standing behind the desk, and of course he had a coat and tie on, and he said, “I asked Mr. Ziegler to ask you to come back
before you left.” He said words to the effect of, “You’ve been a gentleman. You haven’t been a bully...been a lot of bullies lately,” or words to that effect. And I said to myself, what’s going on here? He said, “I wanted to give you something, a remembrance.” I said, “That’s not necessary, Mr. President.” I just, frankly, wanted to get the hell out of there. That’s what I really wanted. And he reached down in his desk drawer, and he opened the drawer and he took out a little two by four box, and he looked at the box, a white box, and he said, “I want you to have this. There aren’t any more. This is the last one. In fact, Pat had to find this for me in my jewelry box.” He said, “I don’t have any more, I don’t have any more.” And he was standing and he gave this kind of sweeping gesture, as if to say, look at this office. It wasn’t a very large room, as if to say that. And the walls were not adorned, the way you might expect a former president’s decor. There was a flag behind the desk. He said, referring to the small box, “This is the last one. They took it all away from me. They took it all away from me.”

I could feel my heart pound with that, and I said something like, “What we’ve done here today is a good thing for the American people. It’s good for history and our children, and our children’s children will know more about your presidency. It’s a good thing that you’ve done, and you should be very proud of that Mr. President.” Shook hands, and left.

Flew back, directly flew back and went straight to the White House, somewhere about eight o’clock at night, it was a Saturday night, I think – maybe about seven o’clock at night. Went up to the residence and one of the first things I did, I still had the small box containing the Nixon presidential cufflinks and the Nixon signed deed of trust. The cufflinks were a presidential seal with his name on the back. I gave them to President Ford and I said, “This is for the Ford museum, someday there will be a Ford museum.” He said, “You hang on to them.”

President Ford and I went through the entire San Clemente story, what happened in the last three days. He called Jerry terHorst in and told terHorst to notify the media, he’s going to have an announcement at twelve noon the next day. He told terHorst what the announcement would be, but he said,
“Don’t tell the media. I’m going to announce a pardon to Nixon.” He said, “Benton, come in early and take care of the coordination of the statement of acceptance?” I said, “Yes, sir.” I called Ziegler and told him it was scheduled for twelve noon tomorrow – I told him I would call him in the morning to confirm all questions. Bill Casselman, who was a lawyer in the staff, good, very bright guy, was formally the GSA, general counsel. I asked Bill to have Art Sampson at the White House at eight o’clock in the morning so Sampson could be the second signatory on the deed of trust. And with that, I caught up with my wife who was at a friend’s house for dinner that night.

Got up real early the next morning and went in, was in the White House by 7:30-7:45, and called Ziegler very early. Ziegler said, “I’m glad you got me so early, we’ve got some changes in the Nixon statement of acceptance.” I said, “What do you mean, you’ve got some changes?” And we were back to the word “I” in the statement of acceptance. “I” was deleted again, and we were back to “the staff.” Typical, typical – I said, “This damn thing at twelve o’clock will be cancelled in a minute.” I said, “I’m going to call you in one hour, I want to see the original statement of acceptance wired to me. Otherwise, Jerry Ford is going to cancel this damn thing. I guarantee you.” And so, it came back the way it was, the language we’d agreed to. And the big firestorm followed the announcement.

Smith: Worse that he expected?

Becker: I think much worse than he expected. Much worse that all of us expected.

Smith: There is a story – there were congressmen who were calling that day telling him he did the right thing, and then going out and telling the cameras that he did the wrong thing.

Becker: Is that right?

Smith: Yeah.

Becker: Well, you know about that Kennedy speech on the floor. Ted Kennedy gives him hell, gives him real hell on the floor of the Senate. Ted Kennedy, to his credit, twenty years later, gave the Profile in Courage award to President
Ford. At that ceremony Kennedy stood and announced the award to President Ford. Kennedy read from his speech on the floor, delivered twenty years earlier and announced publicly “I want everybody in this room to know I was wrong about the Nixon pardon. Jerry Ford did the right thing and I was wrong.”

Smith: It was an extraordinary moment.

Becker: Yes, it really is.

Smith: And isn’t it fortunate that the president lived long enough to participate in it.

Becker: Wonderful.

Smith: I assume these events must have forever after colored any relationship he had with Nixon.

Becker: I’m not sure I understand your question.

Smith: His relationship – President Ford’s relationship with Nixon must never have been the same after this.

Becker: He did go out to California. He was in California and he visited when the phlebitis had hospitalized Nixon.

Smith: Which, again, his political advisors begged him not to do.

Becker: Right. But I think you’re right. I haven’t thought about that, Richard, over the years. But I cannot envision them in any social environment other than a funeral, a presidential funeral, from that moment on. That’s an interesting point you’re making. I have a picture of presidential funerals with multiple presidents standing there altogether, but…

Smith: I think towards the end of his life, he would say, “Nixon never thanked me.” So it existed on both sides. You could understand Nixon – first of all, resenting the fact that he didn’t get his tapes and papers right away, in his own head saying, “I made this guy. I made him president.” Stu Spencer had a fascinating twist on this.
Becker: But the other thing was, I thought. Try to put yourself in the position of Richard Nixon, and what would bother you and what would not bother you, and so forth. I think what would bother me, I’d been vice president for eight years and president for five years, Senator and House member, and devoted my life to all of it, I’d be kind of embarrassed, the world can see the way I talk like a sailor, or I talk like a men’s locker room, particularly with Erlichman or Haldeman. And the things they say about women, and the things they say about African-Americans, it’s just shocking. That, I think, was something in the back of his mind – I’ve always thought that was in the back of Nixon’s mind and made the papers, records, and tapes much more difficult for the transcript for the government. Nixon wanted to be able to object. If somebody wanted to study the papers or tapes, Nixon wanted to be able to prevent it.

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw President Ford?

Becker: Let’s see. Well the last time I saw him at a board function was at the last dinner we had out in California. Do you recall that?

Smith: Right.

Becker: But, we would frequently speak.

Smith: That’s the one where Phelps announced that he was Deep Throat.

Becker: Yes, yes. The President was quite thin then. I think he passed on within six to eight months after that. I can’t think of her name, I should think of her name, the woman who was the final chief of staff.

Smith: Penny Circle.

Becker: Penny. Penny called me a couple of times and told me to try to find the time to come out to California. And I didn’t quite get the message, I didn’t quite get it, what she was really saying, and so I didn’t see him privately. But we did have telephone conversations.

Smith: What do you think about the Tom DeFrank book? There’s an argument; there are people who believe that Ford knew exactly what he was doing and that
this was part of his legacy, that he was getting all this on the record and understood that it would be out there, be part of the record, including some of his criticisms of the current administration, etc., etc. And there are other people who believe that, well, he was a little naïve and that he couldn’t have foreseen that some of these conversations would quite find their way into the record.

Becker: I think the public perception of him in many ways is erroneous. He was a lot brighter than a lot of the media and the historians give him credit for. And certainly knowledgeable of the federal government and how the federal government operated. But if the suggestion there is that there was any kind of deal with Nixon at all…

Smith: No, I mean on the Tom DeFrank book. Was he, in effect, taken advantage of, or was he actually the one who wanted to get this out on the record?

Becker: Oh, I think the openness of Jerry Ford is to get it on the record, by all means. I don’t think he was taken advantage of at all. I remember once during his vice presidency, pointing out to him that something he already knew and that is, you were the only person in the executive branch in these two buildings that Richard Nixon can’t fire. So you really don’t have to do these speeches, you don’t have to do them. This was totally swimming against the stream of the team player. And President Ford said, “Yeah, you’re right. I hadn’t thought about that.”

Smith: Perfect.
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Smith: When did you first come to the White House?

Monkman: When did I first come to the White House? I came in early 1967, sort of at the end of the Johnson administration to work in the curator’s office.

Smith: We all have seen the pictures, the demonstrators and everything else – was there a sense of an embattled climate?

Monkman: Yes, and I think more so even into 1968. In early ’67 there wasn’t, but certainly in ’68. I remember standing in the Usher’s office, looking out at a protest in Lafayette Park, and I remember there were some agents, some Secret Service agents and people there. And they said, “Oh, those Commie students…” And I said, “Well, they could be your children,” because I was of that generation. I was only twenty-five or something. I was of the generation of a lot of those people out on the street. So, yeah, I did become more – I felt that even after 9/11, but it became more insular, I would say. And especially with the huge demonstrations, when the buses were surrounding the White House with the Vietnam protests and things.

Smith: Now, that’s I think in ’69 with the moratorium – there was October and November of ’69.

Monkman: Yeah, that was Nixon then.

Smith: We’ve seen footage, in fact, we aired footage as part of the C-Span series. I think there were paratroops, literally under the old EOB.

Monkman: We had Army troops under that passageway in back. Our office was right opposite the diplomatic reception room on the ground floor, and there is a long corridor underground for the kitchens and where the more utilitarian spaces are. And there were, at times, even after Martin Luther King died in
that spring of ’68, we had troops stationed under there and we’d walk out of the office and there would be these armed troops right there.

And even during tour hours people were concerned that there would be protests in the House. And it wasn’t just the war; it was the Center for Creative Non-Violence, which was a homeless shelter here. They would literally come in the House with – and this was long before security magnetometers and things like that. But I remember one time people came in with vials – we didn’t know it until they started opening them up and throwing them – but whether it was blood or red paint, or whatever it was, they would be in the State Dining Room on the tour and they would open these vials and all this red fluid would come out. Or they would bring in cockroaches and let them go. So we had to train the housekeeping staff on what to do if some of these situations occurred. But, yeah, it was a big time of protests. Huge.

I stopped telling people where I worked. People would say, “What do you do?” I’d say, “Well, I’m a curator in a historic house,” and they’d say, “Oh, where?” And I would say, “Well, I work for the National Parks Service.” I was young and you’d go to parties and everybody took their political things out on you. If I said I worked for the Johnson or the Nixon White House – whew – I just got every bit of verbiage that people wanted to expend. So I stopped telling people where I worked.

Smith: Was it different or basically pretty much the same in terms of people projecting on you whether it was the Johnson administration or the Nixon – was it just different ends of the political spectrum?

Monkman: Yeah. I mean, everybody hated the war, and I think it was very – toward the end of ’68, Johnson was hated, Nixon was hated when he came in – I think the Nixon thing was even worse after Kent State. When that happened after Kent State, even the more moderate people were really upset by the Cambodia bombing and the Kent State thing. And I had a sister going to Kent State, going to graduate school at the time, so I got really upset.
But, we had White House police and Secret Service around, plus then all the political people supporting the issue of the war and this and that. So it was very hard to make those transitions. If you’re in a different world or if you’re among other people who think so strongly about issues, you just kind of stop talking about work, completely - except for in the White House. We’d talk about it to ourselves. I would never talk about it to friends, even close friends.

Smith: Right. I think it is hard today to make people understand what it was like…

Monkman: During that period.

Smith: It’s so aberrational.

Monkman: The fierceness of opinion. And then even during Watergate we watched the newspapers every day. But even within the White House during the Nixon time, when those Congressional hearings started taking place, whew, everybody had an opinion about something.

Smith: Did people watch?

Monkman: We did have television; we did. We turned on the television to watch the hearings, I do remember that. Oh yes, people were glued to their television sets, even if they were little black and whites, or whatever.

Smith: I have to ask you before we move on: did you have any contact with the Johnsons?

Monkman: Yes. In fact, some of my best friends are still people I met in the Johnson administration. One was a secretary to Mrs. Johnson, who worked with Ashton Gonella, her personal secretary. And Bess Abell. I keep in touch with a lot, and Liz Carpenter. All those people, all their staffs, too - their press and their social staff. I think because I was very young and more impressionable at the time, and they were very easy people to work with. Even though people talk about President Johnson, Mrs. Johnson was extremely easy to work with.

Smith: Everyone loved Lady Bird.

Monkman: I remember years later I was down in Texas at this – maybe you went to some of those, those American Presidency conferences, the presidential libraries
and the Parks people did. She invited us up to the ranch. So I’d gone though and looked at the house and I was kind of late. I guess everybody had gone down by the river to the picnic or something, and all of a sudden this young agent called me over to this van. They were taking Mrs. Johnson down to this picnic and she said, “Oh, Betty, come have a ride with us.” She never forgot people, and she was just so thoughtful. Very thoughtful.

Whereas I remember other people coming, like carpenters, and people coming in who worked at nights or worked on the weekends, talking about Johnson roaming the house and screaming about the lights being on and all those stories. But Johnson was the first president I ever worked for and boy, he had this physical presence about him. He was tall and he was big, and he just exuded the – I’ve never felt any presence since him having that physical power about the presidency that I did with Johnson. Even though they were as large and everything, but there was just a force about him physically, I think. But I liked their staff a lot and it was just a very, very difficult time.

Smith: One of the main things that most people don’t know about Mrs. Nixon is, she took an enormous interest in assembling historic furnishings for the White House.

Monkman: Oh yeah.

Smith: It’s not a zero-sum game, it’s not to take anything away from Mrs. Kennedy, but…

Monkman: But she did, she put a lot of effort into it, and she supported Clem Conger. He took the bull by the horns and really ran with her support. But she would sit down and write personal, handwritten letters to anybody who donated an object or even funds for a particular project or something. She received them, had their pictures taken, she would even walk them around on tours. There was an architect we worked with from Georgia, Edward Jones. She grew very close to his family – would have them for dinner. She would put herself out for that tremendously, I think. And she was very supportive of all of us.

Smith: It’s a side that the public never really saw.
Monkman: No, and I think they only saw her when she was out in public and she could be a little stiff out in public – reserved and a little maybe watchful. But when she was in the House, and when she trusted you, then she was very amiable to talking and [was] friendly.

Smith: You saw her smoke?


Smith: That’s funny.

Monkman: We knew she smoked, but I really didn’t see her. Up until the early Clinton administration, we had ashtrays all over the White House for parties and receptions and things like that. It was only since the ‘90s that people had to go stand out on the North Portico, and now I’m sure not many people do that to have a cigarette anymore.

But I liked her a lot and I liked Julie a lot, too. She lived there for quite a while, from time to time, she and David. She was very involved with tours for the blind and she would come into the office and want particular information, or what can they touch. Whereas Tricia was distant and removed. She even would put across her bedroom door wires so that she would know if the maids came into her room, or anybody came into her room. She was very, very different than Julie.

Smith: When Agnew resigned – I suppose in retrospect that’s just one more in a series of milestones on the road – but, at the time…

Monkman: And it was all so close in time, too, wasn’t it. I mean, his resignation – what year was that? Was that ’74?

Smith: It was October of ’73 he resigns, and within days, Nixon announces Ford, and then within days comes the Saturday Night Massacre. In the same month of October, you had Agnew resigning on the 10th, Ford was announced on the 12th, and then within ten days came the Massacre. There must have been this sense of events accelerating.
Monkman: Yeah, especially that Saturday Night Massacre. I think I remember that. It was a Saturday night, I remember. It was on the news, we were watching those talk shows with Hugh Sidey and some of those other people. But, boy, yes that was a very traumatic, dramatic time. I don’t remember much about Agnew, actually. I would see him coming or going, but at that time vice presidents didn’t have offices in the West Wing. They had their offices in the EOB. So, unless they were coming over for a meeting or a function or an event, you didn’t see them too often.

Smith: I think you’ve already answered this, but was there a sense of the place under siege during those last months of the Nixon presidency?

Monkman: Oh yes, and it got worse and worse. After that Supreme Court decision about the release of the tapes - I think I was away; that was in July and I came back at the end of July – and it was so tense around there. I would come home at night and my legs would just ache from tension. From being there.

I remember one day, it was a week or so before Nixon was resigning, they decided to go on the Sequoia down the Potomac, and they wanted all the staff to go out and wave goodbye and give support to him. I just couldn’t go out there. I just stayed in my office. They wanted that public support of him. And I remember, even within a day or two before he resigned, and I would see one of Mrs. Nixon’s staff or somebody in the hall, and I would say something about I’m so sorry this is all happening, and they said, “Oh, we’re staying. We’re not going anyplace.” I mean, they did not believe that he was going to resign. And I thought there was just kind of a denial.

Smith: A bubble within a bubble?

Monkman: Like a denial that this could be happening. And I remember we’d have people calling us from all over the country saying, “What’s going on?” as if we...Finally, I think it was the day before he was resigning, one of our operations people who move our furniture said, “Oh, Mrs. Nixon has called for some packing boxes.” And then we knew that they were getting ready. They couldn’t take very much within a day with them, but enough that she could pack up a few things to take when they left the next day. Yeah, it was
very tense, very tense. And none of us really knew anything, we really didn’t know. Nobody knew, right, until the last day or so? But, yeah, it was very tense.

Smith: Were any of you consulted – because, of course, this was also the time when the vice presidential residence is about to be – was there any consultation on that?

Monkman: Yes, we went out there. I was thinking that. The first time I ever met Mrs. Ford was in July of that summer. Clem Conger and I went out because they were trying to decide what to do with the Observatory Circle house – the Admiral’s house. And so we walked around with Mrs. Ford and we talked and we discussed whether she could borrow things from the White House storage facility. Mr. Conger still ran the diplomatic reception rooms of the State Department, so he was going to plan to lend some things from there to the vice presidential house.

Smith: I take it the house was furnished, but not necessarily…

Monkman: I think the Admiral had moved out so there were some things there, but it certainly wasn’t set up for them living there, or entertaining there, because I do remember the State Department was going to lend them a dining room table for instance, and things like that. And there were no paintings or works of art. It was kind of a vacant place.

Smith: But it was very clear she assumed they were going to be living there.

Monkman: Oh, yes. And I think we went out there a couple of times because the Navy was involved and so forth, too. She was going to go up to New York and meet with people about fabrics and furniture companies, and this and that. So very clearly, this within less than a month before this all happened, they were still planning that move.

Smith: And there is that famous story the day, I think it was the first of August, or a week before the resignation, the day Haig informs the Vice President about the smoking gun tape. And basically, the message is, it’s only a question of
time. And Ford has to go and pretend – he goes with her to look at the house, because if he doesn’t, he knows the press is going to be all over him.

Monkman: Yes, they have to.

Smith: And then, as if that’s not bad enough, and he can’t tell her – they had dinner that evening with Marianna Means, and they couldn’t say anything. It was at midnight when they got back to the house in Alexandria, and she’s going on about the house and he says, “We’re never going to live in that house.” And that was the beginning of the final chapter.

Monkman: Oh, wow. So it was just a week before that he was even aware that the situation was. Well it was very difficult because we knew, like so many of the staff, like Rosemary Woods. She was a very good friend of Rex’s – to see her with that photograph of her trying to reach that tape and so forth. You have to sympathize a lot with the staff, too. Some of them like Rosemary Woods had worked with him since his Senate days or longer, too. I think it really affected a lot of people’s lives after that. There were some people like Steve.…

Smith: Steve Bull.

Monkman: Steve Bull. He was the nicest person, and they would come back for events later on, maybe when Mrs. Nixon’s portrait and the Nixon portrait or something like that, and we’d see some of these staff people. It was good to see that some of them survived and went on with their lives. But then I often thought about some people like that man who ran the re-election committee, who later became a minister.

Smith: Jeb Magruder?

Monkman: Jeb Magruder. He was the most handsome young man. You would see him all the time and would think, “How could he have gotten himself into that mess?” You really see people – I think I became much less judgmental about people, because you really saw them as human beings. And even though these actions took place, you could be sympathetic to them, in a way, too.

Smith: Sure. Well, you develop empathy, at least. Were you in the East Room on the morning of the 8th?
Monkman: I went up there, but the room was packed, it was just packed, and I was standing by the door near the staircase as you walk up the staircase from the ground floor. I couldn’t see anything because there were so many people in there, and a lot of people had to stand. So I went back down to my office and watched it on television because I could see, at least. But I did go out as they were leaving because so many staff were out on the grounds then.

But then it was just after the Nixons left there was this calm, quietness in the house. It was just eerie because all the Nixon staff people had left the residence and the grounds and so forth, and then we were waiting – we knew that the ceremony would take place again – it was at noon or something, it was shortly after noon. But there was this utter emptiness in the house. It was very, very strange. And I remember I’d hoped to go up and see the swearing in, but the police said no, there are only a certain number of people that are going to be allowed to go up. So we didn’t go up. But it was very – I think everybody breathed a sigh of relief, for one thing – I mean that this trauma was literally over with. But it was so emotional, too. Everybody was really drained, I think by that time.

Smith: One thing we’ve heard from several people, variations of a theme – it’s perfectly understandable when you stop and think about it – was after the swearing in there was a receiving line and then I think there was a reception down in the dining room. And you could watch the Nixon people peel off. You can understand it, but that raises a larger question. Just from your observation, how difficult was it to sort of mesh the existing staff with the new people? That must have been a little bit of oil-on-water.

Monkman: Well, not particularly. And I’m more familiar maybe with the East Wing staff than some of the West Wing staff, but I know that there was a State Dinner coming up within a few weeks. Was it the Shah of Iran?

Smith: King Hussein.

Monkman: King Hussein, yeah. And I remember, Mrs. Ford literally had to rely on Mrs. Nixon’s staff. Lucy Winchester was still there. But there is that permanent staff that works there, too in the House, and so they stayed. They would give
the support to the incoming family. I think there were some real issues in the West Wing. I mean, some people did leave, and some people gradually left or whatever.

Smith: Rumsfeld – it’s interesting because Rumsfeld, when he came in, pressed the President to clean house much faster. But Ford didn’t want to tarnish the vast majority of the Nixon people. And it’s a fascinating sort of case study in learning to be president. In some ways, Rumsfeld was right. In some ways the good of the country, the good of the presidency requires a certain amount of ruthlessness in this situation, and Ford, being Ford, and being a Congressman and all of that, wasn’t inclined to kick those people out.

Monkman: A lot of them did stay.

Smith: A lot of them were very good, that’s one of the unfortunate hangovers of what happened. We’ve heard over and over again that the Nixon staff was very talented - with obvious exceptions – particularly in policy.

What was your first contact with President Ford?

Monkman: Well, I think I did meet him at the vice president’s – at the Admiral’s house then. I can’t remember exactly when they moved in.

Smith: It was a week after.

Monkman: It took them a while. Exactly.

Smith: They stayed at the house in Alexandria.

Monkman: At least a week, if not a little bit longer, I think.

Smith: And there is a wonderful story. The first day that they moved in, he walks up to the West Wing and there is a Marine saluting, opening the door. And he sticks his hand out and says, “Hi, I’m Jerry Ford, I’m going to be living here. What’s your name?” Isn’t that typical?

Monkman: I think the Fords were much less formal, more casual people than the Nixons. I mean, the Nixons dressed and sat down for dinner every night. Life was just on a different - well there wasn’t that casual family atmosphere.
Smith: Understood. The story has been told by several people that Mrs. Ford, in her first days there, in the morning was walking, I guess on the second floor, and saw some of the staff and said, “Good morning.” And they didn’t reply. Eventually, she went to the usher and said, “Do they not like us?” And it was explained to her that it was just kind of different under the Nixons – you were not encouraged to speak to the first family. But the word went out that it’s different. We heard that they established – particularly the President – very good relations with the permanent staff.

Monkman: I think so, too. Although this is the end of the Ford administration, but I remember when they were getting ready to go down to the Blue Room for the formal tea with the incoming president. Some of us were up on the third floor where Susan and the boys had lived, and so forth, and the maids were getting ready, doing things for the incoming family. But the Fords hadn’t left yet. And President Ford went around to every single room there and every single working space to say goodbye to the maids and the housemen and the carpenters and everybody. And thanked everybody individually for what they had done for them during that time that they had lived there. And it was very warmly done. There was no…

Smith: Nothing ritualistic about it.

Monkman: No, exactly, as though it were expected. It was something that you knew he sincerely thought. And I don’t recall any other president ever doing that. I mean, they might have had everybody go through a receiving line to say goodbye or something like that, but this was a much more casual, much more heartfelt, I thought, relationship. But that was at the end of the administration.

Smith: We were told that whoever would be serving them in private quarters…that he loved to talk about sports, and so I think there was one butler, in particular, who they would get into a discussion, and I think it was at first, a little bit uncertain, maybe awkward, the butler not knowing how far to go with this…

Monkman: What the barrier was.

Smith: Exactly. And there was one Saturday afternoon the President was watching college football, and one of the butlers asked if he needed anything. He said,
“No, no, I’m fine,” and he said, “come on in and watch the game.” And you do what the president asks, but I think it was unprecedented, and…

Monkman: To be treated…

Smith: Yeah, he didn’t quite know how to…

Monkman: That there wasn’t that separateness, in a way.

Smith: But, again, Ford didn’t see a separateness, which is revealing.

Monkman: Well, I was surprised. There was this kind of issue between Mr. Conger, who always wanted to tell you what to do, and Mrs. Ford. And so, I remember her secretary, her personal secretary, who I liked a lot, but whose name I cannot remember, came down one day and said that Mrs. Ford wanted to talk with me. She didn’t want to talk to Mr. Conger. And so I went up there and there was Mrs. Ford in her bathrobe in the West Sitting Hall, and she wanted to discuss having the wallpaper removed from the dining room with the Revolutionary War scenes, and whether that would be possible. And so, there she was in her bathrobe. I had never – I mean I have talked to many first ladies – but never in their bathrobe. It was like mid-morning, maybe 10:30-11:00 in the morning. It wasn’t 8:00 or anything like that. So that, to me, said something, too; that she felt so comfortable about herself and who she was. That didn’t make any difference whether somebody came to talk with her.

Smith: And the story always has been that she found that wallpaper sort of unsettling, sitting eating and all these people shooting at you.

Monkman: And it was dark and it was on the north side of the house and she wanted something light and airy. So we did investigate how we could remove it and called in people to give us advice and so forth. And it was removed and then it went back up.

Smith: And then it went back and then it got removed again, I think.

Monkman: Well, no, it’s still there. We couldn’t take it down the last time, during the Clinton administration. We put up kind of a scrim over it and then some fabric was hung on that because it couldn’t be taken down again. I think it went back
up in the Carter administration, because Mrs. Carter had talked to Mrs. Johnson and she found out that there had been wallpaper on the wall and so then she asked us if we could put it up again. It’s still there, but it’s behind something now. Clearly, this was something she didn’t want Mr. Conger to say no, it’s not possible. She wanted an honest opinion.

Smith: Is it safe to say that after as many years, and the historic relationship he had with the house and everything else, that you get a little possessive?

Monkman: Well, yeah, and I don’t think he realized in ’74, when the Nixons were having to leave, that things were going to change. I remember still, honestly, it was that summer of ’74, walking with Mrs. Nixon and Mr. Conger around certain areas, and he was saying, “I’m getting these designs from Lennox for your china.” I mean, this takes two years to make. And the reality just wasn’t there in terms of the possibilities of things. But he had raised a lot of money, he had brought in a lot of things, and he just felt that his idea was the right way to go.

I remember in 1976, he was still there in ’76 – well, he stayed for quite a while after that – there was this question of whether, during all those state visits in ’76 for the Bicentennial, whether the Queen of England would be a houseguest in the house. Mrs. Ford wanted the Queen’s Room and the Lincoln Room, and some other areas kind of fixed up because they were kind of down. So Mr. Conger went ahead with these plans without really taking into consideration what she really wanted, and she was so angry. I remember, we got a call about these curtains in the Lincoln Bedroom and she had come back from a trip and saw them and she just did not want them, she had made us put back the old ones that were there, and so forth. So that created a lot of little – she just didn’t want to deal with him because he had very forceful ideas. He went ahead with his ideas without taking hers into consideration, let me put it that way, I think.

Smith: Thinking more the museum than the home? Or the family residence?

Monkman: Yeah, and not really thinking that they had an opinion and they lived there. It was their house. Eventually, it happened the Queen didn’t stay in the house. I think her staff, and she maybe, what had happened in ’39 when the King and
Queen of England had under the Roosevelt’s, and the retinue that comes with them, and all the things that go on. So they ended up not staying there. But, nevertheless, that was something in the back of their mind, I think they thought about.

Smith: Do you remember the time of her breast cancer surgery? One senses that it was a bit of a shock to the country.

Monkman: Yeah, because I think it was so unexpected, but I knew that she hadn’t been well. We have this advisory committee, the Committee for the Preservation of the White House, and meetings would be scheduled and she wouldn’t attend. I remember during the ERA Amendment, there would be things scheduled in the theater with her press secretary and other people, and Mrs. Ford would be supposed to attend and she wouldn’t. So we were clearly aware that she had some health problems. But I don’t think anybody knew about the breast cancer. At that time people didn’t talk about it, either. The recuperation was much longer than it would be today. That’s some thirty-some years ago. But I think people really admired her forthrightness about that and about other things, too. We all loved her. She was really very down to earth.

Smith: Free-spirit?

Monkman: Yes, but we appreciated that after this kind of tight, closed White House that we had experienced. For all the little controversies of things, she had a little vitality about her, I think. She does still have a vitality. I don’t know how well she is these days, but she was a very vital person, I thought.

Smith: In some ways it’s a case of opposites attract, because she would needle him, very lovingly, and he would egg her on. She was not punctual. That was the one thing under the best of circumstances – there was Betty-time and there was someone else’s time. And he was the most punctual of people. But they learned to work around it.

The whole Bicentennial must have been an enormous challenge.

Monkman: And it was the campaign year, too, on top of that. So all of that travel and all of that – but it was a very busy year in terms of entertaining and all those
arrivals, and even the year before when the Emperor of Japan came. That was a huge thing to have the Emperor come. You know, when you work there over a lot of years and administrations, you don’t go out for every arrival. They are kind of one like another. But the Emperor of Japan was such a historic figure you had to go out and watch that ceremony on the lawn. The staff gets very tense, her staff, his staff, everybody, when some of these really important heads of state come, like the Queen or the Emperor, or Gorbachev in the Reagan administration, because they are so unusual and they’re kind of historic figures.

Smith: The famous incident with the Queen’s visit and the band and *The Lady is a Tramp* – were there repercussions after that or was it talked about?

Monkman: Well, I think we all kind of laughed about it, because it really was the Marine Band that was playing the music. It wasn’t anybody else. It was after the dinner, because the dancing was in the dining room. I think the dinner had been in the tent in the Rose Garden.

Smith: And the Fords loved to dance.

Monkman: Yeah, and they had taken the carpet out of the dining room and removed all the furniture, so they used that room for dancing. But that was the music people, I don’t think anybody had pre-selected on the staff, or anybody had pre-selected the music. I think they were very careful after that as to what they played at a particular time.

She probably laughed about it, too, in the end. I’m sure Maria, if she were the one in the charge of the dinner, had some qualms about it afterwards, I never asked.

Smith: What was the atmosphere when the pardon came? Was it like a flashback to all those bad old days when you had people outside the gates, or was it…

Monkman: That happened on a Sunday, didn’t it? That pardon? Because I remember hearing about it. I wasn’t at work when it happened, I do remember that. But I think there was this sense of “Here we go again,” about a controversy, because that was the really big controversy of his administration.
Having worked there for so many administrations and so long, you realize they all come in so hopeful, so hopeful. And they all leave – all of them – other than Reagan, maybe, who stayed there eight years and wasn’t up for re-election, and he had some clouds, too, in the later part of his administration. But it gets tougher and tougher and tougher as all the decisions have to be made. We clearly see this already with the Obamas. But this sense of hope and this sense of anticipation, and then the reality of both living there, losing their privacy – and I think that’s one thing I have to say for people that work closely with the family, either in the residence or on their staff – that was one of our major things – was not to invade their privacy. And to keep their privacy. And I think that’s why we all – we might have talked among ourselves about things - but we didn’t talk outside of work about a lot of things.

Smith: There is a wonderful story sort of contrasting Ford and LBJ, that Gary Walters told us. It was his first Sunday there by himself and he picked up the phone. He [Gary] could tell he [Ford] wanted to say, “Hey, this is Jerry Ford,” but he said, “This is the President,” and Gary immediately went into full alert. It was Sunday morning, they were getting ready to go to church, and he said, “Maybe at some point you could check with a plumber because I don’t have any hot water in my shower.” Gary says, “Oh, of course, Mr. President, we’ll take care of it right away.” He said, “No, that’s alright,” because there is no plumber on Sunday, I guess. He said, “That’s alright, he’ll be in on Monday, that’s fine. That’s alright, no big deal, you don’t have to hurry. I haven’t had any hot water for two weeks.”

Monkman: And he hadn’t said anything.

Smith: Hadn’t said anything. He said, “I just walked down to Mrs. Ford’s shower.” Now, Rex, of course, was on when LBJ insisted on his shower. When the president was out of town, Rex tried…that was apparently all he could stand. It is revealing that Ford just didn’t mention – “For two weeks I haven’t had hot water.”
Monkman: And the casualness of it. And I think, too, having someone like Susan around kind of kept them involved in the normal parts of life, too. To have a young daughter like that, and occasionally their sons.

Smith: And she had her high school prom there.

Monkman: Yes.

Smith: But the really poignant part was, of course, when her mother was in the hospital…

Monkman: Yes, when she substituted for her. I remember that at that diplomatic, white-tie reception. Here she was, the sixteen or seventeen year old girl with these long white gloves standing in that receiving line. She was very poised and did it very well. We had a secretary in our office, her name was Wilma Sands, and her son David went to school in Utah – was it the University of Utah they went to, or Brigham Young – with Jack Ford. And they were very good friends. They must have been good friends in Alexandria in high school and then they both went off to Utah. She died a number of years ago, but she would go up and talk to Mrs. Ford, and just visit with her and talk about their sons and things like that. It felt more like a neighborhood than a formal space, I think. The kids were so casual, too. If Steve or Jack were there, it was very, very casual. And I remember Susan would sometimes want us to come up and look at something or do something, I can’t remember specifics. But there would be – who was the photographer that was so…

Smith: David Kennerly.

Monkman: David Kennerly, he would often be up there showing her how to use a camera, they’d be looking at photographs and various things, too. So it was just kind of casual.

Smith: It seems like every White House family, I know the Fords did, why do they all fall in love with the solarium?

Monkman: Well, it is a very private space, I think. It’s removed from everything. People have to literally walk into that room. Unless you’re a staff person that’s been asked to come up to that room, it’s a private space. It's very airy, light, a lot of
windows. Also, there is access to the outdoors. I think Susan maybe would lay in the sun up there. There is a terrace around there. And so it was kind of a real private space for them. It wasn’t formal by any means and it was fairly large. You could watch TV, you could play cards, whatever you wanted to do up there. It was kind of your space, I would say more so than a lot of other spaces.

Smith: Almost like a family room?

Monkman: Very much so, yes. And for them, it was, I think.

Smith: Ike used to grill steaks outside.

Monkman: Yes, on his cooking thing. There is a wonderful photograph of that, I think, of his grilling. I’ve seen it, too. I think a lot of families have felt that was a very informal space that they could relax in. And they did. For Susan and her brothers, it was just very close to where their rooms were, so it was easy for them to have their friends come in. There were little refrigerators up there and a kind of kitchenette where they could keep things for them to eat or drink, or whatever. So it was a very, kind of like your rec room in another house.

Smith: Little did Mrs. Coolidge know what she was starting.

Monkman: Except you had this gorgeous view, of course, looking out over the lawn and people could go up there and watch fireworks, the sunset, or whatever. It was a very appealing space for a lot of families.

Smith: They came back in later years on a number of occasions.

Monkman: For their presidential portraits, especially. Yes. In fact, I remember Mrs. Ford. Her portrait was hung down near our office on the ground floor, and we were standing there – I can’t remember if it was right at the time of the unveiling, or when she came back another time later – and she said, “You know, I always wanted to look like my portrait, and that’s why I had my plastic surgery.” I remember her so clearly saying that.

Smith: Isn’t that typical?
Monkman: She was so forthright about it. She said, “I always wanted to look like my portrait.” But they had another portrait that she had, I think it’s still in their home in California; it was an enormous portrait of her. I can’t remember the artist’s name, but it was huge. It could have taken up that whole wall. It was kind of like in this pointillist style. Very nice. It was in the gown that she had worn for a State Dinner. But they hung that up on the second floor in the corridor, and I remember walking up there. There she would be, bigger than life. It was huge. But it belonged to them personally, and I think they still have it, because I don’t think it’s at the library. I don’t know whether they’ll keep it or just what will happen to it. I think she seemed to take things with a lightness about her, even with all the difficulties that I think she had with her health and so forth. But she did have a sense of humor about a lot of things.

Smith: There is a wonderful photo – so emblematic of her – with that sort of fantail window, and she is so tiny, she is actually up on the sofa, looking at the residence, or the wing beyond.

Monkman: Yeah, and the EOB through the window there.

Smith: I assume most families spend – isn’t that a place where they congregate quite a bit?

Monkman: Yeah, and especially before dinner. Yes, and the light is so wonderful there. There is another room adjacent to their bedroom, which was for so many years was used for the president’s bedroom. Actually, Johnson, Nixon, Kennedy, they all had these separate bedrooms. But the Fords did not and they turned that into a kind of sitting room/office for him. They would have a television in there, too, because there weren’t televisions in the West Sitting Hall, I don’t think. But it wasn’t quite as bright and airy a room as the West Sitting Hall where people would congregate. It was easier for the butlers to serve them supper.

Smith: We read that when the word got out that they shared a bed there were concerned Americans who wrote the Fords to protest. It is astonishing, when you stop to think, I guess, of what people…
Monkman: It had been just a long tradition that there was always that separate room. It really was, up until the Fords, that that remained a tradition. Since then that Presidential Bedroom has always now been a sitting room, or like Reagan used it, as an office, too. The American public concerns itself with every detail, regardless.

Smith: My favorite is after the *Sixty Minutes* interview. I’ve seen some of the correspondence. A woman from Texas wrote and was very serious about this, as well as passionate. She said, “You don’t understand the Constitution requires you to be perfect.” The perfect mother, the perfect wife, the perfect hostess. And she was dead serious. She was taking her to task for falling short of her Constitutional requirement to be perfect in all these ways, as this particular letter writer defined perfection. And there were a lot of letters like that.

Monkman: Well, they write about everything. And Mrs. Ford did have her controversies at times. But, you never underestimate the American public, is what I say.

Smith: I’ll never forget, because I wrote his remarks, and he practiced for weeks - the 200th Anniversary Dinner.

Monkman: Oh, that was very, very moving. Did you write those remarks?

Smith: I did.

Monkman: Oh, you did? Because I think of all the remarks that were made that evening, his remarks about living in the house and so forth, were the most moving. And people still talk about that. His remarks are still used and quoted in different publications and so forth. Oh, that was very – he did that very beautifully.

Smith: Penny Circle and I were co-conspirators, because I would write the stuff and then she would make him practice. At that point he’d been out of practice in some ways – so she would make him. And we were so proud that night because he really did hit it out of the ballpark.

Monkman: He really did. His remarks were delivered with such empathy, I thought, too. He did a wonderful job. Well, that’s nice to know that, Richard. You’re
behind that. But that was very thrilling. It was a very strange evening, to say the least.

Smith: Because it was right after the election.

Monkman: And the first President Bush was there, and we didn’t know whether his son would be president or Gore. And I remember Mr. Bush was to go off to Spain or Europe or something, and he was going to leave early, but then he was delayed a while. But everybody was on pins and needles that night. But Mrs. Johnson was there. Everybody was there except for the Reagans because of his health. It was a very special evening. But President Ford’s remarks really hit the spot that night. It really did.

Smith: That’s nice to hear. Was that the last time you saw him?

Monkman: Yes.

Smith: He came back for his ninetieth birthday in the second Bush presidency, in 2003.

Monkman: That was after I’d left. I left in 2002. So I didn’t see him then. But I did see Mrs. Ford out at the library – how many years ago was that, I wonder? At the First Ladies’ Conference. Was that 2000?

Smith: Yeah, we did a program.

Monkman: And I spoke. Then we toured that exhibit, I remember that.

Smith: Yes, that’s right.

Monkman: So that was probably the last time I saw her, too, because then I had left.

Smith: I wanted to make sure. You’d written some notes and I want to make sure we’ve covered them.

Monkman: I think I’ve covered most all of them. Oh, I should mention – this is one thing that I really had to admire about Mr. Ford. This is in 1976. He was getting all these gifts from heads of state and so forth, and one of the things that the government of Italy gave him, was this little miniature of President Jefferson by Trumble.
Smith:   I’ve seen it. We borrowed it once for an exhibit.

Monkman:   We knew all those state gifts would go to the libraries, but we really wanted that miniature. The portrait gallery really wanted the miniature, too, so we did a memo to the President and he made the decision to let it stay in the White House, and we could lend it to various things. But I really appreciated that.

And I think one other thing, a gift that year, although we really didn’t want it, but we took it – a couple of things. One was, the Polish government gave this huge portrait of Kosciusko, enormous. It wasn’t a life-portrait, it was a copy of a portrait. It was so big and it was not something we could hang in the White House. But President Ford decided that it should stay in the White House, so we lent it up to the Kosciusko home I think in Philadelphia, or something.

And then there was another gift, I think the Shah of Iran – was he still around? Yeah, he was still around. It was a beautiful Persian carpet with an image of George Washington on it, which we still have in the White House. I think it’s in storage. But just to let you know that we do have some of those Bicentennial gifts that stayed in the White House.

Smith: That’s great.

Monkman: And then one thing we did. When Susan came in she wanted a particular bed for her room. She wanted a brass bed. She didn’t like any of our White House beds, so I remember we went to the curator at the Met-New York, who grew up in Muscatine, Iowa. He had sources all over the Midwest of dealers or places, so we borrowed this fantastic brass bed for Susan from this family in Iowa. And then this decorator did this gorgeous canopy for her. I remember her saying when they were ready to leave that’s the one thing she hated to leave was that bed. She loved that bed in her room. But those were just little instances of things that just in passing…

Smith: Couple of things to wrap up. Did you have any encounters with the vice president? With Nelson Rockefeller?
Monkman: No. And I remember this whole thing about he didn’t want to live in the Admiral’s house, and then brought in all those very modern things. But we really didn’t have any contact. And at that time, I don’t think he had an office in the West Wing, either.

Smith: No, he did not.

Monkman: I do remember Mr. Cheney, though, who became his Chief of Staff. He was really not an easy person around there. And I remember when Mr. Rumsfeld left and Mr. Cheney became Chief of Staff, and he wanted some paintings for his office. So I took him down into our storage room and he was very abrupt and very curt. He made his selection, but he wasn’t pleasant about it at all at that time. Although other people that worked with him didn’t have a problem. I think maybe he was busy and this just wasn’t something on the day he wanted to spend much time with. I don’t know.

Smith: I was struck when the President died and they had the service up at the Cathedral, and they went by the White House and the staff was out front. Had that been done in the past? I don’t remember. I guess you’d have to go back to Reagan.

Monkman: I do remember – when did Mr. Reagan die?


Monkman: Yeah, because I had retired by then, but I got a call from the Usher’s office saying that Mrs. Reagan had said that she would really like to have all of the residence’s staff go down along, I guess it was Constitution Ave. at 16th Street, because the cortège was going to the Capitol building. And so the Usher’s office called me and said Mrs. Reagan had requested that all former and current staff, if they wished, to go down there. It was a really hot day and I decided – I knew the crowds would be terrible – I decided not to go down there. But, that was her request. And then I think they stopped on that access with 16th – not really 16th – but the access there near the Washington Monument. And some people said that she waved to them and recognized some of the staff there.
But for them to do it spontaneously, for Mr. Ford, I think that would be unusual. Many of us received an invitation to go to the service and I saw many people there that had worked in the White House during that time. So they were, again, very generous, and very thoughtful about doing that.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Monkman: In terms of the country, he did bring this great sigh of relief to the country and I think all of us, whether we worked there or not, felt that he was a man of great integrity who kind of soothed the nation at the time it needed to be soothed. And to have a calmness and an honesty about him. So I think if he achieved nothing else, I think this sense that he brought that the country could go forward with an honest man of integrity. And we really needed that at the time. And for those of us who worked there, it was, I think, a real sense of relief that life goes on and there can be a lightness about life again and appreciation of things. It was a good time, considering all the other issues and things, but with the fall of Vietnam and all of that. That was a relief, in a sense, too, I think. It was traumatic, but it was a relief. So I think in a positive way, he’ll be remembered, don’t you?

Smith: Yeah, I do.
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Smith: Let’s start with your stories before you met the Fords. And how Vail came to be. Because it was clearly central in their lives for a very long time.

Bill Hanlon: The President started coming to Vail, I think it was 1968 that he first came, and he was an avid skier and he was an outdoorsman from his earlier days when he was a young person.

Smith: I’ve always wondered where he got the skiing bug, because we don’t think of Michigan as a ski location.

Bill Hanlon: Well, I think it was Bowie Mountain that they used to travel up to and his fondness for the outdoors and being very athletic - that was his bag. And Mrs. Ford, I don’t know. She skied, but he sure was there and made an effort to come to Colorado through a couple of friends, Ted and Nancy Kindel from Grand Rapids.

Smith: Who had already discovered Vail?

Sally Hanlon: They opened the first lodge, the Christiania.

Bill Hanlon: So, they came here in 1963. Vail opened in ’62, but there were only three buildings.

Smith: What was here before then?

Sally Hanlon: His family was in the furniture business in Grand Rapids.

Smith: Okay.

Bill Hanlon: Ted Kindel.

Smith: But in terms of the geography and the region?

Bill Hanlon: Two sheep ranches and a couple of buildings in Vail, but that was it. That’s when Vail Associates at that time purchased two ranches that I think were
about 500 acres each. They did some other things, but they were also in the process of applying for a forest service permit to access public land to operate a ski area. And, in those days, I think it was a lot easier, as you mentioned before. Could this happen again? Probably not. Land being one of the items.

Smith: In Colorado, how much of the ski industry was already developed? Was Aspen developed?

Bill Hanlon: Aspen was 1880 or 1890 and it was a mining town. And it almost became the capital of Colorado.

Smith: Really?

Bill Hanlon: Because there were many people in Aspen. Same thing with Leadville. And then Denver, because of the lower altitude, was probably chosen.

Smith: And am I right that the Fords originally had a condominium in Vail?

Bill Hanlon: They had a condominium in the Lodge of Vail, but I think it was 1968 that they came here. Again, with Ted and Nancy Kindel, who had decided to come here. They built the lodge. Then Larry Burdick, who had built in 1962 a building that is still there called the Red Lion, which is a restaurant. And Larry lived there. So that was their exposure to coming here.

Smith: Sounds like it was love at first sight. I mean, that they developed an affinity for the area almost on seeing it.

Bill Hanlon: Yeah, and I think one of the other items is their children were getting older and as you go to the university, whatever it is, this is vacation time and a place for the children to meet up with the parents for family vacation.

Smith: Later on they had the habit of spending Christmas out here. Was that something they did almost from the beginning? Because I would think the condominium would be pretty crowded for the whole family.

Bill Hanlon: Well, that was his time to have vacation, too, from the House of Representatives.
Sally Hanlon: When he became the president, that’s when they rented the Bass House. Dick Bass was one of the original investors in Vail. And they always gave the Fords that house. That’s where they had every Christmas and summer.

Bill Hanlon: And that became the summer White House.

Smith: Oh, okay. Now, how did your paths cross?

Bill Hanlon: I guess our first exposure was through Bob.

Sally Hanlon: Bob Barrett. Have you met Bob Barrett?

Bill Hanlon: Yeah, but I guess he came when the President was at that time Vice President, and we were up at a function for something up at the top of the mountain. And that’s when Bob Barrett came over and introduced himself and we said, “Well, we’re Bill and Sally Hanlon and we live in town,” and all that. And that was at that function. And then it was the next summer…

Sally Hanlon: When Agnew resigned and then Nixon resigned.

Bill Hanlon: Yeah, and Nixon resigned. The President came to Vail.

Smith: That must have been somewhat unsettling, but also a big deal.

Bill Hanlon: It was a big deal to see the entourage of people coming in before for security for everything. And he had met us and it was a little nucleus that Bob wanted him to meet - some of the local guys - and we were considered some of the local guys. And when President and Mrs. Ford came, he wanted someone to present Mrs. Ford with some flowers in a very traditional way of welcoming the First Lady. And he called Sally and we had two children who were then four and five, to go up to the Bass House, which is a couple of hundred yards from where we lived in town. The town was a lot smaller then. And our children were there and we dressed them up in finery so they looked presentable for four and five year old children. Then the limousine and the security were there and we walked the children over and they had their flowers with them and a car came in at the presentation. The dog was there,
the President’s dog Liberty, and it was good. We took some pictures and we still have them. That’s how we met them. And, I don’t know, there was just a little group of about twenty people.

Sally Hanlon: And that’s the summer, too, that Bob called and asked them if we’d have them for dinner. He said, “Would you host a dinner for the Fords?” And we said, “Sure.” We lived in a small condominium, so we said, “Well, sure.” And that’s how we really started becoming friends.

Smith: Was there anything about them that surprised you? People talk about how unspoiled they seemed to be, how natural and accessible. Was that an impression that you had?

Sally Hanlon: Absolutely. And people would ask them, “What do you talk about?” And I would say, “The same thing we talk to you about.” It was nothing different.

Bill Hanlon: I think that was the surprising factor, because when you first meet him, you’re meeting the 38th president. There were only 38 people before him holding that office and we were there. Nervous? Sure. But it was quite an honor. I mean, I grew up in Boston. Sally grew up in Boston. I worked for public utilities before coming to Vail. Sally was a school teacher in Newton, Massachusetts. We got married and then came out here and it was fine. We had two children and then all of a sudden we were asked to have our children present flowers to the First Lady of the United States.

Smith: Of course, the other side of the coin was they had never expected to be in those roles.

Bill Hanlon: They were mainly just regular people. And the fun thing is, what do you talk about? As Sally said, you talk about anything that was in the paper that day or the current events. But they were just very quiet people.

Smith: Talk about families – kids - as you got better acquainted?

Bill Hanlon: He was always concerned about, you know, the outdoors because he loved golf. And he loved politics. He was in it for forty some odd years.
Smith: The whole Chevy Chase bit, the notion that this guy, who really was a naturally gifted athlete, was a stumbler, bumbler…the whole caricature of Ford. Was that something that he ever discussed?

Sally Hanlon: He would laugh about it. You know, when he would hit the golf ball into a crowd, he’d just make fun of himself and laugh about it. But the press treated him so poorly in that regard. I mean, he was anything but a bumbling athlete.

Smith: Well, it’s interesting, because when he was on the ski slopes, waiting for the lift or actually on the slopes, there were always people who were waving, who wanted to get his attention. There were all sorts of distractions that any other skier would never confront.

Sally Hanlon: Would never have. But I think most of the Vail people, a lot of people, left him alone. People would come into the store and ask where the Ford house was, but no one would ever tell them because we didn’t want them to be driving by that house every day. So I think it was pretty low-key.

Bill Hanlon: That was part of the low-key bit, but if you’re the President of the United States and you fall skiing and there’s someone around, it’s going to make a newspaper.

Sally Hanlon: And a lot of people thought that he shouldn’t ski. That it’s a dangerous sport and as president he shouldn’t be out there. Not Vail people, but the nation.

Bill Hanlon: But he just enjoyed it. And the operating company at Vail Associates at the time - I mean, to have a president skiing on your area. It wasn’t a crowded ski run that he was on. They needed the security and they got it. It was wonderful. And you mentioned Larry Buendorf. Larry was one of the skiers with him all the time. Dale Underlick. Did you know Dale?

Smith: No.

Bill Hanlon: Larry was the Secret Service president(?), Dale was the head of the detail. And he’s in Denver. He’s a retired person. They were great friends, too.

Smith: Did you see much of the kids? Were they up here much?
Sally Hanlon: Susan was here a lot more than the others. Susan and Steve. Susan was dating someone in Vail at the time in the summers.

Smith: Was she a skier?

Sally Hanlon: Mhmm. And then as she got older and got married, our Meg used to babysit for Susan, because they were close.

Bill Hanlon: But it was fun and exciting to be on a first name basis.

Smith: Were there places in Vail that were their favorites? Things to do, places to go, restaurants? Were there habits they had here that you could describe?

Sally Hanlon: They would go to almost any restaurant. They went to Gramshammer’s a lot because they were very close to Pepe and Sheika. They would go to the Left Bank a lot. But people pretty much left them alone when they were in a restaurant.

Bill Hanlon: It was kind of fun, when they came here and after he was no longer President, they were here from the eighth of June until the end of September. And they were up here and they had a lot of visiting dignitaries.

Sally Hanlon: They had the World Forum.

Bill Hanlon: And the Jerry Ford Golf Invitational, also. So there was always somebody in and he was very active on boards.

Sally Hanlon: And he travelled a lot.

Bill Hanlon: And he travelled a lot, but when he came into town, Sally and Betty were very close, so there was “Let’s have dinner next week.”

Smith: We get a sense of what his daily routine was like. What about Mrs. Ford’s?

Sally Hanlon: She had a lot of close friends and she had a group of friends from Denver that she remained very close with that helped her with starting the Betty Ford Center. And people like that would come to visit. She was very close to her interior decorator, the one that did her house in Beaver Creek. She would just call and say, “So and so is coming to town. Do you want to lunch with us?” And it was funny, until this day, I have two voicemails at home that I just
can’t erase. And one of them was Jerry’s birthday a couple of years ago. His birthday’s in July and we joined them for dinner. I was out of town, but we joined them for dinner at the Left Bank and I said, “I should erase that, but I just can’t do it.”

Smith: Was that the last summer?

Sally Hanlon: I think it was.

Smith: That was the summer everyone told them, including the doctors, “You shouldn’t be doing this.” The altitude and all that. And she said to me, “We’ve had the quantity in life. We want the quality of life.” You can understand that being here, but those last couple of summers must have been pretty rough.

Bill Hanlon: They were, because of the altitude. On all people the altitude is going to affect them.

Sally Hanlon: But that summer, someone started a group, a Friday lunch men’s group. And you had President Ford as your guest that summer and he had trouble breathing and it was at Gramshammer’s on the porch. And he was embarrassed.

Bill Hanlon: Yeah, because he wasn’t moving and going from the car to the table that we had, there were probably ten guys. But he had to walk maybe 30 yards and in that time he had to stop, and the altitude got to him. He was a little dizzy and one of the Secret Service guys came over and we sat down in a chair.

Smith: Did you sense he was very proud? You’d never see him in a wheelchair.

Sally Hanlon: No. No cane.

Smith: No cane.

Bill Hanlon: But Mrs. Ford was a very, very active lady and when you see the Betty Ford Alpine Garden, it’s beautiful. People go out there and enjoy her little park.

Sally Hanlon: And they went to all the Bravo concerts. They were out every night.

Smith: Really?
Sally Hanlon: Mhmm.

Smith: Well, we’ve been told that they were very visible, very involved.

Sally Hanlon: Mhmm.

Bill Hanlon: But Vail is a funny place and whether it was Jack Nicklaus walking down the street or Mrs. Ford or the President of the United States, people would not bother them. So they felt very, very comfortable and right now in the big city you can’t do things like that. But here they could and they felt very, very comfortable. They didn’t have to come in the side entrance to go to the Gerald Ford Amphitheater or anyplace. They could just walk down the street.

Smith: That’s interesting because I think one of the banes of existence were the autograph seekers, particularly, the professionals who were out there.

Sally Hanlon: Right.

Smith: But I take it that he didn’t have that as much to deal with in a setting like this.

Sally Hanlon: I don’t think so.

Bill Hanlon: We’ve got a little pile of things. We’ve got some great notes and thank yous and this and that. But yeah, he was always responsive and it was great to be with him.

Sally Hanlon: And all those years, the Firestones lived next to them and Nikki Firestone and Betty were very close, so they did a lot together.

Smith: And clearly, the Betty Ford Center is the Betty Ford Center, but it’s also the Leonard Firestone Center.

Bill Hanlon: They were great friends and when Mrs. Ford decided to do that, Leonard jumped in 100%.

Smith: There are people who say that she saved his life.

Bill Hanlon: That’s right.

Sally Hanlon: He used to say that.
Bill Hanlon: He told me that, and I’m an alcoholic, and he was.

Smith: One of the things that’s fascinating about President Ford – most of us, clichés become clichés for a reason, most of us tend to become a little more conservative as we get older. Maybe we have more to conserve. And fiscally, he was never anything but a tight-fisted traditional conservative. But on a lot of the social issues, whether it was abortion or gay rights or whatever, he seemed to be much more accepting, much less judgmental, for lack of a better word, than some ‘social conservatives’. And was that related in any way to the alcoholism? To understanding that good people have weaknesses?

Bill Hanlon: Well, you said that he was kind of conservative. In New England, we used to call that snug as bark to a tree. That’s tight.

Smith: He didn’t tip generously on the golf course, I’m told.

Sally Hanlon: He would check every bill at dinner.

Bill Hanlon: Yeah, he did. He did like to pay his fair share.

Smith: He was, like lots of people, a child of the Depression and really bore that mark.

Sally Hanlon: Right. And can’t stand to see any waste. But Bill always had a football bet with him.

Bill Hanlon: Yeah, we used to bet more than any game was when Michigan played Notre Dame. And I always used to give him a little bit of jazz, you know, “You get these big rough kids from Michigan playing those nice Catholic kids from Notre Dame who were just going to school and trying to maintain a great grade point average so they could get into the seminary.” “Now, don’t start that business.” He was a very easy person to talk to being the 38th president. One thing I did like, I did like to play golf. Now I’m not a great golfer, but it was very easy to play with him. And we would talk about things. But before I went out on the golf course with him, I would, always at the first tee, wherever we played, whether it was Vail, Arrowhead or Beaver Creek, it didn’t matter, but there was usually he and I and two other people. And I always made a point that I myself would walk away and around the first tee,
you know, everybody that’s there is out looking at President Ford and they’re certainly not looking at the other three people of the foursome. I would always walk away and then get in a good position to say, “I’ll be right back. Don’t forget Mr. President, bring your wallet.” And he’d say, “There you go.” And when we left the tee box, he would say, “At least you’re consistent.” And I would say, “Yeah, but the people like it.” You know, they always wanted to see him. And he was a good golfer. He hit that golf ball a long way.

Smith: Did he ever get a hole-in-one? Did he ever mention that?

Bill Hanlon: I don’t know. I’m sure he got a lot of gimmes.

Smith: Well, now that brings up the somewhat famous story about Bill Clinton.

Bill Hanlon: When they were playing golf.

Smith: Speaking of gimmes.

Sally Hanlon: Uh huh.

Smith: Of flexible rules.

Bill Hanlon: Uh huh.

Smith: Was it Nicklaus or Palmer that they were playing with?

Sally Hanlon: He played with Nicklaus a lot and I think that’s who it was that day.

Bill Hanlon: Yeah.

Smith: Then I think it was Nicklaus who had the great comeback when Clinton said, “Let's do this again tomorrow.” And Nicklaus said, “Okay, but you have to play by the rules.”

Bill Hanlon: We did have a lot of fun. I tried to call Mrs. Ford July 1st. The Fourth of July was a big thing - that’s Americana days. But I would always call on President’s Day and leave messages. She’s out in Palm Springs and she gets the message that I called and we talk every once in awhile.

Smith: Do you really?
Bill Hanlon: Yeah.

Smith: That’s interesting because I don’t think she’s ever gotten over losing him.

Sally Hanlon: I don’t think so.

Bill Hanlon: They were a good team. They were good buddies.

Smith: It’s interesting you put it that way. They hadn’t been in the public eye for while, but people were maybe reminded, or some learned for the first time, of just how close that marriage was. Everyone knows about Ronnie and Nancy it was a revelation, I think, to see how close the Fords were.

Bill Hanlon: They were big _______________ than I was. I mean I’ve got some great memories.

Smith: Did you ever see his temper?

Bill Hanlon: I heard a few GD’s.

Smith: Was that on the golf course?

Bill Hanlon: Yeah, but that was just when he and I were there.

Smith: Never wrapped a club around a tree or anything?

Bill Hanlon: No. He did at himself if he did a bad shot. Some of the things we were talking about - whether it was everyday events or something - there were a few GDs or something, but he was always just a gentleman. And that’s what everybody loved. And walking down the street with them or in a restaurant or something, people did respect him. But there was always somebody yelling in the background “Hey, Mr. President!” It was funny, one night I asked him if I could tell a story because I didn’t know if I would offend anyone.

We were out at a function in the Vail Village Inn and there were probably 60-70 people and we’re all in one room. Then came 10 o’clock and the function was over and it was a fundraiser for drama(?) or one of the events here. And there were two Secret Service people, one in the car and one inside the room. Sometimes they had two, sometimes three when they went out to events. But this night at the Vail Village Inn, it was in the dining room. And next to the
dining room in the bar, there were about 15 people from the University of Michigan. And it was about 10 o’clock at night and they were hooting and hollering and they found out President Ford was there in the next room. And finally 10 o’clock came and everybody’s getting up. When he was talking to his wife, it was “Betty”, when he was getting ready to go, he said, “Mrs. Ford, I think it’s time to go.” And so the Secret Service looked around and I was near him and he said, “Bill, when we go by that door with all those University of Michigan people, can you walk in front of the President (on the outside of him) between him and those people who I think have had too much to drink because they all want to shake his hand?” So, I had three minutes of glory with the Secret Service as President Ford’s wingman.

Smith: They didn’t get the chance to shake his hand?

Bill Hanlon: No, President Ford was between the two of us and we had a little barrier there and he waved and said “Thank you” because they were singing the Michigan fight song. And it was fun. And those are the things that I’ll always remember. The night we went to a concert at the Gerald Ford Amphitheater and Willy Nelson was there. Sally and I and our children had gone to dinner with them and we drove out in the car to the Amphitheater and Willy Nelson was there. To get acknowledged and pointing to the presidential seats, I mean, we got some great people. We went to the dedication of the library and the rededication of the library.

Smith: That was a cold day.

Sally Hanlon: That was a cold day!

Smith: It was amazing to see Lady Bird. I mean, Caroline was inside, but there was Lady Bird outside with Barbara Bush kind of mothering her.

Bill Hanlon: The memories of the gentleness of both of them and they both were gentle people.

Smith: One thing people didn’t fully realize, because they didn’t proverbially wear it on their sleeves, and that was the importance of faith in their [the Fords] lives.

Sally Hanlon: Absolutely.
Smith: People think of Jimmy Carter and they think of born-again Christianity and they think of the Reagans and I’m pretty sure the Agnews, but the Fords really didn’t.

Sally Hanlon: They really did. It was automatic. It wasn’t for the press.

Bill Hanlon: I think you could see that in their adoring of the children and the children adoring them. They had a nice, tight relationship.

Sally Hanlon: They really were close.

Smith: And they enjoyed grandparenting?

Sally Hanlon: Oh, very much so. Very much so. But, as Betty used to say, like we all say, “It’s wonderful to see them all come at Christmas, but it’s wonderful to kiss them all goodbye.” But the grandkids were all pretty close.

Smith: Obviously he had a sense of humor, but he couldn’t tell a joke. He would laugh at someone else’s joke?

Bill Hanlon: He would appreciate it. Another thing, with Mrs. Ford, you could tell about the allergy.

Sally Hanlon: When we first met them, the second or so time they came for dinner, we invited a number of friends and we spent a lot of time in New England, so we decided we would have a lobster dinner, not knowing she’s dreadfully allergic to shellfish. So, when the Secret Service told me that the day of the dinner, we just had steak cooked at the same time for her. You’ll probably be interviewing Rod Slifer, but he and his wife were at this dinner and he cracked open a piece of lobster to break the shell and he squirted Betty Ford all over the face with lobster juice and he grabbed his napkin and he kept trying to wipe her face. We all thought that was pretty funny that the one person who’s allergic is the one he hits.

Smith: Let me ask you something that among those who know them well is well-known - she had a much more ribald sense of humor.

Sally Hanlon: Oh, very, very funny. Very funny. You couldn’t say much about that in front of him because he was infuriated at that nonsense, that there was no respect
Bill and Sally Hanlon  June 23, 2010

for the office. In a private conversation with just the four of us, he would say, “It’s disgraceful. It’s embarrassing.” So that was just a subject that none of us talked about, but you could talk about it to Betty and she’d be funny about it.

Bill Hanlon:  He was disappointed in him.

Smith:  I heard him say Clinton had such talent. He’d say, “If there’s one thing I’d do over in life, I would’ve give much more attention to public communications.” And he saw in Clinton someone who could do it effortlessly.

Sally Hanlon:  A master.

Smith:  Absolutely. And I think he actually used to say “He could sell refrigerators to the Eskimos,” or something like that. So he had great respect for Clinton’s gifts, which made him all the more disappointed. That, you know, you never have the perfect package.

Sally Hanlon:  And he would say things like, “I feel badly for him because it’s an illness with him.” You know, he had compassion about it even though he was angry.

Smith:  That’s interesting. That goes back again to this notion whether perhaps living with and learning about alcoholism broadened his perspective.

Bill Hanlon:  That it’s a disease just as other addictions are. I’d been out visiting him and I’d played, I think, the first twelve Betty Ford Golf Invitations out of Palm Springs Easter weekend. And I would go over just because I was there for three days or something. I’d go over and see some of the people that I knew at the Betty Ford Center who I met golfing and all. And I would just hang around for awhile and that’s a complex that she was so proud of. And he was proud of her doing it. And their mutual friend Leonard was the financial force behind it. They just made it happen.

Smith:  They’d have an annual alumni weekend and you’d see the President cooking hot dogs. He was one of the troops. Before the intervention took place, you obviously had established a friendship. Did you know? Was it visible?

Bill Hanlon:  No, it wasn’t obvious to me.
Sally Hanlon: No, because we were all smoking and drinking, so it was just part of the group. And she was never stumbling, falling down. I mean, she was always composed.

Bill Hanlon: And she pointed out in her book, she made sure she did the packing if they were going on a trip.

Sally Hanlon: She also would say of her days in Washington, “We always would have a drink before we went out just to get ready to go out to drink,” which is true.

Smith: It’s interesting. We’ve talked to so many people, it’s hard to imagine, but 40 years ago, it was a totally different culture. People just drank a lot more.

Sally Hanlon: And nobody drank wine, they drank Martinis and Manhattans and it was just different.

Bill Hanlon: And whisky, they drank lots of whisky. They didn’t drink that wine. There wasn’t enough wine around then.

Smith: My sense was his health was really remarkably good up until about his ninetieth birthday. One of the things that must’ve been really difficult for him was when the doctors said you have to cut out the travel. And travel for him was—

Sally Hanlon: That was his life.

Smith: Yeah.

Sally Hanlon: And he loved speaking at a lot of those. I mean he was an invited speaker many times and people loved having him and he loved doing it.

Smith: Yeah.

Bill Hanlon: It was kind of hard to see in the last few years that he used to come to Vail, to see him out for lunch or out for dinner. And then when he’d get up from the table, he would have to stand there a second to get a breath and to make sure his equilibrium was fine.

Smith: Did he talk about it at all?
Sally Hanlon: She did. He didn’t.

Smith: About the difficulties of aging? I mean, one of the granddaughters said to me that she said, “This getting older is not easy.” Something like that.

Sally Hanlon: She’d say things like, “It’s not for the faint of heart.”

Bill Hanlon: But he had to stop skiing because it’s kind of an age thing. Golf is different, but I think he always maintained fitness.

Sally Hanlon: Well, he swam every day.

Bill Hanlon: He swam every day and it was important for him to watch his weight and to maintain a level of athletic ability.

Smith: And he was a workaholic, even up here. I mean, the mail, he never stopped being a congressman in the sense that the mail—

Sally Hanlon: And he was the one in the last years who always wrote the thank you notes. It was always his writing.

Smith: Well, it was funny. I know the staff in Rancho Mirage and I assume up here, Saturdays, you worked. And Penny’s story was that he’d work Sunday if he could’ve gotten them to. So, after 9/11 and the anthrax scare, they had to explain to him why he wasn’t getting Saturday mail. Well, he wasn’t about to accept that. They had members of the staff put on those costumes and go through the mail so he could have his Saturday mail.

Sally Hanlon: That’s interesting.

Smith: I mean, I sensed he was very self-disciplined, for example, the fact that when she stopped drinking, he stopped drinking. When he wanted Susan to stop smoking, he stopped smoking.

Bill Hanlon: Helping the person that he wanted to help was by doing the same thing himself.

Smith: One of the most poignant stories we have is from a woman, who was their cook. And she’d been through the Betty Ford Center. She’d never been in a plane and had never seen snow. And they brought her up here and he took her
by the hand to ski school, made sure they got her ski clothes, the whole thing. And at one point, she fell off the wagon while she was working for them she offered to resign and, of course, Mrs. Ford said, “No way.” She talks about how she learned discipline and having a sense of purpose, and how he in a very quiet kind of way was the teacher. She didn’t want to get on the plane, so he got the pilot of the plane and they walked all around the plane and explained the engines and everything else. Just remarkably kind.

Sally Hanlon: Yeah, exactly.

Bill Hanlon: One time, they were at the Bass House and a cold weather snap came through. This was Christmas week. And on Christmas day, the Bass House lost all the heat in the boiler. Now, this is getting awful cold when dropping from 72 down to 60. The person who did the repairs was a guy by the name of Bill Burnett, Burnett Plumbing and Heating. Bill had been born and raised in Mintum and if you needed something done, he was the one who watched out for the Bass House. Bill was kind of a little historian on the town of Mintum and he wrote a little book and in the book he told the story and he told it to me. But he got a call on Christmas morning at 10 o’clock that the Bass House was out of heat and so he said, “I knew I’d be out there for a few minutes, so I packed my sandwich and thermos of coffee. And I went out there and we looked and I found out what the problem was going to be, but it would take three or four hours to fix it. So President Ford came down. I explained what we were going to do and that it’d be three or four hours. ‘So, while my son goes down and gets the part, I’ll have lunch.’ He was going to have lunch in the garage. And President Ford brought him over to a little room and President Ford went upstairs to the kitchen and he got a sandwich and a cup of coffee and he came down and sat with Bill Burnett, the plumbing and heating guy, and they spent an hour Christmas Day just shooting the breeze and waiting for the part to arrive. He said, “There I was sitting in the little room off the garage with the President of the United States.” He said, “Not bad for a kid from Mintum.”

Smith: It’s a great story and it reinforces what we’ve been told. The Secret Service agents were very appreciative because the Fords would go out of their way to
be sure that they didn’t have events on Christmas day so the agents could have the holiday themselves. Which is pretty thoughtful.

Sally Hanlon: It really is.

Bill Hanlon: Very thoughtful.

Smith: Do you miss him?

Bill Hanlon: Yeah.

Sally Hanlon: Yeah, you do.

Smith: I mean, does the community, because they must have become such a part of the local scene?

Sally Hanlon: And so much has been renamed in their honor. You do miss them. You miss seeing them around.

Bill Hanlon: Like the Gerald Ford Golf Tournament, that was an event that went on for 20 years. The people that used to come to Vail, I mean, Bob Hope came 19 of the 20 years. The event was for 20 years. He was here 19 of the 20 years and the one year he missed, he was over with the USO. So, the nucleus of people that we used to have coming here was outstanding and it was always an event for everybody in the tournament.

Sally Hanlon: Even today, as frail as Betty is, like a few weeks ago, she asks by name “How is so and so doing?”

Smith: Really alert?

Sally Hanlon: And we would occasionally - and Sheika does this all the time - would send her pictures of what’s going on in Vail. “You wouldn’t believe the construction.” And she’s still very alert.

Smith: So, I assume there was never any doubt about selling the house. I mean, the house was put on the market even when he was still alive, wasn’t he? Toward the very end of his life?
Sally Hanlon:  No, I think it was right at the end because I saw Susan and I said, “Are you coming to Vail with the kids?” and she said, “I’m not sure, because we really don’t have a place to stay anymore.” And I said, “We always can find you a place to stay. That’s not an issue.” But she came for the ski classic that year with a friend. Their husbands didn’t come. And they really haven’t come much since that. And as she said, skiing is expensive for Mike and his family, for any of them. So, I think it was two summers ago Betty spent the summer in New Mexico. No, she was going to be in San Diego to be with Jack, but then I think she went to Susan’s because it was just a cooler climate. In New Mexico?


Smith:  I think you told me the last time you saw him. Do you remember?

Bill Hanlon:  That was at our lunch that we had.

Sally Hanlon:  Yeah. They didn’t stay through all of September that summer. They left earlier.

Bill Hanlon:  He just wasn’t feeling good and on the advice of our doctors here that told him “You’d better get out of here and get to a lower altitude.”

Smith:  Were you surprised by the amount of reaction when he died? Because he’d been out of the public eye for awhile. And it seemed to build as the week went on.

Sally Hanlon:  Yeah, Susan and I’ve said and people have remarked about it. It was so kind to him when he was there, all those wonderful, glorious things. It’s a shame they didn’t write and say those things when he could appreciate it. That was hard for me.

Smith:  But the public outpouring.

Sally Hanlon:  And the stamina that she had to go through those days.

Bill Hanlon:  Well, that was a long process. We went to Palm Springs and then we went to the National Cathedral in Washington and those events were –
Smith: Demanding, physically as well as emotionally.

Bill Hanlon: Demanding.

Sally Hanlon: And then to go to Grand Rapids after that, too.

Smith: At the very end, because I’d been with ABC during the first part of the week and with the family at the second part. We’d been told at the beginning at Saint Margaret’s, “Don’t be surprised if you see her in a wheelchair.” And, of course, we never did. And then again, in Grand Rapids, briefly, she got up with Steve and walked all that way. And the next week someone in the desert commented on that and expressed admiration for her ability to do that and she said, “Well, that’s what my husband would’ve wanted.”

Sally Hanlon: He was so considerate that he wouldn’t die on Christmas day. I always said we’d say that about the Mash, that the group the doctors kept somebody alive through Christmas day so his family wouldn’t have that to remember every Christmas.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered? I realize it’s colored by your own experiences and all that.

Bill Hanlon: Well, all the years that he was in the House of Representatives, I think he was honorable and everybody liked him. You know, today there’s the splitting of parties.

Sally Hanlon: And the scandals surrounding everybody.

Bill Hanlon: And he and Tip O’Neill were great friends. They just liked each other. And, yeah, one was a Republican and one was a Democrat, but they had to work together. They had to work together to accomplish things. And I think that he should be remembered as a person who went in there under very tough situations. The Nixon resignation and the pardon, those were very, very controversial. And that’s why he should be remembered as the leader of free world. His book was labeled correctly, A Time to Heal. And he had to do it. He had to do a lot of things, but he had to run the free world also at the same time. He will always be remembered as a quiet man and a quiet President. But the people that I think got to know him loved him.
Smith: How do you think she should be remembered?

Sally Hanlon: I think for her honesty, her openness whether it was with family conflicts or the alcoholism or whatever, the breast cancer, I mean, nothing was behind closed doors. Whenever she was interviewed on the TV talk shows, she just said it like it was.

Smith: We talked about the change of attitude about alcohol, but it’s hard for people to appreciate how closeted a subject breast cancer was 35 years ago. A, it was regarded as a death sentence and, B, it engendered almost a sense of shame. People didn’t talk about it. And she almost singlehandedly transformed that.

Sally Hanlon: And it was shortly after that - she and Happy Rockefeller were pretty friendly - that Happy was able to announce that she too had it.

Smith: I’ve been working for ten years on a suitably epic biography of Nelson Rockefeller and it’s a huge and very colorful subject.

Sally Hanlon: Well, she one time called, maybe a Tuesday, and said, “Are you and Bill available tomorrow night for dinner?” And I said, “Well, I think so. Why?” And she said, “Well, Happy is coming in with her two boys,” and they were thirteen and sixteen. And she said, “I don’t know how to talk to a thirteen year old, so maybe you and Bill could join us for dinner.” Which we did. We went to Eagle Vail to Whisky Creek Golf Club, the restaurant at Eagle-Vail Golf Course. But President Ford called in the middle of the afternoon and I was in the travel business at the time and he called and asked if I could come over to the house because Happy’s plane was delayed and he wanted to know how he could get information on where she was in the air and what time she’d be landing. So, he just called the Stapleton airport and said, “This is President Ford and I want to know…” And I said, “That’s what I should do. When I want information, I should call and just say, ‘I’m Betty Ford and I’d like to know…”” Well, that night at dinner. It was very interesting, it was fun. There was as many security guards and Secret Service as there were just the ten of us at dinner. And it was a fun dinner. I mean, the Rockefeller kids were just so terrific and sharp as could be. And we were talking and, at one point, I think it was the youngest one that said, “We should take down the
Statue of Liberty if we don’t mean that.” You know, that we welcome your tired, your hungry, your poor, and that’s no longer the case. And he was fascinating to talk to. And my daughter at the time was about eleven. They weren’t invited to the dinner. But I came home and I said, “Meg, I found him.”

Smith: That’s Mark and he’s every bit as impressive as an adult as he was a kid.

Sally Hanlon: As he was at thirteen.

Smith: Obviously, Happy did a great job at raising those boys.

Listen. I can’t thank you enough. This has been great fun and I’ve learned a lot. And hopefully it was nothing painful for you.

Sally Hanlon: It’s been fascinating.

Bill Hanlon: It’s an honor to be asked to do this because we loved both of them and their family and their values and the work they did for America and for Vail and for the people that they’ve influenced.

Smith: Well, thank you for helping us.
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Smith: Thanks for doing this, we really appreciate it. You came to Congress from Houston, from what had been George Bush’s old seat.

Archer: That’s correct.

Smith: Is it safe to say he was perceived to be a moderate conservative to moderate even at that time?

Archer: Yes.

Smith: Now, you were a rock-ribbed Republican particularly on fiscal matters.

Archer: Yes.

Smith: And yet you were in the House long enough to see in some way conservatism redefined, particularly when supply-side economics came in. I sense Gerald Ford was much more of a traditionalist, a fiscally austere conservative. Was there a generational change that took place? How did you deal with the new conservatism?

Archer: Initially, there was not that division. And that only came later on when Reagan became president and Jack Kemp was very instrumental in pushing supply-side economics. In fact, Jack and I had a lot of debates on that, personal debates, because he called me a traditionalist. In fact, he said I just had to move ahead into the new world and deficits didn’t matter. And I said, “No, I think deficits do matter.” And we had some very interesting debates about that. We were very close friends because we came in as freshmen in the same class.

I don’t know if anybody has mentioned the Chowder & Marching Club in the interviews with you, but Jack and I were the two freshmen who were invited to join the Chowder & Marching Club in 1971, and it became a very significant part of my life. Jerry Ford was one of the early members and was
the leading member at the time that I joined. Well, he wasn’t leading member, because Richard Nixon was the charter member of Chowder & Marching and he was president at that time so he would hold a meeting once a year in the White House, which was the way the club worked. And I got to know Ford better than I would otherwise because of Chowder & Marching, [which] also had a lot to do with Jack Kemp and I becoming very good friends.

Smith: What was the purpose of the Chowder & Marching Club? Was it ideological in any way?

Archer: Well, in a sense it was, it was all Republicans, but as the history was explained to me, after World War II there were a number of members who ran for Congress and were elected and fifteen of them who were Republicans decided that they would fight a bill that was being sponsored to give veterans a cash bonus. Since they were veterans, they felt politically they could get away with opposing it. They took the position that we served our country because of our patriotic duty and we don’t want somebody to think they’re abandoning us all by giving us sort of a cash bonus. They were able to defeat that very popular proposal by a few votes, but in the process of getting organized to work against it, they got together socially and they met a number of times and they got to know each other better and when it was all over, they said, “We should keep this group together.”

No one knows why they picked Chowder & Marching as a name for the club and that’s been searched and researched and no one’s ever been able to determine. But in any event, it became a nucleus - that bill’s support - for each of its members. I don’t think I would’ve been able to get on the Ways & Means Committee except for the help of members of the Chowder & Marching Club within the process. And I benefited tremendously as a new freshman to be immediately meeting with Jerry Ford whom I held in awe coming into the Congress.

He was Minority Leader and highly respected by everyone, and it gave me an opportunity to get to know him personally by meeting every Wednesday afternoon. And in addition, we would have social gatherings several times a
year when we would have our wives with us and we would meet somewhere off of the Hill and that enabled me to get to know Betty Ford, too.

Smith: Let me ask you. Is that largely absent today, that kind of socializing? I mean, certainly between the parties, it seems to be.

Archer: Well, unfortunately, the Chowder & Marching Club no longer has the social gatherings. There are a number of us who think it would be good to reinstate them, but part of the problem is that it costs money and in those days, the ethics rules did not have the same restrictions as to how you could spend, whether it was outside your campaign fund or what. So it just hasn’t happened in the last number of years.

What we do continue to do, however, is every five years, we have a gala to celebrate the beginning of the club. At one of our galas, we actually had four Presidents that attended. This year, we will have one in June, our five years is up, and if Jerry Ford were still alive, he would be there, I’m sure, because he was very, very good about coming. But we have a beautiful event. We will have it this year in Statuary Hall in the Capitol, a seated dinner and everyone gets dressed up in tuxes.

So, the Chowder & Marching Club was not philosophically dictated in the sense of any views that might exist now within the Republican Party. Nobody really talked much about philosophy in those days and the social issues had not emerged as a dividing mark. There was the issue of are you a Rockefeller Republican or are you a Goldwater Republican. But that never interfered.

Smith: That’s fascinating. Let me ask you very quickly. Had you met Ford before you came to Congress?

Archer: No, I had not. I, of course, knew [of] him, but I had not met him.

Smith: When you met him and got to know him, was there anything that surprised you?

Archer: I think because I had him up on a pedestal as a Leader of my party in Congress, I was a little bit surprised that he was so down to earth and so natural with no arrogance and no affected airs at all. And I think that was a
little bit of a surprise. Easily accessible, would talk to you openly about anything and I really appreciated that.

Smith: That may answer one of my next questions. What were his strengths as a party Leader?

Archer: At that time, I would say that his strengths were that people knew how genuine he was. He was not in any way artificial. He was not politically driven, per say, in just trying to find some political opening. He was a man’s man. He got along well, and that’s not to say that he didn’t get along well with the few women that were in the Congress, I think there were only two Republican women at that time, but you just felt very comfortable with him. He’d pull out his pipe and smoke it and talk to you in a very down to earth way. And people respected him because he respected them. He respected every one of the members and spoke to them on their level and I think it was that mutual respect that really made him the Leader that he was.

Smith: And he obviously got along with the Democrats.

Archer: Yes, he did. He did. But it was a different environment then, too, very different than it is now.

Smith: Describe the differences.

Archer: There’s been a lot of talk about how bipartisan it was at that time. And it was far more bipartisan, but what people forget is that there were forty or more Democrats who were as conservative as Republicans from a philosophy standpoint. So it was very easy to work across the aisle with those Democrats who shared your same philosophy. That is not true today.

Smith: Isn’t it also true, though perhaps more in the Senate than the House, but both parties also had conservative and liberal wings. I mean, there were Republicans in the Northeast, some in the industrial Midwest, who were largely liberal by the standards.

Archer: By Goldwater standards.

Smith: Yes, they were Rockefeller Republicans.
Archer: But not by the standards of what is a liberal Democrat. And so, particularly on fiscal issues, there was great unity within the Republican Party. And George Bush, for example, who was considered by some of the Goldwater Republicans to be too moderate, was as tough as anybody on fiscal affairs, and that came to the surface when he became president.

Smith: So Ford’s job was not complicated by having to herd cats, ideologically.

Archer: It was much easier then than it is now. And you did not have the social issues emerging that become so frictional. Yes, he had an easier time and because of the philosophical harmony with so many Democrats, it was easy for him to reach across the aisle. And, what happened, too, was that even for those Democrats who are not what I would call conservatives, there were so many of them, whoever the Speaker was, whoever the leader of the Democrats was, he knew that he could not dismiss them totally, and therefore he was more inclined to work with Republicans and to work with Jerry Ford and it worked out fairly well.

Smith: It’s always been asserted that his real goal in life was to be Speaker. Did he ever talk about that?

Archer: No, I never talked to him about that, but clearly that would’ve been his goal, to be Speaker. I don’t think his goal was ever to become president. I don’t think he would’ve said, “Gee, I’m gearing all of what I do to become president of the United States.” I suspect that it was quite a surprise to him when he was picked to be vice president.

Smith: The story is told that, again to illustrate just how different things were in those days, he and Hale Boggs used to debate one another down at the National Press Club and they would drive down to the club and decide on the way what they were going to debate. Get down to the club, do their debate, they’d go have lunch or a drink and go back to the Hill. You really can’t imagine that happening today.

Archer: I don’t see that happening today, no. I really don’t. As I mentioned earlier, the whole environment then was so different and then you also did not have
the advent of money to the degree that you do today. And I think that is pernicious to the system.

Smith: And, I imagine, a very different media environment. Now you have cable TV which is all about conflicts. Basically it’s a food fight 24 hours a day. And the internet, which for all of its useful purposes, has also in many ways coarsened political discourse, rumor mongering and the like. None of that existed. I mean, it sounds like a much more civilized way to do business.

Archer: Well, it was, but again, philosophically, even beyond fiscal affairs, there was a lot more harmony. Scoop Jackson, Democratic senator from the state of Washington, was liberal on fiscal matters and liberal on more domestic matters, but, boy, when it got to foreign policy and defense, he was tough. And he was a big leader and he would get together with the Republicans to fashion a totally bipartisan foreign policy and you don’t see that today.

Smith: How did the White House communicate its agenda to the House Republicans? Presumably Ford was a point man conveying that to his colleagues and vice versa. How did that work?

Archer: Well, with Nixon in the White House, the White House actually did a lot of liaison with the Congress and I think did it very effectively and many of the people who were in the White House who were charged with that would be on Capitol Hill frequently and would be talking to Ford and our leaders and talking to the Republicans as a group and, in addition, working with the conservative Democrats and developing the number of votes that were needed in order to pass something. There was a very healthy relationship between the White House and the House of Representatives. I can’t speak to the Senate, I assume they were doing the same thing in the Senate. And that was very helpful and Nixon was very successful politically. This may come as a surprise to a lot of people, but history shows that to be true. He put in place the EPA, which was a totally bipartisan effort. He was working on a new form of welfare with Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the White House, which would be kind of unthinkable today and a number of issues.

Smith: It was kind of a creative conservatism.
Archer: Yes, it was. Yes, it was. And to some degree, some of the more rock-ribbed conservatives in the Congress were really comfortable with it. There were a number of issues where Nixon was really extending and reaching out.

Smith: I wonder if you felt, because clearly we now know in hindsight that a political realignment did occur. That America went from being a New Deal country to being a basically conservative country, peaking perhaps under Reagan and then with the ’94 Republican sweep of Congress. And at the same time, Ford wanted to be Speaker, hoped that in 1972 with the Nixon landslide, you might get enough Republicans in the House. Did you sense at that time that you were part of this movement that would bring about fundamental political realignment?

Archer: I was excited when Reagan was elected because I thought that was going to change the approach of the federal government. As it turned out, I don’t think that it turned anything around. I think it slowed down movement toward a bigger and bigger federal government. But it was very interesting at that time to be a part of it. But once again, it was an activity that occurred and was successful only because the conservative Democrats, the boll weevils, so called, that got together with the Republicans by the Reagan White House. And Reagan had this great personal capability, but the fact was that he was also attacked by the media. It wasn’t just all peaches and cream and let’s sing “Kumbaya” and all come together.

Smith: And you do forget how polarizing a figure he was. But that’s true of most great presidents, successful presidents.

Archer: Yes, but Jerry Ford was not polarizing. It just wasn’t in his make up. It was in his make up to get along with people as best he could. And that doesn’t mean he caved in on his principles, but there are different ways to do things.

Smith: Let me ask you, because that’s fascinating. He went to his grave believing that he didn’t have an enemy. That he had adversaries, but he didn’t have an enemy. I’m wondering, were there people in the House that he didn’t get along with?

Archer: Not to my knowledge.
Smith: Really.

Archer: Not to my knowledge. He never said or did anything that would be negative toward another human being. He held strong beliefs and he worked for those beliefs, but he was never frictional, he was never raspy in the way he conducted himself. We need more of that in politics.

Smith: He clearly was disappointed that the Nixon landslide in ’72 did not bring in a lot of additional Republican House members. Were you disappointed in relative terms that you didn’t have more Representatives in the House?

Archer: Absolutely. Absolutely. In fact, when I saw how difficult it was to get into the majority, I actually at one point went to Bob Michel when Reagan was president and I said, “Bob, we’re not going to be able to elect you Speaker, but I believe we could elect a conservative Democrat as Speaker of the House and we could then have a bipartisan House with some Republicans as committee chairmen and some Democrats as committee chairmen, but we philosophically could then give Reagan a structure he could take full advantage of.” And I fully believe that was possible. It would’ve meant Bob Michel would’ve had to step aside and tell the Republican conference, “I want us to nominate a conservative Democrat as Speaker,” and he was unwilling to do that.

Smith: Did you have a candidate in mind?

Archer: Yes, I did. There was a Texas Congressman named Sam Hall who was, again, a non-frictional kind of person and solid and strong. He later became a federal judge. I don’t know if he’s still on the bench now. But I didn’t stress a particular individual. He’s the one that I personally would’ve picked. I just stressed the idea of it. And Bob said to me, “No, we don’t want to do that because we can use Tip O’Neill as an issue and we’ll get a majority next time by running against Tip O’Neill.” And I’ll never forget saying to him, “Well, Bob, I don’t think you’re being very realistic, in fact, I’ve never bet over $100 in anything in my life, but I will bet $1,000 that we will not get a majority next time. And I’ll give my $1,000 to Billy Pitts,” who was his chief of staff sitting in the room at that time. There were just the three of us. And he didn’t
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take me up on it. The point I’m making is that I was not encouraged that we
were going to get to the majority. Not in the Jerry Ford, but in the Bob
Michel era.

Smith: You’d said you’d gotten to know Mrs. Ford.

Archer: Not well, but because of the social interchange, I did get to know her.

Smith: What was your impression?

Archer: Well, she’s just a lovely lady in every regard and everybody loved her and
everybody respected her.

Smith: You didn’t sense unhappiness on her part with her lot in life?

Archer: Richard, I didn’t get to know her well enough to be able to pick up on
anything like that.

Smith: Sure, sure. Was it difficult for political wives?

Archer: It’s always difficult for political wives. The whole life of a congressman
strains their family relationship and it’s one of the sad aspects of being a
member of Congress.

Smith: And it’s almost paradoxical that the more successful a member is, the more
visiblity he achieves, the more demands placed upon him, in Ford’s case, the
more travel that the job entails, the greater the strain.

Archer: And it’s even more now. Whoever is the Leader has got to go all over the
country now to raise money. You did not have that same requirement at that
time. Most of the money that was raised for Republican candidates for
Congress was done by mail. And then Jerry Ford’s colleague from Michigan,
Guy Vander Jagt, who was head of the NRCC, travelled a lot and spoke a lot
and raised an awful lot of money, but the Leader himself as I recall just really
didn’t have the same demand to go all over the country. He did travel, but not
to the degree that exists today.

Smith: It’s interesting that you mention Congressman Vander Jagt because I
remember hearing President Ford say that he thought the reason that Vander
Jagt lost his seat was, in effect, that he did his job too well, the national aspect of the job, and he lost touch with his constituents.

Archer: It hurt him back home and ultimately the campaign that defeated him was that he was not paying enough attention to his own district. But he made life easier for all the rest of us because he was funneling campaign money into the races where it was needed. Fortunately, I never had a need for it in my district. I was very lucky. But it’s a very different world today and I think that the fight for money increases the divisions. Members now are having to raise millions of dollars just to run for a House seat and then if they’re in any kind of leadership position, they’ve got to raise extra money for other candidates or if they’re a committee chairman or ranking on a committee. And yet I’m convinced, sadly enough, that that will never change until you amend the Constitution.

Smith: Let me ask you one thing and then we’ll move on, because it goes to the heart of how you all saw yourselves at that point in the loyal opposition. Because as you know, certainly by the Gingrich era, it became fashionable in some ways to almost take pot shots at the Michel approach, the notion that, “Well, we’re not confrontational enough. We’re so accustomed to being in the minority that we’re assuring ourselves of that status.” And when you go back even to the Ford era, people talk about how genial he was and he got along with everyone else. Some people read into that a lack of competitiveness, almost a resignation to permanent minority status. What was the mood within the Republican caucus when you arrived, and how did it evolve?

Archer: Well, clearly we wanted to get in the majority. I don’t think anybody sat back and said, “Gee, I’m so happy to be in the minority. This is a wonderful life.” It became very frustrating to me because once I got on the Ways & Means Committee, fortunately, it was a very bipartisan committee. Wilbur Mills was chairman of the committee and we had three Democrats who were as conservative as Republicans and every day we could put a majority together when we went into the committee room. And the staffs worked together, did not fight each other. So that was a nice situation, but after the ’74 elections was when things really changed.
Smith: This may be a silly question, but to people who don’t know, what’s the difference between being in the minority and the majority?

Archer: Well, the difference is primarily that you lose if you’re in the minority and if you believe strongly in what you were doing, and that was certainly true for me, you aren’t comfortable losing. I didn’t run for Congress just to see my name in lights, I wanted to do something for my kids or my grandkids, and it’s very frustrating. I was 24 years in the minority and at least Ford had been in the majority at one point in his career and Bob Michel had, too, but I’d never been in the majority and I would work hard and I would attempt to articulate well and I could never win.

Smith: Apart from simple role call votes, what was it about the nature of the House, the way the House ran in those days, that made being a minority even more unattractive?

Archer: Well, it depended to a great extent on your committee. In my first term, I was on the Banking Committee and we had a chairman, Wright Patman, who really did not like Republicans, in fact, to such a degree that he would not recognize Republicans to even offer an amendment or to even speak on the committee. So when you say, ‘What was it like?’, clearly that was very, very frustrating. And the staffs fought each other, everything then was as bitter as it is now on the Banking Committee. But then, when I went over to Ways & Means, it was like going to legislative heaven because the staffs worked together and the chairman encouraged everybody to participate irrespective of their party or their philosophy. It was a delight to be there until the ’74 elections and then everything flipped.

Smith: Tell me about the importance of the ’74 elections, because we all know about the whole generation of Watergate Babies, so called, who came into the House and rewrote rules. What happened?

Archer: They just turned the House upside down from where it had been and they rewrote the rules. They were determined to rid the Democrat party of the conservative Democrats, so they took away seniority that protected the committee chairmen and most of the senior Democrats were from the South.
They had been reelected over and over and over again and they were chairman of most of the committees, though not all of them. And most of them were very good chairmen. Most of them were gentlemen and treated everybody fairly.

A good example was Wilbur Mills, Ways & Means Committee, and George Mahon of Appropriations. I could maybe not name all of them now, but the new Democrat majority made every committee chairman subject to the selection of a majority of their caucus. And that changed everything. In addition, they packed the Ways & Means Committee. The Ways & Means Committee had historically been 25 members, 15 majority and 10 minority. That had been as far back as anyone could remember. Well, they packed it to 36 and then put a bunch of their Watergate freshmen Democrats on the committee. Wilbur Mills created some of his own problems, and when he was no longer chairman, the new chairman was just totally partisan, taking no input from Republicans on the committee.

I remember so much about that, of course, all those years were a lot more impressionable on me early on than later on, but there was a delightful Democrat from Boston named Jimmy Burke who never voted for any tax increase and never voted against any spending increase and he would say, “My people like spending. They don’t like taxes.” And he got away with that. I mean, he was just amazing. And he went up to a Republican on the committee, I’d been on the committee for six months and he said, “Jerry, you know, Bill Archer’s been a real good addition to our committee. He works hard. He attends all the meetings. He does his research right and he articulates well, but he’s got one real problem.” And the Republican said, “Well, Jim, what is that?” And he said, “Archer thinks this is all on the level.” And so there was that sort of thing that went on, too.

Smith: My sense is, 20 years earlier, Ford established himself very early as someone who worked hard, read everything, took this stuff home with him on the weekend, asked good questions. I mean, a workhorse, not a show horse. So those same qualities would shine through at any time. That also suggested not everyone on the committee was equally dedicated.
Archer: I’ve used the term frequently that there are two of horses in Congress, a workhorse and a show horse. And to me the workhorses are the ones who really got things done. The show horses got the press and so on. But Jerry Ford was definitely a workhorse, not a show horse.

Smith: The Agnew resignation, did it take you by surprise?

Archer: Actually, it did. It did not take some other people in the party in Texas by surprise who had become convinced early on that his ethics left a lot to be desired.

Smith: That’s fascinating, because one of the interviews we did was with Jerry Jones who, at that point, this is in the spring of ’73, Haldeman and Ehrlichman are still on the White House staff, and Jones has just been reorganizing the White House personnel office for Haldeman. He gets a call from Haldeman. Again, this had to have been March, April of ’73. He wants to know how many people worked directly for the vice president. And Jerry did some figuring and he said, “Well, I guess around 50.” He said, “Good. I want undated letters of resignation from every one of them,” which led Jones in retrospect to believe that they knew long before the Wall Street Journal ran its story that summer about Agnew’s problems, which ultimately led in October to his resignation. But the people around the president, including presumably the president, were tipped off to something that could very well turn out badly. It came as news to you?

Archer: Oh, absolutely. I was just not plugged in to that sort of thing. And I found, too, that as far as any ethical behavior was concerned by another member, I was generally about the last to know because I had my attention fixed on the legislative matter I was working with and I didn’t pay an awful lot of attention to that sort of thing.

Smith: Do you remember how you found out about the Watergate break-in?

Archer: I don’t. You know, that’s amazing, but I don’t. But, actually, it was not that momentous a revelation when it was first announced. It was like some sort of petty kid prank kind of thing and did not take on the magnitude, and actually did not, until Nixon really got involved in it. I kind of dismissed it when I
first heard it. I said, “This is ridiculous. What in the world would they hope
to gain by this?” And I think it could have been squelched very quickly if
Nixon had handled it differently. In fact, I and several other Republicans
went to the White House and urged the President to turn the FBI loose, find
out who had broken the law, and let them pay the price, whatever it was, and
go on. But, little did we know that he was already involved in the cover-up.

Smith: What was his reaction?

Archer: Well, I didn’t actually talk to him personally, so I didn’t get any reaction. All
we knew was that our suggestion was not accepted.

Smith: Were you surprised by the tapes?

Archer: Yes, I was.

Smith: Both by their existence and their content?

Archer: Well, yes, more by the fact that they existed. I found it hard to believe that
that was going on, although Johnson really started it as we know now, and
Nixon just continued it. I don’t know what I would’ve advised him on that,
but I know a lot of people said, “Why didn’t he just destroy the tapes?” I
guess, to his credit, he was not willing to do that.

Smith: What was the mood in the House Republican caucus as these events unfolded,
say, up to and including the Agnew resignation? Did you all feel you were in
some sort of runaway train? What was it like?

Archer: Well, it was very demoralizing and certainly when the Watergate situation
began to unfold, it was very, very depressing. Every time that I would go
back home, there would be a TV camera at the airport wanting me to explain
certain things about what was going on of which I had no knowledge. But it was
like I was a part of it and that was the way most members were treated. So, it
was terribly stifling and it also created the image with the American people
that, “Well, if they’re up there, they’re probably crooks, too.”
Smith: And Ford’s role, it must have been an awkward one in some ways. On one level, [he was] the White House’s man and yet he was the caucus’ man and he was his own man. How did he handle that?

Archer: Well, I’m not privy to any personal discussions with him about that. He seemed to just sort of ride along in his usual way which was unflappable and doing what he believed was the right thing to do. It had to tear him up.

Smith: There is an element of the Boy Scout in Ford. I mean, he was an Eagle Scout after all. And I think he was genuinely shocked that Nixon lied to him. I think that, in the end, is what happened.

Archer: Well, yes, he had to be. He really had to be, and I think Nixon shocked an awful lot of people because you can think whatever you wanted to about Richard Nixon, but I would never, even though he had been demeaned by the media and everything else, I never would’ve thought that he had been doing what he was doing. It just surprised me and most everybody else.

Smith: Particularly with your constituents, with conservatives, whether the language on the tapes was almost as much of a problem as the activities that it described.

Archer: It’s hard to separate it, Richard. I mean, it was a whole very, very unacceptable ball of wax that he was covering up a violation of the law, although be it a relatively minor one in its actual essence. And he made it into a major issue and then his language just seemed so inappropriate, particularly for a president in the White House.

Smith: I guess what I’m getting at is, did it become progressively harder to defend?

Archer: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely, because I didn’t want to believe it at first and until the smoking gun tape finally came out, I was basically defending Nixon, and then it became impossible after that. And so, the rest of it is pretty much history.

Smith: When Agnew resigns, there’s a vice presidential vacancy to fill. Was there an organized campaign? I’m not saying at Ford’s instigation.
Archer: Ford did not, to my knowledge, instigate any campaign to become vice president. There was clearly a need for someone who would be acceptable to the Democrats, but somebody who still was a solid Republican. And when they began to look around, it was pretty clear there was really only one person that fit that mold and that was Jerry Ford. And again, as we’ve talked about his relationship with the Democrats in the House, I remember sitting on the floor the day that he was actually nominated and when he spoke there was acceptance across the chamber. It was the Democrats and the Republicans saying, “This is the right choice. This is the right person.” They knew that the country needed that and they got what they were looking for.

Smith: During his vice presidency, he was out of town a lot, which was interesting. I mean, again, talk about being in an awkward position, defending the president and yet not becoming so close to the president as to impair his presidential effectiveness down the road. But presumably, he was here quite a bit, too. Did you see him during that period?

Archer: I do not recall seeing him. And it may be that he came to one or more of the Chowder & Marching Club get-togethers on Wednesday evenings, but I just don’t remember.

Smith: You mentioned the smoking gun tape. Was that when you realized in your own mind that the Nixon presidency was over?

Archer: Sure. Absolutely. Until then, I was not prepared to vote for impeachment, but after that I knew that I had no choice.

Smith: Did you see Ford at all during that period or was it after he took the oath of office?

Archer: I did not. I did not see him that I can remember.

Smith: For people who weren’t around then, that first week in August of 1974, when the transition occurred with the only president ever to resign in American history, what was the mood like in this town?

Archer: Well, I think everybody knows the mood was extremely down. There was concern about what the capabilities of our government were. There was just a
depressing pall that was over the whole country. I think there were some people who were greatly relieved to see Nixon go. And from the standpoint of the Republicans, I think probably the majority felt relieved that they didn’t have to go through an impeachment process.

Smith: Of course, you had to go through the pardon process.

Archer: Yes.

Smith: Before the pardon occurred, had there been discussion among your colleagues about what to do with Richard Nixon? Or any contact with the White House?

Archer: I don’t think so. I don’t remember that there was and I think it came as pretty much of a surprise when Ford pardoned Nixon.

Smith: And an unpleasant surprise?

Archer: I don’t think so. I think in my mind and the other Republicans that I’d talked to, they sensed that he did the right thing for the country even though it created some real negativity for him. But that it now pushed this aside and we could move forward with not be encumbered with the past.

Smith: Of course, you had a safe district. You could be statesmanlike.

Archer: Yes.

Smith: There are a lot of Republicans that lost their seats in ’74 and they may have lost it without the pardon, but over the years—

Archer: I don’t think the pardon had much to do with the loss of Republican seats in ’74. It was just that the brand “Republican” because of what Nixon had done was so negative that it just was hard to overcome. That was my worst election, too, in ’74. I only got 79% of the vote.

Smith: It will come as no surprise that Mel Laird had a plan to do other than what President Ford did on the pardon. That he was telling the president, “Don’t rush into this. Wait until I get back.” His plan was to put together a bipartisan delegation, members from both houses, to go down to the White House and, in effect, to petition the president to consider a pardon.
Archer: Oh, did he? I didn’t know that. I know Mel pretty well and I’ve had a lot of talks with him, but he never told me that.

Smith: He didn’t? Because I wondered whether that something he’s polished a little bit in his own mind over the years since or whether in fact it was originated as he indicated at the time. The question is, and obviously this is speculative, given the mood of the country and the political mood of this town, how realistically could Ford have “prepared” the country for the pardon? I mean, the first trial balloon, it seems to me, would’ve been shot down before it got beyond the trees.

Archer: I would tend to agree with you. I think that would have been so inflammatory that you would’ve had people just putting out rhetoric that was radioactive.

Smith: Wasn’t Richard Nixon radioactive at that point?

Archer: Oh, yes. Yes. Absolutely.

Smith: Including among Republicans?

Archer: Yes.

Smith: Maybe especially among the Republicans.

Archer: Yes, he had become totally negative to Republicans, politically, and that’s why what Ford did was the right thing, I think, for the future of the country. But it was interesting, because Mel was talking to me a little bit later and he said Ford counseled with him, now whether or not he would say this, but he did tell me this, counsel with him on almost every major decision he made before he did it. And this was the one decision that he did not discuss with Laird. And Laird said, “I was driving to the golf course on Sunday and I was going to play golf with Ford and I heard it on the radio and I nearly drove off the road, I was so shocked. And when I got on the first tee, I said, ‘Jerry, you have made the biggest political mistake of your life! Now, let’s go on and play golf.'” That’s the way he described it to me. I don’t know whether he told you that or not.

Smith: Yeah, that’s consistent.
Archer: In any event, he and Ford really were close over the years.

Smith: There’s another Laird story that we’d love to have your reaction to. Jumping ahead to the spring of ’75 and the fall of South Vietnam. Laird, of course, who was the architect of Vietnamization obviously has an emotional investment in the success of the policy. He has, for lack of a better word, convinced himself that Ford didn’t fight hard enough and that if he’d really, really tried, he could’ve gotten the, whatever, 700 million dollars out of Congress to prop up the South Vietnamese. And again, he was there, I wasn’t, but it sounds unrealistic given the mood of the country and the Congress, particularly after the ’74 elections.

Basically people wanted to pull the plug. Is there anything that our President could’ve said that would persuade a majority of Congress to vote for additional military funds for the South Vietnamese?

Archer: Probably not. I guess we’ll never know, but it would’ve been a real uphill battle to get a majority of votes to do that. I remember those years pretty well because the Vietnam War was just really bad on this country and bad on young people. I saw it in my district and work through the district. Young people lost confidence in the United States and didn’t have much hope for their future. We don’t need to have a long discussion about the war because that’s all history, but I know I had stuck with Nixon all the way through and his efforts to try get us out with some degree of success. I took a lot of criticism even back in my district for that. That, “We ought to get the heck out of there and just turn it over to the Vietnamese and forget about it.”

I would not take that position until finally we had mined the Port of Hai Phong, which in my view should have been done much earlier, but that’s neither here nor there. And we had begun to bomb some of stuff that had been off-limits before. And then, we were so desperate to have a peace agreement that Nixon had sent Kissinger over there to offer a billion dollars to the North Vietnamese if they would just sign a peace agreement. He was in Hanoi talking to them and attempting to get them to agree to that, and we had our mine sweepers pulling the mines out of the Port of Hai Phong at the same
time to show what good guys we were, and “Won’t you please sign a peace agreement?”

And they came with a 100 million dollar appropriation request to bomb the North Vietnamese in Cambodia and I thought, “I can’t believe they’re doing this. You’re stroking the head of the octopus in Hanoi and yet you’re talking about cutting off its tentacles in Cambodia.” I voted with the Democrats to cut off the funding and I think that passed by only two votes. And I became persona non grata within the Republican Party for having done that. But I’m convinced it was one of the best votes I ever made. It made absolutely no sense to take that added risk for our bombers and to spend that extra money and to think we were doing any good at all. So that was a watershed moment for me in my political life as a Republican in the Congress. But I just don’t remember much about Ford’s situation at that time.

Smith: Another thing - if you remember, immediately after the fall of Saigon, Congress wanted to pull the plug, not only on the war, but on funding for resettling refugees. And they basically reneged or were about to. And Ford went to the country and put together this kind of crazy quilt coalition that had George Meany and the American Jewish Congress and others who reminded people about our tradition as an asylum for oppressed peoples - that we really had a moral obligation. It wouldn’t have happened without that effort, which, again, leads one to believe that Laird engaged in maybe a little bit of wishful thinking to believe that—

Archer: Well, I think so. I think so. But that’s a judgment call that we’ll never really know.

Smith: Let me ask you, because I assume one thing you and Gerald Ford certainly had in common was fiscal conservatism when it came to the budget and I think he vetoed 66 bills, most of them he managed to sustain. How difficult was that given the numbers you had after the ’74 election?

Archer: It was difficult because the whole complexion of the House had changed after the ’74 elections, and to try to overcome the spending proclivities, particularly for the Watergate Babies and the Democrat majority, was not easy. He did
draw the line and he was very good about that. But even though he was a political animal, and he had to be to get to where he was, he still would not let that override the thing he knew was the right thing to do. I respected him tremendously for that, and I guess there were others that respected him, too.

Smith: We had a recession and it was a deep recession at the time.

Archer: Yes.

Smith: Worst since World War II, which must have been even more politically in some ways a foolhardy/courageous, depending on your perspective, not to spend federal dollars.

Archer: Yes, yes. Absolutely.

Smith: How difficult was it, coming into ’76 with the Reagan challenge in Texas? I mean, I’m not sure where you came down, but how difficult would it be for Ford against Ronald Reagan?

Archer: Well, Reagan, of course, swept Texas and controlled our delegation to our national convention.

Smith: Did that surprise you, the outcome of the primary? That the magnitude was so great?

Archer: Oh, it did, a little bit. It did. And I had taken the position early on that I was not going to get involved in any intra-party fights. There was a big split in my district when I was first elected to Congress. You had the Goldwater people and you had the Bush people, basically, in my district. And I just said, “Look, I want to work with all of you,” and I had all of them working in my campaign together and I continued with that through the rest of my career. I just would not get involved in primaries.

In fact, that may have hurt me with George Bush when he ran for the presidency, because he called me and asked me to publicly endorse him and I said, “I just can’t do it. I’m going to vote for you,” and I did vote for him, but “I can’t publicly endorse you.” And the Reagan people put a lot of pressure on me and I said, “No, I’m just not going to get involved in a primary.” And I
didn’t. But they clearly were very, very emotional and the pressure never eased. When we went to our state convention, for example, my wife was National Committeewoman from Texas, and they said, “Well, you’ve got to now commit publicly to Reagan.” And she and I had both said, “We’ll work like heck for him for the national convention, but we’re not going to commit before then.” And they put down an ultimatum to her and said, “Well, you will either commit to Reagan or you will not be National Committeewoman” and they pulled her out right at the convention. So, yes, I was right in the vortex of all that, but I never got involved in it.

Smith: What were the factors that you believe led to Reagan’s sweep in the Texas primary?

Archer: You know, I’m not sure. They were very well organized, number one.

Smith: Is it safe to say, they inherited, among other things, the Goldwater activists?

Archer: Yes, they did. And Reagan had come out looking so good after his GE televised address that it just sparked a lot of emotion amongst people and caused them to really want to get out and work for him. Here was somebody who offered a new approach to throw off all the things that they didn’t like that had been going on in Washington.

Smith: And had star quality.

Archer: He had star quality and he was able to take advantage of what Obama used to get elected, which was change, hope and change, for those people who were strong conservatives. And they got out and they just totally outworked, they were better organized and they outworked the Ford campaign.

Smith: Which must’ve been a little embarrassing to Jim Baker.

Archer: Yep, a little, but I don’t think a lot.

Smith: Did you go to the convention in Kansas City?

Archer: No, I did not go to the convention. They would not make me a delegate since I had not endorsed Reagan before the convention. And that was fine with me, I didn’t really care. But I do remember what happened at the convention
which was not too comfortable. They put the Texas delegation right in front of the Ford box. Have you heard about this?

Smith: No.

Archer: The Ford box was at a level that was just slightly above the floor and they deliberately did this when they seated the Texas delegation. And the Texas delegates, a number of them, came with rolls of toilet paper and threw them back over into the Ford box. I mean, it wasn’t very comfortable.

Smith: You know, the fascinating thing is that when people talk about, “Reagan,” I often say, “Well, which Reagan are you talking about? Are you talking about the Reagan who put Dick Schweiker on his ticket in ’76 because he wanted to win, or the Reagan who apparently was going to put Gerald Ford on his ticket four years later because he wanted to win?” I mean, the pragmatist in Reagan tends to get overlooked to the true believers. He was that unique combination.

Archer: No, he really was. He was incredible and somebody who came out of no political background at all. He was pretty amazing.

Smith: One effect of the Reagan presidency was to decouple conservatism from a kind of traditional fiscal responsibility to the point where people said, “Well, deficits don’t matter”?

Archer: Reagan never really embraced that.

Smith: No, he didn’t, but one unwitting consequence of supply-side economics, for example, was to shift the emphasis away from “Deficits do matter” to “Well, they don’t matter as much as they used to.”

Archer: The other thing, too, is in this business up here you never get completely away from politics, and politics is always pressing you to move, to do something that the people find attractive and appealing - and lowering taxes is attractive and appealing. Raising taxes is not. Spending is attractive and appealing. Cutting spending is not. And the Democrats had the spending issue that they could always use and so now the Republicans are coming up, and Jack Kemp and I talked a lot about this, with the approach that is going to
make us more popular with the people. We’re going to be the tax cutters. And that was a change that happened at that time.

Smith: But there are unintended consequences of change. I mean, who would’ve predicted even in 1981 that almost 30 years later we would be where we are in terms of the deficits and a lot of conservatives saying, “Well, deficits don’t really matter.”

Archer: Well, the conservatives are beginning to come home now, though, that deficits do matter.

Smith: Democratic deficits matter more than Republican deficits.

Archer: I think even if you still had Bush in the White House, the conservatives would be saying, “Wait a minute. A trillion dollars? No, thank you.”

Smith: A couple quick things. While Ford was in the White House, did you see him from time to time? What kind of interaction—

Archer: Well, yeah, he continued to be a member of the Chowder & Marching Club. He hosted an event every year in the White House for the members in the Chowder & Marching Club. I didn’t see him much other than that, except that I was, and this was a very, very memorable moment in my life. My secretary came in one day and said, “The White House is calling and they want to know if you would like to come and have dinner with the President.” And, of course, I said, “Yeah. Cancel whatever it is.” And I’d forgotten how much, I think that it may have been the very same day that I was expected to go down there. And I did. Ford was president. And the White House was basically empty.

I pulled up and parked right outside the White House and went in and the staff took me up to the first floor and Ford was in the Red Room, I believe, on the first floor. And I walked in and he was sitting back just comfortably smoking his pipe, and he said, “Bill, why don’t you get a drink. What would you like?” And somebody took my drink order and brought it back. Rumsfeld was there and two other congressmen had been invited; one of them was Otto Passman from Louisiana and I don’t know what the connection between him
and Ford was, and the other one was from Oklahoma, both Democrats. And he said, “You know, I don’t have any business to discuss with you. I just wanted to get a couple of friends in here to have dinner with me.” He said, “I’m a bachelor.” Betty was in the hospital with her breast cancer and he said, “I just want to have a few friends here and just put our feet up and visit a little bit.” And we didn’t talk about legislation.

Smith: Did he talk about her? I mean, did he talk about what she was going through?

Archer: No, he really didn’t. He didn’t dwell on that. I’ve forgotten, frankly, the subjects that we did talk about, but it was so personal and so comfortable. And then we went into the family dining room and we had dinner and at the end of dinner, they were just serving dessert and he said, “I’ve got to apologize to you. I’ve got to leave. I’ve got to go to the hospital.” But it was just a very warm, personal moment.

Smith: I have to ask you. We’ve heard from other people who’ve been with him in the House that it wasn’t intentional on their part, but they found themselves still calling him Jerry. Did you see that?

Archer: I did see it, but I never did after that. I called him Mr. President because I guess I am too much of a traditionalist. I’d gotten to know George Bush very well. He was my number one constituent for the entire time I was in Congress and I called him George all the way through, but after he became president, never again did I call him George.

Smith: In the ’76 campaign, obviously they started out behind and they basically caught up. Why do you think in the end they didn’t pull it out?

Archer: I’ve thought about that a lot and I believe a variety of things. I believe the pardon was a significant factor that hung around his neck even later. I think, particularly from a Texan’s perspective, he was damaged by the Reagan campaign in the primary and there was a carryover from that, at least in Texas. I don’t know about any of the other states. The Reagan activists just never could get into the fold and do the campaign and do the things you need to do in an election. But the other thing is, as you mentioned, the economy was terrible and we had inflation and we had unemployment and we had
stagflation and it was a perfect opportunity for somebody to come in and say, “Gosh, we’ve got to have change,” and Jimmy Carter happened to be that person. Maybe if the election had been a month later, Ford might’ve won because nobody hated Ford. There were not any big negatives as we see today in the political arena, but it was just that they were not feeling very good about their lives economically.

Smith: And, it was, as you say, the climate for an outsider. The irony is, four years later, it was another outsider, who evicted the first outsider.

Archer: Well, and the conditions were even worse then. And as good as Reagan was, and he was outstanding, I’m not sure he could’ve won except for the basic economic conditions that existed.

Smith: Did you see Ford at all? I mean, you must’ve run into him from time to time after his presidency.

Archer: At the last five-year celebration that we had of the Chowder & Marching Club, he came and attended that and I saw him. That was the last time that I saw him. That was five years ago.

Smith: When he died, I was wearing two hats. I was with ABC at the first part of the week and with the family the second part. And I can tell you a lot of folks in the media were surprised at how much public reaction there was. It almost seemed to build, as the week went on. Some of it, I think, was that there was a whole generation being introduced to him for the first time. You know, a lot of the people weren’t alive then and they liked what they saw. He seemed, by contrast with the ugliness of politics today, he seemed pretty attractive.

Archer: Well, he was just inherently a very good human being and I think that came through to people. In addition, there was not the negativity that was thrown at him. The system today with, you mentioned the cable shows and bloggers and the whole bit, the system today can demonize anybody and I think that’s very sad, but it happens over and over and over again. And, fortunately, he was not in an era where the name of the game was to demonize somebody who was your adversary or your opponent. I think that helped him a lot. But he was a beloved individual.
Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Archer: As someone who was dedicated to this country, trying to do the right thing, respecting everyone else and a down to earth, non-arrogant individual even though he had climbed all the way to the very top. And the fact that he was at the top was not because he had climbed over other people’s backs.

Smith: That says it perfectly. Thank you so much.
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Smith: How did your paths cross?

Bresnahan: Our paths probably first crossed when Representative Ford became vice president. At that time, I was assigned to Spiro Agnew as vice president and had been on his detail for five years. When Vice President Ford entered office, I had already been transferred off of the Agnew detail. I was in the Protective Support division of the Secret Service. I was in Washington and was assigned to a couple of speeches Vice President Ford made in D.C. That was the first time I really had come in contact with him. I certainly knew his name from the years that he’d been in the House and he was very influential in all those years, but I never had any contact with him until that time.

Smith: Let me ask you something and back up a bit. One of the interviews we did was with Jerry Jones, who was in the Nixon White House, and who at that point had reorganized the personnel office for H.R. Haldeman. Jones told us a fascinating story. Haldeman and Ehrlichman were still there, so it’d be spring of ’73. And he got a call one day from Haldeman, who wanted to know how many people reported directly to the vice president. Jones did some quick mental arithmetic and said, “Oh, about 50.” And Haldeman said, “Fine. We want undated letters of resignation from every one of them.” Which raises two questions. One, and I realize it’s both speculative, is whether this was a hangover from the general Nixon ’72 election order that basically wanted to reshape the administration, although it was several months later than that. Or, two, whether at that point, they would’ve already known that at the very least some kind of investigation was underway.

In other words, long before the Wall Street Journal broke the story about the investigation of the Vice President, is it logical to assume through the Justice Department, if no one else, that the White House would’ve been aware that he might be in trouble?
Bresnahan: I don’t have any direct knowledge of that. In the past Vice President Agnew refused, not always successfully, to cooperate with Haldeman and Ehrlichman.

Smith: Okay.

Bresnahan: And so there was a natural knocking of the heads there. I recall times that I heard about, I didn’t actually see it, but I heard about it, where memos would come from Haldeman that ‘the Vice President will do this,’ ‘will do that,’ and the Vice President sent it back and said, “I don’t work for you. I work for the President and if the President would like me to do this, I’ll be more than happy to do it.” And so, the order would have to come from the President and that used to drive Haldeman, especially, and Ehrlichman, crazy because they wanted control.

Smith: Was he a proud man?

Bresnahan: Mr. Agnew?

Smith: Yeah.

Bresnahan: Absolutely. And a great guy.

Smith: Was he?

Bresnahan: Oh, a terrific guy.

Smith: Fun to be around?

Bresnahan: He was fun to be around. His whole family was fun to be around. I mean, we’re getting back before President Ford, but he was a terrific guy to be around. Very friendly, very funny, completely misrepresented in terms of what people thought of him. I’m not saying, because I really don’t know whatever happened that took him down. I mean, I know the stories of it, but I don’t know how true it was or anything like that, but one-on-one, he was as nice as he could be.
Smith: During the ’68 campaign, there was this picture, caricature maybe, that was developed of him as racially insensitive. And it’s interesting to hear that the caricature is not very accurate.

Bresnahan: I think that was maybe not the start, but the continuation of politics that we see today, where they try to assassinate a person’s character. I think you’re talking about the incident with the ‘fat Jap’ and that was something that would be like if they called me by my nickname and my nickname had some sort of a racial tone to it. It was not intended that way at all and he was not that way at all. He was a fair guy. He made decisions and he stuck with them as far as I can remember. And he did what President Nixon asked him to do pretty much without question.

Smith: And he became a political phenomenon. I mean, almost larger than the White House had bargained for.

Bresnahan: He really was. He was almost like a Sarah Palin – came out of nowhere, was a county commissioner in Baltimore, Maryland. I grew up in Silver Spring, Maryland, so I voted for him for governor in, I believe, it was 1966.

Smith: And people forget he was the liberal in the race, running against George P. Mahoney.

Bresnahan: Well, yes, but he was a Republican. I certainly did not have any understanding of politics in 1966, I was still in college and not interested in politics, but I do remember voting for Agnew. He was a Republican and I was a Republican. I didn’t really know too much about him, but I remember on the ballot was an issue to raise the governor’s salary from $10,000 per year to $25,000 per year. All of the governors before him had worked for $10,000 per year, which was more money then than it is now, but it wasn’t very much. And I had hoped that I would certainly make $10,000 a year when I got out of college and so that wasn’t very much money. So, I think, for some of the things that he got in trouble for were things that governors had been doing previous to that. Not to say it was correct.
Smith: No, no. There was a deathwatch, let’s face it, at the end. How did he handle all of that?

Bresnahan: You know, it really went fast. We were in a fighting mode, ‘we’ being his group of Secret Service agents. We liked him a lot so we called ourselves ‘we’ although we were not political. We liked him; the politics didn’t matter much to us. We didn’t want to see him get hurt, but if you look back, I think you’ll see that just weeks or so before – it seems like weeks to me now – he went out and was going to speeches where he was being considered the next president, because he was vice president and at that time, it looked like President Nixon was going to go down and he was going to be the president. So, right up until that point, it looked like everything was going to go along smoothly until the trouble came. And I’ve always felt, and I have no evidence of this whatsoever, but I’ve always felt that Haldeman and Ehrlichman finally got their pound of flesh at the end.

Smith: It’s interesting you say that because, in a totally unrelated way, Nelson Rockefeller had an osteopath and buddy for thirty years, a guy named Ken Riland. Through Rockefeller, he came down and did the same thing for President Nixon and Warren Burger and a bunch of people. And he ran afoul of Haldeman and Ehrlichman and spent four years being investigated by the IRS - indicted, acquitted, but hounded. And it was very clear what the source of the problem was.

Bresnahan: There are more stories. I don’t know if this is the forum, but there are more stories of their efforts to dominate the White House and the Secret Service.

Smith: Really?

Bresnahan: I recall that the Secret Service had developed and purchased a brand new armored parade limousine, which at that time, in 1972, was the finest protective vehicle ever built. And the Secret Service brought it around one day and they asked President Nixon if he’d like to see it because it’s going to be a car he was going to ride in. And he said, “Yes, I’d like to see it.” I’m getting this story a little bit secondhand, but he came out to look at the car and
they showed him some of the things in the car which were safety features and so forth, and he was pretty impressed with the car. He went back in and then they put the car away and sometime either that day or later, Haldeman came out and said, “The President will never ride in that car. You didn’t go through me to get approval to see that car.” And, generally, that’s the story. There could be details in there that I didn’t know about because I’m getting it more of secondhand through the grapevine.

But in that inauguration in January of ’73 - I was involved with that inauguration - Vice President Agnew rode in the finest car ever built, not the President because of what Haldeman had done. So, basically, the President was in a very good car, there’s no problem with his car, but this was the newest and the best and he wasn’t riding in it.

Smith: Was that the parade where you had problems with the protestors along the route?

Bresnahan: They were throwing things. Yes. I have some pictures at home. I happened to be doing the advance and I was working what we referred to as the ‘right rear’ of the vice president’s car and I had some paint on my shoes. They had thrown stuff. Nothing actually bad, in fact, I didn’t know I had paint on me until the end of the parade and I looked down and there was a slash of red paint across my shoes. But that was the inauguration where the White House staff ordered the Nixon girls to ride in convertibles. The intelligence that we had was that the demonstrators were going to throw rocks and if one of those girls had been hit in the face or somewhere with a rock, it would’ve been pretty devastating.

Smith: You know, it’s interesting, but one of the really difficult things today, forty years later, is to make people understand what an almost insurrection any culture there was, particularly in Washington. Richard Nixon likened it in some ways to the Civil War. That didn’t justify what happened, but the context is usually the first thing that gets lost when people attempt to explain Watergate and its consequences.
Bresnahan: You asked me if Agnew was a strong personality, and in this particular inaugural parade, his children were supposed to ride in an open car also. He told his Secret Service supervisors, “Just have a closed car available for the family in case I order it.” And, at the last minute at the Capitol, he said, “Put the family in a closed car,” and that’s what we did. We rolled in a closed car, put him in a new limo, and went into the inaugural parade that way. I had heard, I don’t know this firsthand, that Haldeman was furious that anybody would’ve upstaged this situation. But, from a security point of view, we knew we were going to get rocked and we weren’t on the Nixon detail, so we could not help the presidential detail, but we could make sure that our people were safe and that’s what the supervisors did.

Smith: When Ford becomes vice president, you worked some events in D.C. that he did.

Bresnahan: Yes, I was perimeter security at, I think, one or two speeches at that time when I left the Agnew detail, I went to an area called Protective Support Division because they didn’t have any place to put us because the resignation happened so quickly. We were supposed to be with Vice President Agnew for six months after he left office and something happened in the administration and there was a call that went out that the Secret Service was to leave, and this was within weeks of him resigning. He was out in California and they discontinued his detail on the spot. I was back in Washington, at the residence and we discontinued on the spot. So, then they sent us over to this Protective Support Division, which they don’t even have anymore, and that division was kind of a manpower pool.

Vice President Ford came in and had some speeches. I don’t know when they were planned and so forth, but we went and helped with security at those speeches and that’s the first time I really saw him.

Smith: For all of the professionalism of the agency, you’re also human beings. Was there a time, a moment when you either personally, or collectively, reached the conclusion that the Nixon presidency was doomed? Was it when the Court ruled on the tapes? The ‘smoking gun’ tape is the most famous. I
imagine in the abstract, it was unthinkable, because obviously nothing like
this had ever happened before, but was there a time somewhere when you
thought this is going to end badly?

Bresnahan: First of all, I wasn’t that sophisticated to know what was going on. In fact,
when I’ve told my wife, she’s heard it hundreds of times that I wish that I was
paying better attention to what was going on. I was more involved with
‘Where are we going to go?’, ‘What’s going to be the next trip?’, ‘What’s my
next assignment?’, than I was in what was going on right around me. But I
think that we thought there was a good chance that President Nixon would
resign about the time that the Vice President was doing some of these
speeches where he was being mentioned as the next President of the United
States. And so that was weeks or months prior to his resignation.

Smith: Which, of course, put Ford in an impossibly awkward position. I mean, on
the one hand, he had to be loyal to the President and, on the other hand, he
couldn’t be so loyal as to undercut his own integrity.

Bresnahan: Exactly.

Smith: That’s a real tightrope.

Bresnahan: He had a picture in his office in Rancho Mirage sitting in a chair in an outer
office outside of the Oval Office. And he was sitting there and he’s reading a
magazine, which he did all the time, he never just sat. He was always doing
something. He said to me, “Bill, you know what I was doing there?” And I
said, “No, sir, I have no idea.” He said, “Right there, I got up from that seat,
walked in and found out that I was going to be the President of the United
States.” The White House photographer took that picture and it’s quite
historic. I don’t know if he knew what was coming. It didn’t look like he
knew. He was very calm, he was just flipping through a magazine, killing
some time, waiting to be invited into the Oval Office.

Smith: That’s interesting because it raises this large question. And, again, obviously
it’s speculative on your or anyone’s part, but there is this quality about Ford -
that he’s good old Jerry, the Boy Scout, the Eagle Scout, a guy who genuinely
went out of his way to see the good in people. And the flip side of that was
that he was genuinely shocked, I’ve heard him say, when Nixon lied to him or
when anyone lied to him. Was he too nice to be president? Because, you
know, the job requires a certain amount of ruthlessness. For example, not
cleaning house more thoroughly early on, which is something Rumsfeld was
urging upon him. And yet, he didn’t want to tar all the innocent people in the
Nixon White House. Many of them were very capable. And he had to
provide some continuity. He didn’t want to tar all of them with the brush of
Watergate.

Bresnahan: Once again, at that point I wasn’t very sophisticated as to what was going on,
but now I know what it takes to walk into the presidency. You need that
transition period that we give our elected presidents, months of transition, to
interview and hire chief of staff and different secretaries and all of those
things. Ford never had that time. So, it would make sense that he would kind
of keep the continuity that was there rather than go in and blow it up. Even
though he had 25 years, 23 years, of experience in knowing people and who
he might want to put in this or that job, it takes a little time to work your own
administration in when you have to come in so quickly. And, as far as being
tough, he’s tough. He was tough.

Smith: Can you illustrate that?

Bresnahan: He would stand up for what he wanted whether it be something we were
doing or whether it be something on the outside and if somebody said
something that he didn’t feel was true or correct. He wouldn’t be rude, he was
never rude, but he would say, “I don’t believe that. I think” this or that,
whatever the situation might have been. He used to have a saying, I don’t
know if I can come up with it now, something about you can disagree without
being disagreeable. And I thought he really kind of lived by that.

Smith: Yeah, when you look at his relationship with someone like Tip O’Neill. It
wouldn’t happen today. In fact, it’s hard to make people today understand.
Bresnahan: We miss that, but that’s my opinion. No, he could be tough when he needed to be and he could be tough all the time. Whatever was necessary.

Smith: Did you see the temper?

Bresnahan: Where I actually saw his temper more than I ever saw it in any political situation, was in his athletic endeavors. He was the most highly competitive athlete that I had ever been around. It came out on the golf course and he could get furious at himself, at a poor play. He was a good golfer; he was capable of shooting in the 80s, but then sometimes he’d shoot over 100 and, boy, we kept our distance. In those days, he was former President, so we could keep our distance a little bit.

Smith: Were there signs to look out for? There are people who say that if you were up close, you literally could see the red ascending.

Bresnahan: I never saw it. That probably is true, but I never actually saw that. But, the signs that we knew, I was younger and I was somewhat athletic myself, so I was into games and sports and things. I knew when he would tee off and hook a ball terribly into the other fairway or something; I knew this is not the time to ask him a question. So, you picked your spots and because you knew from your own experiences, he doesn’t want to talk to me right now. He just wants to get out there and take care of whatever this problem was.

Smith: Do you think it bothered him, the whole Chevy Chase caricature??

Bresnahan: I can’t see how it wouldn’t have bothered him a little bit, although I think he and Chevy Chase became pretty good friends. You know, I tried to be an athlete and if you tease me about the way I do my sport, I might laugh at it, but I would rather that wasn’t the way. So I assume that was the case. It was a little unfair. This guy was an All-AmSmithan football player back in the 30s and he used to laugh because people used to make the joke about the fact that he played with a leather helmet and had gotten hit in the head too many times and he would make fun of himself on that one. So, I don’t think it bothered him a lot.
Smith: I sometimes wondered whether it maybe bothered Mrs. Ford more than it bothered him.

Bresnahan: You know, I don’t know. I don’t know that. She never said anything to us about that. When your partner gets criticized, usually that person is more offended by it than maybe the person being criticized.

Smith: On August 9th, 1974, the Nixon appearance in the East Room and then the Ford swearing in, where were you that day?

Bresnahan: Let’s see. When did Agnew resign?

Smith: Agnew resigned in October of ’73.

Bresnahan: Okay, I was probably at that time in our training division because I’d gone off the detail, and gone to the training division with a short stop at that Protective Support Division that I mentioned before.

Smith: So, during the Ford presidency, when did you come to work for him?

Bresnahan: I was lucky enough I had learned to ski a little bit, and when Ford became President, the very first year, we were going to come to Vail. The Secret Service was looking for people that could ski because obviously President Ford was going to go skiing and that's when Larry Buendorf – the first time I think I met Larry, he was on the presidential detail at that time. The Service put out a teletype requesting anyone that knew how to ski to give their name up if they would like to possibly go to Vail at Christmastime. And this was a long time ago, but somehow I think I put my name in and I got selected. And so we were all sent out to Vail, Colorado a couple of weeks, I believe, before Christmas, to go through kind a test.

Smith: And I assume there was a whole lot less here then than there is now.

Bresnahan: No, we were just in Vail then. There was no Beaver Creek. In fact, President Ford skied the very first day Beaver Creek ever had a run. He skied on that run before it was open because I skied with him that day. I remember that. But we were sent out here and they put us through a training session and so
forth and, luckily, I made it through because I wasn’t that good, but neither was anybody else. So, we had one good skier, a fellow named Dave Beihler. The rest of us were kind of somewhere in between. So, we got to stay and then we got to come back at Christmastime and be with President Ford and for the next three Christmases, I believe he was in office three Christmases; I got to ski with him every Christmas. That was my only time with him that I recall as president.

Smith: And they stayed at the—

Bresnahan: The Bass House.

Smith: The Bass House. Okay. Private residence in Vail?

Bresnahan: Right in the center of Vail. He could walk to the chair lift from there and we did.

Smith: Did that give you security concerns - the fact that it was right in the middle of a fairly congested—

Bresnahan: We were able to seal off the neighborhood and keep the neighbors happy. I hope we kept them happy. We tried. It was a special problem to take a president on a chair lift and then down an open ski slope, and Larry Buendorf was in charge of that. He basically put the plan together that we would do. We had formations that we ran on skis that were very similar to what the agents assigned to the president do when he’s walking around or moving around anywhere else. And so we came out and we practiced these formations and practiced what we would do in each circumstance. I think we did a pretty good job. In those days, the security was not like it is today.

Smith: After the two assassination attempts in California, was there any significant rethinking of or tightening of security?

Bresnahan: Oh, I think every time we have an issue, the Secret Service looks back at every ounce of whatever information they can come up with and they see how we can do it better. What did we miss? Not necessarily what did we do well,
but what did we miss here? How did we miss this? And so every time we have an incident, things change.

Smith: It’s interesting because when we were talking to Larry, he said the problem with the Squeaky Fromme incident was that basically everyone did what they were supposed to do and it was almost an element of luck that he happened to see what he saw. Because, he’s convinced that no one else physically was in a position to prevent her from getting off a shot. You think of these guys who are still beating themselves up over the Kennedy assassination, but clearly you can be the most professional people in the world and do everything you’ve been trained to do and there are variables beyond your control.

Bresnahan: Yes, and those variables were more back in those days than they are these days. You wouldn’t see President Bush or President Obama now walk across the Capitol grounds in Sacramento. If they did, there wouldn’t be any people that had not been checked standing near them. So, all of those things are an evolution of protection that has come up as a result of the things we did there that we thought we could do better. So, most of what you see now of the president - in fact, I noticed with President Obama on TV, you don’t see very many agents around him and they have worked their protection so that the agents can back off a little bit and give him some space to do whatever the TV cameras want to do.

Smith: That’s interesting because, presumably, every presidential family brings their own experience and outlook and resentments, appreciations. It must have been tough for the Ford kids. I mean, he never thought about being president. Mrs. Ford certainly never thought about living in the White House. But then for teenage children - Susan famously - but the others weren’t that much older.

Bresnahan: Well, I came back and Susan was either a senior in high school, or I can’t remember if it was the first year in college, somewhere around there. She was probably 17 or 18 years old, came back to Vail to ski. And once again, they called on the skiers to come back, and who would like to come back and ski with her? Well, I raised my hand. And so I came back and skied with Susan,
and she and a couple of her girlfriends came and stayed in Vail. I don’t know if it was spring break or some sort of break from school and we skied with her and assisted in her security here. Susan, I think, unless she was fooling me, liked us. We tried not to infringe upon her teenage years. I’m sure we did. I wouldn’t have wanted some guy walking around with me when I was 17 that my dad had control of. But, at any rate, she seemed to like us and we tried to leave her alone as best we could to make her own decisions.

I think Jack was the oldest son. Jack, at his age, didn’t really need a couple of guys hanging around with him, but he more or less put up with it and then I think we finally got a group of guys with him that were more in his age category, and I think it probably smoothed out then because Jack was of the age he didn’t need some sort of senior person keeping an eye on him. He was probably over 21 and he was a young bachelor. He didn’t need us hanging around. But eventually we got the right combination and I think Jack liked his guys. We had no problems with Steve and Mike. Of course, Steve went on to be a TV star and I think Mike became a minister. So, we were with all of them and it worked out pretty well and we didn’t have any major problems with them.

Smith: Let me ask you something, because I think to outsiders, let’s face it, it’s hard to imagine how this relationship gets defined and presumably redefined with every incoming President. It’s clear that you are always there, you’re inescapable. There’s both a professional respect and yet there’s also presumably a line of familiarity that you don’t want to cross. You’re not members of the family, but to outsiders you must look like you’re almost members of the family. How does that get defined? We’ve been told that the Fords were particularly appreciated - or example, on Christmas, they would really try hard to make sure they didn’t have events so that the agents could have a holiday of their own.

Bresnahan: Yes, many of the presidents have stayed in the White House on Christmas Day so that the agents weren’t traveling away from their families on Christmas. Now, very often, on the 26th, they’d go to the ranch, depending on
which president it might be, or they’d go to Camp David or wherever they might go. Camp David wasn’t too much of a problem because that’s close enough to home. But most of them would take that into consideration. And, of course, President Ford came out here at Christmastime, but most of the agents that came out here with him more or less volunteered to come at that time. I mean, the supervisors of the presidential detail would ask who would like to go - to try to get enough agents who volunteered to go on that particular trip so they wouldn’t have to take the guy who has three children and missing Christmas would be a hardship for him. We were able to do that. The supervisor organized a detail of a lot of single guys, after that particular trip they would go back and they would get time off and the married guys would take the next trip. They tried hard to fall within those guidelines if they could. If the mission came up and we had to do it, you have to do it.

Smith: It almost applies more to a former president where they’re out of office. I don’t know if there’s such a thing as a standard length of service on each detail or whether each one is different. I’m trying to understand as a layman how that unique relationship is developed. How close is it? How detached is it?

Bresnahan: It varies from person to person. It also varies from agent to agent. President Ford liked Larry Buendorf a lot. We had another agent who played professional baseball, was an athlete, and he came over to the Secret Service. We had another agent that was with him that was a professional football player. And he had some sort of a relationship with those guys because of their things in common. Bruce Bales was a professional player and he was always talking to Bruce about baseball. David Cahill, had played for the Los Angeles Rams and the Washington Redskins and President Ford always talked to him about football. Football was his big sport because, of course, he played and was very good at it. So, he would talk to them about the sports and when he saw them, he’d say, “See what the Redskins did? Did you see what that team did?” that sort of thing.
So, there was some sort of man to man relationships there that were of interest, but when President Ford went into his house, we didn’t go with him. We weren’t supposed to and didn’t need to. I don’t think it’s like anything I can think of - but it was a friendship when he walked out. He’d say, “Good morning, boys, how you doing?” We’d get in the car and we’d go to wherever he was going. And when we were skiing when he was president, he’d walk out and say, “Good morning, boys. Looks like a great day. We’re going to have some fun today.” And go off skiing.

Smith: Well, Larry told us, for example, he’d be in the front seat of the car with the President and he said, “There were times we’d drive hours and nothing would be said.” The other thing, he wasn’t going to start a conversation - Larry wasn’t.

Bresnahan: No, because you never know, even when he’s former president, what he’s doing in the backseat. He’s reading the paper, he’s reading a magazine, and he might even be scrolling down some notes or writing a letter. So you don’t want to make small talk unless he starts it. Now, if the former president or president in the back seat says something to you, you certainly respond to it. And sometimes they ask you, “Did you see this article or that article?” And if you saw it, sometimes they’d ask you, “What’d you think?” And, in my case - like I said, I wasn’t overly sophisticated - so I kind of stayed out of that. But there were times when situations were going on around us that he would ask something on his mind and he wanted to have somebody to discuss it with. He’d say, “What’d you think about so-and-so doing this or that?” And if you had knowledge of it, you’d say, “Well, blah blah blah. What do you think, sir?” I’d try to push it back on him because he obviously knew what was going on and I didn’t.

Smith: You came out with him in January of ’77?

Bresnahan: I reported to Rancho Mirage in May of ’77. I was assigned in Washington, D.C. I think I was in the Washington field office at that time. I got a call when they were putting the detail together – either that or teletype, I can’t remember how it happened – they were looking for people that wanted to go
to Palm Springs, and I had been in Palm Springs in 1967 with President Eisenhower.

Smith: Really?

Bresnahan: Can you believe that?

Smith: That’s great.

Bresnahan: So, I had a history here that I knew about Palm Springs and I said, “This has got to be a great assignment.”

Smith: What was Ike like? I mean, that was just about before his health really went into a tailspin.

Bresnahan: We actually took him back to Walter Reed from Palm Springs and he passed away in Walter Reed later in 1968, I believe.

Smith: Or ’69.

Bresnahan: Okay, I have it in my mind as April of ’69, because I started with him in April of ’67.

Smith: At that point, again, the whole idea of Secret Service for former presidents was relatively new.

Bresnahan: It was relatively new and I was a brand new agent, stars in the eyes, out in Palm Springs, out in California. I was single. I was making more money than I ever dreamed. So, it was a great time for me and we worked our eight hour shifts and we had our days off.

Smith: Now, where did the Eisenhowers stay?

Bresnahan: They stayed in El Dorado Country Club. He had a friend, if my memory serves me, it was McCullough Chain Saw - owned a house out there and he stayed at that house.

Smith: Played a lot of golf?
Bresnahan: He wasn’t playing as much then because he was starting to get older, but he did play. He played maybe once or twice a week, if I recall, and pretty much with my age in the Service, I was residence security. I didn’t go out with him very much. In fact, Mrs. Eisenhower would call this grocery store that she dealt with and order what she wanted and they would bring the groceries in. The groceries came in a box, catsup and mustard or whatever it was. We didn’t want the delivery people to go into the house because we didn’t know who they were. So, I got the groceries from the guy and thanked him. They had an account, so there wasn’t anything to sign. I took the groceries into the house and the General happened to be in the kitchen as I was bringing the groceries in and he said, “Oh, thank you very much” and I thought he knew I was an agent and he reaches in his pocket and he tipped me 75 cents. I kept it.

Smith: By the way, there were those who would say Gerald Ford wouldn’t have tipped that much.

Bresnahan: I don’t think that’s true. But anyway, I still have the 75 cents that President Eisenhower gave me, the three quarters.

Smith: Were you impressed by him?

Bresnahan: I really never got to know him, but he was very nice. And with my limited contact with him as a brand new agent, really not having much contact, he was very nice. I ended up going with Mrs. Eisenhower to Main Chance in Phoenix, which was a spa in the days before spas were really a big thing. I got to know her just a little bit because I was around her a little bit. And she was very nice, too. Very nice. But those were early days, later we went back to Walter Reed and I got off of doing a temporary assignment there on that detail. I’m going to guess, if April is the right date, then I got off in March and went back to the Washington field office where I belonged because I was still a young agent and I needed to go through my on-the-job training, which I hadn’t even gotten yet. So, I wasn’t around when he passed away in April. But the last year he was out in Palm Springs, I was with him.
Smith: Mrs. Ford, did you have much contact with her?

Bresnahan: Yes, I did. I was with them for two tours and you mentioned before that the Service likes to not have anybody stay in one spot too long anymore.

Smith: You can see why.

Bresnahan: Yes, you can get stale. I would say a four-year assignment is about max and I think that’s probably what they’re doing now. So, my first assignment in 1977 started in May and four years later, I transferred to the Los Angeles field office. And I was there for about two years and then I got promoted and came back to the Ford detail. So, I was with them for eight years. So, over those eight years, we got to know them fairly well. And, because of Vail, my family got to know Susan and Mrs. Ford and, in fact, my girls – I have two daughters – and my wife were invited to Susan’s wedding. So, that was pretty unusual. And then, during President Ford’s funeral in Palm Desert, my oldest daughter happened to be with us at that time – she and my wife were fortunate enough to be guides for the funeral area. And they got to help out there which meant a lot to them because they had known him pretty well.

Smith: There was something like 50,000 people who went through Saint Margaret’s. I still find that extraordinary.

Bresnahan: They had a bus base set up and that’s where my wife and my daughter worked at getting the people on the busses and then to the church and then back again and off the busses. Then, at the end, they were allowed to get on a bus themselves and go through the church. That was an experience that they still remember.

Smith: What was his day like? Did it change at all? We know he was a workaholic. We know he worked Saturdays. Some think he would’ve worked Sundays if he could’ve had any staff.

Bresnahan: When he was former President, he was in the office every day, seven days a week. Now, he came into the office sometimes and he would sit in there because it was comfortable and he would sit in there and read. He was an
avid reader of periodicals and newspapers. I think he read every major newspaper every day. And that’s before we had everything on the internet. He was reading, he was getting the newspapers and reading them.

Smith: We’re told he never became computer literate.

Bresnahan: Uhm, I don’t think so.

Smith: Mrs. Ford did, we’re told.

Bresnahan: He might have been able to look at his email, but I’m not sure of that. But he read periodicals, *Time* magazine, *Newsweek*, *Newsweek*, every week when they came out, he’d read them cover to cover. And sometimes he was happy with them and sometimes he wasn’t, but the newspapers, he read every day. The *New York Times, Washington Post*. In fact, one of the things we always wanted to do is when we got on the airplane is to be sure we had the latest edition of the newspapers to keep him busy for the flight. I remember one time we were going into New York and he wanted to get a *New York Times* in the morning. We got there at 6:30 in the morning because we’d fly all night on a red-eye. And he only had large bills, he asked me, "Do you have any small bills?" And I said, “Sure.” He said, “I want to buy a newspaper.” And so I gave him two dollars or something, I don’t even recall, and so he bought the newspapers and we went on about our business in New York.

We flew back to California that afternoon and the next day, he would be running around the office trying to find me. I’m off because I just took that trip. He’s looking for me for two days to pay me those two dollars back. He did not forget those things and I think that was probably like he told me, he said when he was growing up, sometimes his family didn’t have a nickel. That’s all they had was a little bit of change. And I think when he grew up, that impressed upon him that if he had a debt, he was going to settle it and he would. He would chase you around until he could give you your money back. Not that two dollars made any difference to me, but it made a difference to him.

Smith: How would you describe his sense of humor?
Bresnahan: He had a good sense of humor and he loved a good joke. He wasn’t big on something too off-color. A little bit off is okay, but if the joke got a little bit rough—

Smith: But among those who knew him, it’s well-known, Mrs. Ford has a much more ribald sense of humor than the President.

Bresnahan: Yes, she could get a kick out of something that was a little bit more off-color than what he did. It was kind of funny because you could see at events with him as a former president - I didn’t see him as much when he was president except to ski - and he could get a little nervous around people because he was always a little bit nervous of what they might say.

Smith: In what sense? That’s interesting.

Bresnahan: Well, he just seemed to be, if people would come up to him, he was on guard. You could tell that he was on guard. And he wasn’t going to get tricked into saying something into a microphone or something that he would regret.

Smith: Because he was pretty accessible to the press.

Bresnahan: Yes, when we traveled around, usually, he would do interviews.

Part of tape unintelligible. Conversation resumes with Ford family intervention in 1978…

Smith: How difficult was that?

Bresnahan: You know, it was only difficult for us in that we knew kind of after it started that it was going on. I remember that Barbara Walters came out shortly after they got out of office, and did an interview with Mrs. For. And I was furious with Barbara Walters because she went after her, and it was a little like the press would pick on Reagan towards the end of his 80 years and it was obvious that his memory wasn’t as good as it used to be. And she was kind of having some issues and, of course, I like Mrs. Ford and I wasn’t crazy about the press. I thought Barbara Walters went after it a little too hard, so it made me angry. Of course, I didn’t say anything, but that’s when we knew
something was going on. Shortly after that is when the family got together and they did their intervention.

I was, in some ways, fortunate enough to go with her to some of the meetings. The Betty Ford Center that she has now - when you first arrive, you go and you’re saturated into the Center and you stay there and you do day in, day out rehab. So she did her rehab in San Diego at the naval base.

Smith: How difficult was that?

Bresnahan: Actually for us it wasn’t difficult because she was headed towards a better life.

Smith: She wasn’t resisting it.

Bresnahan: No, not at all. She fell in line and she knew there was an issue and she knew she needed to get some help and she did. The thing that was interesting about it is they didn’t make any special arrangements for her. When she went to San Diego, she was in a group of ten people and they would be sailors, wives of sailors, they would be working people. She was the most prominent person in the group, but in the group, everybody was the same. They would tell their stories and we could hear some of that. When they would get into some of the very personal things, when she would be in with a counselor, we didn’t go there. But the general sessions, we were around. And it really enlightened me as to what alcoholism was and how difficult a disease it is to deal with. I had no idea. I thought, you know, if you’re drinking, why don’t you just stop?

Smith: Forty years ago, it was a very different culture. People just drank a lot more.

Bresnahan: Well, yes, most of our parents, smoked and they had a drink when they came home and most of the time that was not a problem. And only later on, and I think she pioneered some of that - of the fact that she would go through that rehab—

Smith: If you stop to think about her impact since leaving the White House, there are very few presidents who have the kind of impact on how real people live their
lives between the breast cancer and the alcoholism and drug addiction, you know.

Bresnahan: She was out in the open. Yes. And he was very supportive.

Smith: And he stopped drinking at the same time?

Bresnahan: He stopped drinking. When she went through that, he said, “I’m not going to drink anymore. I don’t care about it that much anyway.” So he stopped and he’d literally, as far as I know, didn’t drink anymore. I mean, I don’t know if he ever had a glass of wine anywhere, but he stopped drinking. And in their younger lives, he used to talk about when they were first dating and they’d go on ski trips, in those days, what you did in the evening on a ski trip is you went to dinner and you drank and you had a great time. So that was part of their socialization, but as he got older, as we all do, it’s not that important. So he just stopped.

Smith: He was very self-disciplined, wasn’t he?

Bresnahan: Oh, man! He worked out every day of his life. He had a pool at the house and he had a pool in Vail that he had access to. It wasn’t his, but he had access to it. The one in Rancho Mirage was at his house. And he would go out every day, almost until the end, and get in that pool and swim laps. And then he’d get out of the pool and he’d do sit-ups. I don’t remember if he did push-ups or not, but he’d get in the pool and he would do a certain number of laps and he tried to keep track of the time, even as he got older. And I wasn’t around towards the end, but the agents that were said, he would get in that pool and they would have to help him out as he got into his 90s. But he wanted to get into that pool. He didn’t do it when he was traveling that much because it wasn’t really available, but the minute he got home, into the pool and work out. And he kept fit. He was very fit.

Smith: Did you see them as grandparents?

Bresnahan: Yes, but that was more internal in the house. And I wasn’t around him as much when the kids came to Vail to ski. I know he would take his
grandchildren and take them down to ski school and get them into ski school and get them started. In those days, he wasn’t skiing anymore. His knees had gotten so bad that he couldn’t ski anymore. But he took on the task of taking his grandkids to the ski school.

Smith: I’m told here in Vail especially people were very good at sort of leaving him alone. Which was not the case everywhere. Let’s face it. The ultimate celebrity is a former president.

Bresnahan: Yes, people were pretty good.

Smith: And lots of people want autographs and that’s got to be one of the banes of existence just because you’re public property.

Bresnahan: The only thing that he didn’t like – two things, actually. He didn’t like to give an autograph while he was playing golf. And maybe someone else has told you that, too.

Smith: No, but I would think golf is all about concentration.

Bresnahan: Yes. And he really didn’t like to give autographs to anybody he thought might be a collector. When a little kid comes up to him and asks for an autograph, he would do it as long as he felt like the kid just wanted an autograph of a former president. And he was good about that. But, boy, when he was concentrating on golf, you do not want to ask for an autograph.

Smith: And I’m told on weekends when he was watching football, it was another almost trance-like state.

Bresnahan: Well, I didn’t see that so much because he’d be in the house or he’d be in the office when he was doing that. So, we could hear the TV going, but he’d be in there either with a friend or with someone or by himself watching the game. We wouldn’t go in and sit down with him and watch the game. We weren’t on those terms with him. But, he would come out and say, “Ah, did you see that game?” or whatever it was. And if it was Michigan and they lost, he was upset. And if they won, he was ready to go. And he’d take a bet. If
you wanted to bet against Michigan, he’d take you on. Now, he’d take points from you, but he’d take you on.

Smith: You said you were there four years from May of ’77. Did you go with him when he went to the Sadat funeral which I think was September of ’81?

Bresnahan: No, I didn’t go with him to the Sadat funeral.

Smith: Okay, because that’s supposedly the genesis of the friendship with Jimmy Carter.

Bresnahan: No, I wasn’t there for that. It was ’77 until about ’81. Sometime in ’81 I went to Los Angeles. Was there for two years and then I came back again. So I came back in ’83, I think.

Smith: In ’77 then, in ’80, there was some talk, I don’t know how serious it was, about maybe he’d run again in ’80.

Bresnahan: Could have been.

Smith: And one senses that probably was something Mrs. Ford would not have looked favorably upon. In any event, they had a good life going.

Bresnahan: We went to the convention, I believe there was talk about a co-presidency where he’d be the vice president but he’d have some responsibilities and so forth. I remember that because it was in Detroit and I was working midnights. So, we were asleep during the day when things were going on. So when we got up, we all wanted to know what was going on because I was getting excited because I might be headed back to D.C. again which would’ve been fine. I was born and raised there, so to go back there with another vice president would’ve been okay with me. We were excited about it and it looked like it was going to happen. And then I went to bed and when I woke up that night, it was over. The decision was made and, typically, if President Ford negotiated, he negotiated, negotiated, negotiated, and when it didn’t work out to what he wanted – cut it off. And then we left Detroit. That was the end of that. So, I don’t know anything about any negotiations.
Smith: In later years, you were there ’83 to ’87?

Bresnahan: Yes, ’83 to ’86. I think I transferred back to D.C. in ’86.

Smith: Then, did you see him and President Carter together at all through that period?

Bresnahan: I don’t think I ever did. I did ski with President Carter, but I never got to know President Carter at all. But, I was in the Denver field office and went and skied with President Carter when he came to Crested Butte, Colorado. But I never talked to either one of them about the other. I just know that President Ford, when he first was defeated by President Carter, was not happy. Just like any athlete, he did not like to take a loss. And he couldn’t deal with that.

Smith: Was he depressed or angry?

Bresnahan: No. Angry. Angry or frustrated might be a better word. He wasn’t angry at President Carter, he was angry that he didn’t win. You know, he fought hard and he lost the fight and he wasn’t happy about that. And he mellowed pretty quickly. He didn’t seem to dwell on that. I never saw anything that I would consider being depressed. He just said, “Well, we’re going on to the next thing.”

Smith: I wonder if he ever got sick of being asked about the pardon.

Bresnahan: I think he did and he was asked a lot and the answer was always the same. And, just like the picture I mentioned earlier where he was sitting waiting to go in, people always thought that he knew and that was part of the deal. I don’t think words were ever exchanged or anything in writing. I think that probably Haldeman and Ehrlichman knew that Ford was going to do the right thing in terms of the country. I think that they picked the right guy.

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

Bresnahan: After I retired, I continued working for the Secret Service at doing background investigations, when I was out in California and a lot of times, I
would be doing what we referred to as ‘updates’ on agents that are current and were on that detail. I don’t recall seeing him then. So, I don’t know the very last time I saw him. I do remember that when his knees were not hurting and he was walking around in the Rancho Mirage area, he was spry. He didn’t have the gray hair and he had hair, so he didn’t look his age at all. And then the next day, you would see him and he’d come out and he had some pain in his knees and all of a sudden, he looked his age. But then he got his knees done. I wasn’t around for the knee replacements. I was around for one knee surgery. In fact, I was almost in the operating room when they were doing it because we wanted to put an agent in there. And what we came up with as a compromise is I was just outside. I could see him through this window in the door. And I stood there and watched the surgery. We really weren’t too concerned about that particular situation. But once he got his knees fixed, he was doing pretty well for awhile. I don’t recall seeing him when he was past 90.

Smith: And his health really was very good up until right about then.

Bresnahan: Right about that time and really almost within months before he passed away that the agents would tell me from the detail when I would come back and talk to them (when I was doing their backgrounds) that they were helping him out of the pool and things like that. But he was still getting in that pool every day and doing his laps. And I said, “Boy, that scares me to death.”

Smith: Well, especially at this altitude. Especially those last two summers.

Bresnahan: He didn’t come up here towards the end.

Smith: He actually came up here the last summer.

Bresnahan: The last summer?

Smith: Both the last summers and it was a subject of real controversy with his doctors, his friends. I remember a conversation with Mrs. Ford and she said, “You know, we’ve had the quantity of life. Now we want the quality of life.” But, I mean, it was tough.
Bresnahan: I talked to some of the agents that were on his detail and they said that he actually went doctor shopping on that deal, because the first two doctors he talked to said, “Sir, we don’t think you should go up there. It’s not really good for you.” So he went to another doctor and that doctor said, “You know, you want to go to Vail? Go.” He says, “You’re going to be somewhere when you die, so go to Vail.” So, he said, “Fine.” And that was it, he came to Vail. So, he had a tough time, I think, that last year. It was a tough time. What year was that?

Smith: 2006.

Bresnahan: Okay. I was around, but I was not with them. I’ve always been in Vail ever since 1977 when I came with him, but in talking to the agents, he had a tough time. I think they went back early that year.

Smith: I think they did. Yeah. There was a trip to the Mayo Clinic in between.

Smith: Todd Maturnich, who’s thoroughly professional and discreet, was a little uncomfortable in talking to us and wound up giving us one of the best stories. It was maybe three months before the President died. It was the last time he came out of the Eisenhower Medical Center. And the agents picked him up and they said, “Now, we’ll go home.” He said, “No, we’re going to the In-and-Out Burger.” And they went to the In-and-Out Burger, he gets out of the van, he walks into the In-and-Out Burger, and he stands in line to get his burger.

Bresnahan: I’ve got a story about McDonalds. This is when he was still playing golf when he was younger. He was playing in Palm Desert, I don’t know which course he came from but one of the courses in Palm Desert, and the three men he was with wanted to go to lunch. And President Ford was always in a hurry, he wanted to get back, he had things to do at the desk, and so forth, and he didn’t want to sit down and have a two hour lunch. So, he said, “Okay, fine. Let’s go to McDonald’s and get a hamburger” is what he used to call them. So, I was in the car and he said, “Let’s pull into McDonalds” and there was one right there in Palm Desert. So we pull into McDonalds, we got out of
the car, and I am with him, I just followed him in because this is totally off the
record, we don’t know what’s going to happen. We follow him in and he gets
in line and he gets up to this little girl and this young girl wasn’t even born in
1977, so she has no idea who this gentleman is in front of her. And he goes,
“What do you have?” And she points like this at the menu which is behind
her. She’s looking at him and he’s looking at the menu. “That’s what we
got.” And he looks up there and he goes, “Can I get a hamburg’?” And she
goes, “Yes, sir.” And so he ordered a hamburger and a Coke or whatever he
got and she never knew that she had served the former President of the United
States. It was quite funny because he knew about McDonalds but he likely
had never been inside before because he didn’t really know the system. So it
was probably similar to the In-and-Out Burger story.

Smith: Now, when you’re out with him in the limo did you radio back to the
command post and say, “Change of plans. We’re going to McDonalds”?

Bresnahan: Yes.

Smith: And what did they say? “Okay”?

Bresnahan: Yes. It’s no problem if we didn’t know we were going there, nobody else
knows we’re going there. So we’re not too concerned when we do these off
the record type things.

Smith: So when you sent the report that you’re going to McDonalds, did they come
back and say “_____”?

Bresnahan: No, they were used to that. They might have radioed back and said, “Bring us
back a Big Mac.”

Smith: They knew the system.

Bresnahan: Yes, they know the system. Those things were always kind of funny because
when he would get out in the public and into a routine that he wasn’t used to,
it was funny to watch him.
Smith: I assume even just getting on a plane you’re surrounded by people and presumably a lot of them recognized him.

Bresnahan: Well, as former president, I traveled with him a lot, just like Larry did. And I would always make sure for my own sanity and my own protection that we had the seats that he liked. He wouldn’t ask me to do it, but I knew that if I wanted to have a comfortable trip without him being upset, I’d better find the right seats. He’d travel first class on a commercial and he liked to sit at the bulkhead if there was leg room, because he couldn’t sit like this with his knees bent because it would hurt his knees. So, depending on what the aircraft was, where he would like to sit. I would try to call the airline prior and make sure we were in the seats we belonged in. And sometimes you didn’t tell the airlines who it was, but since you’re a first class customer, they treated us pretty good. I said, “Well, my friend that I’m traveling with” because sometimes he would travel under his own name. Sometimes he would travel under other names.

Smith: Really?

Bresnahan: I can’t remember if Penny would use her name for the reservations, but we would use sometimes different names and sometimes his because I remember that coming up, too. But I always made sure when I was traveling with him that we got to the seats we were supposed to and then when we got to the airport, the airlines would give us the courtesy of putting us on the plane first. Then he would get in on the window side and I would get in next to him in the seat blocking people from actually coming in and trying to shake his hand or whatever. And sometimes people would get on and would recognize and they’d reach over and he’d shake their hand, but I wouldn’t let them get in too close to him. And what he would do is he’d get right into his reading and so a lot of times people would see him and go, “Oh, there’s President Ford” but they would see that he was busy and give him the courtesy and keep moving.

Smith: One airline story that would’ve been after your time, but he was trapped. He had no choice. He saw Oliver Stone’s *JFK*, which is a travesty. I mean, from start to finish.
Bresnahan: Yes, it would be for him.

Smith: And especially for him. I wonder if he watched movies or tended to work.

Bresnahan: I don’t believe he watched the movies very often. He would read and he was funny because when we were, we did a lot of red-eyes, because he didn’t like to waste time. So, he could sleep on an airplane as well as he could sleep in his bed. And he would get on the plane and as soon as the plane started to move, he would go to sleep. He was like a lot of politicians, when he wanted to go to sleep, he’d go to sleep. And he was out cold. I’d be sitting next to him and he’d say, “Bill, I’m going to take a little nap. When the food comes, wake me up.” So, we’d take off and you know how long it takes until they bring the food and in those days, first class had some pretty good food. The food would be coming and I said, “Mr. President, the food’s here” and I’d give him a little nudge. “Oh, okay” and he’d wake up and he’d eat his dinner. He would often say, “Now, I think they’re going to have hot fudge sundaes,” which he liked, so he said, “Wake me up when the hot fudge sundaes come,” and he would go like that and he was out cold again. To be able to sleep like that, what a great thing! Ten minutes, maybe fifteen minutes, the hot fudge sundaes would come and I’d have to shake him to wake him up. And he’d wake up, he’d eat his hot fudge sundae, and back to sleep again. And then he would wake up when we landed in New York.

Smith: Meanwhile, you’re awake the whole time.

Bresnahan: Oh, yeah. That was funny. He would say to me, as we’d land in New York, “Oh, boy, I really slept good on that flight. How’d you sleep?” And I said, “Sir, I don’t sleep. How would it look if your Secret Service agent was asleep next to you?” “Oh, right,” he would say.

Smith: Sounds like you liked him.

Bresnahan: Oh, I did. I did very much. He was great to me and always very nice. We had a deal in Vail when we would travel like that, once again, we would leave very early in the morning to go. He was going to his boards and different things that he would go to.
Smith: Would he fly out of Eagle or would he go to Denver?

Bresnahan: We had to go to Denver. Eagle really wasn’t doing that much flying unless we got a private plane. Sometimes if we had a private plane and he was doing an event and they’d provide him with a private plane, we’d fly out of Eagle. But most times, we’d fly out of Denver and we would leave at 5:30 in the morning to get an early flight and there was a donut shop in Vail and the guy came to work at 3:00 in the morning because donuts, you make early in the morning. The baker’s there and it wasn’t even open and I got to know the guy. So, I would go and knock on the door because on my way to the Ford house I’d get him a cup of coffee and I’d get a bag of donuts for both of us because if he had coffee and donuts, then I could eat coffee and donuts. So, we’d get coffee and donuts and when he’d come downstairs in the car, I would get in the microwave (and he took his coffee black) and warm his coffee up just before we went out and would pass it back to him. “Oh, did you get any donuts?” I said, “Yes, sir” and pass the bag of donuts back. But that meant at 4 o’clock or 5 o’clock in the morning, I could have a cup of coffee to keep me going, so it was kind of a mutual deal.

And the funny thing was that Larry Buendorf was taking a trip with him. After we had done this a couple of times, Larry was going to take a trip with him, and it was one of those 5:30 in the morning things, and he called Larry at home the night before and said, “Larry, can you stop and get some coffee and donuts?” Larry called me the next day and said, “What have you started?” But, Larry went and got the coffee and donuts. He was a good guy. He took care of us and we took care of him.

Smith: That’s a good story.

Bresnahan: I wasn’t surprised by the reaction over what had happened to him and the respect that people had for him. I was surprised that so many people thought that we would be devastated, the Secret Service agents with him. People came up to me and were giving me condolences. I appreciated that and, you
know, I felt bad, but I knew that he was 90 and I knew that we can’t live forever. I felt bad that he had passed away, but I knew that it was going to happen and so I wasn’t devastated like a family member might be. I happened to attend a memorial service in Vail during his memorial service. During the service his Vail friend done a film of all the people making comments about his life and things where he had touched them. During the film people kept coming up to me and kind of patting me on the back and saying, “We’re sorry.” That was kind of nice and I was very glad that my wife and my daughter got to be a part of the memorial in Palm Desert. That turned out very nice for them, too.

Smith: Clearly they were both very active in this community. I mean, very visible, very much involved, and not just names on a board.

Bresnahan: Oh, you could see them walking down the street a lot of times. He would go into town and get his haircut. He had a barber named Karl. Karl happened to be Mrs. Ford’s hair dresser, too. Karl did haircuts and he did ladies’ hair. So, you would see Mrs. Ford going into Karl’s and you’d see the President going into Karl’s. The Fords would go to Pepe’s for dinner or The Left Bank. They had a series of restaurants around town that they would go to regularly and they were very active in the community.

The big deal was the Fourth of July parade. Every Fourth of July, the Fords were the grand marshals of the parade. And they would sit on Pepe’s deck. If you get a chance to go over to Vail and see that, they would sit up there and watch the parade. And I’ve seen the parade probably every year since 1977 and it hadn’t changed since then. The fire trucks and a real down home AmSmithan Fourth of July parade. The Fords would come every year to do that and every year, he would light the Christmas tree. They would come to Vail and they would hold the Christmas tree lighting. They would wait until he got to Vail to light the town Christmas tree. He often took the grandkids to that.

Smith: He had a good life.
Bresnahan: He did. He had a very good life. He worked pretty hard and he enjoyed his golf.

Smith: And he lived long enough – I mean, poor Lyndon Johnson who died the day before the Vietnam peace agreement was announced – and Gerald Ford lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his way of thinking on the pardon.

Bresnahan: Yes, I think he didn’t have any regrets. He regretted losing the election and you know, when an election’s that close, that had an impact.

Smith: Yes, they wanted an outsider.

Bresnahan: Yes.

Smith: They’re voting against Washington.

Bresnahan: Yes, but he didn’t let that get him down. He was upset about it for awhile and then he got over it.

Smith: Last question. How do you think he should be remembered?

Bresnahan: I think he should be remembered the way that he wanted to be remembered and that was as a person that came in at a time when we were in crisis and straightened the crisis out and carried us through. He would’ve liked to have had another four years to push whatever agenda that he had at the time, but he wanted to be remembered as getting us out of that mess. And for us that were around during that, that was a mess. We had the Vice President involved and we had the President involved and it was a tough crisis for us and he did pull us out of that.

Smith: Perfect.
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Smith: I’m fascinated by your involvement with the Brown case and Thurgood Marshall. How did that come about?

Coleman: Well, I had clerked a year for Mr. Justice Felix Frankfurter and during that year I got to know Mr. Marshall.

Smith: You were, in fact, the first African American law clerk?

Coleman: I am not African American, you call me “colored, Black, Negro” but I’m not African American. I probably had ancestors living in northern Italy, along northern Europe long before you did. I’m serious.

Smith: But you were the first Black law clerk at the court?

Coleman: I knew him from that and it also happened that Thurgood Marshall was born in Baltimore right next to the house where my mother lived, so I had gotten to know of him a long time ago, and I was working at Paul, Weiss at that time in New York. He said, “Well, two weeks from now we’re having a meeting to decide whether we should go after segregation in public grade and high schools. I want you to attend.” So I attended and after that he asked me would I work with him. I said, “I’ve got a full time job.” So I worked at Paul, Weiss until about six o’clock and then I’d go down work with him at the Legal Reform Offices until eleven o’clock p.m. and catch the last train to Philadelphia. I was living in Philadelphia and working in New York.

Smith: What was your role in the actual case? Did you co-author the brief?

Coleman: I wouldn’t say that. Mr. Marshall clearly was really in control. I think I made some great contributions. In fact, if you ever read Simple Justice, you will see – spelling out things I did. I certainly felt how they should handle the case. I think that most people would say that I and Lou Pollak wrote most of the
brief. Lou was, at that time, a professor at Yale, but he had clerked for Rutledge when I had clerked for Frankfurter.

Smith: Did you feel welcome at the Court?

Coleman: Oh, yeah. I had a great time. All of them were very good, the law clerks. My co-clerk was Elliot Lee Richardson, later of Watergate fame and also held at different times three Cabinet office - we’d gone to school together. No, I had a good time, although I must confess that one time when I was working with Justice Frankfurter, Elliot stuck his head in and said, “We’ll go down to the Mayflower to eat.” I said, “I’ll be out in fifteen minutes.” When I got out Elliot said, “It’s kind of late, let’s eat at the railroad station.” So I ate there and when we came back I noticed that Richardson and Frankfurter were crying, and they were crying because Elliot had called the Mayflower and the Mayflower said they wouldn’t take a black person.

Smith: This would have been in the mid 40s?

Coleman: This is 1948-49.

Smith: Your paths first crossed with President Ford, because of the Warren Commission?

Coleman: Yes, the Warren Commission. I was one of the senior counsels on the Warren Commission. He was a member and I got to know him then. Also, I’m pretty sure I visited him with Thurgood Marshall to talk about certain civil rights issues.

Smith: How responsive was he?

Coleman: He was superb. I think when the history is written it will demonstrate that people like President Ford and Eisenhower did much more to bring about change than anybody else, although a lot of other people talked about it.

Smith: It’s interesting, because in the case of Eisenhower, the famous Eisenhower judges who…

Coleman: Very significant. I got to meet Eisenhower because my wife’s father was a doctor in New Orleans, and he was on the Republican delegation to the ’52
convention. He and a gentleman named John Minor Wisdom, who went on to be a great judge, were the two that led that delegation from Taft to Eisenhower. So Eisenhower always was very nice to me, and I really got to know him fairly well.

Smith: How hard has it been over the years defending your Republican status?

Coleman: Well, it’s been hard, I think in part because the Republicans really never tell the true story. There’s a wonderful book by a guy named Norton on Eisenhower and the civil rights movement and he has in it things that Eisenhower did that even I didn’t know. For example, after the Supreme Court decided the Brown case, it set it down for re-argument on what the decree should be. Well, before the re-argument, Eisenhower ordered all the schools in the District of Columbia to be desegregated, which is something I never knew. But he just did it. I knew enough about the military to know that they have a certain pattern and he warned, felt that it was wrong for any President to ever interfere and put troops in a state. And secondly, he felt, after he’d been in for some time, that there should be desegregation.

I talked to him once and he said two things changed his mind. One: “when I went to high school there were no blacks; I then go to West Point and there are no blacks; I then, like any other military man, get sent South to train and there were no blacks in key positions.” He said, “the two things that changed my mind was - one: the Tuskegee Airmen who flew and never lost a bomber. They flew and they really protected.” Also, and I had this verified by a German, when we start going through Europe, the Germans felt if you let the armed U.S. troops go through, that the people carrying the goods and military supplies were the black people and they would be scared to go through. But they all went through. Finally at the Battle of the Bulge, something that very few people know, for three days the blacks held that line until General Patton got there. Those are the things that really changed Eisenhower’s mind.

Another thing, the first key person to ever work at the White House with Eisenhower…
Smith: Was it Frederick Morrow that was on the White House staff. Did you know Fred Morrow?

Coleman: Well, I thought the guy’s last name was Rice. Wasn’t it Emmett Rice? Now it’s his daughter who is the one appointed to the UN. I think you will find it was Emmett Rice, he was a great economist. Also there is another story, and the American people just have not understood life. There is a guy, Wilkins out of Chicago, a lawyer who was the deputy secretary of labor. At that time the secretary of labor was somebody who never attended Cabinet meeting. So Wilkins had attended all just about of them. So Eisenhower was the one that started the Branch Rickey Commission, really to help get blacks in. I was on the Branch Rickey Commission, so I got to know him again there.

Smith: One sensed with Eisenhower, across the board, not just with this issue, that, “The job of the President is to persuade, not publicize.”

Coleman: That’s right, and that’s been the great tragedy. Now if you’ll read this Norton book you’ll find out that Lyndon Johnson was admired very much. In fact, I voted for him when he ran against Goldwater. But Senator Johnson would not let them put the provision in the [1957] bill dealing with voting. He stopped that, of course. When he got to be President he put it through, so he gets all the credit. But Eisenhower had drawn a bill and that was part of the bill, but he [LBJ] wouldn’t let it go through.

Smith: He offered you an appellate judgeship, didn’t he?

Coleman: Who?

Smith: Lyndon Johnson.

Coleman: Oh, Lyndon Johnson. Yeah, he offered me to be on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit - but I said no because I had three kids to support. The interesting thing is that what it was, he was in a big fight with Joe Clark, who was the senator, over what they were doing – with Vietnam or North Korea – one of them, one of those battles going on. But I was practicing over at Richardson Dilworth, which were also the leading Democrat in Philadelphia,
so Johnson felt if he nominated me that Joe Clark couldn’t attack me for some reason. But I told him no.

And [I’ve] also been told there is this document which says when he nominated Thurgood Marshall for the Supreme Court of the United States, that if Marshall had not gotten through, that he was going to nominate me. I know that because one guy who was on the committee afterwards saw me and said, “You know the vote was tied, but then I realized that Marshall was your friend, so I voted for him.” So my practice of law continued.

Smith: Let’s go back to the Warren Commission. What was Ford’s contribution to that commission?

Coleman: Well, Ford – they all insisted that it be done right. Earl Warren and Ford, and it was a long time when they rejected the idea that Senator – senior senator from Pennsylvania – Arlen Specter had. They rejected it, but finally they all found the backup facts to believe him. My responsibilities were to determine whether it was a foreign conspiracy, whether Castro had anything to do with it, whether the Russians had anything to do with it, and that part. Specter was the one that really developed the one bullet, and it turned out – I think he’s right – it’s been fifty-five or sixty years now and nobody has come up with somebody else.

Smith: Has any information that has surfaced since then, done anything to affect your conclusion, particularly in terms of foreign involvement?

Coleman: No, I think it was right and actually something we didn’t put in the report, I guess I can say it now, was that Oswald, when he saw his wife who was separated from him, said, “By the next day you will know something about me which will make me very important.” We certainly didn’t think we should say that the reason why he killed the president was because he was trying to satisfy his wife.

Smith: You know, that’s fascinating, because one of the things that President Ford said in the last years of his life went very much to this theory that marital problems, including sexual problems, may, in fact, have…
Coleman: That’s why we would not put that in the report because nobody would believe it. But he was the guy. And another problem we had was that when it happened, the Russians thought that somehow they were involved in it because they had had Oswald up in Minsk for about a year or two training. When they went out on hunting - the rule was, the men couldn’t come back until every guy had shot the animal. And Oswald was such a lousy shot that he couldn’t hit the person, so finally, somebody would stand behind him and shoot so he thought he got one so they could come back.

But when he was in the Marine Corps, he was given the highest rating as sharpshooter. So we just felt that there were people in Russia that were trying to make themselves look good, because they thought that if they trained the guy that killed the President of the United States - our relationships weren’t that great at that time. And also at the time with Castro – found out that he had nothing to do with it.

Smith: But did you know, at that time, what was revealed, in fact, during the Ford presidency with the CIA revelations about the plots against Castro, about the attempts of the American government to eliminate Castro?

Coleman: Oh, yeah, we knew. The Secret Service and the CIA gave us all the information that we needed, Earl Warren insisted and President Ford. They read the documents and they were as prepared as we were when we briefed them.

Smith: How did you become secretary of transportation?

Coleman: Well, I was sitting in my office one day and I got a call from Don Rumsfeld saying would I come down and see the president tomorrow? I met him and talked with him and then he offered me – the first three jobs I turned down-

Smith: Do you know what they were?

Coleman: Well, one was another Cabinet spot and then there was one at the UN, and he then said secretary of transportation. I really didn’t know they had a Department of Transportation, I didn’t know what the hell the guy did, and really you could never say to man like Ford, “I don’t know what you’re
talking about.” So I said, “Let me think about that one.” I went home, fortunately my daughter was home from Yale Law School that weekend, and she said you should do it, because they didn’t have that many people in the Cabinet. I called President Ford and said, “If you still want me, I’ll be willing to do it.” So I did it.

Smith: And it is an extraordinary agenda that you had.

Coleman: Oh yeah.

Smith: Talk about déjà vu, the energy crisis, the fifty-five mile per hour speed limit, which of course today, conservatives all want to repeal. The reorganization of railroads.

Coleman: Railroads, the Concorde coming to the United States. More important, when I took office, twenty five percent of the highway system was not completed, tied up with mainly environmental problems.

Smith: That’s the Interstate Highway System.

Coleman: Interstate Highway and I got them all unglued and got the money to do them all. The one mistake I made was, I did not insist that they change the federal tax from a certain cents to a percentage. Because if it had been a percentage they’d have much more money. There was a memo in a file…so they really, really wouldn’t affect the price charged because the dealer would take that in consideration when he fixed his price.


Coleman: There were two miles done when I got in. And the only thing the federal government would say, they would lend a billion dollars to Metro. Fortunately, I had a wonderful lady working with me, and at the end 118 miles was planned and it all got done. I must say the Mayor of Washington helped me a lot because he was willing to take some of the highway money and put it into transit and that helped us to get moving, and after that we got the rest of the money.

Smith: The landing rights for the Concorde. That must have been controversial.
Coleman: Oh, yes, it was very controversial. The French and the British were saying, well we won’t let it land because we (the US), at one time, were trying to do a high speed plane and we stopped doing it and therefore we didn’t want our competitors coming in. And there were all types of information, what it would do to surrounding territories. So I thought that the best thing to do was have a public hearing. I sat in the public hearing and actually somebody told me that the British wouldn’t come in, but they did come in. Then I wrote the report and at least the Second Circuit said I thought it was a good report. Did you ever read the Second Circuit opinion?

Smith: No, I haven’t.

Coleman: I also did the same thing on I-66, which was all jammed up. I felt that the Secretary should sit down and hold a public hearing, then write an opinion as to why he did things.

Smith: And what happened on I-66?

Coleman: On I-66 for umpteen years, that’s the one that goes right outside of Washington. It wasn’t built because some people thought it was environmentally unsound. It was too wide, not narrow enough, and I just got it done, and also talked to the governor then, and I said, “Well, also, you’ve got to make sure that your employment figures for people doing the job reflects the people that live in the area.” And he said, “Are you trying to blackmail me?” And I said, “I don’t think you should use the word blackmail anymore.” He turned out to be a good friend.

Smith: The requirement of airbags in automobiles.

Coleman: Oh yeah. Once again, we had people to look at it and what would happen and I had a very good general counsel, a guy named John Hart Ely, and we really worked on it and got it done.

Smith: Also, fuel efficiency standards.

Coleman: Oh yeah. President Ford was good, and if we’d had another week, I think we would have won the election, and I think…
Smith: I’m struck by all of these elements. If you put yourself in today’s Republican Party, I’m not sure any of these would get majority support. They would be seen as government overreaching.

Coleman: I thought they were necessary to do, and we did them.

Smith: So where does that put him on the spectrum – certainly he was a fiscal conservative.

Coleman: He was a fiscal conservative, but he understood what had to be done, therefore he did it. He was not for just spending federal money to do things that don’t make sense. But for those, it made sense. Once I got a system where I could also get people employed, like building the railroads and everything, like from Washington to Boston, I just slipped that in. But instead of saying they have to be black, I would just say it would have to people similar to those that live in the neighborhoods. Well, hells bells, _______. And we really did it. We had a good time.

Smith: Can you think of an instance where he overrode you on something?

Coleman: No, I can’t think of an instance, but I know an instance where he wanted to override me. Ed Levi came in one day, the attorney general, to a Cabinet meeting. And his first issue was, what do we do with New York? The A.G Levi thought that you give them money and let them work the system out. Ford kind of passed over that, and the other issue was the bussing in Boston. The Attorney General said we should stay out of that and his solicitor general wanted to file a brief on the side of the white parents - that it was illegal and everything, and I finally said, “You know, this really amazed me. You talk about the first problem and you’ve got one mayor who is supposed to spend all this money and do everything, but yet, when you talk about a federal judge who is the only one trying to change the system, that you shouldn’t let him do that.” I went on and on.

President Ford finally said, “You know, Bill, I never believed in bussing. When I played football, even when I got hurt, I still walked to school.” I said, “Mr. President, if you would go on the television and say that’s the reason
why you’re against it, I’ll support you.” He kind of laughed and we stayed out of the case and then what happened in Boston happened.

No, he was a very decent guy. Not only that, but on his foreign policy, he and Kissinger, first time our nation really recognized the Chinese, he got the problem dealing with Formosa/Taiwan, whatever you want to call it, and he was really solid and I think, with all due respect to President Carter, if he’d won the election again, I think we’d have a better country today.

Smith: How did he use the Cabinet? What were Cabinet meetings like?

Coleman: Well, he’d have a Cabinet meeting, but more important, on Saturdays, he would make himself available from one to five. The reason not until one was because he and Tip O’Neill used to play golf in the morning and then he’d come in at one o’clock. You’d raise the problem and he’d sit there as a judge sometimes, and Jim Lynn would have his ideas, I’d have my idea. One thing - Jim Lynn could read my report but I couldn’t read his. I thought that was unfair, so we finally got so the Cabinet officer could read the report of Jim Lynn to head up the OMD and that really was a good idea. On the other hand he would leave to go off to Asia.

Smith: Did he encourage back and forth debate within the Cabinet?

Coleman: Oh yeah, back and forth with the Secretary of Treasury. No we’d have real debates. I remember one time when the Attorney General came, said that we decided that no Cabinet officer could use the car to go to and from work except the Secretary of State, the Secretary of the Treasury, the Attorney General, and Secretary of Defense. I said, “Why are you exempting them?” They said, “Well, they get threatened all the time.” I turned to Carla Hills, Secretary of HUD and said, “Carla, tomorrow morning write me a letter threatening me and I’ll write you one.” So we kept the cars. We had a good time. But he listened, he was bright. And sometimes he said, “Let me think about it,” and come back the next day.

Smith: You said he was bright. There is this notion, the stumbler and all this sort of thing…the old line that LBJ stuck on him. Tell me about his intelligence.
Coleman: In fact, a young man who was in his class at Yale said that he got the highest grade in the course on how you handle governmental ethics. That he got the highest grade. He was an awfully good student at Yale, did quite well, and he was a good lawyer. He and Phil Buchen – they were good lawyers. Levi was a very good lawyer. They would talk – really talk legal issues and really demand you come back or write up what you want to do. Like on the Concorde, I just said, “Chief, stay out of it – and I’ll let you know five minutes before I announce it. One remedy is that you could fire me other than that - just stay out of it.” So that’s the way it happened.

Smith: He probably appreciated that.

Coleman: Oh, we were always good friends. Afterwards I got him to go on one of the boards I was on.

Smith: One of the interesting things about him - clearly he was perfectly comfortable surrounding himself with people of high IQ and combative personalities.

Coleman: And he brought Elliot Richardson back from London to become secretary of what? Education, I think. No, he was really bright and he really knew how to run the government. The whole time he never had a majority in the House or the Senate, but he got most of the bills through.

Smith: How did you observe the Kissinger-Ford relationship?

Coleman: They respected each other. Henry obviously was very bright. But I think on most issues, President Ford would agree with Henry, and there was no conflict of that type. Kissinger is awfully bright.

Smith: It is interesting, for example - and Ford tried to make it clear there was nothing personal - but that he simply believed it was better policy if the National Security Advisor did not also wear the hat of Secretary of State. That it was supposed to be, not an adversarial relationship, but differing.

Coleman: Brent Scowcroft was a superb person, it really worked. We had some issues and Carla Hills had some issues, and she was able to get a lot done.

Smith: He was a strong supporter of mass transit.
Coleman: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Again, I say it with a certain element of surprise in my voice, because you don’t think of more recent Republican presidents, in particular, as favoring this agenda.

Coleman: Oh, come on. That’s not true – you wouldn’t have the highway system if it weren’t for Eisenhower.

Smith: No, no, I’m saying more recent. Ronald Reagan’s view of government, which has prevailed in the Republican Party for a generation, I would respectfully suggest would be less inclined to support these kinds of initiatives.

Coleman: Yeah, but I think the present President Bush has gotten a lot of unfair raps. I know for a fact that at 10:45 on the last day that he [Clinton] was in office, he told the new Bush that the guy had the weapons – and that’s why Senator Hillary Clinton has never come out against him, or it probably would have lost her the nomination. But not only that, you’ve got to recognize that after the Kuwait invasion, and they got out, and I thought Jim Baker and Colin Powell were very skillful in bringing that about, there were nineteen resolutions passed by the Security Council, each one saying that he’s got to let the inspectors in. He wouldn’t let the inspectors in.

Finally, when they got to the last time, the French wouldn’t agree and Colin, who met with them and said, “Well, how much time do you want?” And he said, “Nine more months.” So at the end of the nine months if he hadn’t let us in, we could then go in with you. And the French said, “No we can’t guarantee we’d do that.” And then Colin said, “Well, do you realize that we’ve got a fleet out there and it’s costing us x dollars a month to do, and under the NATO your pro rata share is x. Would you at least pay?” They said no, and that’s when President Bush ordered the U.S. troops to go in.

I really think that the problem was after going in, nobody knew that the Shi’ites and the Sunnis and the Kurds were separated, and I blame that on the universities. Nobody came down. I also blame it on the fact that shortly after they went in, the Democrats that originally supported him, began to say, “Call
off the troops.” Now if you were an Iraqi not knowing which side to pick, what would you do? I just really think that somebody has really got to do that.

Smith: Tell me about probably the most historic initiative to come out of the Ford presidency, one that was in your bailiwick, and that was deregulation. Beginning with the trucking, and…

Coleman: Trucking deregulation and then we halfway did deregulation with aviation industries and carriers, but that finally got completed under the next people.

Smith: How difficult was that to do?

Coleman: Well, all I’m saying is, when I have to go over to tell the union for the trucking that we were going to support deregulation, the guy threatened to throw me out of the fifth floor. Actually, it was helped because Kennedy, at that time had a superb staffer. It was Justice Breyer, then a staff member in Senator Kennedy’s office. I know Justice Breyer and we worked it out and we got that one done. And Ford, at the end, would not do something else unless they did that. So that’s how that got accomplished.

Smith: Why would the trucking industry, or the unions, in particular, object to deregulation?

Coleman: Because they thought that would affect their bargaining power and how much money they’d get. As long as you had the regulation, and the regulators pretty much catered to the unions, therefore the unions got what they wanted. Look at the automobile situation now. You’ve got new people coming in with these foreign cars, they’re making cars in various places in the United States, and they are charging much less money and not making as good cars. You just have to make a readjustment, and I’m pretty sure anytime a Republican tries to make a readjustment, they say he just doesn’t think much of labor. That just isn’t true. You’ve got to realize what you have to do.

Smith: I know President Ford philosophically was committed to economic deregulation. The railroad – that was part of the package, wasn’t it?

Coleman: No, because we spent so much money. I really can’t remember, you ask me stuff about twenty-five, thirty years ago, I don’t remember when we got
started. I do know though, that I was very much against what we ultimately
did, namely to create Amtrak. What I thought should have happened, was that
the Pennsylvania Railroad, that half would be sold to the Southern Railroad
and the other half to the Chessie. And I say that only to give credit to Liz
Dole, because that is what she did. And it is much better now that she did it. I
tried to do that and I couldn’t get anywhere because the federal district judge
in New York that was handling the bankruptcy just wouldn’t listen to me. He
thought his idea was better. And so they did and they lost money for seven
years and then Liz Dole came in and she also did a better job on the
Pennsylvania railroad station idea. I tried like hell, but she was the one that
really straightened it out.

Smith: Did you oppose Amtrak conceptually?

Coleman: Well, I said it should not be made into a governmental corporation. It was
Consolidated Railroads or something. I said the way to do it was to sell half of
the whole Pennsylvania line and split it up that way, and then you’d have two
lines who competed with each other. And that’s what’s done now.

Smith: And the airline industry. How did that begin?

Coleman: Well, we were working on that. I was only there about twenty-two months
and the pay was lousy – but we were working on that. Now I really felt that
what you should do is either have two U.S. airlines who were awfully good to
handle the foreign stuff and then have the other handle the travel in the United
States. Or you could say that you divide the world into four parts and have
them divide it up that way. Now we represent Northwest and they just merged
into Delta. I told them the next step is that they should get one of the foreign
airlines, I think Chinese airline or the Brit and put it together because that’s
what you really need to make the money these days.

Smith: Do you regret airline deregulation in light of all that’s occurred?

Coleman: Well, what I regret is that we didn’t stay in long enough to really work these
things out. I worked out with the automobiles the whole question of the
airbags. How you had to do it: you had to talk to each one separately and
together. And I remember that I talked to all of them, because I said it should
only be $50 or $55 for the airbag. One guy insisted that I should say $55, but a cost adjustment for each year, if prices went up. I agreed to that.

Then I realized, when the other person came in, he never asked that. I thought it would be the worst thing in the world for him to go back to Detroit with a worse deal than the other guy got. And I just said, “Look, if you ask me for this, I think I’ll give it to you.” And he was surprised and he went back and he finally called and was very thankful. You’re working with people, but you really got to – I think the Cabinet officer has to get his or her hands dirty and really get into it. What bothers me now is that, usually, the Cabinet officer doesn’t get that far into it. I think that’s what you have to do.

Smith: And Ford supported you on each of these initiatives?

Coleman: Oh yeah. President Ford always supported me. But I had known him from the Warren Commission and he thought I was pretty reliable.

Smith: Was there a line between politics and policy?

Coleman: No, he really meant that – he said you do what you think is right. Because in Memphis with whether the road went through the park – he said, “I don’t want you to handle that based upon the fact that I’d get more votes one way or the other. I want you to do what’s right.” Constantly he did that. No, he was a good person. I think if we had another – and I think what killed him was that investigation they had about whether he’d taken some money from unions or something, and it took about four more weeks to get done, showing that he had nothing to do with it. Another week and I think we would have taken it.

Smith: You saw him every year at the reunions, presumably.

Coleman: I saw him every year at the reunions, but also he was on a board with me and I saw him – I think it was Amex – he went on that board with me.

Smith: Tell me about that, because he took a rap in some quarters for going on boards and supposedly commercializing the ex-presidency.

Coleman: No, we made some great contributions. We got some important business and corporate things done. And also I saw him because my next door neighbor,
Joe Robert, has a place in Beaver Creek and I’d go to see him. Then Ford had a place there and we’d always go down and see him. So, I saw him and I would talk to him some on the phone. And if I went to California, because our law firm has a big office there, I’d drop in. He and his wife were always very, very nice to me.

Smith: Tell me about his service on the Amex board. What did he contribute?

Coleman: Well, he contributed. We had the whole question of whether – sometimes it was price regulation and how to handle that – or whether we should be exempt. And then we had some other questions as far as international relations, which were very important things. The company was very successful at the time he was on, the time I was on it. They finally sold it to somebody else and I don’t think it’s as successful as it was, but it was very successful.

Smith: But he was a very active board member?

Coleman: He was very active. He did other than just sit there – he was very active and he would talk.

Smith: Did he ever tell you about his college football player friend Willis Ward, the African American player.

Coleman: By the end of this present administration of the new guy – I want you guys to call us something other than African Americans.

Smith: Fair enough. But that friendship clearly influenced him for life.

Coleman: Oh, sure. He was a real guy and he touched all the time and he was very close to Thurgood Marshall.

Smith: Was he?

Coleman: Oh, yeah. Thurgood thought a lot of him, because a lot of time he’d go see him and get things done or otherwise wouldn’t...No I think his heart was in the right place. But he wanted to do what’s right, and he made great strides, put me in the Cabinet, he put Carla Hills in the Cabinet.
Smith: In fact, you were the first black Republican Cabinet officer.

Coleman: Bob Weaver is supposed to be the first who was appointed by Johnson to HUD, but I always say he was the second, I was the third. You know who the first one was? Alexander Hamilton. He had one-sixteenth black blood in him. No, really. If you go back and read the debates on the Constitution, you can feel that he wanted to do more than that Three-Fifths clause. I always felt that Alexander Hamilton was so superior to Thomas Jefferson that it wasn’t even funny. But that’s alright. When I correct people sometimes, they look at me kind of funny.

Smith: Tell me something about Gerald Ford that most people don’t know – something that might surprise people – maybe at odds with the public image.

Coleman: I don’t think it should surprise, but I think until three weeks before the election he was as friendly to the Democrats as he was to the Republicans. He could cross the aisle and get things done. And secondly, I think he knew more about the world than people thought when he took office. And thirdly, that he was a very decent man and he wanted what I want for this country, just to be the greatest country in the world and that we’re all American citizens with different abilities and take advantage of them. We’ve got to do a better job of educating our children than what we’ve done before. And that’s all I know about him.

Smith: Were you in the Cabinet, I know you joined the Cabinet in ’75, do you remember when in ’75?

Coleman: About late January of ‘75

Smith: So you were there, you were in the administration, for example, when Saigon fell in April of ‘75?

Coleman: Oh, yeah. When we had to pull them out. I was sitting at the dinner one night and I was sitting next to the head of the Navy and the Coast Guard was under me and I jokingly said, “Well if your Navy can’t get those guys off the beach, I’m pretty sure my Coast Guard can.” He did not like that humor. But he stayed nice to me afterwards.
Now there was a break down because the problem under Lyndon Johnson - when you start to say, “I’m not going to give you any more money, I’m not going to give you troops,” you lose. And I just think that we made mistakes there the same way on this whole question of North Korea having the atomic weapon and the Iranians having something. People criticize Bush, but if anybody is to be criticized it really should be Clinton because his secretary is the one who went there and negotiated and he said, “Oh yes, I’m making point A and if you give me so much money in food, I’ll clean up” and that was done. So he actually was making point B, and that’s why we’re still having the problem now. In the meantime they certainly knew how to move it down to Iran. Those are real tough issues.

Smith: Did you ever discuss, after the fact obviously, the Nixon pardon with him as a lawyer?

Coleman: Well, he discussed it with me only because there were several times I discussed it – brought it up. I told him I thought he was right. There is no evidence that Nixon ever knew anything about the break in. The only evidence was after the break in, that he knew about it and felt that if it were disclosed the wrong way, it would adversely affect him as the Presidential election was in full force.

I told him I had a partner, Richardson Dilworth, who was a great one in Philadelphia. He was running for governor. It turned out that one of the secretaries, administrative aides, who worked for one of the richest partners in our firm, a guy named Doug Paxson, that she took some of his money and they found out about it and said don’t do it again. But she kept on working there. Well, a year later when Dilworth was in the midst of campaign, they found out she stole more money from the same guy. And they said, oh you’ve got to fire her – get rid of her. Dilworth said you can’t do that, can you imagine what the press would say if I’ve got some person working for me and twice they steal money and they’re still working? How in hell could I be a good governor – so we just dropped the matter.

It’s just something that you do. I’ll never forget that and I just felt the same way about that. Or the same thing that really adversely affected President
Ford when that false accusation was made about the union. By the time they got it cleared up, because Levi moved very slowly on it, they’d had only about two weeks with that clearing up.

Smith: Ford was lucky. He lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his way of thinking, I think, on the pardon.

Coleman: And he stepped in at a very difficult time. The country could have really gone into a real crisis and he stepped in and did what’s right, and the man he put on the Supreme Court certainly is no “conservative” – he’s a liberal – very good. I had to read all his opinions before…

Smith: How did that come about?

Coleman: When he got the vacancy, Ford had Levi read them all, he had me read them all, I think Carla Hills read them all. And he talked with him. That’s the one that he thought should take. He took him and he performed as a good justice, not liberal, not conservative. He does what’s right.

Smith: It’s interesting, he was probably one of the last justices appointed on the sheer basis of ability – without ideology entering into the equation. He told us, because we interviewed him, he told us in his confirmation hearings no one asked him about abortion. Which also suggests what a different climate prevailed then.

Coleman: Abortion is a tough issue, and even a worse one is whether people of the same sex can do something and call it a marriage. As long as they can do it, it’s legal, you can’t use a word which traditionally means something else, and I blame the newspapers for that – I think the newspapers are not what they used to be.

Smith: Last question: were you surprised at all when he died and there was really such an outpouring. And it seemed to grow as the week went along. Did that surprise you at all – that the people responded?

Coleman: No, in retrospect, people think that he made a difference. Just like a great baseball player – he hits that home run in the World Series – he made a difference. And people realize that. After he left, he certainly remained
interested in public matters, but he didn’t interfere and I think he was treated well because he had done a good job and people realized that. And they felt Carter did a terrible job. Okay, you’ve kept your word, it’s twenty minutes to twelve.

Smith: Thank you.
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Smith: First of all, thank you very much for doing this. We appreciate it. Tell us a little bit about the paths, both personal and professional; that you traveled that eventually crossed paths with Gerald Ford.

Gill: I came over from Michigan State in 1957. In the fall of ’57, when he was running for re-election as Congressman - he’d already been in office, I think, about ten years by that time. I went to work for a television station here in town, the leading TV station owned by Time-Life Broadcasting, and Jerry would literally work himself to a lather on election day, even. Walking the streets, going from house to house, right up until eight o’clock, until the polls closed. Then he would come to the station because we had people out at all the different clerks’ offices, waiting for the returns to come in and we’d have them first. He’d come over and sit and watch the returns come in.

I had a lot of fun with him because he was so tired he’d fall asleep. We had a room next to the newsroom in those days. We had groups come down and wait – kids groups would come down and wait to go on the air. I’d help him get a table set up and he’d lay down on the table and go to sleep. I remember once going up, I guess part of that first year, and seeing Jerry. I knew he had a good sense of humor, he really did, and I’d shake him and I’d say, “Hey, jeez I’m sorry. You’d better come look at the returns.” And he’d come look at them at them and, boy, just light up. Because he was always way ahead.

Smith: That’s interesting because he really never had a competitive race after the first one.

Gill: No, he beat a guy who was an absolute Neanderthal.

Smith: Barney Jonkman.

Gill: Jonkman, I think, was his name. Yeah. And I think Arthur Vandenberg, who was senator then, talked him into running against Jonkman.
Smith: On what do you base that?

Gill: About Vandenberg? I probably read it somewhere at some point. I did not get it from Jerry. I don’t know that because that was probably ten years before I came to town.

Smith: But his dad had been active in local Republican politics.

Gill: Yes.

Smith: President Ford’s father would have known Vandenberg.

Gill: Yes, he would have.

Smith: Did you know his parents?

Gill: I did not, I didn’t know either one of them. And actually I never really knew his family that well. I knew Betty, but I didn’t know the kids. The kids were young then and growing up, and they didn’t bring them to meetings and they tried to keep them, I think, kind of out of it.

Smith: Again, it’s remarkable someone who really didn’t have to campaign at all, would campaign as hard as he did. Was it partly just because he loved campaigning?

Gill: I think Betty Ford, really a swell person, married a young attorney and thought that she was going to settle down in Grand Rapids, Michigan and have a nice family, and when he got the scent of the political trail – he never, never would have gotten off. And he never did. I think she, and I’ve got to tell you, I felt so bad for her at times because she felt so bad that she had lost him, lost him to politics.

Smith: Now, what leads you to that? Are we talking about the early days now?

Gill: Well, the early days and the late days. For example in the national convention in Chicago, I covered that for the station. I was given the assignment of following him everywhere because by now it had become fairly well, at least
rumored at that time, that Nixon had asked him to be his vice presidential running mate.

*This section redacted for Gill’s lifetime*

The happiest day of her life, and I think, I’m sure you were here at that time, I was with the city and I ran the news media for the – was it when he came back as president, or when we opened the Museum – I had the news media – when they had the performance in the Grand Hall – were you here for that?

Smith: No, I was not.

Gill: Okay. They had the performance in the Grand Hall and they had all of Jerry Ford’s favorite people, as far as entertainers go. One of them was Bob Hope. Bob Hope and Betty danced on the stage and I’m telling you, it was just magic. She was just absolutely flying. It must have been the opening of the Museum because, if he was past being president, or she wouldn’t have been that happy. She was just a kid again.

Smith: You could tell – almost night and day.

Gill: Yeah – like throwing a switch.

Smith: Of course, by that time, too, they’d had the intervention and she had beaten the alcohol and the pills, so it was a whole new life, as well.

Gill: Oh, yeah. It’s a real question in my mind as to who did more for the country, Jerry or Betty.

Smith: Well, you stop and think – we were talking to Dorothy Dowton, who had been his personal secretary in the White House, earlier today. And Dorothy is someone, who, like a lot of women, had a bout with breast cancer. She confirmed that it was simply something you just didn’t acknowledge. It was in the closet and Betty Ford, almost singlehandedly, changed that.

Gill: Oh, she singlehandedly did. My wife had breast cancer, too, and had it removed at the Betty Ford Breast Center here in town.
Smith: Really?

Gill: Yeah.

Smith: Grand Rapids has obviously changed physically a lot – and I think probably culturally a lot, too. Take us back to the late 50s, early 60s, when Congressman Ford had become sort of a local institution, but was just beginning to be a national figure.

Gill: Physically, you mean the town?

Smith: Both physically and culturally.

Gill: I came over, got this job offer from the station while I was still at Michigan State. As a matter of fact, I drove over here every night for the first six months because I was still going to school during the day and they wanted me to work. “If you want to work a job here, come now.” So, I came. I had brought my wife over before I accepted, and we drove up and down Monroe Avenue. Where Old Kent Bank is now and the gas company were old factory buildings. They were all shuttered. There were people living in them with their little hot plate things – cooking soup, cooking whatever they could. Every once in a while a fire would start and the firemen would come and put it out and two or three nights later, same thing. The town was grey.

Smith: Shabby?

Gill: Oh, way beyond shabby – way, way.

Smith: What was here, on the current site of the Ford Museum?

Gill: What was here – I believe at that time Voigt Mills may have been here, or perhaps nothing more than a few rambling buildings, factory buildings. There was a mill right downtown; the flour mill, Voigt Mills, and they had a wheel going and that’s why the dam and rapids and all that. There was an island in the middle of the river and they closed that in. It’s just amazing. The hotel – Pantlind – was all but down and out – run by a couple of brothers – the Roberts brothers. I’d go down there and eat once in a while and we went
down there – I’ll never forget – my wife and I went down one evening because it was supposed to be the last day that the hotel would be open, or something like that.

I was having dinner and one of the Roberts brothers – one of them was the upfront man – the other one ran the kitchen, and he came over and he says, “Hey, can I join you? I have something to tell you.” I said, sure. So he sat down. He said, “This is the happiest day of my life.” He said, “Rich DeVos just bought the hotel and he’s really going to fix it up.” He says, “I’ve got to show you around.” And he insisted, after we had dinner he took us all over the hotel, showed us the Presidential Suite up on the top floor. And he was so happy, and rightly so. And they have really turned things around, the people like DeVos, Van Andel, Secchia, although Secchia sometimes…

Smith: A bit of a lightning rod?

Gill: Oh, my, yes. I think there is nothing more typical about Pete than his story about when he was named ambassador. I’m sure you know this one. They took him out – I think he went down to Naples, and they took him out in a glass-bottomed boat to show him around the harbor and fish, whatever. And he’s sitting there looking down, and he’s being introduced to the media in Italy as the new ambassador. And he says, “Ah, there’s what’s left of the Italian navy that we sunk.” Something along that line.

Smith: Not very diplomatic.

Gill: Incredible. He and I never really saw eye to eye. I’ll leave it at that. We’ve had some good run-ins. Of course, he’s got money and I don’t.

Smith: The river, obviously, has only recently been rediscovered.

Gill: Yup.

Smith: What was it like fifty years ago?

Gill: It was not totally unlike what it is now. You have the fish ladder, you have all this lovely stuff along the banks now. Of course, the buildings and structures
along the banks made it look trashy, indeed. They have cleaned it up, thanks a lot to the environmental efforts.

I’ll tell you a little story about a guy I worked for. I was in charge of public relations/advertising for Union Bank, which turned into Chase now. The Frey family owned it. Ed Frey hired me because he was going to tear down old City Hall. I didn’t know that’s why he hired me at the time. The elastic between him and the community. But anyway, he had a great idea. He was going to have a marina right downtown and he spent a lot of money having engineers look into it. Finally, I think what really killed it was the Corps of Engineers couldn’t be persuaded to dredge all the way from here to Lake Michigan, which is what they would have had to have done.

Smith: And presumably that would have required Congressman Ford’s support.

Gill: Well, it would have, and he would have had that, I’m sure. But I just don’t think – maybe Jerry told him it can’t be done.

Smith: Let me ask you something because it’s a funny story, because it’s counterintuitive – the Sandy Calder sculpture must have divided the community.

Gill: Oh, fun. People put wrecked cars there the night before the dedication – on the plaza. They wanted a fountain, for God’s sake. When they didn’t get it…Bob Blandford, who was a city commissioner at the time, and really a gusto guy, he had a wrecked car dragged in and put on the plaza. We had to get it out of there in a hurry.

Smith: It’s interesting because Ford secured the funding through the National Endowment, either for the Humanities or the Arts. By his own acknowledgement, at that point he had never heard of Alexander Calder.

Gill: Yeah.

Smith: But I guess took a real interest in seeing it.
Gill: Well, there were a couple of people who made that happen. One was Peter Wege, and Nancy Mulnix, who was just determined to get him to do that. They worked on Jerry a lot and she’s very persuasive. Peter Wege is an heir to the Steelcase fortune and he threw a lot of money at it and Jerry knew where he was coming from, so…

Smith: Is Nancy around?

Gill: Nancy is around. Unfortunately, she had a divorce not long after the situation here. She left town for a lot of years, came back and she is a nurse now somewhere here in town. I ran into her a couple of times.

Smith: She is someone we should talk to. The interesting thing, the sequel is, that apparently – I don’t know whether the opposition died away once the piece was actually installed, but Dick Ford told us the one thing that his brother said about this museum. They wanted to put up a statue of him, and he didn’t want a statue of himself. But the only advice he had was, whatever art you get, make it representational. And, of course, they wound up with the spaceman, recognizing his work with NASA. So, I assume that’s a critique of…although he gave Sandy Calder the Medal of Freedom in the White House.

Gill: Yeah? I’ve got to tell you a Dick Ford funny one. My wife and I rented their condo down in Naples one winter for a couple of weeks. We went down and I’ve always got to head for the john right away whenever we land somewhere, so I’m going to the john, and I go in and I close the door, and here upon the bathroom door is a picture of Jerry looking down like this, and Dick had put something up there, some comic thing. And when we got back I saw Dick somewhere and I said, “You know, that’s the funniest thing ever.” He said, “We’ve got to keep him down to earth. We find ways.” I think he was president at the time.

Smith: It was really interesting, when we were talking with Dick I don’t think he was holding back, but he told us something that astonished me. He said, “This is going to surprise you, but I never talked politics with my brother, because
everyone else did, and usually they wanted something. And so, we had almost a politics-free zone.”

Gill: You know, that’s smart, really, for him, very smart.

Smith: Smarter than some presidential brothers.

Gill: Oh, yeah. We were down in Plains, Georgia once on vacation, going down to Florida. It was the time when Billy Carter had his little gas station going across the street. We went through Plains to see what it was like – to see the peanut store and all that. They had put up a large, artificial Christmas tree in front of the depot on Main Street. Billy had warned them not to do that because he wanted a natural Christmas tree. They’d gone ahead against his wishes. So the last anybody saw of that artificial Christmas tree was a pickup truck dragging it out of town at about forty miles per hour. They were something else. Didn’t he go to Africa or something trying to get business, or something.

Smith: Libya.

Gill: Oh my God.

Smith: Grand Rapids in early 60s – how conservative a town was this?

Gill: How conservative a town was it?

Smith: Yeah, and in particular, the influence of the Dutch Reformed culture and nightlife of the city.

Gill: I’m forgetting. There was no nightlife. This is the greatest stretch GR’s ever made in that direction. And they still don’t have much here to get convention goers to go to. That’s too bad.

Smith: Can you imagine, for example, to take one name of someone who packed the arena. Can you imagine Elton John playing a concert in Grand Rapids in the 60s?
Bill Gill  May 7, 2009

Gill: No, I couldn’t, and, you know, the arena is what has done it. That’s what done it. It has spawned all the other activity around it. Most of it good; some bad, and the bad get shoved out at some point. I’ll tell you just briefly – I don’t know how much time you guys have...

Smith: We’ve got time.

Gill: When I first came over here and was a reporter with the station, we had little towns right around us, close around us – suburban towns – they were thinking about becoming municipalities. They were townships and they wanted to become municipalities because cities were starting to grab property from them, annex it. I was assigned to do a documentary – a half hour documentary, maybe it was an hour - on the pros and cons of becoming a municipality. And so I went out to several little towns and talked to the township people involved. I went to municipalities and talked to them and then I interfaced it – the good, the bad, and hope this helps you make up your mind, gives you some information so you can vote on Tuesday.

I did this and we were going to run it on a Sunday night – this was back when stations could get time in prime time to run their programs. The network didn’t own everything. We got an hour between nine and ten o’clock on Sunday evening, golden time for that kind of thing. We started promoting it – the minute the first promotions hit the air, I get a call from the mayor of one of these little towns – Hudsonville, just south of here between here and Holland. He said, “You’ve got to be kidding me. You can’t show that on Sunday.” And I said, “Why?” He said, “Because we can’t watch television.” I said, “Why?” He said, “Because our religion won’t permit it.” Ugh. I said, “You’re kidding me, aren’t you?” He said, “No, no, no. I’m not kidding you.” I said, “Well, then nobody will be watching from your town and they won’t know it’s on. I’m sorry about that.” He said, “You can’t do this.” I said, “I’m sorry, we’re going to.”

I talked to management. Management said call them back and tell him we’re going to run it at nine o’clock Sunday night. So I called him. He said, “Well, I’ll tell you what, we’re having a special meeting of the city commission
tomorrow night, and we want you and the management from the station to appear before the city commission.” I told the manager, and the manager says, “You go.” So I went out there and they took me apart, practically, and I’d been told to say that we’re going to run it at nine o’clock Sunday evening. Don’t look.

This section redacted for Bill Gill’s lifetime.

The hypocrisy is so thick, was much thicker than now. When we first came here we had a toboggan on top of our car on a Sunday. We’d been asked to come over to some friend’s house for dinner, or brunch, and they were going to go tobogganing, and we had the toboggan on top of the car. We parked in front of their house, got out, started to the door; this guy, friend, said, “Bill, could you park your car around the block, kind of?” He didn’t want anyone to know we were going to go tobogganing Sunday afternoon.

So, I don’t know. It is not as much the fact that they have these beliefs, it is the hypocrisy of them. Did you ever hear of a Dutch antenna? I did a job for Holland and Zeeland, they were going to combine their water and sewer services, and I ran a campaign for them and it worked for them. But while I was over there, this guy, he just moved over from Detroit, and was running this system, and he’d drive me around town to acquaint me with it. And we’d go by a beautiful home, he was telling what they sold for and yabba dabba, and he’d say, “And that one has a Dutch antenna.” And we’d drive on, and he’d see another one. That was in the days when you had antennas on the top of your house. You had to turn them to get the signal, no cable. And he’d say, “That one has a Dutch antenna.” I said, “What is a Dutch antenna?” He said, “They have them in their attic so when they change channels, nobody knows they’re watching TV on Sunday.” It’s the utter hypocrisy of it.

Smith: We were talking to Seymour Padnos and he was describing the late 40s when Ford first ran for Congress. It obviously hadn’t changed much in ten years, but he said that the liberal elements would go out on a Saturday night, buy a Sunday paper, put it aside, read it on Monday.
Gill: Sure…or in the basement, where they had the drinks, also.

Smith: But that’s interesting because [there is] this story in 1948 when Ford decides to run for Congress and he decides he wants to get married. There has always been a little bit of confusion, not so much over the sequence – he indicated to Mrs. Ford early in ’48 that he wanted to get married, but he had something else he had to do first. And he couldn’t tell her this big secret. Well, he was going to take on Jonkman, and he wanted to take him as much as possible by surprise. But it has always been contended that there was a little more to the story than that. That, in fact, he did want to marry her, but he didn’t want to risk marrying her as a divorcée…

Gill: Yeah, I’ve heard that, too.

Smith: …before the primary.

Gill: Yeah, I’ve heard that, too, and I wouldn’t doubt that that’s the truth because Jerry had guile about him. He was a politician.

Smith: Tell us about that.

Gill: Well, he always had the personae of being, and he was, he was a great guy, I loved the guy. I didn’t always agree with all the stuff he did and all the positions he took, but I realized the party was twisting him into it, and I did all I could to help him. But they were out of control at that time, just as they are now – scrapping among one another and wouldn’t agree to anything. I’m trying to think of something specific…

Smith: He clearly was ambitious. He wanted to be Speaker of the House.

Gill: Oh, that’s all he ever wanted to be. That’s all he ever wanted. He didn’t want to be president, he really didn’t.

Smith: You said you were at the ’60 convention, were you at the ’64 convention?

Gill: No, I was not.
Smith: So, here’s someone, now by the mid-60s he becomes Minority Leader, after the Goldwater debacle. And all sorts of additional demands are placed upon him. He’s traveling very extensively. Did he still get home frequently?

Gill: Oh, yeah, he got home. As a matter of fact, I think most of the time he would leave Betty with the kids in Virginia and come home for the weekend. He really took care of his constituents, and he had a good working office here. He had a good staff and you could ask for something and you could be sure that if they didn’t get it, they had done their very best to try to get it for you.

Smith: He excelled at constituent service?

Gill: Oh, yeah, he really took care of anybody that wanted help. He’d try his best to help them. I think that was genuine, too. But he knew he had to do that in order to remain in office, otherwise somebody would come up behind him and start a better campaign than he was doing.

Smith: Tell me, was there a significant African-American population in Grand Rapids.

Gill: They weren’t voting very heavily then at all. And I think the population, this is a guess on my part, ten percent or so at the most – if that. But they weren’t voting hardly at all in those days. And this is what, of course, submitted it for Obama. He had solid support from African-Americans.

Smith: Yeah, but who have predicted that he would have carried Kent County?

Gill: I would have. I worked for him.

Smith: What that suggests is, a lot of folks who liked Gerald Ford, voted for Barak Obama.

Gill: Yup.

Smith: What does that say about the changes?

Gill: Well, the changing times. I think Jerry, if he looked at what Obama’s doing now with the giveaways to banks or to church companies, and all that money
out there, and all that debt he’s building up, I think he’d go nuts. I really do. He wouldn’t be able to stand it.

Smith: He was a true fiscal conservative.

Gill: Yes, he was. And I don’t like this, either. I keep hoping that Obama is going to be a man of his word and will work on reducing the deficit. Otherwise, we’re going to be in worse trouble than we’re in now. So, we’ll see.

Smith: The Republican Party, I take it, as long as Ford was in Congress, was pretty unified here in West Michigan?

Gill: Yeah. They were not like they are today. I don’t know if you are aware of it, but they just booted the Utah governor who was supposed to come here and talk to Kent County Republicans. And this lady who is an absolute Looney Tune makes donuts – she and her husband.

Smith: Do they have holes?

Gill: That is a very good question. She took it upon herself, by herself, to tell him not to come.

Smith: It’s interesting – I don’t mean to get off on a side road, but it is consistent with that. You probably know there is an effort underway, and it’s moving forward, to put a statue of President Ford in the Rotunda of the Capitol.

Gill: I thought that was a done deal.

Smith: It is, but it wasn’t for a long time. And, in fact, what happened was – in some ways he would be very proud of this – it was held up by a couple of Republican state senators in Western Michigan, who ostensibly were claiming that one of the statues of Senator Chandler - which is going to the Detroit Historical Society as part of the deal – that you can’t rewrite history and you shouldn’t move Chandler and so on. Well, in fact, they were refighting the old Reagan/Ford wars. These new conservatives – to whom Jerry Ford is some sort of dangerous liberal.

Gill: Yeah.
Smith: And, in the end, what happened was that at the end of the session, it was coming right down to the wire, a black senator from Detroit asked for the floor of the Senate. He got up and he said, “Let me tell you a story about Jerry Ford.” Well, it turns out this guy is the grandson of Willis Ward, who was the president’s black friend at the University of Michigan. There was an issue when Georgia Tech said they wouldn’t play and Ford was going to quit the team, and all this. So he got up and he told this very powerful story, and it was gavelled through. But the irony is, it was a Democrat from Detroit, African-American, and not a Republican who saw to it that his statue will be in the Capitol. Which tells you something about the Republican Party today, even in Kent County.

Gill: I’ve got to tell you, this friend of mine, Bob Eleveld I was telling you about. I don’t know how well he knew Jerry, but he has been county chairman here. He’s an attorney here in town, been county chairman, gee, I don’t know how many times, and was a good county chairman. But he’s a moderate. And he and I just commiserate because we brought McCain here, as I said, when he ran against Bush the first time for the nomination. And he came out against him at the same time Milliken did, because I walked to them both. You need to say what you believe. They’ll talk to you about – you know – but try to get them to take a stand publicly, “Well…maybe I can get in and rebuild the party.”

Smith: When Ford became vice president, did that come as a shock?

Gill: Not really. Did you ever see the letter I wrote him, by chance – Ford?

Smith: I don’t think so.

Gill: Well, I’ve got a copy of it. I’ll give it to you, but I can tell you briefly about it, if you want me to, about that part of it.

Smith: Sure.

Gill: He always had a group that he’d talk to when he came to town, but when he got down to…
Smith: Can you remember who they were? Some of those folks? Were they sort of the kitchen cabinet?

Gill: Yeah. And it was broad in the beginning. He would go over here when the Pantlind was the Pantlind. This was in the early years when I knew him in the 50s. They had a little restaurant right on the street called the Knife and Fork. I called it the Knife and Ford, because he was always there when he came to town. He didn’t really make the rounds as much as he did sit in the Knife and Fork and drink coffee and talk to people. He enjoyed it.

Smith: He liked people.

Gill: Oh, he did, he liked to talk to people and listen to them. And he would listen, he really would. I don’t know if it was part of an act or not, I don’t know, who knows what’s real and what’s not. But, anyway, I’d catch him there. I caught him there one day and he starts ragging on me because he was sending, and all the other Congressmen, too, but Jerry was always there – they would send out a little film clip. There was no video tape in those days, just a little film reel, Your Congressman Reports. You could count on him. He wanted to know why in the world we aren’t running them all the time. I said, “Jerry, they aren’t that interesting.” I said, “Everybody expects that you’re doing those things, and you can’t just keep running them over and over if they are not of interest to the people, to the viewers.” “Well…[mumbling].” I said, “You know, you ought to do something different. Why don’t you talk to old Everett Dirksen?” He was in the Senate then. I said, “See what you guys…” And I’ll be durned if three or four weeks later, they didn’t announce the Ev and Jerry Show. Did you ever see that thing?

Smith: Yeah.

Gill: Oh, God. They were like Abbott and Costello. I don’t know who sic’ed them on the networks, but they started giving them to all the networks and the networks would feed them to the stations, and stations all over the country were running it. I was so happy over that.

Smith: He was not a natural showman.
Gill: No, no. He was not. He was a straight man and Everett Dirksen standing there with this ludicrous face of his, and that voice. They were fun.

Smith: Back to when he became vice president. Did FBI agents descend on the town?

Gill: Oh, wow. Let me tell you just a little bit about – and I’ll leave you a copy of this letter. I was reminding him – what got me to write the letter to Jerry. After I got off to other things, I was with the university out in Jersey for a while, and that kind of stuff, and came back. I left the university and came back as news director at 8 in September of ’74. Nixon – they already had the Watergate hearings. They were still underway, and it was very clear Nixon was going to be gone one way or the other. Either he was going to leave on his own or they were going to impeach him. So, Jerry, by then was vice president. Agnew had resigned under fire – or was he impeached?

Smith: He resigned.

Gill: And Jerry had become vice president. Nixon finally made good on his offer for him to be his vice president. He was coming to town and making rounds of the whole country, I think, I’m not sure of that. But I would be willing to bet that he had the same kind of meetings wherever he went in the country, and he was traveling widely at that time. But he had a group here, it was four guys; myself, a high Republican official, a preacher, and a marketing manager here in town who had done work for him. So it was a marketing man, myself, I was news director, and the station was about a block from his little offices over on Cherry Street.

We met there with him about two months. It was the last time the group met with him there about two months before Nixon resigned and he became president. And he was absolutely lost. Just didn’t know what to do. He said, “I have a feeling that he’s going to be impeached, it looks like a certainty.” And he says, “I just don’t know what to do. I’m supporting him, yet I wonder where we’re going with this thing.”

Smith: Did he entertain doubts as to the president’s guilt – or innocence?
Gill: Well, he says, “I believe Dick. I’ve been in Congress with him since the beginning. I believe him.” So he wasn’t really expressing any doubt, if he did. And everybody just kind of sat there kind of stoned because it was very clear to the rest of us that Nixon was a goner. It was just a question of how long he’s going to be able to hang on. Finally I said, “Jerry, you know, you’ve got to back off. It’s like a big tree falling in the forest. If you get hit by it…the American people are really, really, counting on you and you’ve got to maintain your credibility, or you won’t be able to handle it once you become president.” I said, “You’ve got to back off.” He says, “I can’t, nobody else will support him. Nobody else is behind him.” I said, “Doesn’t that tell you something?” And the rest of them then chimed in and said that you really do, you need to back away. And I think we put a real doubt into him. But I’m not suggesting that – I think he talked to a lot of people and I think he got the same advice everywhere he went.

Smith: But it’s interesting that – I don’t want to put words in your mouth, but clearly, if he, at that point, was expressing concerns about the likelihood of impeachment, that meant he was wrestling in his own mind with the likelihood that he would be president.

Gill: Oh, I think you’re right. Oh, absolutely, I think you’re right. But he did not want to seem to be…the guy was loyal to a fault – to a fault.

Smith: Well – it’s almost a flip side of his admirable qualities. He was always a bit of an Eagle Scout, and with that went a genuine desire to believe the best of people, and I think he was genuinely shocked when he belatedly realized that Richard Nixon lied to him. Isn’t that naïveté on his part?

Gill: Of course it is. And it was part of his makeup, I think. I think good boys far outweighed the bad ones with Jerry. I don’t think Jerry was an extremely intelligent man. He was a political man. I think his morals were beyond reproach. You didn’t get any foot tapping out of Jerry. And he was just a family man and I think and I’ve heard him remark on this himself, I think he believed in living the Boy Scout life. He was an Eagle Scout and he lived that
life. And I can’t disagree with that. I was, too. I wasn’t an Eagle Scout, but I was a Scout.

Smith: But it also comes back to this. For example: he becomes president, and on August 28th he has his first press conference. He goes into that press conference believing that everyone is going to want to talk about Cyprus and Turkey and Greece and inflation, and everything except what everyone wants to talk about, which is Richard Nixon. He didn’t handle it terribly well, and was angry at himself, and I think he was angry at the world. I think that press conference was the triggering event that led, ten days later, to the pardon. Now the pardon might have happened anyway, but it goes back again to this kind of naiveté, having been in Washington as long as he had been there, to not sense the mood of the press corps.

Gill: I think you’re right. Do you know the part that Phil Buchen played in that situation?

Smith: I don’t think so.

Gill: You know who Phil Buchen is?

Smith: Oh, yes. Sure.

Gill: Phil was his early law partner and was his personal attorney after he went to the White House. He relied on him a lot. Phil was a great guy, I don’t know if you ever met him. He was just a great guy. He and I went to the same church, and all that stuff – a very liberal church. Duncan Littlefair was the pastor, married my wife and I. Anyway, Phil Buchen, I know, came back to Grand Rapids and met with Duncan Littlefair, who was not Ford’s pastor, but who was Phil Buchen’s pastor. And they talked about it and he persuaded Ford to listen to them.

Smith: He, being who – Phil or Duncan Littlefair?

Gill: Phil Buchen persuaded Ford to listen to Littlefair and him, and they talked to him. I’m 99 percent certain that is what swayed him into taking the course that he did.
Smith: On the pardon.

Gill: Yes. And he may have anyway. Who knows? But they were very persuasive that you really need to wipe the slate clean on this thing. Otherwise it’s going to dog you and the country, and you don’t need it.

Smith: It’s interesting that you say it’s a very liberal church, presumably Duncan Littlefair was liberal theologically, politically, and yet, coming from the left, why would he be urging Ford to…

Gill: Well, Duncan was a different kind of a guy. He didn’t always come out of left field. He was very rational. He didn’t always come out of right field. He was very rational.

Smith: That’s fascinating. Was Buchen as close to Ford as anyone?

Gill: I think he was probably closer to him than anyone, really. I really do. They always, always remained very close friends. You know, I’m ashamed to say, I believe Phil died – I’m not sure.

Smith: Yeah.

Gill: He did? But otherwise I could get you to him.

Smith: It’s a fascinating window. Was there much unhappiness when people here learned that Ford was going to be retiring to California rather than Grand Rapids?

Gill: Well, I guess so. I guess you could say unhappiness, I was looking for the right word. I guess sorry-ness, sorry that he was doing that.

Smith: Were they hurt?

Gill: Yeah, it hurt. It hurt because the town, the district, had always supported him and everybody liked him, and they wanted to see him present, badly.

Smith: Do you remember the ’76 campaign – at the end when he came back. That must have been a very emotional…
Gill: It was.

Smith: And he lost it, didn’t he? Out at the airport at the mural? Were you there?

Gill: I’m trying to remember. He had lost the campaign to Carter?

Smith: No, this was at the end of the campaign, when he – I think on election day, actually – they dedicated the mural out at the airport.

Gill: Oh, oh. No, I was not there. Paul Collins did that for him, didn’t he? I wrote a thesis for Paul Collins when he was a young strapping guy. Somebody sent him to me, I was with the bank at that time, and he wanted to raise money to go to Africa. And I wrote him some stuff to carry around to businessmen and he walked around with it. And durn if he didn’t get the money. And he went. He’s done very well.

Smith: As an ex-president, though, Ford came back here frequently.

Gill: Oh, yeah, he did.

Smith: I mean, well into his eighties and his ninetieth birthday was probably his last big public appearance.

Gill: I wasn’t really in touch with him then because by then, as I said, everybody with a buck had made really good friends with him, and they wanted time with him and I always felt like I was just butting in.

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

Gill: Yeah. I guess the last time that I really had a chance to talk to him at all, was when they dedicated the Amway Grand Plaza. He came back here for that. I’ll tell you a funny story about that. I was communications director at that time and I was running the media and we had an unbelievable crowd because they were having a Canada, Mexico, I believe, he had four or five presidents here. And they were having a little summit. I got to talk to him for a while then, but they locked us up – locked the media up. Have you heard this?

Smith: No.
Gill: It wasn’t right. The Secret Service always takes over, you know, when they come to town. I’ve worked with them a lot with people coming to town, and when they come to town you might as well figure out that anything you’ve been told by anybody else doesn’t mean a damn thing. They are going to handle it.

They locked us up in a room over here in the hotel and said you must stay there until everybody has had dinner and then we’ll let you out and you can come out for the speeches. So they went away and left us alone there, and everybody was saying, “Gee, they’d better give us dinner, we’re hungry.” And so I ordered out for, I don’t how many, God only knows, truckloads of pizza, kegs of beer, and they came in and set it up. Everybody had lots of pizza, everybody had lots of beer.

At some point the trigger started going off with the guys saying, “Oh, my God, I’ve got to take a leak.” Finally, and I beat on the door, trying to get the Secret Service to come. Nobody. So Sam Donaldson was there, and he was just as irascible as he is now, he actually climbed up on a table, says, “If somebody doesn’t unlock that damned door, I’m going to unzip and let her fly.” This was a panic call, so I practically tore the door down. Finally got a Secret Service guy there, and they set up a channel for us of Secret Service people from there to the men’s room.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction when the president died? I mean, the overwhelming public reaction?

Gill: You mean as far as him going to California.

Smith: No, when he died – at the time of his death.

Gill: No, I don’t know, because I think everybody was expecting it.

Smith: But in terms of the public response, the long lines, the crowds…

Gill: Oh, no. The town loved the guy. They loved him. And they had forgiven him for going to California. They didn’t like it but, hey, he’s got a right to have a life after he’d gone through what he has.
Smith: Quickly, this place – putting it here instead of out in the suburbs somewhere, what’s it done for the town?

Gill: It, along with Grand Valley State University, has just made this side of the river. The west side was settled mostly by immigrants who came here to work in factories, and they were good people, but they were poor people and their houses were not all that good, and run down and they were right downtown, essentially. They managed to, with the expressway, and this, and the college, they managed to really clean up the area a little, if you want to put it that way. It’s a good thing.

Smith: Thank you. I feel like I know Grand Rapids much better.
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this. I guess the most obvious question is, what does it feel like to be back in this room?

Laughlin: It feels fantastic, very emotional, I can see him pulling this chair up over there and pulling up very close, almost to knee, [and saying], “What’s on your mind?” And I can say, after ten or fifteen minutes, he’d lean back, “I have some observations for you.” It was beautiful the way it was so simple. And I don’t remember the subject, but it was wonderful.

I can remember another time – I probably shouldn’t talk about – when I came and he was in here, but Penny was gone and the other gal, Judy, she was gone, and he came tearing out. Oh, he was upset. Oh, God, “They don’t leave me anything to sign papers with, damnit.” And he was scrounging through the desk, then he went over to Penny’s desk, grrrr, “Got to find something to sign. How can I sign papers if they don’t…they steal all my things.” Something of that order. He was really incredible. That’s the only time I ever saw him a little upset.

Smith: It was sort of a legend, I guess around the office. Like a lot of folks of his generation, and I shouldn’t say just of his generation, he was not particularly computer literate.

Laughlin: That’s the way we’re supposed to be.

Smith: And I think machinery, generally, was not his friend. When did you first meet him? How did your paths cross?

Laughlin: I had a luncheon that was arranged in San Francisco with American Enterprise Institute. They were about broke, and they were trying to raise money at a club. I guess I gave them a little bit, but I went back and then I had an invitation from Washington to a dinner. I suppose I had another appointment on the East coast because I don’t think I would go back with an
outfit I didn’t really know. At any rate, I went to this dinner and it inspired me. Chris DeMuth and Gerson inspired me, and I think I probably had maybe two bottles of beer and I gave them $200,000 because I thought they were a worthwhile – which to them was an enormous…they were holding on.

So I got invited – the way I met the President - to an early American Enterprise Institute meeting that President Ford sponsored.

Smith: Was that the World Forum?

Laughlin: The World Forum. It was wonderful. Julie will attest to the fact that – I went to meetings. I was a younger man, I had no education in business, so I went to every good meeting I could find. And I had been to many of the best at IBM and graduate schools like Stanford – I went with the young president for a week or two. When I went to this meeting I thought, my God, I have never sat at a table and the President is there – and across from him is the former president – my God. Helmut at this end from Germany and Jim Callaghan – wow, holy Toledo. I started watching.

Jerry was running everything and it was so quiet and so easily done. Discussions would come up and sometimes little arguments. He had a way of listening intently and knowing just when to add something, if he wished. If people were about to argue too heavily, he had a touch. And I’ve since read about it, but he started out as an Eagle Scout, and Congress and so on. But it was marvelous and I was impressed. And yet he was so quiet, he didn’t try to impress anybody, he was very comfortable within his own skin. So I started spending a lot of time observing what he was doing because leadership had started to fascinate me.

I got involved in all kinds of experiments in our own company and constantly had meetings. And there was no question in my mind – that was the best week I had ever had for a meeting. And I kept thinking of Jerry. Although he was quiet, for me he didn’t slam down, let everybody know – “Hey, I’m the boss, you’d better respect me.” So, anyhow, that’s where I met him and about the second year his wife invited me to lunch. They tried to have lunch with the
guests. So I felt really good that I had lunch with Jerry Ford. Little did I know that he would become a great influence on my life through one way or another.

After four years, or, I don’t know, five years of those meetings, Jim Callaghan and I had become quite good friends, Helmut I had gotten to know better. Giscard, I never could get to know too well.

Smith: Let me interrupt – this is such, in some ways, a motley gathering. Jim Callaghan, who was a classic old-line British Socialist and Helmut Schmidt, who was certainly to the left of Ford’s politics, and yet they seemed to hit it off famously.

Laughlin: Oh – they were like brothers.

Smith: I would be interested in your observations. First of all, of how you thought the others looked upon President Ford – what their relationship was with him.

Laughlin: How they got along?

Smith: Yeah, and what they thought of him.

Laughlin: All of them – we played golf every afternoon with Gerson and some other guys, presidents of companies that are not doing well now. But everybody that I talked to just thought Ford was…whether they were Democrats or not – they thought he was wonderful. I do have a story to tell you later – which you’ll see a little different side of him – of somebody who didn’t like him, who was a world leader and international peace prize, Arias.

Well, I had an idea – we were going to lunch, Jim Callaghan and I had gotten to know one another better and better, and I had an idea. I turned to Callaghan and I said, “God, it would be fabulous, I can see it right now – a beautiful mansion, an old, old mansion outside of London in the country, where these four get together – no agenda, no press, no recording, no filming. They just get together.” And he said, “I say, old chap, that’s a good – I think – would it be alright with you if I take that to the boys tonight?” At five o’clock the boys, those four, always met for cocktails. Nobody else was allowed, and I
said, “Sure.” Well, I couldn’t wait until our cocktail party started and Jim 
came over and he said, “Bill, it’s passed! We’re going to go to your house.” I 
had offered $100,000 to pay for whatever, or whatever it cost. I didn’t even 
think of that part. There was no effort at bribery – it was just that I could see 
something exciting happening. Wait until you hear what happened.

They went to a library and they just sat around and I sat up on a – the library 
had a little wall around it – and I sort of sat there and never said one word, 
and they sort of started getting in a dialogue. And it was incredible. It went on 
for four, maybe five hours. But it was inspiring. It was absolutely inspiring. If 
we wanted to do away with nuclear today, that’s the way to do it. Get a few 
very intelligent, well-read, well-experienced men and/or women, and we 
could do it. We’ll never do it at the United Nations or in big groups.

So I was like a kid. I was jumping up, and oh jeez, I can’t talk about this. 
Well, I can talk now a little bit about it. That evening at cocktail hour, the 
ladies, the wives started down the stairs, but fortunately at about five or ten 
minute intervals. The first one who came was Helmut’s wife and she said, 
“How did it go? How did it go?” I said, “It was unbelievable! Your husband – 
oh God, was he great! He was Alexander Hamilton.” “My husband was 
Alexander Hamilton – wow!” Man, she was so excited I just couldn’t believe 
it. Well, one of them, my memory is a little bad on the names – another one 
came down and it was Jim Callaghan’s wife, whom I’d gotten to know a little, 
and Jim was John Adams in my mind, or possibly, no it was John Adams. 
“My husband? Really?” Here they are, foreigners talking about American 
history. Then Giscard, I don’t really remember, but it was exciting. Well, 
Betty had had an operation and she was still here, she did not go. So I, very 
much like a kid, (Julie, when I returned, wasn’t I like a little boy?) Wow – and 
I’ve never forgotten that.

It was a great lesson to get experienced men, who have really been around and 
had enormous responsibility for war or peace or all kinds of things, to be able 
to sit together as friends and do what they did – without an agenda. These 
were important issues, going back into American history.
Now, I think that there is another story that I got to know Callaghan and Helmut even better. And this is where it sort of changed my life a little. With Callaghan, I’d been a guest at his house in the country, which was a thatched roof, leaking water all over the place, not enough money to repair it – and we were sitting there in the garden and I had been asked early: if anybody could ever get Margaret Thatcher and Jim together, you could. Well, thank God, his daughter was there and his wife, we were in a beautiful English country garden, and I brought that up and he went through the ceiling. Turned red, I thought he was close to a heart attack. So the daughter was there and she came to my rescue and the wife came to my rescue and we settled that forever. I had talked Thatcher into saying, “I’ll meet with him,” but, at any rate, I learned constantly from each of them in different ways.

Helmut, at a meeting – Jerry had a double knee operation and in that double knee operation he could not attend a meeting of these former heads of state – about thirty-five of them, InterAction Council. So he sent a letter that Kissinger couldn’t make it, but Helmut, you might remember Bill Laughlin because of Ditchley – that’s where we went – and Helmut did and Helmut invited – really, Jerry invited me. That’s where it changed my life – to get with – meeting as the only one with no credentials at all. I was a dishwasher and a pots and pans boy. So I thoroughly enjoyed it. I was invited…am I getting off topic?

Smith: No, that’s fine.

Laughlin: I was invited to this first meeting – Jerry was not there – I was like a little kid, I was so excited, but toward the end of the meeting I started getting bored and a little depressed. I said, “What’s wrong with me? What is this?” There were about forty- forty-five there, so I thought and thought, and “Ah-ha, I have it.” All they do is talk about problems. I’m an entrepreneur, I don’t care about problems – I find it exciting to come up with creative approaches. So Bob McNamara was there for one day as a guest, so I went to Bob and I said, “Bob, am I nuts, or is this worthwhile for all these people to get together to talk about the problems? Why not have time in smaller groups for solutions?”
He said, “I’ll be damned. I’m supposed to be the whiz kid. I never heard of you, but I will never forget. Go ahead and talk to Helmut, he’s the chairman. But don’t talk to him if he’s sitting all by himself because he has a terrible temper and he’s very emotional.” So I did eventually talk to Helmut – I was invited back to another meeting as a civilian and I was told that Helmut wanted to see me at lunch time. So I went into a room and the first thing you know, there is some wine and a guy there to serve wine, and what the heck? Why does Helmut want to see me and what’s this about? So in comes Trudeau – there were six and finally Helmut came and he said, “Bill, Jerry thinks you’re a pretty good guy, and I think you’re really unique, you’re different than the rest of us.” I thought he was going to give a talk when we sat down. He said, “You’re to sit next to me,” he changed my chair next to me, “Tell us what’s on your mind.”

So I talked sort of like I’m doing now, I guess, a little nervously. And, I told them whatever ideas I had, and the next thing you know I was a member for life – the only non-head of state. Now, Jerry had changed my environment by moving this way, but the thing that Jerry did at the next meeting – he and I flew together. Penny arranged it – we flew together out of Los Angeles to Mexico, and went to a meeting there of InterAction Council. This was just another meeting, I thought, and they had not yet organized it to have solutions. But Arias from Costa Rica talked and he blasted America and after he finished it was very quiet. One guy raised his hand and Helmut started to call on him and Jerry said, in a very calm voice, “No, Helmut, no. I am taking the floor.” Now, I can’t remember exactly, but it was beautiful. I got tears. He talked about America. As a great historian, you would have loved it. He went through all the good things we’d done in the world. And everybody was so quiet, listening to every word and it was very articulate, very organized, from 1917, it could have been even a little earlier, but right through the Depression to World War II to Berlin, and when he finished, you could hear a pin drop.

But he finished with this, “Mr. Arias, you seemed to have ignored and forgotten history. You brag about what a wonderful country that you don’t need any army,” he didn’t say damn fool, but it sounded like it. You damn
fool, “for God’s sake it was the American army and navy that protected you all those years. Sir, you’d better think about that.” And with that he finished and I want to tell you, wow. And when we went to lunch right after, our friend, his aide, always, whenever he flew or traveled, we just talked about it. He was sent to my table – I was with the president of Japan and his group – “Bill, the President wants to have you for lunch. Only you. Do you see him over there? There’s a table for two and an empty chair. That’s yours.” I said, “Really? Really?” So I walked over there, and as I started he said, “Listen, don’t call him Jerry today. Call him Mr. President.” It was beautiful, absolutely. The man was unbelievably – he was in control of his emotions, he never swore, he never raised his voice, he just went over a pretty accurate history, and that night when Helmut joined him for dinner, I did, Helmut and Jim Callaghan, and I think Trudeau, two others, I can’t remember for sure, but he wanted a small group. But here’s the closure: he had asked that his car be driven up to where we were going to have cocktails in a religious – a Catholic building of a hundred or more years, and it was beautiful. We had a cocktail. The road was cobblestone and it was very hard. They said, Jerry, you have to walk, and his knees still hurt. So he got there and we had maybe two drinks and then we came out.

There were thousands of Mexican people – thousands. Very low roof – no higher than that – lower almost than this picture, thousands of people. “President Jerry, President Ford,” (clapping hands) “Bravo.” They cheered, I’m walking behind Ford and I had tears running down, and it was chilling. The next night he had to go give a speech in Washington for the Press Club, and the next night Helmut took the lead. He couldn’t get one (clap). Helmut doesn’t like that. But the whole experience that he gave me to really use the creativity, maybe that I have on different things, was wonderful. And I’ve had a wonderful life, I will always look up to him and when I trace his history – if you go Eagle Scout five times, University of Michigan, he made a bigger impression than just his football – just as captain of the team. He was impressive all the way.
If you follow him along into the Congress and then as he slowly moved up the ladder in the Congress and then to the vice presidency, and then to the presidency, and then back to the gift every year that he named this meeting, every year of intellectuals, of statesmen, of political leaders, of people from all over the world discussing the problems of economics, the problems of the poor and whatever. It was marvelous and the fact that – I’ve been twenty years on the board at Hoover – and a group like that – it’s not very friendly. American Enterprise is very friendly and they loved Jerry. Everybody loved Jerry.

Smith: Who were some of the other folks on the board when President Ford was active?

Laughlin: I wasn’t on that board, but there were practically none – Julie you just mentioned two or three that came to visit me.

Julie: (Inaudible)

Laughlin: He was very young and I think he is chairman now.

I got very ill, so I haven’t been to one of those meetings for how many years? Five? Seven?

Julie: Yeah.

Smith: Now you mentioned Giscard was sort of the odd-man out in the quartet. Was he a little bit harder to know?

Laughlin: Very hard to know. He and I were having lunch some place and we were having a pretty good discussion, I thought, and a woman came along and he just dropped me without even finishing the sentence. I just felt, I don’t know how he fitted into that. And he also was the first one to drop out of the foursome. He was not at my last meeting. I can’t speak for him because I never had…with Callaghan, he had me up to the university, what’s the name of that?

Julie: (Inaudible)
Laughlin: Swansea. What’s the big one – the whole state that he’s from?

Julie: Wales.

Laughlin: Wales, and he gave me an honorary degree at Wales, and all I did – he asked me to give a talk on leadership. I used a lot of Jerry Ford on leadership. And as a result, the students gathered together and did what I suggested, and they started going out to poor people and helping them. And it went from Swansea to the University of Wales, where he went. So he and I were really very, very close and I knew him a lot better, in a way, than Jerry. Because one thing I would never do is take advantage in any way of a friendship. I think that is crude and rude and stupid.

Smith: How frequently would you see the President in and around the desert?

Laughlin: Not very frequently. I do know, because I purposely looked for that. He was incredibly well-known for his constant effort to help fundraising activities and good organizations. He and his wife were involved in everything and I have a very strong feeling when somebody like President Ford has done such an incredible job in his lifetime, that people like me should not, in any way intervene, or try to win over friendships – I just wouldn’t do it. We would have to have a reason.

I called Helmut and all I will say is that when Jerry died, that he was incredibly emotional. I got a lot of time with Helmut because I was a problem-solver. I could solve problems. I didn’t have particular things to problem-solve, Jerry knew how to take care of the whole community and do all these things, and so I got along very, very well with Helmut on that basis. I got along tremendously with the president of Japan, Fukuda-san. And, in fact, I had Julie get a coat for his 88th birthday – as the big one – a beautiful, like a black leather – it was way too big for him – he’s a little guy. He had all heads of state from Asia at that birthday party and my present was the only one allowed to be opened in the big room. And he went berserk, it had a big Japanese sun and had America all over it, and he loved fun. I used to go after meetings with him for a couple of hours.
Now with Jerry, I just think we had a relationship of respect and care and I was very, very aware of all the people that he knew that maybe he hardly knew, that he was polite to – he was such a wonderful listener and gentleman. But it just so happened, he more or less didn’t come – he was getting older – to the meetings anymore and my hunch was that he left that part to me. Somehow.

Smith: Did you get to know Mrs. Ford at all?

Laughlin: A tiny bit. I met her there and I met her here and she had lunch for my wife and myself over at their house. The couch used to be over here. And, anyhow, my wife, on my advice, said come informally and I damned near got killed. She had on new tennis shoes, and Mrs. Ford got all dressed up, and oh my God, oh did I catch it.

Smith: Tell me about the personal qualities of the President. He had a sense of humor…

Laughlin: He had a sense of humor – a tremendous sense of humor. He was a great listener. He had a quality of leadership about him that you just sensed – at least I thought I sensed it. That day I told you about when he asked me to talk about what I was thinking of, my God, you could practically feel him absorbing what I had to say. When I talked to him in the airport or on the airplane, or we flew back from Europe together, he was very tired. He had a bad mattress, and was very tired from that experience in England. We talked, but never about political issues, or about…I guess I probably talked a lot about management and organization and how to get things done through people and I never felt strained. I never felt I was going too far.

Smith: Do you remember the last time he went to the World Forum?

Laughlin: No, I don’t, because I wasn’t there. I had the same problem he had. I had an oxygen problem – had to go to the hospital – how long was I not able to go? Five years?

Julie: At least five years in Beaver Creek.
Smith: Tell me about Beaver Creek, because for years, certainly towards the end of his life, their friends were urging the Fords not to go every summer. And they were adamant – they obviously loved the place, and I gather they were loved there. They were really part of the local community. Just describe the place.

Laughlin: Well, when I heard that he was going there, and I had seen he had been in the hospital in Philadelphia, was it? I thought he should not go because I had had this problem myself and still sort of have a little bit of it.

Smith: And how would you describe the problem?

Laughlin: It’s a hard problem. In my case, with fibrillation, so I have a hard time breathing. I get very weak, I stagger.

Smith: And altitude obviously effects it.

Laughlin: Altitude – I went back a second year and I was in the hospital the night I got there. I checked into the hotel and I was in the hospital. Incidentally, I had the same doctor he had. Not there, but at Mayo. The way I thought about, I should call him, and then I thought, “No, I’m not close enough. He’s not buddy-buddy.” I don’t run around telling everybody I know President Ford. I did tell some people, “I don’t think he should go.” I think it was a bad mistake, but on the other hand, he and his children and his wife had been there years ago from Grand Rapids, I guess, skiing, with their Golden Retriever, and they just had a wonderful time. Those cocktail parties they had on their porch every night for our group were just fantastic. They were relaxed.

Smith: Tell me about the house.

Laughlin: I never went inside the house – never. I went down with Penny – I’ve always been very, very careful not to, in any way, invade the privacy of someone like that. I have had people at a very high level that I’ve known better – well, Callaghan and Helmut. I can’t really say that I know Helmut better. To me, Jerry Ford was very superior to that whole group. He was the ultimate in leadership. If you study leadership and the psychology of it and the administration of it and the techniques and the creativity and the humanness,
the most important thing of all, is caring for people, I believe. Caring – especially for those down lower. Jerry Ford had that.

Smith: How did you see that expressed?

Laughlin: In every action that I ever saw him make publicly and the way he ran the meeting. In the way he met people, it was very warm. The way he was criticized in Mexico, the way he told the American story – from his heart – and the way at the end he criticized, he didn’t swear or raise his voice. It was a little sarcastic, like maybe you should know better, but I think that, for example: there are twenty-one airlines in America. One airline alone, which is relatively new, only twenty-plus years old, if you took the stock of that one company, it is worth more than all the others together. It’s Southwest. And if you ask or follow a career like the founder and president, he was not unlike Jerry. He was 80% - they asked him in his farewell retirement, what did you do? He said, “I didn’t do anything. Our people did.” And if you went around Southwest where the black baggage man is and say, “Hey, did you ever meet the head…?” “Oh, my God, yes. He stops by every couple three weeks and we talk about his kids and my kids.”

There is a caring attitude that Jerry Ford had, you couldn’t do that as president of the United States, but that’s how he got ahead in Congress. That’s how he got ahead as a Scout. I did not mention AEI’s headquarters, those scholars, and you must know this, they loved him. If you go to Hoover – I have to be very careful here – Hoover is great. Tremendous scholars, unfortunately, we have a new organizational concept which I think is going to change things forever. But you go there, there is the sun camera, there is a little mildew in the library next door, and it gets over there and it’s not so easy – last time I was there, because of my illness, I’d just gotten over pneumonia.

I have not been there for quite a while, but the last time was in the spring with the commanding general of our Middle East forces, talking about the big bomb and what the odds are. And he was light and fluffy and full of fun and we had a great talk. We sat together very closely, and we agreed on most everything, but he did make a little comment. “Boy, it’s a little heavy around
here, isn’t it?” (sniffing) And it is a little different. It’s well-run, though. Well-run. It’s just that it seems to me that they have a lot more fun with Gerson and with their presidente. So that’s something that Ford had, not to the extent that the Southwest guy had, because you couldn’t in that kind of a job.

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

Laughlin: No, I don’t remember the exact last time. About a year and a half, two and a half years ago now. It’s odd that I had the same nurse that he had, the same doctor here. I can’t remember.

Smith: Had his health deteriorated at that point?

Laughlin: Yes, the last time. And my health did also. They wanted me to come to that meeting I designed for InterAction Council…


Laughlin: Yeah. The doctors wouldn’t let me go. They said I’d be dead before I got there. Now my doctors tell me if I really watch it I can go to one in Saudi Arabia next summer. But it seems maybe odd that I say it was so wonderful to meet him, he inspired me. I observed him. I spent a lot of time observing leaders. What are they so good at? And I’ve never seen anybody run a big meeting close to what he could do. Sixty, eighty people, all big wheels. In my office people listen to me.

Smith: Maybe because he was so self-effacing.

Laughlin: That’s the best word. He was. He was very humble for a man of such success.

Smith: Did you ever play golf with him?

Laughlin: I never played golf with him. My wife and I saw him when he came out to the Bing Crosby from the White House, and he was late and he fit it in. And we waited for him on one hole and he hit the ball way in the rough. No, I never did play. Looking back, I sort of regret that I didn’t – I wasn’t a little more forward – I was, at that time, I was president of the World Presidents’ Organization, and I was in the State Department as an advisor at a high level.
In fact, one night I wore the wrong suit to dinner. They said get all dressed up, so I got my Irish suit, and afterwards the undersecretary asked me to come and have a cocktail with him and some other guy and a couple of staff. They said we have some private things to talk about, would you go to the bar with these two young people? And they said, “When you come and the President is coming over here you’re supposed to wear blue.” And this was Irish brown tweed, I think. Wow.

Smith: Tell me one last thing. Describe the, for lack of a better word, the charitable landscape of the desert. The Fords were clearly quite active, quite visible, as you indicated, in a number of causes. How does that work?

Laughlin: Well I think it works well because people are coming from all parts of our country here. And in their hometown or their home region, they have a Boys & Girls Club, so they come here and they want to engage.

Smith: Is there a season of the year?

Laughlin: Oh yes. I definitely think. Let me give you a different example on the same subject. I, at Hoover, suggested to them – when I first got on the board, it was a mess – the president of Stanford, the head of – oh, they fought.

Smith: Glenn Campbell?

Laughlin: Glenn Campbell. So I suggested they needed a public relations group of the board. Have a new group – a fundraising group. And that was the beginning. I had a number of other suggestions later. Well, in the fundraising – nobody showed up for the first meeting, I was the only one in Washington to show up, and I told John Raisian, I said, “John, look, if I ever ask you to have board members in a meeting, they’d better be there. I’m an easy guy, but I don’t come all the way to Washington to just sit here by myself. And they have to do all the work, anyhow, because I am more creative.”

Anyhow, they didn’t do very well, and so I went to a board meeting and I said, “Look, what you’ve got to get in your head for your professionals, go where the money is. It’s not going to be in Sun Valley in the winter because
the wealth can be there, but they ski all day, they want a cocktail, a quick dinner and go to bed. They’re tired. Go to the desert. Go to the best country club down there – the richest. And the same thing in Florida, in Palm Springs, Florida, and you will be surprised.” So they went to the vintage, it’s become unbelievable. And now that’s been, how many years ago? Long ago. We have now a record 140 trustees, a number of billionaires – so the desert is the place where you can bring a think tank down here because, look, they play golf January and February. If you hit it late in February or early in March, they’re bored. They want two or three days – so bring George Schultz, your superstars and you’ll win.

Well, the desert has a number from almost every group that come here, wealthy people. And when they come they give money to foundations, they give a lot of money to foundations. If you look at the hospital, there are about 300 people who give $250,000 because they used creativity. The creativity was simple: if you give $250,000 or $50,000 a year, they take seven of their best nurses, full-time, so if you got sick, you’ll have an ambulance take you right, the nurse will be waiting, you’ll get your beautiful room, you’ll get President Ford’s room or someone like that, and there will be a doctor there. It so happens two years ago they lost $27 million from people who didn’t pay their bills. It offsets it. If people who come here already - a certain percentage - love charity, they love to help people.

Smith: Five minutes.

Laughlin: Five minutes to go? Can I hold out?

Smith: You’re doing just fine.

Laughlin: Penny said you’re a great guy. She didn’t build it up enough.

Smith: Tell me, for people who didn’t know him, people who never met him, or he’s just a name in a textbook, or maybe they saw a film clip when he died, what’s important for those people to know about Gerald Ford?
Laughlin: What a marvelous, caring humanitarian he was. What a marvelous team member he was. Team in Congress, team in the White House with all, an ability to get along with the other party. I think it’s very important to know that you don’t have to have an outgoing personality, a rah-rah-rah kind of thing, that he had a lifelong career from Eagle Scout to work toward this. And during every one of those years, they were learning years where mistakes were made, but from the mistakes is a new idea – a new way of doing things.

Smith: I had a very clear sense that they really made an effort, as much as they could, to have younger people around them. You live in a bubble, and people who only see you through that bubble are afraid to approach. They only see you in the official capacity. It’s almost a prison of sorts – that fame and celebrity and wealth, and certainly all of the trappings that go with being a president or a former president. I wonder if they ever felt, in some ways, cut off from the kind of natural interchange that I think they enjoyed.

Laughlin: I never got that impression. That’s another reason I didn’t try a little harder, because I felt they already had their lifelong friends. I think that’s important that everyone have close friends, and I just made an assumption. I had a different situation, say with Margaret Thatcher, that I met through another group I was in. She and I hit it off right away, and we got to talking about a project and I was very forceful with her. In fact, don’t we have a picture showing me with her, where she is pointing at me like this and I’m pointing at her? I think there was something about his personality…he was an American I really admired so much. I know what it’s like to have too many things to do. I regret, in a way, now that I’m talking to you, I’m regretting it a little more every moment that I didn’t push harder.

Smith: Was he a workaholic?

Laughlin: I think so. I would be pretty sure. Work, work, work, work. And I just can’t think enough about how fortunate we are in our country to get people like that. I think all too often our media destroy people. In a job like that, they make mistakes – you have to make mistakes. And it gets to be a more public relations for a particular point of view of the Left or the Right. Where I would
prefer that we chase hatred away and have love, and bring that love to a marriage to bring children up so the children understand values and caring about people. And I think Ford was sort of like that. But I think if I tried to explain it that way, I don’t know…what do you think he would do?

Smith: I know what you’re saying. Emotionally, he never left Grand Rapids.

Laughlin: He never left.

Smith: No, and the example of his parents was a very powerful one. I think all of his life.

Laughlin: Yeah.

Smith: And that’s a perfect note on which to conclude.

Laughlin: You’re greater than I thought.
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Smith: Thank you so much for doing this, we appreciate it.

Timmons: Thank you for coming by.

Smith: Professionally you started in this town with Bill Brock. Was it in the mid-‘60s?

Timmons: No. In 1955 I came here to go to college, but I had to work. I went to school at night at Georgetown and I got a job on the Hill for Senator Alexander Wiley from Wisconsin. So from ’55 to ’62, I was in the Senate as a staffer. Then I went back to Chattanooga and was campaign manager for Bill Brock, who is a contemporary and long time friend of mine. He asked me to come back to Washington in January of ’63 as his assistant.

Smith: So you were really in on the beginnings of what we would call the modern Southern Republican Party.

Timmons: Yes, I think so. And Brock was one of those, of course.

Smith: How difficult was it to elect a Republican in 1962?

Timmons: Incredibly difficult. Brock was the first Republican to represent our district in forty-two years at the time. And the only way that he won, really, was that they had a Democratic primary and the losing side in the primary decided to plague on the party’s nominee and supported Brock. A lot of great stories from those days, but he stayed in the House until he went to the Senate, and served one term in the Senate. But, yeah, there was a lot of movement in the South rejecting the Democratic philosophy and moving to the Republican side. But it was a hard choice for a lot of people whose parents has been Democrats and brothers and sisters were Democrats and sort of ostracized them.
Smith: Well, let’s face it, memories of the war in some places – when they talked about the war, they talked about the Civil War, not World War II.

Timmons: One of my grandfathers was still alive when I was young and got involved in Republican politics. I visited him on the porch one summer night, probably a year before he died. He had been a Democratic ward heeler, a surgeon, had served in the state legislature. He was a union guy, too, very active in all of that; a tax collector. I mean, he was really, for a Southern ward heeler he was the epitome of it. And I was Republican. I sat on the porch with him and he said, “Bill, I wish I had some money in my estate so that I could write you out of my will.” And he would have; he wasn’t joking. So, yeah, it was heavily Democrat, although I must say it was a conservative Democratic area in the South by and large with the ____________.

Smith: Would he have been, for example, a strong Roosevelt supporter?

Timmons: Yes, very strong.

Smith: You could begin to understand. Today you look at the New Deal coalition and you think this makes no sense, until you get to the personal level and you talk to people like your grandfather. Then you begin to understand how all of these unwieldy, seemingly opposed pieces hung together.

Timmons: Well, the TVA, Tennessee Valley Authority, was really instrumental in the economy of the valley in eastern Tennessee and down through there. Roosevelt obviously got all the credit for that, as he should have, and my people felt that jobs were important. And it was cheap electricity, and so forth. So that was running through people’s minds for Roosevelt.

Smith: We’ve talked to Senator Brock. He obviously had a really tough re-election fight in ’64, as a lot of Republicans did. He’d been a strong Goldwater supporter. Were you at the convention?

Timmons: For Goldwater?

Smith: In San Francisco?

Timmons: Yes, I was a floor whip.
Smith: You were?

Timmons: Yeah.

Smith: I have to ask you because my book opens with the Tuesday night when Rockefeller spoke and almost taunted the crowd and the crowd lustily responded. What do you remember of that?

Timmons: Of the speech?

Smith: Well, yes, and the mood. How divided was the party?

Timmons: Well, the party wasn’t particularly divided because all the delegates there were Goldwater delegates by and large, except for some in New England, and so forth. Scranton was the opposition candidate and emotions were pretty high because of what they thought was the Rockefeller wing of the party controlling everything for years. And they now had the ascendancy for the conservative movement. And so it was pretty bitter. But there were not a lot of Rockefeller/Scranton delegates there. In fact, one of my jobs was to lock the door to the convention hall so that busloads of students that Rockefeller/Scranton had bussed in to try to storm the floor, couldn’t get in. I was standing there with Fred LaRue, I guess, and we’d locked the door and wouldn’t let them in. They were out there, hundreds of them, screaming and shouting and trying to get in. There was also a lot of falsification of passes. We found a lot of them had the same number and everything. You’d lick your finger and it would smudge the ink, you know. So there was a lot of that going on, and that all kind of came together as things that made Goldwater delegates upset.

Smith: You get the sense that if he hadn’t existed you would almost have had to invent him. He was the perfect foil.

Timmons: That’s right.

Smith: For where you wanted to take the party.
Timmons: That’s right. And there was nobody else, really. Evidence the fact that he took Bill Miller, a nobody, as his running mate. What did that add? So you would have to invent somebody.

Smith: Obviously things don’t go well in November, but you hang on, come back. And there is this effort to reinvent the rump that remains in the House of Representatives, including finding new leadership. What was the problem with Charlie Halleck? Or was it a combination of post-Goldwater, and people just wanting a fresh face?

Timmons: We’re talking about Gerald Ford in this interview, so Ford had become the conference chairman in ’63 and Brock had been one of the Young Turks supporting that effort for new leadership. Because Brock represented at the time – he was 32 or something – and a lot of other young people. Rumsfeld was another.

Smith: Charlie Goodell, Bob Dole.

Timmons: Goodell, Dole, and on and on, I can’t remember all of them. But there’s core group of young people who wanted new leadership. And they supported Ford in ’63, and then in ’65. The natural progression was that Charlie Halleck had to go because he represented the old view. I don’t think it was liberal/conservative, it was more leadership potential.

Smith: And generational?

Timmons: And generational.

Smith: Let me ask you a big question. The older I get, the more it seems to me that generational politics trumps almost everything else.

Timmons: Yeah. It’s very, very important. Philosophy in a lot of people is immensely important obviously, because you’ve got fringe groups on both ends. But generational politics is extremely important. You see it in Obama, who appealed to young people and turned them out to vote and McCain was seen as the old guard. So generational politics do matter.
Smith: It would help to nail down something because there has been talk over the years that there was a possibility of Mel Laird being a candidate for that job. And of course in the end, it went to Ford. Does that ring a bell?

Timmons: Well, I remember Laird, who I guess became conference chairman after Ford became leader, and I don’t recall that there was an actual challenge to Ford. Because the two became very close all the way through their professional lives. But there could have been. Laird was ambitious, and of course, so was Ford. So, I just don’t recall that specifically.

Smith: But your sense is that the Ford election in ’65 was as much as anything else, a generational desire for change among the freshmen?

Timmons: Oh, yes. In fact, they called them Young Turks; the group around there – Jack McDonnell, and all of them. But an interesting side bit to this was that when Ford was running for leader, he wanted to dump Les Arends as the whip. Arends was Halleck’s whip. Kind of an older generation guy and Ford wanted to dump him in favor, I think, of Laird or somebody – probably Laird. And Arends, - I, of course, wasn’t there but I’m told - said, “Jerry, don’t do this. I’ll win and you will be embarrassed.” Well, Ford tried and Les won and had to serve with Ford. They got along great because everybody gets along with Ford at the time. But he tried to dump Arends, the whip, and Arends beat him.

Smith: That’s interesting.

Timmons: There a little humility there, I guess.

Smith: It’s also been suggested that you had the Ev and Charlie Show, which became the Ev and Jerry Show, and that at least some folks, particularly the Young Turks, looked at Dirksen and they saw an old lion who was sometimes too friendly with the Johnson White House. That Ev would go down and cut his deals over a couple of drinks with the President. And they wanted someone speaking for House Republicans who was perhaps a little bit less amenable to the administration. Does that ring a bell?

Timmons: Well, it could be, I don’t recall that specifically, but it makes sense. Knowing the attitude of the Republicans in the Congress, that made a lot of sense.
However, I guess Hugh Scott replaced Ev Dirksen, which didn’t accomplish much in that regard either – as far as generational politics go.

Smith: That’s true. And it’s hard to believe today – today’s Republican Party would not choose Hugh Scott.

Timmons: You’re right.

Smith: They might not nominate Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania. Tell us briefly, because everyone waxes nostalgic about then as opposed to now. I mean, up on the Hill in terms of just the basic civility that existed, how were things different in those days. And what was the role of the Republican leader in pushing a program when you didn’t have a whole lot of troops?

Timmons: Yeah, well it was a kind of accommodation and I think that Leader Ford had to find ways to accommodate the Democrats without compromising his principles and the party’s principles. And therefore, he was seen rather as a pacifier in the fights that could have happened. [There was] so much more civil dialogue in those days and discussion. President Nixon had great support among Southern Democrats – Joe Wagoner and the group, and Ford was involved in all of that, of course, by dealing with those Southerners to try and get a majority on certain issues. But everybody could sit down and talk. There weren’t the kind of strong feelings that people have today – party politics.

Smith: Let me ask you: how different is it? I was talking to Walter Mondale about this. And actually even Ted Kennedy later on, when we were talking to him, when a new representative went to Washington in the mid-‘60s, you found parties that were broadly liberal and broadly conservative, but also happened to have wings. So that, for example, Mondale was told – well Dole said when he went to DC, he was told, “Go spend some time with Senator Eastland.” Ted Kennedy said he was told, “Spend some time with Dick Russell.” And it wasn’t just spend some time with the Old Bulls, but the fact is, spend some time with people who are ideologically your opposite, but are in your party.

The fact is the Republicans had a liberal wing. The Democrats obviously had a conservative wing. So that within your party, you had to learn to deal with
people who were you ideological opposite before you functioned in the larger institution. Isn’t that by and large gone today?

Timmons: Yes, I think it is.

Smith: And what is the consequence of that?

Timmons: There are heated exchanges every day up on the Hill in both the Senate and the House, within the limits of the rules, on political and ideological issues. And there seems to be very little middle ground. Gerald Ford would have sought middle ground, I think. I’m not sure the current leadership cares about that.

Smith: Why was there middle ground to be found then as opposed to now?

Timmons: From the Republican point of view, there was really no choice. The numbers were overwhelmingly Democratic, and if you wanted to impact legislation in any way, you had to accommodate and compromise. And the Democrats, some of them, were willing to do that, particularly the Old Bulls. Most of the committee chairs were Southern conservatives in those days and their philosophy was not unlike some of the Republicans. So there was an opportunity to negotiate and deal, particularly on budget matters.

Now that all kind of fell apart later. But also in those days staff was very small. There was one Senate building when I came and now there are three. There were two House of Representative buildings and now there are three. Staff of four or five people, and of course a decade or so before that, there was one or two people on the staff. So it had grown some. And now, Lord knows, it’s twenty or thirty. If you’ve got a committee, it’s even more. So the staff takes a greater role now, I think, than they did in those days.

Smith: Is it safe to say - Ford certainly did, even though he had a safe district - that members were much more inclined to go home more often than is currently the case?

Timmons: Right. I think so. There are some that are afraid to go home now. But, no, I think so.
Smith: Do they spend more time raising money now than they did then?

Timmons: Oh, absolutely. No question. A House member starts the day he is elected to raise money for the next one, and some Senators raise money four, five years out.

Smith: Presumably the parties have less control, less influence even, today.

Timmons: Yes.

Smith: It’s more about media, and the media have become more confrontational. Clearly cable TV drives this, and you need a new storyline every 24 hours. So Joe Wilson’s the center of attention today and tomorrow there will be someone else.

Timmons: Yeah. They are all seeking news and creating news, in some cases. But raising money and running for re-election is paramount to most members of Congress these days, as opposed to thoughtful consideration and research on legislation. Even with the huge staffs they’ve got, it’s hard. People made a lot out of how nobody’s read these health care bills, a thousand pages. A great majority of members, both Democrat and Republican, probably will not read it by the time they vote on it. Part of the problem is that you take a paragraph in the bill and it says amendment to such and so and so, line 84, da da da. That means nothing until you go back to the original act and see what it’s amending and that amends something else. So it’s not just “read it though like a novel.”

Smith: It was a different Republican Party then. It seems to me Gerald Ford, in many ways, was almost the perfect representative of a party that was grounded in the Midwest. You were beginning to develop a Southern wing.

Timmons: But a lot in New England, too. In those days you had a strong group. Massachusetts had two Republican senators, and over half the House delegation was Republican.

Smith: Was it Ford’s strength that he got along with and was trusted by everyone?

Timmons: It’s his character. I think that everybody will say is that he had sterling character. He understood people. He appreciated their positions, he had
empathy for hardships in different situations. His character, which includes personality, was just superb. Nobody that I know of, other than maybe Elizabeth Holtzman, ever questioned his character because it was really great. You could trust him, he was honest, straightforward. One word that encapsulates the whole thing is decency. He was the most decent person you’d ever meet.

Smith: And what was it with Elizabeth Holtzman?

Timmons: I think she was kind of off the reservation a lot of times. And Ford didn’t like her, either, after she attacked him personally on so many things. It started way before Watergate, but Watergate kind of brought all that out.

Smith: That’s interesting. It started before he was vice president?

Timmons: Yeah, I think it goes way back when she would not only talk about him and the Republican Party - she was a flame-thrower, as we would say. We just finished talking about [the first] that there was not that sort of vituperation back then. But now here’s an example, and there were several others. But by and large, the Old Bulls in the House liked Gerald Ford. And under the Twenty-fifth Amendment, when he was named vice president, there were very few votes against him in the House and the Senate. Very few. And so it meant that most Democrats supported him, and they liked him.

Smith: Conservatism also, however, has changed dramatically over the last forty years. What kind of conservative was Gerald Ford?

Timmons: I think he was an economic conservative, and a liberal foreign policy person.

Smith: A product of World War II consensus?

Timmons: That’s right. He always supported defense appropriations. He had little interest in social issues back then and was a strong supporter when he was in the House of President Nixon on virtually everything. The only thing I can think of that they disagreed on was Nixon wanted to use some highway money in the highway trust fund for mass transit. And Ford, coming from Michigan, opposed that vigorously. That’s the only one issue that I can think of.
Smith: How was that resolved?

Timmons: In favor of Ford.

Smith: Now, you say opposed. I assume that would be behind the scenes, in the discussions?

Timmons: There were discussions, but I think it was also a public thing. It wasn’t bitter or mean, it was “I disagree with the President on this,” and the highway trust fund is sacrosanct and must be used for what the monies were raised for. Good logical argument. Of course, he’s from an auto state, too. And Nixon was trying to find a way to move some money into mass transit for all kinds of reasons.

Smith: It’s always been said that Ford’s great ambition in life was to be Speaker of the House.

Timmons: I think that’s true. I think he said that several times.

Smith: When Nixon is elected in ’68 and he makes some decent gains in Congress, although obviously they’re still in a minority status. Of course Ford looked at ’72 as a possible Republican landslide and was disappointed when they didn’t pick up as many seats as he’d hoped. And that’s when he told Betty that he would retire after ’76. He said in his book that Erlichman went once to meet with he and other Republican leaders on the Hill, and didn’t help matters by falling asleep in the course of the meeting. What your job was at that point? You joined the administration when?

Timmons: After the election of ’68, __________________ during the transition and then moved into the White House in January of ’69 with President Nixon. I was the deputy assistant. And my responsibilities were the House of Representatives. Kim Ballou was responsible for the Senate, and we worked for Bryce Harlow, who was the assistant to the President.

Smith: Tell us about Bryce Harlow, who is a legendary figure, but I don’t think people know very much about why he was so revered.
Timmons: Oh, just a super guy. He and Ford were so much alike in character and integrity. Bryce Harlow came here from Oklahoma to work on the Hill, and he worked for the House Armed Services Committee. He was a young staffer. During World War II he was assigned to the Pentagon and worked there in Legislative Affairs and then Eisenhower brought him into the White House. He was a valuable assistant there doing some congressional work, but mainly as a speechwriter. He had a tremendous vocabulary and understanding of words and how to fashion speeches. He stayed close to Eisenhower after Eisenhower left office, and he obviously knew Nixon from the Eisenhower days; so he was kind a natural person for Nixon to appeal to, to come in. And he was, at time, kind of the grey-beard of legislative affairs. But he knew every member of Congress - well not every member - but the important members of Congress. Understood how they thought, what could be expected and not expected of them. And of course he knew President Nixon well for years. So he was an ideal person to come in there.

Smith: Is it safe to say that he was one of the relatively small number of people who really enjoyed Richard Nixon’s trust?

Timmons: Yes, I would say so. Nixon turned to him several times, even after Bryce left the White House, to come back in. And so did Ford. Ford liked him a lot and they were close. Everybody liked Bryce. Kind of like Ford, everybody liked Ford with very few exceptions. So he worked in very well there. He started and when I succeeded Bryce in the White House as the assistant for legislative affairs, I followed the same routine that Bryce had, which was to set up once a week an hour or hour and a half, in Republican Leader Ford’s office, a gripe session. Same thing with Hugh Scott in the Senate, different day, and asked Ford to schedule people who were complaining about things so we could sit down and talk to them firsthand.

We did that once a week. I took notes and we talked to these members and tried to satisfy them the best we could. So often it required us to come back to the office and try to figure out whatever they were – bridge or dam or some policy issue or whatever. We tried to do it in ten, fifteen minute segments so we could get more people in there. That’s why sometimes it was an hour and
a half. And we told Ford that we did not object if Democrats wanted to come. So occasionally word got around and Democrats would go up to Leader Ford and say they wanted an eyeball with Harlow/Timmons at the next meeting, and he would schedule it in his office.

Smith: Great idea. Had that ever been done before?

Timmons: No, not to my knowledge. And so I think I was ________ about it. So on one of those occasions, because of some policy issue, we brought Erlichman. Not just us, but John Erlichman to sit in and listen to what was going on. Allegedly he dozed off or closed his eyes or something during one of those sessions. The legislative office, I often think, is really situated not at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue or at the Capitol, but on 8th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, halfway between the two great bodies, suffering the slings and arrows from both directions.

Smith: You know, that’s classic because there is this notion out there - when people use the shorthand, they speak about the Nixon White House. Well, I don’t know what the Nixon White House means, or any White House for that matter. But nevertheless, the notion is taken hold that presumably, beginning with the President on down, those immediately around him, had an attitude bordering on contempt for “the Congress.” What’s your response to that?

Timmons: I think that’s true. I think that certainly with President Nixon it was true.

Smith: Was it based in part on his own experience there?

Timmons: I think so. He was an outsider all the time. He would sit on the House Un-American Activities, and the Senate for what – two years, I guess. But he knew the mindset up there and figured that they were all against him and against any changes, and therefore, the heck with them. He would go his own way. Talk to the American people, try to get something done. He was the first president in 140 years to come into the White House without control of Congress. And people don’t recognize what problems that presents a president. And of course, Ford inherited that. The current president, Obama, has absolute control in both bodies, what a luxury that would be for a president in the White House. We didn’t have that, Nixon nor Ford, so it was
very, very difficult to work with Congress. While Ford was a creature of Congress, I think later, after he’d been in the Executive Branch for a while, he began to say, hey, these guys are not serious, they’re acting politically as opposed to the public interest.

Smith: Given that attitude toward Congress generally, how did that effect the kind of working relationship with the Republican leadership in the House? If Gerald Ford is a man of the House, and his friend the President, who has very different attitudes perhaps, toward the body, how did that work?

Timmons: Very, very difficult in both the Nixon administration – I was only in the Ford administration for a few months, but we tried to set up as many one on one or small group meetings as we possibly could. And Ford was eager to do that, of course, and would go back to the Hill on occasions. Nixon didn’t like to go back to the Hill, but he did agree to - and I think people don’t understand this - a lot more meetings than one would expect of him. One on one, small group meetings, breakfasts, lunches, dinners, we always invited members of Congress to State Dinners. We got kind of a quota and we worked through Ford and Scott on who to invite. So it gave them a little more stroke. They could dole it out and call a member and say, “I’ve arranged for you to…” And we tried to build up the leaders that way.

We talked to them about proposals that were coming before they hit the press and before they hit Congress. If it was a statement to the Speaker and the President Pro Tem of the Senate, we would try to give leaders a 24 hour notice, talk to them. State of the Union Address, I went up when I had the House responsibility with Ford, and actually had a draft of his State of the Union speech, and we sat together and he went over it and he made some good suggestions – change agriculture to farm, you know, things that you can understand. So we did that frequently, again, to build up the rapport with the leaders in the House and the Senate.

Smith: Now, presumably that was easier in the House because Nixon and Ford had had a longstanding relationship.

Timmons: Yes.
Smith: It is reputed that Hugh Scott had a reputation for leaking. Was the Nixon-Scott relationship more problematic than the Nixon-Ford relationship?

Timmons: Oh, yeah. The Nixon-Scott relationship deteriorated, I think, with each day. It was not healthy.

Smith: What contributed to that?

Timmons: Well, I think the leaks and the fact that Scott would criticize the administration publicly, where Ford would do it privately.

Smith: What would he say in private? What kinds of things would he find fault with, or how would he communicate that?

Timmons: He would say that the President must understand the role of Congress here, and he cannot come forward with this kind of thing, he’s got to change it, or wait until next year. We’ve got too much on our plate. I mean, those kinds of advices that he gave the President directly, and less frequently, about what he is picking up from his members. Not his own views necessarily, but what his leadership group thinks. So he would always give us advice on that. We didn’t always take it. But it was always good, I think, what Ford suggested we do regarding pushing different pieces of legislation and how to handle different issues. And I don’t think Scott participated in that regard.

Smith: There are those out there who suggest Nixon’s contempt – strong word – for Congress extended to Ford. You didn’t see that at all?

Timmons: No, no. He was very fond of Gerald Ford. And Nixon, of course is a whole different subject, but he had some imperfections and one of them I think was criticizing everybody, his family, and his staff. If somebody tried to analyze all that they’d come up with some kind of reasonable conclusion. I can’t, but he would get over it. Talking about Nixon now. After a meeting I’d bring in someone and he’d say, “Bill, stay back,” and somebody would escort the member out of the office and he’d come over and use his finger and punch me – I’ve probably still got bruises there – “Tell me the purpose of that meeting! What did that accomplish? I don’t understand why I had to meet with them.” And on and on and on. My stock answer was, “Mr. President, that’s money in
the bank. That’s an investment that will come back and reward you.” Which was partly true, but it also got me off the hook and saved my chest from more bruises. Ford never did that. He would have people in and he would puff his pipe and he would enjoy that sort of discussion, I think, because they had a different kind of rapport.

Smith: Nixon famously said that he was an introvert in an extrovert’s profession. And I’ve often thought that the extraordinary thing about the Nixon presidency is not how it ended, but that it happened at all. I wrote a book on Tom Dewey once, and in some ways there are parallels between them.

Timmons: Right.

Smith: Did Nixon enjoy being president?

Timmons: I think he did. I think you wouldn’t understand that by meeting with him or talking to him or listening to him or looking at his stuff, but I think he really did. And he worked all the time. I mean, he was a workaholic. He’d go to Camp David or he’d go to Key Biscayne or he’d go to other places and he would always take a big bag full of work. He would go over them, writing notes in the margins and calling people from afar. I got more than one call from San Clemente or Key Biscayne, saying, “What do you mean by this?” And I’m sitting at home with no notes or anything and at some kind of disadvantage.

But he worked very hard and I think someone who didn’t enjoy the job would not have done that. They would have taken a pass on some of that stuff. And he enjoyed the prestige of the job and the history of the job. He was well-read on protocol and what the office of the presidency means. When he finally resigned, he used that as one of his excuses, which I think was legitimate from his point of view – that he didn’t want to diminish any more the Office of the President of the United States.

Smith: It’s been suggested that one of the keys to understanding this very complex man is that he was kind of a closet intellectual, who didn’t want people to know that about him.
Timmons: That’s right, he criticized the New England elite, but in fact, he was one himself, in a way. But while he criticized so many people, I can’t remember him ever criticizing Gerald Ford. He criticized me, Kissinger, Haldeman, Erlichman, and he would push people around. But Ford, he had great respect for him, and as far as I know, never criticized him openly. He did talk about how House Republicans ought to get together more and so forth. He didn’t blame Ford.

Smith: Let me ask you about the Justice Douglas “impeachment.” I know there is still debate over whether, in fact, Ford was really trying to impeach him or what he was doing. First of all, you have the Abe Fortas situation in 1969, and then of course, you had the Haynesworth and Carswell nominations that went down in flames. Is all of that related to this or would that have happened in your opinion if none of those things had happened?

Timmons: I really don’t know the background on that. Ford later on, I think, kissed and made up. Maybe in some way, ______ into the White House or something in his declining years. But that was quite bitter at the time.

Smith: Did you ever have any discussions with Ford about it?

Timmons: No, I can’t recall. Maybe I did, but it was thirty-five years ago, so I just can’t remember. But it did come up in Ford’s confirmation hearing in the House. Maybe the chairman, Peter Rodino brought it up. Ford answered it some way. But I think he pulled out some papers that had some naked women or something.

Smith: I think he had the magazine.

Timmons: The magazine of some sort, yeah. And that caused a problem because they said he shouldn’t have done that. I think he admitted later it was a mistake, not as criticism of the Justice, but using props like that.

Smith: It did make the case, though, pretty effective.

Timmons: Oh yes.
Smith: We come to ’72 and the President obviously wins the landslide victory and you don’t pick up that many seats in the House. Did you know, or was it common knowledge, that one result of that would be Ford’s retirement, sooner rather than later?

Timmons: No, I didn’t know about it. I had always assumed he would stay there and become Speaker one day when lightning struck.

Smith: Do you remember where you were when you heard about Watergate, if we define Watergate as the break in?

Timmons: Oh, yeah, I remember exactly. I was Nixon’s convention manager in ’68. When the other candidates were Reagan and Rockefeller in my ________, and then in ’72 I was convention manager again, although I was on the White House staff. In those days you could get away with doing stuff like that under the pretext that the President was going to be there and he was entitled to have some advance work. Truth of the matter is, I was convention manager and we were having a meeting over at the Committee to Re-Elect the President. I guess it was a Saturday in the morning, which I had called to talk about convention mechanics mostly – hotel rooms and buses and transportation tickets and the rules committee and so forth.

While Nixon didn’t have an opponent really, it seems to me John Ashbrook or somebody may have said he wanted to be president. It was really a free ride. And then somebody came in the door and said, “Have you guys heard that the Democratic National Committee was broken into last night? I said, “No, I hadn’t heard about that. Thank you.” The guy left. So what? Why would anybody break into the Democratic National Committee, trying to steal something probably? And if it had been McGovern’s office, that would create some more signals, I think. The Democratic National Committee? So we went on about our business and it was only later that we found out all the…

Smith: Over the years and to this day, there are people who say, “He couldn’t have been responsible for this because it was so stupid.” And one thing about Richard Nixon, he wasn’t politically stupid.
Timmons: Well, I don’t think anybody, even John Dean, has ever alleged that Nixon knew about it beforehand. The cover up is different, but the break in…Woodward and Bernstein accused me on the front page of the *Washington Post* of being one of those that received the illegal fruits of the break in. I protested and had Ziegler go out in the press office and deny it. Didn’t know anything about it. But then McGovern picked that up and used it in campaign ads with my name and teleprompter receiving the goods, as it were. Because Woodward and Bernstein must be right, they always have sixteen sources and they are wonderful and so forth. So I protested. And so I call the general counsel to the President and I said, “I want to sue these guys. This is not fair that I’ve been slammed here and surely by now they know that I wasn’t involved in this thing.” “Oh, no, you can’t do that. ________ you have no __________, you have depositions, and it would be a big issue. It will just fan the fires. This will blow over. You can’t sue.” The counsel was, of course, John Dean. His advice might have been right, but in later years, I’ve harbored some suspicions that maybe he had….so that’s how I heard about the Watergate. And quite frankly, even then, didn’t think it was a big issue. Didn’t foresee the kinds of things that would happen.

Smith: Well, who could? It’s interesting, I only heard Gerald Ford disparage two people in all the time I knew him.

Timmons: Is one sitting across the table from you?

Smith: Oh no. One was Gordon Liddy, and the other was John Dean. And in both cases the worst he could say about them was, “He’s a bad man.” That was as bad as it got.

Timmons: I agree with him in both cases, but I would add some more to the list.

Smith: Understood. Maybe a little more colorful language, too. There’s a sense that at some point, what goes by the umbrella name of Watergate, in effect paralyzes the Nixon White House. Is that an exaggeration? When did it become a crisis as opposed to a distraction?

Timmons: Probably sometime in ’73. I’m not sure. And it took the form of members of Congress not even considering Nixon legislation, not listening to us on issues
and ramifications of what would happen if they passed this or that. And at some point, it seems to me, late ’73, that that kind of set in.

Smith: That would have obviously complicated Ford’s job. Did you have a sense - was he trying to be a good soldier during that period, was he trying to warn you off?

Timmons: He was a good soldier, all the time, a very good soldier. He felt, like the rest of us, that this was politically inspired by the Nixon opponents, the Democrats in the Congress; and that it wrong and while it was stupid for people to break in the Watergate, that the President was not involved. That’s what everybody inside thought at the time, including Ford.

Smith: We talked to Jerry Jones. At that point Haldeman and Erlichman were still there, so early ’73, or before April of ’73. And he [Jones] was in the personnel office at that point, sort of reorganizing it for Haldeman. He got a call from Haldeman one day, who said, “How many people work for the Vice President?” And Jerry did some mental arithmetic and said, “Maybe around fifty.” And Haldeman said, “I want undated letters of resignation from everyone.” Now, Jones sort of looked back and wondered…

Timmons: This was for the Vice President’s office?

Smith: Yes.

Timmons: Because we got the same thing from Haldeman for the regular White House staff, too, earlier.

Smith: Okay, earlier.

Timmons: Because everyone was complaining. They said they thought we won the election in ’72, and here we’re being asked to submit letters of resignation. So they got around to the Vice President a little later apparently.

Smith: Well, Jerry wondered if they didn’t know – and now we know, of course, that this investigation in Maryland had been going on I guess for some time before Elliott Richardson took it over. Whether in fact, those around the President were aware that the Vice President might have a problem. In other words,
before the story appeared, I think it was in the *Wall Street Journal* that broke the Agnew story, did you know?

Timmons: No, I had no idea.

Smith: So it came as news to you?

Timmons: I was shocked. Just shocked. The President and Agnew, as it turned out, didn’t get along very well, it was not a close bond. But we tried to brief him up on legislative activities so he could function as the President of the Senate. [I] just had no idea and was disappointed.

Smith: The selection of Ford as vice president, there’s a lot of stories around that; that the President, if he’d had his druthers would have liked to have put John Connally in that office. What was it about Connally that so appealed to the President?

Timmons: I think his take-charge sort of attitude. He was aggressive.

Smith: Self-assured, positive, typical sort of personality when one thinks about a big Texan.

Timmons: A Lyndon Johnson sort of thing. That he’s right all the time and nobody dared challenge him. So soon after Congress confirmed him as Secretary of the Treasury, President Nixon asked me to ask him over to a leadership meeting, a Republican leadership meeting we were going to have with House and Senate leaders which we had regularly, like every other week; and asked Connally to be prepared to talk about something – I can’t remember what it was, but I said, “Yes, sir.” I went back to my office and I called Secretary Connally and I said, “I just came from the President and he would like for you to come over to a Republican leadership meeting next Tuesday and speak about (something).” I didn’t ask him if it was alright, I told him what the President wanted. He said, “Bill, you know I like you, but tell the President that if he wants me to come over there, he should call me.” Uhhhhh, so I said, “Oh boy, I’m going to get canned right now.” And I walked back into the President and said, “Mr. President, I hate to tell you but…” and related the
story. And he laughed and he said, “Don’t worry about it, Bill, I understand. I’ll call John.” Boy, I got out of there quickly while I still had my hide.

The problem with Connally is that (?) didn’t only push around by Haldeman or Erlichman, by and large, because they had a lot of stories about the Berlin Wall and Ziegler, Haldeman, Erlichman, here, here, here, and he didn’t want it to be known or seen that he was kowtowing to staff. He was Secretary of Treasury and he and the President had a personal relationship and they will talk it over. And he came to the Cabinet meetings…

Smith: And Nixon admired that. The selection process for a replacement for Agnew - how would you describe that? Was there consultation with members of Congress?

Timmons: Not in my case.

Smith: Of course it happened very fast.

Timmons: Oh, it was three days, I think. Two or three days, and I supported Gerald Ford, of course, because I knew him so well and had worked with him perhaps closer than Nixon because of the nature of my job. But also, I thought he would be easily confirmed and Connally could not be confirmed easily, probably not at all, but not easily. George Bush was another one that was bandied about some and he had been the Republican National Committee chairman and I wasn’t sure that he could be easily confirmed. I would have been happy with any of them, frankly, from my personal perspective. But Ford was easily confirmed.

I felt that he and Nixon had a good relationship and he’d been so supportive of virtually everything that Nixon proposed to the Congress that he would have been my choice. I think we received a number of calls and letters from member of Congress for Ford. I didn’t go out and solicit them and didn’t sit down and ask them what they thought. I knew what they would say, generally. There was some opposition to Connally coming in on the telephone or in the mail.
Smith:   Bob Byrd famously said that there would be blood on the floor if you attempt to nominate Connally.

Timmons:  Bear in mind this was before emails and computers and cell phones. This was the old-fashioned landline telephone and loose leaf books on your desk. What a difference technology has made. So we were all very pleased with Ford. In fact, in the White House Pat Buchanan had circulated a little memo that supported Ford. Maybe the President had asked him to poll people, I can’t remember. I had signed up for Ford, I think there was a list, ‘What do you Think?’ So we were all happy. He got into an awkward position for Hugh Scott. I don’t think he expected it, but still people would say, “Well, one leader got it and the other didn’t.”

Smith:   This is a cynical town and over the years there has been a cynical notion that Nixon, in effect, looked upon Ford as his insurance. The idea being that with Jerry Ford here, they’ll never impeach me.

Timmons:  Nah, I don’t think so. I’ve heard that and __________ would be the next person in line and so forth. I just don’t believe that.

Smith:   The vice presidency is always a difficult job. And it’s interesting, one reason why Ford really tried to bend over backwards to be understanding of Rockefeller, who had a very difficult vice presidency, was his own experience. Ford didn’t like the job. And it went beyond the unique circumstances of that time. What was the attitude of folks in the White House toward the Vice President who was, let’s face it, out of town a lot and who presumably, at least in the eyes of some, was not sufficiently outspoken or vocal enough in his defense of the President? Was it a damned if you do, damned if you don’t kind of situation?

Timmons:  I think so. I think Ford was out campaigning for lots of people and doing lots of things, and he was not in the attack dog mode that Spiro Agnew was. And so there was the difference in operations style. He was quiet, self-confident, but not aggressive, and I think in light of being burned by the previous vice president, that extended over a little bit into Ford’s vice presidency. The fact
that, well, we’ve been burned by this; we’ll kind of let him just do his Constitutional duty presiding over the Senate and a few other things.

Now I made a point of going over to see him at least once a week to brief him on legislative affairs, particularly on issues that may be coming up in the Senate where he would have to break a tie. He didn’t have any, but I made a point of doing that when he was vice president. Almost every week when he was in town, and Bob Hartmann sat in on those, and I think Dick Burris sat in on those. I didn’t do that for Agnew. He didn’t ask for it and I didn’t do it, but with Ford I did, because I thought he’d be interested and it might be helpful in some cases.

Smith: Did he ask you about Watergate?

Timmons: He never did. I think I was the first person to hold over - to be named to the Ford White House, as I recall. Not because of me, but because of continuity of the legislative agenda and the fact that members would call and have somebody to complain to other than the new president. And he had said at that time when I went in to talk to him - I said, “I should leave because they are going to kill you, just keep badgering you until you get rid of all the Nixon people. And I’m happy to go. I have three children, have twenty-two years in the government, I have no savings, I’ve got to look after the family.” He said he understood that, but wanted me to stay. And also he said that people would think that Ford was getting rid of people who were in the Nixon White House that had no relationship to Watergate.

He was very sensitive. This was the integrity of the guy and the decency of the guy. He was looking out not only in my situation, but the Cabinet and other people. He wasn’t going to fire them because they didn’t have anything to do with Watergate and they shouldn’t be punished and ostracized for something they had nothing to do with and no control over. It’s amazing to think that President Nixon, I think, under similar circumstances would have probably canned everybody he __________ without that. But that shows to me the decency. So I agreed to stay on through the legislative session, which, this was August and they had a break and then had elections.
Smith: Let me just clear up one thing. Was there a moment in your own mind when President Nixon’s survival became politically impossible? Was it when the Supreme Court ruled on the tapes? Was it when the so-called smoking gun tape was released? Or was it a more gradual dawning?

Timmons: It was a gradual realization that the support wasn’t there, was eroding fast. The House Judiciary Committee - on their Articles of Impeachment where he had strong Republican support and three or four Southern Democrats. And we were taking pretty careful nose counts on those things. So indirectly, it was the effect of releasing the tapes and the transcripts and the smoking gun and so forth, when people jumped ship. Even Republicans said, “I can support the Articles of Impeachment.” And then we shipped it to the Senate to see what a trial would show if he were impeached by the House and that started to erode too, because of dripping out every day. We would go up and say, “That’s the end of it. Don’t worry about it. We’ll regroup.” The next day, poof, something else. Just awful. And so I guess in the summer of ’74 you could sense the erosion of support for the President. And that effected, of course, legislation.

Smith: Was there any informal or formal, for lack of a better word, advice seeking with the Vice President, who after all knew as well as anyone the House, in terms of how to wage this battle? Were there any kind of consultations in terms of individual members?

Timmons: I don’t know who talked to him, if anybody talked to him. I would hope they did, but I don’t know that. I was not party to the discussion. How do you handle the Peter Rodino committee and the articles and so forth? And lawyers were pretty much in control of this then. Haig was intimately involved in it all, too. And we were all deliberately kept in the dark. We found out about these things when they were released publicly, most of them.

Smith: Mel Laird has a fascinating story. Laird, who came back in somewhat reluctantly to the White House, said that about a month after he was there he got a call from Fred Buzhardt. It seems like all roads lead back to Fred Buzhardt when it comes to the tapes. And I guess Fred Buzhardt had been his counsel at the Pentagon.
Timmons: Yes, I think so. And the President only allowed Fred to listen to the tapes there for a while.

Smith: Buzhardt tipped off Laird, which I’d never known, and that’s why oral history is invaluable. He tipped off Laird, he said, “Be careful what you say, I’ve been listening to the tapes. He’s in it up to his neck.” That’s Laird’s characterization. At which point Laird had to sort of debate with himself, do I leave, do I go? He stayed a while. Then when we saw Haig, I’d always assumed Haig had listened to, at the very least, the smoking gun tape. He said, “No, I never listened to any tapes.” He said, “Fred Buzhardt gave me some very good advice. Which is, ‘Don’t ever be alone in a room with a tape.’” And I assume that’s a reference to the eighteen and a half minute gap. So it does seem like Buzhardt is behind the scenes, and a much larger player in all of this than a lot of accounts have suggested. It’s also suggested by some that Al Haig, whatever his other flaws, was something of an unsung hero in trying to bring about a dignified, Constitutional conclusion to this.

Timmons: Yes, I think that’s true. And I think he did an admirable job. He, of course, will tell you he did, too. But that doesn’t detract from the fact that he held it together for a while. I think Gerald Ford appreciated that, although he brought Rummy in, but he had to do that. For Haig, it was time for him to go.

Smith: Now there is a famous meeting, and maybe there was more than one. But there is a famous meeting, at the end that the President had with his corporal’s guard of loyalists. I think there were some Southern Democrats in that room and other folks. Were you there for that?

Timmons: I set it up.

Smith: Was it at the very end?

Timmons: The night before he resigned, yes. August 3rd, or whatever it was. And he went on television, but he didn’t actually resign the next day. But that night he went on television, after he’d met with his loyalists. Well, once we heard that he was going to resign…

Smith: How did you hear that?
I guess Haig told me. My office was right next to Haig’s and Kissinger’s and a few feet down from the Oval Office. So we talked a lot in the corridors and bathroom and went in each other’s office. Then I told Haig that I thought that, “We should first get the leaders down here to meet with President Nixon privately and he can tell them. And then he may want to have his best friends come down. See what he thinks.” I didn’t talk to him. Haig talked to him and said, “Yes, he thinks it’s a good idea, bring down the bipartisan leaders and he’ll meet them in his Executive Office Building office at 5:30 (or something). And at 6:30 we’ll have his friends down to meet in the Cabinet Room. And here are people he wants you to include.” I saluted, contacted the leaders, had them come down. They came to my office first, several wanted a good glass of Scotch whiskey, which I provided, and then we walked from the West Wing over through to the Executive Office Building and met with President Nixon. I stayed there while he told them what was happening and it was kind of a glum, dreary sort of thing. Then I walked out with them. There were thousands of people outside the gates shouting and screaming. Speaker Albert turned to me and said, “I hope the President knows, and you tell him, that I had no part of any of this.” I said, “Yes, sir.”

They left, just in time for me to go over and check the acceptances to the evening event, Democrats and Republicans, best friends. And I got to putting some more chairs around and so forth and they came in and sat down. At the appointed time the President came in and sat down and told them what he was going to do the next day and he said, “I hope I haven’t let you down,” and we’ve been good friends and so forth. Very nice little speech. I looked around the room and everybody was crying – these Old Bulls – I mean, at that time they were sixty, seventy years old, tough, who would do anything to get ahead and they were bawling. Gee whiz.

Then the President tried to get up. We put so many chairs in you couldn’t get his chair out, so I jumped up and pulled his chair out for him so he could get out. He wasn’t crying, but everybody else was. And then he walked into the Oval Office and I told them that I had set up in the theater a television screen since they wouldn’t have the time to get back to the Hill or their homes, anybody who wanted to go over there could see the speech on television and
have refreshments. And about half decided to go see the television and about half went home. But the President maintained his composure.

After that I don’t know how he could have gone on television. He did a good job on television, but wow, it was so emotional. I wouldn’t want to strike a match in that Cabinet room because of the intensity of feeling and so forth for him. Ironically, some of them would have voted against him to save their own skins or whatever reason. They didn’t have a chance unless they were on the Judiciary Committee. I always told the President he would never be impeached, and he wasn’t. So that was that bipartisan thing. Ford was obviously there, and Les Arends was there, and somewhere I’ve surely maintained a list. In fact somebody, I think John Rhodes, published the list somewhere – in the *Congressional Record* or something.

Smith: But the President, you said, maintained his composure throughout?

Timmons: Now, some people have said that because he had trouble getting out of his chair, that he was drunk or emotionally upset. It wasn’t the case. We had pushed so many chairs together he couldn’t get out, and I pulled the chair out for him and he was able to go on.

Smith: The next morning, were you in the East Room?

Timmons: Yes.

Smith: What was that like?

Timmons: Really sad. Just sad for most of us who were loyal. My wife was there. Some of the television clips you see nowadays, you can see us quite clearly, much younger, obviously.

Smith: More tears?

Timmons: More tears. And it was a very sad occasion and he went out and the Fords went out with them outside and onto the helicopter. So it was really a sad occasion for those of us who were loyal.

Smith: How difficult was it for the loyalists? We’ve been told from people who were in the room that later on comes the swearing in, and I think there was a
receiving line and a reception down in dining room. And according to more than one person, you could see the Nixon people sort of peel off, go back to their offices. Which is not difficult to understand. The question, I guess, is what’s that say in a larger sense? In terms of meshing – you’ve already said that the President went out of his way to do the decent thing for the vast majority of Nixon people who were not involved with all these. Don Rumsfeld told us he told the President, “You should get rid of these people fast.”

Timmons: Yup.

Smith: But what were the tensions, in those early days between the Nixon White House staff which remained, and the new people?

Timmons: I think there was some tension. The Ford vice presidential people, I think, probably felt slighted some over the year that he was there, and the Nixon people recognized that and sensed it and so there was some of that there. It wasn’t bitter, but I think it wasn’t a warm and fuzzy sort of relationship. “There’s a new day coming and new people and you accept it” sort of thing.

Smith: How polarizing was Bob Hartmann?

Timmons: Very.

Smith: And what made him a polarizing figure?

Timmons: He had been with Jerry Ford for years and years and years in the Congress as his top guy; his speechwriter, very able speechwriter; and he was the person to go to for Ford. Ford had other staff, of course, but Hartmann was the king of the Hill. And when he came to the White House as vice president, he still retained that position, albeit there were others now brought in and the job changed some because it was the Executive Branch, not Legislative Branch, and there’s no floor votes and a different kind of environment.

Let me say, I got along with Hartmann, both [when Ford was] on the Hill and as vice president, and even when he was president for the few months I was there. But when Gerald Ford became president, Hartmann could see his
strength eroding in relationship to Ford. Ford started with everybody welcome
to come in the Oval Office.

Smith: The Spokes of the Wheel.

Timmons: Spokes of the Wheel.

Smith: Was that the congressional mindset?

Timmons: I guess, yes, it’s the congressional mindset. It doesn’t work in the White
House. Ford finally realized that; Rumsfeld convinced him of it later. So
Hartmann didn’t control access like he did before and he didn’t like that. And
then the President had other speechwriters and Hartmann didn’t like that. The
nature of his personality was rather abrasive.

Smith: Was he possessive of Ford?

Timmons: Yes, very much so. And of course, that was broken with Rumsfeld. He
couldn’t go in to see Ford without going through Rumsfeld, and Rumsfeld
didn’t want to bother Ford with too many little trivial things. He let him focus
on the big issues and that created a real problem for Hartmann. So, Hartmann
was not well-liked by most people. But his loyalty was never in question to
Ford.

Smith: Boy, you should hear Al Haig, even after all these years. He gets very excited
on the subject of Bob Hartmann.

Timmons: And Rumsfeld would, too, I think, if it was raised. Interesting that Hartmann,
even long after Ford left office, I think he felt slighted by Ford, I think. I
talked to him once or twice and asked him about Ford. He said, “I haven’t
heard from him in two years,” or something. I could kind of sense all that. At
the funeral for Ford, nobody realized Hartmann’s declined health at first.
Then, it was called to our attention that he was in a wheelchair. We said,
“Well, we can roll him in a wheelchair; it’s no problem.” So he was able to
participate. The planners for the funeral were family and those very close to
the family and the Fords; they had been long since detached from Hartmann,
and weren’t aware of his poor condition. I think he turned bitter after his
White House tour. And probably blames others.
Smith: We are talking to his widow next week.

Timmons: Roberta?

Smith: Roberta, yeah. A couple quick things and we’ll let you go. As you said, you were not there that long, but you were there during a very busy and historic period. The whole business of changing the mood; those first few days, bringing in the Congressional Black Caucus – what was behind that?

Timmons: Reaching out. He had pledged that he would reach out in his confirmation hearings in the House and the Senate, and that he would be a conciliator, and that he was very anxious to do that. He’d even go up to the Gym Committee – that’s the people that run the House gymnasium for members. He would go up to them and he was trying to do all kinds of things to try to use his character and personality to convince them that he’s different from President Nixon and that he really values their judgment and opinion. So the Congressional Black Caucus was one and a whole assembly of other issues, but he was really trying to reach out in his early days.

Smith: He understood at that point that symbolism was substance.

Timmons: Yes.

Smith: In that mood.

Timmons: In that context, that’s right. And he wanted to be open. Unfortunately, people felt they could call him directly right on the telephone, doing this in the first few days.

Smith: There were a number of calls?

Timmons: Oh, yeah. And we had to intercept them, of course, through the switchboard and redirect them because we were inundated with hundreds and hundreds of telephone calls every day in the legislative office from members of Congress, their staff, either Cabinet officers, people in the administration in the White House. Pink slips…you can imagine what would happen if the President had to….

Smith: They thought he was still in Congress.
Timmons: Right. “Surely he’ll take my call. He may not take your call, but he’ll take my call.” So they were redirected and we had to explain to them. Mail was horrendous. I say there was no email in those days, but the post and the mail came in all the time on all kinds of issues. Some trivial; some important. And we had to review, as I said earlier, his speeches for any congressional impact, and statements to Congress, to write if we thought that would be well-received or not received, or have you thought about this or that? Not so much on policy, but on style and tone in our legislative office.

Smith: Were you privy to any discussion of a pardon?

Timmons: No. I was shocked. I was called, maybe by Hartmann or Haig, on Sunday – I think it was a Sunday, in fact, I’m sure it was – to get to the office immediately. I said okay. Drove down and found out that he was going to pardon the former President and we had to make telephone calls to leaders of Congress and tell them about it. There is a famous picture, I think in the New York Times, with Ford in my office with Hartmann and maybe Haig, I can’t remember, standing there, and I’m at my desk with the telephone. The caption was, “He is contacting members of Congress.” Well, I think a lot of people thought since they were in my office and I was on the telephone, that I had something to do with arranging the pardon, which I didn’t even know about. I think it was the right thing to do. He was sharply criticized by members of Congress and it hurt him, probably cost him the election. It’s debatable, but I think it probably did. And with the passage of time, I think most people believe it was the right thing to do.

Smith: At the time – it has been suggested – that there was a little bit of hypocrisy on the part of some members of Congress who publicly were very outspoken in their opposition to what the President was doing, but who privately took a somewhat different stance. Did you encounter any of that?

Timmons: No. There were very few people who privately said, “Good job, Jerry.” A lot of people - although not the loyalists - but a lot of people were openly critical. I’m sure there were a number of them playing both angles.
Smith: Can you come up with an alternate – I mean, I’ve tried. I’ll never forget, I once spent two and a half hours with him war gaming this, and by the end of the evening, he convinced me Mel Laird, for example, had a plan. Mel always has a plan. And Mel’s plan was he was going to bring a bipartisan, congressional delegation down to the White House, who were going to ask the President to pardon Nixon. Now, the problem with that - I mean, thirty-five years later, tell me if I’m wrong - is given the supercharged political atmosphere at that time in this town, a trial balloon would have been shot down before it got to the trees.

Timmons: Oh, yes. It was a silly idea. I never heard of it. But it was a silly idea. Congress would have gone absolutely berserk. The press would have been all over it for days and days and days. He would not have been able to do it, eventually, if this was before the fact. And I don’t know who Laird could have gotten – a bipartisan group – two people, five people? Who’s going to go down and recommend that? Gee whiz.

Smith: Well, that’s Mel.

Timmons: Yes, yes, I know.

Smith: A couple quick things. The decision to go up to the House and testify – how did that come about? Because that is – to this day – the only time in American history it’s happened.

Timmons: Yeah, I opposed it at the time.

Smith: You did?

Timmons: Yeah, and several other people did, too. He decided himself to go up there. And the problem was there was all this speculation that there was a deal cut between Nixon and Ford, and our friend, Elizabeth Holtzman and Peter Rodino and so forth were demanding answers. They never asked him to come to the Judiciary Committee, but they wanted explanations, explanations. So somebody drafted a letter that he signed which probably wasn’t as responsive as they wanted and sent it up….They said, “This is an insult to Congress. This doesn’t answer any of the questions we asked and we demand he reply in
detail.” Again, they never asked him to go up there. Some of the discussion in the White House was, how do we handle it, what do we do? Provide details? There will always be more details because you can’t cover everything. Even if it was twenty pages long, there’d be some paragraph that would require elaboration on it. And he said, “I’ll go up there and testify.”

Smith: He did?

Timmons: He did himself. And some had suggested that. I can’t remember how the staff was divided, but most of us felt it would be a mistake because one, you don’t know where it would lead. It was a hostile committee, had just voted for articles of impeachment for Nixon, and while Ford had been confirmed by the House for his vice presidency, through that committee, the vote was not unanimous. And so we felt it might lead to all kinds of things that he couldn’t answer, and it would just keep the door open and cause more problems. Also, the historical precedent of it. Somebody had researched it and said that the only time that something close to it had happened was – was it Washington? I don’t know. But nobody had ever come to testify under oath and so forth. They didn’t swear him in, did they? No.

Smith: No, I don’t think they did. That technicality was preserved. It was a voluntary appearance.

Timmons: Right, a voluntary appearance. He did and did a good job, I think. Holtzman said it didn’t satisfy her and he didn’t answer the questions.

Smith: Was there anything he could have said that would have satisfied her?

Timmons: No, nothing. She was partisan, activist, and she wasn’t going to be satisfied. And there were several others like that, too, but she was the paramount one. So he went up and I guess it turned out to be a success. That died down then, the deal died down, but still the precedent was set.

Smith: You had upcoming elections.

Timmons: Yeah.

Smith: What was a horrible atmosphere to begin with, became worse.
Timmons: Oh, yeah. Well, you know, people look at what he inherited here. Inflation is double digit; unemployment is close to eight, seven and a half percent, something like that; not either/or inflation or unemployment, he had both. The economists said it was going to go much worse, predicting disaster. Watergate shifted the balance of power some to the Congress. China relations were stand stilled, the Soviet Union détente was nowhere and the Vietnam Peace Accord was coming apart. And you had a very heavily majority Democrat Congress. He inherited all that stuff to come in there. It’s a wonder he survived the four months I was there. But he went on to do a good job, I think, under the circumstances.

Smith: Did you hear, when the pardon came, and particularly with the elections coming up – Bob Dole, who was in the fight of his life, for example, in Kansas. Were there complaints from the Hill?

Timmons: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Do you remember any of that?

Timmons: No, I don’t remember who, but there were lots of complaints.

Smith: Like, why did he do this now?

Timmons: Yeah, why did he do it, why did he do it now? And then some other implications on that, is he going to pardon other people? Not just Nixon. And did Nixon accept the pardon? What’s the rationale in that? If he wasn’t guilty…you get all these little ramifications.

Smith: But try to imagine if he hadn’t pardoned Nixon. That administration would have been consumed and the country would have been consumed.

Timmons: A great national nightmare, as Ford said, would have been true. It would always be there and it would deter everything positive, and the election not that year, but in two years and so forth, would have all been effected by that. And so he did the right thing.
Smith: Remember, right before the election, he goes out to California and Nixon is at death’s door. He’s in the hospital and pretty clearly, the people around the President said, “Don’t go visit.” Was there a discussion of that?

Timmons: No, not that I was involved in. I’m sure the advance people and whoever the chief of staff was, Haig or Rumsfeld, may have suggested he not do that. But he did. Again, we go back to the decency and the character issue. He did, and he went in and the doctors said, “Don’t upset him,” or something, and he went in and chatted briefly. Phlebitis, I guess; Nixon had that recurring problem. And I think Ford was happy he did that.

Smith: What does that raise? There’s a big question philosophically about the conflict in the presidential job between, in some cases, doing the decent thing, and doing the politically necessary thing. Is there a conflict?

Timmons: Oh, yes, all the time. Every president has that in one way or another. You’ve got to do what is necessary for the economy, for the war effort, for poor people, for rich people, for whatever. You’ve got that to do what’s right. And you’ve got to do what is morally right, which doesn’t always jibe. And you’ve got to make a decision. And Ford made both kinds of decisions. On cargo preference, for example, which gives 20% of shipping to U.S. vessels, which the seafarers wanted very badly. And the president of the seafarers – I can’t remember his name – supported Ford. Ford agonized on that, and agonized on it, because he didn’t want to have to call this guy and tell him he was not going to support that. He did, finally. But every president has got these kind of issues. It’s the good days when they join together, both the morality of it and the policy of it – that’s great. But so often it’s the other way.

Smith: One way of telling the story of the Ford presidency, again, I realize you were only there for the first act, was of someone who came into the office, necessarily thinking like a congressman; who over time learned to think like an executive.

Timmons: Yeah, I think Ford fits that mold. The old adage in town is that former congressmen make lousy executives in the private sector and the government. There have been a whole series of failures of people that had been in
Congress and come down to the government or somewhere else and just couldn’t hack it, because it’s a completely different lifestyle, work style. And Ford had the advantage of having about a year in the vice presidency and having some transition into that; and when he became president, he of course, had a lot more of issues from the executive point of view. And I think eventually he became a good executive and not so much a legislator.

Smith: And in some ways the tragedy was that just about the time he mastered the job, he lost it.

Timmons: Yeah.

Smith: And finally, the vice presidency. The story is there were three names that were seriously considered. Rockefeller, George H.W. Bush, and Don Rumsfeld.

Timmons: And when are you talking about? For what year?

Smith: When Ford chose Rockefeller. Do those three names ring a bell with you?

Timmons: Certainly Bush was in there. I don’t remember Connally.

Smith: No, Rumsfeld, Bush, and Rockefeller, supposedly were the three finalists.

Timmons: It got down to, the best I can recall, to Rockefeller and Bush. I don’t remember Rummy – by this time he was in Europe, I guess, NATO ambassador. Ford always liked him. There was some competition among the other two.

Smith: And were their supporters making their feelings known?

Timmons: Yeah. We got some telephone calls and Bush’s people set up an office downtown here with volunteers to call members of Congress and the White House and so forth. I’m not sure he was involved, although I suspect he knew about it.

Smith: Was there any kind of organized Rockefeller…?

Timmons: Not that I could see.
Smith: And what led the President to choose Rockefeller?

Timmons: I guess one his confirmation. He felt he was well-liked. Two, he had a lot of experience in policy issues, domestic policy issues particularly that needed to be done. And three, I think he liked him personally. I sensed that.

Smith: Did you see the chemistry between them?

Timmons: Yeah, I think he did.

Smith: Because they seemed like two very different men.

Timmons: Oh, yeah. They were different men, but I think they got along. And Ford tried to bring him in to the policy arena a lot more. In fact, Jim Cannon, who was a Rockefeller man, was made head of domestic policy.

Smith: There is a sense that it was a mistake for the President, again, maybe thinking like a congressman, to tell the vice president-designate, that he would, in effect, be in charge of domestic policy. And the theory has been advanced that that was Henry Kissinger’s way of making sure that he stayed out of foreign policy.

Timmons: Right.

Smith: And then, of course, comes Rumsfeld and it just couldn’t work. Plus the fact that Rockefeller was not a staff man. He’d never been number two.

Timmons: Right. To anybody.

Smith: Did you foresee problems?

Timmons: No, I didn’t at the time. I thought it was a good choice.

Smith: Were there complaints from the conservatives?

Timmons: Oh, yes, a lot of them. In fact, Rockefeller lost three or four Republican senators on his confirmation, the Twenty-fifth Amendment procedure. Goldwater, Helms, Bill Scott, I think that’s probably it, and several Democrats. He was confirmed, obviously, but some of the conservatives, the most conservative members of the Senate and House did not support him.
Smith: And he had a very rocky confirmation hearing. Were you involved in that?

Timmons: Oh, yes. We had so many different issues, but boy, they really went through everything that he had and owned.

Smith: The phrase that I heard is “financial voyeurism.”

Timmons: Yeah. It went on for a long time. In fact, Ford had to get involved to try to move them along to get him confirmed.

Smith: How so?

Timmons: Well, he had a statement to Congress about it. He talked to members about it.

Smith: Of both parties?

Timmons: Probably. I can’t remember, but I would think so, because the Democrats controlled the process. We were getting right up to adjournment in December, and if they got home – and this was after the new Congress comes in – and my golly. And he saw Carl Albert sitting out there so he pressed, pressed, pressed to get the confirmation done and it did just a day or two before they adjourned, I think. So he was very much interested. That was one of his priorities. And I think Rockefeller appreciated that. Rockefeller was always a gentleman about this, even when he was, I’d say, dumped. He was a gentleman the whole time. Seemed to understand the politics.

Smith: Good soldier.

Timmons: Good soldier, yup.

Smith: You have a wonderful story about your introduction to him. And the role that you would be playing in terms of managing the confirmation process.

Timmons: Yeah. President Ford had to go out to the press office first and talk to the press a bit, which he handled very well. And then he [Rockefeller] came into my office, the legislative office in the West Wing of the White House, to discuss confirmation. I asked him a number of questions. We talked about the process and how it would go. We had just been through Ford’s, the first person to be selected under the Twenty-fifth Amendment, and I asked him to
think about the worst thing that could come out during the confirmation hearings. “The most troublesome thing you could imagine in your background. Don’t tell me, I don’t want to know, I don’t want anybody to know, but you know and you figure the proper response and rehearse it and make sure it’s good.” And I was thinking about his marital situation, that was kind of the thing, but I didn’t think about anything else. But he said, “Bill, there is one issue that’s going to be very embarrassing to me.” And he said, “But people think I’ve got more money than I really have.” I said, “Oh?” He said, “Yeah, I’ve only got $150 million in Manhattan property, another $200 million in Standard Oil and $300 million here and Argentina,” and he went through a whole bunch of multimillion dollars and said, “And you add that all up and people think I’ve got more money than I’ve really got.” I thought to myself, “Well, I should have such a problem.” And then he said, “And that poor working guy out in the street, the guy’s making $50,000, what’s he going to think about this?” And I said to myself, “I’m making $42,500, and the guy would think a lot about it.” So that was that story, I’ve told it several times before. It’s true. Rockefeller, of course, was honest in this. He wasn’t deceptive in any way.

Smith: Last question. I assume you were at the ’76 convention.

Timmons: I was Ford’s manager.

Smith: Yeah. Describe that convention. How bitter was it?

Timmons: You know, I always knew it was going to be very, very close - but I always thought Ford would win. I never was pessimistic about it. Looking at the delegate count, and the states in question, and Clarke Reed in Mississippi, and all that stuff. The Reagan people selected their test fight on a rule, 16-C, I think it was called, which would require the presidential candidates to name his vice president before the convention voted because Reagan had picked Schweiker early in the campaign and that was a negative for him and cost him a lot of votes.

Smith: Including Clarke Reed?
Timmons: Yes. Clarke Reed needed a lot of wining and dining and care and attention all the way through. But that really hurt in the South and particularly in Mississippi. So we had all these issues coming up and they wanted to fight on that. And we went through our vote count very carefully and I think the Ford people won that rule fight of 16-C by about 120 votes. Which was about the same number that he eventually was nominated. And so that was by and large the big fight. It wasn’t on the nominating vote, it was 16-C. And they recognized that and they tried to get an emotional issue on foreign policy on the plank and that was a big fight, too. That this plank repudiated, really, the Nixon-Ford doctrine on foreign policy – bringing up Kissinger and…

Smith: Détente.

Timmons: And détente and all that, the Helsinki Accords. And the RNC rules committee had rejected it. The convention rules committee had rejected it, but it got enough votes in the convention rules to get a floor vote, so that’s what the Reagan people wanted because it was not popular and they thought they could swing some votes. And so we had a big discussion on how to fight and whether to fight and we decided not to fight it. It was an embarrassment, it was silly, but who cares in the final analysis? Getting the nomination is the important thing. And Ford didn’t like it either. Of course Kissinger didn’t like it at all, and Rockefeller didn’t like it. And they were right. But politically, why fight on that? You’ve won the thing on the 16-C vote; you could possibly lose this plank and that may start a stampede; so we prevailed to let it go and the heck with it. And I still think that was probably the best decision. Which leads to an interesting story my colleague Tom Korologos tells. He saw Kissinger on the floor and Kissinger is very much upset about this and said, “If you guys let this stand, I’m going to resign from the State Department.” And Tom allegedly said, “Well, Henry, if you’re going to resign, do it now. We need the votes.”

Smith: It sounds like Tom.

Timmons: It does.

Smith: Did you have a candidate for vice president?
Timmons: No. I wasn’t involved in that. I was happy with Dole, but what upset me most was the process. As convention manager, all the conventions – Nixon ’68, ’72, Ford in ‘76, I had Reagan’s manager in ’80, and Reagan in ’84. Those were the ones I was convention manager for the candidate, not the party, and I always put together a paper on selection of vice president. Even to Nixon. Things that needed to be considered. No names, but what needs to be done; the process. Talk to this, talk to that, make the announcement here, make the announcement there, call in leaders, and all that kind of stuff. And vet the person.

Smith: Rationalize the process.

Timmons: Right. Nobody has ever followed it. Not a one and not Ford on that occasion. He had his buddies around and they talked it through.

Smith: That brings up the last question, because I have to ask you: it was even more bizarre in ’80 – was the Ford-Reagan thing serious?

Timmons: Yeah, it was serious for a while there, but let me go back to Kansas City. I had worked out with John Sears, who was Reagan’s manager long before the convention, that the winner of the nomination would go to the loser’s hotel the night of the vote, and discuss holding the party together, and maybe even vice president. But who knew at that stage? We both agree that was good for party unity. We went back to the Goldwater thing when that all fell apart and the New England governors and Midwest governors wouldn’t support Goldwater. We said we’ve got to overcome that. And he agreed, and we did.

So after Ford won, I called Sears and said, “Can we bring the President over to your hotel, according to the agreement?” And he said, “Well, I’ve got to check now. Things are pretty bad over here.” And I got a ______, and I said, “Well, it’s kind of important to the party.” So he did call me back an hour or so later after talking to Reagan. He said, “Yes, the governor will see Ford after the convention session at the Alameda at Reagan’s headquarters. But there is one condition. That Ford not offer Reagan the vice presidency.” I said, “Well, I’ll pass that onto President Ford and if that’s a condition, he will do it.”
I went into Ford’s office, which was just two or three doors down and he was sitting there – they had kind of an Oval Office set up with a flag and everything – and he was smoking his pipe and Cheney was there. I said, “Well, Mr. President, I have some very bad news for you.” He said, “What’s that?” “The condition is that you not offer Reagan the vice presidency.” Boy, he smiled and puffed about six puffs and he was just so happy about that because he was worried that Reagan wanted the vice presidency. And he didn’t want to have him because of bad feelings through the campaign. Don’t sell the Panama Canal, and all this stuff that went on, and so that was kind of bad blood there and they both performed well after that, I think.

The Ford people felt Reagan didn’t campaign hard enough for him, the Reagan people sat on their schedule for three or four weeks when the Ford people wouldn’t call them to schedule anything. They said, “Look we have to support candidates around the country…” They called me a couple of times and said, “Call Cheney and tell us what…” So it was kind of a mix up there. So that bad blood was there and coming to ’80, I don’t know actually who suggested it. I always thought it would be Bush because they ran together and normally he’s got a lot of support there and couldn’t win the nomination at the Detroit convention, but he had a lot of support and he’d handled a lot of issues. They didn’t always agree with Reagan, voodoo economics and all that.

So, somebody had suggested they consider Ford and so we set it up in a little team of people with Ed Meese and Deaver and those people. I had brought Baker into the thing in ’80 because he wasn’t coming to the convention and I brought him in. However Reagan people didn’t like it because he was tied to Bush and some of the problems. But, no, it was seriously considered for a while, and I will to my dying day, deny this co-presidency thing that Walter Cronkite or somebody had said and people have written about all the time. I know because I was the only one that could type, and I typed the agreement.

Smith: There was an agreement?

Timmons: Several agreements – talking points, I guess. It wasn’t something they would sign but it was for both sides to look at so there was no misunderstanding on discussion. So as the discussions went on, I would revise and type the thing,
and finally, when it kind of fell apart, I took the last copy, folded it up, took Meese into the toilet in the hotel, and flushed it down the toilet with him as a witness. And I wish I had kept it now, because it would have proved my point.

There was a lot of discussion on the vice president’s role, meeting with the president often, having a voice in policy, comment on policy, personnel, special attention to the Congress because after all, Ford had been there, and Ford wanted some active role in the defense department. Because that was his real love, you know, from Appropriations days. No co-presidency, and no fact that you would give up the authority of the president. These were the sort of things that were normal courtesies, you would think, but in light of the past history of the vice president, they are ignored often.

Smith: He’d had the job, unhappily. He’d seen Rockefeller.

Timmons: That’s right and he wanted some understanding, as former president, content outside of government, that he would have a meaningful role. And that was what that was all about. And people said, well, Kissinger and Greenspan wanted to have jobs. Well, I’m sure they did, but that wasn’t part of any paper that I typed up. And so he would have an enhanced role of historical vice president, no question about that, but it would not be a co-presidency.

Smith: That’s perfect. I’m so glad to get that on the record. Because you are right, the great urban legend – and it really was – Ford being polite, I think it was Walter Cronkite used the phrase and Ford just sort of passively went along with it.

Timmons: Now some of the Reagan people who distrusted Ford put out a bunch of things that he had asked to be something that the Reagan people, in their purity, couldn’t stand. But they were not people involved in the negotiation. They were kind of on the fringes, guessing.
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Smith: Thank you very much for doing this.


Smith: You have Grand Rapids roots.

Watkins: Right. Yes.

Smith: Tell us about your story before the Ford White House.

Watkins: How I ended up there? Well, we grew up with the Seidmans. My parents and Bill and Sally Seidman were very close. My parents are Bob and Betty Watkins. We spent summers together at Lake Michigan. We’d go to their house frequently on Sundays for skiing in the day and hamburgers at night. They had a big indoor pool and we’d swim. They’d come to our place occasionally. And we spent our Christmas days together. I just knew Bill very well.

Smith: Bill strikes me as something of a renaissance man, a man of remarkably diverse interests.

Watkins: Right, very eclectic and even somewhat eccentric as well, but in a good way.

Smith: Yeah? How so?

Watkins: He liked art and he liked making mobiles. He was always organizing things. He organized Thornapple Slopes which was a ski area on his farm with rope tows. We all learned to ski there so it was great fun. He did a lot of gardening. You would not think of him as a gardener and he wasn’t a very good one, but he did a lot of it.

Smith: He was an enthusiast.

Watkins: Yeah, he had more property in Grand Rapids. He thought about developing it. That’s when I started working with him, but he ended up giving it away to
the state of Michigan for a cross-country skiing park. So he liked that. He was always starting television stations and he’d get everybody involved. My parents did a lot of things with him on the business side as well as the social side. Fourth of July, he would be the one who’d collect money from the other parents and go buy fireworks. And he would have lobsters and clams sent in from Maine to Lake Michigan. Just a wild man.

Smith: He struck me as someone who lived every day of his life.

Watkins: I would say so, yes. He had a lot of activities.

Smith: And Sally, they were a real partnership?

Watkins: Yes, they were very close. Sally ran the household with the six kids. Sally was a very excellent athlete and loved the arts, and she did a lot of different things in her own right, but basically she held down the fort, which was a challenge.

Smith: Now, he was instrumental clearly in the creation of Grand Valley State University, which I guess is 50 years ago.

Watkins: Yes, actually this year it’s coming up.

Smith: How does he come into the Ford picture?

Watkins: Well, knew Ford somewhat, but not real well, from Grand Rapids. Phil Buchen, of course, was very close to Ford. You know, they were law partners. Phil Buchen lived right down the street from us.

Smith: Really?

Watkins: He was a very good friend of my dad’s.

Smith: Tell us what your memories about Phil Buchen are.

Watkins: I thought he was this wonderful, stately, distinguished guy who was very friendly and easy-going. You could sit and talk with him. But you know he
was handicapped, he had the polio, which was a curiosity. But he was a very well respected lawyer around town and he was really involved with the start of Grand Valley, too. My dad was on that organizing committee and so were all kinds of people in the community. Bill was the one who would always pull people together. He was very good at that.

Smith: Catalyst.

Watkins: Yeah, catalyst. Put them all together. Sometimes he’d bring them out to his house. He had this big dining room table and Sally would make hamburgers. They’d have this meeting and things would get organized. That’s about the way it worked.

Smith: So when did your path first cross with Gerald Ford?

Watkins: Well, he was our congressman, so we always knew who he was as kids. Actually, his house was about two blocks from mine, I think. Was it Rosewood Street? We were on Cambridge Boulevard which was literally two blocks away. But he never lived there. It was a rental place. It was his congressional district home.

Smith: Now, was this East Grand Rapids?

Watkins: East Grand Rapids, yeah.

Smith: Okay.

Watkins: In fact, Bill Seidman’s house, when he was a child, was also right down the street from ours. So it was all in a very similar area.

Jerry Ford used to come to my high school about every two years to give a little talk and that was always interesting. I would think about skipping the assembly just like high school kids do. Little did we know he would become president. So that was how we got to know him a little bit. When he first became vice president I flew down to Washington with Bill and some other people and they had a reception up at the Capitol Hill Club. I think that’s the
first time I ever really met him. It was funny, because they took pictures and I never knew what happened to those pictures. One day when I was working at the White House, somebody in the photo office said, “I think I found those pictures. It looks like you only the hair is longer.” Turns out it was, so they dug up the old photo.

Smith: Now, why were you on that trip to Washington?

Watkins: Well, it goes back to how this all started. After college, I went to Alma College in Michigan and I really didn’t quite know what I was going to do with myself like so many kids. But I knew Bill always did interesting things and I figured, “Heck, I should go talk to him.” So I did. I went up to the house and I remember sitting by the fireplace and he said, “Well, what are you interested in doing?” I said, “Well, maybe land development” et cetera, et cetera. He said, “Well, let me think about this. Let’s have some dinner.” And so the three of us had dinner, Bill, Sally, and me, and after dinner, he said, “I’ve got this project. It’s those 400 acres I was telling you about. I’m thinking about developing it. What do you think about working with me on that?” And I said, “Sure.” And he said, “You’re going to be my partner.” I said, “Well, that’s cool. Partner with Bill Seidman.” So we worked on that for awhile and then he ended up giving that away to the state, so it didn’t make a dime.

Next his father had died and Bill had a little more money and he said, “I want to buy a ranch in New Mexico. I’ve been doing some looking. Why don’t you go out there and look around in Colorado and New Mexico? I’ll give you my son’s van and some money and while you’re there, check out the ski areas, because I want it near a nice ski area.” And I’m going, “Oh, that’s a tough assignment.” So, out I went, skiing.

Smith: So, has Bill always been a skier?

Watkins: Yeah, he’s pretty good. He learned to ski at Dartmouth when he was in college, so that’s where he started out. He was not a great skier, but he loved
to ski. So I was running around looking at ranches in New Mexico and he and Sally came out for a visit to look at a few. Meanwhile, he had started working for Ford as vice president.

Smith: And what was the nature of his professional function with Ford at that point?

Watkins: Well, I think it started out, and I really wasn’t closely involved, but Bob Hartmann was there and he was more of a speechwriter than a manager. It was a much bigger office than a congressional office and needed organizing. I think it was Phil Buchen that recommended to Jerry Ford that they get Bill Seidman in. He’s the kind of guy that likes to organize things. It turns out that really was the case. So Bill came to Washington.

So, we’d been looking at ranches and all of a sudden Jerry Ford becomes president. Bill says, “Why don’t you come down to Washington? We’ll talk about a few of these ranches you’ve found. I’ll give you a tour of the White House.” You know, fun stuff. “Sally’s going to fly down with Rich DeVos. Why don’t you go with them?” So I said, “Sure.” This is one of those stories you just go. Rich DeVos sends a Rolls Royce over to pick us up in the morning at Seidman’s house. It was to the airport, hop on a private jet, blast to Washington, and a limousine to Seidman’s house. That was on a Friday morning. That evening, Jerry terHorst came over for dinner. It was a couple of days after he had resigned. So it had been in the paper. It was pretty amazing. Bill goes out in this backyard of his house and had this little Hibachi and cooks burgers. And it was fun to see that. That was a Friday.

Smith: Let me ask you something because there has always been a debate concerning the exact motive or motives, maybe cluster of motives surrounding terHorst’s decision. Obviously the public reason given was the pardon. There are a number of people with whom we’ve spoken who claim from personal knowledge that it’s more complicated than that - that, in fact, terHorst found the job overwhelming and not to his liking.
Watkins: I don’t know that personally. That there may be some truth to that, too. It was probably a combination of things.

Smith: I’m wondering. This was right after his resignation. Do you remember at all -

Watkins: Yeah, it seems like Bill said something at one time or another that was “all of a sudden you’re thrust into a very visible, big-league job.” There may be some truth to that. I don’t know for sure, though.

Smith: Did you know terHorst?

Watkins: No, that was the first time I ever met him. Anyway, so the next morning, Bill says, “Come down to the White House and I’ll give you a tour.” This was Saturday morning, he went in early, “Come on down about ten.” So I go down there and get through security and go up to his office in the Old Executive Office Building. And he says, “I have some bad news. I can’t give you a tour of the White House. I’ve got a meeting with the President.” I said, “That’s a pretty good excuse.” And Bill, in his usual fashion, says, “You see that pile of papers on my desk over there? Why don’t you start sorting them out and then drafting answers?” I went, “Well, okay.”

So I sat down and looked, and they’re all from the chairmen of the board from this or that and all had to do with the economy. Bill was the Assistant to the President for Economic Affairs. The Chairman of Chrysler had written. And I said, “Okay” and I started drafting responses and I remember some of the words were like ‘Apparently your letter was lost in the shuffle.’ We used that a lot. And, so, anyway, I never did get my White House tour, but he said, “Why don’t you stick around for a couple of weeks and work on the Conference on Inflation?” “Yeah, sure. Why not?” So that started and it was quite an experience.

Smith: Describe the purpose of that.

Watkins: The Conference on Inflation? Well, remember the economic times were not dissimilar to today. It was stagflation and things were in pretty bad shape. It
was just bringing together all the great minds, all the economists, business leaders, labor leaders, into one forum with people from the Senate, House, and the Executive Branch. It was quite a collection of folks over the course of two days or so.

Smith: And right in the middle came Mrs. Ford’s hospitalization.

Watkins: Was that right? I had no idea. Wow.

Smith: Yeah, because he went up to Bethesda and came back to the conference I think maybe the second day or something. It was a Saturday when she had her operation.

Watkins: I forgot about that. Good point.

So anyway, they had me working on the Conference. And I’ll never forget that they had a big reception at the White House and you’d go in there and just go, “What am I doing here? This is just an amazing Who’s Who.” So I finally did get my White House tour that way. And then Bill said, “We’ve got some follow-up work to do. Why don’t you stick around a couple more weeks?” And Sally said, “You’re going to need more clothes.” She took me out to Britches and got me a suit. Of course my parents paid her back. And then one day we’re driving home and Bill says, “Ah, hell, why don’t we just put you on the payroll.” So that’s how it all started.

Smith: What was Bill’s job?

Watkins: Assistant to the President for Economic Affairs and head of that Economic Policy Board. I think if you really look at the Economic Policy Board, they really structured it very well. There was excellent participation from the relevant departments and the people within the White House staff that were key to coming up with economic decisions.

Smith: And again, for people who don’t know, my understanding is that was a brand new organization.
Watkins: Yeah, it was a new organization, basically a new model. It was built on small former models. But that was a lot different. Bill’s role was that of honest broker. I’m picking up words from Roger Porter because I worked with Roger. But it was designed in a way that all the options would be on the table and they would go through those options, discuss the pros and cons and then you’d come up with a recommendation for the President, if it was an issue they wanted to elevate it to the President. Sometimes it was a Treasury Department issue that would affect other departments, so they could decide it right there. And a lot of it hinged on the President not letting people do end runs through the back door with, “You’ve got to do this for my department” or “This is what I want you to do. Please do it.” I think President Ford was good about laying down the law that, “I want everybody to be involved in this if I’m going to make the right decision.” So, that’s probably one of his real strengths.

Smith: One senses that he wanted to hear as many viewpoints as possible argued out, if necessary, in front of him.

Watkins: Yes, or even argued out before it got to him. Just as long as they come up with good, clear cut options, so the pros and cons are presented. I think there are some other presidential models - you’d know a lot better than I do - that “Let’s let them fight it out. I’ll listen to different opinions.” They’ll come in different doors. With President Ford it was more, “You all come and get together, and in an honest and fair way come up with your options and your recommendations. We’ll do it that way.” It avoided the under the table, back door approach to presidential decisionmaking.

Smith: Now, that said, there’s some strong personalities and strong temperaments on this because I remember talking to Bill, to pick one obvious example, the whole business about “bailing out New York.” And one sensed that you had, for lack of a better word, the sort of doctrinaire conservatives, Simon, Greenspan, in particular, on one side and Bill, this is the part where he made
his alliance with Rockefeller. How would you describe Bill’s politics and, for lack of a better word, his economic politics?

Watkins: I describe him as quite conservative, too, maybe a little more of a realist at the same time. The economic education I got primarily came from Simon, Seidman, and Greenspan, just sitting in the background and listening here and there.

Smith: And how would you describe each of them?

Watkins: Well, Simon was challenging – we actually became real good friends later, but the first time I met him, he yelled at me. Roger Porter and I were sitting in a conference room over in the old Executive Office Building on a Saturday morning. We were in the staff chairs and Simon was like sitting where I am, running the meeting and Roger and I were whispering to each other and he stands up, comes over, and starts yelling at us for being too loud. And I’m going, “Oh, this is cool.” All I can remember is that he had penny loafers on. But then I got to know him, ironically, through Susan Mercandetti and through Bill Seidman. Susan’s good friend was Mary Simon, his daughter. I can tell you a few off-color stories or two about that as well, but anyways.

Smith: But in public, Simon had the reputation for being pretty intimidating.

Watkins: Yes.

Smith: Formidable.

Watkins: Yeah, he came across as a pretty tough, strong guy. He had those big thick glasses and would look at you intently.

Smith: And I take you saw both sides?

Watkins: Yeah, I really learned to like him and like I said, we became pretty good friends, but it was because I was introduced on the social side as well as knowing him from running around the White House. I remember one time I ran into the Roosevelt Room looking for Seidman. I’m just cruising along -
some rush job - and there’s President Ford and Bill Simon talking. And I run right in and I said, “Oh, excuse me!” I didn’t know what to say, so I said, “Did you see Bill Seidman?” And I think it was Simon who said, “I think he’s in the other room, there. No problem.” Like just old buddies, just easy, but a little intimidating stepping in front of him and the President.

And Greenspan, he was a lot younger then as head of the Council of Economic Advisors, although he had the strong philosophies.

Smith: Almost libertarian.

Watkins: Yeah, at that time, I don’t remember him being quite soft spoken. He was younger than Simon and Seidman.

Smith: Yeah.

He told us he brought Ann Rand in to the White House and introduced her to the President. Wouldn’t you have loved to have been a fly on the wall?

Watkins: Yeah, the only one better than that was Raquel Welch, when she came over.

Smith: Tell us.

Watkins: Oh, she came in for March of Dimes or something like that to see the President. Everybody in the Old Executive Office Building, whether it was Seidman or Simon, made it a point to get over there around the same time. She was in the waiting room in the White House and had lots of company. Those are some things that happened.

Smith: Recreate for us the discussions that would go on in this group where you had these strong-willed people; people with clearly delineated philosophies. I mean, how did it work?

Watkins: Well, I think Roger Porter deserves a lot of credit. He was older than I was, but he was still very young. He would go out and pull things from the different departments, whatever issue it was. Say, it was international trade,
you’d want Commerce and State and whoever else, say, the Department of Agriculture. Bill and Roger make sure those all got into that options paper. It gave them something to look at, in advance of their meeting.

Smith: And Roger’s role was?

Watkins: He was the executive secretary on the Economic Policy Board.

Smith: Okay.

Watkins: I went to very few of those meetings. It was usually only Roger and Bill from our office, and occasionally Bill Gorog, later on, who became Bill’s deputy, but that was a year or so into it, maybe nine months into it. That was intentional because Bill Seidman didn’t want to give the perception that he had a large staff. He wanted one or two people, Roger being the guy who did all the paperwork, so it wasn’t like we were trying to create some sort of dynasty within the White House.

Smith: One way of looking at the Ford presidency is tracing the trajectory of someone who, on day one, was very much a man of Congress and who learned over two and a half years the difference between the congressional mindset and the executive mindset. Woven into that is this notion that, well, he was surrounded by all these Grand Rapids people - as if he had to outgrow that. What’s your response to that?

Watkins: Well, there was a Grand Rapids crowd and I remember there were a few people that didn’t last very long for one reason or another. It might’ve been good. Maybe they left on their own, but I think he liked having a few local people with Grand Rapids roots around, too. I think having Seidman and Buchen around was quite comforting in a way. I mean, these are guys that he trusted. I wouldn’t say more trust, because he knew other people from the Hill and he’d been in Washington for many, many years.

Smith: But you stop and think, also, here’s someone who comes into this office under unique circumstances with no transition. He’s got a staff on day one that were
all Nixon people. And one of the stories we’ve been told multiple times is of the swearing in, followed by a reception, and then, I guess, there was something down in the dining room and you could see the Nixon people kind of peel off. It does raise this question of how did he balance continuity and change; being fair to the vast majority of Nixon people that had nothing to do with Watergate, with the political reality of giving the country something fresh?

Watkins: I can’t really answer that because I was so new myself. You got the sense, though, that it wasn’t like they were trying to throw all the Nixon people out because a lot of them certainly stayed.

Smith: Did you sense any tensions between the groups?

Watkins: No, not really. I think if there was any, it was probably at a really high level within the White House. But there were quite a few people on Bill Broody’s staff or in the scheduling office who stayed and that was fine. Everybody got along well. Had a great time.

Smith: Was Haig still around when you were on?

Watkins: No.

Smith: Was Rumsfeld in charge?

Watkins: Yeah.

Smith: How would you describe Rumsfeld in those days?

Watkins: I thought he was a pretty impressive guy. I guess you could say a cool guy. He was always pretty nice. If you would see him in the hallways, he would always say ‘hello.’ Bill used to say they had some problems with Rumsfeld, but overall, he said he was a very well organized guy and very competent. I always thought he was a good speaker. He would come and talk every now and then and it was kind of motivational. I don’t know if it was him or
somebody else that said, “We’re all dispensable and it’s a privilege to be here,” I took that to heart.

And Cheney was fun, too.

Smith: Was there a difference between the two in how they ran things?

Watkins: Cheney and Rumsfeld?

Smith: Yeah.

Watkins: I think when Cheney came on board a lot of it had to do with age. He was very young. He was a very competent guy, but Rumsfeld was with his peers and Cheney was all of a sudden working with senior guys like Seidman, Greenspan and Simon. I think there was probably a little less tension in the air, in some respects, things went smoother just because of that.

Smith: What was your exposure to the president himself?

Watkins: Oh, I’ve got a good story. Just in general, I’d see him in the hallway occasionally. I’d say, “Hello, Mr. President.” And he’d go this way and I’d go mine. He knew I was from Grand Rapids because of Seidman and Buchen and he knew my name, but I don’t think he put my name and my face together.

This is my favorite Washington, D.C. story. A young guy named Jeff Krolik worked for Nelson Rockefeller. I don’t know if you’ve ever talked to him, but you should some time. He lives out in California now. But Jeff and I were housemates. So he works for Rockefeller and I work for Seidman and we got wind that the Rockefellers were going to take the Fords to the National Theater to see Bubbling Brown Sugar, a wild tap-dancing, Harlem-based musical. So Jeff and I said, “Well, we’ve got these little Secret Service pins. Why don’t we get some dates and we’ll take them over to the National Theater and we’ll get there early. We’ll stay out in the lobby and when the President and Vice President come in, we’ll introduce our dates to the
President and Vice President of the United States?” You know, this would be cool!

So, sure enough, we did that. We get there and we’re waiting in the lobby and in come the Rockefellers and the Fords and we all said ‘hello’; we introduced our dates, just like we’d planned; and they go in and down the aisle. So we said, “Well, we’d better go find our seats”. So we go down the other aisle and – excuse my language – but I go, “Holy shit.” They put us right in front of the Rockefellers and the Fords and this is in the orchestra section. It’s not like we’re hidden off in a box somewhere. And it was just before the show started and my date’s going, “Should I slide down in my seat?”

At the intermission, it was a lot of fun. We all started talking about Harlem and Betty Ford said, “I used to hang out up there.” Jeff had gone to Dartmouth, so he and Rockefeller had plenty to talk about. Of course he was working for Rockefeller. We all got chatting and we forgot we were talking to the President and Vice President and their wives and that the rest of the theater is looking at us. And later we thought, “Wow.”

Smith: But they enjoyed the show.

Watkins: Yeah, the show was great. We all loved that. And afterwards, we were shaking a little bit. We felt like we should’ve asked them to go to the Old Ebbitt for an omelet like you used to do in those days. Of course we were hoping they’d invite us over to their place. That was a pretty incredible night.

And then another story is that we’re out in that White House tennis court, actually two stories - quick ones. Everybody used to sneak out there. Bill Seidman used to say - I did his scheduling among other things - and he said, “If anybody calls, don’t interrupt me unless it’s a cabinet secretary or the President or something very urgent.” I said, “Okay.” And he said, “Tell them I’ll be in the Greens Conference Room.” That was code for the tennis court. I was out there another time. We were playing tennis and all of sudden a presidential helicopter comes in, bringing President Ford back from
somewhere he’d gone and we thought, “Oh, we’re in trouble now.” You could see him looking at us and we thought, “Uh oh, we’re outta here.” Anyways, that was a good story.

Smith: But he, unlike some presidents, didn’t decide who used the tennis court.

Watkins: No, not until the next president. And Bill Seidman always claimed that that was his doing. Bill told Hamilton Jordan that the key to Power in the White House was who controlled the tennis courts. After that, President Carter decided he’d control it.

And then I remember the Kansas City convention was a lot of fun.

Smith: Now, you say a lot of fun, but it was also bitter.

Watkins: Yeah.

Smith: You literally did not know going in?

Watkins: Oh, no, it was rough, the delegate count and all that, but I wasn’t involved in that. I helped Bill on the platform committee and then there really wasn’t much for the two of us to do after that. So – this is another tennis strategy. We’re staying at the same hotel with the president, so we reserve the court. Bill said, “You reserve it and I’ll reserve it and we’ll get it for a couple of hours a day every day.” That was another power play. I had guys like Bill Simon come up and, “Can I join you guys for tennis this afternoon?” I remember one time I played with Simon, Gary Brown, a congressman from Michigan, and Jerry Ford’s brother, I think it was Jim. And here I am, it’s my court, and I had these guys. When you’re serving - I was a pretty good tennis player in those days, and I had Bill Simon in my sights. You think about when he was mean, and then serve and just blast him. So there’s good times.

Smith: Did you detect philosophical and/or personal differences between, for example, Simon and Rockefeller? I mean, you had the New York City bail out.
Watkins: I just wasn’t that close to that. I remember the issue very well, but I wasn’t close to the way those two interacted.

Smith: But Bill did form an alliance with Rockefeller.

Watkins: They got along very well and it was not just that – Bill served on a committee that Rockefeller headed up? Was it energy?

Smith: He had one big Rockefeller grand plan.

Watkins: Yep, grand plan.

Smith: The Energy Independence Corporation.

Watkins: Yeah, and Bill was a part of that and I remember he just said, “I really enjoyed working with Rockefeller.” And Rockefeller was just such a great guy – I really liked him, too. I didn’t know him well, but Jeff Krohk said Rockefeller would say, “Hey Jeff, how’s your friend Dirge?” That happened more than once. He seemed like just a great guy and very warm and friendly. One time on a Saturday morning, I’m talking to my mother in Grand Rapids and they were looking at the offices we were going to give up and I said, “Mom, the Vice President just walked in.” He said, “Hi, how are ya? Well, say hello to your mother.” But no, Bill and Rockefeller just hit it off personality-wise and there may have been some issues they didn’t agree on, but it really wasn’t a problem.

But Simon and Seidman was a situation where a lot of people thought it would be a tense almost unworkable relationship. But they sat down very early on and talked. They found out that they had a lot in common personally and socially. They were able to work very well that whole time period and became very good friends.

Smith: So you didn’t see Rockefeller’s unhappiness as vice president?

Watkins: Not so much with Simon. You know, there were always the Rumsfeld stories and things like that.
Smith: I haven’t talked with Jeff Krolik.

Watkins: Did you know Dick Krolik by chance?

Smith: No.

Watkins: He did work for Rockefeller. I think worked for Time Warner, but it was Time back in those days. Jeff’s dad was very close to Rockefeller, so Jeff started working with him from a very young age. He was probably three or four years younger than I am.

Smith: Really?

Watkins: Yeah.

Smith: Did he retell the Rumsfeld story?

Watkins: Seidman?

Smith: Either Seidman or Jeff.

Watkins: No, mostly what I heard about Rumsfeld, of course, was from Seidman. And you’ve probably heard all those stories ten times over again.

Smith: Was it just chemistry?

Watkins: No, I don’t think they disliked each other, it was just Rumsfeld had his way of doing things. And, you know, if you’re chief of staff, you’re entitled to talk to the President directly, obviously, and sometimes that blew over into the policy arena with the Economic Policy Board. Don’s over here doing what he wanted to do and then there was some of his more grand schemes to be the vice president.

Smith: That was gossiped about?

Watkins: Yeah, that was not unknown.

Smith: Nelson went to his grave believing that Rumsfeld did him in.
Watkins: Yeah, and I remember the stories, because of Governor Ray Shafer from Pennsylvania.

Smith: Right.

Watkins: He was counselor to Nelson Rockefeller and I got to know him pretty well after the administration. In between Seidman, Shafer, and all these stories about Rumsfeld angling for the next vice presidential slot. After doing Rockefeller in, and with Rockefeller’s New York delegation and Shafer’s Pennsylvania delegation, that was not going to happen. That was it. You are not going to take over the vice presidency. Now, all this is secondhand, of course.

Smith: Is that from Shafer?

Watkins: Mainly from Seidman, but Shafer talked that way, too. You know they saw some scheming going on.

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

Watkins: Not much. I saw the kids or most of them at the last Ford dinner here in town. And it was fun to see Jack. You know, we’d had some adventures together back in those days.

Smith: Tell us about Jack.

Watkins: Well, Jack…you know.

Smith: No, I mean.

Watkins: Well, at the Ford dinner, he said, “Hey, come on”. We hadn’t seen each other in many years and I have all these Jack Ford stories. He said, “I’m married now. Don’t tell anybody.” I just see him as kind of - he got around, back in those days. I remember some friends had rented a house in Annapolis on the Severn River and Jack came down. Susan Mercandetti and a friend of hers came in from Boston, a very attractive young lady. They hit it off and the
next thing you know, Jack and the friend headed back to the White House.
That must be a real treat. You meet some guy and find out he’s the
president’s son and he takes you back home to meet the parents.

Smith: You remember he also hung around with Bianca Jagger and Andy Warhol.

Watkins: Yeah, that’s right; he had that colorful crowd there for awhile.

Smith: Where did that come from?

Watkins: I don’t know.

Smith: It doesn’t sound like West Michigan.

Watkins: I don’t know. I was too naïve to realize, but I probably could’ve picked up
the phone and called some Hollywood little starlet and said, “Hey, you want
to come to the Fourth of July at the White House?” It might’ve worked.

Smith: And then Kennerly was virtually a member of the family.

Watkins: Yeah, he was running all over the place. Do you know Paula Ahalt? Did you
ever meet her? She was Kennerly’s girlfriend. She worked in the photo shop.
She was a neat, girl and became a real good friend of mine later. As I said,
David had the run of the place.

Smith: What do you remember about the Kansas City convention? Our sense is there
was a lot of blood on the floor.

Watkins: I just remember it was so tense there towards the end, when they were
counting delegates. But again, Seidman and I weren’t really involved with
that part. It was the week before when we spent a lot of time on the platform
committee.

Smith: Remember, there was a real issue - the Ford people had to decide whether to
sort of roll over and let the Reagan folks have their way with the foreign
policy plank.
Watkins: That’s right.

Smith: And the wonderful story that Tom Korologos tells, because of course, Kissinger immediately threatened to resign. And Tom said, “Henry if you’re going to do it, do it now. We need the votes.”

I mean, just inside the platform committee, was there a lot of animosity, between the two sides?

Watkins: I remember a lot of debate, but it didn’t seem hostile. It seemed reasonable.

Smith: Civilized.

Watkins: Civilized. Sometimes people were fairly firm but again, not over the top. Even though it was very tough, I think people remembered we were still in the same party and we’ve got to win this thing. It was either going to be Reagan-Ford, I do remember that getting a little tense from time to time.

Smith: And the campaign itself, were you still at the White House?

Watkins: Well, yes. Bill originally housed me on the Council of Economic Policy, but I was really his assistant. And once we got into campaign gear, I moved over to the White House because I could be more political that way, and a lot of the senior staff was doing political activities at that point. This is where I got the big Staff Assistant to the President title for three or four months. It was a nice way to end up. We were really just doing some intense scheduling, getting Bill out and around the country.

I worked with Margaret Tutwiler who was over at the Republican National Committee and she was our liaison for Bill. I got to work with Margaret a lot and got to know her pretty well. We had Bill going all over the place. In fact, Bill, the whole couple of years there, was considered the one with the busiest schedule of any cabinet secretary or senior staff member. It was just “go” all the time. I had to learn how to cancel events with groups where he was going to give a speech and to make sure that we had a substitute available all the
time. Sid Jones from Treasury we used him a lot and Jim Baker. James A. Baker III, was at Commerce Department and I called him up and said, “Do you mind going to Youngstown, Ohio in two days?” He said ‘yes’ all the time. He was great.

Smith: What was he like in those days?

Watkins: Well, he seemed like a very impressive, interesting guy. I got the sense he was probably going someplace somewhere down the road. No one ever thought he’d end up where he did, which he did was huge. But he was a very good guy. Wonderful guy. And very nice, too. I was glad I got to know him. So every time he sees me, he remembers me, probably because I was bossing him around.

Smith: Do you remember where you were on election night?

Watkins: I went out to Grand Rapids on the trip.

Smith: You were on that last swing?

Watkins: Yeah, I remember President Ford voted at East Grand Rapids High School and that was impressive. I went to that high school, too, as did Bill Seidman much earlier.

Smith: Were you at the airport where they unveiled the mural and he sort of broke down?

Watkins: No, because that was… on his way in? I think it was on the way in, I don’t think it was on the way out. But I remember going to the airport with him in the motorcade and all that. As a matter of fact, I have a picture of me shaking hands with him on his way back to the plane. I flew back commercial and I got back in at eight or nine and by then the handwriting was on the wall.

Smith: What was the mood? Did you think you’d caught up?
Watkins: Yeah, we knew we were catching up. I was always worried and a couple of the younger staffers and I used to talk and we’d say, “You know, President Ford clearly has a wonderful track record.” Way back even before his presidency, he did a lot of pretty impressive things that I think younger people were beginning to recognize. But the one thing we were trying to get - and I remember telling Seidman - Jimmy Carter was always talking about ‘vision.’ He had all these visions of the future. And Jerry Ford really wasn’t talking that way. We conveyed to Seidman and others that, “We need to think about the future here. It’s not just running on your record, but where we are going.” And Jimmy Carter was pretty effective with that. It didn’t turn out so well, but…

Smith: What was Bill’s response?

Watkins: Well, I can’t remember. I don’t think we were disregarded because we were young staffers, but we felt this was just something that younger people will align with and the kind of message they’d want to hear. But that last couple of weeks was exciting; you saw the polls changing favorably.

I remember the night when there was the big gaffe with the Polish comment. We were sitting in the Executive Office Building and went “Oh, no.” You knew what he meant, but we were just afraid the rest of the country didn’t quite recognize that. He was right and we knew what he meant, but we knew that it was going to be taken wrong.

Smith: He was also stubborn.

Watkins: Yeah.

Smith: It took a week to revise.

Watkins: Oh, that could’ve been easily corrected because he was right, but it was just a matter of how you say it.
Smith: Did you see that stubbornness? Because, you know, it was part of his make up. And a temper, which he spent a lifetime controlling.

Watkins: I never saw him lose his temper, fortunately. I knew he was tough, though. I don’t think anybody thought he was a pushover or anything like that. You knew he was that tough football player, a little quieter, but you knew he had that inner strength and you didn’t mess with that.

Smith: Did you see him after the presidency?

Watkins: Not much, no. I saw him in Washington once just sitting at an event and got a quick ‘hello’ and that was about it.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Watkins: I think he was one of our greatest presidents, but for different reasons than others. Part of it was his integrity and his straight-forward honesty, and likeability as well. But I think he held that office and managed that office in a way that was really top of the line. It wasn’t like he was fighting World War II or the Civil War or something like that which a lot of other presidents became famous for. He was one of our greatest presidents at kind of a quiet time. I mean, there was plenty going on, Vietnam and the economy. Everybody’s got something going on, but I think he was just so solid. Right now I think people would love to have a president like that again.

Smith: Do you remember your reaction or your friends’ reaction to the Nixon pardon?

Watkins: Yeah, there wasn’t a lot of love for Nixon and I think a lot of people thought it was a deal, kind of cooked up in advance. I think it took awhile for people to understand.

Smith: Did that include folks back in Grand Rapids?

Watkins: Yeah, a lot of them. I think it took them awhile to realize that you really didn’t want that hanging over your head if you’re the president. It wasn’t just
compassion to Richard Nixon. It was "Get him out of here. We can’t deal with this."

Smith: “I’ve got a country to run.”

Watkins: Exactly. So I think people bought into that over time. Maybe not everybody still.

Smith: But in a lot of ways, time was good to him. He lived long enough to see the country come around to his way of thinking.

Watkins: Oh, absolutely. By the time you went to the funeral at the National Cathedral, you could see that everybody loved him at that point. So, yes, he ended well.

Smith: I was going to say, were you surprised at the amount of public reaction when he died, because he’d been out of the public eye for awhile. I think right then the country really, really needed to feel good about itself.

Watkins: Yes. And I think they could reflect back and say here was a man who kind of brought the country together. The Vietnam War, he quietly ended it. It really was a big deal, but the way he managed it, it wasn’t like we lost the war, it just got over. So I think in the history books, he was looking very, very good to people. And just such a wonderful guy, too.

Smith: Who else should we talk to?

Watkins: Oh, Susan Mercandetti. H.P. Goldfield. Do you know H.P. Goldfield?

Smith: No.

Watkins: There are a lot of younger people: I’ll come up with a list.

Smith: That’d be dynamite. Erik’s collecting names.

Watkins: Yeah, I talked to Marty Allen about this, too, and said, "You know, there were a lot of young people who were on that staff." The senior staff and the Cabinet are fading away quickly.
Smith: Yeah, we just missed Jim Lynn, which is a real shame. He passed away about a month ago.
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Smith: When did your paths first cross?

Barrett: Well, I was working as a public information officer in the army up at the Carlyle barracks at the army war college. And I had two tours at Vietnam and they had sent me back to graduate school to get a degree in journalism/public communication in Syracuse. And when I finished, the command general staff sergeant said, “You’re going for what we call a utilization tour. You know, the Congress is after us for sending too many of you guys to graduate school on the taxpayer’s dollar and we don’t utilize you. It’s just for your credentials, so to speak. So you will be at the war college for three years. Don’t call us. We don’t want to hear from you.” Bah, bah, bah-bah-bah.

After about eight months, I get a call saying I was being considered for the position of army aide to the president - got the call from the White House. I remember it was ten after 10:00 on the 10th of July – all the tens. Brent Scowcroft, who was the military assistant, hadn’t gotten to NSC yet. Nixon was president. July 10th, 1974, you know better than I the state of things right then. So, they called me ten after 10:00 and said they needed my answer by 11:00 o’clock. So I went in and talked to the general who said a whole bunch of good things happen to me, I’ve been lucky in that way. Next thing you know, it’s that afternoon, I’m in a helicopter. They picked me up at Carlyle barracks, they flew me down, put me into the Hay-Adams.

The next morning, a car picked me up, put me over on a JetStar at Andrews and flew me out to San Clemente. Nixon is out there. And the final revelation and the final condemnation of the fact that Nixon did know about the break-in was a completed news item on the 11th of July, you know, in terms of things were bad before then, but this was really bad. People thought I wasn’t knowledgeable of all this stuff at that time, I was just a military guy. And everybody that knew - Haig, chief of staff - everybody out there knew
that Nixon was either going to resign or be impeached. So then the game started and who the new military aide for the president was, on a scale of 1 to 10, dropped to minus 9 million.

I used to go in there and sit each day. It was amazing. This little military office out at the temporary place in San Clemente. I’d go in there, get there on time at 7:30. The last thing I did with any confidence was, you went through this big gate at San Clemente. You must have been there some time. No? They had a big gate and, typical White House, the gate guard which at most places would be like a private, maybe a corporal, they had a master sergeant at the gate there. They’d given me the pin to show that I was cleared in and the last thing I’d do with any confidence was I’d salute the guy at the gate, “Morning. How are you?” Then I’d look in the rearview mirror as the gate was closing and think what the hell am I going to do now? You’d literally sit there because it was panic and then - ba-da-boom - the dominoes fell like a son of a gun.

Smith: Did you have any contact with Nixon?

Barrett: I saw him. They tried every once in awhile to rejuvenate the process because the Pentagon sent you over there and say, “Okay, we think this is the guy you want.” But then the White House staff has to decide and your last interview was with the president. So, they went back to Washington. I was out in the Sequoia, myself and Jack Brennan, when they brought Bebe Rebozo in and he and Nixon are sitting on the stern of the Sequoia. Bebe’s job was to find out [if] he was settled down enough and everything else, that if he said he was going to resign, that they could rely on that and go ahead. Then they sent me up to Camp David. Another person that had to put their seal of approval on you was Rosemary Woods. I had breakfast with Rosemary Woods up at Camp David.

Smith: What was that like?

Barrett: Oh, it was bizarre. By this time, I’m figuring out - even I know - this guy’s toast. It’s too bad. So, it just kept on cascading and then he gave his speech
on the 8th. His resignation speech was a major speech and the next day, Ford took over. And that was it.

Smith: What was Rosemary Woods’ mood?

Barrett: I remember just a few people like Haig. Of course he was down here, but like Ken Cole, Rosemary Woods, the few people I was in contact with, there was really almost a commendable façade of normalcy; like maybe it wasn’t their pay grade to be deciding whether the first president in history ever is going to resign. There was just this demeanor, and that’s what made it so bizarre. You’d leave these little appointments that you had and then you’d go back and pick up the paper or put the television on, and then you’d just been in la-la land with somebody there. And then he took over. I still thought I was going to get my walking papers. I figured that he’d have some obligation to guys who had been with him as vice president. I didn’t know how the system worked. Or somebody else might have an input as to who they wanted in there as an aide. It was about the 21st, 22nd of August when it sort of worked down to my level, or at least got to me, and I got a call. Cheney had come in and was helping. Rumsfeld was going to replace Haig and then Cheney ultimately replaces Don. So, I get a call to go on over to the Oval Office.

First time I’d put on my uniform, the rest of the time I was in civilian clothes. I went over there and I walked in. The first thing he did - he’s behind the desk - he gets up, just immediately comes out and he introduces himself and everything. And the first thing he says is, “I’m sorry there’s been so much confusion.” He says, “I hope you’ll consider staying with us.” Just like that. So, I’m a major and he’s Commander-in-Chief. In subsequent times, you’ve probably seen the liberties that I was privileged to take with him and everything else. But I always tell this story where he said, “I hope that you’ll consider staying with us.” “Oh, I’ll get back to you.” A major, you know, but that’s the tone of him. The first thing he said, “Would you please consider staying with us?”
Smith: There’s a wonderful story. Of course you know they were living out in Alexandria that first week. And the first day that he’s moved into the White House and walked into the West Wing and there’s a guard opening the door, saluting.

Barrett: Mmm, Marines.

Smith: And the president walks over and says, “Hi, I’m Jerry Ford. I’m going to be living here. What’s your name?”

Barrett: Yeah. We went to church, and we went over to the house, and he was living in the house. Went to the first state dinner with King Hussein from the house in Alexandria. And so, after church, we went over. Everything’s being boxed up, they were going through all the confusion that every family goes through when they move, only theirs was a little bit more, but they got more help, too. But, he walks into this room downstairs and there’s an open box and there, folded but not put in the box yet, were his Navy uniforms. And he says to Betty, “Well, look at this Betty. We ought to see whether Goodwill or somebody wants this.” Just like that. And she says, “Oh, Jerry.” And I say, “You know, Mr. President, I hate to tell you. I don’t think that’s your call anymore. They’re going different places with that stuff.” But he said, “Well, you know, we can’t be moving this stuff around. It has to be Goodwill or something like that,” talking about his uniforms.

Smith: That almost surreal modesty was very real.

Barrett: Yeah. It was hard to imagine. That’s what I said. He never would’ve made it through a 25-month primary and general campaign period. He’d be the first one to admit it. He would’ve also admired Obama’s rhetoric because he knew, you know better than myself, not only with Ford but with the other guys you’ve been around, that he just had the greatest regard for somebody who had that gift of speech. Not just articulation, but eloquence. Because he didn’t have it, he knew he didn’t have it, and he just would’ve had a tough time being the kind of guy that he was.

Smith: He got better, didn’t he?
Barrett: Absolutely.

Smith: Because there is that age-old argument that Reagan did him no favor by running against him, but in some ways he actually made him a better candidate.

Barrett: No, he was good. And he knew. I remember one time when we were in Chicago, Terry O'Donnell and myself, Cheney. And he gave a speech in this high school like a gymnasium and he’s up there and he’s giving a hell of a speech. It’s just coming out right, it’s really good. This is like the fourth stop of the day and everything else. And we could take such liberties with him, he liked it. He loved jokes. He never told a joke in his life. I don’t know if you ever heard. I never heard that man tell a joke. He loved to hear them and he had a great sense of humor and he would laugh like a son of a gun, but the joke, himself, he never could tell one.

We knew he was going to come off that stage feeling full of himself because he knew, “Well, I hit that tonight.” We were back in what was a cafeteria kitchen, old pots and pans, big place. So, what happened was, we all hide behind pots and pans, you know, these big islands of stuff. Kennerly, myself, O'Donnell, Cheney, we're hiding. And we took this mascot, they'd given him a tiger, which is the school’s mascot and it was sitting tiger and it was about that high, stuffed. And we put it in the elevator and we put a sign around it that said, “Nice speech.” Because we knew the whole ride back we were just going to get it.

He walked in, he’s waving and everything, he turns around and looks at the elevator and looks around right away and, “Alright, where are you guys.” And he was just like that. He was just something else.

Smith: He had a great sense of humor.

Barrett: Oh, he had a great sense of humor and he loved the stories. He’d [inaudible], “Bob, do this”, “Do that.” And some of the stories about people, he just loved it. He loved the laughter and everything else.
Smith: My sense from being around him and little bits of pieces from others, most politicians love to gossip and I sensed he wasn’t a gossip. I mean, he liked political back and forth, but he wasn’t someone to gossip about other people’s lives.

Barrett: He had unbelievable discipline. I’m going to say a number and deliberately make it a little bit absurd, but I guarantee you that he could keep fifty confidential relationships without blinking an eye. Like, for example, you’ve had lots and lots of time with him, Richard, other people and everything else. I bet you nobody, nobody knows things and he’s gone and nobody will ever know certain things about the Warren Commission, as a case in point. And that could have been such an exploiting big thing. If he had any grandeur or any of the quality that you’re talking about now, he could’ve made, if not a fortune of dollars, he could’ve made a fortune of interest by just discussing the Warren Commission and Kennedy for the rest of his life.

Smith: That’s fascinating that you say that, because the way he did it was so typical, it was so under the radar. The only thing I ever heard about it, and then I thought “Oh, Jesus!”, after the Profiles in Courage award, he did an oral history and in the course of it, he let slip the fact that, they didn’t put it in the report at the time for reasons that would be obvious, but that one of the theories that was advanced by a number of folks that he apparently found credible as to why Oswald did what he did was because he was sexually impotent. And he had to demonstrate to Marina that he was more of a man than she thought. And, given the climate of the day, they wouldn’t put that in print. That’s a pretty extraordinary revelation.

Barrett: It is. It is.

Smith: And yet he, it dribbled out during the course of this --

Barrett: You know, he had extraordinary discipline. I remember after she went into Long Beach, end of February ’78, and she comes out and she’s battling the first period of time when it’s more difficult and stuff like that.

Smith: There was nothing automatic.
Barrett: No. So, three months go by, now it’s time for them to go to Vail for the summertime. So, we get up to Vail and we arrived and she’s downstairs unpacking. There’s like three floors in this house they used to use and we’re on the center floor. You’ve probably seen him do this a lot, too, just talking how considerate he is. He’s in his house and he’s with me, you know, we’d been together quite a while through almost everything, a good number of years and all that, but always, a number of times he did this. He would look to make sure no one was around because he was going to say something that if someone else heard it and it wasn’t meant to be heard by them, that’d be offensive. And he looked around the house. Of course, there’s nobody there except he and I and he said, “Bob,” and you know, boy, he wanted it. He loved those two martinis a night. Loved it. And we always used to fear if he went to the third one, if the day was a little bit tough, because he could turn. I used to say Ford was 98% koala bear and 2% wounded grizzly.

The thing that made it so interesting was you never know when that 2% grizzly was going to show. You kept on getting put to sleep by that 98% koala bear and then all of a sudden and he would turn into the lineman and center from Michigan and he would actually - like Les McCullom once said - “You know what happens to that man when he gets mad? He grows.” That’s Les McCullom, Air Force One. Because he came on to the plane one time angry. He was just this way. And he looked at me and he said, “You know, it doesn’t work when one’s drinking and one isn’t drinking, so I’m going to stop.” He turned that glass over that night and never had another drink in his life.

Four or five years later, Susan is the daughter that wraps all of us fathers around their thumb. You know, the daughters rule. The sons rule their mothers. And so Susan is smoking and we’re smoking with her and sometimes we’d be sneaking and sometimes ________________. We’re sitting in the office out in Rancho Mirage and he says in his totally ineffective way as far as Susan’s concerned, “Well, you know, Susan, I’m pretty concerned about the fact that you’re smoking.” And Susie being this snippet little thing that she is, she’s great, she says, “Well, Daddy, I’ll stop smoking cigarettes if you stop smoking pipes.”
He got up from his chair, he went over, - I bet you the collection, I don’t know, but it has to be worth a quarter of a million dollars. I mean, there were ivory pipes and every head of state and every time he went somewhere, he got another pipe. He gathered up all the pipes in the office, there were a bunch of them there. Got a box from the conference room in the office out in Rancho Mirage. All the pipes. Leaves, goes all over the house. Takes all the pipes, calls Penny in and says, “Send these to the museum.” Last time he smoked a pipe. Forty-two years smoking a pipe and he stopped, like, on a dime.

And that same thing goes back to what you’re saying. He, a relationship with a Tip O’Neill or something with a Rockefeller or something, like he used to say, “He wouldn’t say you-know-what, if he had a mouthful.” And he didn’t. And the other thing was I used to kid him all the time. He’d get angry and he’d try to use profanity. And I said, “Mr. President, don’t do it. You got no rhythm. You’re really lousy when you use profanity.” He couldn’t complete one of the words. He’d say, “Well, Jes-!”, “Well, God da-!” He’d never get through the word, let alone the sentence that had profanity in it. And that whole thing was him. He had an unbelievable amount of stuff inside him when he left this world, I guarantee you. And he kept it all.

Smith: There’s a wonderful story. Stu Spencer confirmed it and actually sort of embroidered it with a sequel, which is what makes the story great. Stu’s in the campaign, ’76. It’s not going terribly well and he’s got a candidate who is not a great campaigner. They had all these surveys. And part of the problem is that the president would go out because he loved it. He would go out. He would give one of these Hartmann speeches that wasn’t great and the numbers would go down. What are you going to do? So, Friday night, he’s in the Oval Office, the only people there, himself, Dick Cheney, and the president. It’s the end of a long week and he’s frustrated and he’s trying to find a euphemism and the president isn’t getting it. So he finally says, “You know, Mr. President, you’re a great president, but you’re a fucking lousy campaigner.”

Well, first of all, what other president could you say that to? And Ford, it just washed over him. But the sequel is what makes the story. That story
appeared when Germond and Witcover wrote their book about the campaign. And Stu went ballistic. He called Cheney to chew him out, he was really upset. And Cheney lets him wind down and finally says, “Stu, there was a third person in that room.” And it suddenly dawns on Stu, the president told the story on himself. Which is extraordinary.

Barrett: That’s it, you know. He just had this quiet discipline, he had an inner strength - and outer strength, too. He was a strong person, physically and morally and so forth. He had his own little edges of it, it was different than your morality or my morality and so forth, but within the context of himself, he just had everything buttoned down so tight it was unbelievable. It was just amazing to watch his discipline. Like the doctor, when he had a lot of the problems with a little bit of the strokes and everything toward the end and so forth, wouldn’t let him swim. They were concerned about something happening, about that whole balance thing and stuff like that. So, he didn’t like that.

I used to have to arrange for swimming every time we’d go anywhere. He just had to have a swimming pool. You could get away with it every now and again, but had to have that swimming pool. And he was always surprised by the response that people had to him. He just never associated himself with being a president, you know, just Jerry Ford. So he called the doctor and he said, “Doc, can you come over here, make a house call?” Of course, the doctor says yes. He said, “It’s really nice, he’s coming over.” So he comes over, Ford takes him outside and says, “I want to show you something.” So, he goes in to the shallow end of the pool and he gets to the point where the water’s up to about his chest, gets his back to one side of the pool, across the narrow side, and starts this, like, running against the water to the other side. He runs around and comes back and he looks at the doctor and says, “Can I do that?” And the doctor says yes. So, that’s what he did for an additional period of time before that went away, too. He was just amazingly disciplined and after that stuff, it was just great.

Smith: There’s a poignant story which may or may not survive the cut, and you may have heard this. It was toward the end, not the last summer they went up to Vail. I think it was the summer before the last summer they went up to Vail.
And he was in a hurry and Reverend Cert wanted to drop by. And the 
president was eager to return to Vail. And Penny’s trying to forestall this, and 
“What’s up? What’s up? What’s going on?” She says, “Reverend Cert 
would like to come by and give you a blessing”. “Screw the blessing!”

Barrett: He was so funny with all this stuff. Like I said, the unexpected behavior, he 
was so predictable, he’s so reliable and he just kept on going, then all of a 
sudden (snaps). I tell you, this was when he was president. Century Plaza 
Hotel. We’re up on the top floor, whatever floor it was they had the 
presidential suite on, we were there, and we were going to go down to the 
mezzanine level. It wasn’t the very lowest floor, but it was a like one level 
above for a political rally out in there, ’76. And it’s time to go, so we come 
out and we all walk down, the entourage, four or five agents, Terry, myself, 
Lou Cash, and Kennerly and so forth. We all get into the elevator. They’ve 
got the Secret Service. This was great. When something like this happens, 
the Secret Service is always fun.

So the doors close and they’ve got it all cleared to go all the way down. The 
thing goes down two floors and stops. The door opens up and there’s a guy 
you could only describe as Happy Herbie from Iowa. You know, I mean, like 
he’s out in California. He’s got one of these full-brimmed hats on, it’s a 
bluish hat. He’s got on a shirt, it’s kind of a plaid shirt and so on. And he 
anticipates this door and the door opens up and this guy sort of goes and backs 
off. Now the doors close again ready to go down. The elevator goes up. 
They’ve got some circuitry screwed up, the elevator’s going up. So Ford was 
like, you hear the breathing start, you hear the breathing start just like that. 
“Sorry, Mr. President,” says the agent, and everything else. You always love 
to see the Secret Service get caught up in this deal, you know, everything is so 
perfect. The thing goes down again. Stops at the same floor.

Now, in the course of the 40 seconds this took, this little Herbie from Iowa 
has gone from being absolutely and totally intimidated and in awe of this 
situation to being totally in charge of this situation. Because the door opens 
up again and this guy goes (looks up confidently). And you could see the 
Secret Service. The doors close again and he says, “Goddamn it all, if it stops
here again, let him in on!” We rode down. But he’s just great. People just have no idea the laughter and the crazy stuff that we used to do together. And I mean everybody.

Smith: Of course, there’re stories about reporters on the ’76 campaign. And even that whole relationship. I mean, it was no accident that one of the eulogists was a journalist because of the message that he sent. He liked reporters.

Barrett: He did, he liked them. He thought they were a good bunch of guys. He liked to hang with them and he really had no qualms about it at all. I was telling Erik earlier today, it was a different deal, though. It’s changed quite a bit. Exposure to cable, punditry versus reporting, the idea that information moves so fast, so competitive, and da-da-da-da-da, ad nauseum. That’s the way it is right now. But back then there was fairness.

Like Helen Thomas, she wouldn’t give you a break if Betty Ford had a drinking problem, it wouldn’t matter a bit if it was impacting his ability to be president or if it kept him from going to a state dinner overseas. Oh, no, that was fair game. But if it didn’t, they’d say, “How’s he doing?” And I’d say, “Oh, he’s doing fine.” But then they would watch. Your credibility was at stake and the next time they saw him, if he wasn’t fine, they’d be all over you like a cheap suit. But if he was fine, they didn’t report about Betty Ford the whole time that she was away.

Smith: How much of that was known? More precisely, how defined was it? Because people sort of used the euphemism “Mrs. Ford’s problem” and no one ever really defined what it was.

Barrett: No, it wasn’t, but, I don’t think that, certainly not me, I mean was around a lot up in Camp David, a lot of their personal times. The aides, a little bit different in that regard, you’re with them a lot. But I think, like when she went to Long Beach, we had a real interesting _______ Persch(?), the doctor, the Navy doctor. She had gone through and was still sort of going through detox and she went through some heavy times. And we went to this office and Persch(?) is sitting there, this military place, it was a long narrow office and there was a desk at the end but there weren’t two chairs in front of it.
There was a chair on the side and President Ford and her were sitting on this side. I’m sitting on this side and he and Mrs. Ford are sitting on the other side. And we were going to go out and Persch(?) and I are going to see two hundred reporters assembled there and I’m going to read this statement. And he’s sitting there next to her, and boy, he never left her side through all that stuff. May be late in arriving over the years of seeing it and everything else, but once it arrived, I mean, boy, oh, boy, he was something. That’s why she was able to be everything she was, because he _______ everything to her after that.

Smith: It was a rough time for her?

Barrett: Oh, yeah, it was brutal. She was frail, Richard. She was never a large woman, the dancer, the model and everything else, but, boy, oh, boy, when the intervention took place, it was so delicate and everything else. I mean, she looked like such a small thing in his arm next to her. So, Persch(?), we’re all set to do this and I know what the meetings about and everything else and so forth, and Persch(?) then says to her, and she’ll tell you the same thing, “Mrs. Ford, is there anything you want to add to this statement?”

And I’m like watching a tennis match, not knowing what had gone on the previous four days she’d been there. “Is there anything else you want to mention?” Then, finally, she says, “Well, I could say that I’ve also had a problem with alcohol.” Whereas, up until that time, you put it at the feet of loosely prescribed Valiums and so forth and everything else. But he wanted a specific reference in there saying “I also have a problem with alcohol.” Just like that. So, she gets emotional, not crying or anything else like that, but that goes into the statement. And then he jumps me like one of those 2% grizzly bear moments and we’re literally two feet closer than you and I are. And he doesn’t come out of his chair, but he leans forward –this was for her that he did it – and said, “Now, Goddamn it, Bob, you go out there and don’t you say anything else, Goddamn it!”

Persch(?) was good, Persch(?) was amazing. They were very lucky. And she’ll tell you the same thing, what a difference he made. Unbelievable gentleman, unbelievable. But Ford was all over me like something else. And
we went out and showing you the press again, all these people, I got his words ringing in my ears. We go out there and I read this statement, okay? And at the end of this statement, I say, “Mrs. Ford’s doing fine. It’s not without great challenge for her right now. And I hope that this statement will suffice for your needs right now. And if you could just give her a few more days, we’ll get back to you with something else then.” With that, a hand pops up, just like that. And the guy got about half the question out, “When did she realize tha—“ Before I can make a mistake and maybe have the president take my head off when he heard about me doing it, before I can do it, all the voices in the audience, “Hey, hey, knock it off. Knock it off.” The press sat the person down and I walked off the stage. It was the press and they were unbelievable. Unbelievable. I loved it. Really nice.

Smith: Did he feel guilt about all those years when he was climbing the ladder and…

Barrett: You know, I haven’t seen this thing, the film that’s got Kate Winslet and Leonardo diCaprio in it about the 50’s.

Smith: Revolution Road.

Barrett: I haven’t seen it, but I heard it’s a pretty tough film maybe ______ somebody. But I think that’s their era. That’s the whole deal. And, you know, you drank, you had cocktails, martinis at lunch, all that type of thing. And I think that the way he was raised, he just presumed certain things about a wife. He presumed certain things about motherhood. Things were probably changing around him, but he didn’t necessarily pick up on it. And what he was doing in his own mind he was doing correctly, he was noble, he was dedicated, he was providing for his family, he was moving ahead, he was serving his country, you know, blankety-blank-blank. None of this would have been at the expense of good thinking about her, but in terms of her needing anything— I don’t think that it ever did, but when it broke, we all had to credit Susan. She was the one who pulled this whole thing off.

Ford and I were on a trip. We were up in Buffalo, New York, and he’s got, like, two more stops. There was one in Virginia it was an in honorarium thing, you know, it doesn’t sound like much for what they get these days, but
it was about $10,000. Then there was another event, maybe in Washington, if I remember right. I don’t quite remember where it was. I get a call. Susan. “We’re going to do this intervention thing with Mom.” Blankety-blank-blank. “You got to get him home.” “Oh, yeah, jeez, okay.” So, you know him as well as I do, as a child of the Depression, the idea of him giving up $10,000 was like. I used to kid him, “Have I ever asked you for a souvenir?” He goes, “No.” I said, “Anyway, have I ever asked you for an autograph? I mean, I’d ask you for somebody else that wants it.” He says, “No, you never have.” I said, “Well, I want something.”

This was after he was challenging some expense that he had that somebody owed him for a paltry amount, it was for some $3.80 or something like that. So, I said, “Well, I finally want something, sir.” He said, “Well, what is it?” I said, “I want the first nickel that you ever made.” And I jumped up out of the chair and I dove and started fumbling with his pocket. And I said, “And I know it’s right in here.” And he, “Well, you--! Well, they owe me that money!” I mean, whether it was a dime or a dollar or whatever. So, I said, “Okay. The first thing I’ve got to do is get—“, because the first thing he’ll do is say, “I’ve got to do these events.”

So I called Kissinger and I say, “Okay, if I can get Kissinger to substitute for him, maybe I can sell this to the event people.” So I called Kissinger. He’s down in Dallas and Ed Haeger had him down there for some event. Haeger slacks. That Haeger family was something unbelievable. So I get to him and he says, “Bob, certainly I’ll do it, but I’m in Dallas, I’ll need some—“ I said, “Okay, I’ll get back to you.” So, then I called Ed. And he used to come to the Ford golf tournament in Vail. Great, great people. And this is how everybody was around them. I started to ask, “I got this problem here,” and I didn’t want to get too detailed about it, but I said, “We got to get the president home because Mrs. Ford’s not feeling well.” Blankety-blank-blank. And I said, “And I’ve got Henry Kissinger ready to fill in for him, but I’ve got to complete this whole loop.” He’s in Dallas, Ed’s in Dallas, and I said, “And I need—“ and he said, “Stop. Bob, you take him home” and he says, big Texas accent, “Don’t you worry about a thing. I’ll take care of Henry. You get him home.” That was it.
At 11:30, I went in and woke up Ford and I told him the whole deal, this, that and everything else. It went so fast, da-da-da, “Susan called”, “the doctor said this”, blankety-blank-blank, and “I’ve called the people here and I’ve got Henry and Henry says he’ll do the events.” And we went home, red-eyed back. And got in there, went down to the office at nine o’clock the next morning. The kids had flown in simultaneously throughout the day we were traveling. And that all commenced at that time. But I don’t think until that moment, again Susan’s to be heralded for that, but at that moment, at that moment, just like the pipes and just like the drinking and everything else, at that moment, forever, and that was 1978, I guess. I took Mrs. Ford to Moscow I guess in January of that year.

Smith: That’s where some people noticed.

Barrett: Yeah. The Bolshoi. That was the year before, I think. That was ’77. That was a trip unto itself with everything that happened there. But at any rate, when it happened, from that date forward, if you were to ask, “Mr. President, tomorrow night, there’s a group of so-and-so, would you…?” “Well, let me check with Betty.” From that moment on, he never made a move that would’ve been anywhere at the expense of her inconvenience or her health or anything like that. And I believe that’s why he didn’t run. He told me when we went through that whole routine in Detroit. I came back upstairs. There were meetings there. That’s a whole other set of stories with Greenspan, Marsh, myself, with Meese and Wirthlin on the other side of the table. I’m convinced to this day that was one of the most brilliant scams maybe orchestrated by DIVA, you know.

Smith: Because obviously the stories take hold in popular, I won’t call it mythology, that somehow Ford was putting out these unreasonable demands.

Barrett: No. What happened was, it was Ford’s birthday, Bastille Day. The deal was that Reagan, the nominee, arrived in Detroit. We’re on the 70th floor, oddly enough, and they’re on the 69th floor. There was this circular staircase you could go back and forth. So, we get to Detroit, and here’s where the orchestration of it came in. I can tell you an awful lot about President Ford and I can guarantee you that I’m right when I say something, and I can
guarantee you when I’d be wrong, and I can guarantee you when I don’t know what the hell I’m talking about. But a lot of people thought, they’d make people like you with the Foundation, or me in that position, they make you into a temple door. None of us ever had the authority. Ford just amassed all the detail.

I never made a decision regarding a dollar for him. I never made a decision saying, “Ah, no, I don’t think I’d like him at that event.” Baloney. I was always so easy because he was always so easy. So you could never get in trouble, you know? “Mr. President, do you want to go speak to that group?” “Quite frankly, Bob, I don’t like that” or “Yes, I do”. Okay, that’s it. Pick up the phone and that’s it. But if I said ‘no’ even though it was his ‘no,’ sort of like your Spencer-Cheney story and so forth, people would never believe it came from him.

Every once in awhile, when I knew the mood was right, “Hold on a minute. Just hold on a second. Mr. President it’s so-and-so, he’s from blankety-blank-blank…” “Well, I just can’t make that,” and he would reinforce that. That’s where my strength came from, is knowing him so well. But in terms of being a door, no. So, we go up there and everybody wants to see him, but they don’t just want to see him. There’s always I’m called down to see about the podium or I’m called down and when I’m down there, Dole arrives to talk to him. Another time, Howard Baker arrives to talk to him. Another time, former secretary of the Air Force, I forget his name. And these are all people that are going in, talking about this other deal.

So, then it’s his birthday and he goes walking over to Reagan’s suite. Okay, we walk in. Bill Casey’s there. Reagan comes out. Bill Casey and the two of them, just Reagan and Ford, go into a room, double doors, and Bill Casey sits down on a corner of the couch here, end table here, and I’m sitting in a chair here. And Casey goes, “Well, you know he’s going to ask him to be vice president.” You remember how Casey talked. “He’s going to ask him to be vice president.” And I said, “Oh, jeez” because I knew where Ford’s mind was, with everything that’d been done, that he’d been talking about. And I said, “Bill, boy, you people are a lot more knowledgeable about this stuff than
I am, but I’m telling you, fine, fine, fine. But be sure you have a back-up plan. If this isn’t on the level, you have a back-up plan. Because I’m telling you right now, it isn’t going to happen. I don’t care what happens.”

And I was panicked, okay? So we come out, Ford and I get in the elevator, just the two of us going up again. He said, “Well, he asked me to run with him. You know, Bob, he is the nominee of the party and I sort of owe it to him” and everything else. Ugh, and I’m saying, “Boy, these days… This place is going to turn into chaos real fast here.” So we get back to the room and he says, “Why don’t you and, like, who?” “Well,” I said, “Jack Marsh is here and you trust the living hell out of him. And Alan’s here.” And he says, “Well, he’s going to get Ed Meese and Dick Wirthlin” and it was somebody else I couldn’t remember.

So we start to talk and I’m there with Kissinger. Kissinger also got a bad rap as if he were looking for a resurrection. I was there for every word that Kissinger had with them. There was as much of a discussion, in terms of certain things having a potential from them, like in terms of Ford’s strength. Like I said something once, I said, “It’s all well and good, but you may not – and I’m going to say this so carefully – you may not be understanding Washington.” I said, “Ford’s got 30-plus years here. He’s respected by both sides of the aisle and he’s got an unbelievable presence in the Congress. There’s not as much in the Senate or anything else,” I said, “And there’s no way, no matter how perfectly Ford behaves or any of all that was around him, there’s no way that somebody’s not going to get to him and then all of a sudden you’ll say, ‘You’ve got an un-loyal vice president.’”

Then they came out, “Well, you know, if we put to his strengths certain things” and they started talking about defense, National Security Council, talking about certain domestic policy, you know that he would’ve been – budgetary stuff, things like that. That was as much brought up in terms of spheres of influence, just like it’s no big difference whether you’re mandated by a title, Richard. You know what I mean? Otherwise, you’ve got Joe Biden now handling that economic deal with Obama’s blessing and so forth. Additional resume, so to speak. And that’s all there was to it, you know.
Smith: It’s amazing how things get calcified in history because it was Cronkite who used the phrase ‘co-presidency’ in the context of he was trying to describe this thing to Ford and Ford just sort of didn’t either pick up on it or didn’t—

Barrett: See, he wouldn’t have seen the danger in something. He was just talking to someone he had a lot of regard for. They were close and that was just a conversation. That just happened to be on the air in front of millions of people, you know. But he would do that now and then. But, anyway, the co-presidency, there was never anything approaching it, you know, and so it continued. We had a meeting and so we took the information back to Ford and they took it back. Who knows what’s going on. Then we go back for another meeting.

Now, it’s about close to 8:00 o’clock. Nine o’clock, Reagan’s going over to the hall to take the nomination to announce his vice president. We’re in a meeting. The same people are in a meeting. All of a sudden, out of the blue, there was some point, it wasn’t a very contentious point, it was some of the same kind of points we’d been talking about. All of a sudden, out of the blue, Meese said, “That’s it for now. We’re not getting anywhere, here.” Meeting’s over. We’re sitting there. You just couldn’t believe how fast it was over.

Smith: Who said that?

Barrett: Meese. And they’re gone. Okay? They’re gone. So I go back to the President. He’s inside, he’s in his trousers, he’s got on a sleeveless t-shirt and he’s got his suspenders hanging down the side of his pants. And I start to tell him what was said. I never did get the chance to get him. I told him later on about what I just told you. But at that point in time he just says, like, very tired, very weary, “Well, Bob. I’ve just been thinking. It just wouldn’t be fair to Betty. It just wouldn’t be fair. Tell them no. Tell them no.”

So, with that, I go upstairs through this back staircase, okay? And the room is in turmoil. The hangers-on and the staff and everything else is outside the doors and Reagan’s obviously on the other side of these doors. And with that,
Deaver comes out and just rushes away and maybe three minutes later Bush comes walking in with him and goes in. Just like that. So, I said, “That’s it.” I just disappeared. I’m walking out and Deaver’s got, I forgot his name, it’s strong right-wing contributor to Reagan. I can’t remember the name right now. It will come to me. And this guy is irate and he’s making some bad comments, “That Goddamn—I don’t know what the hell he was thinking with that Jerry Ford.” This, that, and the other. And Deaver’s saying, “No, no, no. Don’t worry” and everything like that.

I’m not totally unconvinced that this wasn’t a real smart deal. They went in there and Reagan had to have somebody to the center of himself and if you had left that convention open for three days without throwing something in to totally muddy the water, I think it was Deaver at his finest. Really at his finest. That he threw the whole elephant into the room, so to speak, and it consumed everybody and it was going to be Bush all along. If not Bush, some other centrist type of guy because he had to have it to give himself any balance.

So, that was it. Then he goes and we’re supposed to see Barbara Walters and I had to blow off the interview. She was so upset. She wrote a letter back to me saying, “Bob, if you would just make a point in calling a couple of people to let them know that I had that interview, because people were saying that I behaved badly.” She tried to intercept us on the stairs and everything else. She was a good friend at the time, you know. And he decided that it was better on Walters’ venue to put this out, it would’ve been better, and he proceeded to do so.

Now it’s the next day. Phil Donahue calls and says, “You know, there was so much confusion” and this, that, and everything else and blankety-blank-blank. And Ford says, “You know, Bob, I would like the chance to get this out on my basis and that’s a perfect venue.” So we went in and did the Phil Donahue Show the next day and he got to say all of what he wanted to say in the Jerry Ford kind of way, and it was nice, and it was good for the party and everything else. Everybody acted honorably and all that type of stuff and everything. Then we finally - I was beat black and blue - now we’re on the
plane going back to Vail and I’m thinking, “I’m done with this thing.” And I’m sitting opposite, my back to the front of the plane and he’s sitting in the seat where he usually sits and he goes over and he kicks his shoes off just like that and he says, “Well, Robert, not a bad convention. Not a bad convention.” He says, “I gave a good speech and I got Bush as vice president.” And I looked and I said, “They were conniving. Were you conniving, too?” And he never would say that, but it was almost as if he played the card or maybe when Reagan and him were in the room that’s the kind of confidences that he would walk away with.

That he said, “Jerry, you know what I think. I think you’re a great party guy, but here’s my problem.” Blankety-blank-blank. Who knows? Casey telling me. Who knows? But all I’m saying is the way that thing unfolded, if not at the eleventh hour, at the nine o’clock hour, was just as I described it to a T. And I said, “My God.” And it would be like Jerry Ford to have responded to Ron Reagan at that point.

Smith: That’s a great story.

Barrett: He was something.

Smith: He took some heat for “cashing in”.

Barrett: I have an interesting tale. Let me ask you. I know where you’re going with all this, but with all your knowledge of the institution and everything else, let me ask you something. And tell me if I’m right about this.

Smith: Yeah.

Barrett: I think he established this whole thing that we’ve come to know as the post-presidency. And the reason I say that, Richard, is that even from my adult lifetime, I can go back and I can remember things being told to me about Roosevelt. I can remember a little bit, some small, small things, based on my age with Truman. I can clearly remember Eisenhower stuff and then forward blankety-blank from there. You have to remember that, basically, Ford was in a close election. Was it 1.2% of the popular vote, right? An 8,000 vote in three different states and he would’ve been president, okay. So the pardon
definitely had taken its tolls in terms of people one way or the other. But it was a close election and he didn’t lose because no one liked him. He lost because of Nixon and the pardon. He lost because of change and ________.

Smith: Sure.

Barrett: So, it was a close election, but I maintain that Ford was the first presidency in all the years I just danced over in terms of my lifespan. I maintain that he was the first president that left office with esteem and energy. Because if you go back, Roosevelt dies, Truman ultimately has great esteem, but he didn’t have it for the longest time. Ike was at the end of a second career and went back to the farm at Gettysburg. Kennedy gets killed in office. Johnson was sicker than anybody realized, goes to the farm and essentially dies thereafter. And Nixon leaves in disgrace.

Some of them had the energy, but not the esteem. Some of them had the esteem, but not the energy. Ford comes out at 63, 64 years old, with one strong Goddamn physical presence. This, that, and everything else. And, basically, one out of two people wanted him to be president. So, all this largesse just flowed to him, the whole idea of boards and honoraria, and golf tournaments and stuff like that. But he was the first president that did it. And he established this for all these people that have since gone into that. The library, the fund-raising, the foundations and all that.

Smith: Now, that’s interesting because parts of this story never get told. The part about the Mitchell criticism of him “exploiting his office.” People never factor in all the charity work that he did, all the campuses that he visited. But more than that, no one ever factors in, and apparently this is one thing that brought him and Carter together, was the realization that they had to raise, to them, a ton of money to build a presidential library. In his case, two libraries. And the dollar signs, although modest by modern standards, appeared to him to be…

Barrett: Monumental.

Smith: Absolutely. He had no money.
Barrett: Yeah. But the other thing, when he left office, he had $640,000. That was the net worth in the Alexandria home. Now, the person that really set him on his way, and he’s a really wonderful guy because this was a special gift to this person to represent Ford, and that was Norman Brokaw from William-Morris. Norman had Eastwood and Marilyn Monroe and he had been through everything. This, that, and the other. But for him, he was so respectful of that institution. That was something different. And while Norman could be that little son-of-a-gun of a Hollywood agent, he wasn’t with Ford. And nobody, “Ah this event is just not right for him.” No matter how much money was attached to it.

Smith: Can you think of the kinds of things that he would turn down?

Barrett: Well, he turned down a number of speaking engagements, like individual engagements, because they were a little bit too—well, he remembered some of the people. That’s what it was. They were maybe not helpful during the ’76 campaign, you know, like in a pretty overt way. I mean, he wouldn’t have done it otherwise. There were some foreign trips that he didn’t want to do. We ended up doing the foreign trips by adding all the stops in together. We’d go to Israel. We’d go to Syria. We’d go to Jordan. We’d go to Saudi Arabia. We’d go to the Emirates. And you’d balance a trip like that. He got more comfortable when I started to do that type of thing.

The other thing is that people, for the most part - and I think this is a somewhat latter day situation that’s developed - people don’t presume a president to be poor, a former president to be poor. Like, the nature of what a president needs just to be a part of what people are calling upon him to do requires a great deal of money. It requires a lot of travel, a lot of hotel expense, a lot of participation. Are you going to have the guy live in a ______ townhome in Pennsylvania? People just presume a former president be affluent.

Now, by today’s standards, he got to be affluent, but he didn’t go crazy like it’s since become possible. Like, you might say that he got a stock deal by way of Sandy Weil with CitiGroup as Sandy moved through Travelers and the different companies that he had. But that was a modest type of thing that
other people on the board were getting, too, in terms of stock that he kept and stuff.

Smith: Tell me about the kinds of work that he did on boards. We’ve talked to a couple people--

Barrett: Drove people nuts. People would call me up and they would say, “Bob, does he have to make every one of these meetings?” He never misses a meeting. When he took that money, this was a serious responsibility for him. And I used to get the packets. The packets would come in for a board meeting. The packets would be that thick. They’d be financial statements and this and any legal matters and everything else. And for days before, he would be all over that stuff. And he went in.

There were some funny times, too, though. Marvin Davis owned Twentieth Century Fox. He knew Marvin from Colorado. And so Marvin, in his grandiose way of doing things, he gets a board and he’s got Jerry Ford on the board, got Henry Kissinger on the board, got Edward Bennett Williams on the board, and Art McClelland, used to own the Cleveland Browns, on the board. Now, some of the other players from Hollywood that were on the board were Sherry Lansing who was director of production and stuff like that, Norm Levy who was a really knowledgeable Hollywood guy that was on the board, and Harris Cattleman who was TV, Twentieth Century Fox TV. They had M*A*S*H and some property at the time.

These meetings were bizarre under Marvin. God love him, he was funny. He’d sit there, Marvin, 390 pounds. He’d have a chair bigger than this. I put my hands, “Eh. Eh, so Sherry. Tell ‘em what we got going.” And she’d say, “Well, we’ve have this wonderful—It’s going to be a little bit risqué. We’ve got this film Porky’s.” You know, that little porn film, high school. And they’d come out and she’d be talking like this and you got Henry and Ford sitting there. And, I love this one. She says, “We’ve got a really good film coming out with Christopher Reeve. The Cardinal.” Do you remember that film? The Cardinal? Where he played the corrupt money-building cardinal for the Vatican, stuff like that? So, she gives a synopsis of that and Marvin says, “Well, what do you think Jerry?” This is a board meeting. President
Ford would say, “Well, I don’t know, Marvin. I mean, you’ve got to be very careful when you go near this religious stuff.” “Henry?” “Well, I tell you. I always ask Cardinal ______ in New York City…”

The meeting would be bizarre. There would be no form or substance. Somewhere along the lines they weren’t doing that well at the time. They were doing okay, but then towards the end of the meeting, Harris Cattleman, big, white curvy hairdo, Hollywood style, he’d be sitting there. “Harris! Tell us what’s happening.” Harris would say, “Uh, we just sold 38 episodes of M*A*S*H residuals to the following markets for $38 million dollars.” “Eh, let’s go to lunch!” Everyone would get up and go to lunch.

So, the board experiences were interesting, but that was the aberration. The rest of them, he was so diligent. Nobody makes all the board meetings. I’ve been in a corporation. There might be nine of them scheduled a year. And if you make seven of them, you’re a damn good director and that type of thing. He never missed a board meeting. He never missed a board meeting. It was just amazing. And I think he wouldn’t be at all reluctant from picking up the phone. You don’t have the clout. There’s a regard. You know how hard it was for us, all of us involved, yourself even more so, to get something for the Foundation or to get something by way of the archives or to get something for the Library or to get some staffing deal or to get some budgetary line moved over here or there. It’s not like that Congress or that Senate is intimidated by him. We got some things and we didn’t. You know what I mean?

Smith: I always said the difference between him and, say, Lyndon Johnson. Johnson’s library as long as Johnson was alive would’ve been a national memorial.

Barrett: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: And President Ford, in some ways, was too nice.

Barrett: There’s no doubt about that. That was clearly a political liability of that man. He was just too damned decent. There’s just no doubt about it. There’s a lot of times, a lot of people, myself included, I got much quicker and more vocal and everything than he is and so forth, but I would’ve taken on certain people
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from physically, if he ever told me to, to something else. And Cheney’s
certainly capable of it. You know that Rumsfeld was capable of it. You
know that Terry or all of us would’ve done it. But a lot of times, it was just,
“Well, let it go. Let it go.” And there was a lot of consequence from that,
too.

Smith: A couple of things. For one, how did his relationship with Nixon evolve?

Barrett: You know, I’ll tell you. I don’t mean to do this and maybe it’s the third time I
do it and I hope it’s not too much, but that would almost be something that’s
more your bailiwick, you know, with the historical study and all that stuff.
Because, like, I was always surprised by Ford’s references and most of the
time it was in print, oddly enough. I didn’t hear him ever say anything to me.
I mean, we talked about Nixon quite a bit. We talked about everything quite a
bit. But he would use the phrase, “Dick was a friend of mine.” He would say
‘friend.’ And I never, in all the times subsequent, whether the resignation and
the papers and the tapes and until they got a resolution on what was going to
possibly go to go to court and what wasn’t, and blankety-blank-blank. Maybe
that undid something that Ford, before I was around him, had a greater idea.

I tell you, those two are like oil and water from a personality point of view.
One of them is, like, he may be naïve, Ford, he may be this, he may be not.
This is not a man suffering from a lack of conscience or social well-being. I
think that Nixon was a marvelously intelligent person, but I think he was one
of the most socially insecure people I ever met. I know, out in San Clemente,
it was the first day there, you could see it in the man’s body. There was
always this suspicion. It was ‘them.’ That type of thing. It’s the story we
were talking about standing at the counter, that these kind of people. Okay,
he’s brilliant. You don’t have to be brilliant. You have to be articulate and
you have to be secure. People have to feel the kinship and so forth.

That some people can become the highest level occupants of some of our
offices is beyond me. I’ll give you another just so you don’t think I’m being
pompous one way or the other. I think two of the most socially inept people
I’ve ever seen are Al Gore and Richard Nixon. And Ford was not socially
inept. He was like a hot knife through butter with people. Anything else you want to say about him.

Smith: Also, he liked people.

Barrett: He loved them. Golf tournaments, ski tournaments, ________, it was effortless to represent him. It was effortless.

Smith: Way back, were you surprised when the pardon occurred?

Barrett: I was with him and let me tell you what happened. That was on a Sunday and he was going to play golf at Burning Tree, I think it was Burning Tree. So, we get set to go. I’m anticipating that that’s today. And this whole thing settles up, goes through the whole thing, and goes on. And blankety-blank-blank. And I get in the car with him afterwards and he goes to play golf. He was totally, totally at peace.

He would talk to me a lot. There were times that I would talk back and there would be times that I knew that I’m just supposed to listen here. But there was no, “Well, I’ll let him chew on that” or “Well, I’m glad I got that…” Nothing. I mean, like, he was reading himself the newspaper in the car on the way over. You’ve seen him do that a thousand times. He loved his newspapers on airplanes or the car. And he’s just reading the newspaper. It was a misjudgment on his part. He should’ve floated it, but that wouldn’t be Jerry Ford. ________ You know, like, “I should go talk about our relationship with China and somebody’s going to ask a question” And he could say, “Well, I could never conceive a pardon at this moment.” That’s all he’d have to do. Let them all stew. Let all the venom come out with the actual pardon. Let that go for two or three weeks, then he comes back and says, “For the good of the country”. And it would’ve made all the difference in the world.

Smith: It’s funny, because Mel Laird - champion schemer of all times - he had a plan. And he thought he had an understanding. Now, who knows? But the plan was to bring in 30/35, members of Congress from both parties, both Houses, at the right moment, who would basically appeal to the president to consider pardoning this. The problem is, I remember once spending two and a half
hours in a hotel room in Grand Rapids war-gaming this. And I remember thinking, “Yeah, it was the right thing to do, but there had to have been a more adroit way of doing it.” But you know the problem is it’s so difficult to put ourselves back in that climate. And I don’t know if a trial balloon ever would’ve gotten above the trees before it was shot down in that supercharged climate.

Barrett: I told him, and he put it in the book A Time to Heal, I said, “You know what you did, Mr. President. We were all addicted to Watergate and some of us were mainlining, some of us were snorting, some of us were sniffing, some of us were smoking, but we were all addicted.” And he said, “We’re going cold turkey.” And I said, “And you’re really pissing us off.” And that’s what the people need. And the people would say, “Okay, can’t we just have an arm? We want Nixon’s right arm. Give us a hand.” Something like that. So that’s why you would think that any type of, as you said, __________, your viewing of it.

But you’re absolutely right, because that still lingered all those months later and it was definitively, he says ‘No,’ but the election was so close that along with the economic news coming out later, along with the wrong running mate. He probably would’ve been better off with Rockefeller instead of Dole. Ford says correctly so when somebody wants to blame the pardon for him losing the election, he says, “Well, in an election that close, you can’t say that that was it. It might have had a contribution to it.”

Smith: Ford was so fortunate, in contrast with LBJ who dies just four years later, even before the announcement of the peace agreement. And President Ford, on the other hand, lived long enough, first, to know that people had come around, and then that Profiles in Courage award which captured the whole process.

Barrett: In there with the Kennedys; it doesn’t get any better than that. I always said that to people. I said, “You know, he could’ve lived longer. I wish we had him around longer, because he was good in so many ways right up to the very end.” Even months before, when I was out in California, he was certainly debilitated and this, that, and everything else, but there was still humor. And
you had to speak in a different kind of way to get it, but there was still, even then. I said, “It would’ve been nice to have him, but even then 93 is a hell of a run. And when you’re standing there and all this stuff you’re looking at is in front of you as possible things that people don’t know or understand or appreciate, and then all of a sudden all that comes around to stand behind you as a back-up and everything else. That’s a pretty nice deal. Ninety-three years and that’s a pretty nice deal.” And he would’ve been the first one to say it, you know. “We did okay. We did okay.” No doubt about it.

Smith: How difficult was it for him those last few years? I don’t know what you think about the DeFrank book or the process. Put Tom aside, just talking about the president, they had a great relationship. But depersonalize that. My bias, [but] I think it’s a probably an unhealthy thing for a former president to say, “Okay, you’re going to be my scribe and I’m going to pour out my heart and soul and trust your judgment to edit this and decide what I want to be my last will and testament.” Because commercial publishing demands not nuance, not subtlety.

Barrett: He’s still thinking of relationships a la 1975 and he wasn’t that good at recognizing the blogging, technological explosion of competition, that punditry that replaced reporting.

Smith: With all due respect, because you’re his friend, but, you know, the story that Bob Woodward was thinking of doing a book about Ford. Maybe he was. I don’t think we’d want to see it. I think we’ve seen what he had in mind. We saw it before the funeral.

Barrett: Right. Exactly.

Smith: And I don’t think it actually moved the meter historically.

Barrett: No. Well, all you have to do is you have to remember, Bob Woodward stood up at the National Press Club in front of his peers and looked at Jerry Ford and said, “I had the information right, but I interpreted it wrong.” “And,” he said, “I want everybody to know, to hear that now.” Now, see you can go on and write anything you want about Ford now, but when you do that mea culpa coming from a personality of a Bob Woodward at the National Press Club
with all those people there, Bob can write any kind of book he wants about Ford and have it be seen as a responsible thing. See, Tom’s a great guy and everything else, but in a different version of a personality. We were talking about _____, Tom’s got this little, quiet personality. He’s very suspicious. Tom was born super suspicious, you know. Remember Haynes Johnson from the New York Times?

Smith: Yep.

Barrett: The only person more suspicious than Tom about all things, Haynes Johnson was that way, especially about Nixon. You know, Reagan asked the three of them – Carter, Nixon, and Ford – to represent him at the Sadat funeral. I took them over there. And that was another whole story on the airplane.

Smith: And was that where the Ford-Carter friendship began?

Barrett: That’s where it went into another land. That’s where it got to the point Brent said, “Oh, God. Can we throttle back on this a little bit?” But it did and that was a lot of time. That was a hell of a trip, like, all the stewards and attendants on Air Force One. It was fun. I think a lot of people have lived a much more significant life than me in terms of the presidency and stuff like that, but I don’t know of anybody that got to do what I had to do on that trip.

Smith: What was the dynamic between the three of them initially?

Barrett: Well, they all arrived and went to the White House. They had the pictures there, the famous pictures taken there. And then they’re out in the plane. They’re in the cabin part of it and, you know, like, Haig and Cap Weinberger and the other people out there in the _____ compartment, which I thought was really tacky on their part, but not unusual. So, it was pretty good and they all handled it pretty well. You have to remember, nobody’s writing speeches. I mean, these guys did a hell of a job on that trip. There was no time for this. There was no coordination, “Okay, you touch on these points. I’ll touch on these points.” They all had had a personal albeit different relationship with Anwar Sadat and with Jehan, his wife. And they all held that relationship dear.
So many world leaders have told me that that’s the world leader of the twentieth century so far. That’s the bravest and the best and the brightest that they’ve seen. A lot of people say that. So, it worked out very nicely. They went before the Egyptian Parliament; they went before the American community, the diplomatic community. And they’d speak in terms of Nixon would speak first because he was the elder statesman. And in spite of being the victim or sitting there having heard what this one just said, the next one would pop up and it would be an entirely different thing. Nixon was funny with the American community. It was a great line and I really liked him at this point. It sort of has to do with the Frank Langella representation of how we could be so mischievous. He got up and he says, “It’s very special to be here among so many famous people. And I guess in case myself in from these people.” (?) You know, like that, he just let it go.

Then, go back, at the end of the trip, we’re all back on the plane. Hotter than hell. We’d gone through the procession and now we’re about twenty-fifth for take-off because we only have former heads of state with us. And they were having the heads of state take off before that before this 27,000 took off. So we get onto the plane and everybody’s hot. It worked and everybody did it. Everybody did their thing for America. And the presidents are coming on board and I walk back on the plane, you know, tie loosened up and everything else. There were press people, Steve Jones, Haynes Johnson, and I can’t remember who the third one was. So they say to me, “Bob, is there any chance we can get some time with the presidents on the way back?” I said, “I haven’t asked them, but I’ve come to know them,” I said, “I’m sure that will work out. I’m sure they’ll be generous with that. No problem at all.” I said, “I’ll come back and let you know.”

So then I go back toward the front of the plane and the Secret Service goes, “Bob.” So I got over there. I said, “What is it?” He said, “Nixon’s not coming.” I said, “What?” He said, “Nixon’s not coming.” I said, “Where the hell did he go?” I mean, we’re in Cairo. He said, “He’s flying to either Morocco or Algeria, _________. And he’s flying SaudiAir.” SaudiAir was really badly thought of because they had suspended operations to make it difficult to get to the funeral of Sadat who they still resent - had made the
peace with Israel. I said, “Jesus Chris, that rascal.” Just like that. I said, “Let him go.”

So, I walk back, Haynes Johnson is sitting there super _____ . I said, “Ah, I’ve checked and I’ve got some good news and I’ve got some bad news.” They said, “What is it?” I said, “The good news is the presidents would be *delighted* to spend some time with you.” They said, “What’s the bad news?” I said, “There’s only two of them.” And Haynes Johnson says, “Where the hell did that Goddamn son-of-a-bitch Nixon go?!?” He says it just like that, just unbelievable. And Tom had that type of thing. He sort of thrives on this conspiratorial. It’s just part of his demeanor.

Smith: You know, it’s funny, because when you read the book, he makes such a big deal out of this little slip of the tongue where the president, “Well, he’s vice president”. About some appointment or something like that. And it’s like you’d think the whole Watergate story pivoted on this little incident.

Barrett: Well, I think that people are prone toward that. Depending on how much time you have around the president, you sort of correctly covet a certain memory about something a president says to you, or a great athlete or a great celebrity. And for the celebrity of a president or the athlete, it’s just one of 20,000 things he said that day. You know what I mean? But you heard it and you make something out of it.

Smith: Do you think Ford had any idea, when he was doing those interviews, do you think he purposefully was engaged in this as a way of communicating?

Barrett: I think incrementally he probably didn’t establish, you’ll know what I mean by this, like, he wasn’t gifted. He probably didn’t really establish a rhythm that was uniform throughout that whole process with Tom. You follow? You know, way back, hell, he lived so long. He was virile and so capable all those years. But, you know, it was, what’s the name of the *Grand Rapids Press*? They had their annual meetings with him. We had, who else was in there? Brokaw was doing it for awhile. Tom DeFrank was doing it for awhile. Phil Jones would do it. There were a bunch of them that would have these obituary oriented times with him.
So, I think as he goes along, because he continued to have varied thoughts regarding the Reagans and latter day politicians and the Clintons and stuff like that. You know, like, he sort of maybe accelerated the rhythm and like he created some angst in the person who’s hearing it and stuff like that. But he was capable of doing that. Clinton came to Vail in - it must have been in 1995-ish, maybe ’95, ’96. And it was a big deal. Like, “What the hell is Bill Clinton going to Vail for?” Democratic presidents go to Aspen. Republican presidents go to Vail. And it’s basically true. You’ve got the whole demeanor of the population, the business, and this and everything else. But, truth be known, their daughter, what’s her name?

Smith: Chelsea.

Barrett: Chelsea. Chelsea was very interested in ballet at the time and we had formed a very nice partnership with the Bolshoi ballet as a result of the trip to Russia that I was talking about earlier. And they would come and put on performances at Ford Amphitheater. Beautiful set-up. God almighty.

Smith: They loved it in Vail, didn’t they?

Barrett: Ah, they loved it. I’ll tell you about the last golf tournament if you want to hear about loving Vail. Beautiful thing. So the Clintons come and they not only come to Vail but they stay in Len Firestone’s house who was just the pinnacle of Republican fundraisers in California. So Vail, and Leonard Firestone’s, and California, and a Goddamn Democrat. I mean, jeez! But it was because of Chelsea. So they play golf. I set up for them to play golf. Jack Nicklaus wanted to play with them, so it was Jack, Ford, and, a very interesting little story. I bet you don’t know this one.

Ford, Jack Nicklaus, Clinton, and the fourth was supposed to be Tom Apple, a golf pro at Arrowhead Country Club in the Rockies. So, at the last minute, Clinton calls Ford and says that he’s got a fourth. And Ford has to call Tom who, of course, was very excited about playing but absolutely understood. Like, he didn’t think he was supposed to be in there in the beginning anyhow. So, the replacement for Tom, so the $64,000 question to Richard Norton

Smith: Who was person that Clinton substituted for Tom Apple, the golf pro?
Ken Lay. Enron. How’s that fit? That’s a constricting and expanding kind of world that sometimes makes sense and doesn’t.

So, at any rate, they’re there and the Clintons could not have been better. We had an after party after the Bolshoi deal. Outdoors. It was great. He played the saxophone. He was perfect. And she was perfect, too. Hillary was perfect. They were great. And everything was a splendidly successful visit. And Ford and Betty, as you know them, were just perfect there. And everybody in Vail in spite of being Republicans, they had nothing but, “Well, that’s pretty nice that that sitting president would come do.” So now it’s Monday afterwards and I’m over at the house with him. We’re having lunch. The only person that’s out, Mrs. Ford is out. The only person in the house is the woman who is a cook

Smith: We’ve interviewed her.

Barrett: Oh, yeah. So we’re sitting there at the table, you know, just Ford and I. And I said, “Alright, everybody’s gone.” I said, “What’d you think?” Just like that. So, like I was telling you before, it’s his own house, in this case Beaver Creek, and everything else (looks around), “Well, I’ll tell you one thing, Bob. He didn’t miss one good-looking skirt.” That was the way he put it. “He didn’t miss one good-looking skirt.” And he said, “But, you know what? I don’t know what’s at his core.” He says, “I just don’t know what’s at his core.” But he leaned forward and points his finger and he says, “But you tell all our Republican friends that don’t you underestimate this guy. Don’t you underestimate this guy.” He says, “I’ll tell you what, he’s better than John.” John Kennedy. You always forget Ford and Kennedy were contemporaries. We think of John as so much younger. They were contemporaries. He had a lot of regard for John.

Smith: They had offices across the hall from each other.

Barrett: Yeah. He had a lot of regard for him. He says, “Truth be known, John was still an elitist.” He says, “And he loved the press and he knew how to make the press work for him.” “But,” he said, “he hated the rope line.” He said about John Kennedy. He said, “He hated the rope line.” He says, “This guy
loves the rope line and the rope line loves him.” He says just like that. He says, “The rope line loves him.” That’s what he said about Clinton.

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

Barrett: It was about, let’s see, it had to be late spring of, he died in 2006, might have been February or March. It seemed more like it would’ve been April or May that I went out there. It was funny. John Purcell, a friend of mine from Vail, and he used to make Ford laugh so much, John is a very expert boats man. I’m a neophyte boats man, I can do fine. And, Ford, I used to ride him all the time and he used to ride me all the time about being Army, you know, because he was Navy. I said, “You know, what’s the Navy do?” I said, “When have you won a war unless you stand on the ground?” You know what I mean? And he’d go, “Well, …” And we’d go on and on like that.

So then John would visit him and I’d have to completely tidy up after him afterwards because he would say to the President, he’d say, “Bob comes up to see me in his boat, Mr. President. He’s taken out my dock three times!” “Well, I’ll tell you, he’s an Army guy.” For as thwarted and as difficult as it was for him, he’d go, “Have you crashed into any docks? You Army guys, they shouldn’t let you on a boat.” Just like that. Through great labor, but that was the start of the conversation. He’d take it much slower and haltedly that I just did it. But I knew exactly where he was going and I’d say, “I come all this distance. I come 3,000 miles. I got to walk in and sit and listen to that?” “Well, you’re Army…” It was great. Just great.

Smith: Was it tough for his people in the second Bush administration? Because obviously there’s been a lot written, a lot speculated upon?

Barrett: I don’t know.

Smith: He didn’t talk about it?

Barrett: No, he didn’t talk about it. And it was of no interest to me because I really enjoyed what I was able to do with him. You know, like the golf tournament. I just know he stayed so viable, so energetic. The celebrities, the corporate people, the politicians, both sides, having the Danny Rostenkowis, the Marty
Rousseaus, and Tip O’Neills out to his golf tournament as well as the Bob Michaels. And then the Eastwoods. Everybody was there. Bob Hope. It was just great. It was just so great for him to do all this stuff and the travel and everything else. It was just a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, wonderful time.

I used to speak to a few classes and so forth, people would ask me to speak. And I’d say, “You know, let me tell you something about what it was like.” I said, “It never occurred to any of us in the Ford administration to be self-aggrandizing. It never occurred to us to want something.” I said, “Now, before you think that I’m saying ‘Aren’t we special people?’ I want you to parse my words. It never occurred to us.” You see, now, the only time somebody deserves great credit for being moral is when something occurs to you and you say, “No, I’m not going to do that. It’s wrong.” I said, “It never occurred to us. And you know why? Because he was so Goddamn good. He was so good that there was no way that any of us could ‘Well, you know, if you do this for me, I could get you into this dinner’ or ‘If you do this for me or make a contribution over here…’” I said, “We didn’t do it.” I said, “And it was all because of him. He was just so naturally good.”

He wasn’t a prude, you know what I mean. He liked a little bit of a racy story and this, that, and everything else. But he was a Boy Scout. He was an Eagle Scout. He was, with all those qualities, not to shove down your throat, not to be anti-gay, not to be bad-mouthing choice, or this or that. Nope, never at anybody’s expense. But he genuinely was that good without being a prude. He was that good. And all of us, I bet every White House since then, you know, they all still do the same thing, the pictures go up and the carpeting is good and everything is pristine and stuff like that. There was never, I’ve never felt the casualness that we felt.

I mean, passing the press in the hallway like we did. This, that, and everything else. Their reverence of Kennerly or the relationship of, like, I’ll show you some pictures of Cheney, O’Donnell, myself, and Kennerly, we were in the control car all the time together, you know. Cheney is falling asleep. We used to put up signs on him “Wake up, Cheney. You fell asleep
and had a wet dream.” And we’d leave him in the car and we’d go into the event. And he’d come out.

And Rumsfeld, when he was on the staff. We’d go down to an event and we’d get in back. It was all crowded and Kennerly’s cameras and I’ve got the football. Ford’s in the limo ahead. And then we’d pull up to some place, I think it was down here in Florida as a matter of fact, and Rumsfeld starts to go, “Goddamn…” There’s something wrong with the set-up and everything like that. So Kennerly’s sitting in the back. Rumsfeld’s sitting right there and Kennerly says, “I can’t tell. You think he’s pissed?” Within earshot and everything else. And Terry says, “Well, I don’t know. I don’t know if you can tell yet.” And I go, “I think he’s just venting. You know, some people have a need to vent.” And he would go on with this banter until he finally went, “Why don’t you guys shut the hell up already!” I mean, that’s the Chief of Staff, that’s what we used to do.

And, of course, there were times to be taken seriously, like, we cried. We did everything with an extreme of dedication, emotion, passion, and foolishness. You know, bop-bop-bop-bop-bop-bop-bop. And I, myself, and Flip Wilson, we entertained at Ford’s birthday at the White House. And I set up the routine like I had taken the president. You know how the president always gets the physical on his birthday? So I went through the routine. I put a hand up to introduce him and I said, “I was with the president of the United States today and as you know the president’s received a very somber military deal and,” I said, “at this time I want to bring in the assisting medical personnel that’s assisting.” And Nurse Geraldine, remember the routine that Flip Wilson used to do? “I, hear, I love this, I love this man!” And we just took his ass apart. It was just, “I saw parts of this man this country will never see!” I mean, that’s how much freedom. It was just great.

Smith: Do you miss him?

Barrett: Oh, yeah. I miss him. It ended up from ’74 until 2006. It was 32 years. You know what I mean? And I know there were a lot of people that had a more, but that was a long time. You know? And there was a lot that happened after he left office. Like just quantitatively and qualitatively. Like the trips
overseas. He was so well regarded overseas because overseas his lack of eloquence and so forth doesn’t matter because the interpreters take care of that. You don’t need to be. So his words and his expression and his demeanor. I mean, if we were in France with Valéry Giscard d'Estaing or whether we were in Great Britain with Callahan or with Schmidt. Schmidt loved him. All these people came to his forum. I mean, they were fantastic. And in Saudi Arabia, he and I went, and I sat with him and he met with King Saud, you know, Saud’s father. And he would carry messages at the request of either Reagan or Jimmy Carter at different times and so forth. But, I mean, we would go to the Emirates and the same thing. Like the butter, a hot knife in butter. He would sit down at this totally Arab presentation with the pig in the center and they just loved him. Loved him.

Chinese trip, the trip to China, when we went all over China, down the Yangtze and everything else. There were 30 of us on a boat that was designed to carry 600 people cruising down the Yangtze. Brent was with us. And the Chinese Ambassador to the United States was our tour guide. Unbelievable guy. He had grown up and was educated in Germany. And Brent was sitting in the back of the boat one night and Brent said, and this is the kind of great conversations that we had, Brent said to the Ambassador, “Well, how did you become a Communist?” He said, “I was an oriental in Germany during the 30’s, late 30’s.” He says, “And there was no sort of room for anything like me in anything that they had to order so the only place I could have any socialization was with other Communists.” So he became a Communist. That’s what he said. “So, I became a Communist.” Just like that. But, I mean, they just loved him. Loved him everywhere.

Smith: How should he be remembered?

Barrett: Oh, let’s see. I mean that’s a very, very nice opportunity certainly not to be squandered. I would say that he was probably the best across the board representation of America that ever ended up being president. Other people, you know, whether it’s a George Washington or it’s an inspirational Kennedy or an intellectual Woodrow Wilson or a quasi-spiritual Abraham Lincoln, but that middle slice of America, I don’t think there’s ever been anybody that was
more American. Navy, he’s a hell of a Navy hero, you know that. He never made anything out of that. But he goes down three times to pull guys out of a burning engine room with ammunition and everything else. He didn’t say shit about that stuff. He was the best that the country had to offer. And there’s millions and millions like him.

Smith: That’s perfect. Perfect.
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Smith: Some of this, obviously, is familiar territory, but hopefully some of it’s new, too. You came to Congress in ’61, from western Kansas. Had you met Gerald Ford before you took your seat in the House?

Dole: No. The only people I knew were our senators and I had met Phil Hart, of course. Anyway, no.

Smith: The Republican Party in the House in those days, one senses, was pretty different.

Dole: In the minority.

Smith: Was that the psychology?

Dole: Yeah. It was never going to change, so might as well do the best you can with 180 – I think we got to 180 once, didn’t we? 170, 160.

Smith: And what does that do to the psychology of the minority?

Dole: Well, if you had any initiative and wanted to do something, I don’t remember – I know among the big guys there was bipartisanship, but I’m not sure. I remember working with a few Democrats on issues. But you almost get the feeling, well, you’re just a second class member and it’s not going to change. It is a permanent minority. You get paid well, so maybe you’ll stay here.

Smith: Does that encourage an exodus to the Senate, for example? Is that a factor?

Dole: Yeah, you go from one minority to the next. But in the Senate you have a lot more freedom, you can do about anything you want in the Senate, except get a bill with your name on it. That’s not going to happen when the Democrats are in control, or vise versa.

Smith: But the party in those days, if you look at the Republican Party in the early Sixties, not just in the House – but it’s a Midwest party. It’s grounded in the
Midwest because you had very few Southerners at that point. That was about to change. But it was basically a Midwest party with obviously a few from the East and the West Coasts and all that.

Dole: We had one guy, Bruce Houser, from Texas. He was our Southern Bob, and that’s about it. You’re right. Texas qualifies for the South in a way, southwest.

Smith: What does that mean? I think of the Midwest as a place where…

Dole: That’s where we started, in Wisconsin and you get the leadership, whether it’s Dirksen or Halleck, or Gerald Ford. I’m trying to think who we had on the Eastern – Bob Wilson, he’s from California. It was a Midwest-centered party.

Smith: Did that mean it was a more pragmatic party?

Dole: I think so, yeah. I thought Ford was pretty pragmatic. He didn’t have any lists he kept on his conservative rating with the ACU. John Ashbrook – remember that name?

Smith: Yes.

Dole: I worked closely with Ashbrook on the American Conservative Union. And we used to meet monthly to put out our ratings for the month, and of course, since we were doing it, ours were always very good. We were the stars of the conservatives. But he was a very bright guy from Ohio, and for a long time the Conservative Union was pretty important with a lot of new members from around the country, and had a pretty good following with the media because it wasn’t a nut cake organization. It was conservative.

Smith: It was also about ideas, it wasn’t just tactics and name calling.

Dole: We just didn’t look up their votes, aye, no, aye, no…and Ashbrook was a man of ideas, too. He was really a bright guy. He died at a very young age.

Smith: What kind of conservative was Jerry Ford?

Dole: In those days a conservative was one who believed in restraining spending, not choking anybody, but restraining and keeping taxes low. And that was it. There wasn’t any Civil Rights, same sex marriage, abortion. That didn’t happen until – Nixon escaped all that, too.
Smith: That’s right. John Paul Stevens told us when he was nominated for the Court, no one asked him about abortion.

Dole: Yeah. When would that have been?

Smith: That’s about the last time – it would be ’75.

Dole: Yeah, that’s about right. I think it became a big issue in ‘74- well, in my campaign. And the New York Times and all the big papers were out there because this was the first race where, according to the media, this was the issue. And it probably was. There were probably other issues, but this really brought people out on both sides. Six months ago I wrote a letter to Bill Roy. I’m getting too old for enemies, and I’ve been told that he felt that I did something with that issue that was unfair, and he wrote the nicest letter back saying he thought it was pretty rough and tumble and a lot of my people were over the top, but he never thought that I’d done anything. Because they carried these fetuses around in jars...kill babies, vote for Roy. Had little ads, one liners. It was awful stuff.

Smith: Did you have any idea at that point, because that really was a sort of turning point in the nature of American politics, and in some ways, in conservatism, too. It became much more a cultural conservatism, kind of a combustible mix between economics and the social issues.

Dole: I remember my first campaign, there were a lot of people who wanted federal aid for education. I opposed it. The one thing you get support for federal aid is farm subsidies, so these farmers didn’t mind. They’re the best, they’ve got their hand out all the time. And even the Farm Bureau, which was at one time a pretty middle of the road, conservative, not so worried about cows and wheat. They were worried about the country and broader issues.

I can’t remember what they used to talk about on the Ev and Charlie Show, but it certainly wasn’t any of these hot button issues.

Smith: That’s perfect, because that brings up – in ’61, I don’t think he was in the House leadership. In ’62 he took on Charlie...

Dole: Charlie Halleck.
Smith: No, first there was Charlie Hoeven.

Dole: Oh yeah, from Iowa.

Smith: That’s right. And supposedly Hoeven said to Halleck, “You’re next.” Or something like that. Do you remember? The older I get, the more and more I think generational issues trump everything else, including ideology. In other words, your generation of Young Turks were at the point where you were dissatisfied with the elders who were running the party, defining the party in the House. People like Don Rumsfeld and others.

Dole: Charlie Goodell, at that time, and Mel Laird. Laird, he was the kind of guy who would put poison in the river and then run down to the town and ask what happened. That guy was tough.

Smith: A conniver.

Dole: Slick, devious.

Smith: Was he a candidate? Because there is some uncertainty until we get to the Halleck thing.

Dole: He was a good buddy of Ford’s. No he was in the leadership. Wasn’t he conference chairman or something?

Smith: Right.

Dole: He was a very bright guy, I mean, he was young, younger than Ford. He was smart. Came from Wisconsin. But he had this quality that you could never put your finger on it, but you knew he was behind it.

Smith: What was it about Charlie Halleck that made him vulnerable? This is after the Goldwater debacle.

Dole: I think Mel Laird may have put in a good word for me with Ford in ’76. We weren’t close friends but…Charlie Halleck was just a wonderful speaker. I think he had spoken at a convention and really wowed them. He could give a great speech, but he had this drinking problem. He didn’t like to travel and that’s about the time we saw – I think you meant Charlie Hoeven instead of Golden – he used to “Where are you going this weekend, Bob?” And I’d say,
“I’m going back to Kansas.” “Why in the hell do you guys go home every weekend? When I go home, it’s an event. We don’t run around every weekend.” And that’s about the time when all that started to change. If you didn’t go home every weekend, or if you missed a vote, little things – the old boys, once they’d get them, some of them went home, most of them just stayed here. It wasn’t quite as easy to get around.

Smith: You didn’t have jet planes.

Dole: They weren’t flying on corporate jets yet. They didn’t have their Gulf Streams ordered.

Smith: Was Halleck vulnerable in part because the Goldwater thing was so overwhelming that there was just this desire for something different?

Dole: Bob Griffin was sort of the catalyst there. And he was very bright, young. He didn’t dislike Charlie Halleck – nobody did. But it occurred to him and a lot of others his age, including me and a couple of guys from Kansas, that when you look around you keep coming back to Jerry Ford.

Smith: Why? What was it about Ford?

Dole: Just his personality, I think, primarily. He knew everybody. “Hi, Bob,” hi this, and it wasn’t just a fleeting hi ya buddy like some people are. They want to meet the next guy before they met you. So that’s how I remember it. He used to come around and sit down next to you on the floor and “How’s it going?” cause he’d been there a while. “Anything I can do for you?” He may have been looking down the road. Let’s face it, not too many get elected who don’t want to do something better. Part of it may have been that, but I think most of us felt just genuine friendship.

Smith: And he seemed to have a lot of friends on both sides of the aisle.

Dole: He and Carl Albert were great buddies. I don’t know anybody who disliked Jerry Ford. I assume there was somebody back there that didn’t. But again, the Democrats could like all of us because they figured we were always going to be a little group on the right there. But I was trying to think – in those days
we had a Chamber of Commerce rating, and ACU conservative union. We didn’t have quite as many people giving us grades.

Smith: And you didn’t have a 24/7 news cycle, and you didn’t have cable TV, and you didn’t have the internet, which has just transformed – and not necessarily for the better – the political process.

Dole: In the old days you put out those paper releases and then made phone calls to the stations back home – radio. If you were lucky, maybe you could get a TV interview, maybe. But now, it’s a 180 degrees.

Smith: It’s been suggested to us that one reason why Ford was seen as a logical replacement for Halleck, was that there was a feeling that Ev Dirksen was maybe a little too close to LBJ. That Dirksen sometimes was – that Johnson knew how to play Dirksen. That he’d go down to the White House and they’d have a couple of bourbons and they’d swap whatever they wanted.

Dole: Yeah, because Charlie Halleck and Dirksen were old drinking buddies, and I think Charlie figured out Dirksen’s the star, so we don’t need to do anything over here, just see what Ev’s doing. But see, we didn’t have any – well, Goodell and Griffin and the so-called Young Turks, they finally tried a Constructive Republican…

Smith: The Constructive Republican Alternative Program.

Dole: And it was CRAP. So that was a great beginning. But at least we had some people who decided that we’ve got to have alternatives. We liked the same Republicans in the same safe district; there is never any big swift or big change – maybe a few seats here or there. And we needed new blood. I think Jerry Ford wasn’t a backslider, I don’t think. He didn’t have an agenda that would put him up front every time. Sure, he wanted to be noticed, but he wasn’t seeking anything. He might have been quietly, but to us newbies he was just a nice guy and we hated to vote against Charlie Halleck. He came out to Kansas for me and I went out to Indiana for him. He liked me.

Smith: How do you campaign for a job like that? Is it one-on-one, face-to-face – the candidate?
Dole: You mean like Ford?

Smith: Yeah, because I did sense from Rumsfeld, at least, that there was sort of this group.

Dole: Yeah, he was in the group, too.

Smith: Yeah.

Dole: He was my next door office neighbor. He kept trying to get me to run for some House leadership post. But anyway, he had guys like Les Arends, who everybody loved. He was the Whip. He was a corn farmer from Illinois and everyday he’d announce the price of corn. “A dollar and three cents a bushel today. Not going to make any money today.” He’d just go on. And he’d stand over to the side, up near the Speaker’s place and lean on the wall and talk to guys as they’d go by. Never criticism, but always something. “I read something nice about you in the paper, doing a good job, somebody told me you did a great thing in the committee today.” He was really smart.

When you’ve got people like Les working for Ford, and Les was the number two guy, and he was a great friend of Charlie’s, for him to come out for Jerry, sent a pretty strong signal, because nobody disliked him. I remember seeing Halleck right afterwards and he was just – you know, thought he’d been hit by a sledgehammer. I think he thought he had the votes. I always felt the three Kansas votes made a difference.

Smith: Well, they did – just numerically, they did.

Dole: I can take some responsibility for a couple of those.

Smith: Did you get anything in return?

Dole: No, but we said among ourselves – well, if we stick together, at least we’ve got some – if we’ve got a problem we’d go to Jerry and he knew. There may be others that did the same thing. We probably did get something in return, I’ve forgotten. He may have, and I think he did come out and speak on Kansas Day. Now, that was a big thing then. We didn’t expect any pork.
Smith: You go on to the Senate in ’68, and establish a reputation as a strong defender of the Nixon administration. And then along comes Watergate. You’re in the Senate, he’s in the House, did you run into to him? Did you see him?

Dole: He was pretty close to Nixon, as you know better than I do. I never talked to him about, that I can remember, about Watergate, or that I was chairman.

Smith: I think the thing out of all of that, that genuinely dismayed him the most, was the language on the tapes.

Dole: Yeah.

Smith: He was genuinely shocked.

Dole: Oh, I was, too. That’s when I really lost my – I could explain everything else away - but the way he was brought up and the family and the Quakers and his mother - God the four letter words came streaming out like his language. Growing up as we did, if you ever used a four letter word, you got the soap in the mouth treatment. We didn’t do it. And here the President of the United States using the words, that a-hole, it really brought him down from a ten, or maybe an eight to a four. There were a lot of people I think, a lot of little old ladies out there and a lot of older people –

Smith: A lot were Nixon supporters.

Dole: They probably swore a little themselves, but to hear the President of the United States, not just a word or two, but shhhhh.

Smith: That raises a big question about Ford. It goes to the pardon; it goes to a whole lot of things.

Dole: In fact, I never heard Ford use a four letter word – except his own – Ford. We used to campaign saying, “These are two four letter words you can live with. Ford and Dole.”

Smith: That’s a good slogan.

Dole: Yeah. He didn’t run around using them. And I always think people who do that are insecure. They don’t know how to get any recognition, and so they use filthy words.
Smith: Ford said later on, and I believed him, that he was shocked that Nixon lied to him. And it raises the question: there is a kind of a Boy Scout – the Eagle Scout – quality in Ford, which is very admirable. But at what point does it sort of shade over into a kind of naiveté? Was he naïve in some ways? He saw the good in people; and he wanted to see the good in people. And he thought he had no enemies, which is, again, very admirable. Is it affordable in a president?

Dole: Well, I don’t have any doubt, I don’t have any proof that Ford had to do some things to survive and let the country survive, too. I mean, the healing of America – was it 80-20 against the pardon? Now it’s 80-20 for the pardon? We lost the election by eleven thousand votes and there’s no doubt about it, I think he was pretty bitter afterwards because he made the right choice, and I assume that he calculated the politics and all that.

Smith: But maybe miscalculated the reaction.

Dole: Maybe. But I always wondered if there was a big trial going on and he was the president, and they were saying the Republican Party did this and the Republican Party this, and it was only one person. Was it Kevin Phillips who wrote the book about the emerging Republican majority in the country, particularly in the South? And boy, after that it was just shhhhh.

Smith: You felt it, obviously, because you were in the middle of a very tough re-election campaign. Do you remember how you first heard about it? I assume no one talked to you beforehand in terms of advice about this.

Dole: Thank goodness. Yeah, which is a finding that Senator Ervin made in the report, that Senator Dole had nothing to do with the Watergate. Which I thought was very nice of him.

Smith: Do you remember how you heard about the pardon? It was a Sunday morning, were you here or out in Kansas?

Dole: I was here and I was leaving the apartment for some reason – to be on a talk show, I don’t think it was that – I heard about it fairly quickly, and then I remember Bryce Harlow saying, “Well, this story has no legs. Two or three days, it’s out of here.” In two or three days, it was just starting to flame up.
Smith: Did it hurt you in Kansas?

Dole: Yeah, because I was party chairman and some of the Democrats – my good buddies – were trying to indicate that I probably had a – what I said to ___________ in my apartment and all that stuff.

Smith: But then the pardon on top of everything.

Dole: Oh yeah, the pardon.

Smith: Did it sort of toss you an anchor.

Dole: You see these signs when you go campaign, Pardon Me. People are pretty creative, just like they are in these Town Hall meetings.

Smith: Did you talk to him at all? He picked you a couple of years later to be on the ticket. So he obviously…did you ever discuss the pardon with him?

Dole: Nope. Oh, well, I think to the extent that something had to be done. I mean, Jerry was a proud guy. He wasn’t going to get up and mealy mouth and fumble around. He was direct and “I did it for the right reason,” even though he might not have. Who knows what was really kicking in his head? He surely had his political calculator turned on. But that’s alright. It’s about politics. People go, “Everything is politics.” I said, “Well, give me a better alternative, then.” There’re some bad apples in politics, in both parties. And I think Ford – he had a little group didn’t he? A little group of friends? John Burns from Wisconsin, and…

Smith: Well, Jack Marsh, who was very close to him. You pull out the race in ’74, you win it narrowly. When did you begin to think about the vice presidency?

Dole: I don’t know who went off on that. I think Noel Koch – remember Noel Koch? He started thinking that would be a great thing and he wrote some speeches and stuff like that.

Smith: Was one factor the decision to have the convention in Kansas City, for example?

Dole: That was a factor. Ford was in trouble with America’s farmers. I’d been on the Ag committee and was pretty established. We had a good reputation with
the veterans, so did he, and I wasn’t tainted with any – nobody ever said that I was involved in Watergate. And I think he thought he could trust me. He had watched me in the House and knew pretty much who I was, and who my friends were. You can tell whether you want somebody around you by the people you see them with. And the people I mingled with were the same ones that got him elected.

Smith: And at the same time, as I understand it, at least, you were also seen as someone who was more than acceptable to the Reagan wing of the party. Now tell me about when Nofziger – wasn’t Lynn involved?

Dole: Nelson Rockefeller also gave me a thumbs up. And who was the national committeeman?


Dole: Yeah, he really liked me for some reason. And he made sure that Rocky put in a good word. And then Lynn was supposed to be my agent. I was never sure he did anything.

Smith: To the Reagan camp?

Dole: Yeah.

Smith: And how long had you known Lynn?

Dole: Lynn? Oh, God, seems like forever. But he worked for me in the committee when I was chairman. I remember we were nominated and my first speech was to a Legion group in Seattle. We didn’t have any staff, so they stuck Lynn Nofziger and a couple of other guys I didn’t even know on the plane. This was the Dole campaign. Talk about being disorganized. And Lynn spent most of his time wisecracking. And to get him to be serious sometimes will drive you nuts, because he had a pun or a joke or whatever.

Smith: How do you run for vice president? I mean before the convention? How do you sort of make your interest known?

Dole: The only guy I know that ever ran really was Dan Quayle. Because the more I look back on that, the more I know how he got on the ticket. He would,
every policy lunch when Bush would come up and have lunch with us, Bush would come up early and he had a little room in the Capitol, and Quayle would be in there visiting and he was buttering Bush up every week. It didn’t occur to me until pretty late that this guy’s on the campaign trail.

Smith: Because your name was also in ’88 bandied about as a potential. Would you have done it?

Dole: Ah, probably, yeah. All these guys say they don’t want it, probably wasn’t going to get it.

Smith: We heard names - Ruckelshaus, I guess, was in the mix, Howard Baker was clearly considered. There’s still some debate over whether Ann Armstrong’s name was at least on the list.

Dole: Yeah, I think she thought she was going to get it.

Smith: Really?

Dole: Be a woman on the ticket and all that stuff.

Smith: Because they were way behind, and so you needed a Hail Mary.

Dole: Thirty-one points, I think. And then the WIN program – Whip Inflation Now. And all we had were little buttons. How do you whip inflations wearing a button? But again, Ford - you talk about an indefatigable worker, well, you know, the guy never stopped. And he was in great shape and I assume he had a drink or two, I don’t know. But he wasn’t a problem drinker, smoker. I think he prided himself on his physical condition. So fourteen hour days probably didn’t…

Smith: And he loved the rubber chicken circuit. He just loved being out there. And in fact, that was one of the problems in the ’76 campaign in the race against Reagan. There’s a wonderful story that Stu Spencer tells. Because Stu had been brought in before the convention and things weren’t going well.

Dole: Yeah, I know.

Smith: And it was the end of the week. It was Friday, he was frustrated, he was going through a messy divorce on his own back home. So he’s in the Oval Office
with the President and Dick Cheney. Just the three of them. And he’s got the unenviable assignment of politely convincing the President that maybe he shouldn’t go out on the road as much because he had these not very good speeches that were coming out of the speech office, and he’d go out there and his numbers would go down. And so basically they were devising the Rose Garden strategy. But the way Stu tells the story, and Cheney confirms it, only Stu Spencer would say this. He tried every euphemism he could think of, and finally lost it and he said, “Mr. President, you’re a great president, but you’re a f’ing lousy campaigner.”

And Ford not only took it, but later on, when Jules Witcover’s book about the campaign came out and it had this story, Stu was furious with Cheney. And he called him up, “How could you…” and so forth and so on. And finally Dick says, “Stu, there was a third person in that room. It was the President who told the story on himself.”

Dole: But that’s where – as you say – the Rose Garden strategy…I used to say, they sent me out in the briar patch and Ford stayed in the Rose Garden. It was pretty effective. He got a lot of press, didn’t have to give speeches. He’s a wonderful man, a big heart, he’d laugh, but his timing was terrible. He couldn’t tell a joke. He used to tell the joke about the golfer, how he hit three things. The eagle, the… and he just didn’t quite have it timed right and when people were supposed to laugh, they thought there was more coming. He just didn’t have Reagan or Kennedy’s timing.

Smith: He wasn’t a television president.

Dole: No. But you get him one on one in a conversation, because he had exceedingly high credibility – and he was good. But to give a set speech, which he read, and I don’t know whether he used a prompter or not, probably some, but he liked to read them, too. And that’s really too bad because he had all these great qualities, but you’re supposed to be a movie star and everything else with it, and be a great speaker – that’s not what we really want in a president. It’s good if you can have all those qualities, but what you want is an honest man or woman with integrity and some values.

Smith: And judgment.
Dole: And he had it. I’ve got that picture in the next room of all the presidents, and I always say, “Here’s the most unappreciated president I ever served with.” There’s ten of them. Because he knew more about appropriations, he knew more about the issues. If Ford were dealing with health care, God, he’d know every little detail, and that thing is complicated. I was on the health committee, and I’m not stupid, but God, is that complicated. It’s not just about this public plan or this or that, it’s 5,000 pieces. But Ford would have known.

Smith: He’s the last president to brief his own budget. To get up in front of a room full of reporters and introduce the federal budget and stay there and answer every single question until they were done. That’s intelligence.

Dole: Yeah. Everybody has their down side, I’m trying to – you know Ford got a little short with me a couple of times in the campaign when I announced we were going to raise support prices on wheat in Minnesota. He called and said, “If it’s alright with you, I’ll announce the good news.” So, “Yes, sir, Mr. President.” I guess I got the script wrong. There was something else, one other time.

Smith: The night of the debate – your debate with Walter Mondale – did he call you afterwards?

Dole: Yeah. He thought I did great. So did Mel Laird. Called me up and said, “God, I didn’t think you had it in you.” And I said, “Well, we’ll see what happens.”

Smith: Speaking of phone calls, do you remember the call at the convention when he called to ask you to be his running mate?

Dole: Oh, yeah. What was it? Five something in the morning – six? We were right down the hall from the Texas governor.

Smith: John Connally.

Dole: Who everybody thought was going to be it. So all the camera people were lined up, ready to get big John coming out of the room, and I’m trying to think of the ABC reporter who called me and tipped me off. You remember his name?

Smith: Was it Hal Bruno?
Dole: No. He’s a…

Smith: I know, I can see him.

Dole: He said, “How would you like to be vice president?” I said, “Well, I’m already out here, I might as well take the job.” We were just kidding each other. And before long the phone rang and it was Ford. He said, “I’d like to talk to you, think you could come over to the Muehlebach quietly,” come down the back door – all that stuff. So we got over there without being seen. Oh, another time he cautioned me, “You know, Bob, we don’t need any Jack Benny in the White House.” In other words, I know you like to have a lot of fun, but let’s don’t have too much.

Smith: Did Elizabeth go with you over to the hotel?

Dole: Yeah, but she sat in the other room. So we had a pretty good heart-to-heart talk. I think he said he trusted me and he thought I could be helpful with certain groups, and we had a tough row to hoe, we were in the ditch. But we knew Carter never was popular – he’s kind of a pious – very nice man. In fact, he came out to Kansas – you were there – to dedicate the Institute. He was kind of a folksy guy but it didn’t seem like it was real.

Smith: In the course of the campaign, did you run into foot dragging on the part of some Reagan folks? Was that an issue? Was that a problem?

Dole: Oh, both feet, yeah. I met with Reagan in Denver at the airport, New Hampshire, and he was willing to meet with me, but I’m not going to make a lot of press. A defeated candidate for president meets with vice president candidate – that’s no big deal.

Smith: What did you talk about?

Dole: Obviously, we talked about the campaign. But I never knew whether he really cared. His interest was in us losing. No doubt in my mind that Nofziger and some of the gang – they didn’t do anything.

Smith: Did he do the bare minimum? Is that fair to say?
Dole: Very. I mean, Reagan, if he’d gone on nationwide TV, you remember the convention – how he took it over at the end – if he’d have showed up for Ford at a big news conference or something. We only lost by eleven thousand votes. That’s the closest race, I think, in a generation or two that everybody’s forgotten.

Smith: One thing I have to ask you about. We’ve talked to Dick Cheney about this; we’ve talked to a number of folks. Right after you were nominated, there was this idea about going to Russell. And all the people around the President said, “We can’t do it. We’re exhausted. We’ve just been through this terrible convention. Don’t ask us.” We’ve been told that you were looking on at one point, watching this sort of back and forth. Can you describe how it originated and what happened?

Dole: Well, they said, “We don’t have time to notify people.” I said, “In Russell, I think we can get a hold of all the bridge clubs and they could probably postpone it a week. We’re not going to New York City, we’re going to Russell, Kansas.”

Smith: Was it your idea?

Dole: I reinforced the President that there wouldn’t be any problem getting people there. And we’re that close to my hometown and it would make news, and it would indicate the President is going to have a vice president he can rely on and all this stuff. And it sends a signal of whatever he wants.

Smith: Was it his idea? Was it Ford’s idea to go to Russell? I mean, where did the idea originate?

Dole: I think it originated with me, but I think Ford was the one who kind of grabbed onto it, and now all the other people were jumping on it. Not that they didn’t want to do it, there wasn’t any hostility. They were just worn out. But primarily they said, “We can’t do it on this short notice.” I said, “You can’t do it in Russell, Kansas?” What did they have - 24 hours? And it turned out well and we got a lot of coverage.

Smith: Now, there was that famous moment there, where the emotions got to you.
Dole: Yeah, that wasn’t easy. When that happens inside of you is when you try to end it. You know you shouldn’t be doing it, but you’re doing it and you can’t control it.

Smith: But I take it, the memories of what people in Russell had done for you, just came to you.

Dole: Too much. Well, you look out in the audience and there’s a guy that I know had done this. And this guy had given me a hundred dollars or this guy had done this. But, again, it was Ford who jumped up and started the applause, and just in that little 30 second or minute applause, I was able to regain my composure and went on. That’s also the day that my mother locked him out of the house.

Smith: You went to your house.

Dole: Went to the house, there was some fried chicken. We never locked the door in a hundred years. She decided, “Well, I’d better lock it today.” And she couldn’t remember where she put the key. We finally found it.

Smith: And he was perfectly comfortable with the whole thing?

Dole: That’s the thing about Ford. He wasn’t some big shot from the city, he was a normal guy. And it was genuine. I’d go in there and look at those pictures on the wall, and it will give you, I think a pretty good judge – I think I’m a pretty good judge of character. But the one thing that Ford had, and I won’t say that others didn’t have it, but he had it – I shouldn’t use the word in spades – but he had it. They ran around vouching for him, like, “That’s right, Senator Dole’s right.”

Smith: Did you think at the end – obviously, you were really surging in the polls.

Dole: Yeah, one more day – God.

Smith: Did you really think you were going to win?

Dole: Well, Ford did, so I did. I think he really did think we were going to win. As I said [it] was Hawaii and Ohio, eleven thousand votes.

Smith: Were you at the White House election night?
Dole: I was in the White House.

Smith: What was the mood?

Dole: Well, initially, it was pretty good. Then the states started coming – it was pretty good until a couple of hours into it. I don’t think Ford – I think he may have checked in before he knew for certain. Hawaii is a long way out there.

Smith: That’s right.

Dole: And Ohio. Somehow Carter – are there a lot of Baptists in southern Ohio?

Smith: Yeah. It’s more Southern than Midwestern.

Dole: Which never even occurred to me. I thought, “Well, Ohio, that’s a Midwest state.” Yeah, it is part of it. But a little part of it down there is…

Smith: What did he tell you afterwards?

Dole: Every time we’d go somewhere, he’d say, “We made a great team.” I was so upset, I think I told you, when I thought Steve wouldn’t shake hands with me. “But don’t let anybody tell you we weren’t a great team.” Every time I’d see him. He was just trying to make me feel good. I said, “We did come pretty close.”

Smith: Well, you did what you were asked to do. You delivered the farm…

Dole: We carried the farm states, including Oregon.

Smith: Well, and Connecticut and Michigan and New Jersey. You look at the electoral map in ’76 – it’s almost an absolute reverse of the parties today.

I can’t end without asking you, because you saw him toward the end. At the Mayo Clinic – I assume that’s the last time you saw him.

Dole: Yeah, that’s right.

Smith: You’d been up there.

Dole: Yeah, I was up there making a speech honoring veterans, and afterwards I went to the hospital. I was just trying to remember what we…
Smith: I think Mike Ford was there.

Dole: Yeah, Mike. He was very nice. Betty was in the hospital, too, and I didn’t get a chance to see her. Again, I’m just trying to remember – he wasn’t in very good shape.

Smith: Were you able to have a conversation?

Dole: That’s what I’m trying to think. I talked, but he never even recognized I was in the room. That’s was kind of dispiriting. He was that bad. He looked good. I said, “Mr. President, how is everything going? Anything I can tell you about what’s happening?” He just sat there, or was in his bed, propped up. So, I don’t know what that was, that last illness. You look alright, but you’re not functioning. Now how long did that last?

Smith: Just at the very end, I think. It was the last few months. And he certainly talked to a number of people in between. It may have been partly, at that point, medications. They were trying to find the right mix of medications. You know what that’s like.

Dole: Yeah, well, of course you’re always like, “Gee, maybe it’s something I said.” Maybe ’76.

Smith: Naw.

Dole: Then on the way to the airport, there’s no way that guy – he’s had it.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Dole: Well, I think his biggest challenge was the Nixon affair and I think he handled it properly. And history, I think, is going to treat him very well. He had the Mayaguez, or whatever it was, had that, but he never really had a chance – a four-year time to really get into it. I always thought he’d be a star on the domestic scene because he knew so much.

Smith: Yeah.

Dole: Nixon knew foreign policy, but Ford knew domestic policy, and Reagan really didn’t know either one. But he’s sort of like Obama, he’s a quick study and was a charismatic person. And then Carter, of course, knew the stuff.
Smith: You were an honorary pallbearer at the funeral in D.C. Were you surprised at the reaction? I know that people in the media were surprised at how much reaction there was.

Dole: I was, too, because Ford never got any credit for anything. It was all Nixon pardon, Nixon. And he wasn’t a darling of the media. So I figured this could be a little embarrassing. Why are they doing it? People are pretty smart. You don’t want to misjudge the American people. They can read between the lines what people say on the evening news. And there was no reason not to like Ford, except for the pardon.

Smith: Which by then had come to be seen as an act of courage.

Dole: By then people thought, “Well, he was probably right.”

Smith: It was fascinating to see the young people. People who weren’t alive and they were seeing him for the first time in all those clips, and they were comparing that to the current situation and he looked pretty good.

Dole: Yeah, none of us are perfect, and he could probably give you a list of things of his imperfections, but they are very far and few between. And he had a nice family and never had any stories about Ford and women or whatever.

Smith: And then, of course, Mrs. Ford went on to have this extraordinary life after the White House.

Dole: Yeah. It was a great life.

Smith: I think that’s it.

Dole: That’s all I know.
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Smith: Thank you for doing this. Tell us a little bit about you before you and Gerald Ford crossed paths.

Goodwin: I was working here in Washington. I was discharged from the service and didn’t have a job and didn’t have any money. So I finally got a job at a local television station here - what is now WJLA, it was then WMAL on FM TV.

Smith: Was that the ABC affiliate?

Goodwin: It was ABC, right. I worked there for ten years from 1959 to 1969.

Smith: What’d you do?

Goodwin: I started out in the training program and then I wound up as Director of Business Services before I left. I left because I bought a radio station in Iowa.

Smith: Whereabouts in Iowa?

Goodwin: In the Cedar Falls/Waterloo market which is the northeast part of the state. I was born and raised on a farm in Iowa and so I was familiar with the area.

Smith: I lived in West Branch for six years - the Hoover Library.

Goodwin: My dad started the Hoover Library. He was the first chairman of the Hoover Library.

Smith: And what was his name?

Goodwin: Robert K. Goodwin.

Smith: Of course.

Goodwin: He started with the Hoover, which was the—

Smith: Allen Hoover.
Goodwin: Allen Hoover. So, that was in the Fifties, I think, wasn’t it?

Smith: Yeah.

Goodwin: Something like that. So, in any event, I worked at the television station here and one day before we moved back to Iowa, I saw an article in the paper about somebody who’d done an advance trip for President Nixon and I thought, “That sounds interesting.” I sent a letter to I forget who it was in the Nixon advance office saying if they ever needed help, I’d be happy to volunteer to try to help, not having any idea what was involved. I’d never been in a political event before and didn’t know anything about it, but it just sounded interesting. Never heard a word. So then we moved to Iowa and then I wrote again when we lived in Iowa to somebody in the advance office and I did get a short note back and they said, “Nice to hear from you. If you’re ever in town, come see us.”

Smith: Was this still during the Nixon presidency?

Goodwin: During the Nixon presidency, about 1970, I believe. So, I came to Washington about two weeks later, went to the White House, and couldn’t get in, the person who I was supposed to see had no recollection of who I was. Couldn’t get in and didn’t see anybody. And, about six months after that, I got a call in the middle of the day one time to see if I would be interested in going to St. Louis to do a trip for Julie Eisenhower. So, not having any idea what was involved, I said yes. And, not even knowing whether I was going to get my expenses reimbursed or what was happening, I went there and met the fellow they went out to do the trip for. We did the trip, including, as I recall, a trip to the top of the Arch which was interesting. Julie was the nice daughter. Tricia was the one who ruined the careers of a lot of young people unfortunately. I guess I was fortunate to be assigned to Julie, so then I got called to do another trip for her, maybe a month or two later. And then we got several calls to do trips for President Nixon. And that’s where I met Red Cavaney. Then I did Nixon’s last two foreign trips to the Middle East and the Soviet Union.
Smith: Which was extraordinary. I mean, those were amazing crowds in Egypt.

Goodwin: Nixon, at that time in the spring of 1974, had not reached the point yet where there was significant talk that he was going to be impeached. But things were not going too well. Nixon knew that anytime in his presidency when he’d gone overseas his approval rating was greater when he came back. So, he instructed Kissinger to look into possible foreign trips for him in the spring of 1974. Nixon was more popular in Egypt than he was in the United States and that trip was quickly arranged. Then a trip on top of that to meet with Brezhnev in Moscow, oriented on the Black Sea in Minsk, was arranged.

So, Frank, Red, and I and a couple other people were sent out to do these trips. We got to Cairo for the first trip. We’d been there a day and I was told to go to Alexandria, a port city on the Red Sea, because Kissinger, in making the arrangements for Nixon to go there, had to acquiesce to Sadat’s request that Nixon come to the presidential palace in Alexandria and spend a night, unknown to President Nixon. In any event, Red said, “You go to Alexandria and set this up.” So, I went to Alexandria on the train and it was like going back through the Bible because you’re seeing the oxen going around the water wheels blindfolded and all sorts of scenes like that like you see in the Bible.

I got to Alexandria and I set up the trip. There’s a limited number of beds in the palace, so I sent a cable back and said, “There are only eighteen beds including the one for the president, so you’re going to have to leave much of the party in Cairo,” because Nixon was coming down on a train. So, they sent back the names of the people with one exception. There was one person who showed up who wasn’t supposed to be of notable interest.

Smith: Is there always one?

Goodwin: There’s always one. And so the day that Nixon arrived, there were huge crowds and on one side of the route - seven miles to the presidential palace - was the Red Sea. On the other side were miles of open apartment buildings with balconies impossible for the Secret Service to secure. And, several days before that, the lead agent came to me and said, “We can’t secure this.”
Nixon had agreed to ride in Sadat’s open limousine, almost identical to the one President Kennedy was assassinated in, so they said, “We’re going to request that, through Dick Kaiser, that the President invite Sadat to ride in his limousine,” the bulletproof limousine. So, Dick relayed the story to me that he went in to see the president about it and the president said, “No, I’m going to ride in the open car.” He said, “If they don’t get me over there, they’ll probably get me over here.” Shortly before that time, Nixon had heard the tapes that would incriminate him and this was in early June or late May of 1974, so that he had a fatalistic approach to it. In my view, might have wanted to be shot over there and be a martyr as opposed to what he faced over here potentially.

Smith: Extraordinary man.

Goodwin: So, anyway, the train arrived with the entourage and he got into the open car – I have some pictures of that, I think, still - and there are these huge throngs of people that are wildly supportive of President Nixon. So, they got to the palace and everybody settled in. By the way, Nixon wanted to do a reciprocal state dinner, so the entire state dinner was flown over 24 hours before. All the china, all the silver, the California wine, the steaks in dry ice, and the staff from the White House; they were working in a hundred plus degree weather putting on this lavish dinner. Then after everybody got to the presidential palace, some of the rooms were less than perfect. A couple of the rooms where they had beds, they had sort of a common toilet area which was in the floor, but where the President stayed and where Kissinger stayed were very opulent rooms. Shortly after they arrived, Zeigler came up to me and poked his finger in my face and said, “Where’s the room for Ms. So-and-so?” Her name wasn’t on the list, so I had no room for her. And, he said, “You get her a room, get her a place to stay right now,” and turned around and walked away. Well, there wasn’t anything I could do because she showed up uninvited – well, she was invited by somebody, but wasn’t on the manifest. Well, that person that showed up was Diane Sawyer, she and Ron were friends at that time, so he wanted her to come down and enjoy the evening.
So then we had about four days off and then went to the Soviet Union and I did Minsk where the Putin memorial was. We were in Moscow for a few days and then went down. Anyways, Nixon came back and, during this time after President Ford had become vice president designate - I was still living in Iowa at the time – I was called and asked if I would arrange a few of his trips, which I did. It was a very small traveling party at the time of, I think, about six people. And we flew around. The only airplane they gave him was a twin engine plane. I forget what it was, but it wasn’t too terribly comfortable. But he made a few trips. Then he had his confirmation hearing and after that, they asked me to come down and do trips when he was vice president. Then, the day after President Ford was sworn in, they called me and asked me to come down and work full-time in the advance office. There were just three of us, I think, at the time.

Smith: When you were on the vice presidential plane and in the entourage, I realize there’s layers and layers in the perimeter—

Goodwin: Not at that time, there really weren’t.

Smith: Okay. I don’t know if you’ve read Tom deFrank’s book. He makes a great deal out of a slip of the tongue by Ford who at one point talked about ‘when I’m [President?]’. I mean, he was in a very awkward position. Was anything said?

Goodwin: You mean when he was vice president?

Smith: Yeah, as vice president, anything in earshot that led you to believe that they were planning or anticipating or—

Goodwin: No, and I wasn’t in a position to hear that because I was living in Iowa and when I’d finish my trip here, I’d go back there and be involved in my own business. So, I wasn’t in the vice president’s suite of offices in Washington during that time. I’d do my trips. I’d be on the plane with him.

Smith: But, on the plane with him they must have been walking on eggs.
Goodwin: I suspect that Phil Buchen and some of the others were kind of planning behind the scenes and not talking to the vice president about it. I would think there were some conversations going on, but not including the vice president.

Smith: Was that your first contact with Ford?

Goodwin: Yes.

Smith: What was your impression of him?

Goodwin: I liked him very much. He was very down to earth. I’ve worked for four presidents and quite clearly the tone of the administration is set by the person in the Oval Office. It was very different from the Nixon White House in the sense that everybody was walking on egg shells and afraid virtually to do anything wrong or they would, as far as the advance people were concerned, they’d just never be on another trip. Red and I did the last big event back in the United States that President Nixon did, which was a rally in Phoenix and we filled the basketball arena at the time with, I think, twelve or fifteen thousand people. That was after Nixon returned in June and before he left in August.

But, there were a lot of demonstrators and there were difficult times then and there were a lot of people who were creating mischief as far as that was concerned. So, they asked me to come down here and work full-time for the president. We moved down here in July of ’74 and we moved into the house where we’re sitting right now and, before the moving van got here, I left for Poland to do a trip for the President, so my good wife unpacked everything with our children. And, from then on, it was just steady travel, domestically and internationally. The big trip I did was the President’s trip to China, the Peoples Republic of China, and I was there for about five weeks. That’s where I met George Bush because he was head of the Liaison Office at the time, not ambassador as the media incorrectly characterized him, because we didn’t have formal relations with the Peoples Republic at the time. But Bush was more highly regarded there than other ambassadors and he could get in to
see Teng Hsiao-Ping or anybody he wanted to on an hour or two notice, whereas any other ambassadors had to wait a couple of days.

Smith: Tell us something about Gerald Ford that might surprise people.

Goodwin: Well, not surprisingly, he was a very nice individual who went out of his way to thank people. Whenever I was traveling on Air Force One, he would always go up to the cabin and thank the crew for flying him on his way out the front door. Everybody on the staff liked him. I would say he was the most popular president among the full-time staff from one administration to another that there’s been at the White House. And I’d say what would surprise most people the most is that he was much smarter than he was given credit for being.

Smith: Illustrate that.

Goodwin: Well, I heard him on a number of occasions talking about policy. I was just a fly on the wall, but talking about policy matters and saying “We’re not going to do that. We’re going to do this. And this is what we need to say.” And then, just before the election in 1976, Dick Cheney and the President had drawn out a list of changes they wanted made as far as individuals were concerned in personnel. And there were some very solid people slated to come in.

Smith: Really?

Goodwin: Into the White House and a lot of the so-called dead wood that had come with the President from the Capitol were going elsewhere. Some of them were in over their heads, but that’s not understandable because you can’t go from a congressional office to the White House and expect to, you know—

Smith: Did you have contact with Bob Hartmann?

Goodwin: Yes.

Smith: Did you find him to be as polarizing a figure as many people did?
Goodwin: No, I didn’t find him polarizing. Sometimes Bob wasn’t functioning as well in the afternoon as well as he did in the morning. He was a little bit on the gruff side, but he was nice to me, personally. So, I didn’t have any problems with anybody.

Smith: We talked to Don Rumsfeld. He said he urged the President very early to clean house and to do it as ostentatiously as possible. My sense is that he wasn’t just referring to the Nixon people, but some of his own people from the Hill.

Goodwin: Yes, I think that’s correct.

Smith: And, clearly, Ford was reluctant to do that.

Goodwin: But, at the same time, it’s important to recognize that when he came into office, getting his arms around the job of the presidency, that he was almost thrown into the campaign at the same time. Trying to decide whether to run or not.

Smith: Yeah.

Goodwin: Well, we’ll talk about the campaign later, because there were clearly ways the President could have won the election. But, anyway, I think he was probably just a little bit reluctant to change people so quickly and Don probably perceived that these people were not White House level people and he supplemented them with others who were.

Smith: It’s interesting because it says something about him. I’d be interested in your interpretation. In the case of Hartmann, someone who had been enormously loyal, who had produced the most memorable words the President had spoken—

Goodwin: Well, I wouldn’t say—

Smith: Well, at least the inaugural address.

Goodwin: Yeah.
Smith: And yet, someone who was clearly a lightening rod. It got to the point where there were in fact two separate speechwriting operations going on. And he [Ford] was willing to tolerate that. Can you be too nice to be president? Was he capable of ruthlessness?

Goodwin: Well, the President was definitely capable of making the decisions that needed to be made. I wouldn’t call him a ruthless person by any stretch of the imagination, but he was very capable of making the decisions that needed to be made and, by virtue of the fact that they had agreed on some outstanding people to come in if he had been elected in 1976—

Smith: Do you remember any of those names?

Goodwin: I’m not going to mention them, but there were clearly some very qualified people who were coming in and were going to replace a lot of the people that probably needed to be replaced. So, in my view, he would’ve had a very successful four-year term as president because he was comfortable in the office. I was with him a lot, personally, and he never seemed overwhelmed. He seemed fully capable of doing everything that needed to be done and I just never saw him obsessed with the job, but fully capable of handling every aspect of it.

Smith: It’s interesting, because one of the things even critics acknowledge is that over time he put together one of the most impressive Cabinets in recent years. And, if you stop and think about those people, Bill Coleman or Carla Hills, those are heavyweights in their own right. So, he was clearly comfortable with having around him people of great intellectual fire power and sometimes ego.

Goodwin: Yep.

Smith: Did you ever see his temper?

Goodwin: Did I ever see his temper? Uhm, not really. There was one occasion where he was really frustrated, and that was when we were at Vail. The media used to like to go out and get on the ski slopes. There was a station the press would
have assigned to them about halfway down the mountain and they would reluctantly trudge up there and they’d get a shot of the President skiing for the picture of the day. So, on this particular day, he was skiing with the US Ski Team. They’d come in the day before and asked me if the President could ski with them the next day.

So we set it up and he was very happy to do that. And, they were coming down Black Diamond and it was an icy area and, sure enough, he slipped and fell within camera view. The next day, that picture was on the front of the New York Times. The subtext was ‘President’s a bumbler’ and so forth. And here he was skiing at Black Diamond with the US Ski Team; fell; probably wasn’t the only person who fell that day, and it winds up on the front page of the Times. And, the other time, they got him in Poland when he landed in a rainstorm and was coming down the steps of the plane and slipped. So, of course, that picture was on the front of the papers. I think he was probably frustrated by the fact that the press was pretty petty in publishing pictures like that which had no bearing on policy or the country in any way.

Smith: I’ve always wondered how he felt. I mean, the whole caricature that was built up. People forget, Saturday Night Live went on the air in 1975. It was a real sea change in a lot of ways about what was seen as humorous, including the White House. The fact that Ron Nessen would go on the show, too. He knew what a great athlete he’d been. He used to say later on, “Playing football was good practice for this because there are 100,000 people in the stands who are critics, and you’re the only one out there who’s actually playing.” But you wonder if it got to him.

Goodwin: I don’t know that it really got to him. I think that he always struck me as being comfortable in the job and felt that he was capable of doing the job.

Smith: And, above all, one senses, comfortable in his own skin.

Goodwin: He was, and I never really heard him criticize people when there was plenty of room for some people to be criticized, people who did not serve him well. But I never heard him really criticize – other than just one person – even when
he let some people go from his cabinet for good reason, he never really was
critical of them. He just said, “Well, we needed to make a change.”

Smith: I only heard him speak disparagingly about two people and the worst epithet
he could come up with was, “He’s a bad man.”

Goodwin: Yeah.

Smith: That was the worst he could do. One was John Dean and one was Gordon
Liddy. He really looked for the good in people. Someone described him as
Eisenhower without the medals. That kind of middle of the road, middle
American, basically optimistic—

Goodwin: I couldn’t equate that because I didn’t know President Eisenhower, but he was
certainly very comfortable with who he was and where he was, I thought.

Smith: Did he enjoy the job?

Goodwin: I think he did. I think he was very disappointed when he wasn’t elected when
clearly he should’ve been. And, he would’ve been elected - I think that what
disappointed him most was the fact that Ronald Reagan would not campaign
for him.

Smith: Was that disappointment clear at the time? I heard it afterwards, but was it
voiced in a contemporary way?

Goodwin: Yeah, it was because Reagan made seven appearances that fall. Not once did
he mention President Ford’s name after the convention in 1976. I was sort of
the point man on the convention out there and so I was very involved in that.
Of course, President Ford’s supporters had beaten President Reagan on the
one key issue which would’ve forced the President to name his vice
presidential running mate before people voted. And there would’ve been a
great deal of mischief, possibly, by the Reagan people at the time.

Then, after that, Reagan would never appear for President Ford. I know for a
fact that he was urged repeatedly to go to Ohio and Mississippi and very late
in the campaign to Hawaii and I think it’s important to understand that
President Ford ended up with 240 of 270 electoral votes he needed. They tried to get Reagan numerous times to go to Mississippi and Reagan would never go. The seven appearances Reagan made were on behalf of the Republican Party around the country. Not once during that time did he mention President Ford’s name. If he would’ve gone to Mississippi, where the President lost by, I think, 11,000 votes, that was seven electoral votes. I was in charge of a cross-state motorcade for the President in New Hampshire earlier in the year that was very successful, so they asked me to do one across Ohio to sort of wrap up the campaign about the third or fourth week in October, I think it was. So, I was out there and just had started to organize it when I was called back and told, “The President’s not coming back to Ohio.” The reason was that John Connally had persuaded the campaign people that Ford could win Texas if he went back to Texas. Well, Carter was campaigning up and down the Pedernales River and nobody in the campaign at the White House stood up to John Connally and say, “Listen, Texas is a lost cause, but we still have a chance in Ohio.”

So, they acquiesced to Connally and I was on one trip with the President. In fact, the President went to an Oklahoma game down there and had been to Texas quite a few times. I had, for some reason, drawn all of his trips to Texas, so I was there quite a bit. But nobody could say no to John Connally. So, what happened was, instead of going to Ohio he went to Texas. He lost Texas by 130,000 votes, which was forecast. He lost Ohio by only 11,000 out of four million. That was 26 electoral votes. And he lost Mississippi by only 15,000 votes out of almost 800,000 votes. So, there’s no doubt in my mind that if he’d gone to Ohio and turned down the trip to Texas, he would’ve won Ohio with those 26 electoral votes. And, if Reagan had campaigned for him in Mississippi, he would’ve won Mississippi. No doubt. And, even Hawaii, where he only lost by 7,000 votes, would’ve been enough.

I did President Ford’s last two big rallies. One, the day before the election on Long Island, New York at the Nassau Coliseum, and about a week before that at Fountain Valley, California. Red sent me out there and he said, “Go out there and do a rally.” I said, “Where?” And he said, “Some place in Southern
California. Find it.” So, I drove around for a couple of days and had zero staff, so Red said, “Well, I have this friend who runs a gas station. Go talk to him.” So, anyway, to make a long story short, Fountain Valley is maybe an hour from where President Reagan lived at the time. We wound up with a crowd of 35,000 in what essentially started out to be a parking lot. We had John Wayne there and other people and I made repeated phone calls to Ronald Reagan’s office to get him to come down there and they turned me down every single time. Reagan would not appear with President Ford. Flat out would not appear with him after the convention. Not only, as I say this was at Fountain Valley which was only about an hour from where he lived. And, we offered every amenity possible, motorcades and what have you.

But that was sort of an interesting event. We had 35,000 people and John Wayne showed up. John had been imbibing a little bit on the trip down and by the time he got to where we were doing the rally late in the afternoon, John Wayne was having a little trouble standing, so he stayed in his car. Finally, after the President arrived, just before the program was to start where John Wayne was supposed to be the emcee, he pops out of his car like a perfect actor, gets up on stage, does exactly what he’s supposed to do without a hint of there having been a problem.

Smith: Probably not the first time in his career he was called upon to hit his marks.

Goodwin: Yeah. And then we left and the President was going up to Los Angeles to do a media event. Wayne wound up in the President’s limousine. So as we’re heading up to the freeway, somebody called me and said, “We have Mr. Wayne in the president’s limousine. We need to make arrangements to get him to his house.” So, to make a long story short, I got somebody who had a car to follow the motorcade and just before they got to the freeway, I called Kaiser and said, “Pull into that gas station.” So, the motorcade comes in this gas station. The president’s limousine is there with the flags. John Wayne gets out of the president’s limousine. There were a couple people there pumping gas who were just wide-eyed at this. John Wayne gets out. He was a big, major figure at that time. He gets out and stands there and the
motorcade takes off and my guy pulls in with his car. There’s John Wayne standing momentarily at this guy’s gas station by himself by the freeway. So, I think, quite clearly, had Ronald Reagan campaigned for President Ford, he would’ve been elected.

Smith: You were at the convention?

Goodwin: I was. I was there for six weeks doing the planning for it.

Smith: How bitter was it?

Goodwin: I’m not sure that I saw any real bitterness because I was in charge of all of the logistical operations. I think some people didn’t take the diaphragms out of some of the oppositions telephones on the floor so that they could hear, but they couldn’t speak or that when they’d speak they couldn’t hear it out the other end. At that time, the three networks had booths that were on the balcony, sort of like a VIP suite would be at a stadium today and I do recall a couple people getting up there with fishing poles and a sheet that said “Bedtime for Bonzo” and as Huntley-Brinkley were doing their evening news show, this sheet would come down behind them.

Smith: Remember you had the dueling entrances by the wives. You had this sense of constant one-upsmanship.

Goodwin: But that happens all the time. I’d been in charge of presidential debates for a number of cycles and always the wives can’t quite figure out who wants to be the first in for a presidential debate and who wants to be the last in. So, there’s always one-upsmanship everywhere. I do recall that it was difficult to get Reagan to come down to the stage afterwards. We had sort of planned that that would happen, so we knew the logistics of getting him there were not difficult, but he literally had to be coaxed down there on the stage.

Smith: We talked to Stan Anderson.

Goodwin: He ran the convention in ’76.
Smith: He recalls being there in their box making the request from the President and, before he could finish his sentence, he heard the words “Don’t do it, Ronnie”.

Goodwin: Yeah.

Smith: Which, again portends the attitude you described in the fall campaign.

Goodwin: Well, further that night when the decision was made as to whom President Ford’s running mate would be, Reagan entered into that decision in the following way. After that day and evening, I’d been out there going on no sleep for quite a long while, so I wound up about one in the morning in the President’s suite. They were discussing the potential vice presidential running mates. I was not part of the discussion. I was just sitting back on the floor against the wall trying to stay awake because I knew the next morning, at some point, I’d have the responsibility to get everything set up for the media announcement. So, about one o’clock or so, I’m so tired, I left and went to bed. But, at that point, Bob Dole was not even in the discussion. He was one of the five people being discussed, but his name had dropped out and they were focusing elsewhere.

Smith: Was Anne Armstrong’s name in the mix? I know her name was on the list of possibilities, but it’s never been clear whether that was a gesture—

Goodwin: No, she was never one of the final people. The final people were Dole, Ruckelshaus, Connally, and there’s one more. I can’t remember who it is right now.

Smith: Was it Howard Baker?

Goodwin: It could’ve been, but I sort of don’t think it was Howard. I think it was somebody else. But I’ve seen all sorts of lists that were out about it. That’s not to say they weren’t on an original list, but Anne Armstrong was not on the final five.

Smith: Yeah.
Goodwin: When I was in the room that night. So, at seven in the morning, I got a call to set up for the announcement at ten o’clock for the vice president arraignment. I said, “Okay, who is it?” They said, “Dole.” I said, “Dole? He wasn’t even in the discussion when I left about 1:30.” What had happened during the night, they had sent a short list over to the Reagan people. The books all said it went to Reagan, but, of course, Reagan was sound asleep. And they said to probably Nofziger and whoever else - the others - sent back and said that the only person on that list that they would not contest on the floor the next day was Dole. Interestingly enough, President Ford was responsible for Dole even being in the Senate at that time.

The story on that is in 1974 Dole was running against a guy by the name of Doctor [Bill] Roy of Kansas. I had a trip out there with President Ford very late in the campaign, maybe just three or four days before the election. It was a driving rainstorm and a crowd had come to see President Ford appear with Bob Dole. It was a driving rainstorm and these people had stood in the rain for about an hour and so before the President arrived and I said, “Mr. President, this is not a good situation.” He said, “That’s alright. These people have been standing here for an hour in the rain. I can be in the rain.” And he went to that event and there were four or five thousand people there – that’s what they told us, because it was raining so hard we could hardly tell - but Dole was there and that appearance by President Ford was widely credited with pulling Dole across the finish line when he won by a very narrow margin in 1974.

Anyway, back to the convention. The story I got the next morning was that Dole was the only one on the list that the Reagan people wouldn’t contest on the floor the next day. President Ford thought it was important not to have a contest on the floor, and rightly so because nobody could foretell what would happen. And, the last thing you wanted was somebody off the wall being the one the President was forced to run with.

Smith: The second debate with the famous Polish gaffe. Were you there?
Goodwin: No, I was in charge of Bush’s debates in the ’88 primary and the general election ’92 and ’96, but I wasn’t there.

Smith: Did you watch it?

Goodwin: M-hmm. [meaning no]

Smith: Did you have the immediate sinking sensation that some people – by no means everyone – had? There’s grown up this mythology that it was such a decisive factor.

Goodwin: No, I don’t feel it was and I’m quite knowledgeable about Presidential debates. I wrote the debate agreement in 1988 that’s still in effect today. I wrote it from scratch and did all the staging for it. I did all the original staging for it and I know all the details. In 1976, there wasn’t even a written agreement. In 1980, there was a two and a half page agreement. The one I wrote for 1988 was 32-pages and it was the first time anything had ever been put on paper. I’d done all the staging for the primary debates and everything, so after that, after President Ford, I was very involved with Presidential debates. But I’ve looked back and have seen that debate a number of times and I don’t think it rose to the level of what the media portrayed it as being. And, in fact, you could see some semblance of truth to that.

Smith: It was just an artless way of saying that Eastern Europe refused to accept Soviet domination. I mean, he could’ve turned that to his advantage.

Goodwin: But, what the campaign should’ve done was what Jim Baker did for George Bush in 1988, after the debate we did in Winston-Salem with Governor Dukakis where Bush had made a statement, I think, on abortion possibly being a crime that he had to correct. So, the next morning at seven o’clock, Jim called the press together over in Arlington before they left on a campaign trip and clarified what the President had meant the night before. So, I think if somebody would’ve done the same thing with President Ford, it would’ve ceased to be the issue it was.

Smith: But there was no Jim Baker as we know it at that point.
Goodwin: That’s right.

Smith: And the President was stubborn.

Goodwin: Yeah. I don’t think the President felt that he had made that big of a mistake. But Jim came on the campaign in August. Jim’s a good friend of mine, somebody who I have great admiration for. We worked together a lot over the years. But Jim was sort of new.

Smith: Sure.

Goodwin: He came in August. After the convention, I was in charge of making logistical arrangements back in Vail for the post convention meeting. And they said, “Well, get a room for this guy Jim Baker from the Commerce Department – he’s coming out here and he’s going to take over the campaign.” I think if Jim had been there from the beginning, the President would’ve won.

Smith: That’s interesting. In between, of course, you had that event you put together, literally overnight, in Russell, Kansas with Dole. I know that was a source of some friction.

Goodwin: I was not involved in that because I was out in Vail, but, yeah, I think Senator Dole didn’t understand what was needed at that point or what the media was after. And, of course, then, also, in all fairness, Senator Dole put in virtually no effort for debate preparation with Mondale. They had somebody from Rockefeller’s staff traveling with Dole and he was sort of a briefer, he had the briefing books, which were not done in the way they are done today, but nonetheless, they were there and Dole wouldn’t pay any attention to them. The only time he ever opened them was in Houston in his hotel suite the night before the debate when the press wanted to come in and see him studying for the debate.

When Dole ran for President, I got a call one day from one of the senior guys in his campaign who wanted to know if I would take over the preparation for his debate stuff. And I said, “Well, is he going to work at it or not?” And the
answer was, “Probably not too hard. He’s probably going to sit in his condo
down in Florida and get a suntan,” and so forth. So, I said, “In all fairness, I’d
rather not be involved then, because I know how it should be done.”

Smith: He’s certainly not a lazy guy.

Goodwin: No, but Dole’s reason was that he debated on the floor of the Senate every
day, so he could debate. Well, they’re two entirely different things. Jack
Kemp was the same way. Kemp really wouldn’t work at preparation and he
got sort of mopped up by Gore in St. Petersburg. And Jack was an awfully
nice guy, a bright guy, a very articulate guy who felt he had addressed about
every issue there was to address and wasn’t prepared for the format that you
find at a debate like that - which is unique. You don’t find it anywhere else.
But, that was Dole’s reason. He felt that he’d debated on the floor of the
Senate and that was enough.

Smith: I’ve never asked him, but I’ve often wondered, because he’d had one debate
with Doctor Roy at the end of the campaign and it had not been a pleasant
experience – so I’m just wondering whether that was a factor in some ways—

Goodwin: I don’t think so. My hunch is that he just felt that he was on the floor of the
Senate every day and addressing issues in this direction and that direction.
Then in 1996, I handled the debates for the Commission on Presidential
Debates because I’d done them in ’88 and ’92 for Bush and Janet Brown was
under the weather, so they said I was the only person that the Clinton people
would agree to have come in and run them.

So, I did and the last debate was in a “theater in the round” type of
environment we hadn’t done before. It was in San Diego between Dole and
Clinton. Each candidate had an hour of technical briefing allowed to them
and I’d written that in the original debate agreement back in 1987 and ’88.
And Dole came and spent maybe 20 minutes. Clinton, on the other hand,
spent the entire hour, but the only thing Dole requested was that Mrs. Dole be
out in the audience in his line of sight where he could see her. And, so,
during the entire debate, he sat there and looked at him and she had sort of a
frozen smile on her face because she was trying to get him to smile and to be less serious. So, he sort of felt that he needed to be able to see her. The Clinton people sort of chuckled over that.

So, the fact that he really didn’t care where the cameras were, he didn’t care where the tapings were. There was a line that the candidates were not supposed to walk past or to cross forth and, of course, Bill Clinton is a master of that and he sort of takes over the debate in certain ways. So, he just sort of monopolized the debate, not by speaking so much, but in the way that he presents himself. And Dole didn’t do well in that debate, but I think that was lack of preparation as well.

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

Goodwin: Not too much, no. Only at Vail when we were there.

Smith: They loved Vail, didn’t they?

Goodwin: They did. They did. And the President immediately relaxed when he got there and he loved to walk to all of his places, the people he knew - just liked to stroll around Vail. And back then, Vail was not nearly what it is today, of course. You could go from point A to point B in five or ten minutes by walking. And he loved to go out and ski every day in the morning and then he’d work on papers in the afternoon and then he’d always go to a reception or dinner at night. One night, we were at the Ford’s house and he called my wife over and he said, “I just wanted you to know how much I appreciate your letting your husband be out with me so much. I just wanted to thank you for letting me have him for the last year.” She thought that it was very nice of him to say that.

Then, back in those days, security wasn’t what it is today. If I’d leave the White House grounds, for example, at lunch and I’d come back to the White House complex and I’d see some nice family looking through the fence and, if the President wasn’t in residence, I could escort them in because of my White House pass in to see the Oval Office. Of course, you couldn’t do anything
like that today. That was just sort of the environment that was there at the time.

Smith: Did it change at all because of the two assassination attempts?

Goodwin: Well, I was with him on one of them.

Smith: Were you?

Goodwin: Yeah. And, yes, I think it did. Both occurred in California just weeks apart. The first one, of course, you know the story of Larry Buendorf jamming his hand in the hammer of Squeaky Fromm’s gun and saving the President’s life. The second time was at the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco when I was with him. He was about ready to leave the hotel. The police had sawhorses on both sides of the street and there was quite a crowd on both sides. About forty-five minutes before the President was to leave, the Secret Service came to me and they said, “We just don’t like the look of the crowd. Would you ask the President not to go work the crowd and shake hands with the crowd but just to wave?” So, I went up to the President’s suite and told him what the request was and he said, “That’s fine.”

So, that probably saved the President’s life because, normally, what he would do would be to walk around the front of the limousine, walk over to the crowd, and shake hands. Had he done so at that time, he would’ve walked right into the bullet, probably. We walked out of the hotel and I guess I was in the news pictures with him because my wife didn’t know anything about it until somebody from the Secret Service called her and said, “Your husband’s safe. He’s on the plane.” But the President and I walked out in front of the hotel and just then you could hear a sort of pop, pop, pop, and I thought, “Gosh that must make the Secret Service nervous when they hear firecrackers going off like that.” Almost instantaneously, of course, they shoved the President in the limousine. And most of what is written is correct except that I jumped in the Control Car and we raced out to the airport in about fifteen minutes in what was normally a forty-five minute drive.
But, we had no radio contact because, at that time, under those conditions the procedure was not to have any radio contact. So, we didn’t know whether the President was dead or alive or what while we were racing out to the airport with the truncated motorcade. The driver of our car had the local radio on and the report on the local radio was that a ‘good-looking man in the Presidential Party had been shot, so, of course, there was some gallows humor and David Kennerly and some others guessing who that was or who that wasn’t. And Kennerly said, “It couldn’t have been a good looking man because I’m in the car right here.” But everybody suspected it was Rumsfeld. Anyway, we got to the airport and the President was immediately rushed onboard. Of course, Mrs. Ford had flown up from Los Angeles had just arrived at the plane.

Smith: Knowing nothing.

Goodwin: Knowing nothing that had gone on. And, then, as we’re on the plane and flying back across the country, in clear air, just like today, somewhere over Iowa, I guess it was, we hit a downdraft and dropped three or four thousand feet like that.

And for many years, those bullet nicks from Sarah Jane Moore’s gun were still visible in front of the St. Francis Hotel and may still be.

Smith: Did you think at the end of the ’76 campaign that you had caught up and were going to win?

Goodwin: Yeah, I sort of thought so, but again, I was out every day and I was working fourteen, sixteen, eighteen hour days. When I finished the Fountain Valley rally, I took the red eye to New York and started doing the last big rally at Nassau Coliseum – we had about four days to do that – so I was so involved in doing things day to day that I didn’t have a lot of time to think about the campaign. But, I could see the crowds and I could see the reaction the President was getting from the crowds and it was very positive.

Smith: Could you see that picking up? I mean, was there a trajectory to the fall campaign?
Goodwin: Yeah, I thought there definitely was and when we did the cross-state motorcade that took twelve hours across New Hampshire, the crowds were everywhere. In fact, we arrived in Petersburg(sic) an hour late in the evening and there was a huge crowd there waiting and had been waiting for an hour in a slight drizzle. But, during the campaign, all I can say is the events where I was, there was a very strong reception for him. And at Nassau Coliseum, I think Joe Margiotta was the county chairman at the time, sensed that as well. Joe ran things pretty well.

Smith: That was a tradition in Nassau.

Goodwin: Yeah. And I said, “Joe, we need to do this the right way.” And, in about three days, the place was packed and very enthusiastic and the President felt good coming back on the plane after that event. It wasn’t until well after midnight on election night until Ohio came in that the President really realized he probably wasn’t going to win because, I think, all along he thought he was going to win Mississippi and win Ohio. Hawaii was a surprise because it was so close. I think probably in retrospect, they probably might’ve gone out there and done a little more because I think he only lost by about 7,000 votes out there. But, you know in Ohio, what’s interesting is, while he lost by only 11,000 votes, Lester Maddox got 15,000 votes. The President lost by 11,000 votes, but there were 98,000 votes for others, including 15,000 for Lester Maddox, and I’m convinced some of those 98,000 could have been brought over to President Ford.

Smith: We’ve been told it took him awhile to bounce back.

Goodwin: I think it did. I don’t know if he ever bounced back.

Smith: Really?

Goodwin: I mean, later, after he left the White House, he was fine, but I think the morning of the Inauguration – and I was sort of responsible for the Inaugural planning to the extent that he was involved in it – he held an informal coffee at the White House for his Cabinet and senior staff and that’s where he gave the Cabinet chairs - to the members of his Cabinet each having a small plaque
on the back with their name and date of service on it - and so forth. He was sort of nostalgic at that time, but I think, by then, probably, he’d come to grips with it. But I think he felt that he was going to win.

Smith: He was a very competitive guy.

Goodwin: Yeah.

Smith: We’ve been told a wonderful line - right after the election he’d go around - obviously in a small circle - and said, “I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer.”

Goodwin: Yeah, I don’t think he ever thought he was going to lose the election. But if you have time, I’ll tell you the story about how he met Mao Tse Tung unexpectedly.

Smith: Yeah.

Goodwin: I was in Peking for about a month. The U.S. Liaison Office had about twelve people in it, so initially, every meeting that I would go to, Bush would go with me. We became very good friends. So, while we were there, we knew the President was going to meet with Deng Hsiao-Ping (?) and others, but we had no idea. The Chinese were very secretive about who was going to meet President Ford for his arrival at the airport in Peking. So, we could never get that information from them and I sent many cables back that said, “Information not forthcoming.” And George Bush couldn’t get it either. The Chinese were waiting to decide at what level they wanted to receive President Ford and to what degree of seriousness they wanted to treat his visit.

So, the last several days before the Presidential party arrived, I asked my Chinese counterpart on my own, because nobody asked me to do this, in regards to the meeting if he thought the President was going to see Chairman Mao. We knew that Cho en Lai was sick and had cancer and was in the hospital at that time, but nobody quite knew what Mao’s situation was. We knew that Mao had three residences, but where he was, nobody particularly knew. So, the answer I got back was, “We don’t think that it is possible for
him to meet Chairman Mao.” So, I sent a cable back to Cheney or Red or whoever it was and said, “This is the response I have.” And the day before the Presidential party arrived, it was the same answer. “We don’t think this is possible.” The President arrived at noon on a Monday and left at noon on a Friday and Monday came and went and Tuesday, during the day, I asked my counterpart again if he thought that such a meeting might happen and he said, “We don’t think that’s possible.” Well, Kissinger kept saying to Cheney that there was no way that the President was going to meet Mao on this trip and that was the information that Kissinger had been given before the President left Washington.

So, on Wednesday morning, I’m sitting having breakfast on one side of the small dining area in the Guest House where the President was staying and Kissinger was on the other side. Kissinger says, “Come over and sit with me and then you can tell your wife you had breakfast with the Secretary of State.” Kissinger was asking about the rest of the schedule and I said, “But I just have a feeling there might be a meeting with Mao Tse Tung at some point.” And he said, “No, it’s not going to happen.” The next morning, Thursday, Mrs. Ford and Susan had gone to the Great Wall for a trip. The President had no plans in the morning and had a schedule in the afternoon. That night, there was a scheduled farewell banquet, at the Great Hall of the People. About 11:15 a.m., my Chinese counterpart came up to me and said, “Get your President ready. He’s going to go see Chairman Mao.” “But,” he said, “he cannot take anybody with him.” So, I go and immediately tell Cheney and the President and the President says, “Fine.” We lined up the limo and the follow car and, of course, made arrangements for people that normally traveled with the President – cut a few people out – so, I went to my Chinese counterpart and I said, ‘We’re ready.” And he looked out and said, “What are all these cars here for?” I explained to him and he said, “No. I told you only the President can go.” He said, “Mrs. Ford can go and Susan can go and George Bush can go and Kissinger can go. Those are the only people who can go.” And I said, “Well, Susan and Mrs. Ford are at the Great Wall and he said, “No, they’re not. They’re on their way back here and will be back here in a
few minutes,” which was interesting because, in all the trips I made to China then and since, I’ve never see a Chinese use a radio, but anyway Mrs. Ford arrived a few minutes later.

Smith: Probably one of the few times in her life when she was on time.

Goodwin: Yeah, right. So, they said, “No Secret Service can go. The President’s doctor can’t go. Your photographer can’t go. Your interpreter can’t go.” Nancy Tang who was the official Chinese interpreter for the President was there. They said, “None of your White House Communications people can go. Nobody can go except the five people.” And they had this Russian Zil lined up for the five of them to ride in. So, I go back in and tell Dick and I said, “These are the terms. Nobody can go” and I ran down the list again. The President was standing there and he said this meeting was too important not to happen. He said, “We’ll do it on their terms.” So, they take off and for forty-five minutes, nobody in the U.S. delegation – nor the Secret Service - knew exactly where the President was. The Chinese knew where he was, of course, and we had the communications car trail the abbreviated motorcade of just a few cars until they were stopped from going into the Forbidden City, which is the residence that Mao was using at that time, that particular day.

Smith: Right in downtown Beijing.

Goodwin: Yeah.

Smith: I mean, the Forbidden City is right off of Tiananmen Square.

Goodwin: Yeah, but it’s a huge area in there. But he had three residences and nobody knew which one he was at. So, then, after about forty-five minutes, Mrs. Ford and Susan were escorted out.

Smith: By all accounts, the Chairman fawned on Susan.

Goodwin: I’m not sure, but he may have. Of course, they sat in these Chinese chairs with the armrests up like this and, at the end of the meeting, George Bush told me that after Susan and Mrs. Ford left Kissinger and Bush stayed with the President. At the end of such meetings, Mao, usually just sat and whoever he
was meeting with got up and left. But Mao had his two medical attendants help him up out of his chair and walked to the door with President Ford, which was a show of great respect for him to have done that. So, only after Mrs. Ford and Susan came back did anybody really know where they had been and where the President still was. So, for about forty-five minutes, there was no contact with the President.

Smith: It’s hard to tell in the pictures, obviously, but Mao was coherent?

Goodwin: Yeah. Yeah. He had several diseases at the time, Parkinson’s disease and several others, but according to what George Bush said, he was quite conversant and carrying on a conversation. So, it was sort of an interesting time.

During that trip was when President Ford asked George Bush to come back and be director of the Central Intelligence Agency. The Bushes would’ve much preferred to have stayed there for another year. As a matter of fact, when they first got there, Barbara was telling me when they walked their dog, they would attract hoards of people because people thought their dog was a cat. They’d never seen a dog since the revolution. People had eaten dogs and so a lot of people had grown up having never seen a dog. When I first went there in ’75, just walking on the street, people would come up to us and feel our long coats because they’d never seen anything like that. The Chinese people could only wear the two different colored types of pajamas at the time – light grey or dark grey. Also - you had to be invited to go into the Peoples Republic of China at that time. You couldn’t just fly in. I think Air France had one flight a week there or something like that. Arrangements had to be made well in advance for those of us to go to the PRC. President Ford had to be “officially” invited as well.

Smith: You know, Nelson Rockefeller went to his grave convinced that Don Rumsfeld engineered that whole shift that not only brought Bush back home, but deep-sixed him, politically, in ’76. Because, remember, one of the conditions of him being confirmed at the CIA – a job he didn’t really want in
the first place – was that he would explicitly rule himself out of the vice presidency in ’76.

Goodwin: Yeah, but what happened was Bush could not get confirmed by the Senate committee the former Chairman of the Republican Party. The Democrats were using that as sort of a shield to not vote for Bush as Director of Central Intelligence. So, Bush asked me to help him get ready for the hearings and blah-blah-blah, because they lived just near here in Palisades at the time. So, one day, he came in and he said, “They’re just not going to confirm me unless I say that I’m not going to be on the ticket.” And he might’ve been, I’d say, first on Ford’s list at the time. But, anyway, he went in to see the President and the President reluctantly took the action that you suggested and then Bush was confirmed unanimously by the Senate committee.

Then, I remember going to Bush’s house the day after Carter was sworn in and we’re sitting there drinking a beer and Barbara’s packing up their stuff to go back to Texas. And I said, “I hope you’ll run for President some day,” and he said, “I don’t know. You have to have a big ego to do that. I’m going to go back and think about it.” So, then, later that spring, he started calling me to ask if I would meet him when he came to Washington and drive him to his various meetings. It was just Jim Baker and Margaret Tutwiler down in Houston. He’d call me when he’d fly to DC on Eastern Airlines and I’d meet him and drive him around to the different meetings he was going to. He was starting to put things together for his campaign then. But, no, he didn’t want to come back from China. He would’ve preferred to have stayed there certainly.

Smith: Did Ford have a sense of humor?

Goodwin: Yeah, he had a great sense of humor. Oh, my gosh, did he ever. He had a sense of humor and he used it in his speeches. He had a self-deprecating type of humor that pulled people to him. He was always laughing on the plane about something. Probably a good example of the President’s humor was, on one occasion, he was invited to play in the Jackie Gleason Golf Tournament in Inverray in Florida and he played on the first day with Jackie Gleason—
Smith: By all accounts, he was a piece of work.

Goodwin: Yeah. Gleason, Hope, the President, Jack Nicklaus, and a guy from Long Island who had won a lottery to play with them. There were huge crowds everywhere. Gleason and Hope, at that time, had a $10,000 bet where the loser would pay the winner’s charity. They were clowning around that entire time. The President loved it and Nicklaus, through all this, shot the course record. And the President just loved to be in events like that. I did another golf tournament like that with him at Pinehurst when they dedicated the World Golf Hall of Fame when he played with Gene Sarazen among others. Ben Hogan walked around with the President but wouldn’t play. Nicklaus or Palmer did. Sarazen and one other – I forget who it was – they took turns playing with the President. On one occasion the President hit his ball into the rough and he’s about ready to hit his second shot when Hogan says, “Mr. President, I wouldn’t hit that shot. I’d move your ball, because it’s sitting on a twig. You can’t see it.” He said, “I don’t want you to hurt your wrist.” And you couldn’t see the twig with the naked eye, but Hogan knew it was there. Hogan could see it. And, sure enough, it was there. So, the President did what Hogan suggested.

So, anyway, the night that he played in the golf tournament at Inverray in Florida with Gleason and Hope in the tournament. Jack Nicklaus held a reception for the President and the only golfer who showed up for the reception of all these pro golfers competing in the tournament was Nicklaus. Not a single other pro attended. Of course, that wouldn’t be true today, I don’t think. Many of the golfers would show up for somebody like that today.

On the trip to Vladivostok for the meeting with Brezhnev in 1974, no westerners had been in Vladivostok for over 25 years because it was their only warm water port and they had a lot of their electronic trawlers there and they had other stuff going on in that area. And whenever we flew into the Soviet Union, we would stop at some point and pick up a Russian pilot and navigator on the advance trip and usually they would just sit in the compartment behind the cockpit and smoke cigarettes.
On this particular occasion, we picked them up in Japan and when we got over the coast of the Soviet Union, they took over the plane with our pilots moving out of the cockpit. We went down to what I was told later was about 6,000 feet and we would go a ways that way and go a ways this way and we had no idea where we were going to land. Of course, the technology didn’t exist that exists today, so people couldn’t follow us. The only way people knew where we were when we landed was for someone to radio back our coordinates. So, there was a young guy from the CIA who was on the plane who had a stopwatch and every time we’d go this way, he’d time it and then we’d turn that way and he’d time it and so forth. Then, all of a sudden, we landed on this sort of grass runway between these huge mounds which had MIGS in them, we found out later.

But that young CIA agent was Bob Gates. So, only then did we know where we were. We were taken to this, I guess it was supposed to be a vacation area for Soviets, but it was like a sanitarium, they called it. It was a series of buildings and we were there for a couple of weeks. It was difficult to get cables out, but we were able to do that and the meeting was always in flux. Nobody knew quite what was going to be on the agenda. The President stopped in Alaska on the way over and got this huge fur coat, which he subsequently gave to Brezhnev, and a couple of nights before Brezhnev and the President arrived, we had a huge ice storm. The temperature all the time we were there was never above zero. We had this huge ice storm, and as soon as it stopped, the Russians sent out about a hundred soldiers in tattered coats and with some very primitive pick axes and they spent all night long and all the next day chipping away at the frozen ice on the walkways so that when the Presidents arrived, they would have dry walkways. All night long, we could hear these poor guys out there chipping away at the ice.

In any event, the meetings happened and we were in the motorcade going back to the train that was supposed to take us back to where the plane was located. All of a sudden the motorcade just takes off in an unplanned direction. It’s about six or seven in the evening and starting to get dark and somebody in the Control Car calls me on the radio and says, “Where are we
headed?” And I said, “I don’t have a clue.” They said, “Well, aren’t we supposed to be going back to the airport?” And I said, “Yeah, but we’re not in charge of this motorcade, so we’re going wherever they take us.” And I said, “I don’t know where that is.” And, truly, we had no idea. Well, what the Soviets wanted to do at that time was to show the President downtown Vladivostok and so they were taking him on a circuitous tour. But nobody had mentioned that to us and it never came up in any conversation and the President was scratching his head wanting to know where we were going as well. But he felt very good about, whatever transpired at his meeting with Brezhnev, he felt was very positive. And he was very pleased with the outcome of the meeting.

Smith: A couple of quick things. In retrospect, were they too slow to awake to the danger that Reagan posed? Did they underestimate either the likelihood of Reagan running or the threat that he would pose when he did run?

Goodwin: Probably because the President had won - what was it - nine primaries in a row before he ran in North Carolina. And I think they were a little surprised that Reagan won in North Carolina. Until that point, I think they thought it was pretty smooth sailing. But, again, the campaign operation had been through two chairman and neither one was very good. One of them had health problems, also, but there was no strong leadership like there was at the top of Nixon’s campaign operation. So it was just sort of a headless campaign until about Labor Day when Jim Baker took over.

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

Goodwin: Yes, it was at one of the Ford dinners maybe ten years ago, something like that.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Goodwin: I think as a president who brought stability to the country, who brought direction to the country, and I think it’s unfortunate that he wasn’t elected because, had he been, I think the country would’ve certainly been strengthened economically. I think he had a good sense of what our position...
was internationally and was moving in a position of strength in that area at that particular time. Of course, if he’d been elected, we probably wouldn’t have had Bill Clinton in office. We probably wouldn’t have had George Bush in office. Who knows what the direction the country would be in today because none of that would’ve happened, probably.

Smith: And, quite possibly, the Reagan presidency would never have occurred.

Goodwin: Yeah, that’s very true. Very true. The transfer of a few thousand votes in Ohio and Mississippi would have really changed the course of the country to a great extent.

Smith: Last thing. Did you ever see him out at Rancho Mirage afterwards?

Goodwin: No. I didn’t ever see him out there, but I saw him a couple of times back here and he was always appreciative of what everybody had done for him. But, I think, of the Presidents I’ve worked for, he was as strong as any of them and knew what he wanted to do, was comfortable doing it, was not caught up in the Presidency in the sense that he was overwhelmed by it. It was a job that he wound up being in a position to do and he did it very well as long as he was there. I think it’s unfortunate that he wasn’t elected because I think people would’ve had a much different view of him in another four years.
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Smith: First of all, thank you very much for doing this. I guess the obvious place to begin is the beginning – how did your paths first cross?

Hynes: He became the Minority Leader right after the 1964 election, I think, in December at the caucus of the Republicans. I had just come to Washington. Clarence Brown, Sr., who was a ranking member of the House Rules Committee, hired me to replace his counsel who had left the committee. I was Minority counsel, and I was working strictly with committee business for a few years. But, of course, as you know, the House Rules Committee is like the unanimous consent agreements between the Senate leadership about how to organize the body, how to set the debate, rules with respect to amendments and whatnot. The Rules Committee does that in the House of Representatives.

Smith: And who was the chairman of the committee then?

Hynes: Howard W. Smith of Virginia.

Smith: Old line, southern gentleman, segregationist?

Hynes: Yes. When he didn’t like being pressed by the leadership, he would go down to his country place in Broad Run, Virginia and be unavailable until he could work something out with the leadership. But anyway, when the Rules Committee would be on the floor, as they were for all the major debates, offering their resolution which would set the time of time, the hours of debate, how much time each side had, what amendments, if anything, were authorized or not authorized. And really controlled the debate. That resolution was always the first order of business, and the leadership was always down there on both sides. The Speaker was in the chair as the debate started. So Ford began to see me and that was true for the next several years.
It was after the '68 election when Nixon was elected that I first started working with Mr. Ford. The way it happened was interesting because the Voting Rights Act needed to be reauthorized. It was originally a five year pact done in 1964(?). It was time to reauthorize it. And Bill McCulloch of Ohio, the senior Republican on the Judiciary Committee, he and Manny Cellars both thought that they wanted to do just a straight reauthorization of the existing bill with minor changes. The Nixon administration, led by Attorney General John Mitchell, had substantial changes they wanted to make in the act. And therefore, the Minority staff and the ranking Minority member of the Judiciary Committee were working at cross interests to the administration. And that meant that Mr. Ford was going to have to not only open the debate, but he was going to have to lead the debate on the administration’s bill.

Smith: Was it fair to say that the general thrust of the administration changes would be to weaken the bill, given the famous Southern Strategy of the Nixon White House?

Hynes: I would say it this way: more than I would say weakened, I would say that the bill provided for more freedom, if you will, if certain standards were met. They were different standards than the existing law, but it was still requirements. And they weren’t letting any of the states off the hook, but they were changing some of the requirements. It certainly, from a Democratic standpoint, weakened the bill.

Smith: Okay.

Hynes: No doubt about it, but I don’t think it would be fair to say - the administration bill still had some relatively stiff requirements throughout the South. So anyway, what happened was, Mr. Ford was going to have to do the debate and he did not have the floor staff in the sense that parliamentarian, legislative counsel – the kind of staff the Democrats basically had. The Republican staff just didn’t exist, it wasn’t authorized by the Congress. In effect, the Democrats didn’t have any money for us to do it.
So anyway, Ford knowing and having seen me at my work, asked my boss if I could help him, staff him a little bit on that. And I had about two weeks, ten days to learn the Voting Rights Act. And we survived. He did a good job of covering up what I didn’t know and wasn’t able to help him with. At that point he wanted me to spend more and more time.

Smith: Where did he come down? Now there’s this dispute between, in effect, the White House and McCulloch.

Hynes: There wasn’t a dispute. They were on different sides. McCulloch liked the existing law. They weren’t fighting about it. McCulloch said, “This is what I’m going to do.” And the White House didn’t like it, but Bill McCulloch was going to do it.

Smith: Really?

Hynes: And that’s all there was to it.

Smith: And Ford went along with that?

Hynes: Ford was not going to tell somebody who believed that something was right, that he was ordered to do something that he didn’t want to do. That was not Jerry’s way. He would never do that.

Smith: Okay. Did you have a sense of Ford’s own views about Civil Rights and race?

Hynes: Quite frankly, at the time I was so busy trying to catch up with it that all I was trying to do was make sure I didn’t leave him empty-handed, so to speak. I think that he was – I can’t say in my own mind whether I thought he was doing what the administration wanted him to do as leader, or whether it was something he cared for personally. I don’t have any recollection of how I felt about that.

So we worked on that bill. I was down there more and more helping him at times, and then the situation arose that - at this point Howard Smith had retired and Bill Colmer of Pascagoula was the chairman of the Rules
Committee. And his chief of staff was Trent Lott, and Trent and I became pretty good friends because the Republicans and Mr. Colmer had a lot of the same views about policy and things like that. So we worked fairly closely together. And he had someone he wanted to hire, but there was no staff space on the Rules Committee or in the office. There was money around, but there was no rule. So he and I cut a deal; we hired on as Minority staff on the Rules Committee with the money that Mr. Colmer had available, we hired a person that Mr. Lott wanted to have on the staff, it was a good friend of his. And it was Jonalyn Collin(?) who did a marvelous job. She was a great help to me. She basically handled a lot of the work of the Rules Committee on a day to day basis, which freed me up to spend more time on the floor with Mr. Ford.

So then a few years later when Mr. Nixon got himself in the Watergate problem and Mr. Ford was nominated, I was just one of the people he wanted to have on his staff - temporary staff, I guess you’d call it – to prepare him for the hearings. Because, as you know, the Constitution requires if the vice president is disabled or unable to do the work he was supposed to be doing, and Mr. Agnew had resigned because of the problems he had from his days as governor of Maryland, it was just easy for me to get John Linn working up on doing the Rules Committee. I went and worked with Mr. Ford on the confirmation hearings, along with Benton Becker, former congressman Bill Kramer, and Dick Haber. We were the counsel. And the requirement of the Constitution being that you had to have a two-thirds vote in both Houses meant that there were going to be two very serious hearings, and in both Houses you had a situation where the Democrats were the majority. So you could expect for the hearings to be tough and maybe some problems on the floor.

Smith: What was it about Elizabeth Holtzman? Did she stand out?

Hynes: Yes. I think I know the issue you mean, and it’s a good story because it was a situation where the hearings in the House, as you might expect, were more confrontational than they were in the Senate, just by the nature of the bodies.
And some of the Democrats in the House wanted to kind of rough up Mr. Ford a bit, I would say.

Smith: Well, Bella Abzug wanted more than that. She thought there was a path through which she sees we could get the presidency.

Hynes: Carl Albert was the Speaker of the House, at the time that Agnew resigned. If Nixon had had a heart attack, he would have become president.

Smith: Right.

Hynes: And in no uncertain terms, he made sure to his Democratic colleagues in the Judiciary Committee – he was not going to be seen as a usurper of the presidency. He did not want to do that. He was a man of the House, he was a man who really cared a great deal about the system and wasn’t going to have any shenanigans going on, so to speak. And he spoke to them rather firmly, I am told. I was obviously not there – but I’m told he was pretty firm about it. But nonetheless, the hearings were somewhat difficult and Ms. Holtzman was certainly one of the more difficult individuals.

One of the issues that came up that she raised was how could Mr. Ford, on his congressman’s salary, afford to own a ski chalet, as she called it, in Vail, Colorado. And we knew this might come up. One of my jobs was to work with the staff, and I went through all the records of who gave him money in the way of campaign contributions. And what was his voting record – was there any indication to show connections between money coming in for the campaign, and him doing something. And we were very, very careful to make sure that we knew everything; and if we had any questions we’d sit down with the Congressman with a list of questions which he had to answer for. So we knew what the answers were and what he was going to say.

Well, he had the perfect answer for that question about the ski chalet when Ms. Holtzman asked it. And he said to her, he said, “Well, Ms. Holtzman, I have one son in college and I have two kids in high school, one about to go into high school, and they’ve all worked. All the summers they’ve always had
jobs and worked and made money and have their own bank accounts. And we took a vacation out to Vail and had a wonderful time. We just loved it. And the kids loved it and they loved to ski, and the family had a conference and we made a deal. And the family – the kids emptied their bank accounts and made the down payment, and Betty and I would pay the mortgage.” It stopped the questioning immediately. That’s exactly the way they did it.

And then, of course, Mr. Ford became vice president and I did not go to the White House. At about the time Agnew resigned, or maybe a month earlier, Mr. Ford had said privately to his own key staff, that he was not going to run again. He was going to retire. And NBC came looking for me, and I had just joined the NBC staff literally a week or two when Mr. Agnew resigned. Mr. Ford was named in another week or two, and I was asked to join the staff temporarily, and NBC said please, go do it. So I went back to NBC where I had a nice career for many years.

I didn’t have a great desire to go to the White House. I don’t know why. I think I was so new at NBC that I was just getting my feet wet and it was interesting work. A network was a very interesting place to work in those days because, as you know, there were only three real sources of national news; it was NBC, CBS, and ABC at night – John Chancellor, Walter Cronkite, Harry Reasoner. People like that who were really giants of the news business, and were true wonderfully qualified journalists. They had reporters all over the world, in the major cities. They had people on Capitol Hill. And it was the place America stopped between six o’clock and seven o’clock or so to catch whoever was their favorite network and their favorite anchorman. And I really enjoyed it. So I went back with ABC.(?)

Smith: Let me back up and ask you, if you could sort of paint in the background of Congress, which was a very different institution in those days. What was it about Jerry Ford that made him a successful leader on Capitol Hill? What were the qualities that he brought to the place?

Hynes: Well, first of all, he had a boiling point that was very hard to get to.
Smith: Really? Because we’ve heard about his temper.

Hynes: He had one. But it was hard to get him there. So he was a kind of a leader who listened a lot more than he talked. The example of Bill McCulloch on the Voting Rights Bill is a good example. He could have said to McCulloch, “You are the ranking member, you have got to go and support the Nixon bill and you have no choice in the matter. If you want to keep your job as ranking member, you’ve got to do it.” He didn’t do that. He looked for another way to get the job done, to support the Nixon bill.

Smith: Is it safe to say he was unlike LBJ in that regard?

Hynes: Definitely. Hugely different. He was the polar opposite. But that didn’t mean that he wasn’t a strong leader, because he was. He was man who led more by persuasion and an arm around your shoulder and say, “I know it’s tough, but we’ve got to do this.” And he did a lot more of that than he did yelling at people and pushing them around. He was likeable. He was a former football player, and an all-American. He was a bright guy, he was in the middle third of his class in Yale at law school, at the same time he was an assistant football coach, and he kept his grades up and did very well. He was a smart man, he was a good man, and he liked to tell a story, he liked a good joke. He liked to sit and have a drink with his friends. He liked to be around people and they liked to be around him. And that, I think, is as much as anything else, why he was a good leader.

Smith: And one senses that he was as effective, maybe as popular, on the other side of the aisle as his own.

Hynes: Oh Tip O’Neill and he were famously friends. And there are some wonderful stories about that.

Smith: Can you think of one?

Hynes: I’ll tell you one because it’s typical of both of them. They both loved to play golf, as you know. One day they were out playing golf together on a holiday
or something, and they finished their golf game, they had a drink and they were both walking out to the parking lot where their cars were. As you know, the Speaker had a car and the Minority Leader had a car, and they both had a driver and he was basically a security man, just to make sure that the leadership of the Congress had at least some modicum of protection. These were before the days when anything had ever happened. Nothing had ever happened on the Hill. But they were walking out arm in arm, and Jerry said, “Well, Tip, I’m going to go home and grill out some steaks tonight with Betty and the kids and relax a little bit. What are you going to do?” He said, “Jerry, my friend, I’m going to go back to my office and figure out a way to blank you tomorrow in the forum.” And they both laughed, got in their cars, and that’s how they operated. They were on different sides of the fence, and they were both true to their responsibilities on their team with their members and pushing what they could, but Jerry was always able to get something out of Tip that Tip could give. There’s always something you can give on either side. And Jerry found ways to get as much as you could get from the leadership on the Democratic side because he had a relationship with them that was a very trusting and personal relationship.

Smith: The older I get the more I come to the conclusion that as important as ideology is, nothing is more important in politics than generational factors. And each generation looks back at the previous one. Clearly the Gingrich generation thought Bob Michael was too accommodating – and I’m sure that generation looked back and thought, “why are we just taking the crumbs from the table?” But the fact is, particularly in the ‘60s, this was a profoundly Democratic country, Goldwater had just suffered a historic defeat, Ford was only there out of a certain desperation…

Hynes: There were like 140 Republicans in the House, out of 435. Now, with numbers like that, you are not going to win a whole lot of major victories. You are just not. And even after the Nixon victory in ’68, the Republicans, I think, had a big victory in ’66 – I think about 45-50 members came in. So they were back up to a pretty good number. But still, they were less than 200
members out of 435, and although they had the White House, they didn’t have the Congress.

Smith: Tell me about the people around Ford. There was this popular notion, particularly when he got to the vice presidency, even in the White House, that there was this sort of “Grand Rapids set,” said with a certain degree of condescension, as if these people weren’t quite up to the task. Did you have a sense of the people around him?

Hynes: Not his personal staff, I knew them.

Smith: Did you know Bob Hartmann?

Hynes: Very well.

Smith: Tell us about Hartmann.

Hynes: Bob and I spent a lot of time together.

Smith: Hartmann is very important, and in some ways a polarizing figure.

Hynes: If there was such a thing as Mr. Ford’s enforcer, so to speak, about the way he wanted to get things done, the messages he wanted to get spread out, Bob was that person. And I knew Bob reasonably well, we spent a good bit of time together. We spent more time together as I worked more with Ford, obviously. And I always found him to be very smart, good judgment, got hot – he could get very angry at people – and then the next day he’d be fine with you. It was over. But he tried to make sure that Jerry was protected. He knew everything that Jerry had to know and made sure that Jerry knew it right away.

Smith: One senses that sometimes he protected him from himself. The most famous instance, of course, is when Haig is playing games about a pardon.

Hynes: Those were days when I wasn’t in the White House.
Smith: That’s a historic example. Again, I don’t mean to sound condescending – but the notion of ‘good ol Jerry’ suggests that he saw the good in everyone, which is an admirable trait, but maybe a problematic one in this town. Did Hartmann see his role as filling some of that gap?

Hynes: Well, first I’ll say this: Jerry was ‘good ol Jerry,’ but he wasn’t push over ‘good ol Jerry.’ He wasn’t a pushover at all. He had very strong views about things that he cared about, and he cared about a lot of things. When you become president you’ve got to care an awful lot about a whole lot of things that come to your desk. And I don’t have the feeling at all that Jerry got pushed around very much. And Hartmann certainly wouldn’t have let him get pushed around. I know that he and Mr. Rumsfeld never got along, and the two of them were always giving each other problems. And Hartmann took a lot of crap, but he gave some, too. His view was, “I’m making sure that Jerry doesn’t get hornswoggled. Nobody fools him, nobody tells him stories. He gets the straight scoop, he knows what’s going on. I want to make sure he is as prepared to do his job as he ought to be.” And Hartmann did a hell of a good job of doing it. Every president needs somebody like Bob Hartmann. You need somebody who walks in the room and when he says something to you, you know that that’s the story.

Smith: And presumably, equally important, someone who will say if you are full of shit.

Hynes: Yeah, absolutely. And he was very tough that way.

Smith: Before Haig died, we had a session with him which was one of the more surreal conversations I’ve ever had, and the mention of Hartmann’s name – it was like those two people were put on the planet to alienate each other. And it was very clear that after all these years, Haig entertained intense feelings, and no doubt Hartmann did, as well.

Hynes: I’m sure that’s the case.

Smith: The motives of each, and ‘good ol Jerry.’
Hynes: I’m sure they both felt that way because I saw it just in my social contacts with Bob during the White House years and other years, and afterwards.

Smith: Was he unhappy?

Hynes: Hartmann?

Smith: I say that because he’d been chief of staff. There were those who believed that was a role he aspired to in the White House. Little things – where the office was, and the fact that there was an alternate speechwriting operation. He experienced some setbacks.

Hynes: He didn’t have as much authority as he probably would have liked, although I don’t think, in all fairness, I don’t think Bob would have been the right person to be chief of staff. His title was counselor to the president, and quite frankly, that is probably where he was best suited to be because of his talents, which were huge. He could see a problem coming a long way off. He could see opportunities coming a long way off. He could let Jerry know ahead of time, “This is coming down the track. You’re going to have to see this coming down the track early, because if you don’t, it may run us over. He was very good at things like that, very good. And of course, he wrote like a genius politically. I don’t know that anybody has ever written any better stuff than he has. Usually on deadline, usually short time and usually late at night. He wrote at night. I don’t know how he did it, but he wrote at night and he wrote beautiful stuff.

Smith: Did you know Phil Buchen at all?

Hynes: Yes. I liked him a lot. Very nice guy. Is Phil still alive?

Smith: No.

Hynes: I didn’t think so. He was a lovely man. I first met him during the confirmation hearings because Jerry asked him to come down and sort of be a legal senior advisor to him, working a little bit with Bill Kramer’s group, not my group.
But really giving him top of the mountain, looking out pictures. He was pretty good at it and a lovely man.

Smith: You didn’t sense someone in over his head?

Hynes: I think over his head is the wrong phrase – he had to learn a lot of new things fast. There’s a big difference. I don’t think he was in over his head. He was a very bright guy. And he had Ford’s confidence. And he learned pretty quickly. But the problem of not being in Washington and coming into Washington and suddenly you are in a situation where you are talking about the White House. You are talking about the people who are in the White House who are all strong-minded, big egos, know they can do that job, and by God are going to do it, and nobody is going to stop them type.

Smith: Well, and stop and think, we had all these Nixon holdovers who, to varying degrees, were probably harboring some resentments.

Hynes: Absolutely. And the resentment shouldn’t have been to the Ford people and Ford coming in. After all, that was the Constitution. They had to come in. They really should have been more aggravated at some of themselves for letting things go where they went. But people never want to look in the mirror and say, “I really blew this one.” They want to point to the other guy who is trying to clean up the mess.

Smith: Tell us, in the confirmation hearings, what was the story about Mr. Winter-Berger?

Hynes: Robert Winter-Berger.

Smith: Who was Robert Winter-Berger? He seemed to kind of emerged from nowhere.

Hynes: He wrote a book.

Smith: He did.
Hynes: I cannot remember any more than that. But somehow or other…

Smith: He claimed to have had some influence over Congressman Ford. And I remember in one of our interviews, one of our early interviews with one of the women who was in the office remembered him being, in effect, thrown out of the office.

Hynes: I wouldn’t be surprised. I do remember that name and I do remember that he had written a book and there was a minor dustup during the confirmation hearings, but I can’t recall anything about it. I had nothing to do with it. Don’t know anything about it.

Smith: It was the most exhaustive FBI investigation ever. Did it make Ford uncomfortable?

Hynes: No.

Smith: I’ll tell you the reason why I ask. He said that someone in the course of this and they asked him, going back to a fifth or sixth grade, had found a player on an opposing football team, and they asked him about piling on or something.

Hynes: It was thorough. But I don’t think I ever saw Jerry concerned about it. I know I didn’t. He was about as clean a whistle as you could have in a man who had spent his life in the political arena. He was exactly what you saw – a guy who had a good sense of humor. He was a serious person. He was a friendly person. He would throw his arms around you, you’d walk down the hall together. He was just a typical – at least in those days – Midwesterner. I think that’s one of the reasons why he found that he could work with me because I came from the same basic background – that Midwestern background which is kind of open and straightforward, and you look for the good in people, and doesn’t have a lot of machinations going on in his head every thirty seconds.

Smith: It’s fair to say he was always a real fiscal conservative.

Hynes: Yes. Sure.
Smith: That’s part of that package. And I wonder if part of that in his case, like his generation, was intensified by his experience of the Depression. Going to the University of Michigan, he worked, even sold his blood.

Hynes: Exactly.

Smith: Scraped by.

Hynes: That was a whole generation – the whole generation was like that.

Smith: In the investigation, either publicly or behind the scenes, did the fact that Mrs. Ford had been to see a psychiatrist, enter into any of the discussions?

Hynes: In the preparation for the hearings, my team had absolutely nothing to do with that. Nothing whatsoever, as far as I can recall. I don’t believe it ever came up, either.

Smith: Good.

Hynes: Now there’s a place where it may well be that Phil Buchen, who was a personal friend of longstanding, had to know about it, might have advised on how we would handle it if it did come up or something. But it was not part of the work that we were doing on the political activity level, if you will.

Smith: Before you got into this, in terms of organizing this, saying, “Here are the things we’ve got to be particularly mindful of.” Were there areas – obviously finances and the like.

Hynes: Exactly. We had file after file. We knew every penny, I think, that ever came in from the time he was a leader on. That’s what we were really looking at.

Smith: And there weren’t a lot.

Hynes: No, there weren’t any problems.

Smith: There wasn’t a lot of money in the Ford household.
Hynes: No, there wasn’t. For example, Steelcase, which is headquartered in Grand Rapids, and makes an awful lot of office furniture. And a lot of it was bought by the federal government. And the executives of Steelcase gave some money to their local congressman, not much, and when he became Minority Leader, he got some more money, and he got some money for his pac – the kind he would give to other members who needed money, or candidates when he spoke for them. But we found no connections. There was nothing that said here came some money, and this is what happened on the floor of the House – how Jerry did something. We couldn’t find anything like that. And the solution to the Vail ski lodge was so easily provable – we had the closing out of the kids’ accounts down to zero, and the mortgage payments by the folks. It was a clean, cognitive, easy thing, with such a good answer. The biggest problem we had in the confirmation hearings was that the Democrats were just looking around to find ways to undermine the impression that people had of Jerry Ford. And it just didn’t work. It didn’t work.

The House hearings were much tougher than the Senate hearings. Bob Griffin, I think, was a major player over in the Senate on the committee that handled it, and he and the Democrats were not about – they did not want to rough Ford up – they just wanted to have a good record of how he did this, and how he did that, and let him ______ enough about what he did and who he was to give the public a view of him and get out of the way because I think everybody knew that Watergate was a huge crisis that Mr. Nixon well may not get past.

Smith: In the discussions, either with him during this period, or equally important, with the rest of your team - was anything said to indicate an awareness at least, that you might, in fact, be preparing the next president?

Hynes: I think all of us felt that that was a definite possibility. We didn’t talk about it. And I don’t think any of us ever sat down and said the following: We ought not to talk about it because then people would think we’re talking about it. It
was just something we just didn’t go near. But we all were pretty well convinced that this could happen.

Smith:  It did put him in a terribly awkward position.

Hynes:  Yes. And we just didn’t go there. Our job was to get through the hearings, and make sure that any questions were answered in a full and honest way, and just stay away from that kind of stuff.

Smith:  Couple of things and I’ll let you go. Again, the background, the culture, the times, for people who weren’t there, it strikes me how different some things were. For example, that people drank a hell of a lot more forty years ago than they do now. Maybe they should drink more today if it would foster some work across the aisles. It was bipartisan; in some ways it was almost part of that.

Hynes:  Well, the members probably did a little bit more. Now, remember – I was on the Hill for about seven years – and for the first half of it, let’s say ’65, ’66, ’67, I wasn’t working particularly closely with Mr. Ford. You know how the tables are – there’s a table on one side of the aisle and there’s a table on the other side of the aisle – and over here is where the Rules Committee member who is going to handle this legislation stands up and talks. The other side is Jerry Ford’s table – the leadership’s table. I was sitting over here. So he knew me. But it wasn’t until we got into that Voting Rights thing that I really started working with Mr. Ford. But I must tell you that Bob Hartmann often would call people into his office for strategy discussions – how are we going to do this, how are we going to do that? And he’d crack a bottle open and we’d all have a drink.

I was not one who saw too many members drinking because I wasn’t invited.

Smith:  You weren’t over at the Board of Education with Sam Rayburn. Another aspect is one senses that it was a much more civil, certainly a much more bipartisan environment.
Even when the Democrats were rubbing our noses in it, they let us breathe, let’s say. They didn’t keep our head down under water too long. It was difficult, you were losing and you were losing big in the middle ’60s, after ’64. You were losing and losing big for a while. But the people were different. The idea that Tip O’Neill and Jerry Ford were such good friends is an example. And there were huge relationships across the aisle. John Dingle, who was not yet chairman, but was a driving force on the Commerce Committee, and Jim Broyhill, the senior Republican, worked very well together. A lot of members worked well across the aisle together. It was not unusual in those days, during committee markup sessions, to see members walking back and forth from each side of the aisle from committees, talking with each other about things they could work out together. You almost don’t ever see that today. Because if you see it today, the Republicans wonder why a guy is walking over to the Democrats’ aisle and the Democrats wonder why their Democrat is talking to the Republican. So people wonder what you are doing. They no longer think it might be innocent, they think what skullduggery is going on.

Smith: Then it’s on the Internet and you’re off to the races.

Hynes: It’s a problem constantly.

Smith: There are famous stories about Ford and Hale Boggs who would debate issues at the National Press Club. They would drive down together, decide on the way what they were going to debate that day, they would have their debate that day, and they’d have a drink and lunch and go back to the Hill.

Hynes: Well, those kinds of relationships made it much more possible to solve problems. One of the reasons it’s so hard to solve some of these problems today, and granted, they are huge problems – you might say that of a magnitude larger than maybe we had in the ’70s – but the fact of the matter is, the people in the ’70s knew each other a hell of a lot better than members know each other today. Members don’t know many people across the aisle except maybe on their committees and then only from a distance. There aren’t
too many relationships that really go personally, where you go to each others houses and your kids know their kids.

Smith: We’ve been told one of the huge differences is, in those days people brought their families. And when you’ve socialized with people, and you’ve played softball with people, and you’ve gone to kid’s plays, it’s tough to demonize the other side.

Hynes: And remember, the systems were different. I’m not exactly sure what the rules were back in the, let’s say, late ‘60s, early ‘70s. But I’m pretty sure I’m right when I say this, that was before you had as much money as you do now to go back and forth. People now go back and forth all the time. And it’s good to go back and see the constituents, but when you are here in town you have a chance to get to know people. You have a chance to sit down and get to be in their house and the kids go to the same school so you see them at a PTA meeting or something. And you realize, no horns, good people. And that helps an awful lot to be able to cut deals and work out solutions that don’t cripple the majorities’ right to do what they want, but it gives the minority at least something to work with. And someday you’re going to be in the minority, possibly, although it’s fair to say in those days the Democrats thought it was going to be forever.

Smith: Was there arrogance in the majority?

Hynes: Well, some people were arrogant because there are always some people who were arrogant. But a lot of them weren’t. I mean, a lot of them worked very well with the other side, and they did it for the good of the country.

Whichever party is in the minority, sometimes they have good ideas; sometimes they are better than the bill that the White House sends up. And that’s important. One of the problems with the health care bill we’ve just passed, not is just its size, and the fact that it was so hard – they were putting it together at the last minute in a lot of respects – but that the Republicans had no input at all. Now, all that means is, we’re going to find more glitches in that legislation than we might otherwise find, because one party just decided
this is going to be it, and we don’t need the other guys. And that’s not the best way to legislate, no matter who is in the majority.

Smith: Did you run in to him from time to time in later years? Did you have any contacts with President Ford?

Hynes: Yeah, I did. I was assistant parliamentarian to three conventions. For ’68 and ’72, both in Miami, and in both of those Ford was the chairman. And in ’76, when he was the candidate and Reagan and he were fighting.

Smith: One senses the ’76 convention was intensely fought.

Hynes: That was intensely fought. Both of them came to the convention with about 90% of the votes they needed. Ford had a couple of hundred more. There were less than three or four hundred votes that weren’t determined and that was a real, real tough convention. There was a good story about that convention that tells you a lot about Jerry Ford. The fight in 1976 was over the foreign policy plank; it was very bitterly debated. Ford was too much a détente – he wasn’t firm enough with the Russians, Vladivostok and Helsinki and whatnot. And Reagan really pushed that hard. He didn’t come in until late in the primaries, and he used that foreign policy plank to wedge it in.

Smith: The Panama Canal Treaty.

Hynes: The Panama Canal won a lot of the votes in the Southern states, and came into the convention pretty strong. The foreign policy plank was going to be the big fight of the convention on the night before the nominations. And I got a call from one of Ford’s convention staffers, and the Rules of the House, in a modified version, are the rules of the Republican convention, and I think of the Democratic convention, as well. Because, unlike the Senate Rules, which are more a unanimous consent efforts, in the House, because the numbers are so large, 435, you’ve got to have some rules that will advance the effort and the minority can’t stop it, if the majority is firm to do it. So the rules of the convention are that way, too, because you’ve got three or four days and
you’ve got to get the job done. You’ve got to nominate your people, and you’ve got to get out of there.

So the morning of the third day, the convention was going to meet that night on the platform. I got a call from the Ford staff saying on the forum, when Reagan’s team offers their amendment and we debate it, we want to be able to close debate on the amendment. And I said, “Well, the Rules of the House are basically the rules of the convention, and we understand that. And then you understand that the right of the offer of the amendment to close debate is a House procedure. That is, the ________ is always on the floor of the House.” And they said, “Well, we understand that, but we want to close debate.” And I said, “Well, I can’t tell you we’re going to do that. I’ll have to talk to somebody.” He said, “You go ahead, but we want to do it. I’m telling you, we want to do it.” He never said, “Mr. Ford wants this.” He said, “We want to do it.”

Smith: For the uninitiated, what were the dynamics here? What was the advantage being sought?

Hynes: Well, the advantage being sought was maybe, for all we know, maybe Reagan was going to come down and close debate. On the floor, possibly, with a ringing speech. That’s maybe what they were planning, I don’t know. But they wanted to be able to pound the table and say, “We’re going to do the right thing for American foreign policy.” They wanted to have the last big speech. And that was the goal.

John Rhodes, who was Jerry’s successor as Minority Leader – the Leader of the House has always been the convention chair for the Republicans. They want somebody who can manage a body. And I called John and I said this is what’s happened. So and so has said to me that they want to close debate, he sounds very insistent, I told him what the rules were, he doesn’t care, he wants to close debate and he wants to know. And John said to me, “That’s a violation of the rules, isn’t it?” And I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Well, does that close the matter?” And I said, “Not to him.” He said, “Do you think Jerry
knows anything about this?” I said, “I’d be amazed.” He said, “I would, too. I’ll get back to you in a few minutes.”

So I don’t know who he talked to, I don’t know if he talked to Ford or not. He may have just counted to a hundred and called me back. And we both agreed we weren’t going to do it, and I was to call the guy back. I learned later that they did talk, just briefly, and Jerry said, “I know nothing about this, nothing at all. And I’m against it.” So, anyway, I called back the guy and I said, “We’re not going to do.” And they got mad at me, but I didn’t care. What could they do, yell at me? I said basically, “We’re not going to change, it’s a violation of the rules, and I don’t think you want to take this any farther because it’s a violation of the rules.” Nothing happened.

I guess the point of the story is, Jerry Ford had presided over two conventions, he knew what the Rules of the House were, he dealt with them every day, and he sure as hell wasn’t going to take advantage of being the President of the United States at that point. Just break the rules of the convention to get a possible advantage, or to deny them an opportunity – he wasn’t going to break the rules.

Smith: Well, remember that the ultimate irony was, they, in effect, rolled over on that rather than give the Reagan people this intensely emotional, galvanizing issue. They turned the other cheek.

Hynes: They did.

Smith: A wonderful story Tom Korologos told us – Kissinger threatened to resign…

Hynes: Tom is right downstairs – you know he’s downstairs underneath the podium, you know, running everything.

Smith: So Kissinger, typically, threatens to resign, and Tom says, “Henry, if you’re going to resign, do it now, we need the votes.”
Hynes: That would be Tom. A wonderful man. And he probably knows where more bodies are buried in this town than anybody I know.

Smith: He and Bill Timmons, together, have buried a few.

Hynes: Yes they have, and they are both wonderfully good guys. They are just quality people. If all the guys and gals who worked the Hill and represented clients went up there and did the work, the quality the way they do it, the place would be a better place.

Smith: How do you think Gerald Ford should be remembered?

Hynes: A very good man, a man of principle, a man of integrity and honor, who proved it every day. A man who was thrust into a job he never sought, never even in his wildest dreams ever thought he would ever get to. There must be a hundred people who have told you that his lifelong ambition was to be the Speaker. And when he told a few of us early in 1974 that he was going to retire and not run, and if you want to get a job downtown, this is the time to go downtown before I announce it. He was saying, “I’m not going to get the thing I want most in life, and I recognize it and I’m going to make a little money and make sure I get my kids through school and take care of the family and everything else.” And he was suddenly thrust into that job, and he was good enough to do it in a quiet, solid way. He was a Ford, not a Lincoln, just like he said. And he did a good job, worked as hard as he could at it, did every day what he had to do. With Betty being ill and everything else, during that time, it was tough on him, but he never lost it, he never threw his hands up, he never said, “I can’t handle it.” He just kept doing the job that he had to do.

Smith: Perfect.
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Smith: Where did you meet Gerald Ford?

Michel: Well, that was very interesting, I was just an AA at that time, an Administrative Assistant, to my predecessor Harold Velde who happened to be elected in the same class with Jerry Ford. And it just so happened that that year, the Junior Chamber of Commerce in their selection for the Ten Outstanding Young Men of the Year, picked Jerry Ford to be the Politician of the Year. Percy was the Businessman of the Year at that time, and Bud Wilkinson the Coach of the Year. But anyway, we had one of the most active Junior Chamber of Commerce groups in Peoria following World War II, so we got the national banquet and Paul Hoffman was the Speaker.

I was detailed then to meet Jerry at the airport and get him downtown to the hotel. You know how that goes, to shepherd him around to the places he had to be. So that’s how I first met what I never would’ve expected for an eventual president of the United States or minority leader in the Congress. Had I known all those things at that time, I don’t know that I’d have been asking Jerry any more questions than I did.

Smith: What was he like? What was your impression of him?

Michel: Oh, of course he was very young and bouncy and full of vim and vigor and he was all enthused by being named the Politician of the Year by the Jaycees, so it was a nice weekend. I guess it was Friday and Saturday or whatever, I kind of forget.

Smith: Now, Harold Velde was in Congress how long?

Michel: Just four terms. He succeeded Everett Dirksen. He was a former FBI agent during the war and he was just so ticked off that nothing ever happened about the Communist conspiracy, so his big bugaboo was rooting out the Commies.
Smith: Really?

Michel: So, that was his one goal and I think that’s why he was probably limited to four terms. Then, it was controversial, the Hollywood Ten and Bishop Oxnam and stuff like that.

Smith: Was he involved with the Alger Hiss case?

Michel: Yeah, right.

Smith: Ford came from a somewhat different place. Young veteran coming back from the war who had been an isolationist, and then along with Arthur Vandenberg became an internationalist. How would you describe his politics at that early stage in his career?

Michel: I’d characterize it as typically Midwestern.

Smith: What does that mean?

Michel: Basically in those days, obviously it's changed over a period of time, but in those days, pretty conservative. That was the bastion of the hard Right in a sense, although Jerry was never considered to be one of those. But, Everett Dirksen country out in central Illinois, of course he became the Leader. If I’d characterize my own entry into the Congress, it was, “Well, Bob, you just go down to Washington and cut the cost of government and lower my taxes. We don’t want anything. Just get the government off my back.” I think pretty much that was Jerry’s feeling at that time, too, because the philosophy was you do for yourself whatever you can and the government eventually will maybe supplement the shortcomings.

Smith: Now, clearly fiscally very conservative, yet on what then were social issues, particularly civil rights, was a moderate, moderate to liberal.

Michel: Right.

Smith: How would that sit with people in your district?

Michel: I don’t know that he ever ran up against any sort of buzz saw in our caucus that he was too liberal or too moderate, though he succeeded Charlie Halleck
and Charlie was quite conservative and a forceful Leader when he was there. Then, of course, times change just like when Halleck succeeded Joe Martin. Times do change.

Smith: Tell me about that because that’s got to be a wrenching experience, whether it’s because of age or other factors. I mean, Halleck overthrew Joe Martin.

Michel: That was a learning experience for me. I remember first being elected on my own after four terms with my predecessor and going in to, “Mr. Speaker,” - you know he’d been Speaker, twice trading off with Rayburn. And I said, “It might surprise you, but I’m not asking for a seat on Appropriations or Ways and Means, as much as I would like it. Just keep me off the Education and Labor Committee,” because, at that time, organized labor was a big force in the political scheme of things, the repeal of the Taft-Hartley Act, the repeal of Section 14B. And my predecessor had a primary all four times that he ran simply because he was having problems with, in our case, it was the Caterpillar UAW 974. It was a big force, 24,000 members in that one local, so it was a factor. Then, of course, eventually in dealing with Jerry, he’d become Leader, et cetera, et cetera, well, he was quite well aware of what problems I would have to confront in my district to get reelected.

Smith: What led to Joe Martin’s ouster?

Michel: Well, you mentioned the fact that he was getting up in years and there was question about that. And he was a bachelor and I remember when I first would see him, he’d always wear a vest and part of his breakfast and lunch was on the vest. He didn’t have a wife looking after him, but he was a wonderful old fellow. As a matter of fact, the Republicans in Massachusetts in those days, gosh, that was a Republican state, nothing like it is today. That has completely turned around. But he wasn’t nearly the Speaker anymore that I had remembered from watching national conventions and when he and some of the leaders in the party of those times were up there ranting and raving. Well, he obviously was not that kind of fiery Leader anymore. So, I think it was one of those things, an evolutionary thing, younger people coming along. Of course, Charlie Halleck was a real fireball and he wanted to make things move. And, boy, I had pressure put on me by Les Arends because Les was a
neighboring district to mine, a whip longer than any man probably in the history of the country, twenty-five years. He was content to not move up to Leader, but he supported his Leader each time, in this case, Joe Martin over Halleck. But, underneath it all, I could see the membership really wanted a change of leadership and went along with voting for Charlie.

Smith: Let me ask you, because my sense is, in elections like this, ideology matters less than generational factors.

Michel: Right.

Smith: That, in fact, generational factors maybe account for a lot more than most people think. It’s almost like an escalator. It’s your turn and then it’s someone else’s turn. At that point, Ford is not in the leadership when you first arrived in Congress. Did you imagine that he was headed for such things?

Michel: Well, first having met him earlier on and so when I’d see him once in awhile, of course, I would address him as “Congressman Ford,” “Mr. Ford,” et cetera, et cetera. And then I guess one of the things for me, you know, the Chowder & Marching Society was quite a force in our Republican party in those early days, Mel Laird, and Jerry, John Byrnes, and Glenn Davis from Wisconsin and Jackson from California, there was Boggs from Delaware and John Lodge from Connecticut. But it was a group of fellows, returning veterans at that time. As a matter of fact, that’s how the whole C & M thing got started - was over a veteran’s pension bill and these twelve fellows got together and said, “We’re robbing Peter to pay Paul. Who’re we kidding here? We’re all veterans.” And they banded together and decided they’re going to vote against it as much as that was an unpopular thing, to vote against a veteran’s pension bill and they beat it by one vote. And then they said, “You know, we might be a pretty forceful little group if we’d stick together and pick out these issues and take them on.” And so that’s how the whole thing got started.

Smith: And Ford was part of that group?

Michel: Right. And Dick Nixon, of course.
Smith: It’s interesting, because in those days, he [Ford] used to tell this story – how he was told one day to be outside a committee room at such and such a time. And it turned out it was the old bulls who were responsible for CIA and basically all intelligence oversight. That was a very small group of veteran congressmen, no staff, no notes. They met behind closed doors as long as it took to answer all of their questions. And they brought Ford in as a junior member which tells you something about what they thought about Ford. What were those personal qualities that made him appealing?

Michel: You know, it’s really hard to put your finger on it exactly, except that against the whole, Jerry always stood out. He was very likeable and approachable. He had no airs about him whatsoever. He was just out there making friends. He was a popular individual, I think. When I look back on my own climb up the ladder, I thought there’s nothing better than emulating Jerry Ford’s approach to things because it worked for him very well.

Smith: And presumably, these old bulls had taken the measure and decided among other things, this guy could be trusted with secrets, which was not universally the case in the House.

Michel: No, that’s true. He was, of course, another one of those in the service, but an officer, too, and they respected that.

Smith: And then the first NASA oversight committee, he’s on that. Then, of course, later on the Warren Commission. At some point before ’64, there’s some grumbling about the Republican leadership. I don’t know that it was aimed at Halleck, but certainly I guess Hoeven of Iowa.

Michel: Yeah, Charlie Hoeven.

Smith: Who was Charlie Hoeven?

Michel: He was from Iowa, basically very conservative, very conservative. You’d have to slot him right over here on the Right. But from that point on, well, H.R. Gross of Iowa would be in there in that group, but he was always right over here on the Right.
Smith: You know, there’s a famous story that H.R. Gross, the weekend of President Kennedy’s assassination, wanted to know how much the Eternal Flame was going to cost.

Michel: Oh, he was a character, I tell ya.

Smith: Ford wasn’t that kind of conservative.

Michel: Oh, of course not. No, that’s the other thing. I think people looked at him and said this fellow’s basically conservative on the fiscal issues and socially moderate, he was no ideologue, let’s put it that way. He was just no ideologue and if we were going to get back into power someday, there’s a big middle ground out there where we’ve got to make points and Jerry seemed to be the fellow that really could very well appeal to that group of people.

Smith: You know, it’s interesting, we talked with Leon Parma, who in those days was with Bob Wilson. He told us something quite extraordinary that I’ve never heard before. In I think it was ’58, when Halleck took on Joe Martin – late 50s – they’d actually approached Ford to see if he had any interest in it and he wasn’t at that point interested in doing it.

Michel: And ’58, of course, was a bad recession year. Boy, I felt it out there because that was the first year I was running for reelection after first being elected in ’56 and half my freshman class got flushed down the tube in the recession of ’58. So, boy, I learned early on, man, I tell you, when the economy is down and as much union labor as I had at that time, you just had to watch your Ps and Qs.

Smith: That’s interesting because one of the things he always used to talk about was Guy Vander Jagt as the example. That, Guy, as he climbed the ladder nationally, lost touch with the district. Ford was someone who really never had to worry about getting reelected, and yet he would go home an astonishingly frequent number of times.

Michel: And that points out that Vander Jagt was so busy as chairman of the congressional campaign committee that he thought that was his forte. And he was good at it, and a good speaker, and a good fundraiser and people all asked
him to come. In the meantime, he was losing some strength at home. So you just can’t ignore those folks back home.

Smith: How often would he go home in those days?

Michel: Well, of course, there were several problems. One was the distance and the cost of the airline fare. I drove a number of times and back in those days, Dan Rostenkowski, the Democrat from Chicago, and Phil Crane and Harold Collier and I, we were in a station wagon, we’d leave on a Thursday night and that’s before the interstate and we’d drive all night. I’d drop them off in Chicago and I would go 160 miles down to Peoria afterwards and then go back the following Monday night or Tuesday. Boy, I tell you, that wasn’t the best way to commute back and forth, but it was limited. The cost and the distance and the fact that it wasn’t as easy to do as it is today.

Smith: Presumably, you spent a lot less time raising money.

Michel: Oh, that’s true. When people ask me today, that’s one of the first things that I’m just flabbergasted at, the amounts of money that are spent. As a matter of fact, people ask me, “Well, what’d you spend on your campaign, Bob?” I’d say, “On my first campaign, $15,000 to get myself elected to Congress.” And I remember the time when we had the first million dollar race, Bob Dornan out in California, I thought, “Gee wiz, what’s happening here?” And of course now it’s just commonplace. But, really, too much time, that’s the problem today, spending time raising money instead of legislating.

Smith: I remember that was one thing President Ford complained about. But he also said that it was much better when staffs were smaller.

Michel: That’s another thing. When I first came to Washington then, Ev Dirksen had four people, and he was chairman of a subcommittee on Appropriations, but he had four people working in our congressional office. So, when I came down with Judge Velde to take over from Dirksen, I thought, “Well, who’s it going to be?” Three of the four we hired worked for Dirksen because they were the ones who really knew what was going on. But then it kept getting larger and larger and larger. I know Dave Obey who’s still in the saddle
today, was one of those instigators way back then, “We need more staff. We
need more staff.” Then it just kept growing and growing.

Smith: What happens when you need more staff? Does it mean you need more
work?

Michel: Initially, when people were still sending telegrams, when I was first elected,
that made a difference. We didn’t have faxes and you didn’t have this instant
communication; you had to rely on a letter principally. Telephone calls were
too much, too costly. Even the telegrams, only the rich people would send
you a telegram. So it was a different line of communication, but you really
tended to your mail. I could tell, for example, on a Monday or Tuesday
whether the Women’s Christian Temperance Union had met last Thursday
night on some thing because then the following Tuesday or so, in come these
pink and blue letters telling me to vote against whatever had rankled them.
But it was different communicating in those days, simpler, I guess in a sense.
But then everything has evolved since that time to the degree that you got so
much going in the way of communication just to answer the emails and the
faxes. That’s how it grew, I guess.

Smith: Tell me about Ford’s relationship with Ev Dirksen.

Michel: Well, of course, I really considered Ev to be my mentor because he
represented the district I had represented before Judge Velde. Same number
of counties, six counties. And he was in the House for sixteen years and Jerry
respected that and the gift of gab that Senator Dirksen had. Jerry really
enjoyed working with him. Basically conservative, but also at critical times
to buck Colonel McCormick’s Chicago Tribune, he had his view of the world
out there on foreign affairs because he made a lot of trips abroad. His modus
operandi and philosophy, I think, Jerry felt that suited him very well. And I
think he probably took a note from him and thought, “Look, he’s the Leader.
He’s basically conservative, but yet on social issues, he knew where to go.”

Smith: Dirksen was a great showman and Dirksen generated a lot of copy and some
people resented that. Ford didn’t seem to have resented that at all, as if, he
could wait his time. Dirksen himself, someone asked about their relationship
and he said, “Congressman Ford is the sword and I am the oil can.” But as far as you could see they got along very well?

Michel: Oh sure.

Smith: Even though Dirksen had worked with Halleck before, that didn’t come between them.

Michel: No.

Smith: First of all, Ford runs against Hoeven in ’62. Did you support Ford?

Michel: Yeah. I was generally in that group. Mel Laird, of course.

Smith: Tell me about those Young Turks, because you had Mel Laird, you had Charlie Goodell, you had John Lindsay. It was a different party.

Michel: Oh, yeah, we were from all parts of the country, too.

Smith: You really didn’t have a Southern party at that point.

Michel: No.

Smith: But really the Midwest was sort of the center of gravity.

Michel: Yeah.

Smith: But you had a liberal wing in the Northeast.

Michel: By all means, by all means. And they had to be dealt with from time to time even after all those years that intervened by the time I became Leader, I could pretty well say there was six of them I really had a problem with.

Smith: From the Northeast?

Michel: Yeah. And I’d have to, on close votes even right up to when Reagan became President and I was his Leader for his tax program and economic plan and I had only 192 members on my side. I had to get every one of those solid, plus 26 or -7 or -8 on the other side. So that was my chore, getting enough from the other side to join us so we could vote on a number of key votes when
Reagan took over. Just by three and four votes, we won the issues. That was exhilarating.

Smith: ’64, of course, was the Goldwater debacle. Were you at the convention?

Michel: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Do you remember the night they almost booed Rockefeller out of the hall?

Michel: Oh, yeah. Geez.

Smith: What was that like?

Michel: Well, some of these things then, as young as I was, were a new experience for me. I was kind of betwixt and between. I think I traveled in 38 states for Barry Goldwater that year and then nearly lost my own seat to a hand truck driver, a Caterpillar. And so that was a lesson, I tell you, too.

Smith: So, you were a Goldwater supporter?

Michel: Yeah, right. Sure. He had a lot of the really young Republicans and he could fire them up pretty well, you know. But with me, it wasn’t a question of loving him and hating the other, it’s just that I was enthused over Barry’s approach and thought, “Well, we’ll do whatever we can for him.”

Smith: In between, of course, there had come the Kennedy assassination and the Warren Commission. Did it surprise you that President Johnson would ask this relatively unknown Republican congressman from Michigan to be on the Warren Commission?

Michel: Jerry had already gained a reputation for being a real solid individual thinker, as I said, again, no ideologue, but one who had really a great respect for the institution, one who could make it work. So I guess, no, we wouldn’t be surprised at that.

Smith: Yet it sort of flies in the face of the popular image, you know, some of the things that Johnson said about Ford over the years. Pretty clearly, if he’d believed those things, he never would have asked Ford to be on the Warren Commission.
Michel: Yeah.

Smith: Did he talk to you at all about his work on the Commission?

Michel: Not much. At that time, at C & M, you know, we’d have some of the informal back and forth. “Jerry, what’s it like?” Because we kind of had a code of secrecy in the group and whatever we discuss in this group doesn’t go any further, otherwise we’re going to lose the importance of our group. So Jerry was always forthcoming to us to the degree that we were well enough informed to be supportive of what he was doing.

Smith: Did you accept the basic conclusions of the Warren Commission?

Michel: Mhmm.

Smith: That basically they found no evidence of a conspiracy?

Michel: Right.

Smith: After the ’64 election was there immediately a desire among House Republicans for change?

Michel: Well, pretty much so, because we’d been down and then to think we took such a terrible pasting in ’64, the number of seats that we lost again. And, “Geez, here we are really mired down. Where are we going to go?” And, of course, Charlie realized the brunt of that.

Smith: A number of people also said he had a bit of a drinking problem.

Michel: Oh, yes, there’s no question about that.

Smith: Was that more prevalent in those days?

Michel: I think so. Though, shucks, when I was Ev Dirksen’s congressmen, one of my good fortunes was to go over late in the afternoon to see the Senator and that was the time he used to have the folks, that’s how I met Lyndon Johnson, way back when, Flood Byrd was there and all the rest. But, of course, we were from the Peoria area with distilleries, Hiram Walker century(?) and whatnot, and I was kind of the old bartender back there in the back room for
the Senator himself. “Hey, Bob, I think I’ll have about three fingers and don’t mix it with anything.”

Smith: Do you think it was covered up a little bit more in those days than it is now?

Michel: Yeah, probably. Right. And as a matter of fact my predecessor had a serious problem with it, too. I learned from that. That was too bad, but that was the case.

Smith: When you run a race like that for a leadership post, the top post among Republicans, how do you put a campaign together? How do you wage that campaign? What’s your constituency? What do you promise? What do you deliver?

When Jerry Ford decided to run against Halleck, how do you campaign?

Michel: That’s a ticklish thing to do and you’ve got to have a good sense up here of where the membership is. He just had to because he couldn’t make the charge without being successful or he’d be in deep doo-doo. When you stop and think how you put your finger on it, it was just by word of mouth and a little bit here and there and groups, not big groups, just two people talking to one another and then two other people talking to one another.

Smith: And Don Rumsfeld was instrumental in that race.

Michel: Right.

Smith: Bob Dole.

Michel: And Bob Griffin from Michigan. Of course, in that group, we had Chuck Chamberlain and Bob Griffin and McIntyre and, who’d I leave out? But they were elected in my class, four from Michigan that one year.

Smith: Do you think it was mostly generational, again?

Michel: Obviously, now that I look back on it, it had to be part of that because this was really a younger group of guys. Mel Laird was very active, always, with Jerry. Of course, I remember when he was first making the rounds to select Jerry as the vice president.
Smith: Well, there is some speculation that in fact Mel’s name was considered in ’64 along with Ford’s as a prospective candidate against Halleck.

Michel: Right.

Smith: I assume not everyone tells you the truth when you ask for your vote.

Michel: Well, that was a tough one for me. Actually, Charlie took a liking to me. I was president of my class. He took me out to Burning Tree with Les Arends the first time. As a freshman, he had me come back to his district to give the Lincoln Day speech. And I really had those loyalties there, boy, I tell you. Of course, maybe Charlie knew I was Ev Dirksen’s congressman. That was a special bond there, so it was a tough one for me when the time really came. Of course, Les Arends really leaned hard on me. I was one of the younger guys then and it was very important that they split up that group.

Smith: How could Les Arends lean on you? What pressure, for lack of a better word?

Michel: Well, there was no real threats other than, “Bob, did you vote?” Talk in those terms. Man, I had a tough time saying - I’m trying to think what kind of response I made, I’m sure it was kind of fuzzy – I said, “Well, I love Charlie,” but I never went so far as to say, “I’m definitely voting for Charlie.” I just left it hanging out there.

Smith: Do you think Halleck was surprised by the result?

Michel: I suppose so. He was hurt and then what really was bad of all things when he was defeated, there was no committee for him. He went back to become, it was, on the House Administration Committee. Incidentally, that was one of the things when I became Leader, I corrected. If I should be defeated for Leader or something, I can still go back to my committee, which was Appropriations, and could’ve been chairman of the doggone committee. But I just thought that was devastating. I thought that was unfair and, for one who had given so much, yes he lost that election, but geez, he’s still a respected elder. That hurt Charlie.

Smith: Did he ever get over it?
Michel: I don’t know if he ever did or not, but in our relationship after that, nothing ever changed.

Smith: And that brings a larger question, because there were clearly people around Halleck that were loyal to him, how did they deal with the new leadership?

Michel: Well, I guess it just kind of automatically fell in place. More and more of them realized, “Geez, we’ve had a devastating year,” ’64 was, “and we just got to do something here to get out of this mold and break out.” So, the climate was right for making the move.

Smith: And presumably Ford had the kind of temperament and personality that made it easy for them.

Michel: Sure. He was conservative enough, too, because I always said, “You can’t be elected Leader unless you’re basically conservative on the key issues of the day.”

Smith: So now, you have a new Leader, and you’re faced with this need to come up with an alternative to the Great Society. Tell me about that, because today, you don’t even hear the phrase ‘the loyal opposition.’

Michel: No.

Smith: You were the loyal opposition.

Michel: Yeah.

Smith: What did that mean?

Michel: That meant that “Gee-whiz, we’re so outnumbered that there’s never anything on the floor, doggone it, that we like. We’re just against everything and we should have what we called a ‘constructive Republican alternative proposal.’” That acronym there, we got criticized a lot for that. And Charlie Goodell, of course, from New York, was very helpful in bringing along constructive Republican alternative proposals and then it got to be kind of a natural thing for us. We really got to have, particularly on a Motion to Recommit, what is it? Well, it’s a sensible proposal as an alternative to the opposition with all its votes. And, who knows, maybe a time or two we’ll win if we don’t get too
aggressive or take too big a bite. And then sometimes the question then arose, you just want to make a political statement or do you really want to win something? And we’d have that argument sometimes because “Well, let’s get what we can today. Who knows? There’ll be another tomorrow.”

Smith: What was the difference between how a Sam Rayburn ran the House and a John McCormick? Was there a difference?

Michel: Well, of course, Rayburn was the first Speaker under which I served. I looked up to him like he was God Almighty as the Speaker. But, you know, in spite of that, he, you could see, was really dedicated to the House. He would sit in the chair during those monotonous special order things. Man, today, you’d never have any of the leadership sitting in the chair for the special order things. But he did. When we had the Gwin Party(?), for example, Rayburn came and he really had one heck of a good time and the guys were throwing napkins and bread and everything around the dining room like rockets and Rayburn would laugh about it.

Now, the big difference there between he and John McCormick is that John McCormick always had dinner with his wife. That was what he was known for; he didn’t go to these things. But I had the good fortune of having him as my first subcommittee chairman and the ranking member was big Bud Brown from Ohio. McCormick and Brown were the leaders of my first subcommittee on government operations. I had the wonderful opportunity to learn from both of those Leaders. And Sam Rayburn, he knew the members.

Smith: Were they fair to Republicans?

Michel: Oh, yeah, I think both of them, I would say. Absolutely. They were Speaker of the whole House. They respected the fact that the minority had something to say. I’m trying to think of our Parliamentarian. Lou Deschler was the Parliamentarian at the time and there were some of those questions that would come up every once in awhile and I always thought their rulings were quite fair.
Smith: Let me ask you, on civil rights, you had the Civil Rights Bill of ’64 and then the Voter Rights Act of ’65. Were there any significant divisions within the Republican caucus? You were just beginning to get some summoned—

Michel: Well, obviously then, the real strong proponent was for example you mentioned John Lindsay earlier. And even after all that period of time, the years, for me, it really didn’t dawn on me how important an issue that is for them, as distinguished from what little attention was given to that by my constituents, many of whom could care less. And it was tough for that to finally get through my noggin, that, “Gee, that is an important issue. And, while the people back home don’t talk about it, in other sections of the country, that’s a very important issue.” That you had to wake up to the fact and get with it.

Smith: Yeah. Now, Ford voted for both bills and I suspect a majority of Republicans. In fact, famously in the Senate was Republican votes that passed the Civil Rights bill because you had the southern Democrats who were all against it.

Michel: That’s the big thing Everett Dirksen will be noted for. Had it not been for him at that time, it wouldn’t have happened.

Smith: It’s interesting, because when you go back to the Ev and Jerry Show, in some of the interviews we’ve had there was a sense among some of the younger members, there was a feeling that Ev Dirksen was perhaps too close to LBJ, that he’d go down there at the end of the day. Famous stories, over a couple, more than a couple bourbons they’d cut deals and get bills passed and that Ford was seen as someone who’d maybe be a little bit less in Johnson’s thrall.

Michel: Right. And, well, I think that, and you see it even today I guess, that, geez, you can’t be so lovey-dovey with the opposition so that we’re not getting our say appropriately. There’s no question about Ev Dirksen had a way with all the members and with the opposition. Geez, you only need listen to Jack Valenti when he was still living and he would tell the stories about how many times Everett and Lyndon got together on things and the trade-offs and that was the way things were done back in those days. There’s just far less of that today, you just don’t think of it in those terms. That was the old school of
politics. Like I said, Jerry made a marked difference there. They felt that Jerry wasn’t going to be falling in with the opposition as would, they’d say, Dirksen did.

Smith: There are stories about how Ford and Hale Boggs would go down to the National Press Club and debate issues. They’d drive down together, decide on the way what they were going to debate, have their debate, go have drinks at lunch, and then go back to the Hill.

Michel: Right.

Smith: It’s hard to imagine Congress operating like that.

Michel: Right, but that was how it was in those days. You did have the respect of the other side to the degree that, “Hey, we’re in this thing together, but we’ve also got to be opponents.” One of my problems with Newt during my leadership, I said, “Newt, they’re not our enemies. They’re our political adversaries and you’ve got to treat them with respect.” And I said, point blank, “You maybe liked Martin and Rayburn switching back and forth so you’d better loosen up on the rhetoric.”

Smith: What are the factors that made things different then? Some people have talked about more socializing across the aisle. More members had their families here; it was a village.

Michel: There was more time spent here. It wasn’t running home every weekend. Of course, along that line, we always used to criticize that T & T Club, in Tuesday, out Thursday, and they were the Philadelphia and New York lawyers who made their money practicing law over the weekends and came down here as an avocation. We had them in both parties and we used to gripe at those guys an awful lot, of course, in fact, some of the old timers say, “Hey, we’re back in the old T & T days.

Smith: We were talking about the different mood in those days, the socialization that went on across the aisle, the fact that families were here in town.

Michel: And there didn’t seem to be the need to go home every weekend like there is now. Of course, when I first was elected, we had one paid trip back and forth
to Washington. So, man, you had to stay here. And I remember, up until the time when my wife would be counseling incoming members’ wives on what do you do with the kids, and she said, “It’s a tough one, but it’s your decision.” Of course, she’d been here ten years during my AA, she had measurement of Washington and the surrounding area. She was a school teacher before we were married and without a doubt, she said, “Our kids are going to be educated at home.” So we both made the decision, there wasn’t a dispute between us because we recognized it was better for them. Of course, it turned out better for the kids, too.

Smith: One of the rituals of those days I knew Ford took part in was the baseball game. Tell us about it.

Michel: Oh, gosh, before they had the old Griffith Stadium and we went out there, it was fun. I would like to play baseball in high school and college so I was very interested. And, of course, we had those games out at Griffith Stadium. Usually the preliminary game before the regular Senators game back in those days and Jerry, of course, was a good athlete and he was playing. Tom Curtis from Missouri was a good catcher. Charlie Goodell as a matter of fact, of course that was later on, but he was my catcher there at one time. We Republicans won eleven games in a row or something like that. I remember my boss played some, I think he stumbled over first base at one time, broke his arm or wrenched it. There were several accidents.

Smith: Do you remember some of the folks who played for the Democrats?

Michel: From Georgia they had Wheeler, “Fireball” Wheeler, I think they called him. Gee-whiz, it gets a little foggy, some of those names. They were good competitive games and we had a lot of fun doing it.

Smith: Let’s move on - Johnson leaves office and Nixon is elected. And clearly Ford entertained hopes of becoming Speaker, particularly if the ’72 landslide would bring in enough Republicans. Did he express frustration with the failure to obtain the majority? That’s when he promised Betty he would run for one more term and then he would retire. Did he talk about that?
Michel: Not really, but I was a strong Nixon supporter. Man, everything, every little speech or everything that he had given or whatnot, I made sure it was in the congressional record and I was a strong Nixon supporter all the time. So, of course, when you don’t win the whole ball of wax, it’s got to be somewhat discouraging. And it’s too bad for Jerry because it would’ve been a different thing if he would’ve become Speaker.

Smith: Did he really want to be Speaker?

Michel: Yeah, just like in my case, it would be nice to be Speaker. I wasn’t ever thinking in terms of going into the executive branch, being president or vice president. That was the furthest thing from my mind. I think it was the same thing with Jerry. He just wanted to be Speaker of the House, the top spot in the House and you’re third ranking. Gosh, you can be mighty powerful.

Smith: That’s interesting because you use the word ‘powerful.’ I don’t often think of him as someone who was accumulating power. What was it about the House? I mean obviously he loved the House and obviously there are lots of people who love the House, presumably including yourself.

Michel: Yeah.

Smith: What is it about the institution, for example, that makes it different from the Senate?

Michel: Yeah, well, they always talk about the Senate as being a clubby affair and you do get the impression that, well at least most of the time, individual senators can get along with one another. And that’s a nice place to be serving and animosity’s not nearly as strong in the House. Well, in the first place, you’re limited in the time you’ve got to speak, so you’d better capsule what you’re going to speak in five minutes and make it good because you’re not going to go on and on like senators would with no time limitation. It lent itself to more frequent exchanges when you really did have a debate. That’s the other thing, today everybody gets up and gives a blurb in one minute when they’re given the time. Nobody yields to anybody else when they’re given a question. But in the old days, “Would the gentleman yield for a question?” “Yeah, sure.”
Then you get a good mix of debate, but you don’t get that in the House anymore today, unfortunately.

Smith: Do you think television on balance has been good or bad?

Michel: Well, I had a war with myself at the time, this thing of electronically covering the House of Representatives. How many showboaters are we going to have up there hogging the doggone screen instead of legislating? I was concerned about it, wondering whether this thing will really work or whether it becomes a show, you know, a theatrical type of thing. And, of course, as a member, I had to give some strong admonishment to a member one time when he came on a floor with a brown sack over his head trying to dramatize a particular point. Or this idea of bringing loaves of bread and stuff on the floor of the House, that to me, demeaned the chamber. I didn’t like to see us get to that point. Jerry was always very scrupulously for decorum in the House, too.

Smith: What do you do when, and I’m not looking for names, but people who either perhaps had a drinking problem or were sort of past their prime. How did you handle those?

Michel: Well, one of the reasons that I guess I never wrote a book is because you can’t write a book and have everything coming up roses. You’d have to cover the situations you’d prefer not to be talking about, and because I don’t think a doggone book would sell just talking about the legislative process. I said, “I could write a real juicy one” and I’m sure there were a few occasions maybe when generally among the members we’d know something about members, you know, having a problem other than drinking and we’d talk about it, “Listen, how do we straighten this thing out?”

For me, the tough thing to deal with was the lapses of ethical behavior in my contemporaries because, first of all it demeaned the institution. We were always getting enough bad publicity as an institution. And to have this exposed or that exposed or that talked about, this was not good. Or for the individual members welfare back home, to get themselves reelected. Sometimes you just had to talk to them like a Dutch uncle and say, “Look, I’m hearing things that I shouldn’t be hearing. I don’t want to be more
specific than that but doggone it, straighten up and fly right.” And so I’m sure, Jerry, we never talked about it specifically, but I’m sure if I had them, he had them.

Smith: I always found him unusual, because lots of politicians like gossip and he never did. I almost sensed that he was uncomfortable around the gossiping. I mean, political gossip was one thing, but personal gossip was something that he found offensive.

Michel: Yeah, a waste of time. Yeah, he was always business, all business. And in our group of Chowder & Marching folks, it wouldn’t be Jerry that would bring up things like that, other than when he was Leader to say, “Well, sure, if there’s something I ought to be knowing about here, let me know so we can get this thing corrected.”

Smith: Do you remember where you first heard about the Watergate break-in?

Michel: Oh, gosh, boy, it’s kind of hard to go back.

Smith: Well, I mean, what was your initial reaction?

Michel: I thought, “Oh, geez.” Of course, as I indicated earlier, I was a strong Nixon supporter, but I was pretty surprised that the taping was going on.

Smith: Did the language of the tapes surprise you?

Michel: Right, that really bothered me. Then, of course, another thing I learned about it was if a president’s in trouble, his circle of friends ought not to shrink, it ought to build. And, boy, if Ev Dirksen would’ve lived long enough, he would’ve been the only one who would’ve had the stature and one thing or another to go to Nixon and say, “Dick, fire their (you know what).”

Smith: I tell you a story, several members of the cabinet, led by Mel Laird over the winter of ’70-71, met and they were very upset with the way things were developing at that point. They were particularly upset about Haldeman and Erlichman. Rose Mary Woods shared this view and this group said none of them were going to go to Nixon and none of them thought they had the clout to make Nixon listen. And they thought and thought - who was the one
person who could make Nixon listen - and they decided it was Tom Dewey. They were going to get to Dewey when he was in Florida. He died before he could come back. So there were clearly within the cabinet, at least, some real concerns about the directions that the White House was going. As Watergate expanded, became a political burden, how was Ford handling this?

Michel: And, out of all things, that was the year I was elected chairman of the congressional campaign committee and that was my first job up the leadership ladder. And, boy, I tell you, my wife and I would hate to get up in the morning and say, “What shoe fell last night?” It was just a very anxious time because, holy smokes, is there anything good going to happen here? It’s one darned problem after another. And then, of course, we end up losing 47 seats in the House.

Smith: Or is it 74? It’s 74.

Michel: You’re right. Boy.

Smith: I want to get to that, but before that, for example, were there rumors about Agnew before Agnew resigned?

Michel: Not with me. I did not hear. I was floored, although, I will say, I was floored by Nixon at his selection at the convention. I said, “Who is he?” It was kind of like this last time around with Sarah Palin and John McCain. And I guess I did read he was the governor of Maryland or something, but I was just completely floored. Of course, I think, too, when Dan Quayle was picked by George the First. I think your mind has other people conjured up and when it doesn’t happen you’re tremendously surprised.

Smith: When Agnew resigns, in very short order, Nixon turns to Ford. Now, what went on among your colleagues, because the classic story is Nixon wanted John Connally and John Connally wasn’t going to fly, apparently, on the Hill. Is that safe to say?

Michel: Yeah, as much as some of us thought a lot of John at the time.
Smith: And supposedly it was the Democratic leadership, Carl Albert and, to a lesser degree, Mike Mansfield, who in effect impressed upon the White House that, “The one guy we can confirm is Jerry Ford.” Is that your recollection?

Michel: Right. Yep, that happened to be the safest and sure bet and of course I had no qualms about that whatsoever. But going back to Agnew, man, I was just stunned to think that could happen. Maybe at some lower state offices, you’d hear a lot of that stuff in Springfield and whatever, but not here at the national level and the vice president. I was just, boy, taken aback. I couldn’t believe it. And oddly enough, after that was over and I’d played golf with Agnew, with Mel Laird, and I think Bill Rogers, the secretary of state, and after Agnew passed away, I still kept people on my Christmas cards, you know, and one of the nicest notes I got after he’d passed away was from his wife because I’d continued to send a card and I forget now exactly how she told me but it definitely made the impression that people abandon you after awhile and they don’t want to have a thing to do with you. “Bob, you’ve been very kind to remember me and I just wanted you to know I appreciate it.” So that caused me to continue sending out over 700 Christmas cards. At one time, it was about 10,000, when I was Leader.

Smith: Yep.

Michel: But if there’s a widow or a widower, I keep them on my list because I just remembered that incident. You know, people will abandon you and who are your real friends - at least those who think enough to say that you’re deserving of my remembering.

Smith: Talking about real friends, apparently, Ford and Carl Albert must have been real friends.

Michel: Yeah. I don’t know so much about it. Of course, I took a couple trips with Carl Albert and those were experiences, too. I think, when it was a state dinner or something and he’d say, “I’m glad to be here in Yugoslavia” when we were in Czechoslovakia or something like that.

Smith: The mood among House Republicans must have been pretty celebratory when Ford’s name was announced.
Michel: When the word got out and spinning around that, “Hey, we’ve got to come up with a candidate and quickly,” and “Boy, nobody better than looking at our own Leader, Jerry Ford. He’s got the experience and can be confirmed.” We were all excited.

Smith: Did you think at that point that he might be president? I mean, did you entertain the possibility?

Michel: I guess I didn’t think that far ahead at that time, no. I just thought that, “Boy, you make it to vice president, eventually, some time he can run.”

Smith: While he was vice president, did he maintain contacts?

Michel: Oh, yeah, particularly with our C & M group.

Smith: Well, let me ask you, this whole story of Watergate. Did you express or your colleagues express your concern to the vice president to communicate down to the White House?

Michel: Oh, yeah. Yeah, the fellows could really unload. We knew Jerry so well that we could tell him anything. And wanted him to know as much as we knew that would help him do his job better or to be alert of some pitfalls.

Smith: He was in an awkward position, wasn’t he?

Michel: Yes, he was, in a sense, but he handled it with aplomb.

Smith: Did he defend the president in these conversations?

Michel: I guess, he never undercut the president, that’s for sure. Sometimes I think he’d say maybe he’d do it differently, that kind of thing, because he’d never undercut him. But he was less than enthusiastic on some, I can’t remember specifically, there were those times. But again, that was in-house and we could all talk with confidence to one another.

Smith: As the impeachment proceedings began, did the tone of those conversations change at all? I mean, there must have been a perception that we’re talking now with someone who may very well wind up as president.
Michel: Yeah, when you got closer, boy, and I was sticking with Nixon and what finally, oh the fellow from California who was named the Circuit Court of Appeals judge. He was in the House.

Smith: Republican?

Michel: Yeah.

Smith: Wiggins?

Michel: Wiggins, Chuck Wiggins. And Chuck and I, of course, I had to keep bugging Chuck all the time. Railsback was from Illinois, but I knew Railsback, he was going to vote for impeachment, or he was on the other side, so I confided in Wiggins. And then Chuck said, “You know, Bob, our battle is over. I think we’ve lost it. We’ve lost the battle.” That was very traumatic, very traumatic times, when I’d think of impeachment.

Smith: Did you see Nixon at all in his final days?

Michel: No, except that I was there the night when he resigned. I was in the Cabinet room.

Smith: You were?

Michel: Yeah.

Smith: Tell us about that.

Michel: Yeah, I wrote about that. I should probably dig it out of the Dirksen files and send you a copy of what I wrote. I had the presence of mind to take an envelope out of my pocket, because there was no press there. Gene Berch(?) was there and, of course, Sam Devine, Cederberg, Stennis, Eastland, Tiger Teague.

Smith: The hard core.

Michel: The hard core, you aren’t kidding, around the Cabinet room. And the president comes in and Nixon, you know he’s always kind of stiff like that and he comes up to the table and he started out as, I guess you historians you know this, about his mother and his father and back in California and I called
my description of that the next day a room full of tears. It was touching. And of course he says, “Fellows,” because I don’t think there were any women there, “Fellows, I just hope you won’t feel I let you down.” And, you know, we had been let down. And then, son of a gun, he got up after that, straightened his shoulders and went out and made his speech. And, of course, then that lead to the next day when Corrine and I were so privileged to be there in the East Room.

Smith: Tell us about that.

Michel: Oh, gosh, that was like I think my spine tingled on hearing a fabulous aria song or something for me, “Boy, here’s Jerry Ford who we’ve known from those early days on. And, my gosh, he’s being sworn in as President of the United States.” It was a really moving thing for me. Boy, and so happy, you know. And, of course, Jerry’s comments about, “Our long nightmare of Watergate is over,” and here I was experiencing all of this and thinking, “What I’ve experienced in my time, this is history in the making.”

Smith: Did the mood change overnight? I mean, I know in his first few days he had this Congressional Black Caucus down at the White House and George Meany and other groups that had not been around the White House for awhile. It’s almost as if he understood the power of symbolism.

Michel: Oh yes.

Smith: Of opening the place. And then, of course, came the pardon. Now, had there been discussions, informal or private, advice sought or whatever about the Nixon pardon before it happened?

Michel: Ever since that happened, I said, “Had it not been for the pardon, the President would’ve beaten Carter, and we would’ve won the election.” But he had to do it.

Smith: How bad was it? How bad was the reaction?

Michel: Of course, having been an original Nixon supporter as strong as I was, my feelings were different than a lot of others who thought that was just terrible.
Smith: Did you tell him that you approved of the pardon?

Michel: I don’t think I ever did.

Smith: Because one story is that there were in fact members of Congress who rushed out in public and denounced it while privately telling the White House, you did the necessary thing.

Michel: Well, I didn’t think it was necessary in my own case to cover my back side or whatever because everybody knew I was a strong, strong Nixon supporter and that you go through so much and that’s enough, impeachment and resigning and the humiliation of it all.

Smith: Now, Mel Laird, it’ll come as no surprise, had a scheme or he thought he had a scheme that would’ve—

Michel: He’s a schemer of all schemes.

Smith: Mel’s convinced himself he told Jerry, “Don’t do this until I get back.” He was going to get a bipartisan delegation from both parties of the House and go down to the White House and petition the president for a pardon. Now that sounds fine in the abstract, but if you put yourself in the political mood of that period, it seems to me that any trial balloon would’ve been shot down before it got to tree level. I mean, how could Ford, in that climate, have “prepared” the country for this unpopular act? Was there an alternative? In effect, he threw himself on the sword.

Michel: Right.

Smith: And what was the alternative?

Michel: I don’t know.

Smith: I mean, he was supposedly being told by Jaworski that it could take two years to come to trial which would consume his presidency.

Michel: Oh, right. And I don’t know, I just think as close as we all were and particularly Jerry to Nixon, “Well, I’ve got the power to cut it short and try to
go on from here,” because all that trauma over that. I’m sure he thought it through, I never asked him specifically.

Smith: You said you were head of the Republican House Campaign Committee. You must have heard a lot about the pardon.

Michel: Oh, sure. Jeepers.

Smith: How bad was it?

Michel: It was terrible. I just knew we were going down to terrible defeat and there was nothing I could do about it. And then, of course, during the campaign to be faced with the pardon, you just tried to cover it the best you could, that the president just looked at things and said to have this thing drag on endlessly and how’s he going to bring the country back together to accomplish anything. Then subsequently after time passed, “Son of a gun, if we had been given another two or three weeks, we would’ve pulled that baby out.”

Smith: You know, the great irony, forget Mel Laird’s scheme for a moment. Of course, you know Nixon became very ill and almost died and there was no way of knowing that, but in some ways, if Ford had waited to pardon Nixon until he was sitting on his deathbed, maybe there would’ve been a different reaction.

Michel: That could’ve been different. Yeah.

Smith: Were you down at the White House frequently during the Ford presidency? Was there much contact between you?

Michel: Let’s see, what was I doing at that time? Well I hadn’t gotten up to the point, but I’m trying to think, I’ve got to go back through George the First and Reagan, you know.

Smith: Well, for example, he came up and testified before the House, only President in American history who did that, about the pardon. That must have been extraordinary.

Michel: Oh, yeah, we were all obviously listening and “How did you justify it yourself?” I guess. That whole episode was such a traumatic episode.
Smith: And in the middle of all this is Mrs. Ford’s cancer surgery. Now, had you gotten to know her?

Michel: Oh, sure. Betty and Corinne were real good friends.

Smith: Tell me about it, because we know now that it was rough on her. He was away a lot. The burdens of child-rearing fell on her. That’s probably not terribly unusual for a lot of political wives at that time. Did you sense that she had problems?

Michel: Not really, at our social gatherings, gosh, she was so gracious. And then when we had our C & M meetings, we all had a toddy or two and then you just feel, oh shoot, if there was any giddiness. But there was nothing that gave me any indication that she was anything other than the way my wife was conducting herself.

Smith: Was it tough on political wives?

Michel: Oh, I think it is. I’m reminded now, of course, of my own successor, of course, now he’s the secretary of transportation, but one of their decisions for his not running. I took them to dinner a lot and she’d say, “Bob, you know, our life is nothing like it was with you and Corrine,” because she knew it and they went along with us and could experience it personally. She said, “It’s just not like that anymore and I have no base from which to have friendships and all my friends are back home.” So that’s when she decided, “To heck with it” and she was going home. Of course, Ray, since he had been characterized as a more moderate member, he probably wasn’t going to go anywhere in leadership as much as I kept saying, “Doggone it, Ray, with your capacity and capabilities, you can get up…” Well, he wasn’t sold on that.

But going back to the original question, it’s tough on wives. It’s a combination of things. The fact that, then of course, now, you can go home every weekend, that’s still a problem. You want to be a participant in what’s going on here, but if the sociability isn’t there, that’s hard to put that together. Earlier on, when you couldn’t get the time to go home and you tried to counsel a member on whether or not he brought his family down here or there, I said, “You know, as my wife would tell your wife, that’s one you two
have to decide for yourselves.” But I saw, no question in my time, that that caused break-ups in families. No question about it in my mind. You’ve got to be a very strong-willed, number one woman to put up with all that crap, pardon the French. But I always said, “Man, I owe so much to Corinne for how she handled our case,” and, boy, we raised four kids and it worked out just beautifully. When you’ve been married 55 years to the same gal, then nobody’s going to take her place.

Smith:  
Yep.

Michel:  
Jerry and Betty were such a wonderful couple always. Geez. It was just so wonderful to know them and consider them my friends.

Smith:  
So, as far as you could see, she enjoyed being first lady?

Michel:  
Yeah, she did.

Smith:  
The entertaining?

Michel:  
Right, she just handled it perfectly.

Smith:  
He, of course, adapted after ’74. How did things change with all the Watergate Babies, so called, who came in and started rewriting all the rules?

Michel:  
Yeah, of course, then, that’s when things really started changing dramatically here. There’s no question about that. Just the climate, everything. Thinking back to Watergate kind of reminds me of the day here with all the things that are going on. “Well, that was all Bush”, “That was all Bush”, “Bush”, “Bush”, “Bush”, “Bush”. Then to think, “Geez, when are you going to get out on your own and take responsibility? But then I guess we talk about the doggone cycles in politics, I guess that’s what we’re talking about.

Smith:  
Isn’t it ironic that Gerald Ford would spend his life on the Hill, but as president finds himself fending off Congress with the War Powers Act or foreign policy and spending issues. Now, the veto strategy, you ended up sustaining most of those vetoes. That couldn’t be easy.

Michel:  
Right.
Smith: How was strategy coordinated with the White House?

Michel: I’m not altogether sure how all that worked with Jerry during his administration because I didn’t play the role like I did with Reagan and Bush, where there was a marked contrast with George W. and Denny Hastert, so much so that I asked, “Denny, what kind of relationship do you have?” “Oh, fine.” But I can tell it was nothing like my relationship with Reagan because I would call down there, of course we were different, we were a minority, and Denny had the majority, George W. probably would’ve said, “Well, to hell with it. I don’t have to go through that routine.” But the times that Reagan was willing to have me bring as many as four groups in a day, two in the morning, two in the afternoon, just ten or so for the old treatment, the ones that are for you are on the right, the ones that are against you are on the list and the swing votes are here in the middle, and, boy, Reagan could play that like a violin. I just had such a good relationship with him that anything I wanted him to do, he would do.

Smith: And do well.

Michel: Right, right. Well, with just the extreme of my request and the people that I was dealing with, geez, Jim Baker, Mike Deaver, Duberstein, man, I just felt like I had a great relationship.

Smith: Yeah.

Ford had a temper he spent a lifetime controlling it. Did you ever see that?

Michel: Oh, not much. I guess I’d never bring that up on my own. “Oh geez, Jerry had one hell of a temper.” Not one to be aware of. It never really affected me that much that way.

Smith: Did you see it?

Michel: But I could tell sometimes he’d raise his voice and get pretty perturbed, but not out of the ordinary. For God’s sakes, he had every reason to be ticked off. I can’t remember the specific details.
Smith: One of the things that really angered him policy-wise was after Saigon fell and Congress decided to pull the plug on funding for resettling refugees. And that made him angry. And he went to the country and eventually got it turned around. In your memories surrounding that period, was it just that overwhelming desire to put it behind us? Did that explain it?

Michel: I think so, it probably always ties in. He was a great one for looking forward. He’d pick up from the experience of the past mistake of one thing or another and try to adjust and go forward.

Smith: The Reagan-Ford contest in ’76, how did that divide the House Republicans?

Michel: I don’t know that it did, I’m trying to think.

Smith: Because, by that time, you had a Southern party, you had Southern congressmen who presumably were more conservative.

Michel: Yeah, right. Of course, Bob Griffin and I were doing the floor deal that time and the one thing I have in the Dirksen Library, is one of my Whip counts at the convention with that procedural motion that we won. Then we knew we had this whole thing.

Smith: Was there doubt going into that?

Michel: No, I mean, you didn’t know for sure. But that wasn’t that big of a doggone win, either, as I recall.

Smith: Stu Spencer said he was amazed and very happy that they made the test vote on a procedural question because, he said, “If I’d been running the Reagan campaign, I would’ve found something emotional like foreign policy.” Something you could really rev up. And, of course, what the White House did was basically give them the foreign policy plank so they wouldn’t have that.

Michel: That was an interesting comparison for me because my youngest son, Robin, was dating Charlie Wick’s oldest daughter and he was sitting in the Reagan box while I’m down there hustling for Ford. Of course, the Reagans came to
Robin’s wedding and that was resolved. You get over it and replay it and, my gosh, how things all shake out.

Smith: How brutal was that convention?

Michel: Well, I don’t know. I look back and there were some strong feelings with some people, but I guess I wouldn’t characterize it as real intense.

Smith: It really came down to Mississippi, remember, Clarke Reed and Mississippi. What is it about Clarke Reed who has a reputation for, you can buy him, but he won’t stay bought.

Michel: Yeah, well, there were some characters over a period of our history who were very unique. And every once in awhile, I have to make mention of the fact that Haley Barbour is different than Clarke Reed, but still has those Mississippi roots, but he’s a different personality.

Smith: Were you consulted at all, asked for your opinion about the vice presidency that went to Bob Dole with other Republican House members?

Michel: I don’t know. I’m getting it mixed up now because, you know, Jack Kemp is going to have a big dinner with him for Occidental College. I’m just apprehensive how Jack will look because he sounded terrible on the phone when I heard him.

Smith: Did you stay in touch with Ford in later years after he left the White House?

Michel: Oh yeah, of course, I loved him, we just got the invitation for another Ford reunion. I’m looking forward to it, because boy those are all the old hard core guys who you just enjoyed being with so much.

Smith: In some ways, time was good to him. He lived long enough to know that people had come around to his position on the pardon. And I think people were taking a fresh look—

Michel: Yeah, he has to leave this world feeling that he’d really made a significant contribution to the betterment of things on all scores, adding up. He would have to have said, “Lord, thank you for looking over me the way you have.”
Smith: And, of course, Mrs. Ford, she went on to make history in her own right. It’s extraordinary the impact that she’s had.

Michel: Yes.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Michel: Well, he was a president who filled a gap, boy, at just a very, very critical time in our history. It’s like providence, playing a role and playing Jerry Ford the way the Lord wanted it to be played. He got to be Leader in the House, which he wanted to be, except that he didn’t make the Speaker. But of all things, events unfolded to the degree that he bypassed the Speakership and became vice president and filled the role admirably and went on to become president. And just for that one quirk of fate there, he would’ve been president. He would’ve made it. But all the good that he did and the good will that he has engendered over the years, the Lord would have to say, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.”

Smith: That couldn’t be better.
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Smith: Stu [Spencer] – I asked him about this because half the stories appeared in print. Late one Friday, he was exhausted. The campaign wasn’t going terribly well. They were in the Oval Office. The only other person there was Dick Cheney. The president, being the president, loved nothing more than campaigning, and Stu had to find all sorts of evasive euphemistic phrases to suggest why that wasn’t a great idea – because they had surveys that, when he went out – Stu had some harsh words for the speechwriting outfit…

Orben: Everybody had.

Smith: Well, that’s one thing we want to talk about. But Stu said he would go out and deliver these not very good speeches and his numbers would go down. But how do you tell that to the president? So, Ford says, “Yeah, I’ve got to get out and talk to the people.” And, of course, he’s got to go out and eat some of that rubber chicken and do what he loved best. Finally, Stu just lost it, and he said, “You know, Mr. President, you’re a great president, but you are a fucking lousy candidate.”

Now, that’s stunning enough, and Ford just sat there and said, “Oh, okay.” What other president could you say that to? But the sequel is what makes it great. That story appeared in Jules Witcover’s book about the ’76 campaign, and Stu went ballistic when he saw it. He was embarrassed and angry at Cheney. He called Dick and read him the riot act and “can’t believe you would be so indiscreet,” and so on and so on. Dick sort of let him wind down, and then he said, “Stu, there was a third person in that room.” Spencer thought, maybe the president told that story, which I find very revealing in a number of ways.

Orben: Well, I’ll tell you, I have only once heard the president curse, and he never used that word. The worst I ever heard – are we rolling? – the worst I ever heard, if you call it worst – is we were in the White House Mess, waiting for
the returns of the New Hampshire primary, and we had a wonderful oyster stew. I don’t know who provided that, but I still remember it. Finally, we hear the word that Ford had won the primary – New Hampshire – and the door burst open and there’s Ford coming in saying, “I hope that’s the last God damn time I hear that the only thing I ever won was the [whatever] district in Michigan.” And that’s the only time I’ve ever heard that.

Smith: But that’s doubly revealing because it suggested, obviously, that is a monkey he carried around on his back – the notion that he had only been elected to a Congressional district.

Orben: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: It legitimized him, in a way.

Orben: What district was it?

Smith: Well, I think it’s the Fifth now.

Orben: I think so, too. It has a vaguely familiar ring. But, yeah, he was hugely up as a result of that. We were all up because - I guess you’ve discussed this with many people in politics - running for office is an inhumane way of spending your time. I still remember on that very first day we were involved in New Hampshire, we went up and I had had a very light breakfast at maybe six o’clock in the morning at home, and hadn’t had anything to eat until nine P.M.

I’m going down to the dining room and I’m told that in Keene, New Hampshire things close at nine o’clock. I see Red Cavaney, who was then one of the advance men, walking across the lobby and I grabbed hold of Red by the lapels and I said, “If I don’t get something to eat I’m going to kill you.” And he managed to get some hamburgers from someplace, and to this day, whenever I see Red, I grab him by the lapels and I say, “If I don’t get something to eat I’m going to kill you.”

Smith: Let’s back up because you had a very distinguished career long before you ever set foot in the Ford White House.
Orben: Extinguished is the more accurate word.

Smith: Including working for my childhood hero, Jack Paar.

Orben: Jack Paar. I wrote for Jack Paar, I wrote for Red Skelton, I wrote for Dick Gregory during the civil rights days, and Red Buttons – a lot of comedians, yeah.

Smith: Who was the funniest?

Orben: Noooo – they’re all funny.

Smith: On their own funny.

Orben: They are all funny. As individually, with the exception of Red who wasn’t a close person, I told each one of them that, “You could write this stuff better than me, because nobody knows you better than you.” But they no longer have the time for it. And that’s true of presidents. Many presidents can write their speeches. Every once in a while, when the speech was not what Ford wanted, he would come in the next day or the next meeting and he’d have two or three yellow legal sheets that he wrote what he wanted. So the same applies.

Smith: It’s interesting because I’ve heard David Gergen tell a variation of that. That he saw something and thought, “Boy, this is really good.” And only after the fact learned that Ford had written it himself.

Orben: Yeah.

Smith: What is the professional and non-professional training/preparation to write for those folks? How did you wind up in the position?

Orben: Oh – at the age of seventeen or eighteen I got a job in a magic shop – a professional magic shop in New York. The Conjurers’ Shop in New York City, and I had been interested in magic as a result of my brother being interested in magic. When I was twelve-thirteen years old, during the end of the Depression, we went up to the Catskill Mountains and I was the Boy with the Radio Mind. We did an incredibly bad mind reading act. I think the audience knew precisely what we were doing, and here’s this fat little kid
trying to be a mind reader and throw them money. At any rate, I finally got as a result of all this, a job as a demonstrator in a magic shop. This may seem off the topic, but it isn’t. One of the hot magic books in that time was a book called *Smart Talk for Magicians*. And I looked at it. It was jokes that magicians could tell – I thought oh, I can do that. When you’re eighteen years old you think this; nothing alarms you. So, I did. And I put out a grandiose book called *The Encyclopedia of Patter*, and it proved to be a hugely good selling book in magic, and then in show business.

I put out, ultimately, forty more like it, and I became known in show business as a comedy writer. Then I had a humor service that was a topical humor service – came out twice a month – and this was also popular in show business. But then businessmen started to come up, “Well, I could use this stuff,” so they subscribed and finally, politicians, and many politicians – the White House, half of Capitol Hill.

How I got into speechwriting was a little oblique. One of the CEOs that I was doing jokes for on a custom basis, his speechwriter became ill and he asked me could I write the speech. I said, “Sure, I can write the speech. The speech is the easy part. The jokes are the hard part.” And so I did a little speechwriting as well.

Smith: Are politicians, as a class, different from any other group in terms of appreciating humor? They do tend to be a little bit self-absorbed, which I think is the enemy of spontaneous humor.

Orben: What’s the difference with that and show business? No, they are very similar. I think people in show business have a little more innate talent. You have natural performers in politics, and you can name them as well as I could, including Reagan. But in show business you have to have a basic ability to stand up in front of an audience and make it; where in politics, you don’t necessarily have to. Adlai Stevenson was not a barn burner of a speechmaker, but he was a good man.

Smith: Was Reagan a once in a lifetime talent?
Orben: Oh, no. Good heavens, you had people like Mo Udall. We forget now how much of a reputation for humor Barry Goldwater had. The very first time I was ever involved in directly writing for a national political figure, was in 1964 when I was called down to Washington by the Goldwater people. This was before the nomination. They said we think we’re going to make it into the campaign and we’d like you to write special material for Barry. Okay, this was maybe April-May. So we worked out an arrangement where I would send him a page of material a day. Incidentally, all this stuff is at the Ford Library if they ever open the boxes that I sent them. And I did. A page of material a day during the entire campaign.

One thing I still remember about that first meeting is we concluded how this stuff would be sent, where the money, and all that. And then, as the others in the meeting filed out, Senator Goldwater said, “Bob, could you wait a moment, please.” They left and he closed the door and said, “Bob, I have a question, I’d like your judgment on something.” Okay. And he said, “I’m going to do a speech in another couple of days, and I have this joke and I want you to let me know what you think of it.” He told me the most horrendous joke about Bobby Kennedy and three nuns. I don’t think you could do it today on cable television. I’m standing there with my mouth dropped open and he said, “Well, what do you think?” I started to yammer, essentially saying, “Oh, well, it’s a good joke…I’m sure, I’m sure it’s a good joke…but is it really the right joke for this event…,” and I just yammered on.

Finally, Senator Goldwater smiled and he said, “Well, thank you, I appreciate your judgment.” I’m sitting on the plane, going back to New York, and I’m thinking, “He was putting me on,” and he had no intention – I don’t even know where he got the joke from – but he had no intention of doing it. He used a lot of humor during the campaign, which now seems to have wafted away.

Smith: He had a natural sense of humor?

Orben: Very good sense of humor, yeah.
Smith: I remember the delightful story, there was some golf club, I guess, in Phoenix, that had blackballed him. Do you know this story where he said, “Well, since I’m only half Jewish, maybe they’ll let me play nine holes.”

Orben: Or go into the pool halfway. Yeah, he used both. Actually, it was at that time that I was writing for Dick Gregory since 1962. I edited Greg’s first two books. One was a bestseller. Parenthetically, nobody ever asked me during my entire life, what party I was with. To this day, people assume I’m a Republican. I’m not. I’m not a Democrat. Nobody ever asks me.

Smith: But it is fascinating that you were simultaneously writing for Dick Gregory and Barry Goldwater.

Orben: Dick Gregory and Barry Goldwater at the same time. One of the jokes that I wrote for Greg was talking about Goldwater, and as you know the campaign slogan was, “In your heart, you know he’s right,” and Greg used to say, “In your heart, you know he’s white.” It didn’t conflict.

Smith: That was at that height of the Goldwater/Rockefeller fight.

Orben: Oh, yes.

Smith: Did you hear anything about that? Did he talk at all about that?

Orben: No, actually, I only started writing for him when he got the nomination. That was the deal. It was an incredibly rushed time for me because I had already signed with the Red Skelton Show, and I was going out to Hollywood with a contract that I thought was only going to last six weeks. It was one of these strange show business contracts where the contract was for six years, but the first option came up in six weeks. I joined the show at a point where six weeks would bring us to the election, and I figured that since my reputation was writing political humor, they were going to get me for six weeks of political jokes, and then I’m history.

Well, it didn’t work out that way. But at any rate, for six years I was out there writing the monologue for this Skelton show and on the way out to California, the Goldwater people were in touch with me, “Yeah, we want the material.” So at that point I was sending a page of material a day to Goldwater. I was
sending a page of material a day to Dick Gregory, and I was sitting down to write the monologue on the Red Skelton Show. People always ask if jokes were interchangeable and I would say no. At the point where I’m writing Heathcliff and Gertrude jokes for Skelton, if one of those pages were sent to Goldwater by mistake, it would not have worked.

Smith: Did you ever run dry?

Orben: Oh, yeah. But you can’t run dry, in the sense that, at the point where the inspiration muse leaves, you have craft to fall back on.

Smith: How did you come to be in the Ford White House?

Orben: That’s a long story. Do we have four hours?

Well, now I’m in California and I’m writing the monologue on the Red Skelton Show, and come the early part of 1968 – well, I’ll back up. In 1968 Ford, as Minority Leader of the House, is asked to do the Gridiron Dinner. That’s ten minutes of humor. The Democrat was Hubert Humphrey, and the thought was that Hubert Humphrey really knew his way around with words. Ford gave something like 200 speeches a year, but humor wasn’t part of them. The brain trust for Ford decided maybe they needed professional help.

They sent somebody out to California – it might have been Bob Hartmann – who talked to Senator George Murphy, for his show business background. Murphy sends him to his friend, Red Skelton. Red Skelton sends him to the director/producer of the show and the producer of the show calls me and says, “We’d like you to do this.” I wasn’t very happy about this because it smelled of no money. As, indeed, it proved to be. One of the things I used to argue with the other writers on the show, here you people are so darn eager to send free jokes to politicians, and I have on my desk a little sign that says, “Anything worth doing is worth doing for money.” And I realized that I’m not going to tell Skelton no…so okay.

Now the interesting thing about that is whoever came out, and I think it was Bob Hartmann, had two names to get in touch with. One was George Murphy and the other was somebody who had written a lot of material for Goldwater
in ’64. Me. So, one way or another, I was fated to write for President Ford. I wrote the material and Si [Seymour] Berns, who was the director of the show, who was a good stand-up comic, too, he read the material into a tape recorder and we sent it to Ford. Ford taped it and probably edited it based on what they needed, sent it back. Si and I, again, tweaked it, and back and forth it went a couple of times. It proved to be a hugely successful speech.

At the Gridiron Dinner everybody was expecting Ford not to do well, and for Humphrey to walk away with it. Instead, it was the other way around. I think Humphrey did well, but Ford was the surprise hit. And it had a joke that is frequently quoted. Toward the end of the speech, Ford looked around and Johnson was already out of the race, Humphrey was the presumed nominee, and Ford, looking at, I assume, at Humphrey, said that he has no eyes on running for president. He said he “loves the House of Representatives, in spite of the long, hard, irregular hours. But sometimes when it is late at night, and I’m tired and hungry, on that long drive back to Alexandria, Virginia, where I live, as I go past 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, I do seem to hear a little voice within me saying, ‘If you lived here, you’d be home now.’”

And in fact, in 1973, when he had to do the Gridiron Dinner as vice president, we couldn’t come up with a better line so we just repeated it.

Smith: By that time, though, it was particularly sensitive.

Orben: Ford had come to the conclusion that humor was a good thing. And so, through the years, through Paul Theis, who was then at the Republican Congressional Committee and worked with Ford, I would send material. They would ask me for a specific speech and I would do it. Then when Ford became vice president I was asked to be sort of an occasional consultant, and I was.

When Ford was preparing for the Gridiron Dinner in 1973, there was a lot of speculation about Governor Reagan – does he dye his hair? He had been in town just the week before and people were talking about getting snippets of his hair and testing it to see whether it was dyed. And Ford reprised all of this
interest in Governor Reagan’s hair, and he is there to say that “Governor Reagan does not dye his hair. Let’s just say he’s turning prematurely orange.”

Okay, so we’re rehearsing the speech and Vice President Ford looks at me and he says, “Do you think the Governor would take offense at that?” Now, I’m seeing this blockbuster joke of the year go up in smoke, but I think I gave him a fair, honest answer. I said, “You know, Mr. Vice President, Reagan has been in show business a good part of his life. He has gone through a thousand roasts and I am sure he has heard dyed hair jokes. So, I don’t really think so.”

Well, jumping far ahead, it obviously was the blockbuster joke of the Gridiron Dinner, and it took on a life of its own, to the point where ten or fifteen years later, Johnny Carson was still referring to Reagan’s orange hair. Even though, I don’t think by that time, most people knew where it came from. And I’ve often wondered how much of a grudge does an actor, a vain actor, turned politician hold when he hears that joke – and he certainly knew where it came from.

Smith: Well, it’s interesting. I draw the parallel between Ford’s sensitivity there, about hurting Reagan’s feelings, and Hartmann’s famous story about the “long national nightmare.” The line that Ford wanted to cut from the speech because, as I understand it, he thought it was piling on Nixon. Kicking him when he was down.

Orben: That’s right.

Smith: And it’s a parallel.

Orben: And he was a somewhat friend of Nixon’s.

Smith: I see a parallel.

Orben: Same thing. But I wasn’t in a position to say I was going to quit. If Ford had really insisted, we would have taken the joke out. We took out a few jokes, not all on sensitivity lines, but not many. One of the things that I so admired about Ford, and it’s almost unique of all the people I have written humor for... I’ve gone on to be consultant to CEOs of some of the largest companies in the world. And when you first begin, you were always thought of as being the
expert on humor. And then by the time it was show time, getting lectures on humor by people who had never written or told a joke in their lives.

I once gave up on a very well known political figure because his wife would take the jokes I wrote and try it out on people and come back and say, “Well, so and so didn’t like that.” I didn’t like working like that. So we come back now to what I was about to say, and fortunately I remembered.

Ford, if he trusted you, if you hadn’t let him down, would not question things. More often than not, the humor that I wrote for Ford was highly specialized, and in some cases referred to things that he was not conversant with. And if there was time, I would explain.

Smith: Does that include pop culture?

Orben: At that point there wasn’t the gap that there is now.

Smith: Why do you think there is now and there wasn’t then?

Orben: I don’t know why.

Smith: Do you think having teenaged children made a difference?

Orben: There always were teenaged children, they didn’t jump from kindergarten. However, when I was brought up, and when I learned my craft, and for years and years after that, the teenaged children, until they started dating, and the younger kids, and the parents would sit and listen to the radio together. They would listen to Edgar Bergen and Jack Benny and all the rest. When it became television, they would watch all the shows together. So there was a common culture. Then it went off on tangents. So no, it wasn’t that sort of thing. It was mostly something going on in that group at that moment that Ford wouldn’t be aware of. And I would explain the joke, but he would never say, “Do you think that will work?” “Well, okay,” and he would do it. So he was wonderful in that sense.

Every other performer, with the exception of Dick Gregory, Dick Gregory was his own editor, so I sent him a batch of material, he would take some of it, but he wouldn’t question material. Others were just awful. Particularly
politicians, because in many instances - I realize this is the end of my career but my career is over anyway - politicians are running scared. They’re not used to standing up in front of an audience. And so they’re running scared and they want to make sure they are not embarrassed.

Smith: In one session Don Penny did with Tom Brokaw - I’ve seen the transcript - he says to the president, “In this job you have to be Fred Astaire.” And the president asked what he meant - “you have to tap dance constantly.” And it wasn’t something that Ford had done. I’m wondering, did he adapt to the demands of the job in that sense?

Orben: No, I think Ford – I don’t know that this has ever been written or talked about – but I think in school, Ford, if he was ever in a music class, he would have been called a listener. The teacher goes in back of each student, listening to what they’re singing and if they are nowhere near, at least in the Bronx, you became a listener. I think Ford’s monotone was that. I never heard him sing. When he was up in front of an audience and it was the Star Spangled Banner, he would move his lips. I remember once, at some event, some nice lady, as part of a women’s group, said, “Well, if the president would just stand with us in front of the piano and sing whatever,” and I said, “Well, maybe it would be better if you sang.”

So, I think it was a mixed blessing that calm monotone of a delivery, which was common from where he came from. He wasn’t inventing it, but it was not good for humor. It wasn’t good, essentially, for speech making, but in the early months it was good for the country because, boy, did he sound right. Did he sound like he knew what he was doing, and he did know what he was doing.

Smith: Did he take lessons? For example, we know that in the ’76 acceptance speech there was a huge amount, not only of preparation, but practice that went into that. Was there any of that in the early days of the presidency?

Orben: Oh, somewhere in the archives, because Bob Schlesinger, Jr., who wrote the book White House Ghosts, found the pages. The president had asked me, or Hartmann had asked me, for a critique on various speeches. At least three
single spaced pages were written by me, and Hartmann didn’t trust anybody. He brought it to the president. The president read it in his presence, and then initialed it and gave it back to Hartmann, who gave it back to me. We rehearsed every speech. But not too much. I never thought that the president would hold still for extensive rehearsals…and indeed, later on, I learned that he didn’t. But for instance, on the humor events, we’d run through it maybe twice, and I’d tried to give him readings of a specific joke. But everything was rehearsed, and we did the same thing on the plane. I made most domestic trips and on the plane, except toward the very end when there was really no time, I would run through the speech with him.

Smith: Did he ever use a speech coach?

Orben: No. Not that I’m aware of. I was the speech coach and then Don Penny was doing it.

Smith: At what point do you become actually a member of the White House staff?

Orben: Well, seven, eight, nine days after he became president, I figured I’m going to hear from the White House. I’m living in New York and the phone rings and it’s Hartmann, and Hartmann says, “The president wants you down here.” I said, “When?” And he said, “Now.” I said, “I can’t come down now.” He said, “Tomorrow.” I said, “Okay.” I was having dinner with Red Buttons in town and Red wanted to wax nostalgic about the good old days, and so at midnight we’re walking down Broadway – Red is reminiscing, “There’s the Old Latin Quarter etc.” and I’m looking over my shoulder thinking that we’re going to be mugged – and there goes my White House visit.

So, at any rate, the next day, I think it might have been nine days later, but the previous week I had been in Washington working with Vice President Ford. I did a lot of humor for speeches and punching up speeches for the vice president. And so, I remember, he was going out on an eight or nine speech engagement that was, I think, going to end up in Hawaii, I’m not sure about that. But now it’s the week of the resignation, it’s Monday, and I’m down there to work on the speeches. I’m in Hartmann’s office for almost two hours, and we start to talk about the speech and Hartmann is called out and he’s gone
for ten or fifteen minutes. He’s back and forth, and each time he starts to say, “Now, if we’re called across the street…,” and finally I said, “Bob, which street are you talking about? Executive Avenue or Seventeenth Street?” because I never thought Nixon was going to resign. Never thought.

So, I’m still there Tuesday working on the speeches that never got done, and a reporter came in. I turned over the speech, facedown, and he said, “Bob, what’s going on?” And I said, “Look, I’m a writer, who’s going to tell me what’s going on?” On the network news that night he was reporting that something must be going on because they brought their writer from New York. And I nudged my wife and said, “A lot he knows.” Well, a lot I knew.

Smith: Did you find out along with everyone else about Nixon’s resignation?

Orben: Oh, yeah. Oh, I had no idea that he was going to do that. And I had no idea that Ford was going to pardon him. I learned about that the morning of the pardon, when I’m still in New York, because I’d been commuting back and forth, when a Broadway actor who I knew called me up and said, “Do you know what that son of a bitch you’re working for has just done?” And I’m thinking to myself, now it’s early in the morning and I’m thinking, “Does he mean Skelton? He knows I’m not working for Skelton. He couldn’t mean Ford.” That’s how I learned. But at any rate, so maybe eight, nine days after the resignation, they brought me down.

Smith: When you were in there that Tuesday, just a couple days before the Nixon resignation, did you have any way of knowing if Hartmann was writing an inaugural address?

Orben: I don’t know. You mean the few words that he was saying?

Smith: The eight minute speech that he actually delivered.

Orben: No, my guess, I doubt it. That’s a good question because I had become very close to Hartmann through the years, up until he died. It would have been a good question to ask. But I would guess no, because Hartmann’s *modus operandi* was to leave somewhat early, come in the next morning and it was done. He would work overnight.
Smith: What made him a controversial figure within the Ford circle?

Orben: Well, I think Bob was mistreated, I would almost say. Bob had huge faults. I remember when the fellow who did the Ford book asked me to come in for an interview and I said, “Before you get started, you’re going to go through all this Hartmann stuff. He’s abrasive, and this, that and the other thing.” And of course he was. But he also was very astute and a good writer. He knew Ford’s style, he knew what Ford would say – and Ford, again, trusted him. He was curt, he was hard to get along with until you fought back.

He used to have, in addition to the eight o’clock senior staff meeting, a seven o’clock meeting in his office, which I always thought was absurd and told him that. But one time he was saying, “Did you see this in the Washington Post?” And I said, “No, I haven’t.” And he said, “Don’t you read the Washington Post in the morning?” And I told him, I said, “Look, Bob, you give me the limo and the papers in the back, and I’ll read them coming in as you do, and I will be able to answer your questions.” And that was the end of that. He would accept being argued with and fought back with.

Smith: I’m told he was utterly loyal to the president.

Orben: Oh, boy. Yes. And in my mind, Ford needed a few more of those in the administration.

Break

Smith: We were talking about Bob Hartmann’s loyalty and maybe the most historic example of that is his instant, and one might say courageous, response to the Al Haig feeler, for lack of a better word.

Orben: Well, it’s beyond courageous, it was astute. Bob had a very good sense of the total scene and wasn’t carried away by minutia. But he had a picture of where that might put Ford, and he was right. He was a hero.

Smith: Did he, in that sense, compensate for Ford’s credulity? I mean, there was almost an innocence, in some ways, I think, about President Ford. He believed good of people, which is great until they disproved him. It seemed to me, at least, that he wasn’t a guileful person himself, and just as he was a truthful
person, he was capable of being shocked when people were not truthful with him.

Orben: Well, that’s very true. I think his personality was formed by his childhood and never changed. He was the same person who came out of Grand Rapids into Washington and retained all of what we now call family values. You may be right. I think Hartmann, in that instance, was protecting him from himself.

Smith: I only heard him disparage two people in the time I knew him. And the worst he could say was, “He’s a bad man.” That was the worst epitaph that he could come up with. One was Gordon Liddy, and one was John Dean.

Orben: That’s an interesting question – I can’t ever recall – coming back for just a moment: this question of, I don’t know why it popped into my mind, but Ford would hear you out, regardless of what. If you disagreed with him, you felt free to disagree with him. And put it as strongly as you could. What he wouldn’t accept is coming back the next day, or later on, and saying, “Well, let me again say…” That wouldn’t fly. I only tried it with him once and I apologized for it. When he asked Chevy Chase to be on that Humor in the Presidency, three-day conference, and I read about it, I called him up and I said, “Mr. President, this is not a good idea. You’re taking a potential viper to your bosom.” And, again, this speaks to what we were just talking about then, President Ford as a trusting individual. He said, no, he talked to Chevy Chase and Chevy Chase said that he was contrite and he would not do anything to embarrass the president. And I thought about it, and I called him a second time. And he accepted it, but he said, “No, Chevy Chase would be all right.” But he wasn’t.

Smith: He was not?

Orben: I don’t think so.

Smith: Really?

Orben: Because the whole thing resurrected this terrible time. I had often wanted to talk to President Ford after the fact of what he really thought about it. Because here is this star athlete, one of the most athletic presidents we’ve ever had, to
be presented as a bumbler. And to this day, there are people who think that he was a bumbler. And, as we know, he was anything but.

I know he had a temper because one time I was standing in back of him at an outdoor rally at an airport, and I was maybe three, four, five feet in back of him, and there was a group chanting something off in the distance. And they got louder and louder, and as he was doing the speech I could see a vein on the back of his neck turn red and stand out. So he had a temper. But I never had the courage to ask, “What do you really think of that?”

Smith: And along with that, sort of first cousin to that, was this portrayal of him - where the word ‘decency’ was almost used as a term of condescension. “He’s decent,” which is a euphemism for “he’s not that bright.”

Orben: Yeah. Well, of course, this all goes back to the LBJ, “He can’t walk and chew gum” - that was a cleaned up version of it. But there was always a debate while I was there, which was most of the time, as to “Should we respond to the jokes about the clumsiness and the walking and chew gum?” There was the feeling that this only calls attention to it, which is nonsense because the attention is there. I think Ford overwhelmingly agreed with my viewpoint that we ought to do something about it. But sometimes the other side won, and my favorite response was when he went to a Yale law school event and he opened his speech by saying, “It’s a great pleasure to here at the Yale Law School’s Sesquentennial Convocation, and I defy anyone to say that and chew gum at the same time.” It made the start of all three networks. It was that sort of thing that I think we should have even done more of, because it indicated that he was aware of it and he could brush it off.

Smith: By the time I was writing for him, much later, maybe it was a little bit more relaxed and maybe I was a little bit more of a smartass, and I didn’t have the whole apparatus to say no. And it worked, so he kept on doing it. But the one thing he would never make jokes about was age. It was interesting. Reagan made a career out of it.

Orben: Well, he had to.

Smith: And was very effective at it. But he [Ford] wouldn’t do age jokes.
Orben: That’s interesting. I don’t even think that ever came up. Because, this is besides the point, but two things: one time I’m going through a display at the National Archives and they had pictures from World War II – photos – a picture on the flight deck of a carrier stood out. Sailors playing basketball. I got in touch with the archivist, or the curator, and I said, “Do you know who that is going up for the ball?” “No.” The only reason I knew it was Ford – he had sent me to a reunion of the ship, and somebody had that picture. He was really a good looking guy.

But, you know, he was a male model. Candy Jones, was a model at that time, I was friendly with her through another association, and she said that the other models, the girls, loved to be on a shoot with him because while most of the male models would be facing the camera, he would be looking at the girls. And they would be facing the cameras.

Smith: It’s a wonderful story. And, it does suggest a lack of vanity.

Orben: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: Which is not something you associate with male models.

Orben: I’m not suggesting that he was lusting after the girls, but maybe he was. He was a great looking guy.

Smith: Tell me about his sense of humor.

Orben: Well, I remember one time – he would see the craziness in things – one time we were doing something for the Alfalfa Club. I’m going through who would be at the head table - there would be president so and so, and vice president…and he said, “What do you mean president? I’m the president. Well, might there be something in that that we could have fun in playing back and forth?” And so I wrote a long development of the president there who was last year’s president, and then so and so will be next year’s president and all that. And it went on for about a minute and a half. And as we were rehearsing it, I said, “You know, Mr. President, this is called a running joke. I can’t tell you, if a running joke doesn’t work, how long a minute and a half will seem.” And he said, “Well, it’s fun. Let’s do it.” And it was a huge hit. He would
occasionally say things about Kissinger, and I would write them down. Now, always, it was the germ of a joke. You had to make a joke out of it, but he saw the germ of it.

Smith: Now presidents do so many – there was the Gridiron in the old days, and now you’ve got the television, the Correspondents’ Dinner and all of those.

Orben: He did them all. It was the Alfalfa, the Gridiron, the Radio and TV Correspondents’ Dinner, the White House Correspondents’ Dinner, and the Press Photographers’ Dinner. But what was interesting and why there were editorials – I remember there was an editorial in the evening paper, the Washington – not the Times, but whatever it was – saying that it’s nice to hear laughter in the White House again. Because he started every speech with humor, and not the same humor. It was always custom written. Unless you have the Jay Leno staff, that’s almost impossible to keep up. But he scored very, very big with it.

Smith: Tell me about the speechwriting operation, because it did come in for some criticism. How was it structured and how did it work?

Orben: When I came aboard Paul Theis was the editorial director. He had the speechwriting operation and the research department. One of the problems with the speechwriting was that there were never enough speechwriters, particularly as we went into the campaign. There were three writers: Milt Friedman, Pat Butler, and me, and I’m sure in all this research, you’ve learned about Roman Numeral Two, and the shadow speechwriting group that was operating. No?

Smith: No.

Orben: Well, at any rate, our speechwriting operation was always understaffed – at best, we had maybe five, six writers.

Smith: Did that reflect a decision, I think early in the administration, for symbolic, and substantive reasons, to cut the White House staff? Sort of the anti-imperial presidency. I think Rumsfeld boasted about a 10% cut of the White House staff.
Orben: Well, that might be, and for all I know, that’s true. But we just never had enough speechwriters. When I took over in 1976, everybody had been let go except the three that I mentioned: me and Pat and Milt Friedman. We eventually acquired a few more, but we were always understaffed. I remember arguing with Cheney’s group about, my God we’re doing probably more speeches than any president has ever done, and we can’t grind this stuff out with so few writers. And they say, “Well, there aren’t enough slots.” I said, “For God’s sake, let go two of the gardeners.”

There was friction, as you know, between Cheney and Hartman. To what extent this punished Hartmann’s group, I don’t know. But there was a shadow speechwriting operation which we called Roman Numeral Two, because the very first meeting, the first week of 1976, when we were gearing up for the run for the nomination, it was in the Roosevelt Room, and Hartmann had put together a speech, an outline. You don’t put together a State of the Union overnight. And there was discussion about it, and on the other end of the table there was a Roman Numeral Two speech that had been prepared.

We then found out that there was a Roman Numeral Two group. Who was in this, beyond Gergen, I don’t know. But I remember at the end of the election, when we had lost, somebody came into my office and said he was a speechwriter for the other group. I said, “What speech, we never…” Through the entire time that I ran the speechwriting, as much as you run anything there, during the 1976 campaign, I was only aware twice that there was another speech in play.

But coming back to that meeting, Ford really got mad. He threw his pen down and said, “I don’t want this sort of conflict. Hartmann is going to prepare the State of the Union.” Of course, that meant us. But that never went away. And I don’t know why the president didn’t stop it. And I don’t know why Hartmann didn’t argue for more – to have it stopped. I would have loved to had Gergen working with us. Gergen is a wonderful writer, and who else might have been there that we could have used?

Smith: Where was he nominally slotted? Because he was in the White House.
Orben: He came in right at that first week of 1976…he had been working for Simon, over at Treasury, I think. Because I remember calling him almost the end of the year when this thing had been dumped on me. I never wanted this job. And my wife always said they made a big mistake because I could have been so much more effective doing what I was doing, which was adding the humor and punching up speeches. Now, I became a paper shuffler and that’s really what it amounted to.

Smith: What was Hartmann’s role?

Orben: Hartmann ran the speechwriters. I was nominally the director of the speechwriters, but I reported to Hartmann, and the president. Hartmann did some of the important speeches.

Smith: I remember hearing there were complaints about speeches not being done on time, that sort of thing. I hasten to add that was a rap on Hartmann, not talking about the rest of the office. But that is something I’ve heard.

Orben: Well, if Bob was responsible for a speech, it would be the overnight thing. But, I think that was relatively rare. The speeches were always ready on time, and in sufficient time. Actually, the concept was discussed with the president. Now Paul Theis did an interesting thing, which I never had time to do. We would go into the president and there would be such and such a speech. And Paul would come up with three ways to go with it in writing. The president would look it over, and then the president said, “Well, here’s what I’d like to do,” and sometimes it was picking up on one of the three items.

But the big problem in that whirlwind is that you did a lot of speeches where nobody really knew what to say. This is true time immemorial, and so, I think the press calls them thumb suckers. You come up with something and unfortunately, when you do that, it tends to be oatmeal.

Smith: Remember, there was a very substantive, and in some quarters, controversial speech that he gave at, I believe, Tulane, right at the brink of the fall of Saigon. Do you remember that?
Orben: Well, I wasn’t on the plane. That was Milt Friedman going down with – I don’t think Hartmann was aboard, even – usually I was on the plane, but I wasn’t that time. And as Milt told me, and again, this is third hand knowledge, he and the president rewrote the speech, and upset other people.

Smith: Including, I think, Secretary Kissinger.

Orben: Yes, I remember the name. Yes.

Smith: To make it more clear that, as far as the United States was concerned, this war was over.

Orben: That’s the story that I got from Milt when he came back. Kissinger did not take it well…it was never easy challenging Kissinger. I’m probably the only person in Washington, if not the world, who has ever been called arrogant by Henry Kissinger. That takes a bit of doing.

Smith: What occasioned this?

Orben: Well, we were coming up to the Gridiron Dinner, and of course I was writing the material for the Gridiron Dinner, and Rockefeller was also going to be one of the speakers the Gridiron Dinner. So President Ford asked, “Can you help Rockefeller on that?” And I’ve got everything else to do as well, and then Kissinger gets in touch with me and says, he’s going to be one of the speakers, could I do that? And I said, “I really don’t think so, I don’t think I have the time.” I said, “I’ll try. If I can think of anything, okay.” Scowcroft used to call me once a week, and then finally Kissinger calls from the plane and in the middle of shuttle diplomacy, and I said, “I don’t have the time, I can’t do it.”

The next time I’m waiting to go into the Oval Office, he comes out of the Oval Office and says, “You’re getting very arrogant.” And about a month later we’re in Vail and I’m coming in to a meeting with the president. I come in the door and he turns to the president and says, “That boy is sick!” And poor Ford is wondering what that is all about?

Smith: Was Henry sort of a lightning rod?
Orben: The biggest problem that I had, since I never looked on this as a career, and never wanted to be there except for personal loyalty to the president. I had no awe of Henry Kissinger, or anybody other than the president. And so, I remember one time during the campaign, we had written a pretty good campaign speech and Henry comes in with two pages – he had just been to Africa – and it’s an infomercial on what Henry did in Africa. It had no place in the speech at all, so I cut it out. And the next day I go back in with the speech and it’s back in because Henry made an end run. And that’s again, Ford accommodating people. And of course, to some extent you have to.

Smith: Before I forget, because you were there early on, how much friction was there between the Nixon people and the Ford people?

Orben: Well, there weren’t that many – Ford, as I remember it, had said to the Ford group, “They’re all going out of the plane, but not without a parachute.” And so, we still had all of the Nixon writers down the hall. Ben Stein, I wish we could have retained him, he’s a good writer. And poor Ben Stein, he did a few things for us and I had to edit and add some jokes to it. I remember giving it back to him and he gave me such an evil look. Here’s this comedy writer telling me…and he was right, in a way. But at any rate, they all went pretty quickly. Gergen went, they all went, all except John McLaughlin, Father McLaughlin.

My favorite memory on that is, come November, Nessen is doing the briefing on the turkey for the White House. And the press asks, how many pounds, it’s twenty-two, and how big, where did it come from and all the rest, and there was this modest lull, and then one of the press said, it’s in the transcript, “Speaking of turkeys, what does Father McLaughlin do now?” I think a couple of months after that…he was there for a long time what he was doing, I don’t know. We had nothing for him.

Smith: The reason I ask, I think it was Stu – they had gotten into the East Room for the swearing in. Sort of last minute with some members of Congress who were seated.

Smith: It was Stu.
Smith: Was it Stu? And when it was over a receiving line formed, and basically – Leon Parma told the story – Leon got in there – as an old friend, and he had a couple members of the hierarchy. They found chairs for them, and when it was over they left the East Room and this receiving line formed and everyone was encouraged to go down to the State Dining Room for refreshments. And he said you could see the Nixon people, en masse, peeled off and went back to wherever they worked, and the few Ford people and friends and family members went down to the State Dining Room. But it was two very distinct contingents.

Orben: You know, I can see that happening. I wasn’t here for that. But I can see that happening. There was vast distrust of the Nixon people, and likewise. There is something about that I’ve mentioned a few times and it’s never been reported, and I think it is very significant. When Ford was campaigning for the Republicans in 1974, we were out in California, it was a couple of days before the election, and Nixon was in the hospital. Ford went to visit him. Went in by himself, there was nobody else with him. Came out and we get on the plane to go somewhere else. Dr. Lukash sits down beside me and says, “You know, Bob, you might be thinking of a statement from President Ford if Nixon doesn’t make it through the night.” I said, “It’s that close?” He said “It’s that close.” Now, somewhere in the archive there is this statement that I wrote.

Smith: There were the political advisors that all told him not to go to the hospital. Not to see Nixon.

Orben: Yeah, well, sure. But if Nixon had not made it, how history would have changed.

Smith: Were there too many Fourth of July speeches?

Orben: Gotta have a Fourth of July speech!

Smith: But, remember the Bicentennial – at the time of the Bicentennial.

Orben: Oh, the Bicentennial.

Smith: When he was going from place to place…
Orben: Oh, I loved those speeches. Ford, in the midst of everything else, came to us and said, “This is an important historical moment,” and, in fact, there is a little booklet, and I think they were pretty good speeches. But, again, talk about the friction – coming back, Ford wanted those speeches and he wanted them to be good speeches. The second speech, I think, was in front of the Air and Space Museum. It was a good speech, and by the time we got back to the White House, the evening paper, the afternoon paper at that point, said that there was general criticism in the White House of the poor quality of this speech. Ford called a meeting in the Roosevelt Room, and he was mad. He said, “I don’t want to hear anything like this again.” It shocked me, actually. In Hollywood there is a lot of backbiting, but not within your own group and to the press. I’m sure there is some of it, but I was shocked, always when these things got into the newspaper. To my knowledge, that did stop. They didn’t hear the speech because the paper was there when we got back to the White House.

Smith: The acceptance speech at the convention was generally regarded as one of the best he ever gave. Were you involved in that?

Orben: Oh yeah. Oh, my God, yes.

Smith: And how long did that take to put together, and I assume he practiced a lot.

Orben: He practiced with Don Penny, and I must say, the one big credit I would give to Penny is that he wasn’t afraid to use the president’s time. To the point where, I understand, the president got mad. I was so aware of the president’s time, I would have rehearsed the speech twice, and let a lot go. But that speech was put together in a rather interesting way. And at first I had my doubts about it.

Break

Smith: We were talking about the acceptance speech and how it was put together.

Orben: Well, Shakespeare would never have put a speech together this way. This was Bob Hartmann’s idea and I thought this was incredible, undoable. Every State of the Union, all manner of people send you drafts of what they want to say, the Department of Commerce and whatever. So that we got. But then
Hartmann’s idea was to let everybody have a crack at the State of the Union. And so all the writers…

Smith: Now, we’re talking about the State of the Union, not the acceptance speech?

Orben: I’m sorry, the acceptance speech. All the writers gave their acceptance speech drafts, and other people gave – anybody who was in hailing distance – gave it. And the idea was to let everybody know: now here was the framework for the whole thing, we’re going to do this, that, and the other thing. These are the points we are going to make, so it wasn’t totally freeform, but make these points in your own way. And then we got a table or something like this, and we stretched them all out and we x’d out what was no good, we checked off what might be good, and then we got that harrowed and winnowed down. And we eventually got a speech out of it that made the points and got the applause.

Smith: And contained the unexpected challenge to the challenger about debates. Do you know where that idea came from?

Orben: No. But you’re talking – I marvel at the people who remember everything. I have no idea. And sometimes you feel a little awkward about not remembering because these are historic things in a way. But, no.

Smith: Were you at the convention?

Orben: Oh, yeah.

Smith: People who were there, you get this sense that the platform, for example – their refusal to let there be a fight over the platform, to concede the foreign policy plank, for example. There is a sense that in many cases, the delegates’ hearts were with Reagan, even if they voted for Ford. Did you have that feeling?

Orben: Frankly, you don’t have a sense of anything when you’re moving paper. The one thing, once we won it, I went over to something at Reagan’s hotel and I was there in the lobby when the motorcade came up and Ford came across the lobby and up to see Reagan. I was hoping that he would choose Reagan. That would have been such a shoo-in, and it didn’t happen.
Smith: And you’ve heard over the years varying accounts, conflicting accounts, over whether people were told in advance, “Don’t raise this.” In fact, there is a condition of the meeting.

Orben: That’s what I’ve read, but how do you make such a condition? That’s absurd, these are two adults. I’ve never thought kindly of Reagan for doing all this. If he hadn’t challenged Ford for the nomination – we were all, in the Ford White House exhausted by the time we won the nomination. And the Reagan group, or rather Carter was rested, and tanned and ready to go.

Smith: What about the counter argument that Reagan, unintentionally, did Ford a favor in that he made Ford a much better candidate by that summer than he might have been, had he not been tested and challenged and forced, among other things, to become a better speaker.

Orben: I’ve heard that. I don’t buy that at all. Didn’t make any sense to me.

Smith: Did you do any writing for Mrs. Ford?

Orben: Only once, for one of the Easter events, some childhood thing. I don’t really remember.

Smith: We’ve talked to a number of people about this, and she’s written about it; was there a sense, within the White House, that she had some problems?

Orben: I wasn’t aware of it. I was totally unaware of it. Should I talk fast for these two minutes?

Smith: We’ve got about ten minutes.

Orben: Okay. I still remember her. When I got down there, this was nine days, maybe, after he became president. They had a gathering party for the vice presidential staff, and I was invited to it. And I still remember, she obviously had a terrible headache, but she smiled through every individual picture with all of us. The only awareness I ever had that she might have been, no – I wasn’t even aware then. I did this childhood type speech for the Easter Egg roll, and she spoke it in a dreamy playful manner. I didn’t know. Sometimes
people do that when relating to children, so I didn’t think much about it, but I really didn’t have much to do with Mrs. Ford.

Smith: Speaking about the childish event, there’s a wonderful George Reedy story with LBJ – where the word came over, Johnson is doing an event with retarded children and he wants some jokes.

Orben: Oh, boy. For retarded kids?

Smith: And Reedy, without missing a beat, he’s at his typewriter, he says, “Fine. Tell him I’ve always loved retarded children, I used to be one myself.”

Orben: Oh, that’s very good.

Smith: Are there occasions when you’re asked to produce something that makes no sense?

Orben: Well, I would put it a different way – that’s a challenge. I remember one time around eleven o’clock in the morning, I get a call from Terry O’Donnell that the president just got a phone call from Bob Hope, who was in town getting an award for comedian of the century and he wants the president to present it to him. And I said, “Okay, when is it, tonight?” And he says, “No, it’s two hours from now.” I said, “Okay,” and he said, “There’s a problem. It’s Lincoln’s birthday and he’s doing the Lincoln’s birthday speech, so he’s going straight to the event and the motorcade is leaving.” So I grabbed speech cards, pencils and I run for the motorcade, get in the motorcade, and now here’s the problem: I’ve got to write these jokes and print them in such a way because he’s got to read them right off of what I’m writing. So I see him coming down the steps from the Lincoln Memorial, and I’m not finished yet. So I go up to the limo and I tell the Secret Service, “I know this is unusual, but I’ve got to ride with the president.” And fortunately, they used their heads and they let me in and Ford comes down the stairs and I say, “I’ll explain, Mr. President.” And I’m working away on the thing and he isn’t talking to me, thank God, and we get to the event and they are opening the door and I said, “Please one more minute,” so they close the door and I finish. And he goes out and does it, seeing it for the first time. Now this, again, comes back to confidence. Fortunately the joke doesn’t mean much today, but you rely on
craft again. He said, “There’s really good news and bad news, my being here, today. The good news is I’m here to present my good friend Bob Hope with the award Comedian of the Century. The bad news is, how am I ever going to explain this to Earl Butz.” Now, Earl Butz was big news at that time, so that was wonderful. You try to explain to anybody today, and it’s all over.

Smith: I think the last time we ran into each other on the subway, there had been something in the Post that day. There was a story about something – someone wrote, maybe it was Howard Kurtz claimed that Ford had read instructions…

Orben: Oh, this is what I got in touch with you about. Yeah.

Smith: It was something where, supposedly there were instructions for the president within the text, and he read them…

Orben: Yeah, that’s a standard joke about speakers. No, I would never have ‘pause for laughter’ and it was that sort of thing. The only time, and I think this has been written about, when we were preparing for the Philadelphia Bicentennial speech, there was a name in it that human tongues were not meant to utter. And as we rehearsed it, he misspoke each time. You couldn’t change the name, that was part of it. So, what I did, I wrote the joke and pasted into his speech box, and I said, “If you get to this name and you blow it, go to this.” And he blew it, then he said, “I told my wife, Betty, that I knew the speech backwards and I think that’s the way I’m doing it.” Wonderful. So that’s the only time – but you would never put coaching instructions in a speech text.

I remember one time, somewhere in Minnesota or Wisconsin, he was doing a speech for conservationists, and he was talking about what a wonderful thing the government was doing in different areas. He said, “For instance, in the Hudson River, shad are once more in the river. They cough a lot, but they’re back.” And I said, “Mr. President, you’ve got to clue the audience that a joke might be coming, so it’s a sort of dust kicking tempo. You stop, and you smile, and then they cough a lot.” Well, it was a very hot day and he sails right through it. About a second later, there’s laughter – did you hear what he said?

Smith: At the end of the campaign did you think you might win?
Orben: Oh, yeah. I’ve got half of the victory speech. I left the plane in Boston, and I came down on the train with Jim Baker, and I’m working on – because Jim or somebody had been tipped by one of the polling organizations that we were going to win it by one percent. And I think that a lot of people felt that if we had a few more days, we would have won it. Yeah, we thought we were going to win it.

Smith: When was the last time you saw him?

Orben: Well, I think it was probably Rancho Mirage, two years ago. Except when we were in Europe a couple of times, we went to all the events. And, again, one of the things I felt bad about was that I still was in awe of the president’s time. Even though he now had plenty of time. I’m sorry I didn’t keep in touch. I kept in touch somewhat, and I did material for him for the Bohemian Club and things like that. But I only saw him, essentially, on those once a year deals.

Smith: You say you saw him at Rancho Mirage?

Orben: Yeah. Well, Rancho Mirage for the last of the Ford get-togethers.

Smith: Okay.

Orben: When he was no longer able to…you could see the deterioration. Ford worked a room beautifully. The feet never stopped. And the last couple of times here in Washington, he was in one place, and then he was sitting down, and then like a coronation crown emperor’s chair. He was sitting in a chair there.

Smith: How should he be remembered?

Orben: I think, at the time, I felt that history was going to award him huge amounts of credit. We forget how tense those times were. The troops were being alerted, did our system of government work? And with the same calm, knowing where he stood manner, he held it all together. The second speech he made as president was at Ohio State in the field house, 15,000 people, he said, “So much has happened since they asked me to speak here today, I was then America’s first instant vice president, today I’m America’s first instant president. The Marine Corps Band is so confused, they don’t know whether to
play *Hail to the Chief* or *You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby.*” It really put the whole thing in context. He would have been a far greater president than the one he lost to. Now if there is tape, you haven’t mentioned the assassinations.

Smith: Tell us.

Orben: Unfortunately, I was present at both the assassination attempts. The first time I was still in the hotel working on the speech, and when I came out - the hotel was right across from the Capitol Building where he was giving the speech - everything was quiet. And I came running along and I heard Nessen giving essentially a briefing on the whole thing.

But for Sara Jane Moore, which was just, I think, six weeks later, I was in the motorcade two or three cars back on the left hand side of the street. The motorcade had been split into two columns because it was a small street. We were talking and I suddenly hear the shot. It was like a freeze-frame. You looked out and for a moment it was almost like a painting. Then the next thing I was aware of, people had picked up Sara Jane Moore like a battering ram and were running across the street and into the hotel. Meanwhile Ford is being jumped on and pushed into the limo.

Now we’re tearing along the freeway, 70-80 miles an hour, and in front of us is a press van. It was like a station wagon and there was the lighting guy and the cameraman hooked together with an electronic umbilical cord, standing on the back bumper, hanging onto what looks like a luggage rack. As I say, we were doing 70-80 miles an hour. Our driver, a volunteer, is really tense, and we’re creeping up on them so the Naval aide to the president - I don’t remember his name, good guy - said, “Son, maybe you ought to move over a little bit so that when they fall off, you won’t go over them.” Well, fortunately, they didn’t fall off. But I remember asking Lukash to take a look at the cameraman. He was an older guy and he was ashen white.

But there was sort of a little meeting on the plane after we took off, and I still remember, one of the press asking the president, “Were you shook up?” And Ford said, “No.” And the reporter said, “Well, you must have been because you said judgment instead of judg-a-ment,” in whatever he said afterwards.
We all had the freedom and the feeling that we could kid him and talk. I don’t know that I would have done that to Nixon or George W.

Smith: Is there a final, something surprising about him, something that people don’t know that they ought to know?

Orben: Well, it’s probably been said in one form or another, but he tackled things that he shouldn’t have been good at, and did them well. And I’m thinking in terms of my own specialty, humor. People ask me if you have to have a special bent for humor. I don’t know that Ford had a natural bent for humor, but he liked it and he had the courage to get the words out, and then wait for the laughter. That doesn’t sound like much, but I tell you from a lifetime of experience, it’s a lot.

Smith: Well, I also think he had an incredible work ethic, and I imagine it would almost be a challenge. He knew, to be a successful president, this is part of the job and he would work at it doggedly until he mastered it.

Orben: Well, that’s right, but I think we never saw that. I think that was up in the residence.

Smith: Perfect. This is fun.

Orben: Well, perfect, I don’t know.
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Smith: First of all, thanks for doing this. We really appreciate it.

When did your path first cross with that of Gerald Ford?

Schieffer: Well, I interviewed him from time to time. I was a young reporter in Washington when he was up on the Hill, and later when I was the Pentagon correspondent, which was my first beat in Washington. This was when Mel Laird was the Secretary of Defense.

Smith: A legendary figure in his own right.

Schieffer: Of course, he and Ford were great friends. Ford was not exactly a source of mine in those days, but I can remember going up to the Hill to interview him about military stuff, and stuff that was on my beat. Then when he became president, I replaced Dan Rather as the White House correspondent. There had been a lot of controversy about Dan’s coverage of Richard Nixon and he had become the most well-known reporter in America and he had this huge following, almost a cult-like following. Part of this was the fault of Richard Nixon, because they had very shrewdly, when they decided to take on the press, they didn’t take it on as some sort of a monolith, they made it personal. And they picked out Dan and decided they’d dump most of the stuff on him, so he was extremely controversial.

Well, here I was over there covering the Pentagon and about the only people who knew my name was my wife and the people in my neighborhood. Suddenly I was sent to the White House to replace the most famous person in America. In fact, Gary Trudeau, right there on the wall is the Sunday column he wrote, the Sunday strip where it says, “Look, it wasn’t my fault they got rid of Dan Rather.” And it was quite a thing, so I covered Ford from the time he became president and would see him almost daily.
Smith: Let me go back just a bit because everyone talks about how different things were on the Hill in those days. And Ford certainly could be partisan as he demonstrated sometimes, I think to his later regret of the whole thing about Justice Douglas. Nevertheless, there really does seem to have been a very different kind of atmosphere.

Schieffer: Oh, no question about it.

Smith: What was different?

Schieffer: When I came to Washington - 1969 was when I came to work for CBS News - many of the congressmen on the Hill didn’t have press secretaries. The Hill is still the one place in Washington where you can have face to face daily encounters with the newsmakers themselves, the elected officials themselves. That’s almost impossible to do that any place else in Washington, but in those days, even more so. And that was one of the reasons that reporters liked Ford so much. He was so at ease around them.

Now, Jack Kennedy had these great personal friends in the press, Ben Bradlee, later the editor of the *Washington Post*, for one. Ford didn’t have any real buddies among the press corps, but he had this great working daily relationship with all of them, so he wasn’t cowed by reporters. He wasn’t scared by them. He wasn’t one of these politicians who figured they were always out to get him. He was realistic about it, he knew they were there to write stories and if he said something he shouldn’t have said that they were going to write it. But for that reason, he got along very well with reporters and it was because of that, even after we came to the White House.

If you were on Air Force One, we would sometimes tease him. I can’t ever recall another President that I’ve actually teased. I might have made a smart remark to them some time or said things in jest, but I mean we’d go back and forth and he was just a wonderful person to be around. He was a genuinely nice man. I’ve said many times of all the public officials that I’ve covered in the 40 years that I’ve been in Washington now, I liked Gerald Ford most of all. I didn’t always agree with him, but I liked him most of all.

Smith: Where do you think that came from?
Schieffer: I think it was just his being a regular kind of fellow. He liked to shoot the breeze. He liked to play golf. He liked to tell jokes.

Smith: Really?

Schieffer: I always said that the reason he had Dave Kennerly as his official photographer is he wanted to know all the gossip in the press corps. He wants to know who’s doing who and what the latest news on all of that. And Kennerly kept him, obviously, totally informed. But we used to have more fun with him. We’d sit in the back of Air Force One, and sometimes he’d come back and say, “Now, it’s got to be off the record.” And he’d sit down and have a drink with us. I don’t remember any other President that I’ve actually had a drink with as such. But he’d come back, it didn’t bother him.

Later in his presidency, he came to realize he probably ought not to have that martini that he previously had at the end of the day, but he was still having that martini when he was at the White House. I’ll never forget one time, we were on a campaign trip out in East Texas and it’s late in the day and he came down the back stairs of Air Force One. It’s a campaign rally, and the Kilgore Junior College Rangerettes were lining each side of that red carpet. Old Ford came off there and kissed every single one of them, every one of them. And Mrs. Ford was just furious about that. And, of course, we all let him know, “Hey, this sounds like Mrs. Ford she’s not all that happy about it.” “Oh, well, you know.” He took it in good humor. He enjoyed it as much as we did. I’d like to think that.

Smith: His sense of humor, what was it like?

Schieffer: Well, he just loved a good story. You know, he wasn’t a jokester, I mean, he didn’t really tell jokes, but he loved politics, he loved to talk about politics and he told good stories, but you know he had this infectious laugh. He had a big laugh and it was contagious. He was one of those people, you know there are some people that you see coming and you duck in the nearest door because you say, “Oh, here he comes,” of politicians, he’s number one, he’s got to tell you something about how great he’s done something. But probably
if you’re not a reporter, he’s going to ask you for money, and so, they’re to be avoided at all costs.

Ford was the kind of guy, if you saw him coming, and I mean, this was before he got to the presidency, if you saw him coming, you stayed where you were because you wanted to chat with him because he was so down to earth - even after he came to the White House. Dick Gowald who worked for UP and was a friend of mine, UPI, he was Helen Thomas’ colleague covering the White House during Ford’s day, and Ford once told him a wonderful story. He said that when he was the Minority Leader, whenever he’d go over to the White House, he would always get a handful of the matches that used to be out there in the days when people smoked. At the White House, they always had these matches and they were very elegant, they said the White House or something on them.

Ford said he would always get them and put them in his congressional office and put them in a bowl on his receptionist’s desk because he said when the constituents come in from Michigan, they loved to take these as souvenirs. Ford said that one time after he became president, he said at that point, he just really couldn’t believe he was president, and he would go around the White House and every once in awhile he would just pick up a handful of those White House matches because he’d just been doing it all his life. And there were things like that that were so endearing.

Smith: You know, Roosevelt, FDR, designed a matchbook cover and it said, this matchbook stolen from the White House.

Schieffer: Yes.

Another thing, I have another picture on the wall up here and a letter that President Ford wrote one time. Once I was going to interview Ford and it was going to be Walter Cronkite, Eric Severeid and myself. And we interviewed him in, I think it was, the Red Room of the White House. And beforehand, I told my mother that I was going to interview him and she said, “Now, you remember to be polite.” And I said, “Well, mother, I’m always polite to the president.” And she said, “No, I mean to Walter and Eric.”
Well, somehow or another, this story got back to Ford, I didn’t tell him but somebody on the staff told him. Well, I know what happened, Dick Gowald heard about it and wrote a little story on the wire telling this anecdote. Ford sees that on the wire and low and behold, never said a word about it, but one day my mother calls me and said, “I just got this letter from President Ford.” And I said, “What was it?” And she said, “He said, ‘Dear Mrs. Schieffer, I just wanted you to know Bob was not only polite to me, he was polite to Walter and Eric’.” You know, he took the trouble to do that and that’s the kind of thing that he would do.

Smith: How much of that is the old congressman?

Schieffer: Well, it is, it’s all the old congressman. I mean, because that’s how congressmen were and are, you know. But he did it with such natural grace and that’s what gave him such an endearing quality.

Smith: Now, how much of his presidency was defined by the need to outgrow the parochialism of Congress while retaining whatever it was, particularly those personal qualities—

Schieffer: He didn’t have much of a chance. You know, I mean, there wasn’t a chance for him to get much legislation done. Inflation was totally out of control. But I will say this, I was totally against it at the time. I think his pardon of Nixon was probably as significant an action by any president that happened since I was in Washington. I was against it at the beginning, I thought he’d made a horrible mistake, but I later came to realize, and especially during the Clinton impeachment days, what would’ve happened if this thing had gone on and you’d had Richard Nixon in the dock. I mean the country would’ve come to a dead stop for two years with how long it takes these legal things to play out, even for a normal person.

I think it was a real act of political courage. I think he understood at the time, he had at that point decided whether or not he was going to run for president, but I think he understood even then that if he did that, it would probably hurt him if he did decide to run for president. And he told me later in his life, after
he was president that he thought that was the main reason why he lost the election.

Smith: It’s hard to imagine what the mood was like in this town at the beginning of August 1974.

Schieffer: Well, for one thing, this had been going on for a long time and we tend to forget this went on for a couple of years and it just kept building and building and building and it was awful. I mean, there were people within the Nixon administration that wanted to kill us, and I mean that literally. When you look back at Gordon Liddy and those people who talked in a serious way and admitted later that they had talked about blowing up the Brookings Institute and setting off a bomb there in order to destroy something by one of Daniel Ellsberg’s psychiatrist, or maybe it was the Pentagon Papers.

But this was really nasty stuff that was going on. They were not trying to go after the press, they were trying to destroy the press. I mean, they went to our bosses in New York, Bill Paley and Frank Stanton and a lot of us didn’t know about that until afterwards - how serious it had been. They’d shielded us from that because they wanted us to keep reporting, but it was like something I’ve never experienced. I mean, I’ve had public officials on my case, I’ve been a reporter a long time. There’s nothing new about that, but this was something that was in a totally different league.

When Nixon resigned, the day he resigned, I was sent out to Andrews Air Force Base and the last time I saw him, he was still president as he went up that ramp of Air Force One and waved goodbye. Then I drove back into Washington and they sent me over to the White House because Dan was still there, but we’d heard he was going to introduce his new press secretary and it was a guy named Jerry terHorst and he was a tiny little guy. Everybody in the press corps loved him. He’d worked for a Detroit newspaper. When Ford came in there and he introduced him to the assembled press corps, Peter Lisagor, from the Chicago paper, a great guy, and he said, “Hold him up so we can all see him, Mr. President.” And Ford just broke out in a laugh and the room just erupted in laughter. And somehow it seemed like maybe it was the first time in a year that anybody had laughed in that press room. It was
like after a hard rain and suddenly it had stopped raining. The air was clear and everything was different. It just smelled different in that press room after that. It was a remarkable thing.

You know, they went on to make the speech about “the long national nightmare was over”. That was a brave line. You know, he didn’t really want to put that in, but I guess Bob Hartmann wrote that and then he convinced him that that summed it up and I’m really glad he did because that summed it up.

Smith: It’s interesting, people who were in that room who have told us, and it’s not surprising, that once the inauguration was over, there was a receiving line and then I guess there was a reception in the State Dining Room and you could see the Nixon people just peel away and go back to their offices. And clearly much of that dynamic early on must have been “How do I balance fairness to the people who shouldn’t be tarred with the Watergate brush with the need for change, obvious change, to reassure the country?”

Schieffer: Well, I was not there for that reception. I was still out at Andrews Air Force Base. I got back when he announced the press secretary. But I mean for these people, there were some good people in the Nixon administration, they weren’t all crooks. And each of them, I mean, here they are, suddenly they were going to be out of a job. Suddenly what they had come to Washington to do, and which each of them was proud of, it was now something that were they going to be ashamed of it? I mean, it was a lot of introspection and a lot of people just were rattled. They didn’t know where this was going or what this was all about, and it was this great pall of sadness overall. I think that’s another one of those things that Ford did, because of his sort of all around good humor, I think he had a lot of do to with kind of getting people back into a better humor.

Smith: It’s interesting. When we talked to Rumsfeld, Rumsfeld felt that he should take some pretty sweeping changes early on and Ford was very reluctant to do that - in large measure because, again, he thought it was unfair to most of the White House people who had nothing to do with Watergate and shouldn’t be, as I say, tarred with that.
Schieffer: Well, there was a great humanity about Gerald Ford, and it was not something he wore around on his sleeve or anything, but he was just a great guy. He was a congressman; he had a feeling for people. He and Mel Laird, they were the real politicians in all this. I mean, Laird had become the great counterweight to Kissinger, the grand European strategist as it were. Mel Laird was the former congressman who knew what it meant back in the district when the coffins started arriving. And it was Laird, who I think had as much to do as anyone would with bringing the war to a much quicker conclusion. But he was a great influence on Jerry Ford and I think in many ways he was probably Ford’s best friend.

Smith: Well, it’s interesting because we talked to Laird and everything you say is completely borne out by that. But there are two things that Laird - I won’t say he didn’t forgive Ford - but he was very critical of Ford. Laird, of course, always had a scheme for something.

Schieffer: Oh, always.

Smith: Bob Dole said, “I always thought that Mel was the guy who poured the poison in the stream a mile up and then rushed into town to announce that he was saving everyone.” But Laird thought that he could put together a bipartisan delegation from both houses to come down to the White House to petition Ford for a pardon, and that Ford should wait until he had an opportunity to implement that scheme. It just seems, you were there, but given the mood of the country at that time, how could you realistically prepare the country for a pardon?

Schieffer: I don’t think you could. And now I’m not sure how deeply Ford thought about that. I think he just came to the conclusion that that’s what he ought to do and did it. And whether there was a better way to do it, or there could’ve been a better way, I really don’t have an opinion on that. But I was just so stunned that it happened. I mean, not even in my wildest dreams have guessed that he was going to do that. And I will tell you, the press went too far, as we always do, I mean the pendulum never stops in the middle. We fell headlong in love with Gerald Ford in the first weeks because he was so different. You know, I mean, you’d been there and then going through this
thing with Nixon and all of a sudden here was a guy that made his own breakfast and I remember we took pictures of Gerald Ford making his own muffins and this was like Obama’s dog.

Smith: In part because Mrs. Ford had no intention of getting up to make his breakfast.

Schieffer: Exactly, and it was like a teenager in love and because we had been so smitten when he did this, we were crushed. I mean, we were just crushed. And so how he came to that, I mean, I never would’ve thought about it, and I never really came to any conclusions about.

Smith: Well, let me ask you because I think the turning point - it could’ve been in his mind for awhile, he was being told by Jaworski that in fact it might be two years before there could be a trial - but I think the triggering event was on August 28th, he had the first press conference in the East Room. You know, there was that Boy Scout quality about Ford. You could legitimately fault him for a certain amount of naïveté. He really believed going into that press conference that reporters wanted to talk about Cypress and Turkey and inflation and everything but what they wanted to talk about. And he went in and they wanted to talk about Nixon and his papers and his tapes and his legal prospects. And Ford didn’t handle it terribly well and he left angry. I think angry at himself as much as anything else. And I think that was the triggering event. Do you remember that press conference?

Schieffer: I do indeed and I do also remember that he was not happy with himself. Maybe we didn’t know all that much about him, but I remember we all remarked on it and thought about it and you may be right. That may be exactly where it kind of came together for him in his own mind. But you’re right, he didn’t like that press conference that night.

Smith: He had a temper didn’t he?

Schieffer: Oh, yeah?

Smith: Did you see it?
Schieffer: Yeah, every once in awhile, he’d get mad about something and he’d let you know about it and he knew a lot of words which you’d hear on the golf course or around behind the barn at the rodeo. I mean this is a guy, he’d let you know. He’s a big guy. He’s a tough guy. You know, this guy’s a football player and all of that and he was in such good shape.

Smith: Did that bother him, I mean, the way the caricatures took hold that he was clumsy and all that?

Schieffer: It really bothered him. It was terribly unfair and a good part of it was my fault. I think I probably wrote one of the first stories about him falling down on his skis. I had a great experience. Once during the campaign, by now he’d fallen down a lot and we were in Kalamazoo, Michigan and what happened was he was like a kid walking down the street and he says I’m not going to step on a crack in the sidewalk and suddenly there’s no way he can not step on a crack in the sidewalk. I mean, we were in Kalamazoo, Michigan, it was a whistle stop tour in Michigan on the train. He came out the back of the train to make a speech. It was a nothing, you know, it was a basic stump speech. We weren’t going to write anything about it and then of course he turned to go back into the train, the train jolted and he ran headlong into the doorjamb on the back of the train. Well, then we had to do the story.

So in those days, you had to go the local television station to file your story. We didn’t have microwaves and all that, so I go back into town, broke away from the campaign, put a story together and all that, was feeling real good about it and went out to catch a commercial flight to catch up with the campaign that’d gone on to somewhere else. As I walked into the aircraft and was turning to go into the seat, a guy in the back of the plane who worked in our Chicago bureau, I had no idea he was there, and he said, “Hey, Bob!” And when he did that, I turned around and just ran head on into the overhead luggage compartment and literally saw stars, I mean, I fell down and fainted for a fraction of a second. I wasn’t hurt. But anyhow, some time later, after all those stories that ripped about Ford, I felt compelled to tell him about it and when I told him about it, he laughed out loud and he said, “By God, I
wish I could’ve been there to see it.” But that’s why you loved him because he loved things like that.

Smith: Did you cover him in the ’74 campaign? He goes out to the West Coast, end of the campaign, Nixon is at death’s door. Clearly everyone around him - Cheney told us yesterday - almost begged with him, begged him not to go see Nixon. Were you on that trip?

Schieffer: You know, I was on that trip, but I really can’t help you much. I don’t remember many of the details, but I remember we talked about it.

Smith: The ’74 election clearly changed things dramatically and permanently up on the Hill. There is a certain irony in that this guy who spends his life up on Capitol Hill will spend his presidency in many ways fending off Congress.

Schieffer: And you know, if I remember, we were on the road for that ’74 campaign, he had made all these commitments to campaign for people, so he kept them all and I mean, I think every single person he campaigned for lost. I’d have to check my papers on that, but I believe that’s right. I think every single person he campaigned for lost that year. But it was quite an election.

Smith: Before I forget, of course, in the middle of all this, Mrs. Ford has her breast cancer surgery. What do you recall of that?

Schieffer: You know, we had not seen very much of Mrs. Ford and we didn’t know her very well, those of us in the press corps. In fact, I think she was spending a lot of her time in bed in those days and I can remember going out in the Rose Garden on one occasion and seeing her up in the window of the White House in the residence there in a gown, in her nightgown, which she had a bathrobe or whatever, but it was clear that she hadn’t gotten up. I mean, she was down there waving to him down there in the Rose Garden, but we didn’t know too much about her, but there were all these rumors that she had a drinking problem and so forth.

Smith: But now when the breast cancer came along, one senses, after the fact, that people tended to almost treat it as a secret. That she brought it out of the closet.
Schieffer: My wife was a victim of breast cancer twice and they didn’t talk about breast cancer very much. And as I say, we had heard about Mrs. Ford and her problems, when she did that, it really did kind of change people’s perception of her and it was a wonderful thing that she did for cancer patients because she urged people to talk about it, to be open about it and people didn’t do that.

Smith: She then of course gave the famous *60 Minutes* interview and I think the good grey political advisors in the White House all blanched and thought, “Oh my God, what has she done?” And inevitably the critical mail came in, but within a fairly short period of time, her numbers were much higher than his.

Schieffer: Is this when she talked about Susan?

Smith: Yes, and talked about abortion and if she’d been a teenager, she probably would’ve tried marijuana.

Schieffer: It was an extraordinary interview and it was seen at CBS as a real coup to get that interview. People talked about that for a long time. I mean, she was a real trailblazer in her own way. You know, it’s a funny thing about Ford. He was a solid Midwesterner, just kind of a mainstream, go to church on Sunday kind of guy and she was quite daring in her own way, in a very good way. But she would take a challenge. She would take a risk and I think a lot of women really admired her for that.

Smith: It’s interesting…I’ve always thought Hilary Clinton could not have said those things when she was in the White House. In some ways, we’ve almost regressed. Probably three or four years before he died, she came up with this idea for their Christmas card of the two of them with motorcycle jackets. And he said, “Oh, no, no, I can’t do that. That’s not presidential.” And apparently they made a deal where she could get 75 to send to their nearest and dearest friends who would understand. He went along with it, you know, which tells you something about their relationship.

Schieffer: I think it does.

Smith: She was out in front.
Schieffer: She was, she really was. And she, in her own way, had a great sense of humor. And I think he really adored her in his own way. They had one of those kind of congressional marriages for a long, long time where he was just gone all the time, but they seemed nice when you’d see them together. I mean there was a nice relationship.

Smith: And the kids, did you have any contact with the kids?

Schieffer: Yeah, I got to know Susan later on and she was around. I’ve known a lot of presidential children and seen various ones and, you know, I had a friend one time who used to be in the Senate, and I won’t tell you his name, but he said, “You know, if you’re willing to screw up the next generation of your family, then the rest of running for president is easy.” It’s awfully hard on presidential children. It’s awfully hard for them to live in the White House. But the Ford kids were older for the most part. Susan was the youngest one. And they already had lives and I’m sure it was hard for them, but I always found the Ford children to be more normal than your average run of White House children.

Smith: Talk about the fall of Saigon because here’s another Mel Laird ex post facto. This is where Laird gets emotional and, I suppose, as the architect of Vietnamization, you can understand that. Laird believes that if Ford had really tried, he could’ve gotten Congress to give him the 700 million dollars in the spring of ’74 to prop up the Vietnamese government.

Schieffer: But Laird was afraid that he wouldn’t do that and Laird always said he didn’t want Congress to take the money away. He thought that was the worst of all worlds to have Congress to cut it off and which was one of the reasons that he worked so hard to bring the war to a conclusion. I mean, the main reason he did, he just thought it was a folly. He thought we weren’t going to win and it just wasn’t going to happen. But he didn’t want it to be that president wanted to press on and the Congress stopped it, so that was one of the reasons he did. I think the other part of it was, and I don’t mean this in an unpatriotic way, but there was such a rivalry with Kissinger that I think Laird may have sort of enjoyed sticking it to Kissinger.
Smith: Well, and the strains in the White House. You had Kissinger, who by Ford’s own words, wanted him to make the “go down with the flag” speech. And then you had other folks, including Kennerly, who were saying, “Look, this is over and why are you clinging to it?” Did you sense that division within the White House?

Schieffer: Oh, yeah, and I remember when the stories first started going around that they were going to take Kissinger’s national security hat away from him. I mean, Kissinger, it was like he was not six inches from Ford for the rest of the day. Everywhere you went, it was like it was just some sort of glue, he’d glued himself to him, because Henry didn’t take those kinds of things lightly at all. But there were these rivalries. There was also Schlesinger who was in the mix.

Smith: Was it destined to fail just because of chemistry?

Schieffer: Yeah, and I’ll tell you why. Someone, and it’s not my story, but somebody told me Henry Kissinger would go in to see the president and he would say, “Mr. President as you are aware…” and he would outline the problem. Schlesinger would go in and say, “Mr. President, you don’t know this…” And Ford didn’t like him. Ford didn’t like him because he thought Schlesinger thought he was dumb. That’s about it. And everybody knew it and when he got the chance, he fired him.

Smith: And enjoyed it.

Schieffer: I think he probably did and I think there was some enjoyment on the part of Don Rumsfeld as well.

Smith: Well, part of the problem is that Ford had been on the Defense Appropriations Committee all those years and he knew most of what Schlesinger thought he didn’t know. I think the euphemism is “a professorial manner,” but it came off as condescension.

Schieffer: He was a very good friend of mine, Schlesinger was, and we’re very good friends to this day, but his people skills in those days were not what they could’ve been and he would tell you the same thing now.
Smith: Tell me about the role of Don Rumsfeld.

Schieffer: Well, Rumsfeld in some ways - when I saw him in the second round as defense secretary, I didn’t see much difference - he was pretty much today as what he was then. He was a guy who was very smart, but he was not to be challenged, and it was very difficult for people to work for him to challenge him. He’s not an easy person to work for.

But the big change for me was the change in Dick Cheney, who was a very good friend of mine in those days and I still have very good relations with him. But he was so down the middle, there was no partisan chip, he didn’t seem to have an ideology. As we later understood when he went back home to run for Congress, he did have an ideology, but we all thought, “Well, he’s just somebody who votes his district.” I mean, out there, gun control means a firm finger on the trigger and you can’t be for taking people’s guns away from them.

But I had no idea when he came in the White House for George Bush that we’d see him play the kind of role that he played. That was just totally different. I thought Dick Cheney was the single best staff person to work for anybody, whether it’s some subcommittee chairman up in Congress or somebody up in the White House that I’d ever known. What we did find out during the Bush administration is he did know his way around the PR bureaucracy, and all those years, we just didn’t realize how much he knew about it. He turned out to be a real operator. But the part about his very, very conservative views, that was unknown when he was in the White House.

Smith: What were the qualities in your estimation that made him such a good staff person?

Schieffer: Well, he was open, he was accessible. A lot of the reporters didn’t like Ford’s press secretary who had been a reporter for NBC, Ron Nessen. And Cheney, in many ways, became sort of the de facto press secretary and I used to talk to Cheney three times a day. I used to talk to him and I wasn’t the only one. There were four or five of us, but we didn’t fool with the press office. We’d call Cheney. I mean, he didn’t tell us any secrets. He wasn’t “Here’s the list
of all the things we’ve done wrong,” but he was straight. He’d tell you something, and if he couldn’t tell you something, he’d say, “I can’t talk to you about that.” He just laid it down for you.

He was an excellent spokesman and had wonderful, wonderful relations with the press. The reporters that Cheney maintained sort of professional friendships over the years [there] were a lot of them, Tom De Frank worked for *Newsweek* in those days. Me, I mean, I used to talk to him. Later, I would interview him for *Face the Nation*. He kind of maintained those ties. He’d always come up to the Press Club, when they gave out the Ford awards.

Smith: Even when it was a little embarrassing, some of the winners.

Schieffer: Yes, yes, exactly. But it was very interesting to just kind of watch the changes in Dick Cheney. I asked him one time had he changed? And he said, “Well, the job changed, I had a different job.” And then he would say, “9/11 did change me.” But I’ve always said and I have no medical expertise whatsoever, but I’ve always wondered if the heart problems he had had some impact on his personality. But that’s for others who have the expertise.

Smith: TerHorst publically resigned as a matter of principle over the pardon, but it’s also been said, not just speculated upon, by a number of folks over the years, that there’s a little more to it than that. That he found the job overwhelming.

Schieffer: I don’t know the answer to that. I always liked Jerry. I didn’t know him that well. I knew him, but I didn’t know him that well. I’ve come to know him over the years in the Gridiron Club, but I don’t know.

Smith: It’s interesting, we talked to Bonnie Angelo. She was offered the job.

Schieffer: Yes, she was. I know that. Yes, she was.

Smith: Which is pretty remarkable when you think about it.

Schieffer: But I don’t know why she didn’t take that.

Smith: Well, I think she had [a child], I think she said he was 7 years old. I don’t know, but a young child and she couldn’t imagine the hours that the job takes. But, boy, what if?
Schieffer: Yeah, that would’ve been a big headline in those days.

Smith: Do you think they were slow on the uptake…the prospect of Reagan actually running, and then the seriousness of the threat Reagan posed. Were they slow to realize that?

Schieffer: Yes, they were and I think part of that was that Ford just didn’t like Reagan. He just wasn’t his guy, you know. And for one thing, he was out there on the West Coast and he hadn’t all that much dealings with him, but he didn’t like him and I think that may have been one of the reasons that they were slow to realize what would happen. And I think Ford always felt had he not had to fool with Reagan in those primaries that he would’ve had a better chance.

Smith: Did you spend any time around Rockefeller during his vice presidency?

Schieffer: Never did. Never did. Met him twice and he was, you know, a hail and hardy kind of guy and everything. One of the things I always regretted, he was one of the politicians that I never really got to get much of a feel for. Just see him from afar.

Smith: The question of whether he was pushed or…

Schieffer: Oh, he was pushed. No question. He was pushed. They just didn’t think it would work. I also think probably it was a safe choice.

Smith: Making him vice president in the first place?

Schieffer: No, I mean I thought it was a mistake to take him off the ticket and I don’t think Dole brought much to it that year. Remember he talked about Democrat wars and he had that bad Nixon “I need to look different” make up problem. Sometimes these cutting quips, they’re great cocktail parties, but it’s as Gene McCarthy found out, they don’t always work when you’re running, I think that was also a part of it. But, you know, having said that, I mean, it was a race between Carter and Ford and after Ford had pardoned Nixon and on top of that said that Poland wasn’t under the domination of the Soviet Union.

Smith: Yeah. What was your memory of that debate?
Schieffer: Oh, I remember that very well. I remember we just gasped when we heard him. And we spent the whole next day, we were out somewhere and I can’t remember where it was, but Cheney was on the bus with us and we were all on the bus, the press, and we were just chasing him around all day and they were working. And Cheney realized what had happened and he understood the significance of it, but it took him a while to convince Ford that he’d said something wrong. It went on all day.

Smith: Ford was a stubborn guy.

Schieffer: Yeah, he was stubborn on something like that. I mean, he’d get his mind set on something and you just weren’t going to walk him away from it, but it was clear that Cheney knew they’d screwed up.

Smith: Stu Spencer has a wonderful story, but it’s the second half of the story that makes it wonderful. Stu hadn’t really wanted to get involved in the campaign but he did, and he came here and things weren’t going terribly well. It was the end of a long week and he was in the Oval Office with the president and Cheney, just the three of them. The problem was that Ford would love to go out and campaign. He’d give these speeches, which weren’t very good, from the speech shop and he’d go out and he’d campaign and the numbers went down. So Spencer has to come up with a euphemism as to why the president should stay home - in effect the Rose Garden strategy. And nothing was working and Ford wasn’t getting it and so he finally said, “Look, Mr. President, you’re a great president, but you’re a fucking lousy campaigner.” Now, think of another president you could say that to.

Schieffer: Especially one who’d been in Congress all his life.

Smith: And Ford just sort of took it, but anyway it’s the sequel that makes the story, because that story appeared in Germond and Witcover’s book about the campaign. And Stu went ballistic and he called Cheney to chew him out and Dick sort of let him sort of rumble on and finally Dick says, “Stu, there was a third person in that room.” It never occurred to Stu that Ford would tell the story on himself. And he did.

Schieffer: I’ll be damned.
Smith: Which is revealing.

Schieffer: And there you are.

Smith: At the convention, I mean, how close was that?

Schieffer: It was really close, I mean, we went to Kansas City thinking, boy we had a great story. We’re going to have a contested election for the first time in nobody could remember when. And I guess it pretty much resolved itself in that weekend, if memory serves. But it was that delegation from Mississippi, it seems to me.

Smith: Clarke Reed.

Schieffer: Clarke Reed, yes. And it’s hard now, the details are all hazy, but it was a great story. It was a great story and Reagan came and, you know, I remember when there was one night, wasn’t there, that Reagan went to see Ford or Ford went to see Reagan.

Smith: And they’re still debating, after the nomination was over, the winner went to see the loser. And the Reagan people had made it explicit the condition for this meeting was that Ford was not to offer the vice presidency to Reagan, which I don’t think that Ford had any intention for reasons that you’ve outlined. And after the fact, some Reagan people were suggesting, “Well, if only he had offered.” And I think that sort of stuck in Ford’s craw a little bit.

Schieffer: I don’t think he would’ve offered it. I wonder if Reagan would’ve taken it. I don’t know. Maybe.

Smith: And then, four years later, you must’ve been at the Detroit convention where there’s this bizarre—

Schieffer: Oh my God, I’ve never seen anything like it, and if ever there was a scoop, I mean, getting Ford up and into that booth with Walter Cronkite. Everything at the convention came to a dead stop while people were looking up there, watching and trying to figure out what was going on. Barbara Walters, I wrote about this in a book that I wrote, she went up and started banging on the door of our anchor booth, “Let me in! Let me in!” And we told her, “No, you
can’t come in here.” And we always wondered what she would’ve done if she’d have gotten in there. Would she have gone in there and sat down with Walter Cronkite and joined in the interview which was being broadcast on CBS or would she have tried to grab Ford and drag him off the set? We never figured out what she would do and I always teased Barbara about that in the years after that, but it was one of the great sights.

Smith: Now, I’m trying to remember, was it Cronkite who actually used the phrase “a kind of co-presidency”?

Schieffer: Yes! Yes, and it was all taking place up there and old Walter, I mean, he knew when he had something, he wasn’t going to let it go. I mean he would’ve interviewed him for the rest of the evening if he could’ve made that work. You know, Ford always really liked Walter. Always liked him and so he was enjoying himself and I think he enjoyed being the center of attention and all of that, and Kissinger was supposed to have worked out these arrangements and I guess Nancy Reagan saw it and said, “This is not going to happen.” Because, you know, George Bush had already packed his bags by then. They were checking out of the hotel. I mean, Jim Baker told me all about it. And he gets that call and the rest is history as we say.

Smith: And the inauguration in 1977 when Carter paid his very gracious tribute. What do you remember of the changing of the guard?

Schieffer: Yeah, and I can remember that Carter did that. It’s funny, though, what I remember about that is Carter walking up Pennsylvania Avenue. That was the one thing. But I also remember this, I had covered Ford during the campaign because I was the White House correspondent and then when Carter won, I switched over and started covering Carter which meant that I had to move down to Plains, Georgia. And I stayed down there in Plains until inauguration day. I would fly up to New York on Saturday morning and did the Saturday news because I was the anchor in those days and fly back to Washington where my family was, spend the night with them, get up on Sunday and fly back to Plains.
Our kids, they were little kids about this tall those days, my two daughters, and I remember Thanksgiving and my wife brought them down for Thanksgiving dinner and the only place we could find to eat was McDonalds. And they’d been in Plains for 20 minutes and they said, “Can we go home?” And during the election, they had had the election at school and both cast their vote for Gerald Ford and my mother who was just a yellow dog Democrat, I said, “You’d better be careful. I don’t think I’d tell Momo that.” And I said, “Why did you decide to vote for Ford?” and they said, “Better vacations.” Because they’d gotten to go, we got to go out to Vail for Christmas.

Smith: Clearly the Fords were beloved figures out in Vail.

Schieffer: They were and everybody out there loved them and they loved to go out there. It was a great thing for the press corps. Ford was very nice. I mean, he was nice in the fact that he would make sure that on Christmas day, for example, that he would have no schedule so the Secret Service and the reporters - they’d let us bring our families out there on a press plane - so we could have the day with them. And he would do things like that.

Tom Brokaw and I, Tom was the White House correspondent, the first year we went out there with Ford. Tom and I had this big party for all the press and the White House staff and my mother who lived in Fort Worth in those times brought just literally a washtub full of tamales from Texas. She didn’t like Republicans very much at all, but she loved President Ford and he came to the party and so she went and made him a big plate of Mexican food and she took the shucks off the tamales and he loved them and everything.

Well, later on, as you remember during the campaign, he’s standing there with John Tower in San Antonio and someone gave him a tamale and he just takes a big bite out of it, shuck and all, and my mother said, “That poor man, if I’d have just told him they had shucks on them, he would’ve known to take the shucks off.” She always felt so bad that she had embarrassed him. But we had great times out there.

Smith: Did you think toward the end of the ’76 campaign, they clearly were making up ground, did you think that they might pull it out?
Schieffer: I thought they might, yeah, I thought they did. And, you know, it was very close. But I did think he went into it way behind because he’d taken such a battle with Reagan. But I began to think toward the end that he really might have a chance.

Smith: On election night, were you at the White House?

Schieffer: I was. I was, and we didn’t see very much of him at all that night. You know, he stayed up in the quarters with Joe Garagiola, I remember.

Smith: Joe Garagiola and Pearl Bailey.

Schieffer: That’s right, isn’t it?

Smith: Kind of an unusual trio.

Schieffer: And then the next day he’d completely lost his voice and I really felt bad for him because he wanted to make it dignified and then he couldn’t even talk. I mean, that was just kind of, I was just sad, I sort of felt sorry for him.

Smith: Rex Stouten told a wonderful story because he was up there that night and about 2:00 in the morning, it was decided, at least the president decided, “Well, we’re not going to know for sure. I’m going to go to bed.” But it was not looking good. So Rex followed him across the hall in the bedroom and wanted to say something consoling, so he said, “You know, Mr. President, you really deserved to win” and so on and so on. “You’ve given your entire life in service to this country in uniform during the war and all those years on Capitol Hill and these last couple of years during an incredibly difficult time. And, you know, maybe it’s just time for you to take a well earned vacation.” And Ford said, “I don’t think so.”

Schieffer: That’s a great story. You know the guy meant well, but that’s not what you’re supposed to say.

Smith: Someone else said, and in fact, it took awhile for him to get over it. He was angry at himself and he would walk around the White House and say, “I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer.”
Schieffer: He didn’t like Carter either. There just wasn’t any, because they were just so totally, totally different. I mean, Carter had this religious, you know, “I cast my bread upon the waters and God will take care of everything” and Ford didn’t see it that way. I mean he just wasn’t that kind of a guy and he never cared for Carter.

Smith: And yet they, in later years, they became—

Schieffer: Oh, in later years, they did fine. I mean, how could you not hate somebody or dislike someone when you’re in that kind of a _______.

Smith: And you saw him in later years. You saw him at the Press Club.

Schieffer: Yeah, I saw him. I interviewed him several times. I’ll never forget a year or so after he was president - I interviewed him a lot as the former president - and I’ll never forget one time I was interviewing him up in Rochester, New York. They had Secret Service and we’d set up our cameras and stuff in this hotel room and the Secret Service came along and they made us get out of there while they brought a dog in, you know, one of those big German Shepherds that sniff for explosives. Well, the dog was in there people would come in and out and we kept fighting and we kept fighting and I thought, “Oh God, one of these members of the camera crew’s got some marijuana in his camera case and the dog is smelling that and now we’re going to have to go and I’m going to have to explain all that so they won’t put him in jail.”

And finally they open the door and they went in there and it smelled, the smell of Lysol was just so overpowering that it took us back and they wouldn’t tell me what it was and finally somebody told me what it was. They’d used a local police dog and the dog had come in there and just taken a huge dump right where the president was going to sit down. Well, these guys, they didn’t want me to be the first to know about it, so somebody, there was no bathroom in there, so somebody had to go in there and pick it up and put it in his pocket and take it out and they said, “Now you can’t tell the president about this.” And I said, “The hell I can’t. Of course I’m going to tell the president about it.” So, he came in and I told the president about it and he
laughed and said, “Well, everybody else does, so why not the dog?” That’s Ford.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Schieffer: Oh, I think he should be remembered as someone who had the political courage to do something that was extremely unpopular at the moment. It was the right thing to do, I think history proved it right and I think he was a very significant man. I mean, Gerald Ford was exactly what the country needed at that point in our lives. We needed a chance to rest and recoup and relax and sort of get things back on track. He was perhaps the one person who could do that. I mean, he’d come to the presidency just by happenstance, but I think the country was very lucky to have him at that time. I truly believe the pardon of Nixon was one of the most significant presidential acts of my lifetime.

Smith: I’ve often compared it to Harry Truman’s firing of Douglas MacArthur in terms of being hugely unpopular at the time, but almost impossible to criticize after the fact.

Schieffer: Yeah, very significant.

Smith: Yeah.

Schieffer: But something that had to be done. I’ve never thought of it that way, but that’s a good way to put it.

Smith: That’s perfect. Perfect.
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Smith: First of all, thank you very much for doing this.

Kilberg: You’re welcome.

Smith: Tell us how your path crossed with that of the Ford White House.

Kilberg: Well, I joined the Ford White House in July, or the end of June 1975, and it was interesting why I wanted to come in there. I’d been a White House Fellow for President Nixon in the ’69-’70 class and assigned in the White House to John Ehrlichman. I left in June of 1971. However, even though I left, I had this psychological need as a young person to have my colleagues and friends know that I could go back, that I had not been part of Watergate, even though I left before Watergate ever started.

Smith: Based on what you had seen and experienced in the Nixon White House, were you surprised when the troubles began?

Kilberg: Well, because I was a real fan and mentee of John Ehrlichman, I was very surprised. I was not surprised that that kind of thing can happen given the general feel in the White House of a ‘we’ versus ‘they’ nature. But as to the individual person of John Ehrlichman, I was just floored. I still don’t think he got a fair deal. I don’t think he was a willing participant in creating a conspiracy, certainly not in having anything to do with the initial act.

Smith: What did you admire about Ehrlichman?

Kilberg: I admired his integrity. I admired his intellectual curiosity. I admired his organizational skills. I admired the fact that he really cared about young people such as me and would work very closely with us and wanted to have us grow on the job. And I admired him because he really had a very progressive domestic agenda. If you take a look at the domestic policies of President Nixon, he was probably one of the most progressive Republicans
you’ve ever seen. And whether it was the creation of OSHA, the laying of all
the groundwork for ERISA and pensions; whether it was the creation of the
EPA; whether it was the first Affirmative Action Plan in the construction
industry in Philadelphia; whether it was the AT&T settlement, which my
husband actually did as solicitor of labor which involved associates for Civil
Rights at the time, but which involved a massive settlement with AT&T with
women - back in those days, women were not having the opportunities they
have today - whether it was something I was deeply involved with, which was
changing the whole definition of Native AmSmithan policy in the country,
any of those by themselves would’ve been very progressive. Put together,
they really set the Republican Party on a new course and set the
administration in the White House on a new course. And I think they were all
very progressive.

I think, though we will never know, that that was as much John as it was the
President. I think the President set guidelines. The President said what he
wanted to accomplish in general terms; I think John was not the one and only
that made it happen, but framed it. And without the framing of it and without
putting the meat on the bones - as you know, the devil is in the details - it
would’ve been, I think, a very different domestic policy.

Smith: That’s fascinating on a number of levels. Of course, Richard Nixon has this
reputation as somebody who didn’t particularly care about domestic policy.

Kilberg: You know, I think he did care. I don’t think he cared to get into the weeds,
whereas on foreign policy, my impression was - and again, I was right out of
school, I was a very, very young White House Fellow and they don’t take
them that young anymore for a lot of good reasons - he wanted to be in every
detail of foreign policy. I think that’s accurate. He didn’t want to do that for
domestic policy, but he certainly wanted to put his imprimatur on it and tell
people what direction he wanted it to go.

Even just taking two of the examples I can give is, one, Native AmSmithan
policy where he was very actively involved in it in setting the parameters.
And, number two, was health care reform. Now, because of Richard Nixon, you had the creation of HMOs. Now, we all may think HMOs are a terrible thing these days, but back then, that was a major reform of provision of health care services. It was extraordinary. And he very clearly, well, Ehrlichman did - but he sent the instruction to move a number of us over to HEW and not come back until we had the outlines of a deal that everybody could live with. So I do think he cared. And I think his daughters think he cared. I know I’ve had a number of conversations with Ed Cox, his son-in-law, and Ed thinks he cared. I know Julie does, too, though I didn’t have a conversation with Trish about it.

Smith: Let me ask you - you get this sense of Haldeman-Ehrlichman - that it was like Lewis and Clark, almost one person. Were they different people?

Kilberg: I see Haldeman and Ehrlichman like this rather than going in one way. John spent a lot of time, just as one little example, protecting me from Haldeman. I mean, Haldeman had a very different viewpoint of how the White House staff would operate, what collegiality meant, what diverse viewpoints meant, and I think they were very, very different people. As you remember, the Roy Ash Commission created the OMB and the Domestic Policy Council. I think that the President wanted the Domestic Policy Council among other reasons, to insulate in some ways domestic policy from the most raw nature of the political process. And by creating a council and the process of putting John in charge of it, I think he accomplished that. I think if Bob Haldeman, on his own, had continued to go down the path, it would’ve been very different. So, I don’t know - they seemed to be, from a young person’s perspective, they seemed to be perfectly friendly, et cetera, et cetera, but I don’t think they were great buddies or very close. We convinced John to move out to Santa Fe where we have a home after he got out of jail. As a matter of fact I did convince the Council of the Taos Pueblo people to ask the judge to give John community service rather than prison, working with the Pueblos. And the judge said, “No.” But in that process, he started coming out to New Mexico before he went to prison, not afterwards, and settled there. So every summer,
his youngest child, Michael - who was the same age as my kids - we spent summers together for seven or eight years until he moved to Atlanta. And even after he moved to Atlanta, I’d go and see him frequently and was with him.

Smith: Was he bitter?

Kilberg: Yes, he was bitter. He thought his dignity had been taken away. He thought everything he’d worked for had been taken away and that he was viewed by people as some sort of pariah and all the good things he did were ignored. He had diabetes and his kidneys failed. He was 73 or so, I can’t remember exactly, and he was up here.

Smith: He was a Christian Scientist, wasn’t he?

Kilberg: He was a Christian Scientist, but he did take medicine for his diabetes and he was not opposed to having treatments. If somebody had told him you have to have a kidney transplant, maybe he wouldn’t have done it, but he was taking dialysis. At any rate, every year for at least the last thirty years, we’ve had a reunion of our Domestic Policy Council. It’s always in November, the week after the election every year, even odd year elections because Virginia has odd year elections. And John would come to those. And it was probably a year before he died, he was pretty ill and his second wife or maybe third wife had already left him, but he had a gal. Do you remember Senator Talmidge?

Smith: Yes.

Kilberg: It was Senator Talmidge’s daughter who then began a relationship with him and was sort of helping take care of him. She brought him up to Washington and she and I stayed with him during our dinner that night and then in the day and then I took him back to the airport. And he said to me, “I won’t see you again.” I said, “Yes, you will because I’m going to come down.” And I came down to Atlanta and it was, I don’t know, maybe eight or ten days before he died and we watched the Superbowl together. You’ll have to tell me what game that was or what year, but it was a team he liked. And he looked to me
after the Superbowl was over and he said, “Okay, may I go now?” And I just burst into tears and I said, “Do you want me to leave?” And he said, “No, I want to leave.” He said, “It’s time.” He said, “I want you to know, I’m not going to take any dialysis anymore.” And, by golly, he didn’t. But with his strength, it took him eleven or twelve days to die. That’s a long time for someone in their 70s to live without any dialysis. But he just said, ‘There’s nothing left for me here.” I said, “What about Michael?” And he said, “Michael will do just fine, but I can’t do it anymore.”

Smith: I assume there was no relationship with Nixon?

Kilberg: I don’t know.

Smith: Yeah.

Kilberg: I don’t know. I’d hate to tell you. I have no idea.

Smith: Let me go back to when you were there. There’ve been stories over the years in terms of what the White House’s attitude and, in particular, Ehrlichman and Haldeman’s attitudes were towards Republicans on the Hill. I assume from what we’ve been told, they liked Ford compared to Hugh Scott, for obvious reasons. What was your sense?

Kilberg: I don’t know. Again, I was a White House fellow first in the office of the Staff Secretary which was before the days that Dick Darman under Reagan turned that into a massive public policy bottleneck or hold. But I was there first and then when Ehrlichman became head of Domestic Policy Council, I went over and worked directly for him on that. I had very little relations with the Hill. The only time I had any relations was with the President’s Indian message, which you may or may not know about, but it basically redefined Native American policy from one of assimilation to one of self-determination. And part of that also included two major land mass returns. One was Lu Lake, which belonged actually to Taos Pueblo people, which had been taken inappropriately by the Bureau of Land Management or whatever and the surveying era 64 years before that. And then Alaska native land
claims, which were both very important and of great economic importance, including the ability to drill oil. You couldn’t do that until you got this resolved.

This was ahead of energy significance especially in a time of tight energy. As you remember, we went into the Ford energy problem. At any rate, those were the times that I went up to the Hill when I was in the Nixon White House. And in those times, I didn’t sense it…I didn’t see in those two instances any catty comments or anything about actually Democrats or Republicans. I’m sure it existed in spades. I just had no reason to see it.

Smith: So, what did you do in between White House stints?

Kilberg: Well, I left in June. I’d gone to Yale Law School and never had any interest in practicing law, but everyone kept on telling me, including my then new husband, who went to Harvard, “You really need to give this a try.” So I went to Arnold Porter in June of 1971. I was there a little short of two years and I hated corporate law. I loved the people at Arnold Porter. They were great people. And eventually in an attempt to keep me, they put me totally on pro bono stuff. They were one of the first firms in the nation that would sign people on full time to do pro bono work, and I went on to work with a guy you may or may not know, Jerry Strauss, who later became General Counsel to Occidental. But at this point was a partner at Arnold Porter and we took on Buffalo Creek, to put you back many years.

The Piston Coal Company in West Virginia in Logan County would do strip-mining in Buffalo Creek. And they would just pile up the coal, kind of like when you’re in the sandbox when you’re a kid and dig it out. They’d just pile up the coal and did some reinforcement, but nothing that anybody today or even then would consider acceptable. Then there came a major rain similar to what you had in Nashville just this past week. And it just broke the dam and it killed 120 or something people. I mean, it came down that hallow and there was no place to go. We did that case pro bono and I worked on that for probably four or five months, almost camping out in Logan, West Virginia
when it was not an easy place to get to in 1973. And then I just said, “No, I can’t do this anymore.” I left.

So I then went and I became Academic Vice President at Mount Vernon College, which was a women’s college at that time. It was trying to decide whether they would remain a women’s institution. They’d been a boarding school and a day school and a two-year junior college. And the decision was whether to take them into a four-year institution and remain women or not, single sex or not. And they wanted a business-type oriented person to do that. So I came in and did that. We decided to become a four-year institution. They decided to go into just four academic areas rather than the whole panoply of majors. And I was actually very happy there. I went there in June of ’73, but then came August of ’74 and I got a phone call from Don Rumsfeld, probably in September.

Smith: Did he know you from the Nixon White House?

Kilberg: Yes, he was Counsel to the President under President Nixon and he was head of OEO and he had an office in the second floor of the West Wing up next to what is actually now the counsel’s office. And I had a little office in the basement of the West Wing, where if you smiled, your cheeks touched walls.

Smith: Still location, location, location.

Kilberg: That’s right. Location, location, location. Next to Pat Moynihan who also – never mind.

Smith: Was he fun?

Kilberg: He was a great, just hystSmithal. At any rate, I didn’t know Don Rumsfeld. I went to the senior staff meetings in the Nixon White House as a White House Fellow, not because I had any right to be there by seniority, but because as a fellow, and this is also interesting - Nixon felt that the White House Fellows was a program he had a lot of respect for Johnson talked to him before he left the White House about it and he wanted the White House Fellows to have the
broadest White House exposure. So, I became friends with Rumsfeld through that and also very close friends with Dick and Lynn Cheney who, at that point had two little girls. We used to be there late at night and Don would order us pizza and all that.

OEO eventually gave money for the Indian that occupied the BIA to leave town as head of OEO. And he kids me about that to this day, because when all these Indians left, we discovered three days later that they cleaned out all the art and some national treasures. So, Don had the State Troopers chase after them, et cetera, et cetera, so it’s always been a fun story. But, yes, I did know him and he called me and asked me if I wanted to come back to the White House. And that’s when I said to myself, “You know, I really need to be able to show in addition to the fact that it would be interesting, I need to show people that I can come back, that I had not been tainted by Watergate and that’s very important to me.”

In my career, I didn’t know Jerry Ford, but I instinctively liked him; but at the same time, I couldn’t leave. We’d started the academic year and I just didn’t think I could do that. So I said, “I have to wait until the academic year ends in May and then I’ll come in June.” I may have come in July 1, I don’t remember. But I had this conversation with Don, it was fine and checked off. And I saw Rod Hill who was Deputy Counsel and who was going to be my boss maybe a month or two before I was going to come and he had said to me, “Oh, everything’s fine. Great. Looking forward to having you.” When I appeared the first day in the White House, there was not a piece of paper because Don had gone over to Defense by then, hadn’t he, in May or July of ’75?

Smith: He went late, later than that. It was towards the end of ’75.

Kilberg: That’s right. He was still there, but Dick was his Deputy and was handling all that kind of stuff. And they let me in the gate even though now these days they wouldn’t, but they let me in the gate and I remembered most of the guards. And I’m waiting in what was the West Lobby in the White House
and Dick came out and said, “I didn’t know you were coming. Nobody told me that you were going to be part of the staff.” I said, “Well, I’m here. I quit my job at Mount Vernon.” And he said, “Well, we’ll make it work.” But Rod was not a lot with follow-up often and Don had turned it over to Rod and Rod had decided this was great and fine. So, I came without an office, without a title, without a salary, but Dick worked his magic and I wound up in an office far, far away from the counsel’s office in old EOB for about three months until something opened up. But they did manage to pay me and give me a title. I had to wait three or four months to get in the White House mess because they had to go through with the titles, to be the Associate Counsel to the President. The commissioned officers stuff takes time. But I was there. I just had a little bit of a slow start.

Smith: What were Rumsfeld’s strengths?

Kilberg: I think Rumsfeld’s strengths were management, clearly defined objectives, and holding people accountable for results. I would say mostly that. I don’t think he thought nor would he conceive of himself as a strategic or philosophical thinker. He’s very, very results-oriented and liked to see how you’d go about it.

Smith: Obviously there’s a lot of ways to see the Ford presidency, One is the trajectory of someone coming in who had spent 25 years on the Hill, and who, in effect, has to learn to be an executive and a President. And there are those who believe that Rumsfeld was particularly good at coaching him.

Kilberg: Coaching the President?

Smith: Yes, along those lines.

Kilberg: Well, Rumsfeld had been in Congress.

Smith: He had. Yeah, but he had some executive experience.

Kilberg: In the private sector.
Smith: It’s interesting that he called you when he did because a number of people confirmed that he advised the President early on to clean house. It raises a couple of questions which I realize are speculative, Ford felt strongly he didn’t want to tar all the Nixon people with the Watergate brush. He believed in continuity, that there were a lot of very talented people. But it does raise the question of whether you can be too nice or not sufficiently ruthless in situations where perhaps ruthlessness is called for.

Kilberg: No, I think you have to look at how President Ford defined his presidency. And I’m convinced, though again, I stress I was a young staffer, I was not particularly close to him.

Smith: Right.

Kilberg: He knew who I was. He was very kind to me. He read my memos, but I don’t think I was a friend of his as I was with Bush 41. It was just a totally different relationship. But having said that, from what I observed, I think he defined his presidency in large measure as restoring civility to both the White House and to politics, and to give the AmSmithan people a feeling that it was okay, that we were a nation united, and that he was a good guy. And indeed he was a wonderfully good guy. But I really think he viewed that as his role, and I don’t think it was in his bones or his DNA to turn around and punish people by association. I know he came eventually to believe obviously that the President should resign, but I think it took him, from talking to Phil Buchen, who is no longer with us unfortunately, I think it took Gerald Ford a long time to get there. He always liked to believe in the best of people. And he did change. I mean, he immediately changed the White House counsel, obviously.

It’s interesting, also, too, I’m not sure I remember this correctly, but I think the White House counsel under Nixon’s office grew exponentially as he had more and more trouble. I may be wrong with that, but I think so. Our White House counsel’s office was six of us. There was Buchen as Counsel, Ed Schmaltz who was new, he had come from the private sector. But Ed was
Deputy. Rod came in when Ed left, so it was Phil Buchen, Ed, then Rod replacing him, then a guy named Ken Lazarus, Dudley Moore and myself. And then one young fellow named Barry Roth and then we had two ‘legal interns’ who were in school. One was H.P. Goldsmith who is now a lobbyist and one was Mark Decker, whose professional history been a lot of real estate and investments. So, that was it until the guy from Idaho who - what was his name? A Senator who caused the whole CIA to be—

Smith: Frank Church. The Church Commission.

Kilberg: Frank Church. The Church Commission. Then there was a whole other group of people that were brought in as detailees in the counsel’s office headed by Jim Wilderotter, who at least I rarely saw. They were there, but there was kind of a Chinese wall. So it was almost as though ‘I don’t need a lot of lawyers and a lot of defensive stuff. I am who I am and this counsel’s office can deal very nicely being small and efficient.’ And we relied on the Justice Department an awful lot and Bob Bork and Nino Scalia, who was head of Office of Legal Counsel then. Nino’s oldest son, Gene, is a young partner of my husbands and he was going through his dad’s papers for some reason and he found a memo exchange - there were no emails back then - on a logistic(?) veto that I had with Nino and Bob Bork. And that’s the kind of stuff we did. I mean, we weren’t there in this defensive posture.

Smith: That raises a couple of things. First of all, I’d be interested just to hear you talk about Phil Buchen. There is this school of thought that says that the “Grand Rapids crowd”, by and large, fell by the wayside, or over time were ground up.

Kilberg: Hartman and Buchen and ______

Smith: Tell me about Phil Buchen.

Kilberg: I think Phil Buchen was a person who was extraordinarily secure in his own skin as to who he was. And I think his battle with polio really made him put the world in perspective. I was not there when they pardoned Nixon, by the
way, I think that was his real trial by fire. By the time I got there, I was
dealing with busing, the Arab boycott of Israel, the Secret Service and a
bunch of issues, et cetera, et cetera, the arts. He was obviously dealing with
other things that we dealt with such as economic deregulation. We dealt with
deregulation of the airline industry and all that. Plus he was dealing with the
Supreme Court, the appointment of Justice Stevens, and I’m sure lots of other
things I had nothing to do with. But I never sensed that he often lost his cool.

Sometimes, from sitting in on – I did not sit in on the White House senior
staff at that point even though I was higher rank now than I was as a White
House Fellow - but in our staff meetings, I never saw him lose his temper. He
would tell us sometimes, “You know, I’m out of the loop on this one,” or
“Why don’t you all at that level try to find out what’s going on and come back
to me.” But he was never kind of “How dare they do that to me?” or this or
that. I think he was just delighted and thrilled to be there. Kind of a little bit
in awe of “Am I really here?” But he knew that his friendship with Gerald
Ford was as solid as it can be and that he would always be his advisor. And
he would sometimes go in there, not for hours on end, but for a long time in
the Oval Office, and my understanding is that they just kind of shot the breeze
and they’d talk about issues and then just talk about their lives and their kids
and Grand Rapids and all that. I think he was a very secure person internally.

Smith: People all talk about the normality of the people around Ford, beginning with
the President.

Kilberg: Correct. Let me give you some examples. I was thinking the other day, our
first child was born in March of ’75 and I came to the White House either at
the end of June or beginning of July ’75. And I tried very hard not to go in on
Saturdays and indeed in this White House that was not unusual. You didn’t
have to. It was, again, a very-low key White House. But when I did come in,
I would bring Jonathan with me because I only had a five day a week nanny.
And I will always remember, one time the President called a meeting in the
Roosevelt Room, I think it may have been on busing, I don’t really remember,
but I think it was on busing, and I didn’t have a secretary. She wasn’t there. We didn’t have secretaries there anymore. And there was nobody there, so I kind of said, “What should I do?” And was it Nell Yates who was Ford’s Secretary?

Smith: Dorothy Downton?

Kilberg: Dorothy Downton?

Smith: Mildred Leonard, early.

Kilberg: I think it was Mildred Leonard who said, “Well, just bring him” because she didn’t want to watch him. So I had a little blanket and his teething toys and I plopped him down next to me in the Roosevelt Room. The President came in, looked at him, got on the floor and played with him, sat down in his chair and we proceeded with the meeting. Now, of course, once kids start toddling, it’s a little more difficult, but Jonathan wasn’t going anywhere, but it was just that kind of normality. “Oh, a baby. Good!” I mean, can you imagine any of these other guys? They’d just freak out. And it was just the most normal thing. And when we lost, this I remember because it’s on the back of the picture, January 9th, I had Jonathan with me again for some reason and the President saw him and he said, “I think he should sit in my chair.” I said, “What?” He said, “Come on!” So he came in, opened the Oval Office door, and he plopped Jonathan in his chair in the Oval Office and I had photos of that.

When we left the Bush White House, Bush 41, I said to him, “Mr. President, Jonathan has a picture in the chair.” He was now 15 or 16 years old. I said, “He wants another one.” And he said, “Sure!” and he stood behind him, but, again, that was different. I mean, there was a relationship that went back to when I was in college. I mean, I was part of that family. I was very close. I wasn’t that way with Ford, but he just thought, “There’s a kid. There’s my Oval Office chair. Let’s plop him down.” And the day we left office, he invited all the commissioned officers because I would’ve been the equivalent
of the associate counsel to the president, I would’ve been the equivalent of a
special assistant to the president. So it’s down to all your commissioned
officers. How many that would’ve been, I don’t know how many that was.
Invited us all to the state floor to have breakfast, you know, a stand-up buffet
breakfast and sit there and talk with them. And he came around, and I’m
going to start crying when I think of it, because he came around and talked to
everybody.

He thanked everybody for what they did and went upstairs and changed his
clothes, I’m sure. And we just were, you know, just dumbfounded because it
was just a lovely thing to do. And then a lot of us left and stood on the two
sides of the portico, the north portico rather than south, and watched the
limousine come up with Jimmy Carter and watched Ford greet him. We were
not invited, obviously, at that part when they came up and had their own
coffee. I thought, “This guy, 20 minutes ago, was just sitting there talking to
the staff.” And when he lost that night - if you remember, they didn’t call it
until the next morning - some of us didn’t get any sleep at all and got there
really early the next morning and we were just hanging around the press
room. The staff was in the press room and he came down and from the Oval
Office and said, “I’m going to concede now”, went out to the press podium
and conceded, and then came back and just kind of talked to us. And we’re in
tears and he’s just telling people it’s going to be fine, it’s going to be alright.

An extraordinary guy. And, I’m sorry, after he left, and this was after
Reagan’s first year in office and now I had four kids but only took the older
two. John was only six or so and Sarah was four and took the kids to
Disneyworld and we were going down. My husband’s a partner at Gibson-
McCutchten, so we were going down to La Quinta and we stopped at Rancho
Mirage, the Ford’s family home, and with very little notice I just called
whoever it was who was the secretary then out there and I said, “We’d like to
drop by.” And she said, “Well, he’s on the golf course, but I’m sure when he
comes back, I’ll call and let you know.” Called me up - again, we didn’t have
cell phones – but, however, we got in touch, and she said, “Come on by.”
And he spent two hours with us, with the kids, showed them everything. I mean, I’m sure he had a lot of other things to do with his day. And, again, it was not as though he was doing this with someone who was a member of his senior staff who he was very close with. I was a junior commissioned officer, but it didn’t matter because I belonged to him because I worked for him.

Smith: He was very proud of the team that he put together. And it’s interesting. Even people who tend to dismiss the Ford presidency, if you scratch the surface, they’ll acknowledge, “Well, yeah, they put together an amazingly talented cabinet and White House staff,” which also tells you something about the level of comfort, the fact that he was comfortable with people who had huge egos and huge IQs and agendas of their own and never felt threatened.

Kilberg: And that he brought in, he just died recently, Bob Goodwin, right? The guy he brought in to be kind of the scholar in residence who then went to Brookings who kind of wandered around and never had any role? It would’ve driven me nuts. But he would just kind of come around and sit in on meetings and pontificate and then leave. But Ford liked that. He wanted somebody around. That was Ford, wasn’t it? I know it wasn’t Bush and I’m sure it wasn’t Nixon.

Smith: Well, I heard President Ford say one of the appointments he was proudest of was Dan Boorstin as Librarian of Congress and that’s pretty distinguished.

Kilberg: Yes. And you also think – you were talking about the kind of person he was – one of the last things I did was the clemency. In the end we had to make an announcement, which I was in charge of, to create the Clemency Board or did it basically say, “We’re giving amnesty to everybody or everybody coming home.” But remember, he made it possible for all the kids in Canada to come home.

Smith: Which was not a popular thing to do.

Kilberg: No, and actually it was so unpopular that when it came time to announce the policy, everybody turned red and I was the one who went after the White
House press corps. And I guess the theory was that these were the young people who were my age because I was – I’m now 63, so back it up.

Smith: Late 20s?

Kilberg: Well, at the end, almost 30. But these were my friends, I mean, not necessarily my friends, I happened to be in favor of the war, but these were my colleagues, you know, people my age and my peers. And he just felt very strongly that it was a part of the healing and he said, “We need to heal the White House and we need to heal this country.” Part of the healing was people needed to be able to come home and rejoin their families.

Smith: People tend to overlook the fact, but it was only three weeks apart - the announcement at the VFW convention of this program and the Nixon pardon. Party of the same effort, along the lines what you said.

Kilberg: What we did in the end of 1976 was we brought it to closure and we declared that everybody could come home. I’d have to go back and look at my notes and you could do that easily, too, in the library. I have it somewhere. I can get it for you. But that reminds me also, not to beat a point, but would somebody please come get my papers? I have tons of papers of President(?). This was when you still could take things legally. I have tons of stuff, most of them are not originals. I think I left the originals, but tons of copies of all sorts of things.

Smith: I’ll pass that on.

Let me ask you. Did you feel uncomfortable at all as the only woman in the room? One senses that you were on the cusp.

Kilberg: I was on the cusp. There was an article that I have at home that’s framed by Isabelle Shelton from The Washington Star. She did this big, huge article on me which says, “What’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like that?” or something because I was the only woman. I suppose I was one of the few women in a professional role in the White House. I certainly was the woman
lawyer floating around. I mean, Carla Hills was Assistant Attorney General for Anti-trust, I believe. There was a Women’s Office, but that was very different. I never, certainly not from Gerald Ford nor from anyone in the counsel’s office nor from anyone of the Justice Department that I dealt with, felt that anything was strange.

Smith: Nor Rumsfeld.

Kilberg: Nor Rumsfeld. Nor Cheney. Absolutely not. Lynn would’ve killed him. He was very fair. I always found that I was very lucky to have opportunities that other women hadn’t had before me and I was very sensitive to that. But I never felt, certainly not in the Ford White House, any sense of discrimination or that the quality of my work was being scrutinized in a different way or anything like that. But, if you go back to the Nixon White House, and that’s almost another generation in many ways, and, there - again, there wasn’t such a thing as email at that point in time - in the Domestic Policy Council, they divided it up so everybody had certain cabinet members and agencies you dealt with.

Plus, before that, as the Assistant Staff Secretary, I had to be able to deal with all cabinet members, because all their papers came through me and through my boss. Ehrlichman had to call every cabinet member and follow it up with a letter saying that “Bobbie Kilberg is a member of my staff. She’s authorized and required to talk to you all and you need to take her calls when she calls,” because I couldn’t get anybody to call me back. But it was not the cabinet members. What it was was the gatekeeper secretary, who invariably was female. It was not that she didn’t like the fact that I was female and was trying to have access, it was that she couldn’t conceive that I really could be senior enough to be talking to her boss because I was female. Because it was totally out of their experience. That hadn’t happened before. And their answer was, “Well, if you’re calling me and you’re a female voice, you must be a secretary just as I am, and so if I’m going to put you into my boss, you tell me what you want.” So I had a heck of a time for the first month or two
in the Nixon White House - not getting anybody in the Nixon White House to call me back- that was not the problem – but getting any cabinet members in departments or agencies. That was the real issue.

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

Kilberg: Very little. I had a lot of contact with Susan Porter-Rose, who was a very close friend of mine. I had very little contact with Mrs. Ford. I was invited once to a tea up in the family quarters, which I think included women from other departments and agencies, but I had very little contact. I’m sorry, I take that back. I did have one experience with her and that is, at some point in 1976, after the people splattered blood when they came through on the tour – it was calf’s blood or something – the Secret Service said, “Enough of this.” They wanted to create a different receiving area which was more removed. You used to come right into, literally, the East Wing without having any sort of additional checks before that. And so, I did wind up having some interchange with her because the design didn’t have to be approved by the Secret Service, it had to be approved by the Capitol Planning Commission and everybody else and she had an interest in what it was going to look like. And I was the legal person who was walking around with all these darn diagrams and schematics and all that. So I wound up having some interaction with her, but it was just maybe once or twice.

Smith: I’m wondering whether there was background noise in the fall of ’75, late ’75 when she does the now famous 60 Minutes interview. And one senses the good grey political types in the White House are aghast initially. And it takes awhile for people to realize, some poll numbers come in - the country’s changing, particularly post-Watergate. People look at her as refreshing.

Kilberg: And not standoffish like Mrs. Nixon.

Smith: And the Ford presidency’s all about restoring not only confidence and dignity and trust, but also openness.

Kilberg: Yes.
Smith: She becomes a symbol of that.

Kilberg: As you know, there’s the staff mess, the Navy mess in the White House. There’s a regular staff mess and a senior staff mess. I don’t know if there was a senior staff mess initially, but by Bush 41 we had one. At any rate, there was this staff mess and I remember sitting around - if you didn’t have a guest - you would sit around this circular table and I do remember sitting around the circular table and having the guys kind of questioning things. I can think of two guys, but I can’t tell you their names, but two guys in particular who are actually people who dealt with the Hill, saying, “Oh my gosh, how am I going to deal with this?” and “Why would you say that?” And I also remember then the head of the CIA.

Smith: Bill Colby.


Smith: Oh, I’m sorry.

Kilberg: But I’m trying to think, because he would come over sometimes and just sit at the round table. And we had a discussion about how refreshing it was because she was kind of like Barb, Mrs. Bush is like that. He felt totally at home with her because that’s just what he got every day at home and if any of this had happened to Barb, she would’ve gotten right up and told everybody right away. So, I remember talking to him about it. I’m not sure if it was at the time of the 60 Minutes interview or not, but yeah. And that’s the other thing the President would do - and Bush 41 used to do this as well - would come say to me sometimes, “I’m just continuing Jerry’s tradition” – he’d just come down often and just kind of plop down and sit in the mess. President Bush 41 would do that, too, but he’d come more often into the senior staff mess.

I remember one time when we were all just very upset about the budget agreement that Sununu and Darman and Gingrich had forged. And Nick Callio, who at that point was head of House Relations, was sitting in the staff
mess at the round table, sitting here and facing there and the door was there. And he was just furious about the President. “How can he do that without including us” et cetera, et cetera. The President walks in and I’m going like this and Nick just keeps on talking and talking. And the President comes up and he puts his arms on Nick and starts massaging his shoulders and said, “I know you used to love to work here.” And of course, he didn’t do anything about it. He said, “I understand your frustration and I’m going to try to work through it.” And we just plopped down and tried to figure out a strategy to deal with all this, but Ford was very much like that. I mean, I can’t think of a funny story like that, but I remember his just coming in and plopping him down and sitting with the staff and eating.

Smith: School desegregation. I’m from the Boston area originally and knew Kevin White quite well and did some work for him. And know now that he had national aspirations at one point and they went up in flames at that time.

Kilberg: And that was really one of the remaining major - you had Detroit and the Supreme Court ruled that you couldn’t force the busing of white suburban kids into Detroit. You had to be within the parameters of the city, which didn’t do Detroit much good, if you believed in busing. And then what you had was Boston and with Boston tentacles, if I remember, were a lot longer in the sense.

Smith: Geographically a much larger area.

Kilberg: Geographically, yeah.

Smith: What was the administration’s position?

Kilberg: Well, the administration’s position was interesting. I dragged out Jim Reichling because I was trying to remember all the parameters on that. Ed Levi, the Attorney General, was a major influence on that and he took a very long time to decide where we were at in that and I remember numerous members going back and forth and it just confused the heck out of me because I wasn’t sure where we were. Eventually we had two separate meetings in the
Cabinet Room that included Levy, Buchen, myself, David Matthews, and other people. Cheney. I’m going to say Rumsfeld was in that picture, because that wasn’t right because he was at Defense already. And our position - and a lot of people accused us of not being very clear, even at the end - what we eventually got to was that, in order to force busing, you had to have shown that there was an actual practice of past discrimination that lead to segregation and that often related to housing, back to housing, that would require you to remedy that versus saying simply, “Detroit is (or Boston), there aren’t any white kids here, therefore, it’s somebody’s fault and we need to bring the white kids in by force.” Is that de facto versus de jure? It’s kind of complicated. I’m not sure it’s easy to say either way, but I know we used those terms in the legislation, and I don’t know whether our legislation passed. We asked for legislation, but we eventually left it to the courts and it kind of subsided. And if you ask people today about busing, they look at you like, “What are you talking about?”

Smith: Looking back 30 years, was busing kind of an aberration, a noble experiment doomed to fail? What was it? A phase?

Kilberg: I don’t think it was a phase. I think there clearly had been many wrongs. You clearly had segregated communities and in some cases, not only in the South, but in the North, people intentionally creating situations or systems so that these kids were separated out or segregated out, even if they lived fairly close to each other. And I think people had all the good intentions and motives. I think it didn’t work because, in fact, when you take kids out of neighborhood schools and bus them across town or wherever else, you’re leaving a very important component of the educational experience, which is being in a community. You’re losing that and I’m not sure that - because you had tracking systems in these integrated schools - you had that much integration. You had some, yes, but you wound up having, if I remember back to those days, in some of the studies we saw, the white kids on one track and the black kids on another track. Now, was that something that argued against busing?
No. But did it argue against the school systems actually dealing with the systemic problems? Yes.

It was fascinating to me to watch, in college and after that, in the school systems that - and I don’t know why - the kids often segregated themselves back out socially. You had some kids who were really brave and crossed those lines and forged friendships, but a lot of it was their own social segregation back. Now, was that to say that the parents ought to say, “Okay, you all just want to not integrate yourselves with each other, so we’re going to drop it”? No. But I just don’t think it worked. It didn’t improve educational performance, it didn’t improve relationships between the communities, and it took kids out of their communities. Was maybe economic integration the better way, i.e. as people integrated themselves by their income levels, you had true friendships and educational experiences? I don’t know.

But I remember there was one time that the President called over Attorney General Levi, I think it was on a Saturday, and Phil Buchen went and told me to wait in my office and I waited for hours. And they just spent hours, just the three of them, in the Oval office, just talking about it. And I remember then, we wrote up the President’s statement. We didn’t write up the legislation, the Justice Department wrote up the legislation, we reviewed it. But then I think it just kind of died. It went up to the Hill and I don’t remember it ever coming back the other way. Did it?

Smith: I’m wondering about the tension between, in effect, a President putting himself implicitly or explicitly in opposition to Court orders.

Kilberg: Well, that depends how you define the Court orders. What was your experience with White?

Smith: Well I wrote speeches for him and I watched. He was scarred for life by the experience. He started out as this kind of John Lindsay, street corner liberal who, I think, in many ways was redefined by the practical realities of going through this experience. He was a very different mayor at the end of 16 years
from what he had been at the beginning. And right in the middle, came this civil war on the streets of Boston.

Kilberg: Yes, correct, but, if I remember right, what the Court said was that you cannot force suburban school districts who are not part of the city - the entity - to bus their children into Detroit even though the result of you not doing that would mean a predominantly, overwhelmingly, 98%, or whatever, black district. What we were saying was a logical extension of that, which was that, unless you could show that there was clear evidence of distinct practices that lead to that segregation, you couldn’t do that.

Smith: Was it a particularly sensitive issue? I mean, in terms of not wanting to appear that you were lending aid and comfort to the Louise Day Hicks’ of the world.

Kilberg: Yes, to those terrible people. And they were terrible people.

Smith: You knew who they were.

Kilberg: Yeah, and Louise Day Hicks was a very bad person. I think the President thought he was doing what was right. I mean, he was a Yale Law graduate, thank you very much. I don’t think he was a constitutional scholar, but he clearly understood the law. And I think he was comfortable with doing what he did. However, I do think also that obviously he spent a lot of time with the Attorney General and Phil walking and talking it through, because I think he wanted to get it right. Would he have spent that amount if he had been Nixon or Carter or Bush or Reagan? Probably not. But he was a lawyer and he was interested in the intricacies.

Smith: Also, tell us about Ed Levi.

Kilberg: About Ed Levi? I don’t have much I can tell you. I was just kind of in awe of him.

Smith: What made you in awe of him?
Kilberg: Because he was a professor and he just sounded brighter and smarter than anybody else and he wore bowties. He’d walk into a room and he could be very condescending.

Smith: Really?

Kilberg: Yeah. And he could be very certain of himself and very dismissive if you had other opinions. So, if you’re a young lawyer, you can be pretty scared of him.

Now, I’m sure Nino Scalia wasn’t scared of him and other people weren’t scared of him, but I was scared of him. I kind of stood behind Rod or behind Ed Schmaltz during that time.

Smith: Talk about an overlooked contribution - in terms of taking a tarnished Justice Department and restoring standards.

Kilberg: Yes, absolutely, and that’s all part of it in that he was very certain of himself and he had very ethical standards and he was going to pose those and that was absolutely fine. You just asked me why I felt I was scared of this person.

Smith: You were just intimidated.

Kilberg: He was intimidating, which was funny because he was small and wasn’t very big and kind of wiry. But he was. But I also do remember having very frustrating conversations with the Justice Department - about that I spent a lot of my time, while Phil and Ed or Phil and Rod didn’t. But the other four of us did, in doing a review of the FBI clearances for positions. Because you’re bringing in new people and you want to be sure of a very strict ethical standard. You’re going to look very carefully at their backgrounds. And I got so darned tired of reading. The FBI would go and ask their set of questions. “Do you beat your mother?” “Do you hate your wife?” “Are you sleeping with so and so and so and so?” And reading this day in and day out, what neighbors would say about people, no basis in fact, just, “I think” or “I don’t like the color of their hair.” And the FBI would just write all this down and give it to you.
Smith: A raw file.

Kilberg: Yeah. And you’d sit there and read it and say, “Where’s the analysis?” “Where’s the backup to this?” “Where’s the substantiation of any of these charges?” And Ed Schmaltz looked at me one day after we had some nominee who turns out to have had major fraudulent finances in some major deal that went south - there was no Google then or anything else - it was just shoe leather. Ed said to me something about, “This guy doesn’t smell right.” I said, “I think you’re right.” So he called up his friends on Wall Street and we began to piece together a story. We discover that indeed this person was being looked at by Morgenthau in New York, which we hadn’t known or had any access to. And we thought, “Here’s the FBI worrying about who’s sleeping with whom or who’s not taking out their garbage and they were paying no attention to all to possible economic malfeasances or whatever.” I mean, yes, they asked what your income was and they checked and made sure you paid your taxes, but there was no analysis on this stuff. And we really worried about that stuff related to ethics and government. It was one of the things that we really pushed the Justice Department to do something about - the FBI was independent - nonetheless to get the FBI to start focusing on it.

Smith: Who was the FBI Director at that point?

Kilberg: It certainly wasn’t Bill Webster. I don’t remember. I have no idea.

Smith: A couple other things and then we’ll let you go. Did you have any contact at all with the Vice President?

Kilberg: Rockefeller?

Smith: Yeah.

Kilberg: Only because I came to New York as a Nelson Rockefeller Republican. My godfather was Ken Keating.
Smith: I’ve been working for ten years on a biography on Rockefeller and so I have a particular interest in the subject.

Kilberg: Ken Keating was my godfather and had convinced me to work for Rockefeller when I was in law school - for his presidential race during the summer instead of going to a law firm.

Smith: ‘68?

Kilberg: ‘68. So, I worked for Dick Nathan on the domestic policy side. I’ll get to the point of if I had contact with Rockefeller. I did not have relations with Rockefeller.

Smith: Get that on the record.

Kilberg: Get that out now. But at any rate, I worked at 30 Rockefeller Center. It was really interesting. Rockefeller set up his policy team for his presidency at 30 Rockefeller Center. It was Dick Nathan, a bunch of people, and then two of us who were junior interns. Then Kissinger was on that same floor with Nancy McGuiness, who was then not his wife. Nancy Hanks was there and Jonathan Moore and just a great group of people and I was literally the youngest person there. We would go to the kitchen, which was on the floor also, during the day and open it up and it was stocked full of Pepperidge Farm cookies and shrimp et cetera, et cetera. Every once in awhile, they would send us over to deliver something or to talk to the delegate counters or the political people who were in some damned warehouse somewhere, blocks and blocks away in New York City, where you have to kind of walk over the rats and everything else. And he just had this food there because you had to keep these kinds of people, who were his type of people, happy - and those other people, who did that stuff, you’d keep them over there.

His office was just a series of old metal desks and tables and all the delegate books around; of course everything was on paper in those days. But at any rate, we had this wonderful, elite, expensive suite and then it came time to go to the convention - and you’ll like this also - and they forgot about me. And
eventually the Governor said, “Why isn’t she going?” And they basically said, “Well, we’re out of money. We didn’t think of it. I mean, she really doesn’t have any relevance. You’re not going to sit at the convention and worry about domestic policy.” And he said, “No. She goes. And Mark,” who was a Harvard undergraduate, “goes too.”

And so they put us up, a boy and a girl, in the suite that he had in the _____ where he was going to make the deals. And so we were in charge, our only job was to be sure the suite was secured so Mark and I, there was three bedrooms in here and he had one and I had one and we would rotate and we would be sure that the suite was secure. And all sorts of people came wandering through there. I’m sorry I can’t tell you at this point, I can’t remember who they were, but all sorts of state delegation heads, et cetera, et cetera, would come in and meet with the Governor. And it was clear that it wasn’t going well, because I could see the Governor’s face when they left. We used that suite and I was there that night when the count came and he did not get the nomination. And then I didn’t see him or anybody else for that matter, many of those people, until he became Vice President. And Peter Wallison is a very close friend. Wallison was a partner of my husband’s, so we were very close. And Dick Parsons and I forged a real friendship during that period of time and Dick went off and would come down to my office and plop himself down and talk about how it was very frustrating that the Rockefeller people really couldn’t get through the system and couldn’t really be part. And I was not senior enough to really see that, but Dick really felt that the Vice President was supposed to be - “the concept of being in charge of or having a lot of say in domestic policy” - but, in fact, nobody was really listening. That’s the sense that I got.

Smith: Yeah.

Kilberg: And then Susan Herter, who you know lives in Perocking(?) now about twenty minutes from us in Santa Fe, she for a time was there, too. Remember Susan?
Smith: She replaced Ann Whitman.

Kilberg: Yes, that’s right. At any rate, no, I didn’t have much contact at all, but I did have the sense that they really did not feel that they were really part of it.

Smith: He went to his grave believing that Rumsfeld did him in.

Kilberg: Right.

Smith: Of course, no one ever wants to blame the President and I think a lot of it was it was naïve of him to believe that realistically he was going to be given domestic policy. And to some degree, he wasn’t completely honest with himself. He said, “I’ve known every Vice President since Henry Wallace and they were all unhappy.” On one level, he went with a realistic set of expectations, but someone—

Kilberg: But he’d been the Governor of New York State.

Smith: He did and more.

Kilberg: And more.

Smith: And he was a Rockefeller.

Kilberg: And he was a Rockefeller. And he built single-handedly all of these stone by stone by himself.

Smith: Exactly. But someone close to him tried to talk him out of it during this brief period when he was considering it. And after about fifteen minutes, Rockefeller says, “Look, everything you said makes sense, but you don’t realize, this is my last chance.” And when you really stripped it all away, at the bottom, there it was and it never went away. And that almost guaranteed that he would be frustrated, perhaps more than frustrated.

Kilberg: I do remember Dick Parsons being with us in most of our meetings on busing. I do remember that and I think I’ll go back and try to find that picture for you.
I think he was around the Cabinet Room table as well. I seem to remember that. Again, I apologize. This is all so long ago.

Smith: You’re doing great.

Kilberg: Okay. I’m just sitting here looking at notes about things we haven’t covered and one of the things that occurred to me was the whole concept of deregulation. The one I worked on was deregulation of the airline industry. And who was the guy from Cornell who was head of CMV?

Smith: Alfred.

Kilberg: Alfred, he was CMV.

Smith: There were several. It will come to me, but I can see him.

Kilberg: Yeah, me too. Kind of looked like a younger Alan Greenspan.

Smith: Exactly.

Kilberg: Yes, okay. This is terrible. At any rate, Jim, who then tried to run for the Senate in Virginia. He tried to challenge Warner in the primary. He was on the staff of the CEA, the Council of Economic Advisors. And Jim then became the star at Heritage. Jim was very strongly in favor of deregulation and the CMV chairman, “Alan,” I think was probably somewhere in the middle. But what struck me was when not just the airline industry CEOs came in, but other business CEOs came in, and didn’t like this at all. I mean, it was the concept of businesspeople actually liking the free marketplace - which I thought made a lot of sense - was for them horrifying. And they predicted that there’d be turmoil and lots of airlines would go out of business and the President’s attitude was, “Well, that’s the free marketplace and maybe these airlines don’t –“

Smith: Alfred Kahn and Jim Miller.

Smith: Alfred Kahn and Jim Miller.
Kilberg: And Jim Miller! Thank you. But the President’s attitude was that is the marketplace and if we’re talking about Republican principles and we’re talking about the economy working, it ought to be what succeeds, succeeds and what doesn’t, doesn’t. What happened, of course, was small cities lost their routes. But I think if I went away with one thing, it was just - which was perhaps naïveté - how the business community did not like this concept of making them stand on their own two feet without the defense being a monopoly and how businesses from other sectors of the economy were very concerned about it as well. And from that perspective, the other part of the business community, they just wanted certainty. They felt that you wouldn’t have certainty if you had just total deregulation of the airline industry. But we worked on that, too, and Ed Schmaltz worked on that a lot and Rod did - or was it Rod and Ed?

The other thing I remember was the bailout of New York City. And I was telling this to one of Rod Hill’s daughters the other day. We were at a funeral together. And I told her that one of my jobs was to keep track of Rod. Everybody had their jobs, one of my jobs was to keep track of Rod Hills because he was just full of a million ideas and would just go off and try to implement them on behalf of the President whether they’d been approved or not. And he evidently went to New York one day to find the guy who was in charge of Lazard Freres, Felix Rohatyn, with his own deal to bail the city out without anybody’s approval.

And I guess the President or Phil or somebody got wind of this and I got called into the Oval Office which I rarely, rarely did. And they said, “Get on a plane and go find Rod Hills.” And I said, “Any particular place I ought to start?” They said, “Try Wall Street.” And somebody met me with a car and driver and we went around until I found Rod Hills. And I told him that he had to come back and he was not right(?) he could not speak, because he was not returning phone calls. Again, there wasn’t any email. They didn’t have cell phones then. There was no way to communicate with him, so I went and found him and told him to come home. But I look back at it and think,
“That’s pretty cool.” You know, the President calls you into the Oval Office to tell you to go find your boss in New York City.

Smith: Did you sense an internal debate in the administration? I have talked to most of the surviving principles, for example, Bill Seidman, who was quite vocal. He was in the Rockefeller camp versus the Greenspan-Simon sort of purist, if you will. And the speech that the President gave at the Press Club which gave rise to the famous “Drop Dead” headline, was battleground between the two camps. Were you aware of this philosophical turmoil?

Kilberg: I was sort of aware of the fact that some people were more moderate and some people were more conservative. Especially as it came out in the campaign for the presidency or the nomination, that there were certainly people viewed as moderates - which I was viewed as - and people who were viewed as conservatives in the White House. I was never quite sure where Don viewed himself. Or where Dick viewed himself at that point in time. And when I thought, you know, I always put Dick on the moderate camp and then when he went to Congress, we’re very good friends, remain very good friends to this day, but I went, “Wait a minute. Your positions are not what I remembered. You’ve evolved.” And he said he evolved to reflect his constituency. I do remember that. But my only role in the Drop Dead New York was finding Rod Hills. And Rod would’ve been in the Seidman camp.

Smith: I assume that your office was pretty well insulated from politics, but I can’t imagine that anyone in the White House is totally insulated.

Kilberg: No, but we were given very clear instructions that the counsel’s office was the lawyers. We were non-political. We would act in a non-political way. And that we would not talk to any outside parties on any topics. That nobody was to come lobby us outside the White House. Obviously our colleagues in the White House could talk to us, but nobody was to lobby us. That we were not to ever, ever send anybody who came to us to ask for us to send them to a department or agency because they had a problem. That was an absolutel no-no. We cut those people off at the knees. We would do none of that, and Phil
was very clear about that and we all adhered to it. And I don’t think you saw one ounce of any sort of scandal coming in with the Ford counsel’s office.

Smith: Last major question, here. There’s this school of thought that says they waited far too long in terms of acknowledging, first of all, the real possibility that Reagan might run and, secondly, that Reagan might turn out to be as formidable an opponent as he was. I don’t think you were involved in that. I mean, Washington is a town where there’s a lot of conventional thinking…but the sense of a White House that in some ways—

Kilberg: Was asleep?

Smith: Well, asleep, but also coming out of the experience of ’74, not a-political, because there’s no such thing as an a-political White House, but a White House wanting to restore public confidence in the a-political nature of its leadership.

Kilberg: My guess is, though it’s just my instinct, that the people that worried about politics in the White House - which the counsel’s office did not - that they were probably surprised that the President wasn’t viewed as acceptable to what was then viewed as the conservative wing of the party. And I think they probably couldn’t quite figure it out because in fact Gerald Ford was quite conservative.

Smith: Fiscally.

Kilberg: Yes, fiscally very conservative with a wonderful demeanor about him and the inclusiveness was very fiscally conservative, so my guess would be that they were somewhat surprised about the intensity of it. But again, we were totally isolated from that. I think my one experience was that at the convention, Dick did give people permission to go out to the convention on their own dime if they wanted to though they had to show that they were taking vacation time, et cetera, et cetera. And if you wanted (though we were not allowed to, the counsels), but if any White House staff wished to volunteer on the campaigns, they had to show me – I was the gatekeeper on that as was two or three other
people on the White House counsel’s staff – they needed to submit to me that they had performed every week a full eight hours of government work before they took off to do anything else. We kept scrupulous records to show that nobody was doing politics on government time.

But I was going to go up to the convention and I was part of the group that was still pushing for the Equal Rights Amendment, which, by the way, Gerald Ford endorsed initially and Betty Ford was very strongly in favor of. In fact, I went to speak on the floor of the North Dakota legislature, which is the single unicameral legislature, on the Equal Rights Amendment. But at any rate, I was going to go to the convention with a group of Republican women, Jill Ruckelshaus, Peggy Heckler, Mary Louise Smith, who became chairman of the RNC actually, yeah, at the end of the Ford presidency. A whole group of very respectable women lobbying for that and Dick called me to his office and said, “You’re not going anywhere.” And I said, “Yes, I am.” And he said, “No, you’re not, because Clarke Reed will close the Mississippi delegation from supporting the President if you show up there.” I said, “Don’t be ridiculous.” He said, “Clarke Reed doesn’t like you and you’re not going anywhere.” Clarke Reed was very much opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment.

But Bush, when he was chairman of the RNC, created the Rule 29 Commission, which was designed to look at a variety of party rules to modernize them. And one of the rules that the party looked at was rule 32. And Peggy Heckler, who was the congresswoman then from Massachusetts, from Boston, was on the commission but she could never be there and so Bush said that Peggy said, “Can I have a proxy and could that proxy sit at the table and I want that proxy to be Bobbie?” And he said, “Sure.” So, that drove Clarke nuts, number one, because he thought that was a violation of the RNC rules, but, number two, that rule 32 language that was proposed was to have the national party encourage state delegations to have increased representation of women and minorities as delegates. The Democrats at that time were putting in a quota. We thought our thing was personally very
rational. I mean, there were very few women. We wanted to get more. At any rate, I wound up in fisticuffs with Clark Reed on that and he remembered and remembered all the way through ’76 and evidently told Cheney that he did not want me there. I went anyway. I said, “Dick, I’m going just as we say everybody can campaign on my own time. I’m going to put in my timesheet. Take vacation time. I’m going.”

I got there. Everybody else who had come by themselves but were still part of the White House staff got all these fancy credentials and I had this one little credential which I think probably said “Do Not Allow In The Building”. But I get this one little credential and at that stage in time, this was the week before when they were having the platform hearings at the hotel or something and there wasn’t much security in those days. Anybody could go in places. I just remember that I went over to where the White House staff was during the convention and I couldn’t get in. It was just fascinating. I mean, Dick made it very clear I needed to go home. It’s funny. We were having dinner the other night and I was relating this to him and he said, “Come on. I never did that.” I said, “Oh, yes you did.”

The only point of that story that’s silly, my only point was that people were so sensitive and walking on such eggshells that Clarke Reed could make such an unrealistic statement that he didn’t believe, nobody was going to take any chances. And clearly I was going to go and I was going to piss him off. And that meant that one delegate or any delegates from Mississippi were going to move. Everybody was hyper-, hyper-, hypersensitive.

Smith: And the great irony is, in the end, it’s Reagan’s designation of Dick Schweiker as Vice President that P.O.’d Clarke Reed more than you could have.

Kilberg: Oh, of course. Absolutely. And evidently he’s still alive and says very nice things about me these days. I ran into his daughter in New Orleans about a year ago and she remembered those stories.
Smith: Really?

Kilberg: Yeah, he told her about these stories. She and I were about the same age. “There’s this young lady up there that’s causing all these problems.” But at any rate, that just shows you how ridiculously sensitive they were to little things.

Smith: Were you and/or other members of the White House staff sensitive to, resentful of, the media portrayal - in its most extreme form, Chevy Chase - of the President’s intelligence?

Kilberg: Yes. I thought it was totally unfair. I thought the incident with knocking the head and the golf. The golf thing was while we weren’t in the White House, it was afterwards.

Smith: That is right.

Kilberg: Yeah, it was afterwards. But, I mean, obviously knocking the head on the airplane and the Poland thing, I thought was absurd and ridiculous. I didn’t expect that of the press. I really thought that, after they let our their vitriol on Richard Nixon, even though some of it was not deserved, that they too would have an interest in restoring civility and decency. And, instead, they gave us a break for a little bit, but then it was just back to not only business as usual, but ramping up what had become.(?) Sometimes the standard of their profession was: how nasty can you get. But, yes, I really thought that was terrible. Really terrible.

And I also remember sitting there in the fall. Again, by the fall, there weren’t any great policy initiatives coming out that we were working on. We weren’t clearing more people for appointments, so counsel’s office sat around with not a lot to do. I mean we couldn’t do election law. That was being done at the campaign. So I kept everybody’s timesheets while they’d go out and work and help the President. And I remember just sitting there and being very frustrated. You know, feeling that this person that I had no respect for, Jimmy Carter, was just climbing in the polls and I could not understand how anybody
could prefer the governor of a small, little state with, to me, no redeeming qualities could possibly be elected over this man that I thought had taken an impossible job and then done it with dignity and grace and an extraordinary amount of respect. I was very, very proud to work in that White House.

And I think back to when Rumsfeld called me and I said, yes, I’ll do it, but I can’t do it until the spring. The thoughts that went through my mind then, which were that I need to go back to show that I can go back, that I’m not tarred by Watergate, even though I left the White House before Watergate, had changed by the time I was in that White House to just saying how fortunate I am to be here because of the person who is here. Not because I needed to prove something to myself or to my friends. Rather, I want to help him do the things he’s set out to do because he’s just such a gracious person.

And he reminds me, by the way, one, he had the same qualities as Bush 41 has and they come out of that same generation. Gerald Ford did not get a nice middle class, upbringing, he was not part of the upper class New England class of President Bush, but they still had that same quality of character and sense of obligation and duty to serve. And the same kind of parents, even though they were from somewhat different economic strata. And they both had an Ivy League upbringing, at least Ford in law school and Bush all through. This is going to sound terribly elitist, but I really believe this - that taught a value system and a sense of responsibility. I mean, our youngest son is graduating from Princeton in two weeks. Princeton teaches that. I went to Vassar when it was single sex and then to Yale law school. I think they taught it and I think it’s something very important and I think they both had that.

Smith: Time was actually pretty good to Gerald Ford, wasn’t it? He lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his way of thinking on the pardon. He was thrilled when the Kennedy Library gave him the Profiles in Courage award. He said afterwards, “For twenty years, everywhere I go, people ask the same question. Now they’ve stopped asking the question.” The imprimatur of the Kennedys was enough to in effect cut off the
discussion. And I just wonder if you were surprised at all when he died at how much reaction there was. Because I was with ABC the first half of the week and then with the family the second half and I can tell you, journalists, particularly younger journalists, were frankly surprised at the amount of reaction. And my theory was it was a whole generation that was discovering him for the first time. They were seeing these clips and he looked awfully good, especially compared to the ugliness of our politics today.

Kilberg: Well, I’m not sure whether I was surprised or not. Because frankly I was so busy just trying to be sure that the service got completed, actually. I didn’t have anything to do with anything that was going to go on in the service, just the logistics of it. But I think that my children, the oldest of whom is now 35 and the youngest of whom is 22 – so how many years ago did the President die?

Smith: Three years ago.

Kilberg: Okay, 32 to 18 or 19. I think they discovered him for the first time and they paid a lot of attention and asked a lot of questions and it was all positive and they sensed, I mean, I think they all felt the sense of his sunny disposition. Not a Ronald Reagan type of sunny disposition, but a different kind of low-key sunny disposition of someone who – I mean, the picture with the pipe. I think they just felt good about him and they thought he led a good life. And I think he did. And you say how proud he was and how good he felt about getting the award from the Kennedy Library. President Bush 41 gave the Bush Presidential Library award to Teddy Kennedy before he was sick. And a lot of people in the senior staff of the White House were furious, absolutely furious. And I said, “No. This is so typical George Bush. It is reaching across the aisle and recognizing and celebrating a life of service, even if he didn’t agree with him on the issues, but the concept of serving your country.” And everybody said, “Oh, but what about Chappaquiddick, et cetera, et cetera?” I said, “That’s just part of it. That’s just part of President Bush’s
feeling that somebody can redeem themselves and that you ought to recognize that.”

Well, Gerald Ford did nothing to redeem himself from, but it’s still this concept that recognizing that life is a life well worth living and having lived. And I think what the Kennedys did for Ford was the same thing. And President Bush was very proud of his decision to honor Ted Kennedy and I think sent, not a blistering but a very pointed email to the entire senior staff pointing that out. We all didn’t work for him anymore.

Smith: Frankly, time has been pretty good to George H. W. Bush. I think there’s a growing sense that he’s not just an interregnum between Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton. That he had a very significant and difficult historical assignment, which was carried out very well. And then when you factor in the gentlemanly qualities, you know, the graciousness and the consideration and the decency and the fact that he could form his own friendship with Bill Clinton in a way that Ford and Carter did.

Kilberg: Well, that was a little strange.

Smith: Well, yeah, it is

Kilberg: But it’s typical Bush 41. And it took George W., who’s a friend of mine, sometime to get used to that. You know, he said, “What is this? I’m his son!” I mean, he generally said that to me, “It’s really strange, Bobbie.” And I said, “Yes, Mr. President, I know.” But it’s typical. And I would expect, you know, Bush 41 I met when I was at law school and George W. was at Yale, an undergraduate, and I was very young. I was just barely 20 when I got there to the law school and George, we’re the same age, and so it wasn’t that he was behind or that I was ahead, but we wound up being together for two years. He graduated in ’68 and I graduated in ’69 from law school and we ended up spending a lot of time together.

I met his father through that because at one point in time, George Herbert Walker Bush came up to visit and also to straighten things out and explain to
George W. how you need to behave at Yale, et cetera, et cetera. But, once he found me, and I never dated George W., we were just friends, he went out of his way when I came down as a White House Fellow to literally adopt me and my husband and he loved doing that. He loved mentoring young people. He loved to see people grow and to grow into their capabilities and I never heard—well, that’s untrue—there are only two people I ever heard of in his life him say a nasty thing about. I won’t tell you who those two people are. And he found the best in everybody.

Smith: President Ford, I later heard him speak disparagingly of two people. I’ll tell you who they are because it probably won’t come as a great surprise. One was John Dean and the other was Gordon Liddy. And the worst he could say was, “He’s a bad man.” I mean, that’s as close to outrage as he came.

Kilberg: Well, I won’t tell you the two.

Smith: Finally, how do you think Gerald Ford should be remembered?

Kilberg: I think Gerald Ford should be remembered for saving the soul of this nation. I think he came in at a very perilous time when distrust, not only of government, but distrust throughout the country was at an all time high. And I think he restored dignity and civility and respect for the office of the presidency. And I think that’s in the end what he would be remembered for. I think the other issues, whether it was the economy or busing or deregulation or foreign affairs, were important, but I think people will remember him for how he restored our sense of self. And I just think that was extraordinarily important and God bless him. Where he really stood up was the Arab boycott of Israel. And, if you remember, that was all in fashion. If any company did business with Israel, they were boycotted from doing business throughout the Arab world. And, as you know also, Jews couldn’t travel to any Arab countries, et cetera, et cetera. And he really stood up against that and made it very clear that it was anti-public policy and that if any corporation was caught not doing business with Israel because of that, that there would be severe consequences. And he also fought the United Nations with it. He took on an
issue that he didn’t have to and he took on an issue very strongly and I think
gained a great deal of respect in the AmSmithan community because of that.

I was with a friend the other day who worked actually for – would it have
been Kissinger then? Where was Kissinger in ’75, ’76? Still there.

Smith: Secretary of State.

Kilberg: Yeah, Secretary of State. She said, interestingly enough because he was
Jewish, that Kissinger was the bane of his existence. She said that she
remembers getting memos from me and Kissinger just exploding saying,
“God damn it, I’m trying to solve the ancient problems with the Middle East
and the President’s worried about the Arab boycott of Israel!” But he was,
because it was the right thing to do. That’s all I wanted to add.

Smith: I’m glad you did.

Thank you.
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Smith: How did your paths cross with the Fords?

Angelo: I’ve known Jerry Ford long before he was in the White House, long before that episode because he was around town, a wonderful political figure whom everybody liked. Jerry Ford never had a detractor.

Smith: Did everyone respect him as well as like him?

Angelo: Uh, no. No. There were people who, you know, the famous thing which the New York magazine wrote - that he couldn’t walk and chew gum at the same time—

Smith: From LBJ’s cracks.

Angelo: Yeah, and LBJ did have a gift for Ford put downs. So, no, everybody did not obviously think he was a great, luminous figure. But I never heard anybody who didn’t like him, which actually is what got him into being president. I think the ground zero, nobody’s going to object to Jerry Ford. What’s to object? He had the experience, he was a man of such integrity, knew everybody and everybody he ever knew liked him. As you know Mel Laird really wanted him to be tapped for that vice presidential appointment, the first kind in our history, hopefully the last. But Mel told me afterwards, he said, “It just made sense to pick Jerry on this because everybody likes him and he has really no enemies. I don’t think it’s that he’s harmless, but he would be very agreeable on whatever he was supposed to do.”

Smith: There is a story - I can’t vouch for it’s authority but supposedly Rockefeller is in the Oval Office and Nixon points to the chair and he says, “Can you imagine Jerry Ford in this chair?” This was after Ford had been confirmed, which suggests that Nixon totally misread the situation. He saw Jerry Ford as his insurance against impeachment.
Angelo: Yes, I do think that that was making the rounds, that kind of thinking, but also that he knew Jerry Ford’s appointment could not be stopped because he’s a man of integrity. So, it was not going to be an appointment with some shades that they had to worry about. I don’t think he ever intended to work with Ford on anything. I think it was something that he had to do because there was a chair there that had to be filled with somebody who could get approved.

Smith: We talked to Jerry Jones, who had been Haig’s deputy. Before that, he reorganized the White House personnel office for Haldeman. And he gets a call from Haldeman, this was when Haldeman was still in the White House, so it’s before April of ’73. And he wants to know how many people worked directly for the vice president. And Jones did some figuring and he says about 50. And Haldeman said, “Good, I want undated letters of resignation from every one of them.” Which Jones interprets as meaning they knew even then that Agnew was going to have problems. Now, that’s just his interpretation. This would be in the spring. Remember, the Wall Street Journal story about Agnew appeared in August of ’73.

Angelo: Oh, oh, and a lot of rumors were going around in Maryland, as you know, from people involved in state government in Annapolis. There was a long tradition of cutting corners, shall we say, with Governor Mandel and others.

Smith: So it’s entirely possible, given Nixon’s political antennae, that they would’ve picked up on some of those rumors before it reached the journalistic community?

Angelo: Well, if they didn’t know, a lot of other people did, because a lot was just going around in Annapolis, which is a small capital where everybody knows everything. So, what was the alternative? Was it down to Agnew and Ford? Was it them?

Smith: Well, no, but when Agnew leaves.

Angelo: Yes, who was the other that Nixon was considering?

Smith: Oh, in ’68, it was John Volpe.

Angelo: Oh, my, names from the past.
Smith: Yes, yes, and a party from the past, a Massachusetts governor. And I wonder whether Nixon thought to himself, “You know, I blundered with Henry Cabot Lodge in ’60, I don’t think I’ll go that route again.”

Angelo: Yeah. He might have thought that. He might. Even at the time there were those of us who lived in Maryland, as we are just this minute, we wondered, “Why Spiro Agnew?” He was not a man of great distinction. I always thought he thought it’d make a good appearance - he was a distinguished looking man - and that he would be totally manageable, which may or may not have anything to do with it.

Smith: Then, of course, he went on to develop a following of his own. I mean, if Nixon had wanted to drop him from the ticket, he probably couldn’t have.

Angelo: I can’t remember well enough to know.

Smith: Other than his attacks on the press.

Angelo: Didn’t he do that mostly after he was in, the nattering nabobs of negativism?

Smith: Exactly. My point is, that once he became vice president, history repeats itself. Nixon as vice president made it impossible for Eisenhower to dump him through the Checkers speech. I mean, he created a constituency - Republican cloth coats and all that. And Agnew, in his own way by going after the press, created this strong allegiance among cultural conservatives.

Angelo: I would have a feeling that also the pols would say he was manageable. He’s not going to give you any trouble. He’s manageable. Well, they hadn’t counted all the brown paper bags stuffed with dollar bills or thousand dollar bills, whatever is the currency of choice.

Smith: As Ford was climbing the ladder in the House, particularly as the Minority Leader, he was away from home more than he was there.

Angelo: Oh, he was away so much. I think he was doing it for the good of the party. He was a party man and they wanted him to come and he came. I can’t remember exactly if Betty Ford told me this directly or it was somebody so close to it that it might as well have been, but she was alone at home on
weekends, weekend after weekend, four children, three of them lively boys. What kind of life is that? When you look at it in a detached way, what kind of life is that? And I don’t fault Jerry Ford for many things because I really admire him as a person. I think he stepped into an incredibly, historically impossible situation which he handled very well, until the pardon, and that tore the whole thing apart.

But to leave Betty Ford - you know, somebody who had been a beautiful, lively person, she wasn’t a little homebody, Betty was a person - every week to go out to speak to a smoke-filled room full of nobodies. If it was big party things, that would be something else, but it was he just began to feel, I think, that whoever needed him that weekend, he would go. I think it was a very bad decision on his part. Did it do any good for him or for the party? I don’t know. I would think it would be hard to trace it, but it certainly did make it difficult for his wife, a very attractive, lively - not a homebody kind of person. She was a dancer, professional dancer, you know, and good looking. To just sit at home with four children…in Alexandria she couldn’t even go out easily to the theater or anything.

Remember, he had none of that social status that comes with being vice president or even speaker of the House, but not much with speaker of the House, especially when we had John McCormick and his sweet wife that he never left her. Betty Ford must have been sitting there and saying, “I never had my husband at home and there’s what’s-her-name McCormick,” who was something out of the 18th century or maybe the 19th. And John McCormick would never be away from her on the weekend and he was Speaker. Now, that must have stuck in her craw.

Smith: I think, in later years, I don’t know if you ever heard this or not, he felt guilty.

Angelo: Well, he should!

Smith: I think he really tried to make up for it.

Angelo: I think he loved her. You know, I think Jerry Ford loved Betty Ford, but I think he was obviously troubled by her behavior and whether he recognized it as alcoholism as soon as he could have, but families often don’t.
Smith: I don’t want to succumb to cliché here, but she in so many ways is a stand in for millions of women of this particular time who have real gifts and talents.

Angelo: And were somebody.

Smith: Yeah, and were kind of shoehorned into this traditionalist role, which she performed. I mean, she was a Cub Scout den mother from Grand Rapids, which in some ways later on led to people underestimating her. I mean, they saw the vanilla part of the Fords.

Angelo: Yes, and didn’t know that there was a lot of thinking and anxiety or maybe just resentment at being at home alone. And what does a congressional wife who’s important husband is out somewhere in the hustings, what does she do? I mean, you don’t really have the chance with four children to develop the kind of close, close friends that you might, just the two ladies, go out together. That’s hard. So, I think she was really boxed in and she was not a spirit that was intended to be boxed in.

Smith: Well put. Did you know her at this point?

Angelo: Yeah, yeah. Well, listen, you know how it is here. When you’re a journalist covering the Hill, well, I really covered the White House, but you know the people on the Hill as well. And at that time there was much more socializing, political socializing, than there is now. Much more. The early times, the Pearl Mesta days, now we don’t have Pearl Mestas anymore.

Smith: Plus there was socializing across the aisle.

Angelo: Oh, yes. Absolutely, there was so much greater camaraderie; it was not the nasty, really grim atmosphere that has developed over recent years. And I think that was encouraged to develop, I’m just going to say, by the likes of Karl Rove. He was a mastermind of a lot of things, very talented, of course, but a person like Karl Rove, and there are a lot of them around, did not, were not interested in *bon ami*, they wanted hard politics.

Smith: And in a larger sense, the way politics have evolved egged on by some parts of the media. I mean, cable TV is all about shouting at people, about opinion, not information. This political culture that developed in which Ford thought,
is particularly when he was in the House, you could fight like cats and dogs all day long. You had principles, you had convictions, and you fought for them. But, first of all, after six o’clock you made up and were considered friends and all that. But beyond that even while fighting for your principles you were rewarded, you were judged by the extent that you produced. And production meant legislation.

Angelo: Yes, turning out the votes, your votes. Yes.

Smith: And now it’s as if differences are not meant to be narrowed, but exploited. You are rewarded for preventing things from happening rather than facilitating them.

Angelo: I think we’re seeing an interesting clash on that point of view even as we speak. I think President Obama is interested in the kind of politics that we’re speaking of in the past time where you were civil, you could clash on the floor, but it was never or rarely mean-spirited. It was tough politics, but look at Everett Dirksen and Lyndon Johnson. The two clashed on everything and were such good friends and savored the fact that they could be buddies and they were.

Smith: They were drinking buddies, too.

Angelo: I’m sure.

Smith: One of the factors in the whole effort to replace Charlie Halleck was that the Ev and Charlie Show, was usually the Ev Show. Beyond that, that Ev, for all of his wonderful qualities, was a much more accommodating figure to the Johnson White House and that Republicans in the House wanted a little more of an independent voice.

Angelo: Yes, I’m sure that’s a correct reading of it. Did the Republican Party suffer from that? I don’t think so. I think it was a much stronger party in the context of the Congress than it is today. So, you could argue that it paid off.

Smith: I remember asking Walter Mondale about this; when you went to Washington 40 years ago, whether you’re a Republican or Democrat, you found yourself in a party that had a Right and a Left wing. So that, you had to internally
learn how to deal with people with whom you disagreed before you even went out on the stage and tried to pass legislation in the Congress as a whole. And that’s really no longer the case. Plus, Ford’s Republican party was anchored in the Midwest.

Angelo: Yes, it was a moderate Republican party. As we have seen in recent past years, this whole far hard Right conservatives are all tied in with religion. It came after their time and I couldn’t put a finger on exactly what triggered it, but the attitudes that we’re speaking of in the day of Lyndon Johnson and Jerry Ford and Dirksen was a more consensual kind of politics.

Smith: I think today in a lot of quarters, consensus is seen as a dirty word. It’s an equivalent of surrender.

Angelo: Exactly, and that’s the Karl Rove branch of politics. No consensus, we take our stand and that is it. I don’t know whether the Senate as it is now constituted is going to ease up on that or not. I think there was the feeling that maybe they were going to, but I don’t see it. It seems to me that they have made a determination that they’re going to continue to be the really hard line opponents.

Smith: When you saw the Fords in their later years, they would go to every convention and they were increasingly, not ostracized, but they were increasingly isolated. They were pro-choice, pro-gay rights, I mean, things that just set them apart.

Angelo: Even today, they are touchy. But one of the things about covering the Fords and, I can say this but I shouldn’t say it in any way publicly - Jerry did ask me, after Jerry terHorst, his first press secretary, left, following the pardon, although Jerry terHorst says that wasn’t the reason, that there were a lot of other reasons that I have forgotten because I don’t know if I actually believe him on that.

Smith: There is a school of thought that terHorst, in effect, used the pardon and his genuine upset over the pardon, as cover for the fact that he had decided one month into this job that it was just overwhelming.
Certainly, Jerry terHorst has told me that, yes. That it was seen as being because of the pardon, but he said it really wasn’t. So, but there it is. But anyway, after that, I was pleasantly astonished and honored that they tracked me down at a conference that the *Life* top editors and some of the key correspondents were having someplace in Connecticut at one of those conference centers. They tracked me down and the call came in and it was whispered loudly in my ear that the White House is on the line. So, you go to the phone and it was one of Ford’s top people, his name, of course you would know, and he said, “The President asked me to ask you to be his press secretary.” And I got the feeling that that’s (?) aide who was Bob Hartmann, who’s a wonderful guy, but I think he thought, “What?! Why her?” And I just said really right off, “I can’t do it. I’ve got a 12-year old son and that’s a 20-hour day on a good day job, and I can’t do it.”

So, anyway, the next day I was back in Washington and he had John Scali, who was then ambassador to the United Nations and who had been a journalist and so he was an old friend, he had him call me and repeat that. And I was really honored, but I explained to him the same thing. I would’ve been the first woman press secretary. You know, any ‘first’, it’s like, “Hey, we’re making a little progress here.” And we have with no thanks to me. And I explained to him the same reason and I remember John saying, “This is the president asking. You don’t turn down the president.” I said, “But I have this problem of a lively 10-year old son,” or eleven years old, whatever he was, “and I really have to be there.” He said, “Okay, I can take that to the president.” And that was the end of that.

Betty Ford had already asked me before if I would be hers, but I just could not see any interest for me on being in the East Wing. I would’ve been happy to work with her. But it amazed me that they would turn to me because I thought it was a very bold thing to do. I’m not cut out to be a press secretary. I couldn’t explain that to anybody, but I am not cut out to be. I just like to call them, wherever the arrow lands, and that was just such a terrible time. It was right after the pardon. It was such a poisonous time and all I could think about was going into that press room and having people, some of my
colleagues, rip me apart. So I was honored and still feel honored that I was asked.

Smith: That’s a great story. Let me back up, because you mentioned Bob Hartmann. Why was Hartmann such a polarizing figure?

Angelo: He was just a very gruff individual. I had known him when he was a journalist and was head of the L.A. Times bureau. For awhile, his office and the one I was involved in were on the same floor, so we saw a lot of each other. But he was a tough journalist and kind of a gruff figure and I think that that personality trait is a little bit harder than one that’s goes down easily.

Smith: One senses he was also, not just protective of Ford, but possessive of Ford.

Angelo: That’s probably true. Yes, because that happens to a lot of them, doesn’t it? Yes. There are also a lot of them that want their own, to a degree, their own kind of preferences put out there ahead of some others. But Bob was gruff and I think that was it.

Smith: When Agnew left and Ford was nominated to replace him, did you sense or was there anything like a consensus in the press corps that Nixon would be leaving?

Angelo: No, I was going to tell you where I was the night that the choice was being made. One of my colleagues was with Ford, I was with George Bush. George Bush was, it was really like that. I mean and Bush is really such a nice man, Bush the father. And then when the word came in, yes, he was really crestfallen because he wanted it then and would’ve been very good as a vice president. He and I talked about this once later and he said that, “Yes, it was the best thing that happened to me that I was not chosen.” But that’s how close it was. And you were mentioning, who was the other one you had mentioned in terms of being thought of for vice president?

Smith: When Agnew was replaced?

Angelo: Yeah. Well, see, the reason I’m saying is that I just know the two, that one of my colleagues was with Ford and I was with Bush.
Smith: And Rumsfeld had an interest. I think more so during the Ford presidency.

Angelo: Yes, I was trying to think in terms of—

Smith: I think Ford said that the three names on Ford’s list when he had to pick one were Rockefeller, Bush, and Rumsfeld.

Angelo: Yes, that seems very believable, but I was just talking about the first choice.

Smith: At that point, did you think that Nixon might well be forced from office?

Angelo: I think maybe that thought was beyond reality to us. However, I did distinctly feel, “I hope you know what you’re doing” in terms of Ford, because it just looked to me like, as they say in the South, 50 miles of bad road dead ahead. But I actually did not realize, we just had no precedent for that in all of our history, so you would think that they would find some sort of way. But just having to go into that venomous White House at that time did not seem to me like a real prize, but it turned out to be.

Smith: He [Ford] was put in an impossible position, and so what he did was, he got out of town. I mean, he was on the road.

Angelo: Yes, oh listen, I had more travel that year. I was in Hawaii. When we were in Hawaii for about four days and part of it was at a Rock resort, you know those wonderful Rockefeller resorts. I remembered talking to a couple of others, there were just about five of us that’d go with him, but it was because *Time* wanted me with him wherever he was, in case that moment was when he would become president. And it was not a death watch, it was a selection watch.

Smith: That brings up a huge question, because here’s a guy who really likes reporters, who enjoyed socializing with reporters, and yet he’s in this impossible zone where at some point he obviously has to know this could possibly happen, but he presumably can’t discuss it.

Angelo: But he obviously knew it could happen or he wouldn’t have been going anywhere they asked him that he was invited. At that period in time, we went.

Smith: To stay out of Washington.
Angelo: Right. I saw more odd parts of the United States during that period, but I was happy to have that nice four days of nothing to do, we were not doing a story, there might be a line in where the [vice] president…

Smith: During all those months of travel, down time, socializing, after a couple of drinks, people must have asked him on or off the record, “What do you think of the president’s chances of survival?”

Angelo: They might have. I would not have asked him. To me, it’s a wasted question. I don’t care. Off the record and he says, “Zero”? I don’t think so. They might have, but there wasn’t quite that much socializing. I think Ford knew this was a very unique period to be traveling around the country and not to be in Washington where you were the vice president. Who knows what? So, I don’t think there was that kind of discussion. Or he would’ve said, “I’m not talking about it.”

Smith: But he in effect spent a year or nine months walking on eggshells.

Angelo: Well, yes. Was it as long as nine months?

Smith: Well, yeah, because in October he was nominated, and he was confirmed, I think, in December.

Angelo: Was it that late?

Smith: Yeah, the FBI investigation and then, of course, until August, so eight months, I think, as vice president. Something like that.

Angelo: Yes. And then there came the time really late when it was obvious—

Smith: Can you think back? Was it the smoking gun tape or was it something before that? Some people said the Supreme Court decision, when the court ruled that Nixon had to give up the tapes.

Angelo: Well, that was vital to everything. The question that we all had in the press was, “Why hadn’t he destroyed them before it came to that?” You wonder, given the fact that they contained such incredible information.
Smith: We saw Al Haig about ten days ago and he said he advised the president to destroy them.

Angelo: Yeah, I think that makes sense. It wasn’t against the law, they were his tapes, you can do anything you want to with them. And to hang on to them when they had that totally incriminating evidence on it.

Smith: We talked about mysteries earlier. Has anyone ever to your satisfaction resolved the 18 ½ minute gap?

Angelo: No. Not really resolved it, but who doesn’t think Rose Mary Woods did it? The jokes about how she was reaching for the phone, it got to be just a subject of jollity.

Smith: She was a total loyalist, though.

Angelo: Oh, total. Rose Mary Woods, and I think there’s a genre of women who work to support important men, who are committed to him in a way they would not be committed to their husbands, because there’s hero worship there which does not occur much with husbands.

Smith: As with Ann Whitman and Eisenhower.

Angelo: Yes, you think of it in many, many cases. There were other political ones, too, that’s lives were - well, I think Bobby Kennedy, his wonderful assistant was Angie Novelo, a wonderful person. She really had no life outside of it. Her life at Robert Kennedy’s side as his personal secretary, I mean, she was something more than just a regular secretary, Angie was family friend. She was everything, intelligent. It was obviously such a more interesting life than life outside. People forget that when you are tied to a really dynamic, important political figure, it’s racy. And so I never felt that Angie was giving up anything, I felt she was getting a wonderful insight.

Smith: The sad thing is that it comes to an end.

Angelo: Yes, it does.

Smith: Ann Whitman was the classic example. Who went to Gettysburg after the presidency and hated it and then went to work for the Rockefellers for a
number of years and then came back during his vice presidency and it wasn’t very successful.

Angelo: I think that once you’ve been on the inner, inner-circle of the White House, as those very special secretaries were, there were just a few that were in there on everything, people don’t know their names in many cases. Nothing else can be very interesting by contrast.

Smith: Can you remember when you concluded that Nixon was history? That Ford would become president?

Angelo: I guess I really thought so from the minute I was assigned to be with him everywhere he went. I mean, I really thought we were just waiting for the time, we didn’t know when it was going to happen, so we wanted me, in this case, to be with him because it was that imminent. I think I probably thought it before, wondering how. But until the missing tapes, we couldn’t be sure. Look what he had gotten through? Pretty amazing.

Smith: Were you surprised? I mean, Ford was surprised by the language on the tapes.

Angelo: Oh! Well, I’m a stuffy person, I was really stunned, yes. Richard Nixon always seemed very proper, very stiffly proper. He never was at home with himself, which is a bad sign right there. Jerry Ford was never not at home with himself and it’s just the contrast was so incredible.

Smith: There was a little bit of the Boy Scout in Ford, wasn’t there?

Angelo: Oh, yes, and I mean there’s just this in terms of analyzing or thinking about Jerry Ford’s character and behavior, there just is not, in my mind, a negative. You might not like some of his policies. You might think he went down the road without thinking maybe whatever the Republicans wanted him to do. That was it. He took that as his role. He was the carrier of the flag, not the person who was developing the policy. And did it very well.

Smith: You wonder if there was also though - on one hand it’s a very admirable quality in a person, it might not be a very admirable quality in a President - a naïveté.
Angelo: Yes.

Smith: I mean, he believed Nixon.

Angelo: But didn’t he have to? I mean, can you work for a man that you think did those things and be his vice president and say nothing negative, unless you really have convinced yourself this was really not the way it was. I think, of course, by the time the tapes became known - I still remember the moment in the *Time* bureau when Alexander Butterfield was testifying before a House or Senate committee, I believe, not a court thing, but I believe it was a Senate committee. And just, almost as a throw-away line, he made reference to the tapes or the taping system, I believe it was. And down the halls at *Time Magazine*, I could tell you, you could hear jaws dropping and people saying, “What is this?” and people getting on the phone to try to find out more. Of course, you couldn’t because nobody else knew. So you were faced with a historic story and nobody else knew.

Smith: Laird told a remarkable story, because, you know, they brought him back into the White House for awhile. And about a month after he was there, Fred Buzhardt came to him. Now, Buzhardt had been his counsel at the Pentagon and Buzhardt wanted to protect his friend, Mel. And he came to Laird and said, “Don’t believe the president. The fact is, I’ve been listening to these tapes. He’s in it up to his neck.”

Angelo: Oh! Buzhardt said that?

Smith: Yes. I don’t think that’s ever been published.

Angelo: I don’t think it has because I certainly remember his coming, but we looked on him as a rescue effort. You know, there’s his old friend who’s coming and obviously a very good lawyer, coming to save the man.

And he heard the tapes and said that? Did he stay there after that or did he leave?

Smith: Laird wrestled with his own conscience about it, but he stayed a while. But the sequel is, I asked Haig, “Did you listen to any of these tapes?” He said, “Fred Buzhardt gave me very good advice. He said, ‘Don’t get caught dead
alone in a room with a tape.” So, they were all willing to let Buzhardt be the agent and informer who tipped them off to the fact that the president has real problems.

Angelo: That was Buzhardt?

Smith: Yeah, because Buzhardt was clearly the source. And then there’s this bizarre scene, I think it’s on the 7th. No, it’s a week earlier. Haig lets Ford know the first of August that there’s this “problem tape” and obviously Ford realizes what all this is going to lead to, but he has to go through this charade with Mrs. Ford of visiting the vice president’s house-to-be and talk about drapes and china and pretend that nothing’s going on.

Angelo: That’s funny, because I would’ve thought that part would’ve occurred much earlier.

Smith: No, it was a week before Nixon left that Haig informed the vice president about the smoking gun tape.

Angelo: Yes, yes, I understand that.

Smith: It was about that time that the tape was released to the public which really brought the roof in. But Ford had to go through the motions.

Angelo: Yes, but I thought he would have done that earlier, when he was first picked as vice president. We’re talking several months.

Smith: He was going to be the first vice president to live at that house in the Naval Observatory.

Angelo: That’s right because Rockefeller, who he then picked as his vice president, furnished it but didn’t live in it. His own house was rather grander.

Smith: Yes. So, he had to go through the motions and then put on this performance. Then that night, they went to dinner with Betty Beale, and he said nothing.

Angelo: I would hope not!

Smith: And at midnight, he comes home and he says, “Betty, we’re not going to live in that house.”
Angelo: Oh, did he? But he said it to Betty Ford, not Betty Beale?

Smith: No, Betty Ford.

Angelo: Okay, because to say it to Betty Ford is one of those things, but saying it to Betty Beale who is an excellent gossip columnist...

Smith: So at that point, basically a week before he becomes president, he accepts the fact. What was that last week like?

Angelo: I’m trying to, it’s such a jumble in my mind because we all knew, “When is this going to happen?” All the reports, and you talk to your people, what you could, to your people in the White House. And I remember one of the closest people to Betty Ford on her side, one of really the closest, they were walking down…the [Nixon] family was going on a little river cruise on the presidential yacht, which we had until Jimmy Carter decided presidents didn’t need yachts. And she said, “I know that I felt this is like seeing the czar and the family walking away.” And it was such an image of the czar and his family walking to their death and this family walking to its political death that that stuck in my mind.

Smith: Did you have any sort of contact with him during this period?

Angelo: With Nixon?

Smith: No, I’m sorry, with Ford. I mean, were you still covering him?

Angelo: Oh, yeah, well, we were travelling. Yeah, I covered him right up until the day, you know.

Smith: Was there anything different about him?

Angelo: No, Jerry Ford was Jerry Ford, which was one of the wonderful things in my view about Jerry Ford. The turbulence that might have been going on within him, he did not display. He was a picture of confidence and gravity and, I think, sorrow. He didn’t really want all of this to happen. Do you think?

Smith: Plus, Richard Nixon was his friend.
Angelo: And Richard Nixon picked him for vice president and that in and of itself was a triumph for Representative Ford to be picked as vice president. He’s such a good man, Jerry Ford, that I don’t think he could’ve been harboring any glee.

Smith: Bob Barrett said something, because you don’t think of Ford as a secretive man, but Bob Barrett said, “I guarantee you he took to the grave all sorts of things.”

Angelo: Ah, yeah, secretive is one thing, but discreet is another. And I think he would have been a man – because he had such a moral anchor – Jerry Ford was a man who knew where he was, knew where he came from, knew the principles he should live by and did it. I don’t know a negative in terms of ethics or morality that you could accuse him of.

Smith: It’s interesting, I remember, when I was around him in the later years, you know, most politicians love to gossip.

Angelo: Oh, well, yes.

Smith: He wasn’t a gossip. I mean, he loved to talk politics, but he would politely change the subjects if personal gossip came up.

Angelo: Yeah, that matches what I know about him as well. He was friendly with reporters. I mean, we had such a little group of us going on the death watch, so to speak, of the presidency.

Smith: We heard Phil Jones talk about that airplane that the White House provided him with as sort of decidedly downscale.

Angelo: Yeah, I guess so.

Smith: It wasn’t exactly Air Force Two.

Angelo: No, it was not. You know, I just remember it being kind of a p-l-a-i-n plane, you know? But they got barred from the Air Force. I know that there didn’t seem to be any fancying up done for him. And my feeling is that he would not have wanted it because it might have been a symbol that he did not wish to show at that time. I think he was very circumspect. If anybody talked to him in terms of those questions, he just turned them aside. It’s lovely to see
somebody who has that great respect for the serious ethics involved in this whole thing. But Jerry Ford was a man who, as far as I know and I watched him over a number of years, was a man who’s ethics could never be challenged. He did the right thing just by instinct. No one had to tell him.

Smith: He didn’t moralize a lot.

Angelo: Didn’t moralize, no. And was fun. You know, he wasn’t stuffy.

Smith: Speaking of fun - one senses there was real camaraderie on that plane.

Angelo: Oh, yeah, because we were such a small group, and it mostly was just networks and Time Magazine, I suppose Newsweek was it as well, but just the little group of national things, nobody was rushing to their, at that time it was still typewriters, not computers yet, but we had time.

Smith: Were there drinks served on the plane?

Angelo: Oh, sure. Oh, sure. I don’t recall any kind of problem. I don’t recall any kind of problem with any press plane where you can always get it. Richard Nixon cut out the drinks at one point. Richard Nixon, there was nothing too small that he wouldn’t do if he felt that it could hurt you. And I was with Time Magazine on the plane with him many times and Time Magazine was the first to call for his resignation. He was going to Key Biscayne that day and who was on the pool? Time Magazine. Me. That was as uncomfortable as anything could be. Ron Zeigler came back and he said that the president had one special thing to say, and I can’t remember his precise words, but he said, “He takes no note of what Time Magazine thinks about anything.”

Smith: Is that as bad as having the drinks cut off?

Angelo: No! We might’ve even gotten that in the magazine. I certainly filed it. But I was just thinking about the times the little things that Nixon - well, the next time that I was on the pool, the reporter pool, being okay, you circulate from national. Whoever gets on Air Force One, it was not any great favor, believe me, because Nixon would often, almost always, he would eat before leaving, so there was no food. So you might have a cross country trip without any food, which, you know, doesn’t sound bad unless you were so hungry. And
then it does. And you knew it was intentional. That was no question. But I was out in California cross-country once, was in the pool, and he threw me off. He had instructed whoever was handling the roster, “No, no, Time Magazine is not going. We’re going to San Diego and so you have to let,” I’ve forgotten the name, lovely woman, a reporter and a serious one, “It’s her paper and we’ve got to put her on. And so Bonnie’s off.” It was alright with me because we never got anything anyway off the plane. Turns out, she was a friend of mine and I said, “I was glad because I realize you needed it.” She said, “I didn’t want it. They asked me to do it. I wanted to be on the other plane, because I had work to do.” So that was their way of just, “Time Magazine is being thrown off.” I took it as a mark of distinction.

Smith: He really spent a lifetime at war with the establishment.

Angelo: Yeah. Yes, but Time was tough on him. As I say, Time was the first major publication to call for his resignation. Now, that’s pretty tough. And we had been all along and we had a splendid Watergate specialist. He was good, right up there with Woodward and Bernstein and they were good about swapping information. Sandy Smith was his name and he’d been one of the old Life Magazine investigative teams and at one point had been an FBI man himself. So, he was doing remarkably astute reporting during the early part of all this story where you could still try to find out how things were happening and what was going on before it became a court kind of deal. So, Time had been hard on Nixon all along and he didn’t take that lightly. And I can understand that. Why should you like a magazine that’s trying to get you to resign?

Smith: Were you in the East Room when Ford was sworn into office?

Angelo: None of us were. It was not press covered. Maybe they got a pool reporter. They probably had to have a pool, the wires. But I was not, but in my office we were all gathered around every conceivable television set watching every minute of it. It was, you know, in your mind, you know, the tape is running, it’s still running and you just see how he looked and how Pat Nixon looked, because I really liked Pat Nixon. I felt that she was given a hard role to play, got nothing in -I don’t want to make judgments - but you felt that she got
nothing in closeness or esteem in return from the president’s men. So, to see her as we all do in all our minds, watching that was almost more than you could bear, because she had been dragged into something that was not of her doing at all and this historic humiliation.

Smith: On television.

Angelo: On television.

Smith: It’s more than a footnote, it’s a fascinating detour, the real Pat Nixon.

Angelo: Oh, yes. I liked Pat Nixon so much. I felt she was caged. I felt that Haldeman and Erlichman kept her on such a tight leash. She was actually Pat Ryan. And I traveled with her – I liked to go on her trips just to watch this. And I went places with her that really, basically, no other Washington-based reporters went along with her because it was long and expensive. But one that I remember particularly was a trip that she made, a solo trip to Africa. We went to Ghana, met all these wonderful – up in the jungles of Ghana – all these wonderful kings. And Ghana, of course, is the Gold Coast, and I understood why it was the Gold Coast. They were just wreathed in gold. And Pat Nixon was having such a good time.

We went from there to Liberia where there was a very pro-American president being installed. There was a big parade, the streets were lined – of course, you could do this by edict. But I think they were just excited about this American first lady. The streets were lined just for her. She had a wonderful program arranged for her. I saw Pat Ryan emerge. Pat Nixon was left somewhere flying over the middle of the Atlantic. She was this laughing, smiling, eager, loving person, and I wished…because I liked her so much and felt that she was getting such a raw deal in that whole White House. They didn’t care about what she did unless it was what they told her to do.

I just felt Pat Nixon/Pat Ryan is such a different person and she has never really been seen that way by the American people. I tried in several stories to show her in this exuberant kind of… One picture that is very clear in my mind; she was seeing women dancers, a very special group that was dancing for her in a closed room. It was not out on the street, this was a formal
program. I, and a few others in the press, most of them African-based, were across the room from her – maybe six of us. And I thought, this is really a unique experience because all these bare-breasted, black women were doing these really exciting dances, and I thought, I’m seeing Pat Nixon framed by flying black breasts. It was a picture I treasure in my mind.

But I always felt that when he courted her, and he really courted her, he was not really interested at first, from everything you read, and from what she’s made clear. But he did, he assiduously courted her and I think what a difference – something that he really saw - Pat Ryan was who he fell in love with. And I think he was. And as the years settled down she really became Pat Nixon and she had to fill a role and we, the public in general, never, rarely saw her as this Irish, wonderful Irish, Patricia Ryan. And I was very fond of her. I thought she was a special person and was being misused.

Smith: It’s nice to get that on the record. Was Betty Ford, in some ways, liberated by the White House?

Angelo: I can remember having this discussion with one of our distinguished correspondents who had covered Ford constantly in the House, so he had known Ford and he had known Betty. And he said, “Oh, Betty Ford is not going to be happy with this.” I said, “Neil” - Neil McNeill - “Betty Ford is finally getting to be somebody. She is going to be the First Lady of the United States with her own staff, her own interests. She is going to be a liberated woman and love it.” And I think I was right and I think she played her role wonderfully. And she was not afraid to say things that were quite – that other first ladies would have stayed a mile away from. And on television.

Smith: Well, there was the famous Sixty Minutes interview.

Angelo: Oh, yes.

Smith: Now, the sense I have is, in this town everyone is always fighting the last war. So you have a White House full of good, gray political types – men - whose initial, immediate, instinctive reaction was, “Oh my God, what has she done?”
Angelo: Exactly. Oh, she’s saying these outrageous things! And I was looking at it, having been very interested in advancing the cause of women and the women’s movement, and I said, “Here we’ve got a First Lady who is saying the things that a great segment of this country wants said.” And she was tremendously popular for it because she put her chips right there behind liberated women.

Smith: And, of course, before that there was the breast cancer surgery. Tell it to the people in this generation – I think it’s almost impossible for them to understand the extent to which it wasn’t discussed.

Angelo: It was not discussed, and then we had several that made it very public. But most of them after Betty. I remember that day, so specifically, I was doing a cover story, which I have lying around here somewhere in case you wanted to see it, on the travails of Pat Nixon and – who was the other first lady in there, I forget. It’s right over there on my table.

Smith: A contemporary of Pat Nixon’s?

Angelo: The first lady that…

Smith: Ladybird?

Angelo: No, it was not Ladybird. Lyndon really respected Ladybird. He conferred with her. He asked her opinion on things. She was wise, and she understood Lyndon Johnson. And she put up with a lot of things, but she never - he was a man meant for greatness. And I think she was right. She then carved out greatness for herself. What a first lady she was. Can you reach over to the table for a minute and let me see.

When the week began, I was doing a cover story on Joan Kennedy who was Senator Ted Kennedy’s first wife, of course. Who had been sent to or committed herself into an alcohol rehabilitation center that week. And then there was Pat Nixon who had gone through the travails that had never been known by any first lady in our history and hopefully never again. And so I was doing a cover on the travails that the first ladies must bear in public.
So, Ford was speaking to a group out somewhere in this direction, and I said, 
“The publisher wants a publisher’s picture with me and Betty Ford,” just 
because I had her quoted in the story. And she said, “Sure. I’ve got to go for 
an appointment at NIH,” that’s the National Institute of Health, which is just 
out beyond where I’m speaking of, afterwards. She said, “I’ll wait right 
outside and then we’ll get the picture and then I can go in there.” And so we 
did. So the picture of us is in the magazine looking very jolly together.

The next day it was announced that she had cancer. And I thought, she knew 
that she was going to NIH to get the final word which was going to be that she 
had cancer of the breast. And she stopped and did her commitment to speak, 
but then she did something – she could have said, oh Bonnie, we’ll do it some 
other time. She stopped, took lots of time with the photographer taking our 
pictures without ever mentioning it. So then I rewrote the cover the next day, 
and they put Betty Ford’s picture on it, too. Because here’s three first ladies – 
no Joan Kennedy wasn’t first lady, but political-wise, in these disastrous 
circumstances, and I was doing the story and she was a source, and then she 
became one of the principals. And I will always remember her kindness.

Smith: And in fact, the day before she went in for the surgery, the president and she 
had committed to the dedication of the Johnson Grove.

Angelo: Yes. I can’t remember, I should read my cover story, because it’s a little 
vague. I can’t remember whether she actually knew for certain that she had 
breast cancer when she stopped to talk to me, but if it hadn’t been certain she 
knew that this was the issue. And the Lyndon Johnson thing, I think she’d 
gone earlier that morning…

Smith: She’d taken the Johnsons through the White House, and she entertained them 
for tea. In fact, there is a picture. Her suitcase is sitting at the foot of the bed 
that she is going to take to the hospital the next day. She never says anything.

Angelo: That’s right. I think she did them in the morning, I think it was an eleven 
o’clock thing, because then she had this speech with this group out at the 
Sheraton Park Hotel, and that was where I was there and we posed for that 
little picture with the publisher’s letter – not having a clue. And she was
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smiling and generous with her time and herself. In retrospect, I thought, what a warm and generous and thoughtful personality. Instead of saying the first lady cannot see you today, we can’t explain it.

I think Betty Ford was so special for many reasons. She had not really been a captive of the political spotlight. Part of it was because she was always home with the children. So she didn’t have the edges all worn smooth. She just was who she was. That’s why she would say on Sixty Minutes, well, yes, something like if her daughter – I can’t remember…

Smith: Having an affair.

Angelo: Having an affair and whatever, that she’d just say, “Well, yes, I’d want her to talk to me about it, though.”

Smith: That was such a lesson to all of us because we found out – guess what? This is how real people talk. This is what they are talking about.

Angelo: That’s right. She was a real person. She had her problems that real people have. We all know that Betty was hooked on certain drugs.

Smith: Did you know then? What did you know? What was surmised?

Angelo: I knew that sometimes she was spacey, and one of her close people said, “That’s because she has to take these medications.” Well, she did have to take the medications, but she was taking them in inappropriate measure. But I was kind of cautioned on a number of times when I was seeing her personally, so that I would not be troubled by it. As far as alcohol – well, I knew that she and one of her kind of informal assistant – I don’t know whether this person was ever on the White House staff, but she kind of ingratiated herself into the…

Smith: Nancy Howe?

Angelo: Yeah. And I know that they would have their afternoon drinks together. And we know, in retrospect, that was the worst thing that could be done with somebody who was having problems with a tendency toward alcoholism. But that was Nancy’s way of getting in. It was not to be admired. So Betty Ford
had those things. I was told about them, the possibility that she would seem spacey before they were ever in the White House. I was having lunch with one of her really good friends, just to fill in on gaps that I didn’t know, and she said, “She has to take these drugs.” And that was true.

Smith: It’s not the whole truth.

Angelo: But when she later wrote a book about being an alcoholic, I’ve got a copy of it around, but I can’t remember the name of it right now, it was an absolutely bare, tell-all, how I became an alcoholic; how I finally, finally was forced by Jerry Ford to take action. He was really making it very plain that this could not, he would not put up with it. This was after they were out of the White House. But she did not really attack that. I think it got worse when they were out of the White House, also. Maybe she missed the excitement and the support. Where Betty Ford, she’d not been an actress, she’d been a dancer, she’d been a performer, and then all of a sudden she was kind of shut away in her house across the river in Alexandria. So when she got to the White House, there was a stage for her to perform and then she did it beautifully. Except she was always kind of a little bit uncertain there. It wasn’t really known – there was this feeling that maybe she’s taking too much of her medication. But it was not really known.

Smith: You mentioned the pardon. My sense is that he – this goes back to the naiveté – the first press conference was on August 28th and he went there believing that people were going to talk about Turkey and Cyprus and inflation, and everything except what people wanted to talk about. And he left that press conference, by all accounts, angry, I think partly at himself, I think he thought he didn’t do very well.

Angelo: He didn’t!

Smith: Tell us about that.

Angelo: I can’t recall it in specifics because it was a long time ago and there were a lot of other press conferences. But he didn’t handle the questions very well, and because they were so personal he was not ready for them. A good press secretary would have sat down and said, “Now, you’re going to have to deal
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with some of these things. Now how are we going to handle it?" And I don’t
think they did. So he came in and he was blindsided. He shouldn’t have been.

Smith: But, that’s it. For him to believe, three weeks after Nixon left, that the press
corps had lost its obsession with Nixon, is hard to credit.

Angelo: Yes, it is hard to credit. He didn’t understand the adversarial relationship
between the press and Nixon. There’s always an adversarial relationship
between the press and any president, because they don’t want to tell you and
you want to be told. Or you want to have it confirmed when you’ve gotten it
from somebody else. But as Minority Leader of the House, people kind of did
the things he wanted them to do. As he would speak all around the country,
there was no challenge. He was speaking to Republicans, boosting them. I
doubt that he ever spoke to a Democratic group, why should he? So he just
hadn’t had the challenge. He was not a man who would challenge on his own,
it wouldn’t seem proper. And there you go back to his wonderful upbringing.

His mother, and I say this because he talked to me. I wrote a book called *First
Mothers* and how they are a powerful influence on the sons who became
presidents. And of the modern ones, those are the ones from Franklin
Roosevelt forward - those are the only ones you deal with because the
nineteenth century was a whole different world. The mother was the big
influence in his life, not the father. Every single one of them. That’s not to say
the fathers of some were not also influential, but it was the mother. And in
Jerry Ford’s life, which wasn’t – oh his story, I know we don’t have time for
that, but his story is so touching – that his mother was married as a young
society girl in the small town in Illinois? Is that where he was born?

Smith: He was born in Omaha.

Angelo: So she had a big society wedding – it covered the whole front page. They
were, in this town, they were society. So he didn’t come from some nobody.
And that she married a wealthy heir to a major kind of fortune, who was,
indeed, based in Omaha. They went on their honeymoon on the train, as they
did in those days, to California and go down the California coast - a
marvelous trip with your own compartment and all that.
When he got to Portland, Oregon, and they went in the elevator in the hotel a gentleman tipped his hat to her in the elevator – quite properly – and she smiled at him – quite properly. In their room, he struck her – her brand new husband of what – three days? Now that is not a good way to start a marriage. And it only went down from there. Then she left at the end of their long train ride - and he continued to abuse her going down the coast of California - when they got back to Omaha she called her parents and they were waiting on the other side of the river and she fled.

He called and promised to her parents that he’d never do it again – so she did go back to him. And that time she got pregnant and had a son named for him. It was Leslie King. When he was six weeks old, she was holding him in her arms and her husband attacked her with a butcher knife. Now that makes me shiver when I say the words. Then, with the baby’s nurse - they had a lot of money, they were very wealthy people - her baby’s nurse stood watch while they contacted her parents. She went across the river where she could again – the first time she had not quite crossed the river – they took her home.

The stigma was so great that they could not live in their town where they had been such a prominent family. Her father, such a supportive man, took her, with the little boy, little Junie, in her arms to Grand Rapids. He gave up his furniture business. He was one of those small town prosperous businessmen. Started from scratch in Grand Rapids with his daughter and this baby boy. She started going to church there, the Episcopal church nearby, and there she met a man named Gerald Rudolph Ford.

After a proper time he courted her and married her and the baby immediately became Gerald Rudolph Ford, Jr., which he was always so proud of, he was always so pleased. And it was the happiest marriage and family you could dream up after that terrible beginning. The father once came, saw the strapping high school boy working, flipping hamburgers during the Depression, I guess, at lunch time and wanted to take him back to his ranch in Wyoming. And Gerald Rudolph Ford said, “No, my place is here.” He didn’t even entertain the notion.
I just think that that was such a touching - that such a terrible beginning for Jerry Ford to have endured, even as a baby. Then his mother and stepfather had three other sons, and I said to him - he was wonderful talking about this, his eyes teared up, as they would - and I said, “Were you treated differently by your stepfather when he had his own three sons?” He said, “Yes. I was treated better.” He said, “I was the favorite son.” At every turn he could name something for him and it would be his mother and his stepfather’s name – so such a good thing to happen to such a good man.

Smith: I wonder whether, in some ways, it didn’t instill in him – I was constantly surprised at his compassion, at his understanding of people in places in life where you wouldn’t think he’d have much knowledge. It went beyond tolerance.

Angelo: It would be empathy.

Smith: Empathy. That’s a great way of putting it. He was still a conservative, and God knows, fiscally, he was the last real conservative in the White House. Reagan ran up these budget deficits. Jerry Ford vetoed all these bills, used up his political capital. But that didn’t, in any way, effect this kind of empathy – it’s a great word.

Angelo: He really knew the Depression up close and personal. His stepfather had a paint supply company. Grand Rapids was the great furniture capital at that time. In the Depression people didn’t buy furniture, and so then people didn’t buy paint that went into the process of furniture. So they had it really tough and that’s why he was working flipping hamburgers.

They had pictures of him before the Depression, when they would go to Florida in an open kind of car – kind of an open limousine. They lived well, and then the Depression just _____________. So he knew firsthand what it was like. Much worse, I think to have had money, and lose it, I think that gave him the great feeling for people who were suffering, particularly those who, not from their own way of living, but what was done to them. I just think he was a man who cared about people – a lot.

Smith: He liked people, didn’t he?
Angelo: Oh, yes, he liked people.

Smith: You can’t fake that over a career. Nixon and Ford…


Smith: Let me ask you, the pardon. Did it come as thunderclap to you?

Angelo: Yes, it certainly did, to me. Because it came on a Sunday, and I happened to be the person that got the White House call to say, “Bonnie you ought to be here because we’re going to have an important…” Sunday – the magazine is already on the stands. So I hike myself down to the White House, but in the meanwhile I’m trying to find one of my editors on a summer Sunday morning and it was not easy. They were all in their yachts somewhere or whatever. And I said, “It’s going to be important. I don’t know what it is, but it’s going to be important.” I don’t know what I said, I don’t know whether I was ______ enough to say it might have to do with Nixon. I did ask Jerry Warren, who was the one who called me, a couple of questions that were not what it was. It was not a military thing, I knew that. So that just almost led us to Nixon. So then you were at the White House and it was Sunday and you were trying to report this story, your magazine is already closed and your sources are nowhere. It was a memorable day.

Smith: And were there other reporters, obviously, in the same…

Angelo: Especially all the dailies needed something for Mondays. It was just the news magazines that get hit by having – and all those editors were hauled in from their yachts or whatever, in New York.

Smith: I remember having a long, more than one, conversation with him about this because I thought there had to be a more politically adroit way of doing this.

Angelo: Had to be.

Smith: But, you know, it’s funny because we sort of war gamed this. One evening we spent three hours going back and forth, and Mel Laird, who always had a
scheme for everything, of course, Mel figured out he could have taken care of this, too.

Angelo: He could of.

Smith: He was going to bring a delegation from both Houses, both parties, to the White House to ask Ford to pardon Nixon. The problem is, looking back, if you try to put yourself in that superheated, overcharged political climate, the first trial balloon would have been shot down before it ever reached the trees.

Angelo: Yes.

Smith: I don’t know how the president could have prepared the country, short of letting the legal process play itself out.

Angelo: Because it would absolutely blow up the whole country. And then you’re going to do it anyway? If you’re going to do it that way, you’ve got to be willing to say, “Okay, I won’t pardon him. I would like to, but if it’s not in the interest of this whole country, I will not do it.” He couldn’t have it erupt and then do it, do you think?

Smith: No. That’s my point. I try to come up with an alternative scenario. What’s the alternative?

Angelo: My scenario is that he should have gotten something in return from Richard Nixon. It’s as simple as that. He had to have admitted things, he had to be plea bargaining. And I think he made a mistake in not doing that. I personally, was disappointed that he didn’t do that. Because you’re letting the man get off Scott-free. He’s just done something that’s never been – jeopardizing our presidency – never before in our country to that extent, by a president himself. And I just didn’t see why he didn’t do that. And I was told that it was Al Haig who talked him out of it.

Smith: Out of taking that approach – that tough approach. That’s interesting.

Angelo: And I was told by somebody who really knew. It was not just an idle person. I can’t recall which White House source, but it was not…
Smith: Let me play devil’s advocate – is it because Haig or, fill in the blank, thought Nixon couldn’t be brought to that point? That, in other words, he had so dug in his heels that…

Angelo: Then don’t do it. Okay, you don’t want to do that? Sorry, we offered you this. We won’t do it. You’re the president now, you’ve got some clout. I think it was Al Haig feeling sorry for Richard Nixon. After all, he’d known him over many more years than he’d known Jerry Ford. Had worked with him, had done all that. Many years. I think he just pled for humanity on the part of Jerry Ford, and that would have been the only way he could go. Couldn’t say it politically. But in the name of human kindness. And Jerry Ford was a kind man. That’s the only way I could figure it out.

Smith: Did you cover him when he went up before the House to, in effect, testify about the pardon.

Angelo: I was not there. It was an in-house representative, wasn’t it? Senate and House reporters – that was really on their territory, and so they handled that. Obviously, I watched it on television because we were seeing a drama of historic proportions. Unlike some cases, we knew it was historic. Sometimes you have to have hindsight to know. We knew.

Smith: You don’t think of him as a tragic figure…

Angelo: Nixon?

Smith: No, Ford. But, there was an element - he felt by the fall of ’76 that he had just really begun to master this job. To know how to do it, and then he lost it.

Angelo: And then he lost it. Yes. And I think the pardon is what lost it because it was a close election, and there were so many people who felt bitterly about that pardon – to give Richard Nixon, who had trampled over all of our American traditions, not to mention our law – to do that knowingly, and then hide evidence. And then to give him that kind of way to come back in glory, I felt that’s what cost him the election.

Smith: We go back to being naïve; do you think he was, in some ways, naïve in underestimating the Reagan challenge? Either in thinking that Reagan
wouldn’t run, or in underestimating the appeal that Reagan would have when he did run.

Angelo: We’re talking about…

Smith: Reagan announces in December of ’75 that he is going to run. But clearly, there is a build up through much of ’75…Apparently there were people in the White House who believed that Reagan wasn’t serious about running, or that if he did run, he wouldn’t be a formidable opponent.

Angelo: Now, they may have thought the other, but if they did, I don’t think that a lot of other people who are politically astute were thinking he wouldn’t run. Because he ran for governor of California and people thought -his movie star? – was eight years a governor and a powerful governor. He was not just a pretty face. So to want to be president was a logical step for Ronald Reagan. So anybody who doubted it, seemed to me whistling in the dark. They didn’t want him to run. So Jerry Ford brought it off that time, yeah.

What was the next step on that? Because the next time Reagan ran…

Smith: In ’80 there was some who approached Ford about running...

Angelo: Wasn’t there some sort of talk about a Ford/Reagan ticket in ’80?

Smith: Yeah, and then in the Detroit convention, for a few hours there is this bizarre minuet that takes place. To this day, there is a certain element of mystery surrounding what really went on.

Angelo: And at that particular time, I missed the wonderful inside coverage of _________. I was London-based bureau chief at that time, so I was just wishing I were back to do that. But what I turned out to be instead was the go-to commentator on this American political season. I must have done fifty.

Smith: How important was Donald Rumsfeld in the Ford White House? What did he bring to it?

Angelo: I think Donald Rumsfeld, just by being a personality, was important. And I think he was a friend. That matters so much – not somebody who joined politically, but was a friend. So you have to think that he did have a real
impact. Then you see in his second coming, that it didn’t fare so well with George W. Bush.

Smith: I look at the press accounts and it’s pretty clear that there were factions in the Ford White House. Which is nothing unusual.

Angelo: Show me a White House without a faction, and I show you a flagging White House.

Smith: But, the Rumsfeld/Rockefeller rivalry - was that something that was well-known to people covering the White House?

Angelo: You know, this is a hard one for me to reconstruct, because it must have been well known, but looking at it now, the Rockefeller thing seems so dominant that I can’t even remember that it was in doubt.

Smith: Did you know he was unhappy as vice president?

Angelo: Rockefeller?

Smith: Yeah.

Angelo: How can you really know inside? I dealt with him a lot and he was always just terrific to deal with. He was always very enthusiastic or I wouldn’t have been going in search of what he thought if it wasn’t something he was really keen about. I think there were probably times when he felt that he was really doing something important, and that was taking really his skills and using them. Then there were the times when he must have wondered, what do I do now?

Smith: It was such a mismatch in some ways because Ford, in early ’75, announced that there were going to be no new domestic programs until we sort of began to catch up. Of course, to Rockefeller, that’s death.

Angelo: That’s right.

Smith: You get re-elected in New York by coming up with new programs.
Angelo: And that’s really where his heart was, or where his interest lay. Much more, I think, than in foreign policy. A New York governor, so there you are willy ninny.

Smith: And the question is still asked - I have my own answer - was he pushed or did he jump from the ticket in ’75? When it was announced that he wouldn’t be on the ticket in ’76, I don’t know what the journalistic consensus was at the time.

Angelo: I’m trying to reconstruct what kind of machinations there really was.

Smith: Remember, it was part of the larger package – Schlesinger was fired…

Angelo: It happened on a weekend, as I recall, because I was covering down some place in South Carolina, where we didn’t have good – there were certain days for journalists – when you remember your own problems more than theirs. Yes. And it was kind of a Sunday afternoon slaughter of sorts. And your question was whether Rockefeller was pushed or …

Smith: Whether he jumped.

Angelo: I don’t know. At the time I thought he was pushed. When you look at it, not many politicians jump, because they always think that there is going to be a chance. And then they can look back in recent history and kind of show – Jerry Ford is president – and who thought that four years before? Not that it was the same thing, but the unexpected can happen. And what was the alternative? If you jump, what was he jumping to at that point?

Smith: Were you around the president during the assassination attempts?

Angelo: The Reagan?

Smith: No, the Ford.

Angelo: Oh, the Ford. No, I was not. I was not on those trips. Out in San Francisco? No, Dean Fisher was for us that day. I would cover some of the trips, he would cover some and that just happened to one that he was covering. I was horrified, obviously. And these two bizarre girls, you know?
Smith: And Jerry Ford seemed like the last person in the world who you’d want to take a shot at.

Angelo: Why in the world would you do that, you idiots? And you were just glad they couldn’t shoot straight. If you’d had a John Wilkes Booth, it would have not been that way.

Smith: Did you see much of them after they left Washington?

Angelo: No. I wish I had. They lived out there the whole time. After they left Washington I was in London, and then I was bureau chief in New York. Although I was in and out of Washington all the time, I was not covering Washington. I was covering Mario Cuomo, who didn’t run. I had my bags packed, virtually.

Smith: What’s Betty Ford’s historical impact?

Angelo: I think Betty Ford has real impact, and I can’t say that about that many first ladies. I think she was the first one to speak out about controversial things. First one to have a known problem of alcoholism. There was William McKinley’s wife, Ida – she was always having the vapors and who knows what they had back then in their sachet. But Betty was the modern woman. She seemed fearless. She was honest because she hadn’t really been out on the campaign trails enough to know how to circumnavigate the tricky questions. So she said what she thought, and I can tell you – I can’t speak for the male correspondents, but among female journalists – she was a heroine because she said what she thought. She wasn’t namby pamby, to use an old expression.

She took the step that was so remarkable; she changed our whole philosophy in terms of dealing with announcing that you’ve got this dread disease. Nancy Reagan, and then I don’t who – it seems to me we’ve had so much of it - they all do it now. It was Betty Ford that made that the thing to do – to have the doctors brief the press, not to hide it, not to take her away like Grover Cleveland on a boat, a yacht, in the East River as it goes into the bay.
So she was so forthcoming. She had a sense of fun, and a sense of style. She was always good looking, and then the way she dressed. So I think Betty Ford had this special place with women. She dared to do it. She really laid down a marker that made it much easier for other first ladies, some of them like Laura Bush, a very nice person. Everybody likes Laura Bush, but you cannot go wrong with literacy for children. Hardly a challenge, and you hope it had some effect. I hope it did. But not a tough decision.

Ladybird put her stamp on this country in a wonderful way. It was a little more controversial than it is remembered now because there were companies that felt that she was wanting to save all those historic buildings. People forget that she didn’t just plant the flowers.

Smith: Well, and all the billboards.

Angelo: And the billboards. Oh yes. Every time I drive down to my home state of North Carolina, especially when it’s in flower, and there are just miles of blooming flowers along I-95, and I just roll down my window and say, “Thank you, Ladybird,” because she did it. And this country is more beautiful because of it and it’s not going to stop being beautiful. If you tear up those plantings you’d be strung up by the likes of me. So I say that Betty Ford loosened the straps that held first ladies back. If they do it now, it’s mostly because they choose to do it. And I hope they do, because they’ve got power.

Smith: I sometimes use the line, by being herself, she made it easier for millions of people to be themselves.

Angelo: I think that’s perfect, yes. And she had no hesitation about it. If you said, “Be yourself,” she would have said, “Now who else can I be?” But she didn’t mind, she didn’t know the effect of a lot of this. That is one thing – not having been out there on the front lines of politics, she was catapulted into the White House, which is a wonderful thing in the sense that she wasn’t afraid of anything. There are other things that she said that were just wonderful because they were so unstudied. And the country loved her. I don’t think there was ever a negative kind of…

Smith: Well, the right wing took exception – the traditionalists.
Angelo: Did they in any serious manner?

Smith: Remember in *Sixty Minutes*, have you ever told your husband “you weren’t very good today?”

Smith: Oh, well, there’s that wonderful line where she says, “Of course, I tell him all the time.” Which, of course, you could see millions of wives, all over America, silently cheering her on.

Angelo: And that was when she went really way out there when she was talking about her daughter, made it very clear that she would talk to her about rather adventuresome sex.

Smith: There is a wonderful letter that came in from a woman in Texas. It says, “You don’t understand,” and the writer lists all these qualities that a first lady is supposed to have. And she said, “You are constitutionally required to be perfect.” She was absolutely serious.

Angelo: Was she really?

Smith: The woman who wrote the letter was absolutely serious. I would have loved to see the look on Mrs. Ford’s face.

Angelo: I thought maybe she was being mischievous, the writer. You don’t think so?

Smith: Absolutely dead-on. This is what a first lady is supposed to be.

Angelo: But it also shows that the limitations on first ladies are as broad as you want to make them. You do not have to stay and groan about the wives. I think my first time of actually remembering first ladies would be Bess Truman, who I thought was terrible. Harry Truman adored Bess Truman, he adored her. And she would go away with Margaret, taking Margaret with her for an entire summer, leaving Harry with the world’s problems – and there were problems all the time in the Truman years – alone, first in the White House, and then in Blair House where they lived during the renovation. But I felt she owed him more than that and I resent Bess Truman on the part of Harry Truman. He adored her.
Now I thought one of the most interesting was Mamie Eisenhower who said she and Ike could never have such happy years as they did in the White House. Which was lovely because she’d been the Army wife and done all the proper things when she was supposed to; but there they were together and they really found that they liked each other. So I thought that was lovely.

I think you look at the Nixons and you see – this was no marriage. It might have been way in the early years, but when he would go off to Camp David for a weekend and not take her, but take Bebe Rebozo? I think that was kind of a slap to her. They bought the house next door – very unsuitable, totally unsuitable house for a president – on Key Biscayne on the waters of Miami because it was next door to Bebe Rebozo’s. Well, the Secret Service had to buy two more houses, they hated it. Then he would go off to Bob Abplanalp’s private island – again, leaving Pat back there by herself. She stopped going to Florida because she was just abandoned there.

And I thought, to me, that was a tragically failed marriage and he did it in a way that anybody who was paying attention could see. The women of America liked Pat Nixon, maybe because a lot of them identified with her. But to know that she had been this wonderful – one of my great friends who was a CBS correspondent, Bob Pierpoint, which everybody knows, he was student at the high school in the town they lived in, in California. Was it Redlands – the town?

Smith: I’m not sure.

Angelo: I can’t remember. Anyway, he said at the high school everybody loved Pat Ryan. She was the head of the cheerleading squad, she was the teacher, as often happens in the small town, that everybody just loved. And he said, “I can’t see that person in the Pat Nixon that I cover these days.” So, you see, the White House can have a debilitating effect – or liberating effect. I think Barbara Bush certainly found it liberating. She did whatever she pleased and, I think, loved it. Laura must have, too. There is no indication that she didn’t. So we hope that Michelle Obama, who is certainly setting a track record for doing more things to show, “Hey, I’m a person,” and being out in the town, or having school kids come in to meet her. For one who has covered so many
kinds of first ladies, I just kind of look in amazement at how quickly the atmosphere can be changed.

Smith: That’s perfect.

Angelo: Thank you. My pleasure.
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this.

Hills: Thank you for taking your time.

Smith: It's hard to know where to begin. Tell us the road that led you to the Ford White House. What were you doing before your path crossed that of Gerald Ford's?

Hills: I was at the Justice Department. I was Assistant Attorney General in charge of the Civil Division.

Smith: During Watergate?

Hills: Well, yes, in that time. I came to Washington at the invitation of the then Attorney General Elliot Richardson. I came to Washington – actually, he came out to see me in California in 1973. I was teaching at UCLA and running a law practice, so I was very, very busy. I kept asking him for more time to come back. He called me in September and said, “I’m under a lot of pressure, could you come back and make a decision?”

I flew back in October with my husband and met with his deputy, Bill Ruckelshaus, and talked about the position. We had lunch with his wife Ann, and talked about schools for our children in the region, and said finally, “Okay, I’ll do it.” We flew home for a friend’s fiftieth birthday – Saturday night – and turned on the radio when I got there. That was the weekend of the Saturday Night Massacre. I called the White House on Monday and said, “I’m sorry, I was recruited by Elliot Richardson, and I don’t know what your plans are, but I am off the list.” And they kept after me to come, and, indeed, although Bill Ruckelshaus had left, others in the Justice Department pressed me to, as they say, fulfill your commitment. And they felt…

Smith: Did that include Judge Bork?
Hills: Yes. And Judge Bork said, “It’s not a pleasant time for me. I’m under a lot of pressure. I really, really would like to have you come.” So I came back another time and met with then Attorney General Saxbe

Smith: That’s right - from Ohio.

Hills: He was from Ohio, Mechanicsburg, Ohio. I interviewed with him and he was very different from Elliot Richardson. I asked him whether I would have leeway to hire the kinds of people that I had hired for our law firm, and that I was particularly keen about having deep talent and broad capacity. After about ten minutes he said, “Mrs. Hills, are you only going to hire women?” And I thought, never was there a clearer indication that I’m not getting through. I said, “Who’s going to be your deputy?” And he said, “Larry Silverman, who’s over at Steptoe and Johnson.” I said, “Would you mind if I talked to him?” He agreed, and I went over to talk to Larry – never met him before – and was absolutely captivated by him. So I said, “Okay, I’ll come.” And I came in February and then that was the beginning of my being in Washington when President Ford called me.

Smith: Let me back up. For people for whom Elliot Richardson is just a name in a textbook, what was Elliot Richardson like? And what was his role in all of this?

Hills: Elliot was an enormous talent. He graduated at the top of his class at Harvard. He was a man of great integrity He had served as secretary of the Defense Department, served on Health, Education and Welfare, attorney general, and secretary of commerce. He’d been everywhere. He just made an enormous contribution to government as a very strong man of integrity and independent views.

Smith: Did you, in later years, ever discuss with him those events surrounding the Saturday Night Massacre?

Hills: Absolutely. We became very close friends, he and Ann and Rod. He came back into the Ford administration. He was especially close friends with Rod, who did a lot of different things with him when Rod was at the White House.
Rod has pictures of the four of us doing things together. We had an enormous admiration for the Richardsons as a family.

Smith: Did he ever contemplate carrying out the president’s order? How much of an internal struggle was that that he confronted in terms of firing Cox?

Hills: When he called me and said he was under pressure, I had no idea just how much - being out in the hinterlands – I had no idea the pressure he was under. And I think that he struggled with it in the sense that he wanted to be a loyal lieutenant, but he wanted more to be a man of integrity. And he thought that having made the commitments to Archibald Cox that he had made, he had no choice.

I think his deputy, Bill Ruckelshaus, felt similarly and I think Bob Bork felt that if everyone left the Justice Department at this time of great turmoil – and this was a terrible time of high inflation, high unemployment, disappointment and anger over the Vietnam War – that if there ever was a time we needed a strong rule of law and a strong Justice Department, we needed it then. I understood both sides, and admired both. I thought that Bob Bork staying and holding the fort, so to speak, was admirable and courageous.

Smith: Interesting you say that. It did not imply, necessarily, a personal endorsement on his part of the decision to first Cox.

Hills: Absolutely not. And from where Bob Bork came – he’s hugely criticized. He came from Yale; the Yale faculty was very, very critical, and I think it cost him a lot in terms of his prestige. History will, I think, smile upon him because I think he did what he thought was right for the country.

It’s sort of interesting when I think about the people who worked in the Ford administration – a disproportionate number of them relative to what we see in later years – did what was right for the country, as did President Ford.

Smith: Did you harbor – particularly after the Massacre – did you harbor doubts about “What am I getting into? Do I really want to join an administration whose future may be so uncertain?”
Hills: Yes. I was a bit iffy. I didn’t seek the job, the job sought me. I had four children. My husband was going to have to commute from California, and although it was an exciting prospect, the turmoil did bother me. I was, as I say, I was more recruited by the deputy attorney general than by the attorney general. I was very impressed with Elliot Richardson, and to join a team that he was putting together – of the caliber that he had put together – was an honor. The next step was more of a gamble.

Smith: During that period after you arrived, and before the so-called final days, I assume this was a topic that consumed Washington. And I imagine it must have been, if nothing else, gossiped about continually within the halls of the Justice Department.

Hills: Not really. You’re talking about the final days of President Nixon and…

Smith: The unfolding Watergate scandal and the prospects for Nixon’s…

Hills: I do recall that I was playing tennis with Larry Silverman in September, and word came of the pardon and I was absolutely stunned. Judge Silverman who was deputy said, “Well, there’s goes President Ford’s election,” and that was the kind of talk. It was very closely held. I did not have rumor of it ahead of time, other than as reported in the press. There was a “Would he do it? – No, he wouldn’t.” That kind of thing.

Smith: That’s fascinating. Can you think of a time – was there such a thing as ‘that moment” when you internally decided that the Nixon presidency was not going to survive? Was it when the Supreme Court ruled on the tapes, or the specific, so-called “smoking gun” tape, or was it earlier than that?

Hills: Well, this was a time of great anxiety and, of course, the president was claiming that he knew nothing of the Watergate. The tapes were not widely talked about because, until publicity about the 18 minute gap. People weren’t aware generally speaking that their conversations were being taped. So, the view was generally a man is innocent until proven guilty, and I think in the Justice Department that was really the mindset, although there was a lot of criticism of the style and tone of the then presidency.
Smith: It is interesting – just to back up. We had an interesting interview, fascinating actually, with Jerry Jones, who, at the time, was running the White House personnel office for Haldeman. And he got a call from Haldeman, who was still at the White House so this had to be before the middle of April, ‘73. He got a call wanting to know how many people reported directly to the vice president.

Hills: The vice president?

Smith: The vice president. And Jones does some figuring in his head and he says probably about fifty. He said, “Good. I want undated letters of resignation from every one of them.” Which led Jones to believe that Haldeman, Erlichman, and presumably the president, knew as early as spring of ’73 that Agnew, in fact, might have severe problems - which presumably would have come from the Justice Department. I don’t know when that investigation began, but that’s striking.

Hills: I did not arrive until Feb, 1974. But no one ever asked for my resignation. And I was too busy to look up. It was a 24/7 kind of a job.

Smith: Describe the job – why you were at the Justice Department at that point. I think probably, to most people, there’s a perception that government had ground to a halt.

Hills: Right.

Smith: But, presumably, that’s not the case. Presumably below the surface, the government continues to function no matter what crisis is enveloping the White House.

Hills: The Justice Department was very, very busy. The Civil Division represents all the departments and agencies of government - any suit brought by or against them. They are often quite complex. So we had a lot of litigation, and when a country is in turmoil, you tend to get more litigation. So there were all kinds of cases being brought across the land that we were involved in that ranged
from class actions involving the swine flu vaccination to re-lining at HUD. It wasn’t a time of vacation.

Smith: Can you describe – everyone has got their own word portrait of that transition. Does anything really stands out in those last days of the Nixon presidency and the transition to Gerald Ford?

Hills: We were all glued with our ears to the radio in those very last days. First Gerald Ford was appointed vice president and there was a lot of discussion about his qualities as an appointed vice president. And there was discussion in the last days of how he would govern were he a president. But, as I say, we were engaged in tough lawsuits – the May Day Riot suits, the Nixon tapes cases, a lot of Constitutional statutory interpretations that were quite crucial to the country, and so our forces at the Civil Division were scampering to keep up.

Smith: Al Haig, among others, has said that he realized the presidency was gone the day that the court came out with its ruling on the tapes, which I think was unanimous.

Hills: Right, yes. The court issued its opinion in the summer of 1974.

Smith: In fact, someone with whom we’ve talked raised the question, “Could we get away with defying the court?”

Hills: Defying the court?

Smith: From San Clemente, clearly Nixon’s first instinct was, is there any wiggle room in this? Can we – politically, would it fly if we were to defy the court? And the word was passed along, no way. Were you surprised that – really Richard Nixon was surprised – were you surprised that it was a unanimous ruling that went the way it did on the tapes?

Hills: I don’t think I was surprised, but I don’t have any clear recollection. The case was handled in the SG’s office – the Solicitor General’s office – and Al Haig was in the inner sanctum with Nixon – talked to him quite a lot. He was a courier between the presidency and the vice presidency at that time, and so
the comments that you mention – letters of resignation and whether they
could defy the court – I’d be very surprised with their legal training that either
President Nixon or President Ford would think that was a possibility in this
country. Particularly with the turmoil in the country. That would have been a
match next to a gasoline can in my view, with the unhappiness over Vietnam
and Watergate, and then you add the defiance of the Supreme Court. I think
they must have dismissed the idea in thirty seconds.

Smith: When did you first meet Gerald Ford?

Hills: On one Saturday I got a phone call. I tried very hard to be home on weekends
and not do anything social so that I could spend time with my children.

Smith: How old were your children at that point?

Hills: The youngest was four and the eldest was thirteen. One Saturday in February
1974 I got a phone call saying the White House wants to see you. And I
naturally thought it was about one of my cases, and I said, “Who in the White
House?” The White House is calling, and I said, who? Well, it was Don
Rumsfeld. Don got on the phone and said he wanted to see me but the
president also wanted to see me. So I drove down and Don said, “We’d like
you to go over to HUD.” And I said, “I’m not an urbanologist. Is this a good
idea?” He said, “Well, the president thinks you’re a good manager.” He took
me in to to see the president. I said the same thing to President Ford. I said,
“You know, I’m not an urbanologist. You’ll probably get some push back on
this, and actually I think you need me at the Justice Department because that’s
all I’ve been doing all my life, being a lawyer.” And he said, “I’m told you are
a good manager. HUD needs a good manager. I’d like you to go.” And so, I
figured when the president asked you do something, you do it. So I
acquiesced and it wasn’t very long before I was over at HUD.

Smith: Now was there any discussion, not necessarily at that meeting, but from
Rumsfeld or others regarding the HUD agenda? In addition to managerial
skills, there clearly had to be a sense of what they wanted the department to
do.
Less of that, but you must understand that the Civil Division was the trial counsel for HUD. And so I knew very well who the people were at HUD, particularly those who handled their litigation. The first piece of legislation that President Ford signed was the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974.

And what was that?

That changed our whole housing picture. I think John Sparkman, who was then chairman – Senator Sparkman was chairman of the Banking Committee – said it was the most revolutionary change in housing since 1949. What the act did was to let communities, states and localities, decide what to do with the federal monies that they received. On the housing side, instead of having Congress tell them that they would build housing projects, they had a choice of using new, rehabilitated, or used housing – which made a whole lot of sense economically, because a community like Phoenix had nothing but new, and a community like Newark had nothing but old. And so for Newark to be limited to building new housing when it had empty houses that needed rehabilitation and occupancy didn’t make any sense.

And the other side of the act was community development. Up to that time Congress had a long list of specific programs that it mandated for communities - they must have a rat-extinction program, or they must have a parks program, or they must have a lighting program. Congress had seven big, specific programs. The new bill changed that and distributed federal monies based on a formula that weighed poverty and population. I think the age of infrastructure was also a component of the formula. The law required the recipient locality to hold a hearing. A mayor would have a hearing, then the locality may spend it for its critical need – new curbing and lighting, because that’s its need. If the need was to have a new park, then that’s its need – green space, open space – that’s fine. But it had to be on the basis of a public hearing covered by the press. The monies were distributed on formula of poverty, population and age of infrastructure…no earmarks, no special interests.
I often think of that today as we’re stimulating the economy. President Ford felt that the concept of Washington knows best, when San Jose is so different from Little Rock was wrong. A mandatory program misses the mark. And I certainly saw that. On day one when I went to HUD, I could tell that mayors could not leave money on the table. And even though the specific program was hitting maybe their eleventh priority, if there was money on the table, “Okay, we’ll take it.” Whereas, if they could use that money for what they really needed, you would have diminished the cynicism about government.

Can you imagine in a community like Newark, building a new dwelling when there’s a block of boarded up buildings that you’re not using – the citizenry must think, “What are they doing? Don’t they have the sense to know that they could use these buildings and make the neighborhood cleaner and safer?” And so this was a big, big change.

Smith: That’s fascinating because it really does fit in with this whole sense – first of all, I’ve always thought that it’s a mistake for people to look upon the Ford presidency as simply a coda to the Nixon presidency.

Hills: Right.

Smith: That’s a tendency. And it’s more than an interregnum between Nixon and Carter. That in many ways, Richard Nixon can be seen as the last New Deal president. Someone whose political reading was, “I have to accommodate the New Deal majority in the country.” And Ford really represents in many ways, a break with that. The Ford presidency is more about foreshadowing changes that would become consensus. Economic deregulation is a classic example.

Hills: Absolutely.

Smith: But this whole idea of loosening the strings that Washington had used traditionally to mandate one size fits all kind of policy. That kind of pragmatic conservatism seems to be the hallmark of the Ford presidency.

Hills: And he was driven by what he thought was right. Not by politics. You talk about earmarks. He wasn’t for earmarks. He was for doing what was right for
the people. And it was courageous. It’s hard to find a president so courageous. When you stop to think that he, with a Democratic House, and a Democratic Senate, but that his twenty-six years on Appropriation made him know what government did and what government should do. He was quite amazing.

He is the only president, in my recollection, who briefed the press on the budget. That’s every department and agency of government. And when I was told that he was going to brief the press on the HUD budget, my heart was in my mouth because I don’t think anybody would have described President Ford as being very articulate, very smooth in talking. Smooth in thinking and he did the right thing, but eloquence wasn’t the first thing that comes to mind. I was so afraid that he would have a problem. He didn’t have any problem. He knew where every dime was going. It was quite amazing. I don’t think any president – not only if they wanted to – could do that. Any president since, none have done it, in any event. He understood government.

Smith: The other side of that – there is this notion out there that it took him a while, in fact, maybe it took him two years to, in some ways, outgrow the Congressional mindset. To evolve from being a man of the Hill to a president. They are different functions in a lot of ways.

Hills: Right.

Smith: He brought those skills with him to office, but then in some ways, it took him a while to realize that they alone weren’t enough. What’s your take on that?

Hills: I don’t agree at all. I found him to be quite a leader. When you think of the decisions that he made that were unpopular – enormously unpopular; granting amnesty to those who refused to serve in Vietnam; applying sanctions to South Africa at a time when big corporations were opposed; the Helsinki Accords – so many things that he took because he felt that they were the right thing to do. Indeed, the pardon of President Nixon – he knew, he certainly knew politics – he knew that that was going to have a horrific cost.

He was a man of the House of Representatives, he knew he had to run in two years. And yet, he felt when the country was in turmoil – and he said that
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subsequently to me – the country was in turmoil, it was time to draw a line and move forward. And if we had litigated over the impeachment or gone through all the litigating steps, we would have been involved in that for four years, and the country had double digit inflation, it had high unemployment, it had a misery index that was enormous. He wanted to get on about the job of bringing those things down and in twenty-nine months he did that. And so, inflation was brought down to five percent, which is really remarkable, and unemployment was brought down, investment was brought up. He created jobs. I think his economic record was quite, quite good.

Smith: Apparently the folks in the White House, and obviously including the president, were hearing from Leon Jaworski at the outset that it could take up to two years to bring Nixon into a court room. And the thought of having the country and the press obsessed with Nixon and Nixon’s tapes and Nixon’s legal prospects and everything else, weighed heavily upon him.

Hills: I believe that. I believe that when he said this is a time for healing, he really believed that the country would continue to disintegrate if we didn’t draw a line and put the problems of the past behind us and move forward in a more positive sense. If you look at his record, everything that was going down that should not be going down, he brought up. And everything that was going up that shouldn’t be going up, he brought down. And so when he left, people who have commented on his presidency have said his successor didn’t have to initiate new programs, he simply had to continue the path of President Ford. And sadly, that wasn’t done. The economy – again, we got back into turmoil, and I think because of lack of knowledge with respect to the government.

Smith: You don’t think of Gerald Ford as being particularly drawn to urban affairs, urban policy. Was that a misnomer? Did he, because of his work on the Hill, know more about these programs, or have more of an interest than perhaps people might imply? I’m thinking of Grand Rapids, West Michigan, conservative Republican, did he, in fact, have an interest in and knowledge of urban policy?
Hills: He had a great knowledge of how money was spent. He had a strong view that all wisdom did not emanate from the Potomac. And he believed that there was an inefficiency when Washington was specifying how money should be spent. And he must have seen that in Grand Rapids. But, again, having served on Appropriations, where you follow the money, you know what’s happening to the money. He was aware of it. I took any number of appeals up to him while I was at HUD.

Smith: On what, for instance?

Hills: All kinds of issues. My predecessor, Jim Lynn…

Smith: Who went on to become budget director?

Hills: Went on to be head of OMB. As is normal, most predecessors don’t think their successor is doing it just the way they would have done it. So, Jim would call me and say, “I’m not going to let this counseling program go through.” And I said, “Jim, we’ve got a hundred million dollars sunk into a program, and people are coming into housing that have never had housing. And when they get frustrated they pull the plumbing off the wall because they just simply don’t know what to do. They don’t fix things. They need some help. We’re going to invest ten million dollars across the country to work with NGOs and mayors so that they are trained. So people who go in, take care of the places that they are living in.” No, he didn’t want to do that. I said, “Well, take it up.” He said, “You can’t take a ten million dollar program to the president.” I said, “Just watch me.” And what was just remarkable – I mean, this is just one small incident – the president would have us into the Cabinet Room, Jim on one side, me on the other, and the president across the way. Just the three of us. I made my pitch, Jim made his pitch, the president would rule from the bench. In all my time as a prosecutor, I had never seen a judge be so prompt, so thorough, and I appreciated the fact that he ruled for me.

In our dinner, Vice President Rockefeller got up and said, “The person who has brought more of these cases to the president and won them is the one who
put this dinner together.” But it was true. He was just terrific about taking on
and listening to the issues.

Smith: That’s fascinating because we keep hearing this sense that Ford welcomed a
vigorous exchange between opposing points of view. He was totally
comfortable with people who might have a little more eloquence; a little more
polish; a little more – whatever.

Hills: Absolutely.

Smith: And in the end, no one doubted who was going to make the decisions, or that
it would be made.

Hills: Right. He engaged. The Cabinet meeting was interesting.

Smith: Describe how the Cabinet worked under the president.

Hills: He would raise issues so that we were aware, and he would engage, both
qualitatively and quantitatively, to the discussion. There were, as you know,
very strong, differing views over deregulation, over various programs, over
foreign policy. And he was very skilled at participating in the discussion. I
would say that most of the discussions that were focused, were more of one
on one or one on two, or a group. I can recall several group discussions, so
that domestic policy and economic policy were separate from the foreign
policy. But he was extraordinarily engaged in the issues. I think of his Cabinet
– he really had strong-willed, talented people. He brought in – I don’t know
whether you’ve talked to Secretary Bill Coleman – a Frankfurter law clerk,
first in his class at Harvard, civil rights lawyer – I mean, a really splendid
mind.

Smith: And, it’s extraordinary when, just in the course of one conversation, when you
stop to realize, the fifty-five mile per hour speed limit, airbags, the beginnings
of deregulation. And also, the Metro in D.C., I-66, finishing the Interstate
Highway system, it is extraordinary how much happened in that slice of time.

Hills: Twenty-nine months, and on deregulation, his successor gets a lot of the
credit. But airline deregulations, trucking deregulations, you’ll be talking to
Rod about that, but he was in the White House as counsel to the president and he’ll talk to you about those issues. But he gives tremendous credit to President Ford. And President Ford also listened – he brought in such a diverse people – a present from the north, Ed Levi, spectacular attorney general. Present from the south, David Matthews. He brought in John Dunlop who was the dean up at Harvard on labor. He was a very different kind of thinker in terms of what you’d call traditional Republicanism. He absorbed these views we’ve talked about. Elliot, who has been in every post that you can imagine.

Smith: Tell us about Ed Levi, I remember working with the president on the eulogy that he gave at the attorney general’s funeral in Chicago - which was a real education. He was a remarkable man. And I do think, in some ways, he’s an attorney general who set a standard.

Hills: Yes.

Smith: Tell us about Ed Levi, and that relationship and how, in effect, the department regained its credibility.

Hills: Well, Ed Levi was an independent lawyer. He was a strong, thoughtful, lawyer. He called it as he saw it. I’m sure that there are some political advisors in the White House who wished he had made decisions differently than those that he did make from time to time, but there is no doubt that he was going to call it as he saw it. He brought great prestige. I was always sorry that I hadn’t had the opportunity to serve with him at Justice. I left before he came, but we were Cabinet colleagues. We had a lot of discussions. We became very good friends and had lots of dinners together, Kate and Ed and Rod and I. Kate was wonderful in terms of insisting on a one table conversation. When there are so many interesting things to talk about, it’s lovely to get differing points of view, and that was her trademark on dinners, and it was lots of fun.

Smith: That’s great. And I take it that he, over time, became devoted to the president.

Hills: Yes, absolutely.
Smith: On the surface, they are almost from different planets. Just culturally, sort of the obvious. But you could say that about a number of the people in that Cabinet.

Hills: You just said what I would say. You look around the table from Bill Scranton – governor, erudite, articulate…

Smith: And pretty liberal by Republican standards.

Hills: And certainly a centrist – and Vice President Rockefeller – certainly a centrist and more liberal than I would – I’m not fond of labels, quite frankly. I think you have to look at the issue, but Henry Kissinger – very strong-willed and certainly a talented individual. So his Cabinet was made up of people who were independent minded and willing to express their points of view – with courtesy, but they did express their views.

Smith: I remember talking to Bill Simon before he died. As you know I’ve been working on this biography of Nelson Rockefeller for years – people who thought that he sort of veered to the right in his later years, overlook the Energy Independence Corporation. It was just classic Rockefeller.

Hills: Rod will talk to you about that, too.

Smith: Well, good. Needless to say, Simon didn’t agree with this. And at some point, and I don’t know if it was in a Cabinet meeting or in a smaller conversation, but there was a very heated exchange about this. And Simon at some point claims to have said, “Don’t let him do to the country what he did to New York.” And the president indicated in front of the group that he was going to support Nelson on this.

Hills: Right.

Smith: And Simon continued the argument privately. And it shows you who was the real politician. The president said, “Bill, you and I both know there’s not a chance in hell that Congress will ever adopt this, but I’m not going to embarrass Nelson.” Which is so revealing.
Hills: I wasn’t in that discussion, but that sounds so like how he might have just ended the discussion. And, of course, there was great pressure for that on the Hill, from certain segments. So, by moving in that direction, he not only let them do their dance on the Hill, but he didn’t embarrass the vice president.

Smith: How difficult was it for Rockefeller to subordinate himself into this job? He said he’d known every vice president since Henry Wallace and they were all miserable. And yet, I talked to someone who tried to talk him out of taking the job when the president asked him to do it. This guy went through all of these reasons why he would be the latest miserable vice president, and Rockefeller, who I don’t think was totally honest with himself about his motives, finally was backed into a corner. He said, “Bill, everything you say is right, but you forget one thing. This is my last chance.”

Hills: Well, I thought that he was a wonderful man. He brought levity and charm – he had served six presidents I think, in one capacity or another. Certainly in knowledge, big city, big state, populous state, politics. And yes, they did disagree on issues from time to time, but they disagreed agreeably and he wasn’t the only one. There were very strong discussions on labor policy, very strong discussions on deregulation - timing and the extent of. There were others in the Cabinet, too, that would war. It’s not unusual, either, turf being what it is in the federal government; there is a certain gnashing at the edges. He was very compliant when he was not selected to run a second time. He could have fussed about it and created problems, but he did not.


Hills: Absolutely. So I give him very high marks for loyalty and his contributions.

Smith: I think the one substantive issue where there really was disagreement, and it obviously didn’t just involve the president and vice president, was the whole issue of aid to New York City.

Hills: Yes.
Smith: I would be fascinated to know your take on all of that, because my sense is that there were two camps. I talked at length with Bill Seidman about this. Seidman sort of aligned himself with the vice president, and then there was Bill Simon and Alan Greenspan and those folks, who are perhaps more classically free market types. Again, the danger of labels. But, there was this famous speech at the National Press Club, and as Seidman reconstructs it, the two camps were at a tug of war, and he thought the president was going to go and deliver this fairly moderate address. And at the last minute - in part because at that point, the Reagan challenge was looming and it was deemed good politics to take a tough stance against what was seen by many people to be an irresponsible city government in New York. [the speech was changed] That’s the background that I have from those folks. It would really be fascinating to know your recollection of how that evolved.

Hills: I think it was the *Post* that had the “Drop Dead” headline. That’s inaccurate. The president came down more of wanting New York to take on greater responsibility. Whenever you have to work out a situation, you want the folks that have created the problem to take on some responsibility and how are they going to behave. So I think he was negotiating and a harsher headline was put on it than he meant to communicate. So, I would have put him as a centrist on that issue. He did have advice. As I say, on most issues he had vigorous debate. He had a diverse Cabinet and he had a discussion that was pretty robust, and then he came down on one side or another, but often in the middle.

Smith: Were you part of that group that was discussing New York?

Hills: No, other than as how we would provide the funding. In other words, the philosophic issue of helping New York. We were helping New York. HUD was helping New York big time.

Smith: Something like 25% of New York’s municipal budget was already coming from Washington.
Hills: Absolutely. And we were committed to doing that. I thought the president should get credit for that. So, it wasn’t that we were cutting off New York. So this is again what I would put in the era. And if you look at it, New York made it, and I think the problem was in eloquence. How do you express yourself, and maybe by trying to weave between these two groups in the White House, both in the White House. The president didn’t get enough credit for what he was doing, what he was willing to continue to do – which he committed to me he was committed to do – and to try to get them to do more. You don’t just want to throw new money down a hole. You want to know what are they going to do with it. And he was tracking it – he wanted to track it.

Smith: Clearly, when Mayor Beame showed up for the first time, he was not willing to make serious cuts in what had come to be seen as the fabric of New York. Hugh Carey told me years later, he said, “You know, Jerry Ford’s never gotten the credit he deserved for his role in saving New York.”

Hills: Absolutely. That’s what I think. I think that we were working very closely with the people up in New York. We committed to them. We’ll stand by you. What the president was doing was saying, “If we give you any additional monies, we want to know where they are going to go. We don’t want them to just be spread around politically.” And he couldn’t get that commitment and then he got the headline, but his tough stance was really kind of tough love, I would say.

Smith: Did you sense there was a disagreement there between the president and the vice president? Rockefeller must have been in a somewhat awkward position at that point.

Hills: That’s what I meant when I said I was not part of it. I meant I did not hear a disagreement between Nelson Rockefeller and President Ford.

Smith: How aware were you, and presumably other members of the Cabinet, during ’75 - this prospect of the Reagan challenge? It has been claimed over the
years that it tended to be underestimated for a long time. That people in the White House were slow to realize just how serious this might be.

Hills: Right.

Smith: Was that your sense of the time? Were you surprised when Governor Reagan got into the race, were you surprised at what he was able to mobilize?

Hills: Well, you remember the economy was coming up, but it was coming up very gradually. I think that if we’d had one more month, if the projections were constant, President Ford would have won. Very close. President Reagan was a competent campaigner. He and his forces offended me hugely in Kansas City as they danced in front of the president’s box and were rude to a point of an embarrassment, I thought. And that always bothered me a lot. I thought anyone could see what President Ford had contributed to his country in so many ways. You can run a campaign, but you can run a courteous campaign, and they were not courteous in Kansas City. It bothered me considerably.

Smith: That suggests that the split in the party was profound.

Hills: Yes, the split was very strong. Particularly strong in California. California had lost Republicans from the time that Bobby Kennedy was shot in the 60s. In fact, Rod was co-chairman with Leon Panetta of the campaign of a Republican who was criticized for not coming home often enough. And somebody in the John Birch Society, Max Rafferty…

Smith: Oh, sure. Tom Kuchel.

Hills: Ran against Tom and beat him. And then Al Cranston, who was controller, Rod also ran a Claremont professor against Alan _____________. And _____________ beat Al Cranston, who didn’t have a job, so he filed for the Senate seat and he beat Max Rafferty in a walk away. So Alan was always very fond of us. He said, “You paved my way to getting into Senate.” After that time, centrists and even[?] re-registered and were either independents or Democrats. First of all, they had registered to vote for Kennedy, who was popular. So you lost a slew of them then. And then when
the Max Rafferty’s took over the party – you saw a big slide and big re-registration. So the Republican Party had become quite conservative and quite ideological, and it’s had a hard time recovering. If you think about it, Arnold Schwarzenegger would never have won, but for having run through a general election because the party is very polarized there. That’s unfortunate.

Smith: He [Ford] is an atypical president, isn’t he, in a lot of ways? David Broder famously said he was the least neurotic president David Broder had ever known. And maybe in part because he hadn’t spent his life calculating what it would become to president.

Hills: Not at all, he wanted to be Speaker, Leader. He loved the House. So, when he was picked, it was because people loved him.

Smith: The great irony is then, of course, he becomes president and he really spends the next two and a half years trying to fend off the Watergate babies and others who are pushing back against the executive branch of government. And all of those vetoes…did you have vetoes?

Hills: You bet we did. And I have nothing but admiration for him. When you think of the presidents that have come since and you think, how in the world could they have signed that bill? This man vetoed, I think, sixty-six bills, he sustained fifty-four, if my numbers are right, and he had a Democratic House and Democratic Senate. That he was able to sustain fifty-four vetoes because he was right, was because they respected him. We had the middle class housing emergency bill in ’75, we got the bill up and it was, in the president’s view, and with my recommendation, too broad. Remember, we had…

Smith: It was more than a question of money, it was…

Hills: No, no. It was a question of money, but in other words, it took the middle class and it was paying benefits – we were paying the interest rates on mortgages. Very similar – here in 1975 we had the oil shock, we had distaste over Vietnam, we had Watergate, so there was cynicism about government. You know, you think about our government today and the analogy there. I won’t go into that. But I said to him, “Mr. President, this is going to cost us a
bundle because it covers all the middle class, whether they need it or not. Whether the house is in foreclosure or not.” And so he wanted it trimmed back to those who had lost their jobs and could not pay their mortgage. So he vetoed it.

Now, this was a housing bill where it was something the Hill wanted very, very much. Bill Proxmire was absolutely convinced that this would help cure inflation. Spend more and you’ll get jobs. He was wrong economically, but he was my chairman. The president vetoed it. We took it back to the Hill and we worked with the Hill, and with a lot of Democratic help like Ashley, we got that bill back to the president. We killed the override the next day. And we had the bill back within a week, and he signed it at a Rose Garden ceremony. I have a picture of that with the Democrats there who were supportive, helping us get this done. And so, yes, we gave assistance. But he was a president who really worried that the money be properly spent.

Smith: And I assume, probably keenly aware, that not only is there the old cliché there’s nothing more permanent than a temporary program, and by the same token, something starts small and with the best of intentions and balloons over time into something perhaps much, much larger and more costly.

Hills: Well, he had the notion, if you want something – more here – you’ve got to bring it back there. And so he was very disciplined on trying to control inflation and his program worked. He sold it as: one, we’ve got to bring down inflation, and he did bring it down from double digits down to five percent in twenty-nine months. That’s really quite amazing.

Smith: And yet, the irony is, people think about Whip Inflation Now. And that was just a false start.

Hills: Yes. Well, you know, you get these slogans, and if you don’t get the press behind it, they amplify. And we didn’t have Saturday Night Live, as I recall then, but that’s the thing that amplifies the problem. He wanted to whip inflation and the little button campaign was a joke, it was turned into a joke.
But it was a serious issue. If we’d let inflation go way up, we would have had a big problem.

Smith: Can you think of an instance where you really went toe to toe on something and he overrode you?

Hills: No, I cannot. I really cannot. He was extremely supportive. Of course we only had twenty-nine months. He loved the new bill, he thought it was moving in the right direction – away from categoricals – into giving communities the leeway both on housing and community development, to do what they would do. He was proud of what they did with the money. We didn’t have a lot of allegation of fraud because the press was in on it. It was required by the bill that there be a hearing so that the community knew you had the money; what were you going to do with it. And of course, we had seventy-eight head offices spread out throughout the nation who participated, and it was a program he could be proud of.

Smith: Now, you joined the Cabinet when in ’75?

Hills: In March of ’75.

Smith: So you were there in time for the fall of Saigon.

Hills: Yes.

Smith: What are your memories about that period?

Hills: I think that hit him very, very hard. And, again, his efforts with Vietnam and how he treated those who were opposed to the Vietnam War were magnanimous. I just don’t think anyone could disagree with that. But that was wrenching for the country and to see the photographs of people climbing on the roof of the embassy trying to get out in helicopters and leaving behind friends whom we knew would be persecuted. It was wrenching.

Smith: And then, remember the sequel. Congress, understandably, wants to pull the plug, and sort of pretend that this horrible thing never happened. And specifically, not fund, cancel funding to bring refugees into this country.
Hills: Right.

Smith: And the president singlehandedly challenged them on that and put together this crazy quilt coalition. I know George Meany was part of it, and governors like Reuben Askew and others. And he, in effect, went to the country and shamed Congress into putting back sufficient funds to bring out about 120,000 in the first wave.

Hills: You see, there’s another example of doing what is right, not what is politically expedient. And for a president to lie down and fall asleep and just leave it up to the legislative branch is something that he did not do. He really participated with Congress. I can’t imagine that president, President Ford, saying to Congress, “I need some legislation, you draft it.” We drafted the legislation. We went up on the Hill and sold it. Yes, sometimes Congress inflated this or that, and then he decided whether to veto it or to back it. But he was an active president who led the Congress. He didn’t just say, “I’d like to have a bill that looks something like…” and then say, “Well, I’m sorry it didn’t turn out just to please everyone.”

Smith: And then at the same time, in part because of ’74 and this whole new generation – things were changing so rapidly on the Hill – he had a very ambitious energy package. And part of it was the decontrol of natural gas prices, and there was a heated debate about that, not surprisingly. As I understand it, eventually they came to an agreement, a gentlemen’s agreement, a handshake agreement, on a period of time over which this would happen. And Mansfield and Albert came back a week later, embarrassed, and said, “We can’t sell it.”

Hills: That happens. That happens, but then they went to work again. They tried hard. He tried to shape the legislation and give an outline, rather than just, “We need an energy bill, give me something.” He didn’t do that. And also he had people up to the White House that were on the other side of the aisle and worked with them very often. Here was a man who played golf, I would say, every third week or so, with Tip O’Neill. And he’d say, “You know, I don’t
agree with Tip on a lot of things, but he’s a decent guy. I like him.” Can you imagine in succeeding presidents…

Smith: There is a wonderful story. Don Penny, who worked on the president’s speeches and humor and all that told the story; the president and Tip had just met in the Oval Office and had a great meeting, and then Tip went out on the driveway and unloaded, mercilessly, on his friend, Jerry Ford. And Don, who wasn’t accustomed to the ways of Washington, saw this. Took it very literally and went back in and told the president, “You won’t believe what Tip O’Neill is saying,” and on and on and on. The president’s at his desk with his pipe sort of nodding, and he said, “That’s just politics, Don.”

Hills: Really, he was very tolerant of that kind of thing, and yet he didn’t engage in it. It’s amazing. He did not – I don’t remember him – I remember him being a little hot under the collar and I can’t remember the congressman, and he said, “You know, I have to be careful because Betty carpools with them…” So, always, he was restrained in a gentlemanly way. I couldn’t imagine him doing the reverse thing with Tip O’Neill. Not at all.

Smith: I only heard him speak disparagingly of two people. One was John Dean, and one was Gordon Liddy.

Hills: Oh, how interesting.

Smith: But I never heard him disparage anyone else. And then he and Hale Boggs would have debates at the Press Club.

Hills: Yes.

Smith: And they would drive down together to the Press Club and they would decide on the way, what are we going to debate today? They would have their debate, and then they would go have a drink and lunch and go back to the Hill.

Hills: It’s just amazing, isn’t it? Very different atmosphere and much missed, I think. I wish we could bring it back. I used to say last year; I just can’t imagine our current president playing golf with Harry Reid.
Smith: Did you have much contact with Mrs. Ford or the family?

Hills: I did, only socially. I mean, she was very gracious. And then after his presidency they went to Beaver Creek. When he was in charge of a World Forum, I never missed one, except when I was in government and was travelling.

Smith: Describe the World Forum.

Hills: The World Forum was put together by The American Enterprise Institute. But Gerald Ford was the chair of it. Rod and I stayed at the home of President Ford and Betty. I often spoke. It was a roundtable – about two hundred people and so they would have people lead in, and they had groups that met – breakout groups.

Smith: And former world leaders.

Hills: Yes. And in the four corners of the room he had Willy [Helmut] Schmidt, and Jim Callaghan, and Giscard d'Estaing, and Gerald Ford. But the one thing I do take away, aside from the fact that he, again, engaged qualitatively in the discussion, in a very nice way, was that people would come back after lunch and these fifty year olds would be sitting there sort of falling asleep. Gerald Ford would be there right to the end, chairing that meeting like a good CEO would. This is when he was thirty years older than fifty years of age. So, he was just remarkable to the end. And he kept his mind and his wit about him. Just magnificent.

Smith: Again, one of the remarkable things - he and Jim Callaghan were politically as different as two people could be.

Hills: Absolutely.

Smith: Classic old British Socialist Labor, old labor, and yet, by all accounts, they were great mutual admirers and genuine friends.

Hills: They were genuine friends. In fact, with all of them, he was a genuine friend and that’s why they made the trek, which is not easy from Europe, to get to
Beaver Creek. It’s a long way. It’s by saying “thank you” for the association we’ve had with you. And they came year after year after year. They stopped before he did.

Smith: Apparently they were beloved in Vail, the Fords.

Hills: Absolutely. And they did a lot for Vail. They contributed mightily to the community. And Betty did, too. They would have all kinds of charitable endeavors where they would lasso the Fords and get them to lead the effort. But, yes, they were really beloved. And I think that – I know I’ve talked to the family – and in his later years the doctor said, “Now, don’t go up there because the altitude is too much,” and he said, “I guess I have to go because the quality of life means more to me than longevity.” And so, until the very end, he did go, and it wasn’t great for him but he loved being there.

Smith: The ’76 campaign, you talked a little bit about the convention. They obviously started out way behind, and basically closed the gap.

Hills: Yes. I think if the economy had picked up thirty days earlier it would have been a different outcome. And I often think about that because our history would have been different. Everything was going in the right direction with President Ford. He’d only had twenty-nine months. He had to take away several of those months to campaign, and still they were going right. His successor, a nice man, was inexperienced, and things were undone that ought not to have been undone. It’s so traditional that successors want to wipe the slate clean, clean out the people that were there before, and every new administration is anything but my predecessor. You see it in every single presidency, and it slows things down because you lose a lot of talent. It’s very rare to keep someone over, or in administrations, you have the secretaries there home alone, and no assistant secretaries, no ambassadors, no nobody confirmed.

Smith: That raises an interesting question. As Secretary of HUD, did you have latitude to choose your own people?
Carla Hills  March 18, 2009

Hills: I did, and partly because some of those were leaving. Some of them were involved with the prior administration, and had differing difficulties. I brought in as my undersecretary the general counsel of HEW, John Rhinelander. As I had been the general counsel for all these, I knew all the general counsels and he had been in government a long time, and knew the programs at HUD.

One little vignette. I got to HUD in March. Then we were on a June to June fiscal year. The legislation had been signed. It was President Ford’s first piece of legislation – August 9, 1974. I get there March of ’75. I called together my assistant secretaries and I said, “We’ve got a new bill. How many units of housing are we going to get out for our low income population?” And they all look at one another. I said, “Come on, give me the number.” Well, it turned out the regulations had not yet been drafted. And under the law, you put out your regulations for comment for sixty days, assimilate the comments.

Now, I’m testifying in mid-March before the Senate committee on my budget which ends in June. And I’m going to be asked how many units did you get out in the last budget? And the answer was zero. And that was going to make me really popular. Right? So I had to bring together all of our regional people and I said, “Look, I want a commitment.” And we got those regulations out and the next year we blew them away with how much we got done. But that was, as I look back on it, the reason why President Ford wanted someone to manage the place. It is extraordinary to get a bill out in August and not have regulations drafted, not even started, until March. That is lax behavior beyond a minus grade.

Smith: That raises this larger question, and it’s something we’ve asked several people. It’s at the Cabinet level, and obviously sub-Cabinet level, and White House staff: the metaphor is, we talked to Leon Parma who was sort of shoehorned into the East Room for the inauguration on the 9th of August, with several members of Congress. Following the ceremony there was a receiving line and then everyone was invited to the State Dining Room for a reception. And he said something other people have confirmed to varying degrees, “You could see at that point, the Nixon people just kind of peel away and go to their
offices.” Under the circumstances, you could understand, what they’ve all been through. In the broader sense, the president took some heat for not “cleaning out” the White House, and even the Cabinet overnight.

Hills: Right.

Smith: And yet, in retrospect, you see the quality of the Cabinet that he assembled.

Hills: Right – without a transition period. Most presidents have from November to the end of January. He had nothing. Not one day. I think he did remarkably well. I look at that Cabinet and, present company excepted, I would say that it’s very hard to find a Cabinet that matches the quality and the diversity that he put together.

Smith: But it’s also interesting because I had recently occasion to check into this, there were six or seven people who had Harvard degrees. Which, just on the face of it, you can imagine Richard Nixon would not have been inclined to – or Lyndon Johnson – “the Harvards.” Again, this notion that Ford was totally comfortable with himself and comfortable with high powered, big ego’d colleagues.

Hills: Well, and people who had been successful in their own right, and he liked talking with them. They were very different personalities. They had achieved. It’s remarkable.

Smith: You were the only woman in the Cabinet.

Hills: I was the only woman.

Smith: Now, I assume, at that point, you were probably not unaccustomed to being the only women in a lot of meetings.

Hills: That was life then.

Smith: Did you feel comfortable?

Hills: Absolutely. I was the only trial lawyer in the court sometimes. There weren’t many women coming out. I graduated from law school in 1958, and was an
assistant U.S. attorney and there were very few women in my class at Yale. And now, fifty percent or more are female. So, there has been quite a change over a generation, or maybe you could say two generations.

Smith: But as a woman, you felt perfectly comfortable in the Ford administration?

Hills: I certainly did.

Smith: And of course, you have Mrs. Ford, who was pushing women’s issues, as we know.

Hills: Absolutely. She was very outspoken and warm and lovely. Mary Scranton was a wonderful woman. These spouses, Lavita Coleman, wonderful lady. Bill Coleman was really quite a remarkable man. When we got together as a Cabinet in a social circumstance, I think it was just – the spouses were just lovely human beings that were working hard for the country in various ways, too.

Smith: Was your name one of those considered for the Supreme Court nomination when Bill Douglas retired?

Hills: Some books have said so. I was not party to those discussions.

Smith: You never heard anything officially?

Hills: Well, subsequently, yes. People said that she was on the list.

Smith: People in a position to know?

Hills: Yes.

Smith: Do you think Mrs. Ford might have had anything to do with that?

Hills: Maybe. You never know.

Smith: He’s probably the last president, if you look at Justice Stevens, who was chosen in the most nearly apolitical manner. We’ve talked to Justice Stevens and he said at his confirmation hearings no one asked him about abortion.
Hills: Well, that was a different time.

Smith: If you look at how that process has degenerated in a lot of ways…

Hills: There are all these black and white questions that are asked, and they go back over writings that I think is most unfortunate, because law school professors should be thinking about all kinds of ideas and champion all kinds of concepts. It’s too bad.

Smith: It’s become another political campaign.

Hills: Yes. The ideological approach, particularly for the court, is most unfortunate.

Smith: Where were you on election night ’76?

Hills: Where was I on election night ’76? I think I was at – I know the next morning I was at the White House – I think I was probably at the campaign headquarters.

Smith: At that point did you think you had a real shot?

Hills: We knew it was really frighteningly close, and the polls were showing that there was a trend line that was uncomfortable.

Smith: You mentioned this earlier; I’ve often thought everyone focused on the pardon, but in fact, the weekend before – I think it was on the Friday before – there was some economic numbers released that suggested – it became famous as “The Pause” in the economic recovery – and I’ve often wondered how much impact that had at the very end of the campaign.

Hills: It didn’t help. People were voting their pocketbooks. And we, I think, framed that phrase “the misery index.” I guess it was Carter who did that.

Smith: And, of course, it came back to bite him.

Hills: It came back to bite him, yes. Because I thought, my goodness, how could anyone have done any better and in such a short period of time than President Ford.
Smith: You say you were at the White House the next morning. Did you see him?

Hills: Yes.

Smith: And what was that like?

Hills: Well, I was just so sad. I was so very sad. When he finally left, it was, I thought, the country has made such a bad choice.

Smith: He’d lost his voice at the end of the campaign. Did you speak with him that morning?

Hills: I think we had a – if it wasn’t the next morning, it was shortly thereafter – the group got together and it was nostalgic.

Smith: And apparently he gave very explicit orders that this was going to be the best transition.

Hills: Absolutely. We’re going to leave shiny, clean desks for our successors. Make it easy for them. And we did. I really worked over at HUD all the way down to the local offices. Let’s be very careful that we have everything in order. We tried to work hard with them.

Smith: Rex Scouten told us a wonderful story. On election night he was up with the president and the family and it was late at night and it wasn’t definite, but it was clear that it was almost – it was gone.

Hills: This is before?

Smith: Yeah. This is election night, and he was with them all. And it was like three in the morning and the president said, “I think I’m just going to get some sleep.” So he walked across the hall and Rex followed him. And he went over to try to say something consoling, and he said, “You know, Mr. President, you’ve spent your entire life in service to this country, whether in military uniform, or in Capitol Hill, and now as president. And it’s a damn shame and you really deserved to win. But, maybe it’s just time for you to get a well-earned rest.” And the president looked at him and said, “I don’t think so.”
Hills: Well, I don’t think so, and none of us thought so. That was the sad thing about it.

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

Hills: Yes. It was down at Rancho Mirage at a meeting that was prior to the annual dinner. The University of Michigan president came down and made an award to him. I think that may have been the last time I saw him. That has to be – he was weakened, but still showed up. He is so polite, every time that the president, who is a woman, would come to talk to him, he’d stand up. And I could tell that it was making him dizzy. I went over to Susan and I said, “Would you please tell your dad that he doesn’t have to stand up every time.” And I said, “I think it’s having an adverse affect.” I was sitting close by. So she went up and spoke to him. And I went and spoke to the president [of Univ. of Michigan], and I said, “Keep your visits down a bit. I think it’s having its effect upon him.” But he was still clear. We were having a board meeting. I think it was the year that we awarded the medal to Betty. Was that out in Rancho Mirage?

Smith: Yes, I think so.

Hills: Did he come to the one – the next one was Armed Forces – is that right?

Smith: No, he wasn’t at that one.

Hills: I know, he wasn’t there. It was the one before that. I believe, my recollection may be faulty and I may have seen him in another circumstance, but I believe that is the last time I saw him.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Hills: With great affection, great appreciation, and enormous gratitude. I just wish so much that the current crop of political leaders, I don’t even say politicians, but political leaders, would read about him, and think long and hard about how can you rule, not in a bipartisan, but in a holistic sense. How do you take into consideration others’ needs? How do you work with the opposition? How do you make people collaborate rather than have conflict? He was a master at
that and I think one of his great virtues was, when people push back and say, well, we can’t do that, he knew government. And if you want an engineer to build a bridge, you want a good engineer. You want a good doctor to fix your knee, you want a good doctor.

Well, we really had a very good president who knew governance, he knew where the money was spent, and if you know the price tag for these programs, you’re apt to rule more intelligently. And then he had such a gracious manner about him. I never heard him say one arrogant thing – not one. He was self-deprecating. Here’s a man who worked his way through Yale, graduated in the top third of his class, was a top athlete, and the press made such fun when he fell down. I mean, have they ever seen a president ski down a mountain that is straight down? Have they ever seen a president play tennis or golf like he did. He was intellectually sound and an athlete to boot, and a gracious – he made fun of himself. You just don’t do any better than that.

Smith: There’s the classic – Kennerly is the source – because Kennerly took the photo in Vienna on the rain-slicked runway and the president was holding an umbrella over Mrs. Ford and then lost his footing.

Hills: And then fell.

Smith: Exactly. And all the people on the White House staff were berating the photographers for doing this and the president said, “Well, of course, they took the picture. If they hadn’t they would have lost their jobs.”

Hills: Oh, yeah. That’s just typical. He’s trying to see it from the other side. Once he tipped over a coffee cup. Well, how many of us have not tipped over a coffee cup? It was so amazing but you get words that kind of stick.

Smith: But, you know, in many ways time was good to him because he lived long enough to know that, for example, on the pardon, the vast majority of people had come around to his way of thinking. At the very least, even if they had disagreed with it, they didn’t question his motives.

Hills: Not at all.
Smith: And the Profile in Courage Award at the Kennedy Library was the icing on the cake.

Hills: And then when he spoke to the Senate here, and they gave him their award, and it was packed. It was really a wonderful occasion. But he had earned all of those accolades and more. And I do think that as history goes on, you’re the historian, how people forget some things, but whether the vote is – you know, I think about prior presidents. We weren’t there when our alleged greats served. So we don’t know whether we’re forgetting some great problem that they had and exaggerating some virtue that they had. But I know that as a man of integrity, decision and capacity to govern, I give him an A+ on each one of those departments.

Smith: That’s perfect. Thank you.
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Chris Chase interviewed by Richard Norton Smith, January 21, 2011

Smith: First of all, thank you again for doing this. Tell us how your path first crossed with Betty Ford’s.

Chase: Well, if you want real words about what time it was, I can’t do it.

Smith: That’s okay.

Chase: I lived in New York and she was in California then, I guess, most of the time.

Smith: This was after the presidency?

Chase: Oh, yes. They were out. And she wanted to see some people because she wanted to do a book, and so I think I was with William Morris. I don’t know. But anyway, I went with some people from William Morris out there and she and I had lunch and then she said, “That’s the one.” And I didn’t know why I was the one, except that I was – like her – I was kind of timid. It’s not timid exactly – but I didn’t talk much. I just listened to her and I watched her.

Smith: Was she shy?

Chase: No.

Smith: Because you think of her as a free spirit.

Chase: She wasn’t shy, but she was watchful.

Smith: Careful? Cautious?

Chase: Yes, I think so.

Smith: Was that, do you think, being a politician’s wife? Or do you think it was intrinsic to her?

Chase: I think that was her.
Smith: Then when you are telling her story, and particularly at the end – the intervention and all that – did that caution make it more difficult for you? Was she reluctant to talk about things?

Chase: No, she wasn’t at all. There are things – I don’t think it would be nice to even tell – just funny, if you won’t use it. We were working on one of the books – I don’t remember which one and I said no to something she had just decided on. I said you can’t do that, it will make you look awful. And she said, “Chris, when we did the first book, I was not the writer I am now.” They all think they did it. But I wouldn’t tell that while she was alive.

Smith: No, I understand. How did you work with her on that first book? What was the - for lack of a better word - the mechanics of putting it together?

Chase: You spend a lot of time with the person, and the person goes on and on and on, and then you take it home and you…

Smith: You taped her reminiscences?

Chase: All the time. I don’t know what happened to all those tapes, but I always went home and typed them so I’d have it all. And it was very easy. She is not a hard person to work with. In the beginning she was still drinking and it was very hard because you’d go in the morning – I don’t like to do this because I’m afraid in some way it would get to her.

Smith: I guarantee you that it will not.

Chase: Okay. She would be okay. She’d wake up and she’d have her breakfast and everything. By lunch she’d start drinking and so we really couldn’t work until maybe…right after lunch we’d just give it up. So I had to meet her in the morning and there was always a guy outside – even if they knew you, they’d open your bag and look at it. It was so funny. But she was sometimes just in her nightgown until afternoon.
Smith: She was not a morning person.

Chase: No, I don’t think she was. I don’t know because I did work in the morning.

Smith: Did she know she had a drinking problem?

Chase: Oh, I think so. I think she was very careful about letting other people know it. But she had rough time a lot of the time and that went way back with her, when he was away.

Smith: Was that a significant thing? I often wondered whether he felt some degree of guilt – looking back at all the time he was away and the demands that that put on her. Not that he felt responsible – but he felt in some ways that he had contributed to her problem.

Chase: I think he did. He was away so much and she was left there with the maid and the kids and she was bitter about it. As far as I know. She felt neglected – which she was.

Smith: Well, she saw a psychiatrist for a while.

Chase: That was way later, wasn’t it? I think.

Smith: I thought that at some point in the Sixties…

Chase: I thought it was after she had been through the whole thing and she was going to a doctor as well. But I could be wrong.

Smith: The reason why is – and again, you don’t want to overdo this – but if you look at her in the mid-1960s, with an ambitious, rising husband who’s off doing his job and making good, and a bunch of kids; a woman who had accomplished things on her own, been a dancer and all of this, when you think about Betty Freidan, and a whole generation of women who were looking for their place - in a sense, who were neglected. She really is, in some ways, representative of that. Don’t you think? I’m sure there are people in Washington who took one
look and said, “This Cub Scout den mother, Sunday school teacher, West Michigan…” and kind of wrote her off. But there was always a lot more there than on the surface. One senses that she enjoyed a lot about being First Lady because, first of all, he wasn’t away as much as he had been, but secondly, for her, she was onstage again. Do you think there is anything to that?

Chase: I think she was afraid of it a little bit in the beginning, and then I think she liked it, she enjoyed it. I didn’t know much about it – I wasn’t there all the time. When we started working, she was already out. They were not in the White House anymore. But we had to go there for some reason, and she called some man and sent me in, a girl that was working for her and me, through the whole building, which I think you ordinarily don’t get to do that. Out in the garden and everything. And that was really fine, but she didn’t have to do that. We went to the cook and everything. She liked it, she thought that would be a wonderful thing for me to see, and it was nice. It was very nice.

Smith: Was she close to her kids?

Chase: Oh, yes. There were four of them, right?

Smith: Yes.

Chase: And they had to be. I mean, when they brought in that thing they started with her – I warned you.

Smith: The intervention?

Chase: The intervention, when she was so angry that it all kind of broke up and then it came back again. But that first time she was not amused, and she was not grateful that they were trying to make her be better. She was angry, angry, angry.

Smith: Really?
Chase: Yes.

Smith: Angry at them?

Chase: She cried – yes, she was really furious that her family would do that, that they would just embarrass her in that way, which she didn’t like at all. And I don’t remember quite how it…

Smith: Well, then she went to Long Beach Naval Hospital.

Chase: She didn’t want anybody to know that either. I think I said, you can’t hide, because you stood out there on the platform and said that you were a drunk and now she just didn’t want anybody to know anything about it. And I said you can’t do it now. You did it and so you have to stand by it. And it was good. She eventually met a lot of people she never would have met – sailors and soldiers and everything and she was kind of charmed by it. I think they are very stern there on your having to pay attention. I mean, she wanted me to go with her with everything, and so I would go in there and watch them. They played games or whatever it is they did, and I got caught. Because they said, you have to do this, you have to be in this. And I didn’t want to be in it, I just wanted to watch it. They were very stern, I guess is the word. But in the end it was a wonderful thing. They were so many of them saved from dying of drugs.

Smith: We’ve heard that she was in tougher shape than perhaps the public suspected. That her condition by the time she went in was…

Chase: Yes – she didn’t want to tell anybody, though, that’s the thing. You have to say, you’ve got to tell because everybody knows anyway.

Smith: Did she really believe that people didn’t know?
Chase: I think she thought that she could just go into the hospital and get well and come out and that it would be simple. I don’t think that she thought it was going to be a big deal.

Smith: Okay. And did you talk with her while she was in the hospital?

Chase: Oh, yes. I was there. I had to stay – I didn’t have to sleep over, I don’t think. It’s funny, one of her sons, the younger one.

Smith: Steve.

Chase: Steve, yes. Everybody thought that he was my husband and all these people – it was such a strange thing. Steve was there quite a lot. Of all of the children, he was the one that was there the most. And I was there because I was told I had to be there. You remember things like getting across the street – strange, stupid things that aren’t important. But most of the time she was very good. In the beginning, she wanted a certain kind of room and she didn’t want anybody in it, and that all went away. She really liked those guys.

Smith: So the anger and the resentment evolved into acceptance?

Chase: I think so. I think it was a place that she was safe in and people were all having the same problems she had, so that it was quite comforting, I think, to her. And I think she was probably a little proud of herself that she would do it. That they could force her to do it is a whole other story. I don’t think she got up one morning and said, okay, I’ll go there. I think she was sort of pulled there.

Smith: Sure. Was the President a frequent visitor?

Chase: Yes, and he was feeling bad. He’s a very sweet man, really, and he felt that it was his fault, a lot of it that she had been left alone. And, actually, right up until they did the intervention, I don’t think he said much about it. But then when that happened, he was right there.
Smith: It’s interesting, because he stopped drinking, too.

Chase: I didn’t even know he ever drank. She blamed it all on being alone with four kids. And actually, she was mad at him a lot of the time and she didn’t know it.

Smith: Exactly. Which I’m sure is a common reaction of people. I’m sure there are lots of people in that dynamic, in that situation.

Chase: Yes, I think so.

Smith: It’s never been terribly clear to me what role the drinking played and what role pills played. She clearly had the pinched nerve, and she had this condition that was painful and for which she was medicated. And was it simply that sort of unwitting combination of prescription medication and alcohol multiplied the impact?

Chase: I don’t think we could ever figure it out because for one thing, she didn’t want to admit that she drank. And so I never knew whether she made up the thing about all the pills. I saw her drinking; I never saw her taking pills. And maybe she took all the pills in the world, but that wasn’t what was going to kill her.

Smith: You’ve worked with a number of people on books. How was she generally speaking, to work with?

Chase: She was swell. I mean, I had a lot of fun with her. She was not in any way a problem.

Smith: By the way, it’s fairly well known among their intimates, although I don’t think the public, that she had a much more ribald sense of humor than he did.

Chase: Yes, she was funny. And she was pretty smart, too, I think. I remember something that was funny. We were talking about him being elected and he came in – we were talking about that – and he said, “Girls, girls, I was never
elected,” that’s not the right word – what is it? Anyway, “I was not elected, I was put there after Nixon left.”

Smith: Inaugurated.

Chase: Inaugurated, yes. But he thought we were very shabby then. We had it all wrong, so we thought that was funny. But every once in a while he would stop in and help a little bit when he was home. He did a lot of – he was very busy. Bob Hope and he went and played golf all the time. He enjoyed his life. And then when he wasn’t in the White House anymore, he was still on all those…

Smith: He was on a lot of boards.

Chase: He was on a lot of boards and that made a lot of money.

Smith: In fact, he took some heat for “commercializing” the ex-presidency.

Chase: He was on a plane.

Smith: He loved to travel.

Chase: He did.

Smith: And that never changed. I mean, he may have very well felt guilty about leaving her at one point, but he didn’t give up his travel.

Chase: It’s true. I think probably she saw him more when they were in the White House than when he got out. I don’t know about that.

Smith: A theory is that the problem became more of a problem because, when they moved out to California, by that time the kids had basically grown up and were on their own, and he was on the road and she was alone.

Chase: Well, I remember when they built that really big house. Do you remember the guy that was their close friend and did so much?
Smith: Leonard Firestone was their neighbor.

Chase: Leonard, yes, he was a great man. Wonderful man.

Smith: We’ve been told that she saved his life.

Chase: Well, she certainly tried to. He just was angry, as she was. She talked to him about drinking, and he was really just furious.

Smith: What was the source of his anger?

Chase: Because he didn’t want to be fixed – he drank and he was a very pleasant, nice, funny man. But he did not want anybody to do that. And she had been through that and she knew what it was like for him. And I wouldn’t be surprised if she saved his life. There was a very rough time there at one point.

Smith: In my eulogy in Grand Rapids, I talked about the cliché that people, as they get older, become a little more conservative. Maybe it’s nostalgia for the past, or maybe they have more to conserve or whatever. He was always a fiscal conservative, but in a lot of other ways, he actually became more liberal with age, and on a number of issues. I’m wondering whether it was her influence. Stop and think: he was very involved with her in the work of the Center. And he saw all of these people, good people, accomplished people, friends, whom he liked and admired, who happened to have a weakness. And the compassion factor – I just wonder whether that was part of it. We’ve been told ten years before he died he told friends that gay marriage was coming and they might as well get over it. Attitudes that you wouldn’t associate with a conservative Republican president.

Chase: Leonard was very generous to everybody. And when Mr. Firestone had the last – when it was in that icy part of the world where they had a new house – I think he gave the Firestones the house. Certainly gave them land to put a
couple of houses on while I was there. He was a very good friend to them. He went dancing when he was about two hundred years old. He’d go out.

Smith: She, of course, had been a dancer.

Chase: Yes.

Smith: When she went to Studio 54 – first of all – tell us about Studio 54. What prompted that?

Chase: She wanted to see it. She came into New York and she had read, I guess, a lot about this stuff and what happened there. She really wanted to see it. And the other girl and I…

Smith: Penny Circle.

Chase: Was it Penny then? Yes, we went and it was a strange place. I had never been there, but there was all this screaming and there were all these people with their nose up against the wall. And the guy that owned the place was saying, “Dance, dance. Nobody wants to see you watching.” It was a horrible place. Betty was very interested in it. And she sat behind that curtain – we were all there – and she was sitting on a couch, and some crazy woman from Canada who was married I guess to the head of Canada…

Smith: Margaret Trudeau.

Chase: She got down on her knees and crawled across to Mrs. Ford, sort of like wanting to lick her shoes or something. It was funny. The weirdest night I’ve ever seen.

Smith: Did the Secret Service come, too?

Chase: Yes, there’s always somebody. That’s kind of fun. If you go to a movie with them, even, one of them is on either side and a guy is on either side of them.
You never are alone – ever. There are two people following you all the time. But that thing was strange – like, crazy girl down on her knees.

Smith: Penny remembers this vividly because she had never seen it before. She went into the ladies’ room and there were lines of cocaine…

Chase: There was a guy in there, too. We went in – I went in with her because she wanted somebody to go with her, and there is this guy standing in the middle of the room. And I said, “Sir, this is not for you. This is a ladies’ room.” And he said, “I’m not going to hurt anybody,” and just kept on with whatever he was lighting up. He would not go out. It was an odd night. She was staying at the Waldorf. It’s this odd thing – you come off the elevator and there were men there – all up the row.

Smith: I’ve been told they liked New York.

Chase: She did. She liked it. She liked to come, and she came without him several times.

Smith: To go to the theater?

Chase: Yes, went to the theater. She liked New York and everybody liked her.

Smith: One thing that I found surprising, and I don’t want to exaggerate it - notwithstanding that she had been a dancer, she’d been on the public stage, giving a speech was really tough for her. There was an element right before of what can only be called stage fright. Did you ever sense that?

Chase: No. But actually I heard her do a lot of speaking and I think she got to a point where she was very good at it. I’ve read some of the things I thought, I didn’t know she had done that – that was good what she did. But I think with the dancing, it probably wasn’t as much dancing – it sounded good and it looks sort of exciting and everything. But I don’t know that she ever was in a company, I doubt that.
Smith: My sense is that her father’s death was always sort of tiptoed around a little bit. The question of whether it was an accident or suicide. Remember he died of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Chase: In a car?

Smith: In a car. Which begs the question. And I just wondered – going back almost to your first comment about her caution, withholding things, whether that was one of them. Susan has said, for example, they all assumed that he took his own life. But it seemed it was something that she was very, very uncomfortable with. Were there subjects that she really wanted to avoid or that you felt were painful?

Chase: I don’t remember her ever talking about her father. But I was not in that place. Once I met her when they brought me out there and we started to work, and those people I could watch and see and know. But I never really knew anything about her early life. What she said I took as the right story.

Smith: That intrigues me.

Chase: She had an interesting thing with that first husband where she actually – he was not a great guy – and she was about to get rid of him, to divorce him, and he got sick and she stayed for two or three years and took care of this guy, and then when some miraculous thing happened where he got better, where everybody had said he was going to be dead tomorrow, and he got better, and then she left. And I thought that was an amazing thing. But by that time I know she didn’t like the man, the man had disappointed her in many levels, she stayed for five or six years, I think, taking care of this guy. So she’s done some good stuff. Stuff I wouldn’t have done. I would have somehow got rid of him. But she just waited until he was better.

Smith: Do you think that experience made her reluctant to contemplate remarriage?
Chase: I don’t know. I think, like a lot of us, she wanted to get out of the house and there he was. I don’t remember if he was a big handsome man or what, but I don’t think she knew much and she was young and had no idea what it was going to turn into. So I think a lot of it was just, “Oh, God, I have to help this guy,” and she did it. I don’t know many people that would.

Smith: If someone tells you something that you don’t believe – or that is incomplete – or that needs in some ways to be challenged. Do you feel comfortable pushing people?

Chase: Once in a while. It’s like when I said to her, you can’t do that. And she said, yes, we can. But then she would do it. No, I had no problems at all with her, nor I guess, she with me. But I lived with them. I had to go to dinner and I had to whatever. Whatever house they were in, in the summer and the winter, I was there.

Smith: And how long was this period? Several weeks, several months? Or were there different periods when you would be with them.

Chase: I’m sure, but I cannot remember a single one. Whether it was a month that I was there, I would think maybe that was right.

Smith: For example, when the first book was about to be published, and that’s when the intervention took place, and I think you added on chapters.

Chase: That was horrible because she didn’t want it. The people from Random House, I guess it was Random House, said this book cannot be done unless – she had just come out – and the whole book was sweet and nice they were pointing out flowers in a nice glass of water, and here’s this terrible thing – terrible for her because she did not want to be exposed like that. She was very unhappy about that. And there was nothing in the book about it – nothing. And so these people that were going to publish it just said we can’t, we can’t unless you put another chapter in and tell what’s happened, we’re not going to
do it. And so she said she wasn’t going to do it. She said no. So I said, well, the only thing I can tell you is you’re not going to have the book because they are not going to do it. And she thought about it – she was already in the hospital – she thought about it and after a bit I think she wanted the book, and so she said, “Okay, Chris. Do it.” So I wrote a whole thing – I don’t remember it. But she did not want that known at all and she did not want that chapter in that book. I don’t know how I got onto this.

Smith: But that’s fascinating because it is a continuing form of denial.

Chase: Yes, and she wanted a million people knowing that she was a drunk, too. Because she was a very careful woman. She had very nice clothes, she kept her make up, her hair, everything was perfect, and I think the idea that she was some sodden drunk really outraged her.

Smith: That’s fascinating. I think that is a core issue here, and I wonder – she was famously unpunctual.

Chase: I didn’t know that.

Smith: Talk about opposites attracting – he was never late. And she was never on time. And it was sort of a joke in the family. And I’ve often wondered if, in fact, it was a manifestation of this perfectionism. That she was not going anywhere until she had done everything humanly possible to be as nearly perfect as she could. Which is a real burden, in some ways. It goes beyond liking clothes.

Chase: The whole world is so different. I remember at one House where a lot of people from China arrived with presents. People come to you when you’re in that position, with big boxes as though it were Christmas. And they just sit there and open it up and thanking Mr. so and so. The whole world is so strange there to a regular person.
Smith: Can you explain to people who weren’t around in 1974-75…

Chase: God, was it that long ago?

Smith: Well, what a big deal it was at the time of her cancer operation. And the degree to which breast cancer was in the closet. She really transformed public attitudes.

Chase: She did.

Smith: Describe what the attitude was then. What was it she changed?

Chase: I’m not sure. She talked about it, which most women would not have done, you know. And she talked about it loud and clear. She wanted women to know that there was a future and not to be so frightened and all that. She just did it.

Smith: It’s hard, I think, for people today who take for granted the openness, to realize just how secretive the subject was.

Chase: I imagine it must have been very hard for her to make the decision to do it. But then she liked very much having helped. Why did she start that place, if she hadn’t really been like that. She wanted to be somebody that was useful and that people would admire. I guess everybody does, but she did it.

Smith: As you say that, it occurs to me whether it was a conscious ambition or not, you stop to think; here was a woman who for much of her life, like millions of other women of her generation, had these talents, these skills, these latent abilities, but really didn’t have outlets for them. And ironically by going public with her alcoholism, she created an institution, and arguably made a bigger impact on how ordinary people live their lives than some presidents ever do.
Chase: Absolutely. It’s strange, I think, until the children all got there and said you’ve got to quit, I don’t think she was taking anything very deeply. And then when she finally just said, okay, she never stopped. She said she had to go and be healthy and other people had to go and be healthy and build a place where people can go and be healthy. Once she decided to do it, she did it. She did it all the time. It was interesting because she was a pretty, young woman when it all started, and she liked good clothes. She was in so much trouble, remember when she had the face lift? And suddenly everybody, including my mother, said, “What a ridiculous woman.” Up until then, everybody had thought about how she’s a worker, she’s out there helping everybody, and then this silly woman comes along and has a face lift. And people really were horrible to her about it, really, really bad. It cut off a lot of stuff, I don’t remember what that was.

Smith: It made her seem frivolous?

Chase: Yes. And they wanted to think of her as this wonderful, strong woman.

Smith: You don’t think of Mother Theresa getting a face lift.

Chase: Right, she’s not going to do it. He asked her to do it, she won’t do it. No, I think she was surprised that people didn’t like it.

Smith: It’s fascinating that you say that, because I’ve often thought – again, we all tend to put labels on people – there’s a kind of shorthand and Washington does it more than any other town. And the fact is that she didn’t fit into any obvious pigeonhole. On some things she was a traditionalist; and she was an activist. She was a pioneer, and she was a woman who worried about her husband and her children and her grandchildren and her face.

Chase: She was shocked, I think. When she said, “I’m going to have a beautiful face to go with my beautiful new life.” It was something like that that she had said to people. And all these women were saying, “This is awful.”
Smith: She also had a great one-liner. When people would ask her why did you have a face lift, she said she wanted to look like her portrait in the White House.

Chase: Great. It apparently hurt her in many ways that hadn’t been expected. Not just by her but by other people that were working with her saying, “Oh, God, she’s in deep shit now because people are saying this is a wonderful woman, all she thinks about is herself and her looks?” I remember that. She did send at one point one of the girls to test a doctor – to see if he could do something good. I think it was something at the knee or something, but she wanted a good doctor and had people looking around for that.

Smith: Did she have a lot of friends?

Chase: Yes, she had a lot of friends. A lot of actors and actresses – I mean I had dinner with a lot of those people that were friends of hers. She had a lot of friends, I think. The family had a lot of friends, you know.

Smith: When they were in Vail, they were beloved out there. Among other things, a lot of people think that they really put the place on the map.

Chase: I bet they did.

Smith: Particularly as a summer resort.

Smith: Did you go out to Colorado with them?

Chase: Yes. It is nice. I don’t remember much, but they moved around a lot. I remember that thing that went up and somebody got caught in that. I was just thinking about those strange things. Always, though, Leonard was there a lot. He bought their stuff and his stuff right together, two houses. I had a house all to myself. He said to me one day, he said, “You don’t want to be in the house with everybody all the time.” And I said, “I don’t care.” And he said, “No, no, no. Right across, you go through these bushes and there is this beautiful little house and a lady comes and leaves cookies that have just come out of the
oven.” And I once had slept there – I had broken up the whole place because it was cold when I woke up this one morning, and I went to this place and tried to set _____________ and suddenly the whole house seemed to blow up. And I thought, “Oh my God, I’ve destroyed this entire place – and they’ve been so nice to me.” And what it was, it was an earthquake, and I really believed that I was just standing there and everything was….and oh, they are going to kill me. I ruined this beautiful place. It was an earthquake. He’s very useful.

Smith: Did the President check in at all while you were working?

Chase: Oh, sure. He would just tease us. I told you that one thing where he said, “Girls, girls, I wasn’t elected.” He would read something if we wanted him to, he didn’t come around much, but he was there. They both actually had to fly a lot. God, I hated it. But sometimes it would be some little thing – she and I were sent to be someplace and it was a small plane, and there were just her and me and they brought us lunch on this little bitty plane. And then we came down and there was a red thing going all the way to the front. You know, you have this little bitty thing and you’re going to make a speech in there. But there was a red carpet wherever she went. And you never touched – if you had to stay over and you had a bag – you never touched that. They picked that up and it was at the hotel when you got there. Very high living, really. I remember that. A lot of that was fun, a lot of it was irritating.

Smith: I think you said before that she was very conscious of her weight.

Chase: Oh, yes. She didn’t eat a lot. No, she was very careful. And she kept her figure as long as I knew her.

Smith: Did she cook at all herself?

Chase: Never. Not once did I see it. Maybe I would have – I didn’t know them then. I was thinking I don’t know that she even cooked when she was home with the
kids and everything. Because they had servants all the time. But no, I don’t think she had any wishes to cook.

Smith: I know later she was a reader. She read quite a bit. Was that something you were aware of?

Chase: No, but I could have forgotten it. I’ve forgotten so much that it upsets me.

Smith: There were two books – was the first book judged successful? *The Times of My Life.*

Chase: Yes. That was a big lightweight, fun book, really. The other one…

Smith: *Betty: Glad Awakening.*

Chase: All about what she went through – good works and everything. It wasn’t as much fun or as charming, I think as the first one, but it had news in it. It had some stuff that might help people.

Smith: Did you ever talk politics?

Chase: No. Sometimes if you’re sitting at the table and they’re arguing about something, you hear stuff.

Smith: Did you have a sense of what her cultural/social views were? She had a reputation, obviously, for being somewhat more liberal.

Chase: I don’t think she ever would have gone against him, though. It was truly a Republican person. I don’t know what she, in her heart, felt, but I don’t think she ever blamed him for anything.

Smith: Did you ever hear them talk about Nixon?

Chase: Yes, I did. They despised each other, you know. I don’t remember what it was, something I think that Betty felt - that he had wrecked her husband’s
chance at something. I don’t even remember all that. Was it the presidency?
Nixon and he had not liked each other at all, at all.

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw her or had contact with her?

Chase: I have a bunch of letters, and none very recent at all. I would say maybe 1990.
I haven’t heard anything from her. And you don’t want to do it yourself, you
know, bother somebody. I never called her. I got a lot of phone calls, but I
think she is tired. I haven’t seen any pictures of her, haven’t seen any stories
of her. It’s almost as if she were in a nunnery or something. I don’t know,
maybe she’s just protected to go out and protected to go in, and that’s it. I
don’t know what you’d feel like if you’re a hundred and three years old.

Smith: How do you think she should be remembered?

Chase: It’s hard to say because there is such a split. I was reading something the other
day, and it was people saying what a silly woman she was, and how she got
credit for all this stuff that other people did. Just really mean. It was a book
review and it was perfectly nasty about her. And then there were other people
that think she is a goddess. I think for the most part, people liked her. You
didn’t have to admire her, or think she was a wizard, but I think she was a
nice woman and she was decent to people and she tried to help. So I don’t
know why anybody would go after her. But they do, they do just to get it in
the paper. I’m surprised at that, especially because it was a woman that was
printing it.

Smith: Well, she became in some ways a lightning rod for criticism, particularly from
the social right. They objected to her views on abortion, and they objected to
her support for the Equal Rights Amendment. There were people who thought
she should have been a more traditionalist – not have outspoken political
views of her own.

Chase: Yes, walk six miles behind him or something.
Smith: Although, apparently her husband didn’t feel that way.

Chase: No, he didn’t. He really liked her. I was surprised, when he died, I didn’t know how old they were, and I just thought how could it be him that died. He’s so strong and she was so much more fragile. I think she was surprised. It was awful.

Smith: Devastated.

Chase: Yes. Terrible.
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this. We’re interested in knowing about AEI and President Ford’s relationship with AEI. How it evolved over the years and things like the World Forum and other events. A little bit about AEI; how it existed before Gerald Ford was part of it.

DeMuth: The American Enterprise Institute goes back many, many years. It was founded in 1943, and was active, for example, in decontrol of the economy following World War II. That was one of its early missions. It pioneered the idea of the think tank, which has now become very common. There are lots of think tanks in Washington, but the basic techniques were developed by people at AEI in the 1950s. Which was to commission topflight academics to do serious research; not lobbying propaganda, but serious research on important policy issues; foreign policy, domestic issues, economics across the board; and then to take that work and produce it in a kind of brief, digestible, document that even a congressman can understand. And circulate them very aggressively around on the Hill, arrange for academics to give testimony before Congress on something the United Nations or farm policy or tax policy, or whatever.

It was a very small outfit, but doing serious work, getting attention in the mid-1950s, and it had a strong free-market, pro-private enterprise cast. And it sort of set itself against the establishment wisdom of Washington. It’s never been a partisan organization. But Washington is a company town, everybody is enthusiastic for big government, more government, and AEI has always been: slow down, let’s look at the virtues of the private enterprise system, private solutions to problems, and so forth.

I know that our work came to the attention of young Congressman Ford very early on. I can’t give you the date, but when was his first election?

Smith: He was elected in ’48.
DeMuth: ’48. It was within a few years. It could have started with a 4, it could have been the early 50s. We have in our files a letter from Congressman Ford. I don’t think it had been solicited. He’d read one of our studies and he found it very interesting and valuable and encouraged us to continue to work and try to make the debates more productive up on the Hill. So this is all way, way, before my time. But I know that he had warm relations with AEI going back a very, very long time.

Smith: And when did you come on board?

DeMuth: I came to AEI at the end of 1986, and I served as its president from ’86 through the end of last year, 2008. I’m now a Senior Fellow here.

Smith: Let me back up a little bit, because, clearly during that time you’ve also seen at once both the growth, and in some ways, the fragmentation of conservatism.

DeMuth: That’s right.

Smith: And when I think of Gerald Ford while he was in the White House, there were a number who thought of him as the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge. Which didn’t obviously prevent him from being challenged from the right, and certainly by the time he died, many people thought of him as – or Bob Dole, someone else I’ve worked with – as being almost apostates to the…

DeMuth: Old-fashioned, moderate Republicanism.

Smith: Yes. Could you label them primarily, first and foremost, economic conservatives as opposed to social conservatives? Is that a valid distinction?

DeMuth: I think the conservative moment beginning in 1980 with Ronald Reagan became a much, much bigger movement, looking much more like we associate with the Democratic Party. When you become very big, you have lots of different schools of thought within the party, and things become more fractious. It’s not necessarily a bad thing. When you are successful, there are a lot of people who are trying to control the agenda, and some people want to
work on social issues, and some people want to work on business issues, some people want to focus on foreign policy.

And the conservative movement for many years now has had neo-conservative foreign policy hawks, pro-business deregulation, tax-reducing conservatives, and social conservatives. You see it throughout the last thirty years. Republicans are for tax reform, but when you talk about the details, the social conservatives want big exemptions for children. They want to use the tax code to give people incentives for good behavior, and the economic conservatives simply want to lower marginal tax rates. So you get these kinds of debates.

Gerald Ford, his coming of age in the Republican Party, was, for the most of his career, a minority party. He was a leader of the minority, and he was a legislator. He wasn’t a governor, he wasn’t a talk show host, he wasn’t a crusading columnist. He was somebody whose job it was to forge compromises from a frequently pretty weak position in the embattled minority. And he had views that were different than those that dominated the party beginning in the 1980s, although, I think that by the end of his career, he was pretty happy. He was a social conservative in that he believed in strong families and he was a very ethical man and believed in the importance of strong cultural norms. But he was not pro-life on the abortion issue. He was pro-choice. Betty was very pro-choice, and they’d always been that. And that kind of, as it is for many people, sort of gave him a little bit of distance from the new conservative party, and he would see that.

Smith: It’s fascinating you would say that. I think it is an excellent overview of where he came from and how he was perceived in his later years. I wonder, also – the older I get the more I think life is defined less by obvious ideological differences, and more by generational distinctions.

DeMuth: Yes, there was some of that.

Smith: And I think Ford’s Midwestern conservatism, because he came into the party at a time when its center of gravity was shifting, but to the Midwest. There was very little of the Southern party.
DeMuth: The movement from the Eastern establishment westward. And, for a time, it kind of was right there over Michigan, but it kept moving and ended up in California.

Smith: Yes.

DeMuth: But he was not really a Rockefeller Republican either. He was his own distinctive brand, and there was a certain Midwestern, Herbert Hoover style, no-nonsense practicality to him.

Smith: Someone once defined him as Dwight Eisenhower without the medals.

DeMuth: Yeah, very similar.

Smith: But, going to the social issues, there is a sense of, again, generational and geographical coming out of the Midwest. A lot of what we debate today as social issues - basically people simply were too reticent to make part of the public conversation. There was an element of privacy about these issues. They weren’t something for the government to address. I mean the consistency of his conservatism, a kind of a healthy skepticism about social engineering, about what the government could do. He wanted it out of the boardroom, he wanted it out of the classroom, and he wanted it out of the bedroom. And those latter issues really weren’t even on the agenda until some ways after his presidency.

DeMuth: And of course, Barry Goldwater was also a consistent libertarian, pro-choice guy in the same way.

Smith: When we talked to Justice Stevens, no one raised a question about abortion at his confirmation hearings. Which seems remarkable, until you go forward and think of the Clarence Thomas hearings, when there was great skepticism voiced that, in fact, as he said he hadn’t debated these issues. But then when you go back and think about the time when he would have been in school, if senators weren’t asking nominees for the court about abortion…It just brings home how remarkably accelerated is this period of change.

DeMuth: I can think of a couple of episodes involving AEI that illustrate both the differences and the similarities. Abortion became a very, very hot issue pretty
much after even his presidential administration. It became much more salient because of the Supreme Court decisions and people really hadn’t, I think, seen it coming before then.

But first of all, on economic issues, Jerry was a very strong traditional conservative and a very bold one. Ronald Reagan – I never worked for President Ford - I did work for Richard Nixon as a very young man. And I later worked for Ronald Reagan in the Reagan White House. I worked on regulatory policy; specifically deregulatory policy for Ronald Reagan, about which he had very strong views.

But the deregulation movement was actually begun by Gerald Ford. He had very strong convictions; he had a top team of people at the White House, such as the economist Paul MacAvoy, and some young people such as Paul O’Neil and John Snow. They were just kids at the time that later became very important. He appointed the first strongly deregulation-minded person to a major agency – John Robson – to the civil aeronautics board. He proposed very, very aggressive deregulation of motor carriers and railroads. And when he was excused from further duties by the voters in 1976, he came to the American Enterprise Institute and he was a Distinguished Fellow and remained here as a Fellow for the rest of his life.

But for his first year out of office he was actually right here. I’m not sure exactly where his office was, but he was here. And he brought with him a team of people that had worked on various issues, but most of them were deregulators, and produced several volumes of important work proposing very thorough elimination of government controls over prices, entry into certain industries, and so forth. And it still, in AEI’s history, it’s one of our proudest achievements – this volume of original research that was used by Jimmy Carter, who also was very, very good on deregulation and later by Ronald Reagan.

But it was Ford who really got it started, and he had strong convictions on the matter. You may have a tape someplace in your vast archives of Paul MacAvoy coming in to see him about a bill that the President had asked to be drafted for deregulating the Interstate Commerce Commission. And Paul
began by saying, “Mr. President, before we go through the details, I want to
tell you that I’ve consulted with the leaders of all the trucking companies, and
the teamsters and all the trucking unions. All of them are completely opposed
to this.” The President sucked on his pipe, took a puff or two and said, “Well,
Paul. It must be a good bill. I’m for it.” He understood how the interest groups
get hold of policy and twist it around to their advantage. He was there long
before Ronald Reagan was.

Smith: That brings up a fascinating question. The conventional wisdom sees the
Nixon/Ford presidency – certainly Jimmy Carter tried to cast it as such – as an
unbroken entity. And I’ve often suggested that, in fact, Ford is not a coda to
the Nixon presidency in policy terms. But in many ways he was a curtain
raiser, and deregulation is the classic example. In some ways, Richard Nixon
is the last New Deal president; someone accommodating himself politically to
the consensus that he grew up in as a result of the FDR coalition. And I think
Ford really represents a break with that.

DeMuth: Nixon railed against the Washington establishment. He hated the bureaucracy,
distrusted it and so forth. But he never really stood up to it. He accommodated
it. The Nixon administration was a time of great regulatory growth. Nixon
was the pioneer for affirmative action, racial quotas were born in the Nixon
administration. He created the EPA. I was one of the junior bunnies in the
White House working on that.

Smith: OSHA?

DeMuth: OSHA; Consumer Products Safety Commission. The effective establishment
of the Highway Traffic Safety Administration, it had been around a little bit
before, but it was created in the Transportation Department. It was a time of
great regulatory growth, and in some cases, these are at the Interstate
Commerce Commission and the Environmental Protection Agency very
different sorts of things.

Nixon actually was what I would call an immoderate environmentalist. In
other areas, he wasn’t an enthusiast for anti-trust, but anti-trust grew
evertheless on his watch, and he used it as a tool against the TV networks,
who he hated even more than he hated the bureaucracy. So the bureaucracy
grew and Gerald Ford did not challenge it to the extent that Reagan did. But he was very, very different from Nixon. His term was so brief that we don’t know what the record would have been. He came in under very difficult circumstances. The Nixon pardon, inflation was getting out of hand, not as bad as it would get under Jimmy Carter, but he was very, very constrained. But even given those constraints, when he made a decision, he was fearless in taking on the Washington establishment. So he was very, very different. And I do think he established a few beachheads that later presidents – in some cases Jimmy Carter, although Jimmy Carter was different in other aspects. But Ronald Reagan kind of took advantage of some of the early steps that had been taken.

Smith: Well, he’s also – going back to his traditional economics – he is arguably the last president, even in a very weakened political stance, to use whatever capital he had, particularly in form of the veto, in confronting his old colleagues on Capitol Hill.

DeMuth: Right. I know. He was terrific with the veto pen. He loved it. He said, “You’re president, one of the things you do is you read the Constitution, you veto stuff.” And he would do that.

One area where thinking in conservative circles changed, and where he was a skeptic, began in the late ’70s and early ’80s, was on tax policy. And President Ford was a traditional Republican budget balancer, strict fiscal conservative…

Smith: It was almost a moral imperative.

DeMuth: It was a moral imperative. There were changes in thinking in the conservative wings. A lot of them begun right here at the American Enterprise Institute in the late ’70s, and there was a strictly economic component to it, which was: in some cases, tax rates are so high that we can reduce the rates and actually raise more revenue. That was supply-sidism. There was another wing that was much more nakedly down and dirty political. And the argument went, “For decades now, the Democrats get in and they become very popular by all sorts of new spending programs. Then they run up deficits and things get to be a mess and they throw the rascals out. The Republicans get a turn. What do the
Republicans do? They raise taxes to pay for all these fun things the Democrats did to make themselves popular. The Republicans never get any credit for it; they get the blame for raising taxes. This is a bad program. Let’s try something else. When we get in, let’s cut taxes and maybe the deficits will lead to pressure for reducing spending.”

Now, there is a lot right and a lot wrong in that argument, and I’m not arguing for or against it. There was simply a change. And I can remember my first encounter with the World Forum. As an academic I’d published things with AEI and I’d been involved with AEI, but it was before I came here as its president. I was working in the Ronald Reagan White House in Office of Management and Budget in 1982. We’d won some pretty big tax reductions in ’81 and we were going after more. At the 1982 AEI World Forum held out in Vail, Colorado, it was in Vail or Beaver Creek that year, it later moved to Beaver Creek, it was the second World Forum where President Ford had gotten together with his three best friends and peers as head of state or government when he was in office.

Smith: And a motley group.

DeMuth: Philosophically diverse collection: Chancellor Helmut Schmidt of Germany, President Giscard d’Estaing of France, and Prime Minister James Callaghan of Great Britain. And he was there with them. And in those days they would have their sessions, but they would also hold press conferences afterwards. In June we were in the middle of some big budget and tax battles. In June of that year at the World Forum the President held a press conference and was fairly critical of Reagan’s reducing taxes in the face of big deficits. Now this was really exciting for the New York Times. This is a way to really make mischief for Reagan.

I think it was the only time the World Forum ever got on the front page of the New York Times, and we were just furious at the White House because a former president, who was held in very high opinion, was criticizing Ronald Reagan. It was a difficult…but you see, it illustrated – he was from the old school. He said, “Why would you be cutting taxes? We have these deficits and we’re going to be leaving this to our grandchildren.” Now, I was on the
Reagan team then, so I’ll say, we were taking some pretty big cuts out of government spending as well. We certainly ended up taking more reductions in taxes than we did in spending, and we not-knowingly ran up some deficits for a military buildup, which we think turned out to be a pretty darn good investment by the end of the 1980s.

Smith: Right.

DeMuth: But that was one illustration. And we would see these. When I got to AEI and we had newer generations of Republicans coming in like Newt Gingrich, people from the Reagan administration, you would see this tension. It wasn’t an unhappy tension. It was a good tension. We had very, very lively arguments over these things and you could see the different schools on fiscal policy contending with each other.

Smith: Generational again?

DeMuth: It was very much a generational change, very much.

Smith: And then also, I imagine when you get to Gingrich, stylistic; the more confrontational approach as opposed to, for lack of a better word, the civility or get along to go along, or minority status, whatever.

DeMuth: There was a stylistic – there was that difference. You could call it generational. But also by this time President Ford really was an elder statesman and Newt Gingrich was a scrappy young congressman, and he ended up coming to really like New Gingrich. They got along quite a bit. Newt is quite brilliant, and Gerald Ford was somebody who could appreciate quality. You could tell at the beginning, when I was first bringing Newt out, that he was a little uncomfortable with this. I can remember on some occasion, Newt made some reference to something that he had done, I forget what it was. And President Ford allowed as how he thought that that was a little bit too aggressive. He was a little bit above the fray and everything. And I leaned over to him and I’m not sure if I said this to the whole meeting, but I said, “President Ford, am I wrong in thinking that when you were a young congressman, you led a movement to impeach William O. Douglass?” He puffed for a second and set back and roared with laughter. He remembered
what it takes to be a scrappy congressman. He could kind of remember some of the old days.

Smith: And people forget.

DeMuth: And that, I think, helped warm him up to Newt, because he could kind of see himself as a young man.

Smith: Exactly. He came to Congress by knocking off this entrenched, moss-backed, isolationist, and then, of course, he knocked off Charlie Halleck as Minority Leader. So, again, it’s that escalator, you move up, you forget where you were at the beginning. But there must be, particularly at that time, now we’ve moved on, obviously – but there must have been a time when it was an article of faith for a lot of conservatives to draw a sharp contrast between the Ford White House and the Reagan White House. Both in terms of substance, policy, and political success. And that must have made for some awkwardness.

DeMuth: It did. And I don’t think that he ever – I think that the competition between him and Ronald Reagan was a little bit too direct and constant for him ever to become completely emotionally reconciled. But I can tell you that by the end of the 1980s, and especially as it was clear that the Soviet collapse was for real, and was really happening, he came to have a genuine appreciation for that achievement.

They were alike on many things. Reagan was an adamant free-trader, and Ford was an adamant free-trader from the very beginning. So there were issues where he really appreciated Reagan, and as a firm anti-Communist, you never heard him say that the Soviet Union collapsed of its own weight. This wasn’t anything that Reagan had to do with. He appreciated and admired Reagan’s foreign policy achievements. And he was very proud, proud in the right sense of the word, that in his brief time as president, he had brought to the forefront of national politics so many people that went on to great achievement later on, after the Republican Party had changed. Not just Dick Cheney, but Carla Hills, Donald Rumsfeld, Alan Greenspan. Now the only one of them who was a big player in the Reagan years was Greenspan.
Cheney was in the Congress, Rumsfeld and Hills were off in the private sector.

Smith: And Jim Baker.

DeMuth: Excuse me, and Jim Baker, that’s right. And some other lesser characters. Yes, of course, Jim Baker. And he enjoyed getting together with them. He enjoyed talking politics with them. And you could see that one of the things that gave him most gratification from his years in office was that he had been such a shrewd judge of talent. And, unlike many presidents, had never feared – he just wanted the brightest people around. The political calculuses – he never wanted yes men around, he just wanted extremely able people.

Smith: Which also tells you volumes about how comfortable he was in his own skin.

DeMuth: That’s right.

Smith: And that gets to this unique relationship he had with the folks you were talking about. Lord Callaghan – forget the Lord – that old line labor socialist; Helmut Schmidt, who certainly wasn’t on his economic wave length; and Giscard who may have been a “conservative” but who lots of people think of as French and aristocratic and top lofty. And they all seemed to connect with Ford.

DeMuth: They got along wonderfully. They did. Health interfered and they were not regular participants by the end of the 1990s, but for ten years they would be there every year, and it was a wonderful thing to watch. There was a certain amount of understandable – well, when we were in charge things went much better than that. But for the most part, it was providing to the people who were in office now, some of whom had known them, some of them had not, who were dealing with very, very, difficult, hard questions. Questions where there is no good answer. Very constrained. The stakes seemed very, very high. There was real wisdom in these gentlemen being able to remind people that they had seen problems that were just as bad in the past, and the world had survived.

Smith: Who came to and participated in the World Forum? What happened at these events, and when you mentioned current policy makers, would there be
representatives from the Reagan administration who would participate during the 80s?

DeMuth: Oh yes, and I’d have to go back and look. But you would find the president and the vice president – they never came – it’s very hard for them to come. Although, Dick Cheney came for every one of his years as vice president. But George H.W. Bush did not, when he was vice president. But Alan Greenspan was a regular participant. And there were several Cabinet secretaries, top people from the White House, people from the military and defense establishment who would come throughout those years.

Smith: What kind of presentations, discussions went on?

DeMuth: The World Forum has a unique style. For about half the President’s years we sat around a single table. It was a very big table, a very long table. You almost needed binoculars to see the other end of it. And the group consisted of four hosts. The host was really the President and Betty Ford and their three friends from across the ocean. There would be legislators and officials from the American government and from governments in Asia, Latin America and Europe.

After the Soviet Union came unglued, in the early days of Gorbachev and Glasnost we had a lot of important Russians, including Yegor Gaidar, who was prime minister, and some very important people that were part of the Yeltsin revolution and its aftermath. And younger legislators and government officials from Europe, from the UK, Brian Mulroney came a couple of times when he was prime minister. Always had a good contingent of Australians, and a good number of business executives. Some of them were people that had been long time supporters and pals of President Ford.

President Ford kept up a little bit of business involvement. After he was in the White House he was a director of American Express and some of those people. But we worked hard to bring in younger rising generations of business leaders. We would sit around the table and each session would be an hour and a half. We would have sessions on big, broad issues like the current state of the economy, international security challenges, reform issues in Washington. We would have things focusing on developments in Asia and in Europe.
Economic development issues in Africa. And we would always begin with three or four people who were real statesmen, currently in office, or people such as President Ford.

Actually, President Ford and Schmidt, Callaghan and Giscard, the way it came to be – people who were currently in office would talk about major issues and they were off the record. We eventually stopped doing press conferences. It may have been a little sore point for me from the times I was on the receiving end. But they were completely private, and there would be very candid presentations. There would be three or four set ones and people would have charts and slides and have some data to put out there. And then we would have an open discussion. And we would try to get people from different perspectives, people from the business community, people from foreign governments to talk about these things. And we would have very serious, substantial and quite candid conversations. The President was always the moderator. He would call on people and I would kind of be scurrying around and I’d ask you and I’d ask you, “Will you…?.” And then I’d give the President a list and he’d say, “Well, why don’t we call…” And so the two of us would handle it that way. He would, unhesitantly, jump in and he was always very polite. But he if disagreed with something, he would disagree, he would argue.

He would often bring episodes from his own days in Congress, in negotiating a health care bill in the 1960s, or the Civil Rights Act, some of the big legislative issues when he was a congressman and introduce some reflections or perspective on the current developments. And he and Schmidt, Giscard and Callaghan, would usually wind up. They would summarize what had been said, they’d try to add a little texture of wisdom on top.

Smith: It was a council of elders.

DeMuth: It was, but we never wanted it to be an old man’s club. We would be on the phone and he would always be pressing me to get new people. He’d read about such and such in the newspaper, and he knew so and so. What if he gave a call to this person. He was very active in recruiting, and very keen on trying to bring younger generations in.
Smith: When did the Forum end?

DeMuth: The Forum is still ongoing. We held the World Forum in Beaver Creek, Colorado in Gerald R. Ford Hall, which is the name of the hall where we’ve always held it, that they’ve now named after him, last month – July of 2009. The last Forum that he attended was 2005, and you’ll have to correct me, I think he was 91. It was right before his birthday. He was speaking on his birthday. He didn’t come to all the sessions, but he came to most of them. He was sharp as a tack and he gave a welcoming talk that was interesting, gracious, and there were lots of his old friends – the Cheneys, the Hills, Alan Greenspan, and a lot of people that had been coming to the World Forum year after year. So he was a wonderful host.

His health prevented him from coming in 2006, so that was the first one we’d held without him. He was in Rancho Mirage and I went down on Sunday afternoon when it was over and we spent a lovely afternoon talking about the World Forum. A man named Harlan Crow, the son of Trammel Crow, the long time close friend of the Fords. Harlan was the son and taken over the business. He’d gotten to know the Fords himself quite well. Harlan and I went down and we spent a long afternoon with Betty and Jerry and then we went out to dinner. That was the last time I saw him. He had gotten a little bit distant when you are talking about current affairs, but when we got into details with the Forum he kind of remembered people, and had questions about this. He wanted to know what Newt said about such and such, that kind of thing.

We tried the technique that you sometimes do with people that are quite old and not quite on top of current developments and we raised a couple of questions about his early days as a lawyer in Grand Rapids; about that famous war story on deck when he almost got swept off in a big storm out in the Pacific. We raised those issues and he became absolutely lucid, and energetic, and so more of the conversation was in early days in the ‘50s than it was about the World Forum. But it was a perfectly, great, great day.
Smith: I sensed that they were beloved figures around Vail and Beaver Creek. That the Fords were really more than first citizens, that they really had a profile and a presence.

DeMuth: They had lent their name and their presence and that had been very important to the strictly development aspects of Beaver Creek. At the first World Forums that were held in Beaver Creek, there was one hotel, there was this village hall, and there was one hotel and a few private homes, but it was really out in the boonies. And you look at it today and it is very, very highly developed; and they were part of that. But it was just not a development program; they were real citizens of the community. They participated in a wide range. They helped build the chapel – that was a project that was particularly dear to them. They worked on cultural welfare issues, they had opinions on this development and that development, and they were not above the fray. They were real participants. I don’t think they were beloved anywhere more than at the American Enterprise Institute. But Vail was certainly up there.

Smith: And tell me, you must have gotten to know Mrs. Ford.

DeMuth: I got to know Mrs. Ford very well, an unfailingly gracious lady. At the World Forum we never just took the spouses, mostly wives, and had them go out for the ice carving demonstration with the chef. We always integrated them into that, but Betty was always kind of the leader of the ladies auxiliary, so to speak. And she spent a lot of time with them. She spent a lot of time with my wife and children when they were little, and would come. But they were part of the conversations, as well.

Smith: Including the spouses of the other leaders.

DeMuth: That’s correct.

Smith: The Callaghan relationship is particularly intriguing to me. They seemed to be polar opposites in so many ways, and yet they maybe in some ways, they became closest. There’s a story that Callaghan was in Grand Rapids, and wanted to be driven around town. Later on he said, “I wanted to see where
Jerry came from. Now I understand him better.” Which is an interesting effort on Callaghan’s part.

DeMuth: Their politics were very, very different. Their political viewpoints were very, very different. But they had both had very, very challenging terms in office. And they had both been retired earlier than they had wanted to, Callaghan by Margaret Thatcher, and I think both of them came to – I think if we were going to talk about tax policy or deregulation – they’d have very, very different views. But their personal friendship and the fact that their political experiences had certain things in common, led to a genuine warmth of friendship and affection. Callaghan was a man who, although he was a tough partisan when he was leading the Labor Party, he did have capacity, I would say more than that of Helmut Schmidt, to really transcend partisan differences, to put himself in the shoes of the other person; to understand different points of view and to argue with a real twinkle in his eye.

Smith: Lastly, how do you think Gerald Ford should be remembered?

DeMuth: I will remember him as a man who brought to office a great deal of personal dignity and genuine devotion to the public good, and much less of a political strategizer than any president after him, any president of either party. It could be that George H.W. Bush comes the closest, which is actually better in the long term as something that can be argued about. But Gerald Ford, when an issue came before him, he always asked what is best for the country. And he acted on it, even if it was politically risky, or something that was politically likely to fail or to redound against him. He was not a tactical president.

Now, he was a practical man and I’m sure that he made many political compromises as our chief executive. But he was a man of great fidelity; what he thought was good policy. To the general public he’ll be remembered as the man who brought an end to Watergate and provided this respite from the very bad years that came before him. And I think that his historical, his reputation in history, will grow, and it will certainly outsize the number of months that he was in office. I think that the Kissinger memoirs were a pretty good example of that. When you see what he did to navigate U.S.-Soviet, U.S.-
China relationships during those years, there was a tremendous wisdom and [more] foresight than any of us realized at the time.

Smith: That’s interesting, because clearly, Helsinki and the Helsinki Accords were seen in one light at the time they were signed. And, in fact, Carter, who ran against him from both the right and the left, attacked him, only to become a great supporter of the Accords over time. Would you agree that now, in the light of everything that has happened since, they are at least seen as a milestone on the road to the West’s victory of the Cold War?

DeMuth: Absolutely. And in the early 1990s when we were all trying to come to grips with what had happened, and the collapse of the Soviet Union – and of course, all of the attention, particularly among conservatives, was on what Ronald Reagan had done. I had a couple of sessions focusing on the Helsinki Accords and I felt pretty strongly about this, but it was also a way to do a little educating of the conservative/triumphant/Reaganite/triumphalist. Because many of those people had been people that excoriated President Ford for the Helsinki Accords.

And if you go back, he actually knew what he was doing. It might have failed, but this idea that he got the Soviet leaders to acknowledge the importance of human rights inside their country – just as you can say Gerald Ford started the deregulation movement and Reagan ran with it – that move, which was so criticized by conservatives because the deal was something they didn’t like, in retrospect, it was a brilliant deal for our side. And it really did – was the beginning of what later became known as Glasnost. I don’t know the year, I think it was 2003 or 2004, after we’d had a few discussions of Helsinki, I made a point of attracting to the World Forum Natan Schransky. And Schransky gave a talk at the World Forum, which we have published.

It was opening night and I had him give a talk. He acknowledged that the beginning of what he was able to accomplish as a dissenter in the old Soviet Union, began with the Helsinki Accords. The President had never met Schransky. So it was the first time that they had met. And Schransky – that he could actually be there and share the podium with the man who had provided this wedge, this opening, in the domestic politics of the old Communist Soviet...
Union. I know it was a moving moment for Schransky, and I think that it was – Ford at this time would have been 89 or 90 – but for him to have this living legend who had made the Helsinki Accords breathe and come to life inside the Soviet Union, it was a very big moment for him.
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Smith: First of all, thank you so much for doing this, especially here which, as you say, has a lot of memories.

Roberts: I’m thrilled to do it.

Smith: There is a lot of nostalgia for the way things used to be. Not that the Sixties and Seventies were exactly an era of good feeling. Is it misplaced nostalgia, or is it justified?

Roberts: There is a lot of justified nostalgia. Jerry Ford, in the last interview I had with him, said to me, “Cokie, you know, your dad and I, when I was Minority Leader and he was Majority Leader, would get in a cab and we’d go someplace like the Press Club, and would say on the way down, ‘Okay, what are we going to argue about?’” And then they would get there, and there would be a real argument. He said, “We really did disagree about the means to an end, but then we’d get back in the cab and be best friends and go back to Hill. We might argue there, too, but we were very good friends.” That is gone.

Smith: What do you think are the factors that have killed that kind of culture?

Roberts: I think a whole lot of factors are involved. There is, of course, the media component; the drawing of district lines is a very real deterrent to comity, when members of Congress choose their districts and their voters instead of the voters choosing their members. They don’t have any reason to listen to anyone who disagrees with them because they have only like-minded people in their districts. The kind of ginning up of partisanship by various interest groups, I think is also to blame. But, as someone who has read and written a good bit of American history, I have come to believe that the period where my father and Jerry Ford first came to Congress and started to serve was the aberrant period; that this partisanship that we suffer through today is the
norm. And at least people are not calling each other out on the floor of the House and going to Bladensburg and shooting each other in a duel.

Smith: Was it an unusual period because of the shared World War II experience?

Roberts: Yes, I think so.

Smith: And then, presumably, also a kind of artificial consensus was imposed by the Cold War.

Roberts: Right. I think World War II and the Cold War had everything to do with it. Also, think how self-conscious these men were as veterans – that huge class of 1946, which was a Republican class. But my father came and he had been elected in ’40, defeated in ’42, served during the war, then came back in in ’46. So this enormous Republican class – that he was a Democrat elected in, ’48, this enormous Democratic class that Ford was a Republican elected in, these men were very self-conscious veterans. As you know, they ran as the men who went, not the men who sent. And they knew who the enemy was; it wasn’t the guy across the aisle, it was the dictator across the ocean. And I think that the fact that the whole country had gone to war, that there was not just the Rosy the Riveter, and all of that, but there was rationing, there was a sense of sacrifice that was so strong that it really brought people together in a way that was not common.

Smith: I remember once when I was doing a project on Bob Dole, and went out to talk to Walter Mondale, I pitched an idea which he embraced – the notion that forty years ago each party had a left and a right wing, disproportionate in size. But nevertheless, you came to town and you had to learn within your own caucus how to deal effectively with people who might not be on your wavelength philosophically, which is something that presumably is lacking today.

Roberts: Well, that’s what I was basically saying about the drawing of district lines. That the only way you can get in trouble in Congress today is from the right if you are a Republican, and from the left if you’re a Democrat. It is somebody saying you are not pure enough. And so if you compromise, if you talk to the person across the aisle, you can get in trouble at home. The one other thing I
forgot to mention, and it’s very relevant to my memories of the Ford family, is that the families all knew each other. We all moved here. Transportation was not easy. We lived here and then we lived back in the district for a period of time, usually summertime. We all went to school together; our parents were in PTAs together; we went to church together; we ran into each other at the dry cleaner; we knew each other.

Smith: It wasn’t just an annual softball game.

Roberts: No, it was very close. One of my best, best friends growing up was Libby Miller, Bill Miller’s daughter. And she and I are still in touch. That was just the way life was, it was a much more congenial setup. For the men who didn’t bring their families here, they were batching it, as it was called, and they would all come to dinner at the homes of the people who did have families here. The wives would cook for them. And those would be bipartisan evenings.

Smith: Can you pinpoint a time when that began to change?

Roberts: Yes, I think it really changed with the class of ’74. The Watergate Babies came in and so many of them represented areas that were not Democratic. So, in order to get re-elected, they set up district offices and started traveling home every weekend. They got, and you can obviously check this, I’m pretty sure that that was the year they got travel allowance upped so that they could go home all the time. And the difference between my father serving in Congress and my mother serving in Congress, when she was elected in 1973, was huge. She was back in the district every weekend. And that was just simply not the case when we were growing up.

Smith: And it is also interesting, parenthetically, the Joe Wilson incident with the President – I did some research. The fact is, Ford in April of ’75 went up to the Hill to talk about aid for Vietnam, and two members of Congress walked out on him. And they were both members of the class of ’74. Just representative of an era when…

Roberts: We have a house in South Carolina and we were there for Thanksgiving and there was a cartoon in the local paper of kids going Trick or Treating, and one
of them is up at the door and says, “Obama Lies,” and the other kids are behind him saying, “Shoot, we should have dressed as Joe Wilson, he’s mopping up.”

Smith: Isn’t it revealing of the political culture that an overnight celebrity, with millions of dollars funneled both for and against him…

Roberts: It’s crazy.

Smith: Yeah. Do you remember your early contacts with both the Fords?

Roberts: I remember Mrs. Ford as always being just beautiful. In that era there were all kinds of teas and fashion shows and all kinds of things like that, that the Congressional wives did for good causes. She and my mother often were the ones who wore the small size that the models actually wore, so they were sashaying down the runway. She was always just this gorgeous person. But in later years we knew she was frail. There was a sense of fragility there.

Smith: Did you know she had a problem?

Roberts: No, no. And you know, nobody talked about stuff like that. And by the way, if we were talking about people with drinking problems, we would have been talking about the whole city at that point.

Smith: It was a different culture, wasn’t it?

Roberts: Oh, gosh, yes. It was hard liquor and it was early and it was often.

Smith: Well maybe that fostered some of that comity.

Roberts: A lot of people do believe that. Everybody would repair to Sam Rayburn’s Board of Education for some bourbon and branch, and people did get along a lot better under those circumstances.

Smith: Was she always kind of a free spirit?

Roberts: Yes. I think Mrs. Ford was not as willing as some of the other wives to just do exactly what they were supposed to do. And my mother was so willing to do that, having been raised in the South and all of that. It was kind of really refreshing to see Mrs. Ford.
Smith: On the other side of that, did you sense any unhappiness?

Roberts: No, but I wouldn’t have. I was a kid. What I mainly remember as a grownup, until I re-met her as a real grownup, was after my father’s plane went down, she was so upset. It was just a couple of months after the two families had been to China together, and had become quite close, and she was really very, very, undone by it. And was very sweet to all of us.

Smith: And the Congressman at that point?

Roberts: Congressman Ford was the Minority Leader, and he had – let me just say this on tape: Congressman Ford is the Minority Leader, Congressman Boggs is the Majority Leader. Their wives and staffs went to China in the spring of 1972, and it was quite a trip. It was China in 1972. So they were constantly mind-boggled by everything that was going on.

Smith: Impressed?

Roberts: Impressed by a lot, in fact. It was the cultural revolution and the kids in this country were having long hair and sex and drugs and rock and roll, and in China they were behaving. They would have gone to jail if they didn’t, but still for the parents, it looked pretty good. And I remember they came home. I had two little bitty kids and they came home with funny toys and all of that. So they really spent different times together than you do on Capitol Hill. That’s always true in a Congressional trip, but it was particularly true in this trip.

Smith: I assume those trips are still taking place.

Roberts: They are not as common – __________ are not as common as they used to be because they get so much bad press as a boondoggle, when in fact, they are very, very useful. And they are a huge source of bipartisanship. But, at any rate, the families – the two couples and their staffs had really gotten quite close. So after my father’s plane disappeared, and there was this long search, Congressman Ford was here, at this house, regularly, checking on everyone and seeing how everyone was doing, but on the phone all the time. It was a very difficult time, as you can imagine. The plane was missing, and actually,
it was never found. We went to Alaska immediately, but then after we got back, it was just this limbo time and so he was very, very gracious.

Smith: Does something like that haunt you for years?

Roberts: Yes. You know, it’s funny, we went to all the briefings, all that, and the SR71, the spy plane went in and conducted the biggest search ever and found like logs and stuff – from 80,000 feet. I intellectually understood that it was very likely that the plane had frozen up and sunk to the bottom of Prince William Sound. But when I moved back to this house in 1977, the kitchen wallpaper really did need cleaning up. And I was a little hesitant to do that, thinking that if he came back he might think strangers were here. So, sure, you have these odd things.

The other thing to remember about the relationship between my father and President Ford was, of course, they served on the Warren Commission together. And that was somewhat searing because of the criticism, but also it was not easy taking that testimony, and I think that that also made them closer than they would have been under other circumstances.

Smith: That’s fascinating because, of course, as a young Congressman, the Ford you talk about, his office was across the hall from JFK. Often their votes would cancel each other out on domestic policy, but not on foreign policy - part of this (Cold War) consensus. It is interesting because a lot of people don’t make the connection. When LBJ called for that investigation, Ford was not at that point Republican Minority Leader. He was just another member of Congress.

Roberts: But he was always a member of Congress that everyone admired and listened to. He came in, in the Vandenberg tradition, and that was huge. This town was still in a position where forging the institutions to try to maintain peace after World War II was still very much on the agenda. And to have that Connally-Vandenberg coalition in the Senate that really set the framework for all of the _________ institutions and all that, was something that was almost a movement. I don’t know how to describe it, but particularly once McCarthy came along and all of that, this was the other side, and Jerry Ford was very
much out of that tradition, and everybody knew it. So he could be someone you could count on to be a sensible person in a situation like this.

Smith: It’s interesting you say that. First of all, has too much been made of LBJ’s wisecracks about his intelligence?

Roberts: Yes, because LBJ made cracks like that all the time. I mean, the tapes are wonderful. I’m such a nerd that I just sit and listen to them. But that was LBJ and he said some pretty insulting things about my father, too, and they were very close friends. So, yeah, sure. It’s interesting.

Smith: Early in the fifties, he’d only been there a few years, but early in the fifties he was told by one of the old moguls to be outside a committee room at such and such a time. And it turned out that he was being vetted, if you will, or what passed in those days for oversight of intelligence. Which apparently was five veterans and one promising newcomer. No staff, no notes. They sat there until all their questions were answered and no leaks.

Roberts: Wow.

Smith: Which, again, suggests that early on he was perceived as someone who could be trusted, if nothing else.

Roberts: Those guys loved LBJ – I mean JFK – LBJ was another issue. They respected him and liked him, but these members really loved Jack Kennedy. He clearly had some aspect to his character that made them very fond of him. And, of course, he was in that class of ’46.

Smith: So that personal element lent an extra pain, almost, to service on the Warren Commission. Then also, you’ve got this crazy Clay Shaw business in New Orleans and all that. How did all that factor in?

Roberts: It was awful. And it’s still going on. Here we are in 2009 and…

Smith: President Ford once found himself on an airplane…

Roberts: With one of these nut cakes?
Smith: Oh, no. Worse. They were showing Oliver Stone’s JFK. I mean, you want to get him started? It was – well, you can imagine.

Roberts: I can imagine. We actually, at the point when that movie came out, Sam and David Brinkley and George Will and I were taken to see the movie mid-day at some theater in Washington. And we all just howled with laughter. But at any rate, the attachment to Jack Kennedy made the Warren Commission service harder, and then the criticism of course, made it very difficult. And I think that had the effect of bonding my father and President Ford.

Smith: In the last years of his life, after he got the Kennedy Profiles in Courage Award, which was a huge thing. He said, “You know, for twenty-five years everywhere I go people ask the same question. And since that, they don’t ask me anymore.”

Roberts: Isn’t that fascinating?

Smith: It was extraordinary. The imprimatur of the Kennedys. But I think he did an oral history while he was there. It is really fascinating and I wonder whether you’ve ever heard this: he said one of the theories, and I guess they didn’t expound it in print, largely for questions of taste, but one of the theories that they kicked around explaining Oswald’s motive was that he was in this very unhappy marriage, that he was impotent, that his wife was calling attention to that fact, and that he was going to show her how much of a man he was. Which may be off the wall, but it’s interesting. To hear somebody like Ford discuss that as something that was, in fact, discussed.

Roberts: But just think about what you’ve just said; the question of taste. What a concept!

Smith: From that to the Starr Reports.

Roberts: Exactly. I have, though. I have the book, the Final Report of the Warren Commission, signed by all the members. So my father clearly thought that was something that was historic that he wanted his children to have.

Smith: And I assume he never waivered in his view.
Roberts: No, Oliver Stone tried to make a case that my father questioned the findings. What he said was that with the information that they had, which is, of course, how you cover yourself as a member of Congress.

Smith: I think I heard President Ford say the members of Congress who were on the panel insisted on this language.

Roberts: Right. Because they know what it’s like to have facts change on the ground.

Smith: For people who weren’t around here in ’73-’74, can you recreate a sense of…

Roberts: Not really, because I wasn’t around here in ’73-’74. I was actually out of the country for the entire Ford presidency. That’s what I tried to convey to you, that I really could talk about more the growing up part and then the recent years. But we were in Greece for the entire Ford presidency. So it was quite something. But, you know, one of the things that that had the effect of, was to give you a sense of the strength of American democracy. Because I remember Ben Rosenthal, who was in Congress at the time, and he had been chairman of the subcommittee that dealt with Greek relations, and was very anti-junta and it was a big deal. He came after __________ fell, and he made the point to people there; never underestimate the strength of the American democracy. The President of the United States, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, was forced to leave office and not one soldier left his barracks to defend him. Now it wouldn’t occur to us that that would happen, but to look at it from that perspective is really something.

Smith: There is a wonderful story about the first day. Of course they stayed in the house in Alexandria for a week or so while the Nixon’s stuff…

Roberts: Yeah, I noticed that in the piece that I was looking at last night.

Smith: And so the first day that he actually went into the West Wing as a resident, a Marine guard was saluting. Ford, ever the Congressman, walks over and says, “Hi, my name is Jerry Ford. I’m going to be living here. What’s your name?” Isn’t that a Congressman?

Roberts: That is a Congressman, that’s also a gracious person, and that was probably something of a change in the White House at that moment.
Smith: Mrs. Ford, in her first week there, walking through the family quarters around the permanent staff she’d say, “Good morning.” And they wouldn’t speak to her. So she went to the usher and said, “Do they not like us?” and he said, “But you have to understand, it was very different under the Nixons. You didn’t talk to the presidential family.”

Roberts: That’s too weird.

Smith: But word got around and everything. The other wonderful story, to contrast with LBJ; we talked with Gary Walters. It was his first weekend in the usher’s office. Sunday morning he knew the Ford’s were going to church, and he gets a call and it’s the President. He asks, very politely, if maybe at some point, they could come up and take a look at the shower because he has no hot water. So Gary says, well, it’s Sunday and there’s not a plumber, but we’ll take care of it while…He’s says, “No, that’s alright. I haven’t had any hot water for two weeks. I just used Mrs. Ford’s shower.” Can you imagine Lyndon Johnson saying….?

Roberts: No. Among other things he was entertaining people in the shower, so…

One other thing, though, that students of Congress should understand about Jerry Ford, is he was on the Appropriations Committee. And the Appropriations Committee is different from the other committees. It is much more bipartisan. The joke is there are Democrats, Republicans and appropriators. And it drives the members of the other committees completely crazy how the Appropriations Committee sort of gets together and sort of runs the place. But that is the case, and that does make for a lot more comity.

Smith: It also explains – remember, Ford was the last president who could get up – it was almost like a party trick – in front of a room full of reporters and introduce the budget and actually take them through the budget.

Roberts: And know what was in it.

Smith: And answer every question that was asked. It didn’t communicate itself to the American people. He was never a television president; he was the least self-dramatizing of men.
Roberts: Which was so refreshing. But the understanding of how exactly the budget works is something that very few presidents do. And being on the Appropriations Committee is the place you learn that.

Smith: I realize you were out of the country, but looking back at the trajectory of the Ford presidency, he had to, in effect, not necessarily unlearn being a Congressman, but he had to learn the difference between being a Congressman and an executive.

Roberts: Being a Congressman is really terrible preparation for being president. It’s no accident that we’ve only elected a few people directly from the Congress to the White House. And most of them - I mean, Warren G. Harding, Jack Kennedy, and Barack Obama – these are not people who were known for their work in the Senate. They really weren’t of the institution. Jerry Ford was very much of the institution. He’d spent his life in the House of Representatives, which is where he wanted to be. So, I think it is very difficult to then go from the place where everything you are doing has to do with consensus and bringing people together, and finding the grey areas where you can just sort of fudge it so that people can vote for it, and all that. That’s very different from being in a position where you have to lead and you have to draw bright lines, particularly in a presidential campaign.

Smith: And communicate.

Roberts: And communicate. And you not only have to communicate differently than the way you are with your buddies, but you have to communicate on a medium that was not that common at the time. Even when Walter Mondale ran in 1984, he said, “Well, I just wasn’t so good on television.”

Smith: The old line: Mondale gave a speech, it was typed better than it was delivered.

Roberts: Right. It’s true. That is true. During that campaign, I remember one day in particular, it was some Jewish organization here, it was a big thing, like the big meeting of the B’nai Brith or something. And I had the speech ahead of time and it was a terrific speech. And, of course, I had picked out the sound bites ahead of time. If I had used those sound bites it would have looked like I was sabotaging him, because he was tripping all over himself, and all that.
And then Reagan comes in to the same group. They move the flags so that they frame him. He gives this beautiful speech. My basic reaction to that is if you’re not good at this, get good at it, because it’s a trained…nobody was born being good on television. But Ford was that many years earlier.

Smith: And he did get better. There is this notion that Reagan actually made him a better candidate. Obviously, you can argue both ways – that the Reagan challenge fatally weakened him.

Roberts: You’d probably know this better than I would, as a presidential scholar, but my memory is that any time you challenge a president in a primary, he loses.

Smith: Yeah.

Roberts: That was the biggest thing that happened with Bill Clinton with nobody challenged him in ’96.

Smith: Two quick things and then we’ll talk about the post-White House. Rex Scouten told a wonderful story. On election night he was up with the family, and about two-thirty in the morning or so, it’s not looking good. Ford says, “I’m going to bed.” So Rex follows him across the hall because he wants to say something consoling. And he said, “You know, Mr. President, I don’t know what’s going to happen, but if you don’t pull this out it’s a shame. But just stop and think; you’ve given your whole life in service to this country. The war; Capitol Hill; these last two incredibly difficult years. Maybe it’s just time for you to take a well-earned rest.”

Roberts: What did Ford say?

Smith: Ford said, “I don’t think so.”

Roberts: If it had been Johnson, it would have been saltier. Speaking of going into the White House under those difficult circumstances, my mother was the only Democrat at his swearing in.

Smith: Really?
Roberts: Yes. So that’s how the families had gotten so close. She had been elected to Congress in March of ’73 in a special election, and when he had that small swearing-in, she was the only Democrat there.

Smith: Wow. And afterwards, time was pretty good to Jerry Ford.

Roberts: Yes.

Smith: You think of poor Lyndon Johnson, who literally died the day before a peace agreement was announced.

Roberts: That’s right. He died January 22, 1973, I remember because my father’s service was January 5th or so. What had happened was that Congress had come in, for the 4th, to clear the seat vacant and then we all went to _______________ and had the service, and then the special election was declared. But Johnson came to that service looking awful. And then he died a couple of weeks later.

Smith: Were you not terribly surprised?

Roberts: I kind of was surprised because you kind of thought he’d go on forever.

Smith: He was a force of nature.

Roberts: But he was clearly unwell. He also had his hair down to here. He looked like some interesting Mark Twain character, it was very interesting. Anyhow, Mrs. Johnson and my mother were really best friends.

Smith: Everyone loved Lady Bird.

Roberts: Oh, she was wonderful. She was just wonderful. But that’s true. Time was good to Jerry Ford, but also, he made it good. And his collaboration with Jimmy Carter was really something special. And I remember President Bush saying to me, President H.W. Bush saying to me, “You know, I doubt that Bill Clinton and I would ever be able to do what Ford and Carter have done.” And then they did do it. And so I think that not only was the collaboration and the graciousness that President Ford showed to the man who defeated him, something that was special on its own, but it set a model for future presidents.
to follow. And that’s a good thing, particularly given the partisanship that the country is suffering through.

Smith: I sometimes wondered if one of the things, though, that perhaps aided that relationship was that they both ran against Ronald Reagan.

Roberts: That probably is a bond, right. “Shoot! Did you see what he did to me? Look what he did to me!”

Smith: Mrs. Ford. I think it’s hard for this generation to get its arms around just how forbidden a subject breast cancer was.

Roberts: Ah! The word cancer was really not even used. People would be described as having a wasting disease. And of course, one didn’t use the word breast. So, for Mrs. Ford to go public and say that she had breast cancer has probably saved millions of lives. Nancy Reagan being the other person who followed on. To do this in the 1970s, nobody, nobody had done that. And the courage that that took, the going into klieg lights saying this, it’s embarrassing. I’ve had breast cancer myself, and had to be public about it. And it’s not easy. And that was in the 21st Century. If Betty Ford had not paved the way, I think that that would have been very much harder.

Smith: And he’s part of that story, isn’t he?

Roberts: Very much part of that story. The pictures of him at the hospital with her, and him talking about the day of the surgery, him just welling up and saying the doctors say she’s going to be fine. You have a sense of their real devotion. You know, I remember when they did move into the White House, even though I was living abroad, looking at the pictures in the paper and saying, “Oh! They’re sharing a bedroom!” And, until I had noticed other White Houses as a kid somewhere along the line, I had never heard of married couples not sharing bedrooms.

Smith: They were the first since the Coolidge’s.

Roberts: But then, growing up, I saw these pictures of White Houses, and saw that the presidents and first ladies had separate rooms, which I found passing strange.
But then, I noticed that they were in the same room, and by that time I was grown up with kids of my own, and I thought, good for them.

Smith: It’s funny, I’ve seen that concerned Americans wrote to protest. They just thought this was offensive somehow.

Roberts: Well, remember TV sitcoms. Everybody was in twin beds. Boy have times changed, and not necessarily for the better.

Smith: And my favorite letter was after the Sixty Minutes interview, which really is a turning point. If you go back and actually look at the transcript of that interview, I remember thinking, I’m not even sure Hillary Clinton could say those things. In some ways, we’ve almost regressed. But the immediate reaction in the White House – everyone always fights the last war – “Oh, my god, what has she done?” And it took a little while, and some polls to come in and the country had changed. It was a time when people wanted authenticity, more than anything. She fit the bill.

Roberts: But also, again, as I was saying, about the China trip. What was America going through at the moment? All the kids were giving their parents grief. And to have the First Lady basically say, “Here’s the way it is, folks, and I would have to deal with it.” That is exactly what every mom was feeling.

Smith: There was a letter from a woman in Texas who wrote in – dead serious – saying, “You do not understand. You are constitutionally required to be perfect.” No irony. Perfect wife, perfect mother, perfect…on and on. And it’s in the Constitution.

Roberts: Well, you know the role of first lady is such a difficult role and it’s so ill-defined, or totally undefined, and Americans project all of their own ideas about marriage and women’s roles and all that onto that one woman. And there is such a kind of fear of her, because there is this kind of sense of “she’s got power that we don’t understand, and she can’t be fired.” There is a kind of almost Greek tragedy sense of fear of women here. It’s almost like Madea(?). Women are, in some ways, always doing something irrational, and perhaps a little evil.
Smith: My reference to Mrs. Clinton wasn’t meant to be critical. In some ways, I think Mrs. Ford, because she had this pre-existing image as this Cub Scout Den mother, Sunday schoolteacher, from Grand Rapids, actually had a little bit more breathing room, in effect, to be counterintuitive. Which I think in some ways was denied Hillary Clinton.

Roberts: I think that’s exactly right. Good point, because she was seen as…

Smith: Child of the Sixties…

Roberts: Rhymes with witch. All of that.

Smith: You mentioned an interview you did with President Ford in ’93. Had you done others?


Smith: 2003, I’m sorry.

Roberts: No, but I had seen him in various places, and he was always incredibly gracious. And we always had fun just reminiscing. A lot of the men from that era – Mel Laird is another one. There’s a real sense of camaraderie still, and with the kids. We were Congressional brats – that’s what we called ourselves, and all really had that sense of camaraderie.

Smith: I’ve heard Susan talk about it. Her dad really was a workaholic, and he’d go in on Saturdays, and I think he’d go on Sundays if there was anyone to work there, but he’d go on Saturdays. The kids would play in Statuary Hall.

Roberts: Right. Well, that’s the other thing. We loved the Capitol. The Capitol was our playground. And, of course, there was none of this nutsy security, and we had birthday parties in the Speaker’s dining room, we would ride on the Senate subway – it was just the one little wicker subway – and the men who ran it were sweethearts, who would basically babysit us. And our parents just brought us to the Capitol. I remember when I was seven years old – this is a pathetic story – of waking up on my seventh birthday, and saying, “Great, I can go in the public gallery now!” Because until then you were only allowed
in the family gallery, and if you could go into the public gallery, you could take people on tours.

Smith: A real turning point.

Roberts: Now this still occasionally is true, I’m happy to say; any night that there was a presidential address, a State of the Union, or a Joint Session, you would see the dining room filled with Congressional families. And the difference then, though, was that we would also come up for big votes. It wasn’t on television, if you were going to see a debate on some significant piece of legislation, you had to be there. So we went, and it was great because we got out of school.

Smith: On balance, what do you think the impact of television has been on the daily functioning of Congress?

Roberts: The daily functioning has been, I think, - I think television has had its pluses and minuses. It does bring it to people’s homes and they get to see the workings of the place, but it also does mean that there is a lot of posturing. Particularly in the one-minute speeches in the morning – the special orders in the afternoon. The real thing, however, that had an impact on the functioning of Congress was the automatic roll call. The electronic roll call. Because it used to be that it took forty-five minutes to call the roll, and a lot of votes were by teller vote. That meant that a lot of people didn’t know how you voted. And now, roll calls are called on all kinds of things, just so that various interest groups can have their score cards. And that has not been a very salutary development.

Smith: Gotcha, lots of gotcha.

Roberts: Particularly on the journal, voting on the journal every day. ____ was absent, five millions times!

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw President Ford?

Roberts: I saw him at the Republican Convention in Philadelphia – what year was that? That was when he had his little…

Smith: Well, that was 2000.
Roberts: So that wasn’t the last time I saw him.

Smith: Maybe that interview you did in 2003?

Roberts: Maybe that was the last time I saw him.

Smith: When you saw him in Philadelphia, did you detect…?

Roberts: He was fine. I was very upset when I heard that he’d had a little – ischemia or something like that?

Smith: Yeah, exactly.

Roberts: Because I’d seen him and thought he was great.

Smith: Apropos nothing, within twenty minutes of that news becoming public, I got two calls – one from Julie Nixon Eisenhower, and one from Tricia.

Roberts: You know, they are nice women. I saw Tricia at Mrs. Johnson’s funeral, and she is a nice woman. She really is.

Smith: People don’t realize that there is this fraternity of presidential families.

Roberts: That’s right.

Smith: It totally transcends politics.

Roberts: Because they’ve had an experience that very few other people have had, and only each other has had it. Once I interviewed Martin Luther King, III, and he said, “You can’t imagine what’s it like to live this life.”

Smith: With that name.

Roberts: With that name. None of the siblings married, none of those children ever married, and he said, “I just think there’s nobody who can share this.” And I said, “What about the Kennedys?” And he said, “Well, I’ve reached out, but no.”

Smith: Yeah, that’s interesting. Do you remember the last time you saw Mrs. Ford?

Roberts: The last time I saw Mrs. Ford was 2003. We were at the house; we had a very, very, nice visit. She looked wonderful. I was out of the country for the
funeral, but my mother went to the funeral and saw her there. They really
were close. But Mrs. Ford and I had a wonderful visit in 2003 where she
talked a lot about the Betty Ford Center, and she was in the process of
bringing Susan in to do more. But she was so knowledgeable about everything
going on there, and about addiction. What a contribution she has made. It’s
just unbelievable.

Smith: When you combine the impact of breast cancer and alcohol and drug
dependence; I’ve often said, there aren’t a lot of presidents who have had the
impact on how ordinary people live their lives that she has had.

Roberts: I think that Betty Ford and Eunice Kennedy Shriver are two people who have
had more impact on literally millions of people, than any politicians I can name.

Smith: I didn’t realize you were out of the country. That week I was sort of wearing
two hats. I was with ABC for half the week and then I was with the family,
and I sensed – and actually, some of it was pretty explicit – as the week went
on, there were people in the press who were surprised at how much response
there was.

Roberts: Response to?

Smith: To the President’s death. Because he’d been out of the public eye and all that,
and I think there were a number of factors. I think we needed something to
make us feel good about ourselves at that point. But also there was a whole
generation that was discovering him for the first time through these old grainy
clips. And he looked pretty good compared with politics today.

Roberts: Right. Exactly. We were just on vacation and I was getting my mother up
here. Oh my god, it was like Normandy. But it was very, very important to her
that she come, and she was quite angry with me for not leaving all the
children behind and…but I was in touch with Susan.

Smith: How do you think Gerald Ford should be remembered?

Roberts: I think Gerald Ford should be remembered as the person who tried to bring
the country together at really one of the worst times, other than the Civil War,
in our history. To understand how bleak the period was is just terribly important. We were feeling dispirited about the country. There was this war going on that nobody liked, there was a generation at war with their parents and not feeling any of the sense of pride in the country that all the rest of us had been raised with. There was a president who had lied and cheated and done all kinds of things that embarrassed us and enraged us, and then to have this regular, good man come in with his regular, good family, and wonderful wife and say, “The long national nightmare is over,” it was a great moment of hope. It couldn’t last because the country was too divided and was too upset. And there was no right answer there. But he did his best and he carried that on after his presidency and I think did contribute to the healing over the decades after he was defeated.

Smith: Perfect. Thank you.
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Smith: Thank you for doing this.

Frey: Glad to do it.

Smith: One of the things we’ve been delving into is the whole question of the political environment that produced Ford that shaped and reflected him. Clearly West Michigan changed an awful lot over the last fifty years. How defining was the influence of the Dutch in this city, in this region?

Frey: I think you see that in some of his vetoes as sitting president. You see his frugality, his thriftiness.

Smith: A lot have said he was tight.

Frey: Frugal, I’d say. And there is a difference. But he was very mindful of some of the real basic Dutch, Midwestern values of thriftiness and balancing the books, so to speak. Living within your budget, and not living beyond your means. And you could see it through the whole pattern of his life. Frankly, in today’s world, that’s a less cherished value than it was then. Sometimes then is better. I think we’re going to go back to then. I think we’re in the process of learning the lesson all over again, both nationally and individually - because part of our economic and fiscal challenges are the result of the excesses of financial institutions - but also the excesses of individuals, whether it’s credit cards or mortgages or whatever – excess spending. Excessive spending.

Smith: In a curious way Ronald Reagan decoupled conservatism from fiscal responsibility.

Frey: Budget balancing.

Smith: He opened the door to credit card conservatism.

Frey: Right.
Smith: And we’re paying the price.

Frey: People are coming back to the fiscal fundamentals of the party, the Republican Party, which was sort of pirated by President Clinton there for a while. I think we are coming back to some of the basic fiscal tenets of the party and rightfully so.

Smith: Now, your family clearly goes back a long way in this town. What are your origins?

Frey: My grandfather, John E. Frey, was born here on the west side of Grand Rapids, at the corner of Straight and Douglas in 1880. He started Union Bank and Trust Company in 1918. The bank was subsequently chaired by my father and then myself. The Frey family has been here well before 1880. My two biological sons are fifth generation, so we have been here a long time. This is our family home and the city of my birth and several generations of Freys.

On my mother’s side, I should just add parenthetically, my mother’s family moved here in 1911 or 12, the Taliaferros, and were originally from Virginia. But this branch came from Missouri and my grandfather Taliaferro was chairman and chief executive officer of the American Seating Company during the great years of American Seating Company when it was, in fact, the premier manufacturer of school seating in the country. And then in World War II it converted to war time production. It was the major employer in Grand Rapids for thirty or forty years.

Smith: During which the town was transformed.

Frey: It transformed a lot, although there were years when I didn’t live here. I left to go to private school and returned about twenty years later and it had changed a lot, and it continues to change. I’ve tried to play a role in helping it change for the better and making it a more economically vibrant and more diverse city in terms of its culture and institutions. And so it’s changed a lot. There is more change on the horizon. If you don’t like change, this is probably not where you want to be. But I think we’ve retained some of our core values. Most of the changes have been physical changes, economic changes, cultural changes, but not value changes.
Smith: Well, that brings up a point. If you were describing Grand Rapids to someone who had never been here, what is it that sets it apart, not so much physically or geographically, but in terms of the culture, the values?

Frey: I think it is very Midwestern. We’re not blessed with an abundance of truly great architecture, but we’re Midwestern people and our core values have stayed steady through all the economic turmoil that we’ve currently experienced in the state. But I think it’s basically Midwestern, a very friendly city, for the most part. Private people, perhaps, but very frugal, dependable, hardworking, diligent, certainly a very prayerful culture. Churchy, as described by others. But it is what it is and it’s not atypical of other upper Midwestern cities. We’re equal distance between Chicago and Detroit. We’re never going to be a megatropolis, but we can be a terrific, fabulous, mid-size city and retain the virtues, if you will, and the culture that was embodied in President Ford, which he carried through all his life. He never strayed from his principles, and I think that is one of his greatest attributes.

Smith: I said in his eulogy that emotionally, he never left Grand Rapids.

Frey: Right.

Smith: I think that’s true.

Frey: Whenever I saw him in a crowd, he just had this glow in his eyes, a smile that wouldn’t quit and a genuine affection for his constituents and for his mission. And he was true to his mission, he was true to himself, comfortable in his own skin, and understated, and yet a tower of strength and highly principled. And if you talk to those who served with him from his early years in Congress all the way through to his presidency and afterwards, he was the same Gerald Ford that you knew, whenever you knew him. And the level of his seniority did not affect the man.

Smith: We were talking to Greg Ford and he said something I thought was remarkable. I asked him the last time he saw his uncle. He said it was in March of 2006. He got out there and he said they had forty-five minutes together. At one point Greg said something, not that he intended to do this, but he was kind of curious if he were ever to go into politics. He said, “You
know, Uncle Jerry, I’d really like to know what is the most important thing for someone to know who is going into politics. What in your life sort of defined your success?” And President Ford said something very interesting. He said, “I always made other people’s problems my own.” Which is a very interesting way to sum up looking back how he saw his career.


Smith: When did you first meet him?

Frey: As a very young man, he was a congressman. We lived in the southeast part of town, East Grand Rapids, where Congressman Ford lived. I may have met him before, this must have been early ‘50s, and he came to our house on a Saturday morning to discuss some pending legislation with my father. I was home and I met him at the door and introduced myself and somehow that sticks in my memory. There may have been an earlier meeting, but on this occasion I would have been maybe nine or ten – something like that. And it’s one of those special moments and I’ll just never forget it. It was a sort of interesting moment, my father and Jerry Ford spent probably an hour, an hour and a half together on some legislation that was pending in Congress and he left to go on to another commitment.

Smith: On a Saturday morning.

Frey: The first of many meetings, and they were always interesting, they were always fun, and enormously important.

Smith: What made him such a successful congressman?

Frey: Well, he paid a lot of attention to his constituents; he was always available. While in the Navy on in my second tour of duty I was stationed in Japan, and spent a lot time in Vietnam; I was in the war zone – frequently, not in combat, per se, but in the war zone. I got out of the Navy and I was doing some job interviewing and stopped in Washington and had a good talk with Congressman Ford and he was a great listener, a great listener. Because of our mutual Navy experience, (my father who served in the Navy on Guam had the same experience in World War II) there was a special sort of affinity there
and we could relate to each other. He asked all the right questions, and I’m not sure I gave all the right answers, but I gave him the best answers I had. We had a great conversation. After I was out of the service and we had more meetings subsequently all the way through his passing. Special guy.

The Vietnam war was winding down and the fleet was being downsized and some naval base was being considered for closure or reduced capacity.

Smith: It’s interesting because someone who, by modern standards, had essentially a safe district and didn’t have to come home as often as he did - by all accounts he did come home.

Frey: He came home often, and as I said earlier, he was faithful to his constituents, made every effort to really pay attention to what was going on in his district, he listened to constituents. He absorbed it, he retained it. This was not a cameo appearance, we were not doing a walk on – he was genuinely interested in people’s lives their concerns and what their views on various issues, and I think that’s made him a great congressman. He became the influence that he was in the House of Representative – he knew what was going on in the streets and on the farms and in the cities and suburbs of Western Michigan, of his district. And he never forgot from whence he came. He just had such great bearings and great orientation, and he was so well grounded, if you will, in Western Michigan.

Smith: People over and over again say, “What you saw is what you got.” That almost begs a question of whether there was, maybe not as visible, and in the best sense of the word, ambition, calculation - guile is a pejorative. But here’s a guy who was going places, who obviously wanted to be Speaker of the House and all of that. I wonder if, at some times in his life, he didn’t use that reputation – nice, good old Jerry. In a sense, putting to use for him?

Frey: The President was a very moxie, individual and that could have been. He was in some respects self-effacing, but ambitious - I would say appropriately aggressive in the right circumstances. He was a highly competitive individual. All of his athletic and academic activities reflect that, suggest that, and confirm that. He could have used that personality trait to advance his career,
but it was not in any way but in a truthful, forthcoming, forthright manner, which was the essence of the man.

Smith: Were people here surprised to see this projectory when he became Republican leader of the House, and then the leap to the vice presidency?

Frey: I don’t think you could be surprised. He was so respected and revered by his fellow Republicans in the House; and even the Democrats – of course that was a different era, a different process, if you will, of how legislation got passed that we don’t have today to the extent we had it then. But I don’t think we should be surprised. I think he was so well respected, even if you disagreed with the man, that to see him continually move up in the leadership chain was not surprising. In fact, it’s a confirmation of all that is great about this country and about the person as well as the process and what you can do with the great set of characteristics, attributes, faculties and energy that he brought to the task. I don’t think we should be surprised; we should be proud that we sent him there.

Smith: There must have been local critics. We were talking to Werner Veit earlier today, and he made it clear that he and the paper were somewhat to the left of Ford, although having the same veneration, almost. But they were very critical of the pardon at the time. But I was wondering even before that, when he became sort of a local institution, whether there were people taking pot shots?

Frey: I’m sure there were. There’s always somebody saying how could he? But there’s always this part of the human condition, there’s always the naysayers, the ankle biters, those who would hound you – whether it’s jealousy or whatever – people who would second-guess the success of an individual, for whatever reasons they may have. But they are, in this case, so far in the minority. You have to listen to all who have contrary views, but I would say those who disagreed with his progression up the political ladder all the way to the White House would be small in number.

Smith: Do you ever find it ironic that he was largely responsible for the Calder?
Frey: Most people would not attribute the acquisition and placement of the Calder – that was perhaps not one of President’s personal areas of interest and perceived skill set - but it was the National Endowment of the Arts who helped do it. It was something the city wanted, and if it was not high on his priority list, he recognized that it was high on the community’s priority list and would work tirelessly to make it happen, which he did.

Smith: How controversial was it locally?

Frey: Well, actually, I was not here at the time. This was late mid-Sixties and I had finished graduate school and then off to the Navy for three plus years, I’d been deferred through graduate school. I was commissioned in Newport, Rhode Island, and then off to my first tour of duty I went. Although I did get some clippings from the then Grand Rapids Herald and the Press. I knew it was controversial in many quarters, but as we look back, it was really a national first for the NEA and the city and it has become sort of our hallmark. Our logo, if you will.

Smith: It’s also intriguing that as president he gave the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Sandy Calder, just before Calder died. So there was some connection for him there.

Frey: I guess I had forgotten that fact. He understood the need for public art in the cultural mix, even if maybe it was not his own personal first priority in terms of his passions. But he certainly respected the place that it had in our culture, both nationally and around the world.

Smith: We had been told that he did not want a statue of himself here at the museum. So they did the spaceman and he was happy with that. We’ve also been told that he gave genial, but firm advice to people that, “whatever you do make it representational art.”

Frey: You may end up with a statue – I don’t know if the final decision has been made for all time – but for those of us who are trustees of the Ford Foundation we try to live by his direction.

Smith: Now, by the time he was president, were you back?
Frey: I was living in New York City at the time. I got out of the Navy in December, 1970, about one or two months early. They were issuing early outs for some of the officers – I was a Lt. JG, stationed in Sasebo, Japan, but was on Yankee Station frequently and it was a great experience. I was all over Asia, primarily in Vietnam and so forth. And then I moved to New York because I was a bachelor and wanted to work for a bank in Manhattan. I can remember the headline in the *New York Times*, “Gerry Ford becomes vice president,” Jerry with a “G.” And he was so unknown to most of the country. I think you’ll find there is an above the fold article in the *New York Times* library that was a little bit embarrassing, perhaps, at the *Times*, having misspelled his name. I had moved back to Grand Rapids when he became president in August 1974.

Smith: What did you think about the pardon?

Frey: I think, as most people did, that it was sort of a bolt out of the blue on that Sunday morning. Not expected or anticipated by some, although there was always that sort of occasional undercurrent as if it was something the President was thinking about. I think that the trauma of the Watergate process was so gut wrenching, that when Vice President Ford became the president in August, it soon became apparent that he was spending an inordinate amount of his time related to “Watergate” and Nixon-related issues; a huge distraction for him personally and the Cabinet; and just the uncertainty of it all and where it was going to lead, and for how long it was going to take to get there. The process itself could have taken not just months, but years, and that would have incessantly invaded the time, energy and focus of the President who had so many critical issues that demanded his attention.

So I think in hindsight, and hindsight comes in different time frames. Sometimes it’s weeks, sometimes it’s twenty years and thirty, but I think almost to a person today, the wisdom of it, and I would say the courage of it at the time he did it, was pretty amazing. And it really speaks to the individual and to the level of comfort that he has in his own skin and his own judgment. It would have been very easy, in some respects, to pay less attention to it, let the process go where it was it was going to go, and be in the headlines, either above the fold or below the fold, day after day, month after month, year after
year. Today I think President Ford’s decision is pretty clear to almost everyone that he really just cut it short. I think those that think there was some sort of deal struck, I think they are misguided and unfounded in their belief.

Smith: Thankfully Ford lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his way of thinking. He said, “For twenty years everywhere I go people asked the same questions.” When the Kennedy Library gave him the Profiles in Courage Award, they stopped asking the questions.

Frey: It really sort of put it to conclusion and it could have been some other circumstance, but that sort of stopped it for all time.

Smith: It’s unstoppable.

Frey: It sort of said, “That’s it. Move on.” I always, in my heart of hearts, wish the President could have had one full term of his own to let the public get a full measure of the man. With all respect to President Carter and the election, the challenges of the two and a half year presidency, there would have been a much more substantial evaluation then and now, because we would have had a chance to really see some legislation passed, do some really great things instead of being on defensive for a good part of his presidency.

Smith: Now, presumably, you got to know him much better after he left office. Was there resentment locally when he decided to locate in California?

Frey: I think there was some head scratching, but I have to go back for just a moment. A wonderful memory of mine is that I had just moved back to Grand Rapids in 1973-74, and I think it was 1975 or 6. The President came on one of his visits to Grand Rapids and stayed with my parents. The Secret Service came in and had the house wired with all these special phones and the President spent the night. I came over to my parents’ home and had a wonderful visit with the President, mixed him a drink. He’d had a very long day. He stayed with some other friends from time to time, Bob Brown, I think, and perhaps some others. But it was a really special moment because he was sort of off duty. I remember because my parents lived next door to Bob and Mary(?) Pew, and the Pews came over and had drinks as well with the President and he had his valet with him. It was a wonderful couple of hours
with a sitting president who could talk about anything, it was off the record and all amongst friends. There was nothing particularly sensitive discussed, it was a fun moment.

But people appreciated Betty Ford’s health issues, her back and related issues – I think it was asthmatic issues, perhaps. I’ve sort of forgotten all the medical issues, but they had looked at a number of different climates that would give them the privacy that they earned and deserved, as well as be more helpful to her medical conditions. I think people were hoping that he would come here, or hoping that maybe he would retain a residence and spend a portion of the year here or maybe in northern Michigan, that way they could have some privacy. But I don’t think that anybody, for more than a short period of time, took exception to their decision to select Palm Springs because he was so loyal to the city, and came back frequently.

Smith: Has Marty told you this wonderful story about Mary Pew, who apparently, umpteen years ago, was a potential suitor?

Frey: They actually dated.

Smith: They did? Okay. Has Marty told you this story? One evening he was going on about Grand Rapids and the name came up and so on. Once prompted he started going on about “Gee, just think, I might have married Mary.” And Mrs. Ford said, “Now, just think, if you had married Mary Pew, instead of being President of the United States, you could have been president of Steelcase.”

Frey: There you go.

Smith: Perfect shaft. But he took it. One saw that they had that very kind of comfortable relationship. She had a sharp wit and he almost enjoyed the darts.

Frey: Well, they did date. Mary reminded us about that during that evening over at my parents’ house. It must have been in the ‘40s, I guess; obviously before he married Betty.

Smith: Now, there was obviously some controversy about where the Ford Library-Museum was going to go. And isn’t it the act of a congressman to split it
down the middle? When this came up with Werner, I said, “Were you upset about that?” He said, “Well, actually by that time people in Grand Rapids just wanted to make sure we didn’t lose the whole thing, so we were delighted to get the museum.”

Frey: I was living in New York City. Well, I can’t recall all the facets – there was really a question of where to locate the museum in the city. There were some that were wishing that it would be on the east side of the Grand River, and it turned out it’s on the west. It’s been a great location, a great site. I think, my own personal view is, that the President’s loyalty to the University of Michigan was extraordinary and special and deservedly so. I think most people think at the time the decision was made to split the library and museum that it was the right decision then, but with the renaming of the school of public policy, the Ford School of Public Policy - that hindsight always being perfect, and 20-20, that the Ford School undoubtedly is and will continue to be the focus of the President’s legacy in Ann Arbor. And at some point, maybe consideration should be given to uniting the library and museum to Grand Rapids. I do not think the GSA would permit another bifurcated presidential museum and library in the presidential system.

Smith: No, that’s safe to say. And I think the trick is in convincing the University that they are not actually losing a library, but they are gaining a foothold in West Michigan.

Frey: And it could easily be identified as such. That’s a whole different issue for another day. But I think it would increase attendance, I think it would be more operationally effective from the budget standpoint. There are lots of issues to talk about. But it is what it is. It was the right decision for the President when he made it, but I don’t think you’ll see another split facility in the presidential museum system going forward.

Smith: I know he wanted very much to put it downtown. I understand that Fred Meijer had some land and it was very generously offered. There is a sense that a lot of people looked at this and thought that it was a curious place to put it. But in many ways, hasn’t it been a catalyst for what followed?
Frey: It really has. It really accelerated the growth and development of the near west side of the city, which for the most part has been industrial and residential. As you look around the museum has a fabulous view to the east and the north and to the south. It’s been a huge success. And so I think it’s been a catalyst for growth and investment, mostly private investment in the west side of the city. And it’s going to continue to move in that direction. So I think it’s been a great pick, it’s a great pick for the President’s burial site.

Smith: And that was always part of the package.

Frey: Always part of the package; I understand that. It’s a very special place, and reflects his loyalty to the city of his birth.

Smith: Now you must have seen a great deal of him in his later years when he came here.

Frey: Right.

Smith: Did you go to a football game with him or watch football with him?

Frey: I did not have that opportunity, but on several occasions when he was here or we were in Palm Springs or Ann Arbor in his later years, we always had a few quiet moments to talk. He knew my grandfather who was born in 1880, died in 1962, and he was chairman of the bank, Union Bank and Trust Company. I can remember the President saying, “Gosh, Dave, I remember your grandfather so well and your dad.” The President and my father went to the University of Michigan together. They were fraternity brothers. The President always kidded me, “Your dad was pretty tough on me down at the Deke house.” They were both members of Delta Kappa Epsilon. My father was in the class of ’32 and the President was class of ’35. So really, the family relationship goes back to the late nineteen twenties, if not the early 1930s and so it’s been a great friendship and a very respectful relationship and a very special one that has spanned a lot of decades and it’s going to keep going.

Smith: How did he change over time? Let me put that in a more specific context. I’ve often wondered whether he didn’t change and the Republican Party moved ever further to the right - or a different set of issues came up and illustrated
that difference. There were a number of issues on which, as I said in the
eulogy, most of us tend to get more conservative as we get older, and he
certainly never stopped being a fiscal conservative. But he seemed to become
more tolerant. And I often wondered how much of that was her influence on
him and how much was just the experience he had in life.

Frey: I think that clearly his wife, Betty, has been a huge influence on some issues.
And he has such love and affection and respect for her, and was an advocate
for her views on a lot of issues, which I think he shared genuinely. And he
was a fabulous listener, he could digest things. I think he aged very
gracefully, for the most part. His basic personality didn’t change much. You
may not have the same energy level as you get a little bit older, but I found
him a remarkably consistent person both in style and thought and action. I
think the party has moved in a different direction. But certainly the process
has moved in a different direction. And the style that made him so successful
in the ’50s and ’60s and ’70s is a different style today, much more
confrontational, much more along party lines. Still, negotiation is important,
but it’s a different era. But I think he was true to himself, true to his views,
willing to change when circumstances changed and world events caused
change. But I found him remarkably stable in those things where he could be
true to himself and true to his views, and true to his convictions.

Smith: At least one opinion that changed, from the time he left office until later in
life, was his opinion of Jimmy Carter. It took a while, but they became very
good friends.

Frey: I think in the heat of the battle, when you are fighting for your political life,
particularly for the presidency, some things get said; some things get done,
not necessarily by the principles, but by secondary, tertiary staff people, well
intentioned as they are, to sort of create issues that would not otherwise be
created. I think that it really turned out to be a remarkable relationship and
friendship. It took a while after President Carter had served in office. I think it
was on the flight to Sadat’s funeral that they sort of bonded, and subsequent to
that had some great time together and very respectful and I think some
genuinely warm feelings towards each other. As different as they might be on
a number of issues, they got over it finally and were able to put all this stuff aside and had a pretty good one on one relationship.

Smith: That’s a great example for their successors, in both parties.

Frey: Absolutely. The Carters were here when we rededicated the museum. It was a fabulous dinner. The senior Bushes Mrs. Johnson, Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg and, oh gosh, it was a great event.

Smith: You must have seen him in the crux of the Foundation, and his fiscal conservatism. Tell us about it.

Frey: We had a meeting of the Ford Foundation in the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel several years ago now, when the Foundation was much more modest in size. We were talking – a number of the trustees, maybe fifteen of us in the room with the President – and we were talking about the investment portfolio. Well, the President being a child of the Depression, his parents having lived through the Depression, as did my grandparents and parents, and that was a huge influence on any young person…it was a huge influence. And the President was concerned with this. He said, “We should be 98% in bonds.” And Fred Meijer was in the room and myself and Pete Secchia and a few others and in the conversation. “Mr. President, that may be a little too conservative. If we want to grow the principle of the Foundation we should be more diversified.”

So after a long discussion we moved from a predominately, almost exclusively, bond portfolio to a much better mix of assets. I had explained to the President that’s what we had done in the Frey Foundation in terms of diversity of our assets. And how we needed to grow the Foundation in order to sustain our grant making. I think he thought about it, it took him a while to get there, but at the end of the day – several weeks later, he signed off on a different mix of assets that would help us grow this Foundation over a period of time.

Smith: And, obviously, it grew far beyond what its originators envisioned.
Frey: Both by the investment portfolio and by gifts. We’ve had extremely generous donors to the Foundation. We still need to grow it some more, but between our investment performance and our gifts we really are doing quite well.

Smith: And you’ve weathered the storm over the last couple of years?

Frey: We have. There’s been some uneasy moments for all of us, both individually and for the Ford Foundation, and even if you think you’ve got a well-balanced portfolio, when you get some of these dramatic and traumatic shifts in the market, you’re going to take some temporary – hopefully temporary – some asset diminution. But the markets recover. And it’s still true today that equities over the long haul will serve you well, but you do have to have a balance.

Smith: Did he have a sense of humor?

Frey: He had a great sense of humor. And I can remember he had a great laugh. It was more of a chortle, maybe, than a laugh, and it was genuine. It was deep, it came from well within him; he had a great sense of humor. It had to be the right moment and the right person. He had this great chemistry and it had to be the right person, right time, and when it came out it was wonderful to hear, wonderful to see. It was fun to be with him. I think he was a good storyteller.

Smith: Actually, it’s funny. Penny and I were co-conspirators, because I was writing a lot of his stuff in the later years, and she would make him practice and practice and practice. He wasn’t a natural joke teller. He said one time, “If I had to do things over, I would have spent much more time mastering communications skills.” So he knew he wasn’t a natural spellbinder. But the sincerity showed through.

Frey: The sincerity, the genuineness, his truthfulness came through. I think in hindsight, that’s probably one of the things he could have spent a little more time on, as it became more of a communications age. Knowing the President went to Washington in the late ‘40s, television wasn’t then the nation’s primary communication vehicle. Whatever you do, you need to be a great communicator, an effective communicator. Some are better than others, but
it’s not personal politics but because television is so persuasive and it’s increasingly important.

Smith: He spent a lifetime, very successfully for the most part, controlling his temper. Did you ever see his temper?

Frey: Not frequently. I think most of what you saw with his temper was a clenching down on his pipe, or something that sort of conveyed a concern. But I never heard him say an unkind word toward anyone, which speaks volumes for the man, no matter what his thoughts, or whatever concerns he had about individuals or circumstances. I never heard him issue an unkind word towards anybody. So it takes me back to what my mother, [when I was] a young boy would say to me when I was a young boy, “If you can’t say anything nice about someone, don’t say it.” He was very civil. And he was the right person in the right place at the right time, all through his career. And he had a wonderfully diverse and enriching career – from his naval experiences, or even as a young boy here, all the way through the presidency.

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

Frey: I do remember the last time I saw him. I saw him in Ann Arbor at the groundbreaking of the Ford School of Public Policy in November 2004. I have a picture in my office of the President and Sandy Weill and myself. That was about two years before he passed away. He did not make it back for the dedication. This was an indoor, ceremonial groundbreaking, and he was sort of frail at that point. Then I was with him at – the last Gerald R. Ford Foundation trustee meeting he attended in Palm Springs in June 2005, about 18 months before he passed away.

Smith: And he announced that he was Deep Throat.

Frey: Oh, that’s right.

Smith: And there’s one time he practiced and practiced, and by all accounts, he pulled it off. Had the place just stunned.

Frey: It was like, oh my gosh. And after a second you could hear the laughter fill the room, and that was a great moment. I’m so glad Judy and I went out to
Palm Springs for that meeting. It was very difficult for him to travel at that point. And I’m not so sure he left Palm Springs after that.

Smith: Up until he was around ninety he was still getting around, and then the doctors really prohibited it and I thought that was a kind of death. Because he just loved traveling. He liked rubber chicken, he just loved it all.

Frey: He’d been doing it for so many years, and when you stop doing something that you love, and you’re used to it, it’s like the wheels start falling off the wagon.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction at the time of his death?

Frey: I can’t say that I was – I think he was respected and revered, and I think the outpouring for him, particularly here – was pretty remarkable. And by his own design was a modest funeral for a very modest person. He could have had a much more elaborate service, but it reflected the man and what was important to him, and it was comfortable for the family. He was very sensitive, as you and others know, of his relatively short presidency, and that he was an unelected president. He wanted to make sure the service was respectful of the scale and style of other elected presidents. It was a very moving moment for me and for everybody who knew the President.

You never know what you have until you don’t have it, or maybe appreciate what you have until you don’t have it. And I had so many moments when I think how much I miss this good man – for who he was and what he did. For how special he was and yet he had such an understated style, but so dependable and so remarkable in so many ways. So I am not amazed. If I am halfway typical of the country, what the country values in its leadership. The outpouring of goodwill for this man was genuine, it was nothing other than a heartfelt goodbye. He was terrific then and now…he had this great respect.

Smith: Would he have been surprised to see the lines?

Frey: He would have been, but he probably shouldn’t have been. But that was also his style. Even after he left the presidency, he had this modesty about the fact that he had served as president. You don’t see many people who were
respected, revered and adored like this individual. It is very rare to be respected and liked – he was both.

Smith: Last question: how do you think he should be remembered?

Frey: I think he should be remembered as he is remembered. I think it is really important that those of us who are involved in the President’s Foundation continue to educate, to promote in the best sense of the word, his legacy, his contributions to the country, and the world. I’m very much in favor, and we’re working very diligently, to have a definitive biography written and published about this President. I am an advocate for that as part of his legacy, because he really does need that to cement his place in history. The School of Public Policy in Ann Arbor and this museum, as well as the library in Ann Arbor will collectively promote and secure his place in history. I think his legacy will continue to grow, even given his short presidency. So I am optimistic. So we are committed to making sure that his place in history is secure for all time. He’s the real deal.

Smith: That’s perfect.
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Smith: We often ask people to tell us something surprising about Gerald Ford, something that might surprise people.

Gergen: I’ll tell you what surprised me. It was that he was a lot brighter than what I’d been told. And just a smart man, more informed and more talented. And I think one of the biggest mistakes we made on the White House staff was to underestimate his (George W. Bush’s) - underestimate his talents and capacity. I have written about the fact that I found it agonizing to go through the speech preparation process in the Ford White House, and I’m happy to talk all about that. But it was as if we were writing speeches for *See Jane Run*. Everything was reduced to single syllables because he would stumble over them; simple declarative sentences.

We thought, and to some degree in our arrogance, this is what suited him best, because otherwise he might stumble. But after he left office, I got a call from his team one day saying President Ford has a speech he needs to give and he’s got a draft and he’d like you to look over it. “Can we fax it to you? He’d like to call you at home tonight and talk about it.” I said, sure. And I got it and it was a very complex speech. It was beautifully written, but very complex; lots of three or four syllable words, and I thought somebody has written an elegant speech, but it’s not Ford. And what he wants me to do is to “dumb it down,” to put it into simpler language. Something that he would feel comfortable with. And so when he called me that night, he just said, “Well, how did you like the speech?” And I said, “Well, Mr. President, it’s a wonderful speech. Really elegant, but it’s not quite you. Did you want me to work on it or whatever?” And I could hear him chuckling in the background, he had a pipe. And I talked a little bit more and I talked myself further and further out on a limb. And finally he said, “Well, I just wanted to…” He said, “For a long, long, time, I’ve never had the space in my life to write my own speech. This is the first time I’ve done it for a long time, but I wanted you to read it.” And I
said, “Oh, my God.” But my biggest sensation was, we totally misunderstood just how capable this man was, that he could have given some of the most impressive speeches and oratory. That he really was a thoughtful and deep person. It was like so much of Jerry Ford that he was so self-effacing. He was so humble, but he would never correct you. On the other hand, he did not want you sort of belittling him.

Smith: Was that the problem with Jim Schlesinger?

Gergen: I was just going to say…Jim Schlesinger is one of the brightest people I have ever met in public life. The man has candle power far surpassing that of almost anybody else. But as defense secretary, when he started lecturing President Ford about how the appropriation process worked on Capitol Hill, and Ford had spent years doing this himself and being master of it, I think frankly the President was pissed off. And he fired him. He just didn’t want to have to put up with that guff. But you could see that. We did have some inklings, and early on when I first came there – I’d been there in the White House at the end of the Nixon days, and I stayed on for part of the early Ford period. Then they flushed me out, with every good reason. They wanted to get the Nixon people out of there.

Smith: That’s a huge question – that period. Rumsfeld told him to basically clean house.

Gergen: Right.

Smith: He was reluctant to do that for a number of reason. Stepping back, how did the meshing go? How did the Nixon holdovers deal with the Ford incomers?

Gergen: It was not an easy transition. There continued to be an arrogance and smugness on the part of the some of the Nixon people; and yet the scandal had engulfed us. For those of us who worked in the Nixon administration – I was a young kid at the time, and I thought it was like playing for the Chicago Black Sox. I thought we were finished in baseball, in effect. I thought none of
us would ever come back and we would be written off. But when President Ford arrived, as nice as he was, he had only a small coterie of people around him, and they were very mixed in their attitudes toward the Nixon people. Almost to a person, they didn’t like the Nixon people. By definition, they wanted to do everything different. If Nixon had walked on the left side of the road, they wanted to walk on the right side of the road. They didn’t want a Haldeman around, they didn’t want a strong chief of staff, all the things that are obvious.

Smith: And was Hartmann the personification of that?

Gergen: Hartmann was the personification of that, and Bob, I think mellowed some in the years since, but he did see us as the Pretorian guard – that’s what he wrote about later on. He very much wanted to be protective of Jerry Ford. I happened to think he was right, his instinct that wanted to protect Jerry Ford was right.

Smith: From himself?

Gergen: I think he wanted to protect him from the Nixonians. I think he wanted to preserve the Ford that he knew as the man of integrity and not get splashed out. Because, you know we had all these questions then about the pardon and everything else that arose very quickly.

Smith: Is there a thin line between being protective and being possessive?

Gergen: Yes. And I don’t think you can see quite where the line is. But he had been there for Ford, he was his guy, and every president I know has got someone who is sort of protective of the boss. But Hartmann had outsized influence, and he was also erratic, so you never knew quite where you stood with him. You couldn’t go in and have a conversation because he was very hard to approach. And I think it was quite clear that President Ford, having been thrust into these circumstances, didn’t have the kind of team you’d normally have coming into the presidency. He had a congressional team; he had a
House congressional team. That’s a very mixed bag and the President of the United States needs the best that he can get. President Ford knew he needed some help; and so he, I thought, was more welcoming, personally, and more respectful and more to do well by. (?)But the team was not.

For example, I had been head of the Nixon speechwriting team at the end. It was a speechwriting and research team. It was unclear what my future was. I assumed that over time we would all be asked to leave, but it would be a graceful exit of some sort. Al Haig was still there as chief of staff and I got a call from Haig one morning saying they just put the word out that there is a new head of the speechwriting team – Paul Tice – you’ve been replaced. He said, “I tried to stop it. I tried to do it in a more dignified way, but they just sort of basically cut off their head.” And he was really angry because they bypassed him to do it, Hartmann had bypassed him.

Smith: One senses that Hartmann and Haig were put on the planet to piss each other off. We talked to Haig before he died, and the thing that got him red-faced with anger, thirty years later, was Hartmann.

Gergen: Well, it was possible to hate Bob Hartmann. He engendered that. But, by the way, he also enjoyed – it’s one of these things like Franklin Roosevelt in ‘36 – “I relish my enemies.” So he didn’t suffer people because they didn’t like him very much. I got tossed out on my ass, but then they came back to me and said, “Well, would you like to work for Paul Tice?” And I said, “Not on your life, I’m not doing that. I’m out of here.” But there was a lot of stuff like that that went on that was messy.

Smith: But you were the mainstay – there were literally rival speechwriting teams, organizations. What does it say about the President? His loyalty to Bob Hartmann notwithstanding. Can someone be too loyal? Can you be too nice? Tolerating Hartmann and all that, professionally, let alone personally. How can this system – if you want to dignify it as such – work?
Gergen: Not well. It was tricky. That’s why eventually he had to have a chief of staff, and that’s why eventually, when Dick Cheney came in, he needed to have more power. He couldn’t make the place work; it was riven with tensions and rivalries. I’ll give you an example: the State of the Union Address in 1976. I had just come back, I think, in the fall of ’75, I had just been a short time. And Cheney was running things. Rummy had gone to Defense by then. It was Rummy and Cheney together who had invited me to come back to the White House. They needed help on communications and one thing and another, and I got a fancy title.

But when it came to doing the State of the Union speech, there was a very strong view among Dick Cheney and his top lieutenants – I was one of those – that this needed to be a very thematic speech. Bob Teeter, a pollster, was urging that, to be very thematic, not be a laundry list. And then Hartmann came up with the first draft, he was tasked with doing the draft and working with the President. And it turned out to be a total laundry list, which is exactly what the bulk of the people around the President didn’t want. So I was tasked, over Hartmann’s objections, but with the President’s approval, I was tasked along with Alan Greenspan to write an alternative, which we did. And it was very thematic. And then we had a showdown meeting in the Oval Office, I think, early of an evening, and there were like sixteen of us in the room in a big circle. We had these two different drafts. Everybody read the two drafts. We had a big discussion about the merits and demerits of each draft. Hartmann was “Urff, urff,” and so finally….

Smith: At least he was sober.

Gergen: Yeah. And finally the President said, “Okay, I need each one of you to vote individually. I’m going to go around the circle and ask each one of you which one you prefer.” The vote was fourteen to two in favor of the Greenspan/Gergen draft. The two votes against were Hartmann and Jerry Ford. And guess which speech he gave.
Smith: Lincolnesque.

Gergen: Lincolnesque. Five votes against, Lincoln says, “I want to do it the other way. The ayes have it.”

Smith: But that raises a question. One way of seeing the Ford presidency is a trajectory, over two and a half years, of outgrowing the congressional mindset.

Gergen: I felt that he became much more comfortable in the office. I mean, we all remember that this was not the office he sought. He wanted to be Speaker. He always was a creature of the House; he loved the House of Representatives; he loved the people; he was one of these people who was a grand bipartisan—a partisan—but a grand bipartisan. And that was the institution he assumed. He was so much himself there. Usually for the presidency, you have to go through a lot of psychological preparation, as well as intellectual preparation. It is a very different job from anything else in the United States. It is a unique position. Most people spend a lifetime trying to get there. It’s a slippery pole, as we all know, and it takes an extraordinary amount of ego to get there. And you have to do a lot of crazy things to get there in terms of the craziness of the American campaign.

And so Ford hadn’t gone through any of that, and he brought a congressional mindset, but he was serious about the nation’s problems, but he didn’t know quite how to go about solving them. And he didn’t quite know how to be president. He’d never played that role before. One of the things that saved him, and why I think he was a much better president, especially in the rearview mirror of history, was not only his integrity, which was, I think, enormous, but he also was so self-effacing. He was so accepting of who he was that he was extremely comfortable to have people around—in fact, wanted to have people around—who was better than he was in what they did. So he was extremely comfortable with talented people like a Kissinger. And he was extremely comfortable with a Greenspan and others.
Smith: The Cabinet he put together was pretty impressive.

Gergen: I think if you look at it, by the time he left office, he had assembled one of the best Cabinets around. I think if you look back over history, the Ed Levis of the world – were just really high quality people at the Justice Department. And he drew other people like that – Bill Coleman and there are so many others that went on to serve the public for years later. But he had to grow into the presidency itself. I saw a dramatic change when the campaign – and through the spring primaries of ’76 – remember I came back late ’75, left in ’74, came back in ’75 – through the campaign’s early primaries, we were sort of in a mess. Once Reagan got his voice and started whipping us, it got rough and tumble. And Dick hadn’t been given the controls.

Finally, Dick not only won his confidence, but the President realized I’ve got to have a strong chief of staff to make this work. And he gave Dick a lot more authority. And Dick Cheney, in those days, was a very substantial, and I think, terrific chief of staff. I had parted company with ______________ later on that was a whole different story in the George W. years. But I had a lot of respect for Dick Cheney in those years. There were a number of us who thought he’d be a great national candidate one day. Because we’d worked with him and at the age of thirty-five he was terrific.

Smith: Let me make sure I understand, in terms of acceding him power - was it that Rumsfeld had had that power and Cheney wasn’t initially given the same kind of authority?

Gergen: No, I think it was that Rumsfeld had – one had less power than Haldeman did, less power than Haig did. Ford really did believe in the Spokes of the Wheel concept. But when Cheney came in, because he was young, and he wasn’t Rumsfeld, he even had less power than Rumsfeld. When this was all over and we were already to depart, there was a farewell party for Cheney. We gave him a – Terry O’Donnell brought it, I think – it was an old bicycle tire, and it was all gnarled up and broken and spokes were coming out. But this was a
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theory that we had – the Spokes of the Wheel concept – and it didn’t work. Boy, Cheney got that up and rolling. There was a pretty darn good team those last months. We were coming from thirty points back.

Smith: A number of people have said the atmosphere in the White House was different working under Rumsfeld than under Cheney. Specifically, Dorothy Downton, the President’s personal secretary - Rumsfeld tried to get her fired. Didn’t happen.

Gergen: I’ll tell you when I got into a really, really awkward situation. When I had left the Nixon White House, I went to work for Bill Simon, who was treasury secretary. Tough, no-nonsense, very conservative. And he and I got along very well together, and I became very close to him, and worked for him for a year. And when we were there, and I can’t quite remember when it was, but when Dick was trying to run things early on, there was a movement outside the White House by a number of Ford friends – I think it was Charlie Bartlett, the former journalist, who was behind a lot of this.

Smith: The old Kennedy friend.

Gergen: Yes, the old Kennedy friend, who went to Bill Simon and said you really ought to be chief of staff, because they need somebody to take charge there. We’re going to lose the White House now if we’re not careful, and so forth and so on. And they had long conversations and they came to me to – and I was working for Dick and believed in Dick, but I also thought he had too little authority. And they had a letter from their group that they wanted to get to the President, and asked me if I would give it to him. This was very awkward for me because I wanted to be loyal to Dick Cheney, I believed in him, and yet I also knew this thing was not working. And Bill Simon was a friend of mine. So I eventually did get to the President, and I think I talked to Dick about it because he knew I’d been involved and I think he was – I can’t remember the exact circumstances – but it was just really hard because I was in a dilemma. I didn’t know quite what to do with it. But I didn’t want to be sponsoring Bill
Simon - as much as I liked Bill Simon, I didn’t want to sponsor him. But I also know the place needed to be shaken up. And I was so pleased when we made that shift and Dick really moved in. I think the place really humped them because we had a president who had really grown into the job, we had a staff that was clicking, we had people who liked each other. By and large, it was the most congenial White House staff – I’ve been on four White House staffs, and I have to tell you – I think it was the most congenial staff. You didn’t have to keep your back to the wall. After we got past the Hartmann chapter…

Smith: I was going to say – it seems like the mirror image of the original.

Gergen: Yes. And things had fallen into place and people sort of knew who they were. After a while, even though I’d been replaced by Paul Tice, for example, he and I became very respectful of each other and I wanted to see him succeed. He was a sweetheart of a guy.

Smith: By the way, do you know what job Hartmann was going to have in the second Ford administration?

Gergen: No.

Smith: Ambassador to Ireland.

Gergen: Oh, wow. The US News, in the Whispers column had me replacing Cheney in the second term, and I don’t believe for a second that was true. But you never knew quite what was going to happen there. But I did think there was a loyalty factor to Jerry Ford. People just liked him. The Ford Alumni Group were named, I think, the strongest of all the former president alumni groups that I’m aware of. The Nixon alumni group went on, but it was sort of like, we’re not going to go down, we’re in the ___________ together. And the Ford group really came together because they liked Jerry Ford and came back every June for his birthday.

Smith: Do you think the Reagan challenge made Ford a better candidate?
Gergen: Yes, I do.

Smith: Was that offset at all by undercutting…

Gergen: There is no question that the Reagan challenge strengthened the internal White House workings and put some more starch into the President because he knew he was going to have to fight for the job. But it also left him thirty points back, and with a Republican base that was divided. And he had to drop Nelson Rockefeller as a part of that challenge. And I think that was one of the hardest things he ever did, let’s put it that way.

Smith: Did you see evidence of an unhappy vice president?

Gergen: Of Nelson Rockefeller? I didn’t know him well. I just knew some of his team, they were very much like a third body altogether. I mean, you had the Nixon people, you had the Ford people, and you had the Rockefeller people. Some of them __________________, Joe Canzari went on to serve Reagan, I think, admirably. But they were sort of seen off to the side. I think Dick Parsons was floating around that group, as well. But it was almost an independent organ.

Smith: Did you see Ford’s temper?

Gergen: I saw his stubbornness. I never saw him throw his glasses across the room or anything like that. But he was one of the most stubborn men I ever met.

Smith: We all know about the Polish gaffe, which I guess took almost a week for him to take back.

Gergen: It took several days. We couldn’t convince him. Well, he was living in a bubble up there. He made the statement. We saw the polls change. Right after the debate was over people said he won the debate. And then the media started replaying the Polish thing and by noon the next day - Bob Teeter was polling them hourly – we’d lost the debate and we knew we had to reverse it. He was out with his traveling team, Dick Cheney was back in Washington, and everywhere he went he was greeted by these enthusiastic crowds. So, the
view from the plane was, hey, they love us out here. You guys are just using polls, it’s just New York, you live in a different world. We’re here in the real world.

Finally it got so bad Cheney had to fly out to Air Force One and pierce the bubble and say, “We’ve got to deal with this.” Do it for the best of intentions, but you’ve got to reverse it. And he did. But it took several days. It cost us. I don’t think it cost the election, but it cost us. I’ll tell you what it did was, we were coming up in the polls and it was stalled. We started up again, but there isn’t any question, if we had never stalled it could be he’d caught Carter altogether. I’m not so sure.

Smith: Doug Bailey describes it better than anyone…what the strategy was in ’76. Which is basically: if the election were about Ford he would lose. You had to make it about Carter. So it was about engendering doubt in this unknown commodity.

Gergen: Hard to do.

Smith: Yea.

Gergen: Because the narrative about Ford had been told in such a way it was very hard to overcome; stumbling, doesn’t understand, doesn’t know, the pardon, all the rest, the economy haywire. We had a bad economic situation.

Smith: I’ve often thought that while everyone focuses on the pardon as “the reason,” the fact is, you had basically caught up, and then the weekend before – Greenspan refers to it as “the pause” – there were economic numbers that came out that suggested this rocket recovery had stalled out. And I’ve often wondered if there was a critical mass of people who were prepared to vote for Ford, but when the slightest sort of infraction came along they said, “Well, I don’t really want to commit to four more years of this.”

Gergen: I think that’s right. And you’ve got to remember there was a romance about Carter. He wasn’t Nixon, he wasn’t Ford, he wasn’t an insider; and that was
working powerfully in his direction. And he did seem like a – there was something almost Obamaesque about the Carter campaign. It was well choreographed.

Smith: By the election, did you think you were going to win?

Gergen: No. I didn’t think we were. In fact, I’d say that in my heart of hearts, as much as I wanted Ford to win, I thought from the country’s point of view, maybe the time had come for a change, and new people. Get some fresh blood in, and all of us probably ought to take a rest. You do begin to realize after eight years of any administration that things wind down a lot. People were tired and the country needed some kind of lift. I didn’t realize what we were coming into. I’ll tell you what it really did, it revived the Republican Party. The out years were particularly productive for Republicans in terms of going back to the drawing board intellectually and refreshing and coming up with a whole series of ideas that Reagan could run with four years later. It prepared the table for Reagan. If Ford had won, there would have been no Reagan.

Smith: That’s true. I don’t know if you saw him after the election, because a number of people have said to us in varying degrees, it took him a while to bounce back.

Gergen: It did take him a while to bounce back. And he was angry at Carter. He didn’t like Carter.

Smith: The line we’ve heard is, he said to people, “I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer.”

Gergen: Well, he was. They finally, I think, put aside their differences, on that flight to Sadat’s funeral during the Reagan years.

Smith: That’s right. I’ve often wondered whether one of the things that brought them together was Ronald Reagan, and the fact that they’d both run against Reagan.
Gergen: That’s right. The word was, they were flying back, I think they spent a lot of time together talking and they were sort of aligned when they got back. And Ford thought that Carter had gone from chicken shit to chicken salad. But Nixon had gone to ___________, or Nixon was isolated off or something.

Smith: Nixon went on to conduct his own royal progress to the Middle East.

Gergen: Yeah, they were there together. I have a picture of all of us just before we left on that trip, Ford, Carter, Reagan and Nixon. I know there are four presidents in that picture. And they let staff people jump in for some shots. A lot of fun.

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

Gergen: Had very little contact with Mrs. Ford. I had continuing contact with him. I went to the dinners. He called me about some things, and I wrote a piece about him which he was really pleased about when the Kennedy Library gave him the annual award for courage. From the Kennedys for his pardon. I wrote a piece in the *New York Times*, he wrote me a note, he called me; we talked from time to time and I saw him in various places. I went out when they opened the Ford Policy Institute at the university – I saw him there. He asked me to come out and speak. I really was drawn to the man as a human being.

Smith: Don’t you think that time was good to him? Poor Lyndon Johnson, who died the day before the Vietnam Peace Agreement, such as it was – and yet Ford lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his way of thinking. The Kennedy Profiles in Courage Award was the imprimatur. He said to me, everywhere I’ve gone for twenty years, people have asked the same question. Since then they don’t ask the question any more.

Gergen: Is that right?

Smith: Yeah. It had that much impact.

Gergen: Well, it was. I always thought it was a courageous thing to do; I just thought it was hap handed in the way it was presented.
Smith: But you talk about in later years, the contacts that you had with him.

Gergen: I can’t remember exactly, but there were just notes that would come and an occasional phone call, or I’d see him somewhere.

Smith: In my eulogy I talked about the fact that most of us as we get older become more conservative. With him, it seemed the opposite. Whether he was reacting to the Reagan takeover of the party.

Gergen: It was partly that, I think it was probably Betty. Betty is a very modern sort of woman who has evolved over time. The two people I’ve seen the most adaptive like that have been Jerry Ford and George Schultz. George Schultz has gone through an extraordinary evolution in thinking. And you see he is very green, he’s very much for getting these prison laws in regard to drugs that he thinks is crazy, and destabilizing Mexico. He’s for a zero nuclear world – I just have a lot of respect for people who continue to grow and think. Bob Dole is one of those. But I thought Ford aged extremely well. And I also felt that his tenure in office looked better and better. You go back to the Richard Peeves’ apology to him in the American Heritage. It is really quite remarkable. I really did feel that captured what happened – that there were a lot of people, especially in the press, who had misjudged him.

But, you know – I want to go back to one of the things – I came in there late ’75. And going through the budget process and being in the room with him as he made decisions about the budget, came to the conclusion that he understands the federal appropriations process and the budget and the Congress better than almost anybody I’ve seen. He’s really good at this. He knew the numbers, he knew what the programs were, he knew what the first weapons systems were – he knew all this stuff and he knew a lot about the rest of the budgeting. So it was in that January/February when he presented his budget. Typically what a president does is send the budget up to Capitol Hill. It’s a big thick document and then he may come out and make a few sentences and then leave and have a press conference for the press that is
conducted by his budget director. The only person who had ever done that himself, the only president who had ever done that was Harry Truman. He did it himself, he briefed on his own budget. He is the only person who had the mastery of the budget. And so after hearing this for a while I went to Cheney and some others, Jim Jones, Jim Cavanaugh, and others, Jerry Jones and Terry O’Donnell and recommended strongly that Ford do his own briefing and surprise people. It was going to be a complete surprise.

He was terrific. And for a while then he really convinced a lot of journalists – this guy is smarter than we thought he was about the innards of government. Now he may not be the wise man or the strategist that Richard Nixon was, or the master of the process that Lyndon Johnson was, but he certainly can hold his own here. And it made a difference. All I would add to that is that we didn’t fully appreciate that inside, especially on the speeches.

Smith: I always say he is the least self-dramatizing of presidents. In an age where so much of the presidency is theater - that he really never was comfortable with.

Gergen: I agree. He would do it, but it was his _______________. He was a guy who was part of a club, got things done on Capitol Hill, did it well, liked his constituents and had a good life.

Smith: Were you surprised by the degree of reaction when he died? He’d been out of the public eye for a while.

Gergen: I was surprised because I hadn’t realized just how much warmth there was. I think there was a nostalgia about what he represented. He was a World War II representative, and he did represent those values. I think we miss that generation a lot. Almost everybody I’ve ever worked with in that World War II generation who has died has gone out with flags flying.

Smith: I remember you once saying that you had come to the conclusion that military service, if not essential, was hugely beneficial to a president.
Gergen: I do believe that. We had seven presidents in a row from Kennedy through Bush, Sr., who were the World War II presidents - as you know better than I - who all wore a military uniform. And I think it made a big difference. And, of course, before that Eisenhower and Truman. FDR had not, but he’d been very involved as assistant secretary of the navy. And I think that service in military uniform while young shaped the political culture of that generation and made it much more civic in nature. One of the reasons why I am now such a proponent, and went down to the Ford Institute when it was opened and tried to do all these other things - I’m a very big proponent of service, national service. Not everybody, but having both military service and domestic, civic service like Teach for America, I think make a huge difference for this next generation. I think that one of the big failings of people who came of age in the Sixties and Seventies was the fact that so few served. And it was so divisive and there were such deep resentments about it.

Smith: I just sent this essay off to Time on the Kennedy/Obama parallel. And there are surface parallels, but the huge, huge difference, it seems to me, is: Kennedy takes office 28 years after FDR begins his revolution in the course of which, because of the Depression and the war, there is fostered a collective sense of thinking. A solidarity born of shared trauma. And a trust in government, and a rallying around the president, culminating in the Bay of Pigs and so forth. Obama kicks off his presidency 28 years to the day after Reagan pronounces government more a problem than problem solver. And the Reagan consensus has not gone away.

Gergen: But there is no sense of national cohesion.

Smith: Exactly.

Gergen: And there is no sense of “we’re all in this together.”

Smith: Exactly, it’s “what’s in it for me?”
Gergen: So I’ve been extolling the new generation because I think it’s a great hope. I have to tell you, I was shaken a little bit when I went to see Social Network and this portrayal of Mark Zuckerberg may be unfair, but I came out and I found a lot of young people around here think, “Well, Mark Zuckerberg did what you have to do to succeed in life.” He was a visionary? “Oh, yeah. He had to run over a few people, but, so what? He looked pretty good.” And I came out and thought he was a jerk.

Smith: What I find astonishing is, just a couple of years after Wall Street – its greed and excess – almost took us all over the abyss, that so much populist anger is directed at Washington instead of the crooks on Wall Street.

Gergen: Yes, I was just with an investment crowd two days ago and made that point. I said, “It’s astonishing to me, but people like Rob Portman, who is running out in Ohio, who has this investment background, and worked for George W. is fifteen points ahead.” What’s going on here? I don’t see this being directed at Wall Street right now. I do see it directed as way too much government. And I think Obama, somehow, has taken all that anger and channeled it on himself.

Smith: Yeah.

Gergen: And I don’t know why. We’re going to be a long time trying to figure this one out.

Smith: Last thing: when the famous Sixty Minutes interview took place with Mrs. Ford, people in the White House said, “Oh my God, what has she done?” My sense is though, that before too long people began to realize that, hey, wait a second, there’s another side to this, and that for an administration that’s all about openness and candor and honesty, she may be a real asset.

Gergen: Betty Ford turned out to be an enormous asset, a huge political asset. And I think the President came to appreciate it. She was always an asset in his life, I do think he saw that. She was home, she was anchor, she was protection, she
I saw that. I will remember to this day that when Richard Nixon resigned, we were down at the helicopter and he had that famous wave and the helicopter went off and then we sort of went back to reality. The President and Mrs. Ford were walking together back toward the White House and he reached out for her hand to walk back. And I really thought, she’s important to him.

Smith: Do you know what he said to her as they walked back in?

Gergen: No.

Smith: He just whispered in her ear, “We can do it.”

Gergen: That’s nice. That’s very nice. And so I always felt that, but I think he felt she was a bit of a loose cannon publicly.

Smith: But it turned out, that’s what people…

Gergen: That’s what they liked.

Smith: Authenticity.

Gergen: Right, there you go. And I think she opened the place up a little bit, especially after all the bitterness and all the anger, the incriminations of the Nixon years. I think she was very fresh.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Gergen: I buy into the notion that Jerry Ford was first and foremost, in terms of his national contribution, he did begin to heal the wounds. And we were extraordinarily fortunate to have a man of his integrity come in at the moment he did. This whole notion from Bismarck that God looks after fools and drunkards and the United States of America, I really thought that there was something almost Providential about Ford coming into office.

Smith: Is the other side of that coin that, in effect, by January of 1977, he had performed his historical mission?
Gergen: Yes. I thought he had – whatever he went on to do as president would have been more conventional and this was special – this period of needing to get to across the valley. And it was not just Watergate, it was also Vietnam. We had just come through seven or eight years where confidence in government and confidence in the public officials had plunged. The highpoint of public confidence in the presidency and government was in ’66 and ’67 and a decade later or so when Ford came in, it was almost demolished. And so he really did begin the rebuilding process. Didn’t complete it. Actually, Reagan did a lot more later on. But I also felt that Ford was one of the last “good guys” to run the country.

Smith: David Broder said, “He was the least neurotic president.”

Gergen: Yeah, and there is something for the normal Midwestern guy who shows you can do it. *Mr. Deeds Goes to Washington.*

Smith: I’ve often wondered, if there had been a full term, whether there might not be a kind of Trumanesque aura around Ford.

Gergen: Possibly. If he had a big comeback, what are you going to do? You sort of had a Clark Clifford type – overcome the odds and won. He wasn’t as feisty as Truman, nor was he…it would have been hard to govern. He’d lost so many seats in ’74. It would have been very hard to govern. Some things might have gone differently, I’m not sure we’d have seen the Iranian revolution turn out quite the way it did. There are others things would have gone differently. But I think for the period he had, the shortest presidency in the 20th century, it was an enormous contribution, and I think we should be grateful to him. But, again, go back to – I think people are so tired today of the manufactured, the gauzy, the invented, the inauthentic – to have somebody who could do that office pretty darn well and hold the country together, and be so normal and be so likeable. That’s a good thing.

Smith: Do you think the kids helped in that sense?
Gergen: Yeah, I think the family helped a lot. Betty first and foremost, but the kids – it was sort of an all-American family and you wanted them to succeed. They weren’t pretentious. They were thrust into it. Every president since Kennedy forward, other than Ford, has been thrusting for that office – has reached for that office. It was very different, as you know. Used to be – say an Eisenhower – you almost got drafted for it, basically got drafted. And Truman came in. But every person since has been sort of grasping for office.

Smith: Someone has described Ford as Eisenhower without the medals.

Gergen: I like that.

Smith: That same instinct for the middle of the road and the pragmatic, not ideological, approach.

Gergen: And I think what the country longs for now - I think we’ve had enough of the specialness – let’s just get somebody who is very sensible. And I don’t know whether we can find them or not.

Smith: That’s perfect.
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Smith: For starters, how did your path first cross Gerald Ford’s?

Kennerly: The day that Nixon was going to make his announcement on his replacement for Agnew, who had resigned, it was going to be in the evening, East Room ceremony at the White House, and I was the *Time Magazine* photographer. I had been covering Agnew. In fact, I had some really good pictures of him. I was dogging him around the country for *Time Magazine*.

Smith: What was he like to work with?

Kennerly: Who – Spiro Agnew? Well, actually, my first memory of Agnew was quite a good one. I think he was as shocked as anybody that he was picked to be the running mate. Unfortunately for him, if he had just stayed as governor of Maryland, he probably never would have had to resign in disgrace. But I was a UPI photographer here in Los Angeles in 1968, and Dick Halstead was UPI’s chief photographer, so he came out with Nixon, who after the Miami convention, came out to California to Mission Bay to formulate his campaign strategy and all that. I was sent down here as a UPI photographer in LA to help Dick out, and one of the things that I did was to cover Agnew. Back then nobody cared about the vice presidential running mate.

It was a Sunday morning and Halstead said, “Go cover Agnew going to church.” I went over to where he was staying. He had some Secret Service protection – it wasn’t that heavy. I was standing there. There was no press vehicle or anything and Agnew saw me and said, “Hi, how you doing?” and introduced himself. He said, “What’s wrong?” And I said, “Well, sir, I’m supposed to go cover you, take pictures of you going to church and there’s no accommodations [meaning a press car in the motorcade]. Just you and the Secret Service.” He said, “That’s okay, you can just get in the Secret Service car.” And those guys flipped out. But that’s what happened; I rode with them over to the church. He was very nice, very approachable. He had some kids
that were probably about my age, so that was about it. I came back to Washington and he really wasn’t a big figure back then. Anyway, he resigned.

I have a classic photo of him in the back of his limo the day after he resigned that ran in *Time*. But then, of course, the speculation immediately leaped forward to who was going to be his replacement. John Connally was on the list, I don’t know who all; you probably know – Howard Baker, whomever. I chose the Gerald Ford straw. We were going around trying to get pictures of all these people. I went up to the Hill on, I think it was Friday morning, and Paul Miltich was his press secretary in the House and had been forever. I called Paul Miltich and said, “I’m from *Time Magazine.*” He said, “Oh sure, come on up. How about eleven o’clock?” It was so easy. So I go up and I meet Ford for the first time. I think I had photographed him a couple of time during the *Ev and Jerry Show* [Sen. Everett Dirksen, Minority Leader GRF], which was at White House press briefings.

But I didn’t know Minority Leader Ford at all so I went into his office. He was just terrific, and I said, “I’m here for *Time Magazine*. You’re on the list.” He said, “Well, you’re wasting your time.” And I said, “Well, but you’ll have a nice picture for your wall.” So I took some photos of him in his office in the Capitol and one of the photos that I took, I had him by the window and there was kind of nice light coming in, I call it Rembrandt lighting. But I spent about ten or fifteen minutes and then left. Then that afternoon…

Smith: Let me stop – he did not seem to you like a man who was waiting by the phone?

Kennerly: Gerald Ford did not seem like a guy who was waiting by the phone for this call. Now, I can’t remember when he got the call; I honestly don’t know. But I will tell you another story a little bit later about when he became president. No, he was so relaxed. Do you happen to know when he got the call? Do you remember?

Smith: Well, that’s not clear because, of course, there was the call at home which was…
Kennerly: …the event was that night, though. So he must have gotten the call the night before then, I think. Actually, it’s a question worth answering, but I can’t answer it.

But no matter what, he was really relaxed and he said, “You’re wasting your time,” – very good natured. I thought, wow, this is easy. If everybody’s like him, my life would be terrific. So that night there he was in the East Room. I wasn’t there. Dick was there, Dick Halstead. But the photograph I took of him was the *Time* cover picture. And it was his first *Time* cover and my first *Time* cover, and John Durniak was the director of photography at *Time* – this is back when magazines had money – assigned me to cover Ford full-time. And that’s unheard of. Nobody had ever covered a vice president – there was the resignation…

Smith: Was it the assumption that…

Kennerly: Well, but that was an early assumption [that he would become president]. There was an early assumption on the part of some people – it wasn’t rampant speculation because that was October of ’73.

Smith: October.

Kennerly: October of ’73. And Watergate was mounting, but it wasn’t at a critical stage. But anyway, Durniak said, “I really want you to cover him.” And I and about seven or eight or nine others, Phil Jones from CBS, Maggie Hunter from the *New York Times*, I think Ann Compton, to some degree, for ABC and there was another ABC person. No photographers.

Smith: Tom DeFrank.

Kennerly: Tom DeFrank of *Newsweek*, and *Time*, on and off, David Beckwith, of *Time*. So that became the sort of merry little band; we were traveling around with Ford. He was so easy to be around. So I got to know him and I got to know the family. They went to Vail in December of that year and I went to Vail. I mean, basically, *Time Magazine* was paying for me to learn how to ski.

Smith: What were they like in Vail?
Kennerly: In Vail the whole family was there. It was something they did every year, and it was really informal.

Smith: Now, did they have a condo at that point?

Kennerly: The Fords had a condo in Vail, right in the middle. It was at the hotel, like the Vail Hotel or something. It was right in the middle of the village. And it was like a two or three bedroom condo. It wasn’t particularly ritzy.

Smith: So it was kind of crowded with the whole family.

Kennerly: It was crowded. In fact, I actually stayed with the Fords the first night I got out there when they arrived in Vail. I think the Secret Service didn’t like me much back then. But there was a tradition. The whole family got together; they were all good skiers, including then Vice President Ford. But at the end of that particular trip, we went to an Asian restaurant, I think it was a Chinese restaurant – it must have been – because at the end they brought out these fortune cookies and passed them around. There were about fourteen people there, and Vice President Ford cracked open his cookie and read it and slammed it down on the table. He looked kind of shaken, so I said, “So what did it say?” And he said, “Aw, nothing.” I pried it out from under his hand and it said, “You will undergo a change of residence in the near future.” And I looked at him, and he said, “No, no, I hope not.” He was so worried that people were going to think that he was trying to force Nixon out, even then.

Smith: That brings up a large question, because we’ve been told by a number of people he really did not enjoy the vice presidency, in part because he was forced to walk this extraordinary tightrope. But also, he didn’t like the job.

Kennerly: He loved being a legislator. I don’t think he liked the job because it had no particular power; he wasn’t close to Nixon. I think there are a lot of reasons for it. Under the circumstances, the minute he went into the job, speculation basically was that he would be taking over the job from Nixon. He was almost an anti-Machiavellian type of person. He was not someone who was orchestrating and pulling the strings. Now if Nelson Rockefeller or somebody else had had that job, Nixon would have been looking over his shoulder the
whole time. Nixon would have started out at the end of the plank, as opposed to just slowing walking it.

Smith: We have been told by a number of people on the staff, however, that the Nixon staff were not particularly warm toward the Ford staff – the vice presidential staff.

Kennerly: The Nixon staff basically hated the vice president’s staff because they were so totally different. Bob Hartmann came with him. He was his chief of staff as the VP. [He] was this gruff old newspaper guy and had a lot of enemies. I always found him to be an interesting character because he was kind of the last of the good old days type – double-fisted drinking…

Smith: Straight out of *The Front Page*.

Kennerly: Oh, yeah. He was a character. My background was really that, too, in a way. I don’t know if Jack Marsh was working for him at that time. Probably not.

Smith: Let me ask you, because in his book, Tom DeFrank makes a great deal out of a verbal slip.

Kennerly: Which was?

Smith: As he presents it, I want to do justice to it. There is something about the…

Kennerly: About the tie?

Smith: Yeah, something that Ford makes some reference to – I think it was an appointment or something of someone – but something about how when I’m there, or something like that. And as Tom describes the scene, there’s this kind of intake of breath and realization that I’m somewhere I don’t want to be, and he swears Tom to secrecy and – what I’m trying to get at – was that particular story the larger, in some ways, tougher conundrum that he was in? Clearly as things went downhill for Nixon, there had to be people thinking whatever the odds are, we’ve got to prepare this guy to be president. And yet, he couldn’t give the slightest indication, publicly, or apparently privately, that he was even entertaining that possibility. How virginal was he throughout this period?
Kennerly: Well, I spent a great deal of time with him, usually on the road. That was mainly where I’d be covering him, and he was almost pathological about not talking or hinting at or suggesting that he might take over the presidency. To him it would have been the ultimate act of disloyalty, more than anything. And I think that if you looked at his generation – Nixon was in the Navy – people forget these kinds of attachments for World War II. I’m a post-World War II kid, but I know a lot of people, obviously, most of them gone now, who were there, and there’s a sense of loyalty. They were in Congress together. I think he liked the Nixons. He found him to be kind of a remote guy, to a degree, but they seemed to get along fine. Nixon chose him in part because he knew he could get confirmed. He’d probably wanted John Connally, according to everything I’ve heard, because Connally was really more like him. Which is, why would you want that guy there? I don’t know.

Smith: It is also why he was non-confirmable.

Kennerly: He was un-confirmable, that was the main reason. Ford was the guy that got along with everybody, and so he picked Ford. Let’s go forward from where we are, because I think his vice presidency was really not about much of anything other than waiting around.

Smith: Walking the tightrope.

Kennerly: He was walking the tightrope, which he probably hated.

Smith: In the end, doesn’t it come down to a contest, in effect, between loyalty and maintaining one’s integrity?

Kennerly: I think at the end he had both. I think he was loyal to a fault, but he was a man of great integrity. I think to him there was no black and white. There were real grey areas about that. It’s just the way he thought: this is the way you do things; I didn’t want to let anybody think I was going after his job. I don’t know one person who would ever say that – who would ever contradict that. The fault part of it was not just calling a few advisors in, probably, and saying, “Look, I don’t want the job. I don’t expect to get the job, but I’ve got to be totally up to speed.” I don’t know how much Nixon helped him out, which is a good question. Like: did Ford get all the briefings; was he in on all
the big meetings, all that kind of stuff that the modern vice president is just there as the right hand?

Smith: Again, to go back to the book.

Kennerly: DeFrank’s book.

Smith: Yeah, DeFrank’s book.

Kennerly: The book that is filled with faltering recollections of President Ford toward the end of his life.

Smith: Do you want to offer an opinion? Did President Ford know what he was doing?

Kennerly: About what?

Smith: Did President Ford bequest a posthumous legacy in a sense, knowing that Tom, or anyone else that he was talking to – was there an element of naïveté in his conversations with these people, or did he know exactly what they were likely to do in terms of exploiting those conversations?

Kennerly: That’s a good question. I think it all goes to: what did he say and when did he say it? And I think, as he got older, I noticed from conversations I had with him where his recollections were not exactly acute – I mean, he didn’t have Alzheimer’s, I don’t think, but he was getting really old - and so there were faulty memory scenarios there. I never looked at him as a naïve person, I always thought he was very politic and I thought he was always very smart, and I knew there were certain people that he really didn’t care for, but he would not overtly say something. The worst thing he would say would be – like about Jim Schlesinger - “I really didn’t like that guy.” That’s what he said. For him, that was like a stunning admission and it’s almost like he would say, “Now you can’t repeat that.” But he was always very candid with me, and one of the things I loved about him, there were many things I loved about him, really.

When I think about the age I am right now, it’s the age he became president. I’m 62 – I think he was either 61 or 62 years old. I always looked at him as a
much older guy, because I was 27 - like my dad, he was older than my dad. I think he wasn’t naïve. He knew what he was doing. Sometimes I think the good natured side of him probably took him off track a little bit.

But when it came time to talk about Reagan, for instance, after the fact, we got some good stuff under extraordinary circumstances. You should get all those transcripts. I hope you can get them. And Cheney did an hour and a half interview with us. So if you could put those together…NBC has those. You should talk to Brokaw about it.

Let me just go back first. Let’s get him to the presidency. A week to the day, the night of August 2nd, I had a long scheduled dinner on the books with the Fords at the Old Angler’s Inn outside of Washington, which is a good thirty-five, forty minute drive. And considering what happened, it probably was one of those deals that seemed like a good idea at the time, but he couldn’t cancel it. So I drove with them in the car from Washington out to the Old Angler’s Inn, it was just the three of us; Mrs. Ford and I. This is the day…

Smith: …this is the day after he had been told by Al Haig about the smoking gun.

Kennerly: That’s right. The night before, apparently.

Smith: August 1st was the day he was told.

Kennerly: Then it was the next night. It was Thursday – now I remember, because August 9th is the day he became president. It was the 2nd of August, we were in the car and we were talking about all sorts of things. I don’t remember specifics. The things I tend to remember from the good old days are really important things that people said, because I hear a lot of bullshit, day in and day out, as we all do. If he would have said, “You know, I hate to say this, but I think I’m going to become president,” if there had been anything like that – but I think if Gerald R. Ford had decided to become a professional poker player, he would have been a billionaire, because the guy knew how to play his cards. He held them so close, including from his family and the closest advisers.
Smith: There are those that have said to us and they can’t prove it, obviously, but they say you’d be surprised about how much he took to the grave with him.

Kennerly: Maybe. One thing he didn’t take to the grave with him I don’t believe, was a deal on a pardon. I don’t believe that.

Smith: That’s a good point, a point worth making.

Kennerly: But at any rate – we had dinner. Roy Rowan was there. Roy wrote that book on the Mayaguez – remember? The Four Days of Mayaguez. Roy and I had been in Asia together for Time. He was the Time bureau chief. He’d been in China. He wrote a wonderful book about the revolution of 1949. He was covering that and he was living in Shanghai other when I was with Time in Hong Kong. We were having a dinner party. It was him and David Burnett, and some of my pals, people Vice President Ford liked. He knew every photographer in town by their first name because it was a small group covering the Hill. Wally McNamee of Newsweek, George Tames of the New York Times, on and on. So we had this group of ten-twelve people. It was really in honor of Roy Rowan, who had just survived cancer. The Fords stayed until it was getting later, [then] he said, “Well, I’ve got to go.” But they stayed for the dinner and the drinks and afterward and then took off. And, of course, it wasn’t a week later on August 8th when Nixon announces it – the first we know about it. And I was there.

So flash forward through that hectic week – and I think there was a trip in there somewhere and I can’t remember – where he went down to Mississippi or someplace – I can’t remember. It’s all part of the record. But obviously it’s just a matter of time; it’s like a deathwatch for Nixon at that point. And I’m inside the chicken coop, and all these other photos are dead ducks because they hadn’t been covering him. I was like as close as you could get at that point, in proximity with the family - with the Fords. So the night on August 8th, when Nixon was going to give that speech. [I was at their Alexandra residence.]

Then Vice President Ford comes out on his lawn in Alexandria, in front of 914 Crown View Drive, and talks all about Henry Kissinger. It was like, at
that point, Nixon was going to resign, it was going to happen the next day, and so I was there to watch Nixon lift off and wave goodbye from the helicopter. The Fords standing next to David and Julie Eisenhower and…

Smith: In that last week, building up to the actual transfer, were you around Mrs. Ford?

Kennerly: I spent a lot of time with Mrs. Ford.

Smith: Did she talk about what was happening? Or what it might all lead to?

Kennerly: I don’t ever recall her saying anything about it. I don’t know – I probably should remember that, but I don’t. He had that old joke, that initially when Nixon had called, can you call back on the other line? …blah blah blah. Which is what you were talking about, I think. It would have had to have been the night before because the next day is when he was announced as the VP, by Nixon.

Smith: It was that night. Believe it or not, it’s hard to believe, but it was that night. They were told to be at the East Room in two hours.

Kennerly: Well, then he didn’t know. [when I photographed him in his office earlier that same day.]

Smith: The call that came back…

Kennerly: Then he didn’t know that morning – then guess what? – of course, he wasn’t anxious about it because he hadn’t been asked, if that’s true. When I was in the office with him, he did not give – he could be a great poker player – but Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford did not give any indications that this was going to be a happening thing. He also is not a guy to lie about stuff, or even misdirect. He may have done that on the pardon a little bit, because he got caught short on that one.

But, anyway, he gives the talk on his lawn, reassuring the world and the foreign leaders that Henry Kissinger is there and everything is fine. And the next day Nixon leaves; I’m in the East Room when he was sworn in; and at that point, I was in flux. I had thought about – he had not even remotely
hinted that he might want me to work for him, which very much goes in line. I’m sure Hartmann and he must have talked about it.

Smith: Would Hartmann be the one person to whom he could, during that whole period, kind of unload?

Kennerly: I think so. I think Hartmann was the single most important person to him. It later became…

Smith: Does that explain the loyalty later on, when Hartmann becomes, in many ways, not only a lightning rod, but a liability?

Kennerly: Yes. Hartmann and he were really tight. He was always like, “Oh, Bob did this…or Bob did that.” It was almost like having a Billy Carter brother scenario. And Mrs. Ford and Hartmann just were like this….Mrs. Ford would never let him come up to the second floor of the White House.

Smith: Really?

Kennerly: Oh, yeah. Occasionally, at the end of the day, I was always the one going home and having drinks with the President and Mrs. Ford; sitting up on the couch talking about something. I mean, Dick Cheney talked about that one time. We were at Ken Adelman’s house for dinner with Cheney – this was before Dick was a VP. Adelman always liked to stir up stuff, so he said, “Well, Dick, how did you let Kennerly get away with all that stuff?” He said, “Are you kidding? You’ve got to understand, David Kennerly was the last person to see the President every day. He’d go up and have drinks with him at the President’s request – almost every night.” He said, “Kennerly wasn’t worried about me. I was worried about Kennerly.” But I never had an axe to grind. The only axe I ground was with Hartmann. I felt that he was doing the President a disservice and I wrote him a memo about him - and I rarely wrote memos.

Smith: Explain to me – one way of looking at the Ford presidency, the trajectory of someone who spent twenty-five years on the Hill, who has to learn to be president.

Kennerly: Well, it’s like the no more Mr. Nice Guy, which he was, essentially.
Smith: And part of that: here is a guy who is so loyal to Hartmann that he’s got, in effect, two separate speech operations going, and he’s perfectly willing to tolerate that. He may complain about it – but even with the State of the Union Address. Clearly, his presidency is suffering because this guy’s ego is getting in the way of a smoothly functioning professional speechwriting operation.

Kennerly: I wrote a memo to President Ford – and I’m not a memo writer. I was the last photographer – I didn’t like putting anything on the record. I did it two or three times during that whole period. I’m not a bureaucrat, obviously. I was twenty-seven years old for Christ’s sake. I came in there pretty much fresh out of Vietnam – two and a half years of Vietnam, and came back to the States and that was mid-’73 and Watergate and all this shit is hitting the fan over that. And so then, to kind of skip ahead, I got from one big-time battle into another one, was what it boiled down to. I’m not a bureaucratic person, it’s just not me. But I was very loyal to President Ford, he was somebody that I loved, trusted, admired – I don’t know how else to put it. I mean, he just let me be myself and take the pictures without any micromanagement.

I’ll tell you the story about how I got the job, but just to keep you on this track – on the Hartmann thing, I was so concerned because I had to go listen to every one of those Goddamned speeches. Photographers have a very low tolerance for this kind of thing, particularly when you hear it over and over and over again. We’re always joking about stuff and making fun of people – it’s just the way it goes - and it’s not even malicious. But you would hear President Ford go on and give one of those “give them their money’s worth” speeches of 45 minutes to an hour long as a congressman, because he had kind of an old-fashioned idea of what the people really wanted to hear. He was essentially – he had not moved the speechwriting apparatus from a congressman from Grand Rapids into the President of the United States mode. And so in a lot of the ideas and everything – basically, I got into it.

Smith: Was that hard for Hartmann, to make that transition?

Kennerly: I don’t know. We never really talked that much after we got in there, because he just couldn’t stand me now. At that point. I was a young guy, I had no real responsibility outside of taking pictures; plus I was me. I’m a little more
subdued now, but not much. But what I did see was that the speechwriting operation was really damaging the President. I wrote a memo of how he should get rid of Hartmann. And not only did I write it, there was one copy of it. That’s it, I never made a carbon of it. I took it in and I talked to Mrs. Ford about it, and she thought I should talk to him. And I just said – I almost pleaded with him – to do something – not even fire the guy, but just like do something to get somebody running that show that wasn’t going to kill him. He was a matter of ridicule at that point. It was a matter of ridicule – people talking about – he was not a good speaker anyway particularly. And you combine a guy who is not a great speaker with bad material and you’re really screwed, essentially.

So I sat down and I made him read it. It was at one of my cocktails after work scenarios. I pulled it out and I gave it to him. Mrs. Ford was sitting here, he was sitting there, and I was sitting on the couch. I said, “You’ve got to read this. It’s a very difficult thing that I’m doing here, but I want to tell you what I think. And I can only do it properly, and I wrote it myself and there it is.” And he read it, and he put it in his pocket and he said, “Well, thank you for saying that. I really appreciate your honesty and your directness.” That was it. And nothing really happened.

Smith: Is there such thing as misplaced loyalty?

Kennerly: Sure. Of course.

Smith: And is that a Capitol Hill hangover?

Kennerly: I think it’s a human hangover. He was not the only person to do that. A lot of people did it.

Smith: To be a successful president, you need to have a certain element of ruthlessness. And I don’t think of him as having that gene.

Kennerly: I’m not disagreeing with that. Well, he could have fired me for all the shit I was doing, too. I mean, dating famous women, and getting my name in the paper – except he got a kick out of it, fortunately for me.
Smith: Did he get more of a kick out of vicariously living your glamorous existence than he did having his press secretary being on Saturday Night Live?

Kennerly: I’m sure, although he never said anything really bad about that. Everybody else was aghast that Nessen did that, but you have to understand that President Ford had three boys. Probably the closest in temperament to me would have been Jack Ford, who was more out there. For one thing, President Ford didn’t get married and have his first kid until he was like 36 or 37 years old, which is what I did, also. President Ford, in the good old days, was a bachelor, had a lot of good looking girlfriends. He loved women. He was a model at one point, a football player, lawyer, you name it. I mean, the guy was having a pretty good bachelor life as far as I knew, and liked women. He liked looking at them, and he knew that Mrs. Ford would kick his ass if he looked too long, but that is the way it went.

Smith: Including Vicki Carr.

Kennerly: Oh, I know, believe me. Candice Bergen, who I was dating, I took her to a ball for Ali Bhutto– we went to a State Dinner for Ali Bhutto, and we left early. The next morning – I’m always in there early – the buzzer rings and it’s the President, “Come up here.” He said, “Where did you go last night?” I said, “Ah, well, we got tired.” He said, “I wanted to dance with Candice. Edgar Bergen is my old friend.” I said, “You didn’t want to dance with her because of Edgar Bergen, don’t give me that.” But it was funny. He was great. It was so fun to be around him.

Smith: Why did that never get through to the public – the warmth, the humor, the qualities that you saw?

Kennerly: Oh, I think it’s just the way it goes.

Smith: He was the least self-dramatizing of political figures.

Kennerly: But he wasn’t a quipper like John F. Kennedy. I don’t know where Nixon’s sense of humor was. Just didn’t have that ready retort. Don Penny, obviously, came in and helped out with some of the humor stuff. That was my engineering to get him in there.
But just to go back to the night he became president. [August 9, ‘74] He had a small group of people over to their house on Crown View Drive, and I was one of them that he had invited. There was like Phil Buchen and the Parmas. There weren’t many people, it was not a celebration so much as it was a very quiet acceptance of the fact that he was now the president. One of the things that was in, *Extraordinary Circumstances* that came out of that interview – did I give you the transcript of the interview from 1995 that I did with him?

Smith: I don’t think so.

Kennerly: It’s quite a good interview. I did it in Rancho Mirage. Sitting there I’d go through photographs with him, which is how we did those other ones later. But one of the little gems in there, I thought, was when I showed him the photo of them looking and waving goodbye to Nixon. I said, “What were you thinking there? That was such a big moment. He’s lifting off and you’re going to become president.” He said, “Well, to be honest with you, I couldn’t wait to turn around and walk in there, get sworn in and start my new job.” He said, “I really felt there were so many things that needed to be done.” I’m paraphrasing – but that’s it essentially.

I was always surprised by that. I never heard him say that and I don’t think he really thought about it so much until he saw the photo about – there I am; there goes Nixon; I’ve got to go in, get to work.

Smith: Do you have a sense that the relationship with Nixon was never the same? Especially after the pardon.

Kennerly: Of course not. Of course it wouldn’t be the same.

Smith: There is a sense that, and I think he did say publicly, or at least allowed himself to be overheard saying that Nixon never said thank you. Which would be the tip of the iceberg.

Kennerly: Well, I do know that the night that Nixon announced he was going back to China, which was on the eve of the election…

Smith: New Hampshire primary.
Kennerly: The New Hampshire primary – I was upstairs with him again, having dinner, and I was really pissed off about that. Because I thought that’s the biggest “**** you” I’ve ever seen in my life. That’s precisely what I thought. I was railing and going on and on upstairs with just the three of us. And I came down and I railed to Nessen and Jerry Jones afterwards, I’d had a couple of drinks. But President Ford was not disagreeing with my assessment. He never would have put it the way I did it. But I thought that was going to kill him, politically.

Smith: We talked to Stu Spencer about this, and he basically agreed with you. He said, “Nixon knew exactly what he was doing.”

Kennerly: It was such a hideous thing to do. “Thank You - it’s **** You.” I mean, forget being thanked. I’ve never seen anything like that. It just was like trying to put it off on old Jerry for his own misdeeds or something. I don’t know, I never really knew the guy. The night of August 9th I was at the house. I took some pictures and President Ford – now President Ford for 20 minutes [a joke – it was more like 9 hours...] asked me to stay afterwards. He said after everybody leaves, I want you to stay, I want to talk to you. Considering all the people on the face of the earth that the new President of the United States would be talking to, but there was something about him and we had such a great relationship – I made him laugh, he always would like roll his eyes at the stuff I was doing. So we sat on the couch in this living room and you have to understand, I’m still a kid from Roseburg, Oregon. I mean, I’ve never been around great wealth. I come from a very lower middle class family, and here I am sitting with the President of the United States. I know the guy really well, and I’m saying, “Mr. President,” and I keep thinking “I’m having this conversation.” He wanted to talk about the White House photographer’s job. I had thought about it and I had figured he would probably offer it to me. There were other people who wanted it, like George Tames desperately wanted it, the New York Times guy. He figured he’d probably earned it; having been around all that time. But he said, “How do you look at this job? How do you see the job of White House photographer?” I said, “Well, I’ll be really honest with you, the way Ollie Adkins was treated was so horrible. He
never was in the Oval Office for very long and everybody was telling him what to do. He worked for Ziegler and Haldeman and Erlichman. The secretary could tell him not to go into the Oval Office. It was really pathetic.”

And I said, “I’ve got a really good job. I won a Pulitzer Prize in Vietnam. I love traveling around the world and doing my thing.” And I said, “I would be interested in working for you under two conditions. One is I work directly for you, and number two, I have total access.” He’s like puffing on his pipe, and he said, “You don’t want Air Force One on the weekends?”

Smith: He had a sense of humor.

Kennerly: He did have a sense of humor. That was funny. It’s like how brassy can you get? The guy is President of the United States. But I said, “Look, I can’t do it otherwise, I can’t.”

Smith: On the other hand, you’re leveling with him, which he would have respected.

Kennerly: Oh, totally. But there was another thing that happened that night. He said, “Well, I’m not offering the job right this second,” because he was a friend of Ollie’s. He said, “I want to talk to Al Haig about this.” And he looked at his watch, and he said, “Oh, let’s go watch the TV, I want to watch the swearing in.” And so we went into the study. This house is no bigger than this room, in square footage. And turned on the TV and the TV didn’t work. And he goes, “Betty, this TV’s not working.” Then one more TV was up in their bedroom, and so it was that I, Mrs. Ford, Susan Ford, and the President, watched the local news swearing in of Gerald R. Ford. I said, “Well, I’ve got to go.” But he rose up and took my hand in both of his and he said, “If you came to work for me, wouldn’t that be a problem with your colleagues after everything that’s happened with Nixon?” I said, “You know, those guys all like you,” all those other photographers, “and I think they would be happy to have one of their own in the White House.” And that’s how we left it.

The next day I’m over at *Time Magazine* and I get a page on the intercom and it’s a very frantic sounding telephone operator. I call in and she says, “David, President Ford is trying to get hold of you!” I said, “Well, tell him to call back,” and she said, “He’s on the phone!” He was on hold. He had picked up
the phone and called over there and he said, “So how would you like to come to work for me?” I said, “I’d love to.” The Time office was across from the White House, it was in the Motion Picture Association building next to the Hay-Adams Hotel at the *Time* office. He said, “Well, that’s good. Well, you’d better get over here right now, you’ve already wasted half a day of the taxpayers’ money.”

And that’s how I went into the White House. I will say that there were two occasions where he asked me not to shoot something. He asked me if I wouldn’t mind not going in, and they were both occasions – one of them was Earle Butz getting fired, and another was the chairman, George Brown of the Joint Chiefs getting chewed out for some statement he’d made about the Jews running the newspaper business or something. In this day and age, that guy would be gone, he wasn’t then. But they were so intensely personal, and I said, “I don’t want to be in the room for that.” But that was it. I was in every top secret meeting, in everything.

Smith: Based on that intimate, ongoing, unique relationship, tell us a couple things that would surprise people about Gerald Ford.

Kennerly: The question would actually be better put the other way: like, from his generation there was a lot of racism. Just the way people grew up in America. And I think that one of the things that probably wouldn’t surprise people, but they wouldn’t know, was how absolutely colorblind he was as a man. As a person who grew up in the Middle West in a white area, I never heard him say or demean any person on the basis of race or religion. That alone is an example of a good person, it is foundational to me.

Smith: Is that the Eagle Scout?

Kennerly: Eagle Scout.

Smith: And his upbringing?

Kennerly: Probably. I think that’s how we all learn. I was in Boy Scouts. I come from southern Oregon where black people were just a rumor. I’d never seen a black person except maybe on TV later on. But I had no knowledge that anybody
existed that weren’t all white. I grew up in an area where they had Impeach Earl Warren billboards along the highway, which I had no idea what that meant. What year would that have been?

Smith: Oh, late ‘50s, early ‘60s.

Benton Becker told us a wonderful story.

Kennerly: He’s another person that has memory adjustments.

Smith: I know what you’re saying, but filtering for factuality.

Kennerly: Filtering is lawyeristic.

Smith: Earl Warren died while Ford was vice president.

Kennerly: Right. I was at the funeral. I shot it, actually.

Smith: And Benton said, “You know, Mr. Vice President, I think it would be a really nice gesture if you went up to the Supreme Court to pay your respects.” And Ford thought for a minute and said, “Well, the White House wouldn’t probably be very happy about that.” He said, “Let me think about it.” In the course of the day Becker discovered without ever being told, that in fact, Ford had, on his own had gone up to the Court to pay his respects. And sure enough, apparently the next time he saw Nixon, Nixon said something derogatory. But it’s a revealing, very small, but revealing about the relationship and the decency.

Kennerly: Like I say, that’s not a surprising thing, except I think it’s worth talking about to a degree. When you hear those Nixon tapes about all the shit he was saying about different people – across the board. He was so not like that – he was just the opposite of that. Even to the degree of being prudish. If I had an off-color joke I would never tell him; I’d always tell Mrs. Ford because she would think it was funny. He would look at me kind of quizzically. So – okay, we’re not going to do that anymore.

Smith: We’ve heard from a number of people that she likes a good raunchy story. And she and the girls would tell stories and he would come in, hearing them
roaring with laughter, and they would tell the story and it would go right over his head.

Kennerly: Exactly. That’s true. I totally agree that’s true.

Smith: But we were also told that he was genuinely – I don’t know if you’d call it naïve. He said, and I have absolutely no reason to question his sincerity, that he was shocked that Nixon lied to him. And by the same token, I think he was shocked by the language that he heard on those tapes.

Kennerly: Oh, for sure. Because he didn’t think like that, or speak like that. Terry O’Donnell and I probably spent the most time with him, those long trips in the car together. The dynamic back then was on a presidential trip, you had the limousine, the Secret Service follow up car and then the chief of staff’s car. It was the chief of staff, me, the driver, personal aide, and either the doctor or the military. That was it. That was part of the package if some bad stuff happened, that’s the primary thing. So Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Terry O’Donnell and the various rotating military aides were around all the time. But the people in the room, I was always the other person in the room. Nobody was in there as much as I was because I went to economics, national security, whatever staff meetings. Generally the chief of staff or deputies, so it was either Cheney or Rumsfeld, but I was always the other person in the room. And so, I observed him more closely than anybody possibly could have.

Plus, as a professional person, I’m taking his photo, but not just taking pictures, I’m in there trying to get the essence of the people and the drama, the moment and all that stuff. And the worst thing he would ever say was, “God dammit!” if he said that, he was truly angry, really pissed. I would be like, whoa! One of the best ones was O’Donnell, Cheney and I – I don’t know if Dick told this story – but we were at the Republican National Convention in Kansas City, and there had been this Reagan demonstration going on and on. And I think it was Jim Rhodes, I think was the chairman. Who was the congressman – not Jim Rhodes?

Smith: Jim Rhodes from Arizona who would have been the Minority Leader.
Kennerly: Right. He was the guy with the gavel, and the prime time slips by with all these Reagan people chanting – the heart and soul people who really wanted Ronald Reagan there. And it was by a razor thin margin that Ford beat him. President Ford had taken so much time working on his speech – this is what Don Penny did for him – they got a good speech. The President practiced it. He said, “Oh, I don’t need to practice that.” “No, no, no. You do.” And they made him do it. So he was locked, loaded, ready to rock and roll on this speech. He had a nice tie and a new suit from Britches in Georgetown, compliments of Mrs. Ford and I - getting him to take those plaid suits out – assassinate them. And so he was ready.

I’ve never seen him so mad. It was like Cheney and I and O’Donnell were sitting there, and he goes into his bedroom and the time has gone by now – a half hour even, before he’s even getting over to the arena for when he’s supposed to speak in the prime time moment. So he goes into the bedroom and he slams the door. The door opens up again and he comes back out and it’s like one of these Cary Grant moments where Cary Grant is really pissed off. And he says, “Call over there and you tell that Goddamn Rhodes to get that meeting in order. We’re going over.” And we’re going like, “Whewwww, this guy is mad.”

Smith: How much of that was getting up for the…

Kennerly: Oh, no, no, no. He’s not an actor. He was not an actor. And I watched Ronald Reagan getting ready to go up and give a speech and he would almost like, as he’s being introduced, you could see this transformation. And so, as you husband your resources, tell you you’re on camera. I mean, Reagan was a genius at that. But President Ford wasn’t like that. He was just mad, and he knew that it was slipping away, and the time, and less people were going to see it, and he was so popular that his material is what he was going to be doing. Anyway, that was one example. It was pretty rare, though. It’s like if somebody you know doesn’t normally lose their temper, loses it, you notice it like a hundred times more. And that’s what happened.

Smith: Let me ask you – I suppose when we started this I was influenced by Rockefeller’s semi-paranoid…
Kennerly: When is that book coming out, by the way?

Smith: I’ve got a deadline of two years.

Kennerly: You told me that two years ago.

Smith: July, 2011. It’s a huge – I have 600 pages written.

Kennerly: No, no – it’s going to be so interesting. I can’t wait.

Smith: I want to talk to you about that, too. Let me tell you how my view has evolved, for whatever its worth.

Kennerly: Now, how are you going to deal with this material. It’s a lot of stuff. What will be the culmination?

Smith: What we’re doing here?

Kennerly: Yeah.

Smith: This will eventually wind up in the library. But it’s the Foundation’s property, and it will be available for online, it will be available for filmmakers, it will be available to new exhibits in the museum.

Kennerly: Well, it’s great because there are fortunately enough people around that can still talk about it.

Smith: It’s interesting, we’ve talked to a number of people – Ford, in effect, had to learn how to be a president. He had to learn how to be an executive.

Kennerly: And I can tell you, by the way – don’t let me forget to tell you the moment when I think he took it over.

Smith: Okay. But that Don Rumsfeld was actually invaluable in coaching, for lack of a better word, and in fact, Rumsfeld brought to that process that element of constructive ruthlessness, to which I referred earlier. For example, Rumsfeld said, and we have a number of other people confirm this, he strongly advised the President to clean house early. Not to let it go as long as it did. And the interesting thing is, of course, Rumsfeld has always been fingered, particularly by Rockefeller, and I think by Bush, as the architect of the
massacre at the end of 1975. Whether or not that is the case, that’s a separate issue. But my sense is that Rumsfeld…

Kennerly: What difference does it make if it is the President’s decision, if he thought it was a good idea? That’s where you get advice. Anyway, continue.

Smith: But my sense is that Rumsfeld, first of all, served the President by making it clear that he would not come back to the White House given the spokes of the wheel. That that was unworkable, and a condition of his taking the job was getting rid of it.

Kennerly: That the President was the hub and…

Smith: And then all these people – which is very congressional.

Kennerly: I know.

Smith: I’d be interested in hearing your general take on the roles played by Rumsfeld and later by Cheney.

Kennerly: Yes, I think that is a really good question. And I think the good news is, for me – you see, Rumsfeld and Cheney are both incredibly smart people. And Rumsfeld, to me, has always had, like Robert Kennedy had, this reputation of being ruthless and all that. I do not see that. I think he’s tough, though, really tough. He was definitely tougher than President Ford in a lot of ways. Whether he coached him, I don’t know if that’s the right word for it, but if you go back into the time where Charlie Halleck was overthrown as the Leader, led by none other than young Congressman Donald Rumsfeld. I mean, that guy was like a Viet Cong sapper. You know, he’d come up under and blow the fence up, and Ford would walk through. And that’s what he did. And he did it, not in a bloody, nasty way, but it was just hardball politics.

I don’t know if it’s his Chicago upbringing, his wrestling background, grappling with not only issues, but people, and you have to come out on top there. There are very few ties in the wrestling business. Rumsfeld - and I watched it all the time - was the perfect chief of staff, even though he closed a lot of backdoors – I mean with Hartmann and the old buddies and all these people giving advice. It wasn’t that Ford wouldn’t talk to them, but there are
only so many minutes in the day and I think Donald Rumsfeld helped hone the President in on what was important. But if you looked at the schedule, you could also say that Rumsfeld wasn’t doing his job because it was like tons of stuff on there. A lot of people would have said, “Oh, we don’t need to do that.” But Ford wanted to do it. And so it wasn’t Donald Rumsfeld like controlling him in any way, but he was helpful, and I think he did streamline it.

Dick Cheney was his disciple, and a totally different kind of personality. But Cheney learned – the chief of staff model that Rumsfeld used was to be very much in the background. You make sure all the information that should be getting in and needs to get in, gets in, in a fairly neutral way. And that goes for the NSC staff, everybody – Brett Scowcroft is also that way, by the way. He was surrounded by people who actually weren’t that political. I say that to people now about Cheney and Rumsfeld not being really political, and I truly mean it. Everybody has their point of view, they weren’t trying to push their point of view on the President of the United States. I was in too many meetings about that. One of the big ones was when George Walker Bush accused Rumsfeld of engineering him taking over the CIA job in order to get him out of the way.

Smith: At the same time, Rockefeller believed that he was part of getting rid of Nelson. It was all the same operation.

Kennerly: Well, Nelson’s liberal to moderate background is what got rid of Nelson. It’s the one thing that Ford probably told you he regretted more than anything. I think he hated himself for dumping Nelson Rockefeller. He liked Rockefeller, but he didn’t figure he could get out of the very conservative national convention alive, and I think he’s right. Reagan would have taken it. I don’t think there’s any question about it. That was a tough, hard, political move that he made. Rumsfeld is not the Machiavellian person that people make him out to be, from my point of view. But he’s tough.

Smith: You didn’t see Rumsfeld at that time as someone who was manipulating events to be on the ticket in ’76 himself?
Kennerly: If he had wanted to do that, why would he have become secretary of defense? And why would he have taken that job? Why not be at the right hand of the man, like George Bush looking at Dick Cheney when he was deciding on who was going to be his vice president, and said, “It was you all along.” That was weird. But Cheney was the same way. Cheney was an honest broker. By the way, they weren’t keeping out the old buddies and everything. There was time for them to come in. If somebody really needed to get through to him, they could. But they saved the President a lot of time with “You’re not in Congress anymore, Toto.” That was the reason.

Smith: Just from being around them, did you sense a change in the Ford/Rockefeller relationship after Rockefeller was, in effect, dumped?

Kennerly: I told you that I thought Nelson Rockefeller - I think I mentioned to you, the only letter I ever wrote to anybody over there was, I wrote a letter to Rockefeller after he had been dumped, expressing my admiration to him with the way he handled that… and I wrote a very heartfelt letter because I really liked the guy. I said, “It must have been terribly disappointing what happened. But the way you handled it was inspirational to me.” About how someone could deal with something of that magnitude of being - I’m paraphrasing – something that negative. And he goes out to the convention and stands there. He’s in the meeting with President Ford when Bob Dole came in. You know what? That was unbelievable to me, what Rockefeller did. And I’m sure he was…you have all the information about that, but publicly, he was damned good on that one. And not embarrassing the President, or being petulant about it, or whatever.

Smith: The fact is, he actually delivered the votes that provided the margin of victory over Reagan.

Kennerly: I think he was unbelievable. I saw it.

Smith: Did you get a response at all from your letter?

Kennerly: He sent me a nice note back, just thanking me. He thought it was a very nice thing. Plus I had the only picture of him flipping the bird signed. He didn’t
want to sign it, but he did. He signed it “Rocky!” And Bob Dole is in the background of that picture, which makes it even funnier.

But I’ll tell you, this is a very good Rockefeller/President Ford story. The night of the State of the Union – so it would have been in ’75 – the last State of the Union before going into the election year and all that, a friend of mine - one person you should talk to is Jerry McGee, who is here in town, and he can tell the story himself because it is really a funny story. Don Penny and Jerry McGee, at that point had been helping out President Ford and all that and it was looking down to the election, so the President gave the State of the Union speech, so it was January, ’76.

They went back to the second floor of the White House, and the President was sitting on that couch with the window behind him, and other people are in there. Jerry McGee is sitting and by the chair is a little phone on a hook and the couch is against the window – President Ford is there. So the phone is ringing and the President says, “Go ahead, Jerry, answer.” So Jerry picks up the phone. This guy is an advertising person from New York and he’s extremely funny, but he’d never been in a situation like this. And he goes, “It’s the White House operator, sir. Henry Kissinger wants to talk to you.” “Oh, okay.” This phone had this really long cord on it, I have pictures of this in the archive, so the President says, “Yes, Henry. Thank you, Henry. Thank you so much, Henry.” He hands it back to McGee, he hangs it up.

The phone rings again and the President says, “Go ahead, answer it.” He says, “It’s the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.” He says, “Oh yes, Warren, thank you, Warren, I appreciate it.” He hands it back. The phone rings the third time and so McGee just answers it, “Hello, the President’s residence. It’s the Vice President.” “Oh, yeah. Let me take it.” So he takes the phone and the President saying, “Yes, Nelson, thank you Nelson. Oh I appreciate that, Nelson. Thank you very much.” And hands it back. McGee hangs up the phone and President Ford leans back, puts his feet up on the coffee table, folds his hands behind his head, and says, “It’s always good to hear from number two.” And then he said, “Don’t tell anybody I said that!”
It was so cute. I don’t know how else to put it. It was so funny. Here’s this
guy, this multimillionaire, vice president, and here’s this guy from Grand
Rapids – Gerald Ford’s not even his real name [it’s Leslie King]. I mean,
Rockefeller is like an institution in America.

Smith: But it’s the tag line that’s intriguing. How cognizant was he? Did he live with
this fact that anything that he said might at any time be repeated, in or out of
context? Was that just a situational…?

Kennerly: No. I think it’s because he let himself be like a human being. Like any of us
would say – here’s the rich kid on the block and he works for me – that’s what
it was. And it was not malicious, it was funny. I’ll never forget it because it
was his reaction after he said it. It was like “I can’t believe I just said that.” In
the context of today’s world it’s so….

Smith: Let me ask you: his first press conference is on August 28th and I’ve always
thought that it was the tipping point that led to the pardon. Because - you talk
about naiveté - here’s someone who’s spent twenty-five years in Washington.

Kennerly: That was in the East Room?

Smith: Yeah. And he’s convinced himself that the press is going to want to talk about
Cyprus and Greece and Turkey and inflation, all of those things that he’s
trying to deal with.

Kennerly: Right, because he inherited that – right in the middle of that.

Smith: And of course, the press didn’t want to talk about that. They wanted to talk
about Nixon.

Kennerly: Of course.

Smith: And the story is he was angry afterwards. Partly because the press wanted to
talk about Nixon, partly because he didn’t handle it terribly well. I’ve often
wondered if that was, in fact, the catalyst that brought about – maybe earlier
than it might have otherwise – the decision which came just ten days later to
pardon Nixon. Did you hear conversations in the Oval Office before the
pardon?
Kennerly: Yes. Well, the one in particular was on September 5th. Benton Becker was in it. I photographed the meeting. Phil Buchen, Al Haig, Benton Becker – Becker is being dispatched to San Clemente to try to get something out of Nixon.

Smith: A statement of contrition, which presupposes that the machinery of a pardon was moving forward.

Kennerly: That was a very tight group, though, obviously. A lawyer – two lawyers, Al Haig, who was the chief of staff, and me, but that was a pretty small group.

Smith: But that presupposes a fundamental decisions had been made by that time?

Kennerly: I honestly don’t know. I know he must have talked to Hartmann about it, or maybe Mrs. Ford. I don’t know when that light bulb clicked on. I don’t know when the wheel started moving. Benton was involved in it. That was the first time I really remember that there was a discussion about it. I may have heard it before, but…

Smith: Were there people trying to – for political or other reasons – argue him out of an immediate…

Kennerly: I didn’t hear any of that. There could have been. I wasn’t at every single thing.

Smith: How would you characterize Haig’s role at that point?

Kennerly: Well, Al Haig, he was Nixon’s guy, obviously. He was chief of staff and I think he should get a lot of credit for keeping things kind of going down the middle. I was only on the outside of the fence up until President Ford got in there. If there were conversations with Haig and Nixon about any of that, I wouldn’t have been in the room for it, because even though I was there 95% of the time, the other 5% - who knows?

Smith: Were you surprised when the pardon was announced, or did you know before?

Kennerly: No, I knew it was coming.
Smith: And Sunday morning…

Kennerly: Well, afterwards I told him – after the shit had hit the fan about the pardon – I said a week later, we were going to some event in an elevator and I said, “So Mr. President, did you think by pardoning Nixon on a Sunday morning that no one would notice?” And he got mad at me because at that point he’d lost his humor about that particular scenario. I think his numbers went down to about where Truman’s were after he fired MacArthur. Probably in the same neighborhood.

Smith: Did he misjudge the intensity of the public reaction?

Kennerly: Yes, he did, I’m sure of it. Because after he signed the pardon – there are some really interesting pictures, by the way, in the little anteroom.

Smith: He’d gone to church beforehand.

Kennerly: Went to church.


Kennerly: Pardoned Nixon, and then he went and played golf. A good Republican president, what the hell – he’s not going to Disneyland. “So, Mr. President, you just pardoned Richard Nixon – what are you going to do next?” “I’m going to Burning Tree.”

So I can’t remember who he played with that day.

Smith: Mel Laird.

Kennerly: Oh, Mel Laird.

Smith: Who insists to this day, that if only he had done what Mel Laird wanted him to do, which was…

Kennerly: Make sure that Nixon’s plane crashed on the way to San Clemente.

Smith: Mel always had a plan. And Mel still says he was pissed at his old friend Jerry for doing this. Mel’s plan – he was going to bring a delegation, bipartisan delegation, from both Houses of Congress, to the Oval Office to petition Ford.
The problem with that scenario is, it’s fine thirty-five years later in this antiseptic – but in the culture of the time, the first trial balloon would have been shot down before it ever got to tree level.

Kennerly: Right.

Smith: You couldn’t prepare the country for…

Kennerly: I think Ford knew, he knew it was going to be negative. There’s no question about that. And that’s why he kept it so tight, for one thing. Once he’d made up his mind to do it, he was going to do it. I don’t think he wanted to get talked out of it or worried about what the reaction was. That was part of it, too.

Smith: Here’s another thing…

Kennerly: And Ted Kennedy was one of the strongest critics, and then of course coming all the way around, which was a big deal for him.

Smith: But here’s this thing: it goes back again to what I sense was Rumsfeld’s role, and what I say was his necessary ruthlessness.

Kennerly: Rummy – who you mean, “I was out of the country when it all happened,” Rumsfeld?

Smith: For example, right before the election that fall, Nixon is ill.

Kennerly: Phlebitis. I was there. I was in the hospital. They wouldn’t let me in.

Smith: And there were people trying to talk him out of going.

Kennerly: I remember.

Smith: What?

Kennerly: Well, this brings up another good point, which was midterm elections in October. President Ford had a scheduled trip to Dallas, Houston, somewhere in Texas and John Connally wanted to see him. And at that point John Connally is under indictment for this milk scandal thing, but it was a big deal. Connally had sent word to the President that he wanted to see him. And every
single person on the staff said you shouldn’t see him, you don’t have to see him, you’ve got a busy schedule, and there may have been another God damn it in there. “John Connally is a friend of mine and that’s it. I’m going to see him.” And whoever it was, I don’t know at that point, it was either Rummy or Cheney on that trip. And somebody said, “Well, you know, two minutes after he leaves that room with you, everybody is going to know about it.” He said, “I don’t care.” He said, “Because you’re under indictment doesn’t mean you are guilty, and he’s a friend of mine.”

Fast forward to the 1976 campaign. Now here he has really been a good friend of John Connally, who is a dick, and the way that John Connally repaid Gerald R. Ford, was when Ronald Reagan announced that he was running in the Republican primary, Connally said, “Oh, these are both good friends of mine, I can’t support either one of them in the primary.” John Tower, who I will always admire for stepping up to the plate, came right over to the White House, endorsed President Ford, who said, “You know, this may be a losing battle in Texas, because they are really conservative, and John Connally…”

So what happened was the day that Ronald Reagan picked Dick Schweiker as his running mate, who was considered fairly liberal – was shocking, actually - before they went into the convention, right? the phone rings, and John Connally just happens to be coming up to Washington and would love to stop by and see the President and maybe give them an endorsement.

I heard that and I was very, fiercely, loyal to the President – I could say stuff nobody else was going to say because I’d get really mad about something. So, he takes his call. He says, “Sure, tell him day after tomorrow,” or whatever. And so that evening I rode up in the elevator with him. He could tell I had something on my mind, I was really mad. We walked out of the elevator and went across to their bedroom, and he said, “Okay, what is it?” I said, “After what John Connally did to you, you saw him in his darkest hour and he paid you back by sitting on the fence. And now Reagan has picked a guy who will probably cost him the nomination, and Connally is going to come up here.” I said, “I just think that is horrible. If I were President of the United States, I wouldn’t do it.” And he looks at me and kind of smiled and puts his hand on my shoulder and says, “That’s why you’re not president Dave.”
Flash forward again to the Republican convention. John Connally honestly thought that Ford was going to call him up and put him on the ticket. I was in all those meetings. You can talk to Cheney about that one, too. All those people’s names were swirling around. And Connally was coming up to see him, and this goes to the not so naïve, and not necessarily un-ruthless Gerald R. Ford. So Connally – they have the meeting. I kind of look over, he shakes his hand and leaves. I said, “Now you’re not seriously considering picking him as a running mate, are you?” He says, “Dave, you remember what he did to me. Are you kidding?” I laughed. It was always in there and it was like, he knew, and he was an incredibly smart politician. It had to do with why he got along so well from both sides of the aisle.

Smith: Tell us about Mrs. Ford’s cancer surgery.

Kennerly: Well, I was there when he got the word on that one, and in fact, I think he was just devastated by that. He cried. They were so close and he could see the possibility that she might not make it. And there was actually a really interesting public moment when there was this big economic summit.

Smith: Summit on Inflation.

Kennerly: Whip Inflation – but it was Greenspan and all these other guys. It was a bipartisan thing. It was at one of the hotels, I can’t remember. And we had just come back from the hospital, having flown out in the helicopter, and she had gone into surgery and he had to make an appearance here and he broke down in front of this group. And there is a picture of him sitting there – I shot it. It was so touching. But I was with him during the whole time and the kids were there in and out. But I was really there for him and it was like really he was truly in anguish about it. Forget being president, or anything else. I guess he was thankful that she was getting such good care, and obviously it all paid off, but it was a tough one. I felt this almost familial relationship with her, was very close to Mrs. Ford, and everybody was worried. Back then it was not a sure thing.

Smith: Let’s face it, it’s hard for people today to understand – you didn’t talk about.
Kennerly: Well – then. Mrs. Ford should get sainthood for all that she’s done. If you want to talk about miracles on two different levels: having breast cancer and talking about it – nobody talked about it. No women talked about and men just didn’t want to hear about it. And also President Ford was so supportive of that. As a guy born in 1913…

Smith: People talk, understandably, about her courage and her trailblazing, but in a curious sort of unheralded way, in his response, he also sort of set an example for how husbands should respond to this.

Kennerly: He really did. Steve Ford talks about that, actually. If you haven’t talked to Steve, you really should talk about that because Steve makes that very point about his dad stood right by his mom, and then the whole business with alcohol and drug rehabilitation and all of that. And that’s very noble and all of that, but I don’t think it was quite as groundbreaking – no, it was groundbreaking. I know my parents generation – my parents were actually younger than they – that alcoholism runs in my family. I have personal experience with that and I know how difficult that is and people never talk about it. The older generation, they became kind of, oh you go to the Betty Ford Center. Now it’s a household name for recovery and dealing with your problems. I’ve had five or six of my friends go through the Betty Ford Center and she saved their lives.

Smith: We get conflicting – and it’s not something we dwell on – but sort of a conflicting sense to what extent her “problem,” however defined, was noticed, relevant during the White House years.

Kennerly: I’m a good person to talk to about that. I spent so much time with her, and now I tell this to people because I have my own personal difficulty growing up with my mother drinking. So I was pretty damned sensitive to it. It wasn’t like this is an academic problem. But even then I was sort of like I didn’t know for sure as a young kid, but as you get older you see it, obviously, because for one thing, you start drinking yourself and know what it will do to you. But I spent so much time with her and I never felt like – and I’m not a doctor by any means – again, I’m an observer, but also with some kind of sensitivity to that, it never struck me as being this huge problem. And I think
there may very well have been. One of my friends said, “I didn’t know my dad drank until he came home sober one day.” Maybe there was some of that, but she didn’t drink that much, and I think she was mixing the two. And her speech patterns were a little slow, but they always were, kind of always considered. You know her really well.

Smith: But it’s safe to say, it did not significantly impair her performance as First Lady.

Kennerly: No. I honestly believe that. There is no cover up. She’s the one that’s told all, she’s opened the closet.

Smith: And the other thing is, it’s interesting, opposites attract. He’s so punctual, and she – has she ever been on time in her life?

Kennerly: Right. But he did love her dearly. There’s no question.

Smith: It’s almost a measure of his love.

Kennerly: And also, if you think about the ERA, and the fact Mrs. Ford – that was not a Republican point of view, the Equal Rights Amendment.

Smith: The Sixty Minutes interview.

Kennerly: Oh, I remember that.

Smith: My sense is, there is an immediate, predictable reaction, followed by a kind of, gee, we didn’t stop to anticipate that reaction, i.e., that is of subsequent polls which were a lot slower in those days. But nevertheless, they reveal the country was changing, and that while there were certainly people who took exception, a lot of them Reagan supporters to begin with on the right, but they were outnumbered by people who found it refreshing and candid. And the irony is the message of the whole Ford presidency about openness and transparency, she, in the one interview, embodied that as much as anything that happened in those two and a half years.

Kennerly: It’s funny because transparency was not even a word that was in the lexicon then. That’s all latter day. But you’re right, she talked about what if her daughter was having an affair. Normally, an unmarried person going out with
other unmarried people is not an affair, it’s like you’re doing it, or whatever. And drug use, talking about how I would hope that my kids would talk to me. Those are all real rock solid ideas, being a good parent.

Smith: Basically she was simply acknowledging the existence of these issues - no one ever asked Pat Nixon about those things.

Kennerly: Well, no. And I think you look at the kids and you think that it wouldn’t even cross your mind. But the Ford kids were really kind of – young Susan was what? Eighteen? And Jack was out there with Bianca Jaeger and doing all this stuff, and I was in league with him.

Smith: Was that an issue? Were there people at the White House who were worried about Jack and his behavior?

Kennerly: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, but see, I was like the Henry Kissinger of the West Wing to the East Wing. That’s why Rumsfeld and Cheney knew that part of my value was that I was a direct link to the family - things that they didn’t want to talk to the President about. One time they asked me to say something to Mrs. Ford about something, and they didn’t want to talk to the President about it. I said, “I’m not going down that road. This is up to him and her.” She had made some statement in the book about they wanted her to tone it down a little bit. It was either Rumsfeld or Cheney. They asked President Ford, “Do you think you could get Betty to tone it down a little bit,” and he said, “Hey, if you want her to tone it down, you go ask her. I ain’t doing it.”

So, basically, she drove her own ship. But it wasn’t like the Clinton administration where there was really the North and South Korea. There was a DMZ, East Wing to West Wing, and Mrs. Clinton had her own political agenda and really ran this political operation separate from Bill Clinton. Mrs. Ford wasn’t like that. She had the things that she really believed in. It was a much quieter, lower key situation. Obviously, older people, too.

Smith: Did she enjoy being First Lady?

Kennerly: I think she did. I think she enjoyed being First Lady because she made people happy, and she was so much fun to be with. I mean, witness that last picture
of her on the Cabinet Room table. Never before or since will there be a picture like that taken. And it showed her sense of fun and that mischievous quality that she has.

Smith: Tell us about your trip to Vietnam and the context.

Kennerly: The context of the trip was, I was in a meeting. It was a top secret meeting in the Oval Office, and Fred Weyand, who was the Army chief of staff, was in there. Graham Martin had been in Washington getting some dental work done or something, Henry Kissinger, Brent Scowcroft, and me taking pictures. The meeting was about sending Weyand to go over to Vietnam to see what, if anything, could be done to save the government. The North Vietnamese had invaded, they had come over the DMZ and they’d also attacked along up near one of the other borders.

Smith: This is early April, end of March, early April of ’75?

Kennerly: It was the end of March, because the trip – I remember the dates – I went the last week of March. Things were really looking bad. They left the room and I said to the President, “You, know, I would really like to go with the General.” And the President thought about it and said, “You know, I would really like you to go, too. I’d love to have your point of view on what’s going on.” Because I had no axe to grind, I was there as a journalist, photographer, I’d been all over the country and Gen. Weyand was actually a hero in the ’68 Tet offensive, so he knew the turf.

Smith: Let me ask you, and this may not be answerable, but, to this day there is a legitimate debate over what – not so much over whether South Vietnam could have been saved, that’s another whole thing. But about inside the White House, the notion of going to Congress and asking for the $750 million. Did the President really believe, ala Henry Kissinger, that a) he could get it; and b) that it would do the trick; or was he, in effect, necessarily going through the motions? Because then you had the Tulane speech where Kissinger wants him – one has the sense, at the risk of oversimplifying, one has a sense that Kissinger wanted to go down with all flags flying.
Kennerly: No, Henry Kissinger was never going down with all flags flying. Not if he was on the ship. The ship might go down, but it wasn’t going to be with him at the helm.

Smith: Right. I’m trying to get a sense of what the internal dynamics were, how realistic Ford was, what he really believed he could get out of Congress. Because I would trust Gerald Ford’s assessment of what he could get out of Congress a hell of a lot more than Kissinger’s at that point. And that’s simply because of Ford’s experience with Congress.

Kennerly: That’s true.

Smith: And it’s critical to know whether Ford thought he really could get….

Kennerly: You know, there were big appropriations – I think, for one reason, that’s why he sent Weyand. He wanted to get a response from a military guy. And Weyand had been in charge of III Corps during Tet, which is the Saigon area, and even though it was a political disaster, Weyand and company had actually driven the Viet Cong out and all of that. He, as a military guy, had done a great job, but he understood the country. So Graham Martin and I flew on plane to Saigon. It was Graham Martin, it was General Fred Weyand…

Smith: What was Martin’s frame of mind at that point? Did he think it was salvageable?

Kennerly: Yes. He definitely was going to go down with the ship. He would have. He believed until the end. I stayed with him at his residence and I spent a night. He had a son who was killed. He talked about that and it was pretty sad, but Graham Martin didn’t want to allow – when I showed up there, of course I knew all the news people and they wanted to try to arrange to get their Vietnamese civilians out. They knew that the end was most likely coming and thought these people would be at risk because they worked for Americans. I went to talk to Graham Martin about it, he said, “What about all the Vietnamese that work for us, the government?” He said, “If I condone letting anybody especially come in and start this sort of a secret evacuation, the whole thing is going to go to hell.” And it made me resentful about Martin,
but I totally understood his point of view about that. And I knew a lot of the people that were in question there.

Smith: There really was no way you could secretly airlift people out?

Kennerly: Once you started, that was it.

Smith: It’s tantamount to surrender.

Kennerly: That’s right. And what was interesting for me as a professional observer, I went over on that last business, I was up in the Nga Trang with the American Consul when he was evacuated and I went up on a helicopter. A ship had been commandeered by the South Vietnamese soldiers – a whole ship was filled with soldiers fleeing south. They shot at our helicopter, which was the first my parents – AP put that story out – and my parents who thought I had this nice job at the White House discovered I was back in Vietnam getting shot at. The President had to call them up and tell them I was okay, which he did.

But the main thing was, I went up north; I saw what was going on; it was like the handwriting was on the wall pretty clear. I don’t know what that appropriation would have done. It might have bought some time, I’m not sure. It was a handy way to blame Congress for the end of it. I’m sure that was in somebody’s mind. I’m not certain that President Ford thought that directly. But then the CIA, because I had this presidential order given me carte blanche, flew me into Phnom Phen.

I went into Phnom Phen and there was no one at the airport, they were all behind sandbags. The airport was under fire and the CIA guy told me, “Look, I’m just going to taxi by the terminal and you’ve got to jump out.” It was one of those short take off/landing [called a “STOL”] planes that they used in Laos. I said, “That’s fine. I don’t want you to get blown up.” I jumped out and he took off, and I thought, oh this may have been a really stupid thing I just did. And so I got a ride into town; went to the embassy and got a top secret briefing a map showed Phnom Phen was here and there were all these red arrows pointing there and it was like, uh oh, this is essentially over with. The ambassador said they were going to evacuate.
Smith: Phnom Phen fell before Saigon?

Kennerly: Yeah, it fell a week after I was there. In fact, if you saw the *Killing Fields*, it was right in that period, and a bunch of my friends decided to stay around Phnom Phen. And my suggestion, quietly I said, “Get your ass out of here.” I said, “There will not be the U.S. Calvary coming to save you because it’s going to be too late. There’s no way they are going to commit troops. I can tell you that right now. I wouldn’t ask if we get an SOS from you guys after you stay here and the Khmev Rouge are coming down your throat.” And guess what happened? Got back to the White House; SOS. Scowcroft and I talked about it and he said, “Well, what do you think about it?” I said, “You can’t do it.” I don’t think he was going to do it, but I said, “They know.”

Smith: Did you and General Weyand fundamentally agree on your assessment of what you’d seen?

Kennerly: Well, I was hearing what they were saying. In fact, I was just looking in the book, and they were preparing their report and the President was in Palm Springs, and I went over there. I think they were saying that possibly they could hold them off for a certain length of time, I don’t know what the assessment was. It wasn’t a pretty assessment. One of the chief CIA guys was on the plane with me, also.

I told the President, I showed him photographs. I said, “This is what is going on, and anybody that tells you that Vietnam has more than three or four weeks left is bullshitting you.” That’s what I said, and he was really downcast. Saigon fell three weeks later. I’d been in Vietnam, not just that trip, but before, and then I was in the room when the decision was made to pull out of Vietnam for over two years. And it was in the Roosevelt Room, ironically, under this portrait of Teddy Roosevelt, you’ve got all the guys sitting around like the President, Vice President, head of the CIA, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Kissinger, and they are sitting there right after Ford pulled the plug and like, no one is saying anything.

Smith: Pulling the plug meant what?
Kennerly: Evacuating all the Americans that were left in Vietnam. Pulling the plug meant…

Smith: And as many of our South Vietnamese friends as possible?

Kennerly: One of the reasons – and I will say this that I truly believe it – that when I came back with my photographs, and they were pictures of refugees from around the country, Cambodia, wounded people, it was pretty grim. And I replaced all the photographs on the White House wall – all these cheery photos of state arrivals and all that – color pictures. They still do it to this day, and they are nice to see for the staff. And I put up the pictures I’d shown President Ford of refugee kids, of wounded evacuees, of the ship filled with fleeing South Vietnamese soldiers, on the walls. And someone, overnight, had taken all the pictures down from the day I went up. And the President got so mad about it that he ordered, personally ordered, that all those photos go back on the wall. He said, “You people who work here have to know what’s going on over there. This is a horrible situation we’re in and you have to know what it is.”

And when I told him about a lot of the Vietnamese people that I’d worked with who were there, I said, “One thing that really concerns me, and Graham Martin feels this way, is that it’s your obligation to try to get as many Vietnamese who are high risk Vietnamese people out of there.” People who had worked for the intelligence agencies and the military authorities. People who wanted to leave, we’re not going to make anybody leave, but the opportunity has to be open. And there were some in the State Department, at high levels, who felt that way, and at the highest level just wanted to close it down, get the Americans out and throw that chapter into Gulf of Tonkin. And President Ford felt very strongly about continuing the evacuation, which was a very dangerous thing that was going on – and kept the door open for thousands of Vietnamese who got out because of him.

Smith: Did they wait too long to take Reagan seriously as a challenger in ’76?

Kennerly: I don’t know. Those political discussions – a lot of those were happening offshore from the White House. My favorite picture in the book, the
Extraordinary Circumstances book, one of my favorites, is Reagan and Ford sitting two blocks from where we’re talking right now in their tuxedos, in what looks like a scene from Godfather III, at the Century Plaza Hotel. It looks like a Julius Shulman architectural picture from the ‘60s. And Reagan, looking very elegant, is sitting there and Ford is talking to him, and it was Halloween in 1974. President Ford was at some big fundraising thing, that’s why they were all dressed up like that.

I don’t know if Reagan, in his mind, was considering the run. I’m sure he must have been. He looked at Ford and probably thought, “I can do this.” But when you get around to – I don’t know at what point they started taking him seriously – certainly, but when he dumped Rockefeller, sometime prior to that, where they said, “Look, the hard, true-blue conservative Republicans want Ronald Reagan. He’s like an amazing candidate.”

Smith: At the end of the campaign, in ’76, did he think he was going to win?

Kennerly: Ford?

Smith: Yeah.

Kennerly: Yeah. I think it was that close. People don’t realize how close that election was. With Gore and Bush, I think you had two candidates that most people overwhelmingly didn’t want. It was sort of this is what you got, this is what it is. Ford almost overcame Carter. Carter was a bad candidate, and it was so close. I was there in those meetings.

Smith: What was that night like?

Kennerly: It was a horrible night. Up on the second floor it was Jake Javits and Cheney sitting in a room…that was up in the residence; that was like two o’clock in the morning. Cheney is up there smoking cigarettes and then I slept on my couch in my office. It still hadn’t been called at that point. It was so close that anything would have tipped it.

Later, I went back upstairs and the President was alone having breakfast. It was around seven a.m., he’d only slept for three or hours, if that. And at that point, I was the first person to talk to him when he knew it was a wrap. And it
was sad. And I’ll tell you what happened later that morning, and it boils down to Terry O’Donnell and I. The President had almost lost his voice, and I have a picture you can see the President sitting behind the desk and Cheney’s over underneath the Washington portrait by the fireplace, and they called Carter to concede. And Ford kind of croaked out, “I can’t talk.” He’d lost his voice campaigning, and, “Dick Cheney will say something.” And so Cheney read the concession statement.

Then the kids came down and Mrs. Ford, and we were in the Oval Office and it was really not a pleasant time. But they wanted a picture behind the desk like the one they’d had the day on August 9th, so I took a picture of them. The one I really like with Mrs. Ford sort of reaching over and chucking Jack under the chin, like, you know, try to buck up. Mrs. Ford was always like the cheerleader of the family. And then there is a smiling picture which doesn’t mean anything, but then they went out to the press room and Mrs. Ford read the concession statement. The kids were there.

And then Terry O’Donnell and I and the President walked back to the Oval Office and the rest of them left. I had a picture – I’ll never forget this, it was so poignant to me – the President puts his arm around Terry and he said, “I probably never told you this, you’ve done such a great job, you’ve been so dedicated, you’ve spent so many hours,” he said, “If there is anything I can do for you, let me know.” And I’m taking a picture of that and I just burst into tears because, once again, the guy is thinking about somebody else. You know, he’s just lost the presidency and yet he’s concerned about Terry O’Donnell. The picture - Terry and I both totally lost it. It was so typical of him, that’s why I loved working for him.

Smith: Did it take him a while to bounce back?

Kennerly: I think as he got older, he got more bitter about it. But what was so ironic is like becoming friends with Jimmy Carter. Who would have thought that? And not friends with Ronald Reagan.

Smith: No, in fact, I think one of the things that brought Carter and Ford together was they both ran against Ronald Reagan.
Kennerly: Yes.

Smith: They had that in common. A couple of quick things. When was the last time you saw him?

Kennerly: I saw him and he was still able to sit up in his chair, but it was toward the end. He was so frail. But he told some great stories. He was still in pretty good mind, but it was like he wasn’t totally on track. But he was old. In fact, most people don’t make it that far. It was so great to see him. And getting back to the DeFrank book, DeFrank made such a big deal about being the last reporter to see him. I mean, who gives a shit? Honesty. It’s like, I don’t care about that. The question is, who was Gerald R. Ford in the prime of his life? He was a great man, he was a good friend, he was somebody who should be revered and honored. And not for some recollections when you’re like kind of over the hill and past the point.

Smith: Were you surprised at all by the public response, which seemed to just build as the week went along?

Kennerly: Of course, I was. Because he was only president for like a half hour, essentially.

Smith: And he’d been out of the public eye.

Kennerly: That’s right. Two and a half years, and he died in, and I think considering everything else that was going on in the world, I think people were just fond of him, even if in retrospect people didn’t know him, knew that he represented something that was good. He was from a generation of people who, in his own words, felt that you could disagree without being disagreeable. He had lessons to teach people; still does. And I didn’t learn too many of them myself, but I know that they were good lessons.

I really lament the fact that he didn’t have a four year run in his own right. Who knows? I mean, things still would have gone to hell in many cases, but one thing that wouldn’t have happened, for instance, and I’m convinced of it; there would not have been American hostages in Iran. He would have gone down with the Shah and if the Shah was evacuated at some point, then so
would the Americans have been. Not this chicken shit way of doing diplomacy. Honestly, that was what caused that situation. I don’t know that it would have made any difference, except that I’m pretty sure that wouldn’t have happened, because that all just eroded just so slowly, like watching the blood seep out of a body.

Smith: Have you had any contact with Mrs. Ford since his death?

Kennerly: I haven’t seen her in a while. It’s been at least three months, really. Well, I took the book over to her, she loved the book. And it was really such a tribute to him and to her, and what was great about it, and your piece and everything that was in there was just all straight ahead stuff. It wasn’t being reverential about him, it was just like, “Here’s the guy.” The good news, the bad news.

One moment that I did want to talk about. The New York Times asked me to write an OpEd piece after Ford died [we should get a copy of this for the record]. And they wanted like my favorite picture or whatever it was. There are so many photos, of so many different things. People ask me my favorite picture and I cannot answer those questions. But I thought about it, and I didn’t write it. They asked me one time if I would do something ahead of time, but I could not sit down and write like their obit, which makes sense. I couldn’t do it until he was really gone. And then I only had twelve hours or less to write it.

And I thought about the picture, and the photo that I ended up with, which they used, was him during the Mayaguez incident, and he has his glasses on top of his head, and I thought that was the moment where he really assumed command of the presidency. I thought the picture showed a resolute person. It showed a determined man. It showed a good leader. And he managed the Mayaguez thing effectively, and Marines were killed and all that, I know; but it was handled in a really smart way and he made decisions that were important and he did not lean on Henry Kissinger or anybody else. He made his own decisions after the information came into him about what was going on.
One telling aspect of that was, that there were political people who thought that we had to kick the shit out of these Cambodians for taking the American crew, and basically, making the Cambodians pay for what the Vietnamese did to us across the border. And he just wasn’t having that. He did not make those decisions based on politics at all. In fact, he pulled back in a couple of cases on using greater force, and it worked out. But from then on, he didn’t have to come out on his lawn and talk about how Henry Kissinger is going to be here. Henry Kissinger almost lost his job at one point there.

One of my moments was that Henry Kissinger, early on, and I like him a lot, he’s just a great character and I’ve gotten along with him really well, but every time that Bob Hartmann or one of the guys would drop something to Evans and Novak about Kissinger, and undercutting him all the time, he would call up Ford and threaten to resign. One day I was in one of my sessions sitting up there having a drink. Kissinger called up and Ford said, “Well, I’m sorry you feel that way, Henry. But naw, don’t worry about it. I know, I know. It’s one of those things.” So he hung up and said, “Henry, he’s so upset about this Evans & Novak column, he’s talking about quitting.” I said, “Mr. President, just accept his resignation and he’ll never do it again.” And I’m not sure if he took the advice. But Henry never resigned.
Nixon Leaves the White House After Resigning

August 9, 1974

I was on the South Lawn of the White House as President Richard Nixon and First Lady Pat Nixon, their daughter Julie Nixon Eisenhower, son-in-law David Eisenhower, and Vice President and Mrs. Gerald R. Ford, walked from the South Portico of the White House toward the waiting helicopter.

Richard Nixon, the first president to ever resign that high office, climbed up the stairs of the helicopter, looked back at the White House, then gave a brisk wave to the dozens of staff who had assembled to see him off. I took a sequence of photos as the drama unfolded.

At first Nixon looked grim, but suddenly the crowd broke into cheers and started applauding. His mood shifted, and suddenly, if for just a few moments, he became the old campaigner, arms lifted above his head as he flashed the "V" sign. Then he turned, and disappeared inside the chopper.

Of course it wasn't a campaign, but one of the darkest days in presidential history.

Gerald R. Ford watched the spectacle, and as the helicopter lifted off, banked toward the Washington Monument, he walked back into the White House. In a few minutes, exactly at noon, in the East Room, Ford would become the 38th President of the United States, and Richard Nixon, flying somewhere over the Midwest heading toward California, became a private citizen.

The following day President Ford appointed me as personal photographer to the president, only the third person to serve in that capacity. I left the White House job when Ford did, January 20, 1977, after Jimmy Carter was sworn in as the chief executive.

David Hume Kennerly

Santa Monica, California
October 7, 2010
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Smith: The first thing I want to ask you: you obviously had a very impressive career before you ever joined the Ford camp. When did you stop being the youngest person in the room?

Mathews: I don’t know; time took care of that. I think it was more significant that I didn’t come from Washington. Yet even though I didn’t have a Washington background, I had experiences that served me well when I got to D.C.

For instance, I lived through the desegregation crisis. George Wallace was the governor of our state when the University of Alabama desegregated. I was at Columbia working on a PhD in history and came back to the university in the summer of 1963 to help with desegregation. The governor’s stand in the schoolhouse door was political theater. African American students were already in the dormitories and preparing to go to class. I became President a few years later, and a university that had served part of the state had a chance to be the university for all of the state. The challenge was no longer just ending segregation; it was fostering integration, which was a different. When I came to Washington, however, the focus was still on desegregation in a very acrimonious, political controversy.

I also had some experience in trying to reform health care. Alabama had very good medical care available in the medical school at the University of Alabama in Birmingham; yet 60 miles away, we had third-world health statistics. So I worked with the legislature to begin a College of Community Health Sciences in Tuscaloosa, which focused on rural areas.

In addition, I was familiar with working with elected officials because before coming to HEW I had served as the university’s liaison with the state assembly, and my grandfather and great-grandfather had both served in the legislature.

There was also a long history in social work at the university that helped me in Washington. And my wife’s relatives had been very much involved in social services. Her cousin, Loula Dunn, came to Washington during the Roosevelt administration to head the
Emergency Relief Administration. That was a useful connection. In addition, the university had done a lot of work with the disabled, and what I learned from those programs served me well.

I was pleased to be associated with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare because it represented the compassion of the American people.

Smith: Interesting. It traditionally has been seen as a political graveyard.

Mathews: Yeah, but if you look at the people who developed HEW, particularly Nelson Rockefeller, they made a contribution by bringing the federal programs that served people to one department, which provided opportunities for coordination and mutual reinforcement. The department also reflected some of the enduring values of America. It was, for example, the agency for administering the social compact between generations: the tradition of one generation caring for another.

Smith: I wonder what kind of institutional history there was. I mean, for example, were there people who remembered Mrs. Hobby?

Mathews: Not if she had her way. She didn’t seem to dwell on her experiences as the first Secretary. Mrs. Hobby went back to Texas and her newspaper. Other past secretaries often stayed in touch and shared what they could with their successors. Consequently, the department has had an institutional memory, particularly of people like Nelson Rockefeller, who was well respected. Some of his furniture was still around. There were also distinguished veterans, such as Wilbur Cohen and Arthur Flemming, who, like Nelson, were very helpful to me. All were truly public servants.

Smith: Did you know George Wallace?

Mathews: Oh yes.

Smith: What was your relationship with him? And did you see him change; did you see him evolve?

Mathews: As a young legislator, he served with my grandfather, although I have few memories of that era. I knew him best for his stand in the schoolhouse door at the university in 1963. He said he was carrying out a promise he made to perpetuate school segregation. I also
knew a lot of people who went to school with Wallace, including Frank Johnson, whose rulings as a federal judge checked the governor and brought about desegregation. In addition, I had ties to other progressive southern governors. In the 1960s, these governors were part of a network of educators and civic leaders in the South that included Jimmy Carter, Terry Sanford, and LeRoy Collins. Some of them remembered George from his student days when he was so liberal he was thought to be “pinko.” They saw Wallace’s about-face as opportunistic.

When Wallace first ran for governor in 1958, he said he wasn’t fit to serve if he couldn’t treat all citizens equally. Yet after being defeated by John Patterson, he later went on to pledge “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.”

My personal encounters with Wallace came when the university assigned me to work with the state legislature. We clashed over a proposed speaker-ban bill like one North Carolina had passed to keep Communists off the campuses. The real targets of the bill were civil rights leaders who were accused of being associated with the Communist Party. Of course, the universities were opposed to the bill, and my job was to try to stop it in committee. I found a committee member who was the father of a classmate; he was sympathetic to our position, and his vote helped prevent the bill from coming to vote on the floor.

The University’s president at the time, Frank Rose, took a very courageous stand opposing the bill, and Wallace wasn’t happy with its defeat. I was outside George’s waiting room some time after that. When he heard my voice, he came out of his office to talk about the speaker-ban bill. He said in effect, “I’m going to help you. I’m going to give you a Confederate flag and a pole to fly it.” And he put money for both in the appropriations bill. Our response was that we already had a real Confederate flag in the archives, which had flown when Union troops burned the university in 1865. We didn’t need to prove anything to anybody. So, we were on opposite sides on most, but not all, issues.

Wallace didn’t oppose my efforts to get funding for the College of Community Health Sciences. And we also received funding for another college dealing with environment and energy. Alabama is an energy-rich, mineral-rich state, so there wasn’t significant opposition. Later on, after Wallace was shot and in terrible pain, he would call at night to talk to people. Sometimes he would call me; he’d talk to me about old times, or if I wasn’t there, he’d talk to my wife, Mary, and if she wasn’t there, he’d talk to the kids. I went by
to see him after he’d won his last race for governor; sitting in a wheelchair, he could recite every ballot box in Alabama and the tremendous number of black votes he had received. By then, Wallace had confessed to making a mistake in supporting segregation, and the black electorate had supported him.

Did you see where Wallace’s daughter came out for Barack Obama, even campaigned for him?

Smith: No, I didn’t. Isn’t that something? Talk about the new South.

When I look at HEW during the Ford years, you had more than your share of hot potato issues. Let’s back up. How did you get the job?

Mathews: I have absolutely no idea. I had met Ford during the Bicentennial. The university was one of the first to have a Bicentennial program. Ford recognized that, and the White House asked if I’d come up for an award. (I was serving on the National Advisory Council for the American Revolution Bicentennial.) Other than that, I didn’t give much thought to Washington until I got a call from somebody with the White House who wanted to know if I was interested in HEW. I have a good friend by the same name as the caller (Walker), and I thought someone was pulling my leg. I didn’t take the call seriously until the White House called again. President Ford later said that calling me was his idea. He had inherited a lot of people from past administrations, and I assumed he wanted some who were his own choices.

Smith: Did you have a job interview with the President, or what was the process?

Mathews: After meeting Ford, I interviewed with the chief counsel and other staff. The time was short; Cap Weinberger was determined to get back to California, and President Ford wanted to complete his Cabinet.

Smith: Did you talk to Weinberger at all about the issues?

Mathews: Yeah, I talked to Cap about many things; he gave me good advice, and he was always on tap if I needed to talk to him.

Smith: What were the most pressing issues when you arrived?
Well, they fell into two categories, those issues that came from broad political trends, and those that came from specific policy controversies. In 1975, one of the most significant trends was that Americans were losing confidence in government. Pundits at the time thought maybe Vietnam and Watergate were to blame, but the lack of confidence persisted into the 1990s and beyond. In fact, contemporary polls show real hesitation about trusting government.

The other thing that was happening, as you know, was that we were dealing with what has been called “the new American political system.” We’ve always had interest groups, but the groups that related to HEW had become much better organized. Their members had taken positions on the staffs from Congress, as well as within the bureaucracy. Their heightened influence added to a shift in power away from the President and elected officials to the bureaucracy and the courts.

The tone of politics was also changing, becoming more moralistic and less pragmatic. Everything was a right. The civil rights movement had been a success, and other groups contended that they, too, were championing rights. But if everything becomes a right, which is absolute, how is the government, with its limited resources, to set priorities? There are no priorities when it comes to rights. Yet, if you’re in the government and there is an issue about whether the complaints of Mexican Americans or African Americans should be a priority for OCR’s compliance staff, the administration is in an impossible bind.

Going back to the loss of confidence, I would add that citizens were not only losing confidence, but also losing voice. These feelings may have had something to do with a shift in focus from the general interest to a focus on particular interests. Consequently, a large number of Americans were increasingly of the opinion that “folks like me” don’t count. Special interests aren’t bad, and every conceivable group was available to represent every conceivable interest. They were well organized and effective. Still, people didn’t feel like the political system represented them as a whole. Personally, we usually integrate our interests, but interest groups aren’t integrated; to be effective politically, each one is like a dedicated missile aimed at one specific target.
Smith: That’s interesting because one of the organizational innovations of the Ford presidency, which is with us today, was the Office of Public Liaison—clearly designed to address these group aspirations.

Mathews: That was helpful. And particular interests don’t necessarily conflict with the interests of all. It was a problem of balance. The more influential organized interest groups became, the more the balance tipped away from the less organized citizenry and the interest of the public as a whole. That same shift has occurred in the legal system; for instance, a community playground closes because it can’t afford the insurance to protect against personal injury.

The influence of organized interest groups was enhanced by increased reliance on regulations. The administrative state operates through regulations, which aren’t made through open debate the way laws are made. Furthermore, the legislation that the department had to implement through regulations was often very general; in some cases, only a few sentences added to in a bill. And this addition may have been passed without debate, which made the intent difficult to interpret. Consequently, the “taking powers” of the state, as Oliver Wendell Holmes put it, grew as regulations multiplied. I thought this raised a serious question: who would regulate the regulators?

In addition, as you know, there has always been an issue about the right balance between state and federal power. We benefit in many ways from a strong federal system, but in the 1970s, the balance had shifted decidedly in favor of Washington, as the federal advisory committee on government noted in the 1980s. This trend had implications for the department because many of its programs depended on effective state and local government. The department also depended on viable communities. For example, as Margaret Mead pointed out in health, whether or not you get well has a lot to do with the networks of nurture in a community. Roughly put, if you have the same problem I have, and more than six or seven people care that you get well but fewer care that I do, you’re likely to get well and I’m not.

This shift in balance of power away from local jurisdictions compromised that wonderful American invention of allowing sovereignty within sovereignty. Not allowing for divided sovereignty has plagued other countries, and in the United States, we have to rebalance power constantly.
These were the broad trends that were in the environment in which the department had to operate. In that environment, there were also specific policy issues that arose out of crises. The integration crisis is an example.

Smith: Let me interrupt just because I remember—I’m in Boston. Tell us about Boston.

Mathews: Oh, yes, I was about to mention Boston.

Smith: Tell us about Boston and the administration’s response.

Mathews: Well, the federal judge there, Arthur Garrity, issued a desegregation order that followed the 1973 decision in the Keyes case. This put the court up against a very formidable and adversarial Boston School Committee or board. Violence erupted when the judge’s ruling required busing children from a low-income Irish neighborhood to a distant, low-income African American neighborhood.

Smith: South Boston and Roxbury.

Mathews: Yeah, South Boston and Roxbury. The two had clashed in 1968, following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. And before then, in the 1950s, the Irish neighborhood felt it suffered from federal housing policies. So there was a tinderbox in the city, and the federal judge’s ruling supplied the spark. Initially, President Ford refused a request from state officials to send in the federal marshals. He said that maintaining safety was a local responsibility. But by the next year, the Justice Department sent federal marshals, and the Federal Community Relations Service was there. At HEW, we provided funding to ease the transition through the Emergency School Aid Program.

I also sent a special assistant there, Dr. Joffre Whisenton. He was the first African American to get his doctorate at the University of Alabama, where he had been my graduate student. I believe an official from the Office of Education, Herman Goldberg, was there as well. They were looking for the kind of civic organizations that had proven helpful in other communities like Pontiac, Michigan. For example, governors like Reuben Askew of Florida, as well as Robert McNair and John West of South Carolina, had created biracial committees. These were very constructive, not necessarily in getting people to like one another, but at least in preventing the destruction of a community that was in the process of obeying the law. There were some civic organizations with similar objectives in
Boston. But battle lines had hardened there; it was an extremely difficult situation. And this is why I said earlier that Washington was still focused on desegregation.

Smith: Was there a sense that a lot of people in the South felt there was a bit of a double standard?

Mathews: Oh, yeah. Even members of Congress who weren’t from the South, like Edith Green, were saying, “What’s good for the goose is good for the gander.” Yet many northern urban areas were ill prepared to deal with the challenges of desegregation.

Smith: And in some ways as segregated.

Mathews: Yes. De facto.

Smith: De facto segregation.

Mathews: Yeah. And President Ford’s position as a member of Congress had been that he was for civil rights legislation. And at his confirmation hearing as Vice President, he said he considered de facto segregation as illegal as de jure segregation. He liked the Esch amendment, which would have prohibited school systems from transporting kids past their nearest or next nearest school.

After Boston, on the eve of the election, President Ford had to come out with his own plan for desegregation. To explain how that plan was put together, let me tell you the story about differences in the way the Justice Department and HEW went about preparing this plan. Although I saw the signs that busing wasn’t working as intended, I told the President that it was probably a mistake to give the impression that there was some alternative to busing, which had been successful in certain cases. The desegregation issue had been framed in a way that made more extensive busing inevitable. As long as the government required specific ratios of black to white students, there was no way to achieve the necessary racial balance without transporting some students, usually African Americans, out of their neighborhoods.

I was pleased that when the President came out with this plan, he didn’t give the impression that there was an alternative to some busing. He wanted to limit it, while acknowledging it had been useful in certain cases. The bill he proposed was a hybrid. Ed Levi and the Justice Department wrote part of it, which had to do with limiting the use of
busing, and I took what I had learned from the citizen biracial committees and tried to get them institutionalized in the form of a quasigovernmental agency.

My models for this agency, to be called the National Community and Education Committee, were the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Science Foundation. The President needed a national plan, yet we had to depend on local citizens. Whatever citizens felt about desegregation, if they didn’t want their city torn up as Boston had been, they had to come together. They could create the kind of organizations that could counter the people who were organizing to oppose desegregation violently. And if you were in Boston, you knew how effective the citizens rallying against desegregation were, particularly when encouraged by the school board. So, that’s where we came out.

Smith: Let me ask you, because it’s not unusual for there to be tensions between the White House and departments, but I’m wondering, this is also playing out against the backdrop of an impending challenge from the right in the form of Ronald Reagan.

Mathews: Yeah.

Smith: Did you ever sense how that factored into decision making at the White House?

Mathews: There was no pressure from the White House to respond to the Reagan challenge. Our principal contact was Jim Cannon, head of the Domestic Council, and he was quite professional. A good friend of mine, Doug Cater, who was in the Johnson White House said, “You’d better hope there’s nobody like me in the Ford White House.” President Johnson is said to have kept his departments on a short leash and depended on the White House staff. I was fortunate to have Jim, a fellow Alabamian, in Doug’s role. We really weren’t that different in our outlooks; he seemed to share my nonpartisan inclinations. I had grown up in a state where I didn’t see a Republican until I was 30 years old. I was an independent, and never have been interested in partisan politics. Any need to respond to the Reagan challenge wasn’t a consideration, not in the conversations that Jim Cannon and I had.

Smith: Bill Coleman remembers at one Cabinet meeting, he wanted to keep the administration from getting too far out in front, filing a friend of the court brief or something at some point. And of something the President said, consistent with what you said earlier, “Well, you know, Bill, I just don’t think anyone should be bused beyond the nearest school.” And
Coleman said, “Well, if you agree to that, then we’re both in agreement.” Does that ring a bell?

Mathews: Yeah. The discussion occurred while formulating the President’s plan for desegregation. Keep in mind that another Coleman, James Coleman, had authored two reports on the schools. The first had shown the ill effects of segregation. Nobody had to tell me about the bad effects of segregation because I had seen what it had done to the South—the energy that it had drained away from everything else. It was an injustice to everybody. And I saw what could happen to an institution, the state university, when it was free of that burden. So there was no question in my mind that we had to integrate the schools. But in his second report, Professor Coleman warned against the unintended consequences of extensive busing.

Smith: To desegregate.

Mathews: Desegregate, yes. And integrate the schools.

Smith: In a nutshell, what was the difference?

Mathews: The way I use the terms, desegregation is a legal matter. It is unconstitutional to have a law that says certain people can’t attend a public school because of their race. But integration is a far more complex social matter. It isn’t the same as homogenization; it’s about forming working relationships. Different people may have lived together in the same place for a long time, but their relationships may not be on equal terms and their interactions quite restricted. To integrate is to foster positive, respectful, pragmatic ways of dealing with one another. When you bring African American students into an all-white institution, you learn about the challenges of integration. For example, these students have to have some space that they can call their own. They may want a choir that will sing gospel music, as well as one that allows them to sing Handel. So integration is a great social challenge. I was talking with a young musician in New York, and he said, “You know, we all go to desegregated schools, but we don’t live in an integrated society. People don’t know one another.” That is a different challenge than desegregation.

Smith: And did the President understand that?

Mathews: I think so. In fact, one Saturday, in June of 1976, we convened a meeting at the White House, so the President and his staff could see the biracial committees and the things they
had learned the hard way about integration. Then members of these committees explained what they did and what the challenges were. The President understood them.

As I said, President Ford broadened his stance on school desegregation toward the end of his term in office. He refused to use his office for a Constitutional amendment to prevent busing. But it was clear from what James Coleman was reporting about the effects of busing and from what Norman Cousins was writing in the *Saturday Review* that busing was having unintended consequences. By 1976, the schools were already beginning to resegregate. Whites were moving, some—but not all—because of race. The middle class, not just whites, had been moving out of the cities since the 1950s. (Of course, the black middle class at that time was very small.) But economic class, as well as race, was a factor. And as our schools began resegregating, we needed to address a number of problems like those contributing to high dropout rates.

In response to the backlash against busing, Congress passed several anti-busing amendments, led by Senator Robert Byrd for the Democrats and by Representative Marvin Esch for the Republicans.

What made integration difficult to bring about was the tone of the political rhetoric at the time, which was aptly characterized in the title of Dan Carter’s book, *The Politics of Rage*. Everybody was mad with everybody about everything just at the point that the country needed some innovation and creativity. Judge Garrity himself said, “I’m boxed in.” And I thought that turning to local biracial committees locally, while no panacea, was a way to begin to get out of the box. Unfortunately, renegotiating racial relationships was stymied because the rhetoric wouldn’t allow it.

This was doubly unfortunate because America is continually renegotiating race relations, sometimes with great intensity. We renegotiated them in the Constitutional Convention, and we renegotiated them again in *Plessy v. Ferguson* after years of Klan violence. Then we renegotiated them after World War II when black soldiers came home and decided they didn’t want to ride in the back of buses anymore. The school desegregation crisis wasn’t just about desegregating the schools; it was about renegotiating racial relationships. Fortunately, America did substantially renegotiate the relationship by the 21st century, and while the relationship is continually being renegotiated, the country has moved beyond where it was in the 1970s. This has not only happened in race relationships, but also in
gender and other relations. This renegotiation was going on in the Ford administration even though we were not able to solve the school desegregation problem.

Smith: We talked to Justice Stevens, and it’s hard to believe, but he was there. He said in his confirmation hearings, no one asked him about abortion.

Mathews: Really?

Smith: Yeah, which undoubtedly makes him the last of a kind. How much of an issue was abortion?

Mathews: It wasn’t as explosive an issue as it became later. Politics was just beginning to become hyperpolarized, as it is today, although you could sense the tightening of the lines. Still, politicians could differ on the floor of Congress and go to dinner together that night. There was controversy, but I don’t recall the abortion issue being as ideological as it has become.

There were other divisive issues in the Ford administration—remember the brouhaha over genetic engineering? Scientists in the labs had figured out how to modify a special strain of *E. coli* so that you could change its characteristics and the way it behaved. There was a great deal of fear because a new bug has no natural enemies. Would it get out of the lab? Would it attack somebody? Nonetheless, President Ford supported going ahead with genetic research. He opted for science, and we’re better off for it.

Smith: Several of your Cabinet colleagues have mentioned that their jobs, in some ways, were made easier because of the connections and the trust and the relationships that Ford brought from Capitol Hill. That he could pick up the phone and ease their labors.

Mathews: Oh, yes. He did that in the swine flu case.

Smith: Describe that, because everything old is new again.

Mathews: Yeah, there has been a lot of news about an H1N1 flu recently. A flu virus is totally unpredictable. It can change its characteristics, and it doesn’t give you any advance notice. In January of 1976 there was flu outbreak in New Jersey in one of the forts.

Smith: It was Fort Dix.
Mathews: Fort Dix. And more than 200 young soldiers showed signs of having been affected by a new flu virus. A dozen or more soldiers had to be hospitalized; one died. That was a clear warning. You didn’t have to remind Americans in Ford’s generation of what a flu virus could do because people remembered the terrible pandemic in 1918. Still, we tend to underestimate flu. Flu kills. I mean, just in a normal season, flu will kill an estimated 36,000 people in the United States from flu-related complications. Swine flu had come in a relatively mild form in the spring of 1918, and then had hit with deadly force in the regular flu season.

In 1976, the folks at CDC did their job; they called the best scientists that they could to determine what kind of virus had caused the Fort Dix outbreak. And the department had to decide what we were going to do for the fall. It took about six months to prepare and test a vaccine. So we had to respond immediately to be prepared for a possible fall outbreak. Vaccines are prepared by injecting fertile chicken eggs with a flu virus. The eggs then form protective antigens. Fortunately, there were some roosters available that we could use to fertilize eggs. We had to take advantage of that and move ahead to prepare the vaccine and then test it. The tests went well. There were no untoward effects. And there had been none when swine flu antigens were put in the flu vaccines that had been used in the military during the 1950s and 1960s. So we had some experience with the type of vaccine we were preparing.

By August, we had the vaccines in vats, but we ran into another problem, one that required the President’s intervention. The insurance companies were nervous. As you may know, insurance risks are assumed by companies around the world. If there is a risk in one country, the insurers in that country take part of the risks, and then they pass the rest along to insurers elsewhere. Still, the extent of the risk in nationwide immunization programs is considerable, and it was difficult for the U.S. insurers to find partners in other countries. You cannot inoculate on a mass scale without the risk of some injury, even though mass vaccinations are the only way you can prevent a pandemic. (You have to immunize a large enough population in order to get a herd effect.)

It was August: the flu season was coming up in October, and we had a big problem with insurance. The federal government was going to have to assume some of the risk, and the issue was, how much? Once that was determined, we could negotiate with the insurers to get protection for vaccine manufacturers. But we needed legislation to move forward on
the risk the government would take. Congress, however, was hesitant. At that point, the
President intervened and called his friends on the Hill to say the liability problem was
serious; you’ve really got to do something about it. And Congress passed a tort claims bill
to protect the vaccine manufacturers (except when found negligent). That is how we got
the insurance problem settled; it was because of President Ford’s credibility in Congress.
We put the vaccines into the proper doses, and almost 50 million Americans were
inoculated. Nobody knew whether that would be possible because we have a decentralized
health care system. Yet the system worked reasonably well and, fortunately, swine flu did
not reappear in the fall.

Smith: Was that disproportionately aimed at the very young and the very old?

Mathews: This particular flu hits the population it’s not supposed to hit—the young and healthy. It
was a young, otherwise healthy soldier who had died. That was alarming. And even those
who were middle-aged had no protection.

We also put in place a very strong surveillance system. And we did pick up some cases of
a neurological disorder called Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS). Guillain-Barré is not
necessarily associated with vaccines. It is brought on by any number of things, including
vaccines for flu and other diseases. Back then we didn’t have a good gauge for judging
what was the norm for cases of Guillain-Barré. But the surveillance picked up a spike in
the GBS cases within a few weeks of the vaccinations. We did the prudent thing: stopped
immunizations in mid-December 1976. Later, the Carter administration determined that
the risk from something untoward happening with the vaccine was less than the risk of the
flu. So they reintroduced the vaccines, I think it was in February of 1977, a few months
after the suspension.

Smith: We talked to Vice President Cheney who remembered a meeting in the Cabinet Room
with the President and Jonas Salk and Dr. Sabin—the giants in the field. Do you
remember that?

Mathews: I do. This is what we did. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommended that we
have a national immunization program. They said we just can’t afford to take any chances
with the health of the American people. I think it was the right call. But at HEW, we
checked with people who were not at CDC to see if there were any dissenting views in the
medical community. The White House did the same with its contacts. Then we jointly
brought together all of the independent parties, including Sabin and Salk. The reason for having them both there was that they seldom agreed about anything. If there was to be dissent, it was quite likely that it would come out at the meeting in the White House.

In the meeting, we went over the data and the recommendations and asked if there were any second thoughts. Then the President said, “I’m going to go into my office and if any of you have something to say to me, come and talk to me.” Nobody came. He went on camera, announced the program, and then took the shot. I think he may have been influenced by a World War II mindset; if you’re going to lead the troops, get out front. I do remember saying to him, “this is a no-win situation. If the virus is virulent and comes, we’re going to be accused of not being prepared enough. If it doesn’t come, we’re going to be accused of squandering millions of dollars and God only knows what else. I’ll be happy to make this announcement and you can stay presidential.” “No, no,” he said, “I’ve got to do it myself.” Out he went.

Smith: It’s revealing. Wonderful story. That raises the larger question about his style of leadership. How did Cabinet meetings operate, for example? Were they frequent? Was it more a kind of information sharing? Was there debate, general debate over policies?

Mathews: The Cabinet meetings were lively, but you have to see them in the context of the other contacts with the President. I found Ford very accessible. I have talked to Cabinet Secretaries in other administrations, and some said they seldom saw their president. We, however, had easy access. I called him on several occasions to ask about how to deal with various problems. I never was unable to pick up the phone and talk or make an appointment.

Of course, as you would imagine, there were debates in Cabinet and other meetings. These were substantive, and Ford had wonderful ways of dealing with differences. I remember we had some flap over the Social Security System in a meeting of the President and the system’s three trustees: the Secretaries of Treasury, Labor, and HEW. We were disagreeing about something or other when Ford motioned to Bill Usery, the Labor Secretary, saying, “Come on with me. Let David and Bill Simon, the Secretary of Treasury, work out these differences.” And we did. These sorts of meetings were quite common.
Smith: Carla Hills, among others, has regaled us with stories of friendly disagreements with OMB that would wind up in with the President, Solomon-like, hearing them . . .

Mathews: Having to decide where the money went.

Smith: Did you have a situation with that?

Mathews: I did once, right after I had arrived. The issue was whether to continue funding for medical scholarships when a shortage of physicians appeared to have been eliminated. I was concerned, however, about the lack of doctors trained to practice in rural areas and inner cities. Remember that my experience in Alabama was with developing a new way to practice medicine in rural areas. Putting one doctor alone in small communities wasn’t going to work. They couldn’t even keep up with the number of patients. We had to design an educational program for primary care physicians that would show them how to involve their communities because communities and their social networks can affect people’s health. Today, we are quite aware of the social determinants of health. A lot of hospital admissions are connected to behaviorally related illnesses, type 2 diabetes, for example. If you want to change behavior, you can use an educational campaign or impose various sorts of prohibitions. But peer group influence and support, social scientists have shown, is more likely to bring about change. I found an ally for the kind of community-based health care that I was advocating in Margaret Mead, who had been calling attention to social indicators and community involvement for some time.

I thought we should continue scholarships to encourage students to go into community medicine. But that was not in the OMB budget. I made my case based on my experience and got the money back. That was a very pleasant victory. You didn’t win many victories over OMB because they control the budget.

Smith: And the President was a fiscal conservative.

Mathews: Indeed, he was a fiscal conservative. And that meant we weren’t going to be able to start any expensive programs. But I didn’t find Ford draconic, and he didn’t have an antagonistic attitude toward HEW. Evidently some White Houses considered HEW to be the worst of the worst.

Smith: Particularly Republican administrations.
Mathews: Yes, that’s right. Yet Ford never indicated anything like that to me, or certainly I didn’t feel that in dealing with Jim Cannon and the White House staff. I remember OCR, which was especially controversial. It was the lightning rod of all lightning rods for the department. Every rights-based interest group was focused on OCR. And the office had been named in numerous federal lawsuits, such as the *Adams v. Weinberger* case on discrimination against African Americans.

Smith: OCR being?

Mathews: Office of Civil Rights. In the *Adams* case, OCR was sued for not handling complaints from African Americans fast enough. There was a backlog of cases. The court said OCR must handle these cases immediately. However, as I mentioned before, when OCR shifted staff to comply, the Mexican American community then sued on the grounds that it was being neglected. That group wasn’t being totally neglected, but OCR had to obey the *Adams* court order.

OCR, with limited resources, was getting bombarded by one group and then another. I recall asking for an additional 400 staff; we didn’t get that many, although we did get a hefty increase of 150 positions. Still, that didn’t address the fundamental problem, which was that the department was under so many different court orders that it was pulled in multiple directions. Finally, the Carter administration asked the courts to consolidate some of their orders because the department was in an impossible situation.

Smith: From its beginning, I have a sense that HEW had been viewed as an administrative challenge, a real hodgepodge of agencies and functions. What were the challenges in an administrative sense that you faced?

Mathews: HEW was, at that time, the largest department in our government. It is said to have had a budget that was larger than all but six of the budgets of other countries. So in a sense, it was the seventh largest country in the world. And what looked like a hodgepodge of programs was actually components of a fairly coherent vision for the department: compassion for those who needed help; protection for those who needed to be protected against dangerous foods and drugs; justice for those who were underserved. The department had some historical memory of that vision for putting the pieces together, although it was somewhat obscured by contemporary pressures.
Under pressure from various interests, however, the department was subject to being Balkanized. Each interest group focused on its own office in HEW, and each office tried to respond to its own constituency. This Balkanization worked against comprehensive policies. Such separation was unnatural (health, education, and welfare are interrelated), and some of the Secretaries (like John Gardner) kept the pressure on for inclusive and complementary strategies. I admired these Secretaries and, consequently, was never a fan of breaking up the department.

Smith: And that brings to mind one of the real initiatives of the Ford presidency, which was deregulation.

Mathews: Yes, right.

Smith: And how did HEW fit into that?

Mathews: We were at the center of the regulatory universe on the most sensitive subjects. We had to handle these sensitive issues case-by-case. One of the things we did in the interest of regulatory reform was, as I mentioned, to raise the question, of who regulates the regulators? We also made changes in the federal procedures to put draft regulations before the public early on. Our political system is predicated on the assumption that laws shouldn’t be passed without full consideration. What is that line in Thomas More’s *Utopia* about not acting on proposals until time had been allowed to reflect on them? That’s a cardinal precept in our democracy. Nonetheless, as I said before, regulations, which have the same force as law, don’t have to be debated openly.

We changed the federal procedures to require a notice of intent to regulate *before* a regulation could be posted in the *Federal Register*. Otherwise, in the interest of expediency, the bureaucracy would publish a draft regulation, that was, in effect, a final regulation. We were trying to change that process with an early alert, the notice of intent. We also publicized draft regulations more broadly than just in the *Federal Register*. I mean, how many people sit down and read the *Federal Register* every day? The wider publication, we hoped, would allow “just folks” to comment. The system favored organized interests, not average citizens. Interest groups tracked the regulatory hearings; they were already close to what was happening because they had former staff in the regulatory agencies and on the Hill. They were in an ideal position to influence the
regulations, which was their job. We were not trying to block their influence, but simply trying to open up the process.

Smith: One senses the thrust of the Ford presidency was economic deregulation. No one ever suggested rolling the clock back in terms of food safety and the like.

Mathews: You are right. In the final analysis, the department had to regulate, and citizens wanted some things regulated. They didn’t want food safety deregulated; they didn’t want their drugs deregulated. We just wanted to open the process to more voices.

Smith: Was there a wall between the 1976 campaign, the overt politics of that period, and what you were doing every day?

Mathews: There is no such thing as a wall in an election year. It just colors everything. However, electoral politics was kept at arm’s length at HEW. Some Cabinet officers like Ed Levi said, “It’s not appropriate for the attorney general to be out campaigning as a partisan.”

Smith: Levi, I take, is a very impressive guy.

Mathews: Yes, he was. He was a solid fellow—the kind of person that you’d like to see in government. Ford came into office under unusual circumstances, and many of us who came into government then may never have come otherwise. Some of us didn’t come up the usual party ranks. I am an independent, although I did some work for the Ford campaign at the end of the administration. I took exception to Ford being stereotyped as not “swift on the uptake” and remember doing a campaign ad comparing Ford to a dependable long-distance runner, someone you could count on.

Occasionally, we would get weird accusations coming out of the presidential campaign, like the charge that the swine flu initiative was a scare tactic intended to boost Ford’s popularity. There wasn’t any talk of the presidential campaign when making the swine flu decision. It could be that some overenthusiastic staffers thought they could use the flu campaign for political benefit. Who knows? I didn’t think the flu scare was a vote getter.

Smith: Tell me about your overall impression of his intelligence.

Mathews: Ford was a very bright man. And he knew how to get things done. He had an especially keen social intelligence: the ability to read people, to know what was possible. Ford was
sensible and pragmatic. Yet America was entering an ideological age. Maybe Ford was the last true pragmatist—someone who concentrated on making the political system work. That seemed to me to be his abiding vision of government—it ought to work for people.

Smith: Among his great frustrations in losing in 1976 was that he felt that he had just, in effect, mastered the job, when he lost it. That he had learned the difference between congressional leadership and executive leadership. That he had really grown into the office, learned how to be President.

Mathews: He held very high standards for himself. He could be disappointed with his performance. And those were dark moments for him.

Smith: Did you see him right around the time of the election?

Mathews: Yeah, off and on. Everybody was traveling right around the election. But after the election, yeah.

Smith: What was his mood right after?

Mathews: My sense of him after the election was of resilience. That he knew himself well, and he knew how to bounce back from a defeat.

Smith: Someone who was around him said the next day, and for some time thereafter, he would sort of walk around the White House saying, “I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer.”

Mathews: I’ll tell you a story about Ford’s resilience. I have known Jimmy Carter for some time and respect him. He was part of that little group of Southern progressives I mentioned earlier—Terry Sanford, Reuben Askew, and a few college/university presidents. During the election, Ford and Carter didn’t have a lot of good things to say about one another. Nonetheless, they joined forces in 1983 to promote a stronger role for citizens, and I had the opportunity to work with both of them again. After I left office, I teamed up with the dean of public attitude research, Dan Yankelovich, to work on a concern we shared about the lack of opportunities for average citizens to understand government policies, particularly those policies that affect people’s daily lives: the education of their children, their own health, their economic security.
I came out of Washington determined to try to do something about creating a more knowledgeable and public voice. And the Kettering Foundation gave me that opportunity. I thought the country needed a Domestic Policy Association to be an equivalent of the Foreign Policy Association. Dan Yankelovich and Cyrus Vance had created an organization called Public Agenda that seemed an ideal partner for this venture. Dan had noticed in his work on public attitudes that there was a qualitative difference between first opinions and more considered judgments. He saw polls would go up and down, and then right before an election attitudes could stabilize. People had moved in making up their minds and had come to a conclusion. Opinion had changed into judgment. So to assist in this maturing of attitude, we designed citizens’ briefing books that are fair in the presentation of a range of legitimate policy choices. These books help people move from first impressions to more reflective and shared judgment. This was the beginning of the National Issues Forums (NIF) books.

The first NIF book was on financing Social Security. Alan Greenspan was then heading a bipartisan commission to look at the looming deficit, and he was nice enough to let his staff work with us on this briefing book for public forums. Then we faced the question, who is going to hear the result of these forums? We talked to Fred Friendly, a great media guru who said that nobody in the press was going to be interested because the outcomes of the forums were going to be dull. So I went to Plains, Georgia, to see Jimmy Carter. I told him what we were trying, and asked him if he would cosponsor a presentation of the results of the Social Security forums at the new Ford Library. He agreed and joined Jerry Ford. I’ve forgotten whether this meeting was before or after the two former Presidents’ flight to the Sadat funeral.

Smith: I think it was before, just before.

Mathews: Yeah, perhaps it was. [Actually, the funeral was October 19, 1981, and the meeting was February 9-10, 1983.] I recall sitting at one end of a table in the library with President Ford, while my wife, Mary, sat at the other end with President Carter. I had said to Mary, “If the conversation goes badly, just rattle the dishes.” Well, it didn’t; the two former Presidents had become good friends, which was nice to see. And the reports on NIF forums have become an ongoing series. In fact, all of the presidential libraries have now done these forums on the election issues.
Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him?

Mathews: Here, in Washington, on his 90th birthday.

Smith: Yeah.

Mathews: What I remember about that occasion, and you will, too, is that he wanted to do well and thought his speech wasn’t up to his standards. For those who heard him, we thought the speech was fine, but Gerald Ford had really high, exacting standards for himself. I got that same impression from talking with his son, Mike Ford.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Mathews: In context. I think if you take Gerald Ford out of Grand Rapids, you’ve missed a good part of what he was all about. I’m from a small town right across the river from the community where Nelle Harper Lee lives—the place she wrote about in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I could relate to Ford because Grand Rapids was not simply a geographic location. It was home; it was a place that he had strong feelings for and a place he understood. I could explain the things that I had taken away from my own town, Grove Hill, Alabama, and he would understand what I was talking about.

Ford’s unique qualities also become apparent when you see him in the context of what was happening in the 1970s in the political system.

There’s a very interesting book about the 1970s, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened*. The author, Peter Carroll, shows that the decade was actually a time of great transition. Ford was well-suited for a decade of transitions because he was a president who remembered who we were and where we had been yet also had a sense of where we needed to go. For example, having experienced the integration of the armed services, his generation knew that the segregationist regimes were wrong. I’m sure you heard Ford talk about the impact of his personal experiences with his black teammate in football.

A president who can look back and forward at the same time has a perspective that visionaries are not likely to have because visionaries are prone to miss what is behind, perhaps even demonize it. And somebody who is rooted firmly in the past is going to try to hold on to that too much. So I think if you put Ford in that context, you can see what he really meant to the country.
I think Gerald Ford will also be remembered in the context of today’s hyperpolarized political system. Ford was a staunch Republican, yet his partisanship didn’t preclude personal friendships with Democrats. He had very good friends on the other side of the aisle. And he brought that capacity for building good working relationships with him to the White House. It was a constant as he tried to move the political system in the direction he felt it should go. Sometimes he was successful, and sometimes not. There were a lot of vetoes. Still, Ford didn’t change his style; he didn’t have an enemy list that I know of. I don’t know that anybody could have saved us from the hyperpartisanship that we have now. But Ford helped foster bipartisanship by who he was and what he did.

Smith: The older I get the more I’m inclined to believe that ideology, although it may be important to many people, is ultimately trumped by generational politics. Go back to Grand Rapids—Ford was of a generation of conservatism, which had a healthy skepticism about the ability of government to engage in social engineering. But it was consistent skepticism. It said, I don’t really want government in the boardroom, or the classroom, or the bedroom. And it evolved into a kind of social conservatism, which on the one hand said I don’t trust Washington, but was perfectly willing to use government to enforce its own social agenda.

Mathews: Yeah.

Smith: And I’ve often thought that the Fords were almost marooned at the end of his life with the Republican Party.

Mathews: That’s right. He was certainly an economic conservative, and I wouldn’t disagree with you on his understanding of the limits of government. However, in terms of my dealings with him at HEW, he was moderate to progressive on social issues. Take his position on Title IX, which had to do with women’s rights, including the right to have access to intercollegiate sports. He was also very helpful to us in higher education on affirmative action. If you took all of the African Americans with PhDs that institutions of higher education had promised to hire, it was something like a hundred times the population that was available. The government accepted all of the promises, yet it didn’t do enough to increase the supply. So we created a program at HEW called the Graduate and Professional Opportunities Program; it identified kids early on and put them on track for academic careers that their circumstances would otherwise have precluded. Ford was very
supportive of the program; no problems with OMB. The Carter administration picked it up and succeeding administrations funded it until 1995. These are some of the reasons I would count President Ford as a moderate to progressive on social issues by today’s standards.

Smith: And what’s the story behind Title IX?

Mathews: Well, Title IX is the Betty Ford story. I’m sure of that.

Smith: Speculate for us.

Mathews: It’s just a matter of fairness. Betty was very much a champion of women’s issues. You have to remember that the Fords’ generation was not too different from my parents’. Competitive sports for men dominated. That was the case in my high school in the 1950s; and at the University of Alabama, men’s sports certainly flourished under coaches like Paul “Bear” Bryant. If we didn’t win the national championship in football, alumni thought it was a bad year. After Title IX was implemented and I returned to the university, I realized that we needed an equally good sports program for the women who wanted to participate. Although the student affairs office started the program, the athletic department took the responsibility shortly after its inception. Paul Bryant’s attitude was if there were to be a sports program, it should be excellent, and his department should manage and pay for it. The women’s program at Alabama continues to do exceedingly well.

The Fords had that same attitude. Of course, there have been some problems with Title IX. There will always be questions of what’s fair to both men and women, and there will inevitably be disputes over the standards for compliance. Yet implementing Title IX, which wasn’t just about sports, was the right thing to do.

Smith: I sense that Mrs. Ford was an influence in many ways.

Mathews: I always felt that. She was never pushy, and he never said to do something because Betty insisted. But I can’t believe that she didn’t have considerable influence.

Smith: Anything else?

Mathews: Two other things in the Ford administration we ought to talk about a little bit. One is fraud and abuse in welfare. Paul Light has done some very good research on public
administration. But he missed something and admitted it when he asked me about a study that he was doing for Congress on HHS. It had to do with the creation of the Office of Inspector General in HEW, which was established in the Ford administration. Remember, the courts had ruled in ways that opened the doors to welfare in the mid-1970s. Cases were mushrooming; costs were skyrocketing. The volume made the system susceptible to fraud, although I don’t want to imply that all problems resulted from criminal behavior. Many problems had to do with discrepancies between what the federal government wanted and what the social service agency required.

That caveat aside, fraud was a serious problem, and we added an inspector general to the department to investigate it. Later on, in 1978, Congress passed an act authorizing the office. But it was created within the department in concert with the Ford administration’s position on fiscal responsibility.

There were other innovations in the Ford administration, such as an effort to empower local committees, which we’ve already talked about.

The second issue has to do with the Social Security System. The system was entering a crisis because, you remember, the Nixon administration had double indexed the benefits, thinking inflation was coming. The government was making generous payouts, assuming that inflation would hit the salaries, and they would go up. Well, that didn’t happen. As a result, the Social Security System was in danger of running out of money. This problem was compounded by a growing imbalance between the number of workers paying into the system and the number of citizens receiving benefits. We, the trustees of the system in the Ford administration, demonstrated that the problem was real and serious, that it wasn’t a partisan ploy. Using the department’s analysis, I met with Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale to demonstrate to their satisfaction that a real crisis was looming. Fortunately, the Carter administration took measures to shore up the system for a time.

There were other significant handoffs to the Carter administration, which says something about the Ford administration. The Carter administration completed some things that we had begun, and their follow-through should be acknowledged.

Smith: I’ve often thought—people tend to think of the Nixon-Ford administration—but in fact, Nixon is the last New Deal President in many ways.
Mathews: That’s exactly right.

Smith: And Ford is much more about anticipating future developments than he is about completing old business.

Mathews: That’s right. To my way of thinking, the Nixon and Johnson administrations had themes much like those in the New Deal. I think of Ford and Carter as transition presidents. They came in at a time when the presidency had been weakened, Congress was fragmented, and the interest groups were more powerful. Ford and Carter deserve to be judged by what they did that began to rebalance the system, even though the results of some of their efforts weren’t evident until after they left office.

Smith: We’re on the same page.

Mathews: Good. What we are saying about the connection between administrations, even when they are of different parties, reminds me of a recent book by Gareth Davies, *See Government Grow*. It deals with programs that begin in one administration but don’t mature until much later. Do you know Gareth? He’s at Oxford and has written one of the best histories of our welfare system that I’ve seen; it’s neither right nor left. In the book I mentioned, Gareth wrote about Johnson and his major initiative in education, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which was related to his War on Poverty. Republicans denounced that program but later spent more on it than the Democrats had. Gareth concluded that although Americans are antistatist, they like everything the government does. Whether or not that is true, what one administration plants often flowers much later in another.
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Smith: How did you first cross paths with Gerald Ford?

Mehney: I met Jerry probably in the late ’60s – ’69-’70, when he was a congressman. And then in 1972 - I started my business in ’66 – built a new building in ’67, which was 10,000 square feet and every year we added on to it. And then in 1972, we doubled it. I think it went from 70,000 up to 140,000, we put in an exercise room for our people, sauna, bath, racquet ball court, and all that. I asked Jerry if he would come and cut the ribbon. We knew each other, but we really got to know each other after that. He came and cut the ribbon as a congressman.

Smith: Tell us about your business.

Mehney: I was a Kawasaki motorcycle distributor in five states and probably was very instrumental in putting Kawasaki on the map because I became very, very close to the Japanese. We brought a lot of their engineers over here. The thing about Japanese engineers - all engineers are good - but the Japanese engineers – “Oh, ah so, we understand what you want and what you need. We can do that.” European engineers, on the other hand, say, “This is the right way to do it. This is what you’re going to get. This is it.”

Smith: I assume, in 1972, this was a city and a culture less accustomed to welcoming foreigners?

Mehney: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Than it is forty years later?

Mehney: Yeah. Even back when I got in the motorcycle business, although there was still that sentiment out there, Pearl Harbor and all that. This is interesting, because my first year in Japan was 1967, and I made a point to try to learn their culture and how they thought and all that. It’s really an amazing culture
and customs. Like when President Nixon was in China, and he toasted with the president of China; our people didn’t think anything about that. And I said, “Holy cow, this is something special,” because the Orientals, the Chinese and the Japanese, if they don’t respect you and don’t like you, they don’t toast with you. Period. And they don’t usually invite them to their homes. I said this is really special because you have to really be special to be invited to one of their homes.

Knowing their culture and everything has made a big difference. I know how a lot of Americans still feel about the Japanese because of Pearl Harbor. I said, “How do the Japanese feel about the Americans because of the A-bomb?” And they told me; on the contrary, they think it was the right thing to do. They do not hold Americans guilty at all because they had been lied to by their leaders. We’re winning the war; die before you surrender. And they knew the United States had two choices: drop the bomb or invade. If they invaded there could be millions of people killed from both sides.

Smith: Have you been to Hiroshima?

Mehney: I’ve never been there. They’ve taken me everywhere, but I’ve never been there.

Smith: We went a few years ago. It’s an extraordinary place, very moving.

Mehney: I thought that was unique on their part. And the other thing that was very interesting; they showed me everything. Kawasaki was a conglomerate; they made their ships, they made their best planes in World War II - not the Zero - but the best ones and they were bombed on from the U.S. I saw some of the ruins and all that. But what was really unique, during the Vietnam War, there were only two companies that made that twin, Vertol helicopters that the Marines use – Boeing, Kawasaki. They all were taken to Kawasaki for reconditioning, and Kawasaki was also making a two-man camouflage jet bomber. They showed me all that, but they said, “You cannot take pictures of it. But we’ll show it to you.” So I couldn’t take any pictures. And the reason why the Japanese people, even today, you’ll understand this, under no circumstances do they like war. They’d been through it. They’d had it on their
home ground. They’d been through it, so if the Japanese people knew Kawasaki was doing this, they would be frowned on by their people.

Smith: I assume you didn’t get Congressman Ford on a motorcycle.

Mehney: No, but some of his buddies did; one of his close buddies, Dick Gillett, rode a motorcycle. I had him on a motorcycle and he used to drive it back and forth to the country club.

Smith: Let me back up a bit because we hear how almost legendary a figure he was as a congressman. What was it about Congressman Ford that made him so effective? And so popular?

Mehney: I guess you’d say it all – because he’s ‘Jerry.’ He insisted on being called Jerry, even as a president. He really listened to the people; I think he wasn’t controversial, and he tried to work things out on both sides of the aisle. He had friends on both sides of the aisle and I’ll tell you about that a little bit later. I’ve watched him from a congressman to a vice president and to a president, and his personality never changed, it never went to his head. He was still the same person. No ego. Humble, and just really a good, honest person.

Back to the motorcycles. He was never on a bike, but his youngest son, Steve, was in high school and his parents caught him smoking. And his mother and dad said, “What will it take, Steve, to get you to quit smoking?” And he was probably sixteen years old at the time, and Steve says, “Dad, if you buy me a motorcycle, I’ll quit smoking.” Now, what do you do as a parent? What’s worse – smoking or motorcycles? Jerry called me and he said, “What should I do?” And I said, “Well, Jerry, do you have a farm – places he can ride the motorcycle to keep him off the road?” He said, “Yes, we do. There are places here we can do that.” I said, “Then I would get him a motorcycle.

I’ll tell you what, you send Steve back here for four or five days, and we have a big field in the back of our facility and I’ll have my best guys train him how to handle a motorcycle.” The worst part of a motorcycle is the first week or two of ownership. Your instincts aren’t there. You’ve always got to pay attention to what’s ahead of you. “You do that, and we’ll offer that to you.”
The interesting thing is that because I had Dick Gillette, I had like nine Detroit Tigers, Mickey Lolich, Bill Freehand, Mickey Stanley, and others of the Tiger’s World Series, on motorcycles - and what I would do, I would give them the motorcycle, title it in their name so they are responsible for it and they’ve got to pay the insurance. At the end of the year, they give it back to me and I give them another one. I said, “I’ll do the same thing for you, Jerry.” Politically, that’s probably not correct, but that’s what happened. And we did that and Steve came and we trained him and for three or four years he honored it, and quit smoking and Jerry was very, very appreciative of that.

Smith: That’s a great story. So in ’72 you have your ribbon cutting. And then obviously life gets very interesting for him.

Mehney: Right.

Smith: Let me ask you, because we’ve got conflicting reports - someone who I probably shouldn’t mention suggested that he was part of what I would call for lack of a better word, a kitchen cabinet. A very small, informal group who met and who, while Ford was vice president, not long before Nixon’s resignation, pressed him to acknowledge the fact that he might be president and get ready, etc., etc. And other people have said, “Well, we’ve never heard of the existence of such a group, and it doesn’t sound like Ford.” Does any of that ring a bell with you?

Mehney: I don’t buy any of that. It’s interesting. I talked to Jerry Ford that Friday morning before Nixon announced that he was going to be vice president. That morning, as a congressman; and I’ll tell you the conversation.

Smith: Was Ford vice president at this point?

Mehney: No, no. Ford was congressman. Maybe it was a Saturday. It was a Friday or Saturday, whenever…

Smith: Before he was nominated to be vice president?

Mehney: Nixon announced it that afternoon or early evening. I talked to him early that morning because I had to catch a flight to Dallas because my sister was getting married. I talked to him before I left, and when I got there I watched
the news conference, and during this conversation in the morning – we were talking about some other things – but then I said, “You know, Jerry, there’s a lot of talk about you being the next vice president.” And he said, “Yeah, there is. And the reason why is because the Democrats know I have no ambition to be president. They know that I just serve this and then at the end of the two years, or whatever it is, I go away.” And that was appealing to him. “I got along with both sides of the aisle and I’m very non-controversial.” And that’s big to them. So it would be an easy thing.

But you know what he said? “But you know who Nixon really wants?” And I said, “No, who?” And he said, “Connally. But they know they can’t get him because he does have aspirations to be the president. He quit the Democratic Party and join the Republican Party – that would have been a war so we couldn’t afford to do that.” And I said, “Well, you know Jerry, it’s not every day somebody asks you to be vice president.” We kind of chuckled and I said, “As a matter of fact, it’s not every day somebody from Grand Rapids is asked to be vice president.” And we chuckled about that. I would bet you my life that he did not know that, that morning.

Smith: Okay.

Mehney: Even though he knew he was in the picture.

Smith: That also raises another interesting thing, a very interesting thing. And it’s kind of hard by its very nature to nail down. Everyone talks about him being a man without guile, which is not necessarily a man without ambition, or even calculation. And I wonder whether he knew there were people who underestimated him, people who tended to write him off for whatever reason. “Good old Jerry.” And whether he used that - appearing naïve, particularly in a place like Washington, is not a bad strategy. My hunch is by the morning of that day he probably had a pretty good idea that he was [the choice].

Mehney: You’re right – there’s no question, if he knew what was going to happen he wasn’t going to tell me. That’s just my impression by reading between the lines. And I could be all wrong, but that’s my impression. And I was also told later on, he was at home on the telephone in the afternoon when he got a call
from the President, and he put the President on hold for a minute while he was finishing his phone call. So that also tends me to believe that maybe that was the phone call that…

Smith: Iced it.

Mehney: That iced it. And so that’s why I feel he didn’t know about it in the morning. And the other thing that I think is very interesting, and I don’t know if anybody has ever said this in your interviews, but I was also told he took three people from Grand Rapids. Phil Buchen, who was a very close friend and very well respected attorney here in town; of course, Bill Seidman, who everybody knows; and then his buddy Jack Stiles.

Smith: Tell me about Jack Stiles, because he clearly was an important figure in all of this and he may be the least well known, certainly outside of the local community. Who was Jack Stiles, and why was he as close as he was?

Mehney: I can’t answer that because I didn’t know him at the time. I know the name. The interesting thing is, I am part owner of Thousand Oaks Golf Club, which is all the land that Jack Stiles owned at one time. In fact, when Jerry was still playing golf, I wanted him to come back and play there one time because this is all solid oaks and rolling woods, and everything else, and he had his retreat there. And this is where he got away and I know he had a lot of his political friends go out there, because it was twelve minutes from downtown, but you think you’re up north. And when Jack went to Washington, kids from two school found it and by the time we got it and started clearing it, which was in 1998, it was trashed because they partied there all the time. And then when Jack was killed in an auto accident, a friend of mine is the one who bought it from his estate, and that’s how I got involved in it. But that’s about all I know. I think Jack Stiles was probably very politically oriented and knew a lot of politicians and they did a lot of things together and all that. Jerry is a very loyal guy to his friends and his people. Very loyal.

Smith: That’s interesting. Tell us about Phil Buchen.

Mehney: Phil Buchen - I happened to be in high school with his daughter, she’s two years behind me, so I knew him – but I was young and respected him. But to
me, he was a brilliant guy, very trustworthy and a very solid person. And when you’re in Washington, you’ve got to have somebody like that. And the story that was told to me, and I believe it, because I heard it from good sources when it became known – when Nixon got into trouble – what does he do? And supposedly Buchen and Ford went to Camp David together to discuss it. And I think Phil was there to tell him what he can do, can’t do with the law, from that point of view. And that’s when Jerry decided we cannot afford to go through a long ordeal with a trial with Nixon and he pardoned him. Cost him the election, but the two of them, that’s what I was told and I believe that, where they went up to Camp David and they made that decision. The best thing we can do for the country is end it. And he was spot on. Unfortunately, the rest of the people in the country didn’t understand it.

Smith: When the pardon was initially announced, what kind of reaction happened here in Grand Rapids?

Mehney: You know, I don’t remember any kind of reaction one way or the other. Maybe because I agreed with that decision, because the last thing you need is to tear the country down. And he did the right thing, and unfortunately – I was invited to the funeral and all the things that went on at the funeral, and the whole country – now they all come up and praise him for that decision. It’s too bad they couldn’t have done that in his lifetime.

Smith: He lived long enough to know that most people had come around. So he had that satisfaction. Of course, the kids grew up in Washington, really. And Mrs. Ford was there. Did you know her at all?

Mehney: Yes, and my impression is, she was happy for him to be vice president and go back home. She didn’t like the limelight, she didn’t like all the stuff that goes with it. She’s just a very nice person that doesn’t care for all this stuff. But she would do whatever for Jerry. She was just hoping, I think, that he would serve his two years as vice president and then come home.

Smith: They were going to come back to Grand Rapids.

Mehney: Come back to Grand Rapids. And they moved to California for very good reasons, mainly because of Betty’s health and all that. It was much better for
her to live there than here. But this is still always home to them and they were always very special here.

Smith: Were there people upset at the time that they moved to Palm Springs, California?

Mehney: There were people that were; but that’s shallow. They don’t really understand that this is the best thing for Betty for the health reason. A lot of people move to Arizona and Palm Springs for health reasons. That’s the best thing for her. And I think they eventually got over that and they realized it. But at the beginning you heard a little bit of rumblings here and there.

Smith: And he did come back.

Mehney: A lot. And always did whatever he could for the community. Well, look where he’s buried. That says it all right there.

Smith: Yeah.

Mehney: And that’s where Betty will be, too.

Smith: Did you see him at all during the presidency?

Mehney: Yes, two things: one, Guy Vander Jagt, and I don’t know if anybody has ever talked about Guy.

Smith: Can I tell you what President Ford said? Obviously, they were friends – but he held up Guy Vander Jagt as the perfect example of a very talented congressman who forgot where he came from. In the sense that as he went national, he spent less and less time back home, creating a situation where he was vulnerable. It’s interesting that Ford, who had a safe seat, throughout his congressional career, never made that mistake.

Mehney: Right. And that’s true, he’d come back here. Like Cedar Springs, it’s a little small community north of here, for the annual Red Pajamas, or whatever they called it.

Smith: Red Flannel Days.
Mehney: He was always there. I mean, Jerry never did forget and was always here. But Guy Vander Jagt – now Jerry became president, and from my perspective, that really wasn’t his ambition or goal. But once he got there, he loved it. He absolutely loved it, and that’s why he ran again. And he was doing a lot of good, too. Guy Vander Jagt had an idea; there’s an artist in town. You’ve heard of him, Paul Collins. You see his work, black artist. And I knew Paul. I met Paul right when I got started in the motorcycle business in 1965. Paul is one of these people who can really do a portrait of somebody and you almost think it was a picture. He has a great talent. And Guy came up with this idea: let’s have Paul depict Jerry’s life and some of the key things that really mean a lot to him in his lifetime. And they set up a committee, and it was a black committee and then Paul asked me to be on the committee. I was the only white guy on the committee. Bobby Butler was the chairperson.

Smith: That raises a question - because African-Americans generally vote Democratic. Was he involved with that part of the community?

Mehney: I can’t honestly answer that, other than my gut shot feeling here locally, yes. Let’s say they are more for him than what they would be throughout the United States, because history shows usually 80% of them vote Democratic. But he had no racial bones in his body at all. It was very good and I’ll tell you one of the things that happened. What Guy wanted to do, it was his feeling, you unveil this thing about thirty days to forty-five days before the election, because you have a black artist doing this thing with Ford. Terrific idea.

Smith: Yeah, very good idea.

Mehney: Terrific idea. So this started probably in the summer a year before the election. I was invited to a State Dinner in Washington – Linda and I were invited to a State Dinner, which was a thrill. And it was in the fall. At that time I said we need to raise money to pay for this whole thing, to pay the artist. So I came up with the idea: let’s do reproductions and if Jerry will sign it and Paul will sign it, I’ll number them and we’ll sell them for two hundred dollars. We’ll do one hundred and fifty of them. I thought, “Gee, the President of the United States puts his signature on that, you get a copy of it and there’s only a hundred and fifty. At two hundred dollars, I’m doing you a favor.” So
when I was at the State Dinner, I asked Jerry if he would sign them and he said, “Absolutely.” And so it was a done deal.

Well, then, the next two or three months gone by, four months, nothing was happening. And I was getting nervous. I said, “You know, I’m going to get out of this thing because I’m not going to embarrass him and I’m not going to embarrass myself.” I’m in Florida on spring break, and I’m at a club eating and I get a call from Guy Vander Jagt. And I don’t know how the hell he knew I was there, or how he found me; but I guess they can find you wherever you are. He begged me to stay on. So I came back and I said, “All right, I will,” and I told Paul, “You and I are making a deal. I’ll guarantee you the money, you guarantee me that gets done, because there is not going to be any embarrassment here.” And so we did that.

Well then, I had an idea to help plan that event, and so during that time I had conversations with Jerry also. I had the whole thing outlined. I said, “What do you think about this?” Back to your one question: one of the inner city schools, grade school, first grade through sixth grade, they made cookies and sold them and raised $75 to help this cause. So that kind of gives you an idea what they thought of him in this town. And I thought that was precious. So I went to the grade school and interviewed the principal, and I said, “During our unveiling, I want six kids, a first grader, second grader, third grader, fourth grader, fifth grader, sixth grader. And all they are going to do is they are going to be part of the program; when the right time comes up, they are going to give a bouquet of roses to Betty after the unveiling and then they go sit down.” And then I talked to Rev. Abney, I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of Rev. Abney, but he was the Reverend at the Church of the Pentecostal Choir, which is nationally known. An incredible choir. I asked Rev. would he bring his choir and sing at the unveiling, and had everything planned out and Jerry endorsed everything.

Smith: By the way, had he seen…

Mehney: The mural? No.

Smith: He knew nothing about its contents?
Mehney: No. And I’ll get into that. So now we’re at the ceremony and now it’s the unveiling and he goes on the stage and he unveils it. I don’t know if you’ve seen the mural or not.

Smith: Oh sure.

Mehney: He unveils it. He starts to cry. He’s looking at his parents, he looks at his kids, and he starts to cry. Of course his car’s there, his first home and a lot of the different things. He starts to cry. And the people who were invited for the unveiling at the airport are the ones that really donated to the mural, and their wives or whatever, and so we had quite a number of people there. And I’m up on stage and looking out and everybody is crying. It’s just all the way through the whole thing. And he talked, and of course his lip was quivering and all that, and he was having a rough time because it meant so much to him and got so sentimental when he saw it.

Then after we got through that, it was time for the kids to go up there to give them the roses. You have these black kids go up and give the roses and they are supposed to go and sit down. Jerry grabbed three of them; she grabbed three of them; and was just hugging them and wouldn’t let them leave. And they are just standing there. Then the Pentecostal Choir played God Bless America, and the whole place went down.

Guy’s whole idea was to do this thirty days before the election. You know when it was done? The day of the election. And I’ll guarantee you that if he would have done it thirty days before, he would have won the election because he would have picked up another fifteen-twenty percent of the black vote because they see that; the real man as he is. Guy had all that foresight, which I thought was tremendous.

Smith: It’s a great story.

Mehney: And after he lost the election and the way he was so gracious and how he handled everything; you’d hear it on the streets: people would say, “Jeez, I’m sorry I didn’t vote for him,” because now they saw the real man.
Smith: Yeah. I think that must have been a source of frustration, particularly to people here who felt they knew him - that the rest of the country didn’t see. Or they saw this caricature of Chevy Chase – all the bumbling.

Mehney: And then I think the news made a big deal out of that. He was a star football player; you’re not clumsy, being a star football player in the Big Ten.

Smith: Did you have contacts with him after the presidency?

Mehney: We always shared Christmas cards, and when he came to town, yes, we had contacts with him. I’m not one that pursues somebody and tries to hang on to their coattails. I respect their privacy and so we’ve always remained good friends. All the years, every time I’d see him, he’d bring up Steve and thought I’d saved his life. It was almost embarrassing to me. I didn’t do anything anybody else wouldn’t do. He was very, very appreciative of that and so was Betty. I knew Steve much more than his sister and his brothers, but I knew them a little bit. But Steve was special.

Smith: Was Steve like his dad? He looks like his dad. He’s almost a dead ringer for him in some ways at that age. But I wondered if he was in personality or temperament.

Mehney: That’s hard for me to answer.

Smith: Were you involved at all when all of this [the Ford Museum] took place?

Mehney: I was part of it, but a peon part of it. When we had the grand opening, I was in charge of the fireworks. I love fireworks. What kid doesn’t like fireworks? You grow up loving fireworks. They gave me a budget and I can’t remember, Zambelli or something like that – a big fireworks company out east, Pennsylvania or somewhere. I contacted three people and when I contacted them I said, “You know, this is for President Ford. I’ve got a ten thousand dollar budget, but I need thirty or forty thousand dollars worth of show. What can you do?” And I said, “I want to do something very, very unique for this.” And we came up with; can you do a portrait of Jerry Ford in fireworks? And right across the river here, because a lot of the people are on this side of the river – we’re shooting the fireworks from over by the building over there, so
everybody got a great view. And I’m in the pits with the people doing the fireworks, which was a thrill for me. And this thing was probably thirty yards wide and ten yards tall. It was a huge board. And they lit it off, and I can’t remember if it was the ending or the beginning. I think it was maybe in the middle, whatever it was; they lit that up of Jerry Ford and I could just hear the ohhhs and ahhhs, I wish I could have seen it. But I understand it was just gorgeous. It was a great big portrait of Jerry.

Smith: Was that the first time that fireworks on a large scale had been done downtown?

Mehney: That was number one. And now they have the annual one ever since then. They get four or five hundred thousand people down here every September. I can’t come because its football night and I coach football for a high school. That’s the only one I’ve ever been to.

Smith: Really?

Smith Would you tell that story about the State Dinner - your conversation with the President?

Mehney: Okay, yes. When I was at the State Dinner, after dinner people were kind of moseying around. I was talking to Jerry for quite a long time, which I know doesn’t happen because you’ve got to keep moving or whatever. I was talking to him ten-fifteen minutes. And a lot of it was – we got into the mural and all that sort of stuff, but just other things. Some people from the press realized it and they came up to me afterwards and they said, “We noticed you were with him for an extraordinarily long time. What were you talking about?” Well, I know what I wanted to tell them; but I didn’t. I just said, “Well, we were just talking about the fact that the Michigan/Michigan State game is coming up and Jerry wants to go to that game but the Secret Service won’t let him,” because that’s after Squeaky or whatever her name was, after the shooting. “They wouldn’t let him do that and he was kind of upset because he really wanted to see that game.” And that’s the answer I gave the press, but really not what we talked about.

Smith: I assume that’s the only White House State Dinner you’ve ever been to?
Mehney: That’s the only one I’ve ever been to. Probably the only one I’ll ever be to.

Smith: Pretty impressive, isn’t it?

Mehney: Oh, very impressive, and it’s a real ego trip, really. It’s very, very impressive to do that and see that. I don’t remember all the people that were sitting at my table. I think Barbara Walters was there, but we had a good group of people. Henry Kissinger was there, and so you get a chance to meet a lot of these people.

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

Mehney: That I don’t remember. On one of his trips to Grand Rapids.

Smith: There was the ninetieth birthday that they did. I think that was his last trip back here. Were you surprised by the reaction at the time of his death?

Mehney: You mean how...

Smith: How much there was. Not only locally, but really, nationally.

Mehney: I’m not surprised by it. But boy, it sure made me feel proud. And particularly when the ceremony was here and I was one of the lucky ones invited. And to see our town outpour the way they did for that man, it made me feel proud to be a Grand Rapids person. That was just incredible.

Smith: There really never has been anything like it, has there? And probably won’t be again.

Mehney: No. My dad is an ophthalmologist, and Jerry was one of his patients and he used to always remind me that – and also Senator Vandenberg, who they thought was going to be president, was one of his patients – and he said, “You know, I took care of one president and almost did two.” He bragged about it, he loved that. That was really something special.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Mehney: Well, actually he should be remembered, even though it was a short time, as one of our great presidents, because he came in at a very tough time, and he got the country back together again. And he put down unnecessary spending,
he vetoed a lot of things, he did all the things that had to be done. So even for a very short time, he did a whole lot. And probably because he was only there a couple of years, he won’t go down to the kind of recognition he should get. Because not many people go into tough times like that and do what he did.

Smith: He was a true fiscal conservative, wasn’t he?

Mehney: Yes.

Smith: I assume that is part of his legacy from Grand Rapids?

Mehney: Yeah. Grand Rapids is a very conservative town, and as you know, we’re predominantly a Dutch town. They are a hard working, ethical people and they put a great foundation on this community that’s still here today.

Smith: That’s interesting.

Mehney: This is a great town. And thanks to the generations ahead of me, the icons, the DeVos’, the Van Andels, the Meijers, the Cooks, the Pews, and there are a number of others, look what this town has done. What other town in this country have you seen like this and has what we have to offer.

Smith: It’s true.

Mehney: And thanks to those families that give to this community, because they love the community.

Smith: And presumably, the decision to put this [museum] downtown was at least one of the catalysts for what followed and is still ongoing.

Mehney: There are a lot of catalysts and this is one; and when you look at the Meijer Gardens, this place, the [public] Museum, which is now down on the river and all that, there is life in our downtown.

Smith: It’s funny – you wonder though, why it took a while for people to rediscover the river. The river really in many ways is the catalyst for a lot of this.

Mehney: Back in the old days, because we were the furniture capital, that’s how they got a lot of their wood, through the barges from Lake Michigan – right downtown here. And of course, maybe one reason it took a long time is a lot
of the old factories were along the river and they were kind of trashy and all that. It just took time for somebody to have the foresight to redevelop it.

Smith: And what was down here before this place was built?

Mehney: I don’t remember exactly what was right here at that time. But there were different older buildings over on this side.

Smith: We know that Fred Meijer offered some land on the outskirts of town for the site. But I guess President Ford felt pretty strongly about wanting it to be downtown.

Mehney: This was the right thing. I think the Grand Rapids Museum – the reason I’m a little aware of that is Peter Cook and I raised the money for the carousel.

Smith: Oh.

Mehney: And there again, Peter is one of my very close friends and he was also very close to Jerry. Peter and I had the last ride on that carousel. I think it came from Pennsylvania. And to watch Peter Cook riding that horse and singing away and having a ball was just precious.

Smith: There’s a famous story about when the museum was dedicated, and the President and Mrs. Ford riding the carousel. Let’s just say she took to it more naturally than he did.

Mehney: Yeah. And unfortunately, that carousel, or the museum went through a political nightmare as to where they were going to build it. People wanted it in different places and finally it prevailed where it is, and I’ll tell you, it couldn’t have been more perfect, either - that carousel out over the river and all that. Funny story about that, Mr. Frey, EJ Frey – he’s another one of our icons, had done a lot for this community and of course, his kids are doing the same. And he bought one of the – what Peter and I did, we came up with ideas, we’re going to sell these animals and you put your name on it, so you owned that animal. And that’s how we paid for it. And Mr. Frey bought one, and this thing is going into turmoil, three or four years before they made a decision, and Mr. Frey called me. I’m good friends with his kids; I played football with John, his oldest son. And he called me and said, “Dave isn’t there something
you can do to get this thing done? I want to see it in my lifetime.” I started to laugh and I said, “Mr. Frey, I’m a peon, you’re the icon, you’re the one that can get something done.” And the unfortunate thing is he did pass away before it was finished. He really wanted to see it, and I kind of felt bad for that. But then everything started, as you see now, Medical Mile and so forth is really making a difference, too.

Smith: Is there still a Dutch influence in this town?

Mehney: I would say there still is, but it’s probably not like it was fifty years ago. I mean, if you mowed your grass on Sunday in a Dutch neighborhood – that wasn’t the thing to do. That’s all kind of gone away.

Smith: We’ve heard wonderful stories about people who would buy the Sunday paper on Saturday night and not read it until Monday.

Mehney: Yeah.

Smith: Or paperboys who knew in Dutch neighborhoods, you didn’t throw the paper on the porch on Sunday, you hid it behind this tree or that barrel. Werner Viet told us when he started the Sunday paper he had a delegation of eight Christian Reform ministers call on him and get on their knees and pray for the worst of all sinners, the one who encourages sin in others.

Mehney: But that all slowly has changed. Just like when I was high school in the Fifties, the Christian High School was here, it’s a very good school. No dances, no movies, things like that. Of course, today they have it all, which is better.

Smith: We’ve talked to Rich DeVos at some length, and it’s interesting to listen to Rich, who I guess is trying to bring elements of the Church together. There are, I guess, divisions – and he’s really trying.

Mehney: I think that’s one of his crusades right now, and if anybody can do it, he can.

Smith: Well, that’s true.

Mehney: And he’s spot on, too. That’s the thing. I’m not a religious person, but I really strongly believe everybody should have the right to do what they want to do.
And to have some of the disasters that we have had in this world because of religion makes no sense to me.

Smith: Finally, what has this place meant to the community – the fact that it’s here, that he’s here, what does that mean to Grand Rapids?

Mehney: Oh, I think that’s huge, in my opinion. Think it’s huge the number of people who come to Grand Rapids and they go through this place. I don’t know the numbers, you’ll know the numbers, but this has got to be one of the more popular presidential sites in the country. We get a lot of people come to Grand Rapids and it’s because of this, it’s because of the whole thing – the Meijer Gardens, the museum, everything that’s really been going on here. And in my opinion, this is part of it; Jerry is part of it; but also, our other leaders. You go to any city that’s great, it’s people like the ones that we have here that are willing to put back to make the city special. And this is a very special thing.

Smith: All you have to do is compare this side of the state with the other side of the state, or this city with any other city in Michigan.

Mehney: The people are very, very productive. Just to give you an example of this site, when Kawasaki bought me out they were going to move everything to Lincoln, Nebraska where they have a manufacturing plant - I was part of helping them find places back then. And the manufacturing plant is still there. And they were one of the very first companies to come over here and do that. They did that I think in the late Seventies, around ’75-’76, to make certain motorcycles and jet skis and, at that time, also snowmobiles. And they looked all around and they settled there. But then when they bought me out, they were going to move everything to Lincoln, Nebraska. And I said, “No.” I had two buildings side by side. I said, “No, I’ll leave, you stay.” That way I kept fifty jobs and I just moved next door.

Since then, because of the work ethic that we have in this community, all the other divisions, other than motorcycles, that’s still located in California, but all their other divisions are right here in Grand Rapids. And that’s because of the people and the work ethic. And so that says a lot about our community.

Smith: It does, indeed.
Mehney: They could have gone to Lincoln, they could have gone to California and they chose here and they are still here.

Smith: It also suggests one more reason why Gerald Ford was, in so many ways, emblematic of this community.

Mehney: Yeah.

Smith: A reflection of its values and outlook.

Mehney: The proof’s in the pudding. You saw what he’s done for this community and he’s always come back and everything else. And I guess he could have been buried anywhere he wanted to be, and he picked Grand Rapids. That says it all.
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Smith: First of all, obviously, thank you very much for doing this.

Cheney: No, no, it’s nice to be asked. It’s an important subject.

Smith: Before your path crossed with Gerald Ford’s - what’s the concise, Dick Cheney autobiography leading up to, I guess, August of 1974?

Cheney: I grew up in Wyoming, graduate of Wyoming High School, recruited to go Yale – got kicked out twice. The second time they said, “Don’t come back.” Built power lines and transmission lines in the west, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and then got serious about getting married, and said, I’d better go back and work on my education, which I did at the University of Wyoming.

Lynn and I got married a year later. She was then an instructor. We were the same age, but she moved rapidly through her academic requirements and I didn’t. But I got both my BA and a Masters’ at Wyoming. While I was there, I did a stint in the Wyoming legislature as an intern, which was a new concept in those days, in 1965, with the Republicans in the State Senate – my first political job.

I wrote a paper about that experience and won a national competition and was then selected for a follow on a year later, in 1966, to spend a year with the governor of Wisconsin - all supported by the Ford Foundation and the National Center for Education and Politics. We moved to Madison. Lynn started graduate school, and then I started in Madison. After I finished with the governor, I did all the coursework for a PhD in political science. I had my dissertation left to do, passed my prelims, then went off to Washington to work on a dissertation on another grant – this one from the American Political Science Association.

I spent what was supposed to be a year on the Hill. I moved there in the fall of ’68. It was the year we had Tet and Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King
assassinated, riots in the cities, the Democratic National Convention. It was a wild time. Liz had been born in Madison, so we had at that stage, a two year old, and moved as poverty-stricken graduate students. All of a sudden we had $500 a month tax free and thought we were in hog heaven. A guy named Don Rumsfeld came and spoke to the group as part of the orientation program that they ran for the Fellows. And I was impressed.

We had to negotiate our own arrangements with members of Congress; we were free help to them. But I asked to interview with Rumsfeld. Went and did an interview with Rumsfeld, and it didn’t last very long. It was the worst interview of my life, and he threw me out – thought I was some kind of fuzzy-headed academic. I thought he was about the most arrogant young man I had ever met. And we were both right to some extent.

I went down the hall and went to work for Bill Steiger from Wisconsin. He was a great guy and a friend of Rumsfeld’s. Working in Bill’s office was a woman named Maureen Drummy, and Maureen had been involved in getting me the fellowship to go to Wisconsin originally. She was a significant player in terms of moving me along in my career, because she would show up, like in the National Center for Education and Politics, and had been involved when I won the award after the state legislature, and then recruited me to work for the governor. Now she’s working for the Congressman and put me on the payroll there.

Shortly after I went to work for Steiger, Rumsfeld got nominated by Nixon to be the director of the Anti-Poverty Program in the Office of Economic Opportunity. Bill was advising Rumsfeld about that because they were friends and Bill was on the committee. I sat down one night and wrote an unsolicited twelve-page memo to Rumsfeld, telling him how he ought to handle himself in his confirmation hearings, what he should do with the agency once he took over. It was a little presumptuous of me because I hadn’t been asked for it, but I gave it to Bill and he really liked it. So he passed it on to Rumsfeld. Then I didn’t hear any more about it for a couple of weeks.

Then Rumsfeld got confirmed and sworn in and I got a phone call from a guy named Frank Carlucci, who was a Princeton buddy of Rumsfeld’s, a foreign
service officer who was temporarily detailed to help him over at OEO. Frank invited me to come down the next day and be part of a transition advisory group. They were getting a bunch of academic types and policy wonks together to advise on the transition at OEO. I went down, there were about forty or fifty of us gathered in a room. Rumsfeld came in and spoke and gave us his marching orders and then left. After he left his secretary came in. She said, “Is there somebody here named Cheney?” I held up my hand. She took me out and walked me back into Rumsfeld’s office and Don was working at his desk. This was his first day on the job. The room isn’t even furnished. He’s obviously pressured for time, but he looked up at me and said, “You. You’re Congressional Relations. Now get the hell out of here.” He didn’t say, “I’m sorry I threw you out last time, or I liked the memo, or how would you like to come to work for me. He said, ‘You’re Congressional Relations. Now get out of here.’”

So I went out and asked where Congressional Relations was and they pointed me to it. I went down and took it over and ran the Congressional Relations shop at OEO the last several months of my fellowship. I’m still getting paid by the Ford Foundation and the American Political Science Association. That led into a four year stint with Don. We worked at OEO, we also worked at the White House. We split our time – part of the time during the day at the White House and part of the time at OEO. And then later on, full-time at the White House for about a year, and then when wage-price controls came in, we took over the Cost of Living Council. I was the director of operations for the Cost of Living Council, had three thousand IRS agents who were responsible for enforcing it.

Smith: Was that philosophically difficult?

Cheney: It got more and more philosophically difficult all the time through this. Terrible experience.

Smith: Would you dissent from the Nixonian view that “we’re all Keynesians now” in that instance?
Cheney: The Democrats passed legislation giving Nixon the authority to control prices because inflation was supposedly a big issue. They never dreamed he’d do it. And then he took the authority and used it, imposed the ninety day freeze, and then we moved to flexible rules and regulations. But it was a fundamentally bad idea.

A great story I love about Nixon wage-price controls: we started them in August of ’71, and we moved to flexible controls ninety days later. But we got to the point where we trained the American people to believe that whatever the price of hamburger was, it was the government’s fault. If it went up ten cents a pound, Richard Nixon was the guy that raised my hamburger price. But we got on to the summer of ’72 and it’s the re-election campaign. We had a big meeting over in the Cabinet room one day with the members of the Cost of Living Council, which is about half the Cabinet - anybody with economic responsibilities. John Connally is the chairman of the Council, as Treasury Secretary. Rumsfeld is the executive director. And Nixon was in this meeting.

The debate was whether or not we should refreeze food prices going into the campaign, because there was the perception out there in the public mind that food prices were going up like crazy. So we had this big debate, and in the middle of it Nixon told a story about Nikita Khrushchev. He said he’d been talking to Khrushchev once, and Khrushchev had told him that sometimes, in order to continue being a statesman, you have to be a politician. If the people believed there is an imaginary river out there, you don’t tell them - the politician doesn’t tell them there’s no river there. He builds an imaginary bridge over the imaginary river. Therefore, obviously, we’ve got to refreeze food prices. Food prices had gone up zero point zero percent. There had been no increase in food prices, but there was this public perception that there was.

Anyway, it was that kind of a program, and it moved me in a decidedly conservative direction. The idea that you’re going to have the federal government controlling, literally, wages, prices, and profits of every man, woman, and child in America was just fundamentally a bad idea.
Smith: Out of sequence, but I have to ask you: can you imagine Gerald Ford imposing wage-price controls?

Cheney: No. But it’s interesting, Arthur Burns was a big advocate of wage-price controls. Part of this harked back to his World War II experiences, I think. I think Nixon had been part of that for a while, before he shipped out back during the War.

Smith: That’s right. He always claimed that that’s where he really got his loathing of bureaucracy, if not necessarily bureaucrats. He was in the OPA.

Cheney: Yeah. Well, anyway, it was a bad idea. We got down to the end of this ’72 election, and I’d been given a choice. Back in the summer of ’71 I was working helping set up the Committee to Re-elect the President, when Rumsfeld got tapped for the controls. And I was given a choice whether or not I went to CREEP, the Committee to Re-elect, or whether I went with Rumsfeld on controls. I picked controls. That was a good choice. Most of the guys that I would have been working with ended up in a lot of trouble after the ’72 election – Watergate.

When the campaign was over, the morning after the election, as I recall, Haldeman and Erlichman asked Rumsfeld, and all the other agency heads to pick up resignations from all the political appointees and their departments and agencies. Don refused to do it. He said, “You tell me who you want me to fire and I’ll fire them. That’s your prerogative.” But what they were going to do was collect all these resignations and then keep some of them and give the rest of them back. And he thought that was a terrible way to treat people and said so.

I always had the feeling that, in part, triggered his assignment to NATO. He went from working in the White House to being the ambassador to NATO in January of ’73. When he did that he gave me a chance to go with him, but I really didn’t want to go to NATO. Went to work for a private company there in Washington, an investment advisory firm, and for the eighteen months that the administration was unfolding - Watergate was at its peak - I was outside government, watching all of that unfold.
Don was thinking seriously about running for the Senate from Illinois in ’74. We actually opened up an office out there – set up a secretary – I was sort of the link to it. Then as things got worse and worse on the Watergate, we finally had to fold that up. It was just going to be a terrible year to run, so we dropped that idea. Then August 9th, I had come back from Wyoming and left Lynn and the girls in Wyoming. We’d been on vacation out there. Lynn was helping a friend of ours who was running for Congress in his campaign. So I went back to Washington early. I got a phone call – this would have been on the 9th (?) of August. I’d gone to a friend’s house for dinner, and then went home. When I got home there was the phone call from Don’s secretary – Brussels, saying that he was going to be coming back to land at Dulles the next day…afternoon about two o’clock. Would I meet his plane? So I did. This was the night that Nixon went on the tube and announced his resignation.

The next morning I watched television coverage of Nixon’s goodbye speech in the East Room, and then Ford’s swearing in. Got in the car and drove out to Dulles, met Rumsfeld, and there waiting for him out there was one of the White House drivers with a letter for him, which he opened up and it instructed him to come straight to the White House. It said the president wanted him to run the transition signed by Bill Scranton. He turned to me and asked me if I could spring myself for a couple of weeks to help out with the transition. I said yes, and we reported into the White House.

This is the afternoon, I guess, of the 9th of August. Ford’s been sworn in, and he spent the afternoon meeting with the ambassadors and so forth. I did not know Jerry Ford. I’d been in a meeting once where he presided on the Hill, when I was a staffer. That’s the only time I’d been around him. He didn’t know me at all, and I didn’t deal directly with him during the transition. The transition is about ten or twelve days long, is all. It focused on the domestic side of the house. He said not to mess with the national security side. You may remember the night that Nixon announced that he was going to resign, the cameras then cut to Jerry Ford out in front of his townhouse in Alexandria, and the first words out of his mouth were, “I’ve asked Henry Kissinger to stay and he has agreed.”
He gave clear instructions to the transition team that they were not to dabble in the national security arena. He didn’t want anybody involved with that. We were to look at domestic policy at OMB, the relationship between the White House and Cabinet and so forth. But the idea was to wrap it up as quickly as possible. You didn’t want two tracks running on the regular White House operation ongoing, and then sort of lay over transition on that. You wanted to pass the football, so to speak, as quickly as possible.

Smith: In that initial phase, in that transition, was there discussion of this “spokes of the wheel” concept of running the West Wing? And did that play any part in Rumsfeld’s departure? Was there any discussion of Rumsfeld staying on, for example, on a more permanent basis?

The reason I’m asking is because a number of people have indicated that there’s a consensus that it didn’t work. That it was well intentioned, but that it couldn't work. That it is emblematic, essentially, of a Congressional mindset imposed upon an executive institution. In fact, I think Rumsfeld told us, but other people have told us *about* Rumsfeld, that he had made it a condition of his coming back, that that was going to go. That the White House was going to be organized differently. Does that ring a bell?

Cheney: My recollection of it is that, you start with a proposition that there was a conventional wisdom that said the reason, or one of the reasons, Nixon had created and then there had been Watergate and the cover up and so forth, was because of the way Haldeman had organized and ran the White House - that the strong centralized staff system was part of the problem. I, personally, believe that was not true, and I’ll come back to that in a minute. But, anyway, that’s literally what everybody believed out there – the press, the Congress, the Ford people that were moving in – some of whom had been with him in the House, with him as vice president.

Ford is the one, I believe, who came up with notion of the spokes of the wheel - that there wouldn’t be a chief of staff. That there wouldn’t be any one person in charge – there’d be eight or ten people, all of whom would have equal access to the president. It was a fundamentally bad idea, but they didn’t know it at the time. Al Haig is still around, and Haig’s not leaving. Haig has been
the guy that provided continuity during those fourteen months of Watergate. Nixon leaves, Haig’s still there. We’re there for the transition and Haig’s still there. Nobody had gotten up the gumption to ask Al when he was going to leave. It just hadn’t been addressed. It is a messy period of time. You’ve got the old Nixon crowd, you’ve got the new Ford crowd. One of Ford’s first responsibilities is to find a vice president to replace himself, where he picks Rockefeller. That happened during that transition period. And I do not recall, I’m not aware of – Don would know better than I would – that there was any discussion of his coming back to be chief of staff at that stage.

We left in late August, I want to say around the 20th, 21st, 22nd, of August. He went back to NATO and I went back to my firm in Washington. We’d completed the transition. And then, on the 9th of September, I think it was the 9th, Ford pardoned Nixon. All hell breaks loose. I always thought, at the time, I didn’t disagree with the decision, I did disagree with the timing. I thought he could have waited until after the election, which was just not far away – a couple of months away.

Smith: Well, remember, Nixon almost died.

Cheney: Oh, yeah.

Smith: It’s crass, but if you take advantage of that fact, I mean, you would have eventually had some sympathy out there.

Cheney: That’s right. It could have been posthumous or something. Yeah.

But about a week after the pardon - this is mid-September - I’m on a business trip in Florida. I get another phone call from Rumsfeld. Rumsfeld, as I recall, is back in Chicago. His dad is very sick, a bad case of Alzheimer’s, and is in a home in Chicago. Don asked me if I’d meet him that weekend in Washington, that he’d been asked to come back and talk with the president, and would I meet him on Saturday, as I recall.

So I did, at the Key Bridge Marriott, and we got together that morning. He said he thought he was going to be offered the job as chief of staff. He wanted to know, if he took it, would I sign on as a deputy. This is before it’s been
offered. I said yes. So he went and met with the president and then came back and said it’s a done deal, and wanted to make sure I was committed. I said I was, so the agreement is reached that Don’s going to be chief of staff, Haig’s going to depart, and I’m going to move in as the deputy.

We first went over to the White House – maybe it was that Sunday, I remember it was on a Sunday – and we’re in the big corner office, the chief of staff’s office. Haig is gone. George Joulwan is gone. George was the deputy to Haig, later became a general. You’ll come across George, I’m sure. Don left and went down to the Oval Office, and when he came back he brought the president with him. Brought him in and introduced him to me. It was the first time I’d ever formally met Jerry Ford, and it was remarkable in the sense that he immediately, unquestioningly, adopted me as part of the operation.

Don wanted to function in a way that we’d take turns in terms of our regular meetings with the president, or travel. If he was on the road with the president, I’d be running things in the West Wing, and sometimes I’d take the trip and he’d be in the West Wing. Sometimes he’d go in at five o’clock at night for the daily wrap up, sometimes I would. And Ford very quickly adapted to that. I was always, not only very pleasantly surprised, but impressed with the extent of which, once you signed on, he wasn’t suspicious or cautious. “You’re on the team – you’re part of my team,” and it was full speed ahead from the very beginning.

Smith: Let me back up just a little bit, because we talked with Haig who had an interesting take, which he repeated, repeatedly. Ostensibly, it concerned the complaint that he’d made to the president about Bob Hartmann. Clearly there was no love lost there – and we won’t go into the details – but he felt strongly. The president, according to Haig, said, “Al, you’re just going to have to let me handle this.” And Haig’s response was, “Well, that answers my question. You don’t want me to stay on.” It sounds like Gerald Ford.

Cheney: Yeah.

Smith: I don’t know whether it sounds like Al Haig or not. Was Hartmann possessive?
Cheney: Hartmann was bad news. What Bob could do, he could write a good speech for Jerry Ford, and he wrote some good ones. He was not the right guy to be running the place. He’d been the chief of staff when Ford was vice president, and I remember there was a story, I think it was the Wall Street Journal, that ran before Ford becomes president about how screwed up the vice president’s staff is. It’s Hartmann’s bailiwick and it wasn’t a happy shop. I’ll be direct about it. Bob was the kind of a guy on writing speeches who would say, “You can’t see it because the president hasn’t seen it yet.” And after the president had seen it, he said, “You can’t see it because the president signed off on it, and we’re not changing it.” He made it impossible to work with the policy types. My God, you want Alan Greenspan to look at the economic speech and so forth.

Smith: Is that part of the transition from a Congressional office to the Oval Office, that he never made?

Cheney: I think so. When you are in the Congress, you’ve got the principal, the member, you’ve got a speechwriter, and that’s all. He wasn’t going to check with anybody, the two of them were going to work it out. When you got down to the White House, the day that Ford became president and the Nixon folks moved out, Hartmann moved from his Old Executive Office Building office, when he’d been with the vice president, into the office right next to the Oval Office. I think it had been Rose Mary Woods’ office. There is the Oval, and then there is a bathroom, a little hall there with the bathroom on one side, on the other side is a little cubbyhole of an office. Then at the end of that is sort of a regular-sized office and Hartmann took that office. It was a mess.

When Rumsfeld and I took over we’re trying to manage the paper flow, the people, the schedule, that’s all stuff we’ve got to control if you’re going to run the place. And we would find stuff. I would get everything coming out of the president’s outbox – it would come across my desk. And there was stuff in there that I hadn’t sent in. Somebody is feeding the beast from another source someplace.

Then we had a situation where, I think it was Bill Timmons, wrote a memo to the president and it showed up in Evans and Novak. Hartmann had gone in,
taken the Timmons memo off the president’s desk, took it out and leaked it to *Evans and Novak*. So, it’s a zoo, and we’re trying to get control of the paper flow and the scheduling and everything.

Smith: Was the president made aware of that fact?

Cheney: I think he was aware of it, because what I did, I came up with a concept and then Rumsfeld sold it to him – that the president needed a private office. He really didn’t want to go traipsing over to OEOB like Nixon did all the time to his private office. What he needed was that office where Hartmann was. That needed to be the president’s private office, so we set it up that way. We had the president, as I recall, tell Hartmann - because he wouldn’t take it from anybody else - tell Hartmann, “Bob, you’re out.” And moved him down the hall and he got the office that I had when I was the vice president. I just left here. It’s the office that eventually went to Mondale, but ever since, it’s been the vice president’s. Nice office. Bryce Harlow used to have it.

But the fact was, that let us gain control of the paper flow and the scheduling in and out, and the president understood what we were doing. But it was a graceful way to manipulate the process, to cut Hartmann out. I think Hartmann figured out he’d gotten screwed, too. But there wasn’t anything he could do about it, because the president was the one that said, “Bob, this is how it’s going to be.”

Smith: That’s a huge question. Let me go back, because on the 9th of August – I realize you weren’t there, but we talked to people who were in the East Room, who have vivid recollections of both Ford people and Nixon people. That once the ceremony ended, there was a receiving line, and then there was a reception in the State Dining Room. And, with very few exceptions, you could see the Nixon people sort of peel off and go back to their offices.

Which, in a lot of ways, you could understand. But that raises the larger issue of how difficult was it to integrate existing staff? What was the president’s attitude?

For example, Don Rumsfeld said he urged him early on to make changes in the Cabinet and staff. The sense we get is that he was reluctant - certainly he
was reluctant to tar folks with the Watergate brush simply because they had worked in the Nixon White House. How did you handle all of that during those first few months?

Cheney: My feeling was, we had two conflicting objectives and we had to satisfy both. One was, we had to convince the American people that this was a new day in the White House, the old crowd was gone. The folks that brought you Watergate and the cover up and all of that, they’re toast. They are no longer running the show. Secondly, you had to convey to the world out there that this was a place…that the changes that had occurred didn’t signify any change in fundamental U.S. policies, especially in the world, internationally.

You had these conflicting pressures for continuity and change. And it shows up in things like the president’s directive to the transition team that first day, “Go deal with the domestic side of the business. Give me recommendations, Cabinet and OMB, and so forth. Don’t touch national security. Stay out of Defense, CIA, State Department. Henry’s got both the State Department job and the NSC job.” That held for about fourteen months. Of course, when we came around later, we changed it.

Another important problem here was that Ford did not have a staff that could move in and take over the White House. It wasn’t like he’d been out running a major national campaign for president, and he wins the election, and you’ve got a couple of months to put your people in place, and you’ve got a huge contingency out there of folks who want to come in and take jobs. You’ve got a guy who’s been a Congressman from the Fifth District of Michigan, and the Republican Leader in the House, which - those aren’t big management jobs. And he’s been operating with his old friends, Phil Buchen, who was his law partner from 1940 Michigan, and Hartmann had been with him forever as a speechwriter. And it wasn’t what you would call a dynamic set of people that he moved in with.

Then you still had Al Haig around in that first month. Nobody was in a position, nor was anybody charged with the responsibilities to fix it up, clean it up, to say, “You’re in, you’re out,” and put together a good organization. One of the things that Rumsfeld and I did, I think we brought some order to
that process. We did make some Cabinet changes. For example, the president wanted to bring in Bill Coleman to be Secretary of Transportation.

Smith: Had he known Coleman?

Cheney: He’d known Coleman and liked him. And, of course, I think this was the second time there was an African-American Cabinet member. We had a problem though, because Claude Brinegar was Nixon’s Transportation Secretary and he didn’t want to leave. And he agreed only to leave if we would first fire Alexander Butterfield, who was running the FAA, part of DOT - a lot of bad blood between Brinegar and Butterfield.

Smith: Because of Butterfield’s role?

Cheney: Butterfield was the guy who revealed the existence of the taping system. You were going to get your fingers burned if you do anything with Butterfield. I got the job of firing Alex Butterfield, which I did. Called him in and told him he was through. And then Brinegar quietly left, as he said he would, and we brought in Bill Coleman. Bill got to be transportation secretary. So there was stuff going on.

The thing that Don and I did was, we staffed up with some people from outside, but we kept some key people that had been working for Nixon that weren’t tainted by Watergate, hadn’t been involved in any way. People like Jerry Jones, who became our chief scheduler. We brought in Bill Walker to run the personnel shop. We kept Red Cavaney, who ran the advance operation. Terry O’Donnell had come on board earlier as the president’s aide – we kept him. Brought in Jim Cavanaugh from Domestic Council, he’d been working up there and he became one of my deputies. Mike Duvall, who was a Nixon advance man. He’d worked in the White House going back to ’67 or ’68. He’d even been there under Johnson. And so we used some of those talented folks.

But you had to have a new – how to make the trains run on time. We had other situations: Dave Gergen. Gergen was in the speech shop and he got into a big fight with Hartmann and Hartmann fired him. So I got Gergen a job over at Treasury, working on Bill Simon’s stuff. And then when Don left and I
took over as Chief of Staff, I brought Gergen back and put him on my staff, and he was our secret speechwriter.

Smith: One hears stories that the speech operation needed help. That it was often late, often disorganized, and infrequently attuned to the fact that it existed for one purpose only: which was to make the president sound and look good. And yet Ford sort of put up with it. There was the famous State of the Union address, I guess, where…

Cheney: Dual competing drafts of the State of the Union – oh, yeah. I was afraid you were going to bring that up. The speechwriting thing was a hell of a problem. The normal temptation is to think that you make a policy decision, and then you write a speech to explain the policy. That’s not the way it works all the time. Lots of times, it’s the process of having to write the speech that drives policy. You don’t get the decisions made on policy until you know you’re going to have to give a speech. You have the State of the Union address in a couple of weeks and you’ve got to resolve all these issues so you can announce the policy at State of the Union time.

To the extent that speeches drive the policy process, they’ve somehow got to relate to the policy process and there has to be interaction there. And, as I say, Hartmann just refused to do that. Ford never would fire Hartmann. I made an effort at one point to get him to appoint Bob as an ambassador. To get him out of town. And he wouldn’t do it. He wouldn’t do it. He knew Bob was a problem.

We had a situation for a while there when I brought Gergen back in to write speeches. Of course, I’m really treading on toes here. You’ve got Hartmann over there with a speech shop and doing his thing, and I’ve got Gergen, who’s not a part of the speech process. But what would happen was, I’d go down at night and the president would give me the latest draft that he’d gotten from Hartmann on a speech. I would take it, I’d have Gergen rework it and rewrite it. I’d take it and give it back to the president. The president would give it to Hartmann, as though it were the president’s own words. Hartmann would accept that. We went through these travails. I’d say on the time we had competing drafts of the State of the Union speech, as I recall, I was
commuting back and forth to Baltimore. Because this is the TOYM Awards - the Chamber of Commerce gave every year – picked ten outstanding young men in America. It was a big deal, and I got picked that year, and Bill Bradley did and David Boren from Oklahoma. We were having this big weekend over in Baltimore and I’m commuting back and forth to attend these sessions where we’re duking it out with these competing drafts for the State of the Union speech.

It was a real problem, but basically because the president tolerated it. In Hartmann’s defense, Bob wrote some of Ford’s better work. But he was very hard to deal with. We had other little tidbits. This isn’t going to come out. Bob’s dead now, I suppose, I can talk about some of it. I can remember being in Vladivostok and my room was right across the hall from Bob’s and I happened to be there at my door one morning, getting ready to leave and Bob put down his suitcase outside the door for the baggage car. It was full of bottles. I guess he was a heavy drinker. You could just hear them rattling in there. It sounded like somebody was dumping out the garbage at the bar after a bad night.

We once traveled all day long on Air Force One. I got back fairly late in the day to Andrews, and got on the helicopter. Bob was booked on the helicopter to fly into the South Lawn with the president and myself and a few others. We got on the helicopter – there’s no Hartmann. We wait a couple of minutes. Still no Hartmann. So I sent somebody back to check, and Bob’s passed out on Air Force One. The president waited and waited, and finally we had to leave him and take off. It was that kind of behavior that just was beyond the pale.

The stewards used to keep score. He never knew this, but they’d keep track of how many drinks they served him. He was a big martini man. I’d frequently, at the end of one of these counts, I’d just get a piece of paper with a little number on it, and that was Hartmann’s consumption for that day. It was big time.

Smith: And Ford tolerated it?
Cheney: Ford tolerated it.

Smith: Throughout his presidency?

Cheney: Yeah.

Smith: One way of looking at the Ford presidency is he is someone who really did grow into the executive role over time.

Cheney: He did.

Smith: But that did not preclude…

Cheney: It wasn’t perfect. There were natural tensions. Hell, there are in every White House. Each one is different. But what I’ve learned now, I’ve worked in – I guess we’ve had five Republican presidents since Eisenhower and I’ve worked for four of them. The fifth, I’ve worked very closely with, was the Reagan years and I was part of the House Republican leadership. Each one of them is unique. We, as political scientists, we’re trained to find those common themes and threads and institutional propositions that apply across all administrations. The thing that I’m absolutely impressed with, after all these years, is each one of them is really unique, and really reflects the personality of the guy in the Oval Office and how he got there – the kinds of problems he faced. Now, the president was willing to make some other changes. We had patches there where he made some really big changes.

One other Hartmann story and then I’ll quit. During the campaign in ’76 he had Pat Butler working for him, who later went to work for the Washington Post. Pat’s a good guy. There was a dust up on Air Force One and Pat had written, at my request - we decided we quickly needed a statement on some foreign policy issue - so I got Pat working on it. The president could get off at the next stop and issue a statement. Then, when Hartmann found out that Butler had written something at my direction, and he hadn’t been in the loop, he fired him on Air Force One. So I brought Pat up and I said, “Okay, you’re hired. Now you’re working for me.” So, it was those kind of situations. You had people around Ford, like any president does, who are loyal to him and who stick with him, and he doesn’t like the idea of getting rid of those people.
Smith: That answers one question: I was going to say, was Hartmann quick to fire people?

Cheney: Once he got worked up, he’d pull the trigger on somebody.

Smith: Was the Schlesinger thing destined? Was it just bad chemistry? One senses that Ford resented what he saw as a certain patronizing attitude on the part of a very bright man, who didn’t always conceal his IQ.

Cheney: His intelligence. Yeah.

Smith: And, in fact, Ford had spent a lot of years on the House Appropriations Committee. He knew a lot of things that…

Cheney: George Mahon was one of his best friends – the Democratic chairman of the Appropriations Committee, and of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee.

The Schlesinger thing – it’s important – it was bad – and it got worse as we went along. In the end, he addressed it as part of this larger package, when we made a whole series of changes. We replaced the vice president, took away the secretary of state’s second hat, as NSC advisor, replaced the CIA director, replaced the secretary of defense, replaced the secretary of commerce - new people throughout. But I think it probably would have happened even if there hadn’t been those broader moves – it would be my judgment on it. And the president, I’ll always remember that morning, because it’s when I took over as chief of staff and Rumsfeld was going to go to Defense, but he hadn’t really signed on for that yet.

Smith: He indicates he was reluctant to do it.

Cheney: He was. There’d been a leak on a Saturday night that this shake up was in the works and so we decided we had to accelerate part of it. I got hold of Colby, the CIA director, and Schlesinger of Defense. The night before I worked with Jack Marsh on this and we got word to them that they were to be in the Oval Office the next morning. Colby came in first, and the president picked up his resignation. Colby took it like a man. It was pleasant and he departed.
Smith: And he was offered an ambassadorship or something?

Cheney: I can’t remember on Colby. On Schlesinger, I went in before Schlesinger came in. Schlesinger was waiting in the outer office. I went in and said, “Now, Mr. President, have you thought about maybe offering Jim something? Making him an ambassador some place, or at least give him the offer to save face here a bit.” And he looked at me and, as he was occasionally got, chewing on his pipe, he got red spots on his cheeks on both sides. That’s when you could tell when he was pissed off. And what he said to me was – and he was not a man who ever used a lot of vulgarity – but what he said to me, he said, “Dick, get him in here so I can fire him.” So, I did.

Smith: Sounds like that had been welling up for some time.

Cheney: When you say Jerry Ford didn’t like to fire people, that’s one he enjoyed. I’m a Jim Schlesinger fan, and I like him and I think he’s a bright guy and he did good work at DOD. But I think you’re right, a big part of the problem was, the president had expressed his dissatisfaction to Schlesinger about how the Defense budget was getting cut, and he wanted Jim to do a better job on the Hill – marshalling support for it. Jim’s reaction to that was to hold a press conference criticizing George Mahon, chairman of the Appropriations Committee. Wrong move.

Now, whoever was responsible for those cuts, it wasn’t Jerry Ford’s bosom buddy, George Mahon, who was a great gentleman, and as I say, one of the longest serving members in Congress, and they had a very close relationship. The other thing that hurt was in the spring of ’75, when we had the evacuation of Saigon at the end of the Vietnam war. The North Vietnamese are taking Saigon and we’ve got people at the embassy getting off and getting on helicopters and so forth. The plan was, as I recall, in the middle of a State dinner for the Dutch, or somebody, that when the word came down from the Pentagon that everybody was out, then we’d go out and announce that we’d completed the evacuation and all the Americans had been safely been able to evacuate the scene. So that word came over and they went out and announced it.
Then we got another call from the Pentagon saying, oops, we screwed up, gentlemen. There are another 50 or 60 Marines still on the ground at the embassy. What they’d done is trigger on the ambassador. The ambassador always said he’d be the last man out. So when he came out, somebody made the mistake of saying, well, everybody’s out. But they weren’t. The president was embarrassed by that and angry that it wasn’t better handled. So there were things like that.

Smith: Sure.

Cheney: I think Kissinger and Schlesinger didn’t get along. Henry got a lot of time in the Oval Office with the president and Schlesinger didn’t. It was the right thing to do and it had to happen. Sometimes things don’t work.

Smith: It will come as no surprise to you, Mel Laird has a ex-post facto theory about how things could have been done better. Of course, he’s got his theory about the pardon. He said he told the president, “Don’t do anything until I get back,” and he was going to put together a bipartisan delegation from both Houses and they would come down and petition the president to do this. The problem - given the political climate of the time - that any trial balloon would have been shot down before it got above the trees. I don’t know how you could prepare the country for that news. Now, you’re right, you could have waited until after the ’74 election. Apparently, Ford was being told by Jaworski or at least Jaworski’s representatives that, in fact, it might be two years before there could be a trial. Which, if you factor that in, you can understand why. He’s a new president and he sees this dominating his entire term.

Cheney: Yeah, I’ve talked to him about it over the years. When I went up one of the first things I did after Don and I came back and took over, was, shortly after that he had to go to the Hill to testify before the Judiciary Committee. I went along that day and sat back in the committee room and watched him. I really came to believe that he’d reached the point that this was the right thing to do, and politics never entered into it. If he’d considered the political consequences, or how to do it so that it would be politically less damaging, it would have somehow been out of character with the decision he made and the reason he did it. I think he really did do it based on the notion that the country
didn’t need any more of the grief that this all represented. He needed to put Watergate behind him and it was a terrible continuing burden on him and on the presidency, and once he decided to do it, it was like firing Schlesinger, get him in here so I can fire him.

Smith: But I wonder if there is not a certain element of naïveté, because, remember - of course you weren’t around - but August 28th was the first press conference. He went there sincerely believing that they were going to talk about Cyprus and Turkey and inflation and everything except what they all wanted to talk about. And he came out of the press conference, I think, angry at himself because he hadn’t handled some of the questions very well, and angrier that the press seemed obsessed. I assume all kinds of emotions were boiling at that point. But supposedly that is a turning point in terms of deciding, if not now, when? Isn’t it a little naïve on the part of a president to think that…

Cheney: Yeah, but you can ___________ on that. It was just a few weeks after the pardon – this is early October. It’s the first time I was ever in charge of a presidential trip. We went on a campaign swing through the West. We started in Kansas City with a Lick Your Plate Clean speech. I don’t know if you’ve come across this.

Smith: No.

Cheney: We’d had the Economic Summit earlier. Again, Don and I weren’t around, but out of that they’d done a big speech, an economic speech on television. They had more material than they could use, so, they decided to give the second half of the speech in front of the convention of the Future Farmers of America – all the young kids out there in their blue corduroy jackets and the gold symbols on them and so forth. They were having their convention in Kansas City and he went there and gave that speech, and he talked about lick your plate clean – fight inflation and so forth. The Lick Your Plate Clean speech, was the way the staff referred to it.

We went from there on out to California, en route to California, he got word that Nixon was back in the hospital. We were staying at the Century Plaza Hotel. He called me up and said he wanted to go visit Nixon - called me up to
the front of the plane. I argued with him. I said, “Mr. President, here we are, the election is a month out [sic], we’ve still got all this controversy over the pardon, the last thing we need to do is to go down and meet with Nixon and have that dominate the headlines. It is just going to blow away anything we are going to try accomplish with this trip. We’re trying to elect Republicans.” And he said, “Damn it, Dick, he’s a friend of mine. He’s sick. He’s a former president of the United States. I want to go see him.”

So I scurried around and got helicopters lined up and one landed in Century Plaza parking lot there in Los Angeles the next morning. Got on the helicopter and we flew down and it was Long Beach Naval Hospital or someplace down there. We went in to the hospital and they had the press sort of gathered in this fairly big room, and then Ford had to go through some swinging doors. On the other side of the swinging doors he was greeted by Pat and the girls, and then walked on down to the room that Nixon was in. It’s a new wing of the hospital and Nixon was the only patient on the floor. When they got down to the door where he was located, the door was jammed, they could not get it open.

So, you’ve got the press out there, outside these swinging doors wondering what the hell is going on. You’ve got the president and Nixon’s family standing in the hallway. Nixon’s laying there, tubes running in every part of his body. He’s pretty sick. They finally got a carpenter up to take the door off the hinges so that they could get in. Nothing works. When it goes bad, it all goes bad.

Smith: A euphemism for the campaign.

Cheney: Right. So we finish there, we went on. We had a campaign in California, and Oregon and Utah. Stopped in Grand Junction, Colorado, where we did the speech – a big rally. They had baseball stands full of people and a flatbed trailer parked across the pitcher’s mound. It was homecoming weekend at La Mesa’s Junior College there in Grand Junction. So the homecoming queen and all of her attendants were lined up in their finery on the flatbed trailer, and Ford got up and got ready to speak. He looked down the line of young lovelies and walked down and gave every one of them a kiss. Then he went
back to the mike, he got ready to make the speech, looked down the line again, and he went back and did it a second time. Everybody got a second kiss.

We then got on the airplane, flew to Kansas, did a rally for Bob Dole in a terrible thunderstorm. I think when we got all through and looked back on that trip, Dole was about the only guy that got elected. Everybody else went down in flames, Watergate era. *New Yorker* magazine ran a cover of Bozo the Clown above the president. I was convinced when I got back that Rumsfeld was never going to let me out on the road again because nothing worked. It was a dismal kind of experience.

The speech thing entered into that again, with the Lick Your Plate Clean speech kind of thing.

Smith: We’ve been told that Whip Inflation Now, in fact, was a product of the speech shop.

Cheney: Yeah. And the last day we were there, we’d had a breakfast with the Cabinet upstairs in the residence. After that was over with I walked him back to the West Wing for the last time, said goodbye to the secretary. People are crying and so forth. He went around, once last look around, and then left and went back up to the residence to meet Carter, who was coming down, of course. The crew came in and started stripping the place – the Oval Office – of all his pictures. They opened the drawers in the desk and in one of the drawers – they had drawers on the front of the desk – and one of them held cufflinks and stuff like that. The other one opened up and it was full of Whip Inflation Now buttons that he’d put in there two and half years ago and he was going to pass them out. He never got rid of very many of them. They sat in that drawer all that time.

Smith: That’s great.

One quick thing, the selection process. Someone who was very close to him told me they had this discussion. I believe the president called Rockefeller and he’d asked for a day or something to call back, and a conversation took place. This guy went through all the reasons why Rockefeller would be miserable
and unsuccessful, and there’s a long list. Finally he [Rockefeller] said, “Look, everything you say is true. But you don’t understand, this is my last shot.” And so I think he wasn’t totally honest with himself as to why he took it. Yes, he took it because the country was in a crisis and the president asked him, that was all true, but it wasn’t the whole truth. And it was almost doomed before it began. You do wonder how deeply the president had thought about it before he did it. It makes a lot of sense on the surface, to give someone who has a global reputation and a lot of good people around him, and appeals to the other part of the party, although he obviously alienated a larger part of the party, and all of that. Rockefeller was led to believe that he would be in domestic policy, like Kissinger was in foreign policy. And that was a mistake, clearly.

Cheney: Interesting. Well, what I remember about him, the selection happened during that period of time which, technically - while we were having the transition – was one of the first things Ford does. There was speculation about George Bush. I got a phone call from Bill Steiger, who was my old boss, lobbying me on behalf of George Bush. They had an organized effort to try to promote Bush for it. And the other guy who was under serious consideration, because Ford told me this himself sometime later, was Rumsfeld. He really had three choices: he had Rumsfeld and Bush, whom he believe represented the future of the party – young guys, dynamic guys that he would have ordinarily picked. But he really felt, as a guy who had been a Congressman from Michigan, and that was it, that he needed somebody of real international stature. And that’s why he went with Rockefeller.

I also believe, although I have no evidence to support this, that Henry Kissinger played a major role in all of this. Those first words out of his mouth, when it’s first public that he’s about to become president of the United States, “I’ve asked Henry to stay and he’s agreed,” I think Henry had an important impact on some of these decisions. And, of course, Henry was a Rockefeller protégé.

Smith: True.
Cheney: If we go on and move forward in terms of timing, I became convinced that we could not win the battle against Reagan in ’76 - we couldn’t capture the nomination with Rockefeller on the ticket – that he was too much baggage. He came from that wing of the party. Ronald Reagan had been the guy that had clear sailing to the nomination in ’76 until Nixon resigned, and all of a sudden Ford’s on the scene. If we were going to win the nomination and fend off Reagan, we needed to have the ability to create the idea of competition for the vice presidency. We needed to be able to dangle it in front of all those various players out there, which is what we did. The president asked him to get off the ticket, in effect.

Smith: Before that, because Bo Calloway had made some remarks, and Rockefeller went to his grave convinced that Rumsfeld did him in, thought that Calloway was a Rumsfeld person and that all this was orchestrated and so on. Which strikes me as, at the very least an exaggeration. Calloway was pretty much a loose cannon, or was he acting on his own?

Cheney: Well, Calloway was…

Smith: Who was his sponsor?

Cheney: Well, I suppose I was, as much as anybody. When we put together the campaign committee, we got a problem in the sense that we’re going to get a challenge from the conservative wing of the party. And we needed to take action that would allow us to help fend that off. If we’re going to run a Nelson Rockefeller style of presidential campaign, we’ll probably get our butts kicked the same way he did in California in 1964. The Calloway selection, Bo had been a Republican Congressman from Georgia. He was secretary of the Army, as I recall when we moved him in. I eventually had to fire him, he got into this deal with using Army letters to talk about his ski area, or some such thing – somebody else I had to let go.

But it wasn’t because he was anti-Rockefeller that he was picked. Any Southern Republican who had a base in the conservative wing of the party would have been anti-Rockefeller. Bo’s problem was probably that he talked about it. But I don’t remember that being a special problem. I had a terrible
run in with Rockefeller. Rockefeller was convinced I was out to do him in. At
the convention in Kansas City, we were slated to - after the president gave his
acceptance speech - bring out the vice presidential candidate and raise hands
and bring out the families and so forth. And we had a problem, because we
had the new vice presidential candidate, Bob Dole, and we had the old vice
president, Nelson Rockefeller. And Nelson Rockefeller did not want to go out
after Bob Dole. He was the vice president of the United States, by God, he
was going out. So we had that fight to resolve.

Then he’d given his speech that afternoon to the convention and in the middle
of the convention the mike had gone out, the sound system had gone down.
He had confronted me underneath the podium during that evening, once we
got there. Backed me up against the wall and just laced me from one end to
the other. I was totally innocent. I had nothing to do with turning out the
sound system. But his conspiratorial mind said, Cheney controls everything,
Cheney did it.

Part of the problem that we ran into was really created by Ford and
Rockefeller. Now, they got along fine, nominally, but on the one hand, Ford
made the decision to give Rockefeller control over the domestic council, but
then at the same time, we had enunciated a policy across the administration
that there aren’t going to be any new starts.

Smith: We’ve been told that a major factor behind that decision, and when it was
announced, was to basically brush back the vice president who had a habit
every Thursday of coming into the lunch with the president with a shiny new
program with an indeterminate price tag. and with all of the force of his
enthusiasm and personality behind it. But it hadn’t been cleared up and at
some point the president, and I don’t know in what words, but made it clear
that he’d like to end that.

Cheney: My feeling is, I’d have to go back and maybe check this, but we announced
the “No New Starts” because of the economic situation, because we were
faced with inflation and recession and so forth. We also had a situation where
the Democrats had overwhelmingly controlled the Congress,. and it wasn’t
like we could get anything through, _________ we wouldn’t want it anyway.
What we had was a veto strategy in terms of dealing with Congress. We put the No New Starts marker out there for good and legitimate policy reasons. Rockefeller just refused to abide by it. He would come in for these weekly sessions with the president and he always had a new proposal. I’d go down that evening, or sometimes the president would even call me right after Rockefeller left, and I’d go down and he’d hand me the new proposal and he’d say, “Dick, what do we do with this?” And I’d say, “Well, Mr. President, we’ll staff it out.” And so it would go to OMB and then get fed out through the system, and the answer would always come back, “This is not consistent with our basic fundamental policy,” and get shot down. Rockefeller became convinced I was out to do him in. It was another one of the charges against me.

I think Ford felt badly about it, but he wasn’t willing to violate the policy until the very end. And you may remember, one of his last official acts was to send up Rockefeller’s energy proposal, this monster of a big spending project.

Smith: The Energy Independence Corporation. A hundred billion dollars. For anyone who says Rockefeller moved to the right to chase the caboose…the fact is, he was going to fund it with the same moral obligation bonding that he’d used in New York. He hadn’t changed at all, really. The story is, supposedly, that the president, at one point, and I don’t know where, but that Bill Simon was arguing, this thing had been discussed in the Cabinet and Simon kept up the argument pretty vociferously.

Cheney: For or against it?

Smith: Against, not surprisingly. And the president said something to the effect that, Bill, we both know Congress is never going to let this go anywhere. But he didn’t want to embarrass Nelson. Does that ring a bell at all?

Cheney: Yeah, I think what he did for Rockefeller as he left, he felt that he ought to go out of his way to make it the last message he sent to Congress. It was right towards the end, just before the inauguration, and I really felt that he felt he owed Nelson one; he’d told him no so many times. He also had a lot of sympathy for anybody serving in that job. He hated the job, Ford did. He told
me that on more than one occasion, the nine months he spent as vice president were the worst nine months of his life. He told me that after I got to be vice president.

Smith: Was that because of the unique position that he was in of having to defend Nixon, but not defend him too much. Or is it just endemic to the job?

Cheney: I think it was both. No question, there was a unique set of circumstances. They’ve got him out on the road, flying around in an old Conair prop job. They don’t even give him a jet, doing fundraisers, trying to build support in the party, and Nixon is going down in flames back in Washington. I think that was a terribly frustrating experience. If I’d had to do that as vice president, it would have been a bummer. But I think he also felt, over the years, that it was a nasty job. It was reflected in what he demanded from Reagan in 1980, when they were in Detroit and Reagan is trying to get Ford to go on the ticket, and Ford is saying, “Okay, but I’ll only do it if I get control of the National Security Council. I want a major say in OMB, personnel,” and he started ticking off all this stuff.

I sat through a session in Detroit because I was a delegate to the convention that year from Wyoming, and there was all of this stuff going on, swirling around Ford. I was not directly involved until I got a call from Howard Baker and John Rhodes from the Senate and House leader. And they asked me to come down to the hotel, the main convention hotel, which I did together with Bob Teeter. They had Bob and I in because they knew we were close to Ford, and they had some major problems with what was going on here. They thought we might be able to come in and shed some light on it, maybe, and bring some sanity to the situation.

Teeter and I sat there and listened to Bill Casey, on behalf of Ronald Reagan, run through this list and we couldn’t believe it. They were willing to give him a hell of a lot. Now, fortunately in the end, cooler heads prevailed. I had the feeling that Ford didn’t really want the job and one way he could get out of it was ask for the moon, and he did. And the Reagan people figured out you can only have one president at a time. I think he had a mixture of sentiments about the job, about Rockefeller. You will appreciate very much the fact that
Rockefeller stayed true to the cause, even after he’d asked him to get off the ticket.

Smith: He was a good soldier.

Cheney: Delivered the delegates from New York, boy, when we needed them. He could easily have got off the reservation and I always felt, after the fact, Ford sometimes had second thoughts about having pushed Rockefeller out. I think it was the right thing to do.

Smith: That’s interesting, because I’ve seen this, I’ve talked to him about it, and I’ve seen it in other interviews he did: Ford could surprise you. He could come to you with a fresh take on a situation that you hadn’t thought about, and all of a sudden you thought, well, of course. In some ways maybe it’s leapfrogging guilt, because, clearly, the question of whether he [Rockefeller] was pushed or whether he jumped - he was clearly pushed. And I think Ford felt some guilt about that on a personal level. Maybe it’s a bit of rationalization, but you know what? It’s a damn good one. He said, “I don’t think Nelson would have been happy as vice president in a second term,” which was clearly…

Cheney: Clearly the case.

Smith: Absolutely. So I think then he convinced himself that he was doing Nelson a favor by…

That weekend, when the story began to leak, and one of the problems with Rockefeller was he went up to Pocantico for weekends. He wasn’t a part-time vice president, but Happy was up there with the kids, and he would go up there on the weekends. So, anyway, he’s up there that weekend, and on Sunday he’s playing golf with Laurance, and the phone call comes, calling from the White House, that this is leaking. The person who took the call to him told me he wouldn’t take the call. And he was finally asked, point blank by this individual, “Are you telling me you won’t take a call from the President of the United States?” And he said, “That’s exactly what I’m telling you,” and he played golf.

Cheney: I never heard that.
Smith: He was angry. His anger lasted about – and there is only one other person who ever saw him angry, Mac Mathias.

Cheney: At that incident?

Smith: At that incident. And right at that time when Mathias was trying to say something consoling and…Rockefeller, who was also not one for vulgar language, Rockefeller says to Mathias, “Who wants to hang around with those shits, anyway?” And it was in the heat of the moment, but he delivered New York and played a significant role in delivering Pennsylvania.

Cheney: Well, after we fired Schlesinger and Colby that morning, then we got on the airplane and flew to Jacksonville, Florida for a summit with Sadat. As we were landing in Jacksonville, he called me up to the cabin again and told me to get on the phone and get Rumsfeld’s commitment to serve as secretary of defense because Rumsfeld wasn’t on board yet for that. All of a sudden that morning I’d started as Rumsfeld’s deputy, and by noon, or whatever it is, I’m acting on behalf of the president, trying to get Rumsfeld to go to the Cabinet job. Then I think we came back that night and then on Monday, I believe, is when he had Rockefeller in, and formalized the process.

Smith: He brought the letter, I think, at that point, that he had drafted over the weekend.

Cheney: And, as I say, I still believe the vice presidency played a crucial role in that nomination fight in ’76. With Reagan, it led Reagan to go with the Schweiker ploy, which hurt him badly. That’s what gave us the Mississippi delegation. I don’t think that would have ever happened if we’d been running with Rockefeller as our running mate.

Smith: Let me ask you, I’ve been told you can tell us better than anyone else, tell us about Clarke Reed and Mississippi. Mr. Reed has a reputation of someone who can be bought, but doesn’t always stay bought. What transpired? Was the Schweiker thing, in fact, just what he needed to do what he was already inclined to do?
Cheney: No. Clarke was, of course, a long time Republican chairman in Mississippi. He’d been a Nixon man. By this time in ’76, Reagan was running flat out out there. We’re winning Florida and New Hampshire. He’s winning North Carolina and Texas and so forth.

Mississippi has got the unit rule. They’ve got thirty delegates, but they’ve got thirty alternates as well, and what they do, they all take half a vote and all vote together and whichever candidate got a majority of the votes, then all thirty delegate votes went there. So you could have a delegation that was split 31-29, counting the delegates and the alternates, and whoever got the thirty-one would get the full delegate support. So, it was unique that way.

There was a hell of a contest. Reed was nominally neutral as the party chairman. Billy Munger was the Reagan chairman. I’d go on down to Mississippi to meet with the delegation because we were doing everything we could to round up uncommitted delegates, and that was obviously one of the key targets. I met with Clarke and a lot of the delegates he had together for a delegation meeting. I think it was in Jackson that weekend. Then I got on the airplane and flew back to Washington.

When I got off the airplane, I heard that Reagan had announced that Schweiker was going to be his running mate in this effort to reach out to the left. And it was clearly aimed at trying to shake the Pennsylvania delegation. I went to the White House, I got hold of Drew Lewis, who was our chairman in Pennsylvania, and who clearly the Reagan people were working hard. Drew, to his credit, said, “Tell the president I’m with him. There’s nothing to worry about in Pennsylvania. It’s solid, it doesn’t matter what he does with Schweiker. We’re Ford people.”

Then I had the president call Clarke Reed. Clarke was pissed at Reagan and what he’d done picking Schweiker. And in the anger of the moment, he committed to Ford, and that created some real tensions inside the Mississippi delegation. I think if it hadn’t been for the Schweiker ploy, he would never have had the incentive. He might have well have stayed neutral until things sorted out and they got down to the convention.
The actual vote was cast at the convention, in a delegation meeting, when we won the vote. But I’m going to say; once Clarke committed, he stayed committed. I think it tore him up. Years after that I’d see him occasionally and dealt with him some. We really put him through the wringer. He wished to hell he’d never had to go through that process. I don’t think he was looking for an out so much as he reacted with a flash of anger at the Reagan ploy on Schweiker, and the president called him at exactly the right time and put the arm on him and got him to commit.

Smith: It’s interesting. Stu Spencer – we spent six hours with Stu Spencer…

Cheney: Did you?

Smith: Oh, gosh, great stuff.

Cheney: Stu’s full of good stuff.

Smith: He talked about Reagan and it’s fascinating listening to a pro dissect the opposition. He said Reagan is someone who, if you throw him off his rhythm - he’s a rhythm candidate, he says - you throw him off his rhythm, it takes him almost a week to get back. And the ad about Governor Reagan couldn’t start a war – apparently Reagan was so angry he punched a hole through the plane wall. Suffice to say he was off his rhythm.

Cheney: I never heard that.

Smith: But listening to Spencer talk about it - he was ecstatic with, I guess it was Sears, who decided to make it a procedural fight at the convention.

Cheney: Yeah. 16-C.

Smith: Because, of course, Stu believed you needed an emotional issue, and foreign policy was that issue. I guess Henry wasn’t happy about it, but by ceding the platform, you in effect, nailed down the nomination. Does that ring a bell?

Cheney: Yeah. Again I come back to the idea, the reason they tried 16-C, and I think John Sears was the guru behind a lot of this, is because of the opening for vice president, and to try to get Ford to designate who his running mate was. Once they got in trouble with Schweiker, then you could change 16-C and force
Ford to do what Reagan had done when he picked Schweiker, and pick somebody, and that was going to piss off somebody in the party. So it was not an unreasonable choice, but, in effect, it was forced by the fact that there was a vacancy in the vice presidency, not on a decision that had been made seven months before. And once we won on 16-C, we were focused on that, we thought that that’s the key fight. And it was.

What followed after that, after the rules were adopted that night was the platform fight, and Jesse Helms had gathered together this foreign policy plank for the platform that was beautifully done. It was tough, didn’t name Henry by name, but you knew who that querulous bastard was who was leading Ford astray, and who was for détente, and all of these various and sundry issues. It led to a great meeting we had up in Ford’s suite at the hotel. Kissinger was there and Rockefeller, Korologos and Timmons. I’m sure Stu was probably there, and the president.

Rockefeller and Kissinger are arguing vociferously that we have to defeat that platform plank. They want us to go war, go to the mattresses, kill this plank, and our thinking, looking at it, this is late at night, we’ve already won on 16-C, our people are in bars all over Kansas City thinking we won the fight. We’ll never get them back. If you go to a vote on this, we’re going to lose. And that will undo all the good we did with the rules fight, and could, in fact, reverse the whole dynamic of the convention. Then Henry threatened to quit. He said, “If you don’t go down and fight this fight and beat this on the floor, I’m going to quit.” And that’s when Tom Korologos piped up and he said, “For Christ’s sake, Henry, if you’re going to quit, do it now. We need the votes.” A memorable, memorable moment.

Smith: Doesn’t that sound like Tom?

Cheney: It sounds exactly like him.

Smith: Was Ford just kind of observing all of this?

Cheney: Oh yeah. As I recall, he was sitting there observing all of this. But he made the decision. He backed those of us who didn’t want to go have this fight. And so, what we did when they brought the plank up, we just agreed to it. There
was never a vote on it. And it was exactly the right thing to do. That was the end of the rebellion. We’d won the key fight, and we went on about our business.

Smith: Stu, by the way, tells a story, so I’ll give you an opportunity to tell me whether he’s telling it accurately or not. It’s a wonderful story, but only half of the story has ever been in print – it’s the second half involving you that makes the story so great. Stu was not thrilled with the way things were going, and it was the end of a long week. He did say one of the frustrations he had originally on the job was that he spent half his time fending off all Ford’s buddies on Capitol Hill who would come to him to tell him what was wrong. He went in and told the president, in no uncertain terms, and it stopped.

So, anyway, he’s there and he’s trying to think of a euphemism, because he had these numbers – the president would go out and loved to campaign, and he had these not very good speeches from the speech shop, and his numbers would go down. He couldn’t come up with a euphemism, so finally he says, “Look, Mr. President, you’re a great president, but you’re a fucking lousy campaigner.” Now the only other person in the room was you. First of all, what other president could you say it to? Which is revealing in and of itself. But the great story is the sequel, because, when Germond-Witcover’s book comes out the story is there. And as Stu tells the story, he called you, very upset, going on and on and on, and you let him kind of rumble, run down. And finally you said, “Stu, there was a third person in that room.” And it never occurred to Stu that the president might have told the story himself. Which is a great story.

Cheney: No, I remember, it was when we took in the campaign plan. I’d had Stu and Foster Chanock and Mike Duvall, guys who worked for me, pulling together the fall campaign plan, and this is, I think, before the convention. Stu and I took it into the Oval Office, and what I remember was the president saying, “What’s this?” And Stu was looking at him and saying, “Mr. President, this says you are a lousy fucking campaigner.” That’s the language he used. And the president sort of reared back. He wouldn’t take that off just anybody, but
he would take that off Stu. And, as you say, he’s one of the few people that the president would listen to that and respond to it.

Smith: There’s also the funny story, I think it’s in one of these interviews that Brokaw did, I think it was with you. Where the dinner for Queen Elizabeth - if Her Majesty had looked at the guest list - she would have been astonished at how many delegates and uncommitted delegates and wives were attending this state dinner.

Cheney: Yeah. About half the Wyoming delegation to the national convention was there that night. I mean, these people had never seen…they were wearing their boots, and white tie – it’s a special occasion.

No, the story I love about uncommitted delegates, I don’t know whether we’ve ever talked about it or not, was, as we went through this process, uncommitted delegates became like gold. We’d do anything to get your hands on an uncommitted delegate. We had this woman from Brooklyn who would announce she was for Reagan, and then she would announce she was for Ford, and so forth. Finally, we got hold of her, and I asked her, “What do we have to do to get you to commit to the president?” She said, well, she wanted to bring her family down, and have them meet with the president in the Oval Office. So, she did, and on the appointed day they showed up in the West Wing lobby – the scruffiest bunch of people you ever saw in your life. We took them in and shoved them into the Oval Office. I didn’t even go in, I couldn’t stand to watch. They came out about thirty minutes later, the president made the sale, and she committed, and she stayed right with us.

Then the dinner for the Queen. With the Bicentennial year we had all that good stuff to use. We finally get down shortly before the convention, and the Fords are in bed late at night upstairs in the residence. In those days Pennsylvania Avenue was open and a guy jumped that fence off Pennsylvania Avenue and headed towards the White House carrying a long length of something in his hands. The executive protective guy was out there and hollered at him to stop. He didn’t stop. Fired a warning shot and told him to stop. He didn’t stop, he kept coming. So the guy did the only thing he could,
he took aim and shot him and dropped him right there on the North Lawn of the White House.

All hell breaks loose. I mean there are sirens going everywhere, police cars. The guy who did the shooting had only been on the force about six months and he was really shaken up by it, so they got him down in the Secret Service command post underneath the West Wing. Then all of a sudden, this happens sometimes - a situation like that - it got very quiet for just a moment and one of the older agents leaning over against the wall announced, he said, “Gentlemen, if that fellow we just shot was an uncommitted delegate, we’re in deep shit.” It’s a true story, actually. So the uncommitted delegate stuff was very important.

Smith: Was the White House slow, originally, to recognize either the inevitability of the Reagan challenge, or the seriousness of the threat that he posed?

Cheney: I think that there was a hope that there would be a way to get Reagan not to run. We had Tom Reed, who was secretary of the Air Force, who had been, I think, Reagan’s national committeeman from California for a long time. He was fairly close to the operation. We worked through Tom to try to feed back into the Reagan organization to find out what was going on. We talked to him about Cabinet jobs - if we could get him into the Cabinet - make him part of the Ford team. We even tried that.

Stu, when he signed on, of course, was very important because he knew the Reagan operation better than anybody else. I think Stu always took it seriously. I certainly did. We didn’t have a lot of time. By the time the president gets sworn in, in August of ’74 - by the summer of ’75 we’re going flat out getting organized. Then of course the campaign really kicks off in the New Hampshire primary in February.

Smith: Mrs. Ford, and her relationship with the campaign: there is this storyline that certainly some of the things she said, most famously the *Sixty Minutes* interview, produced at least, an initial wave from some, of outrage – succeeded, as time went by, perhaps to the surprise of many in the White House, with poll ratings that were much higher than her husband’s. Although,
presumably, not among those who were going to vote for Ronald Reagan anyway. How much of an issue was that? How did you deal with it?

Cheney: Well, I didn’t think it was much of an issue. I have a recollection, I can’t remember where it comes from, but of talking to the president about it. Raising it with the president that Mrs. Ford was out doing *Sixty Minutes*, did he know where she was? And him saying, “Look guys, you want to get her to do something else? You go talk to her, because I can’t.” I think many of us saw it, it certainly eventually got to the point where we saw this is Betty Ford, and she’s the real deal, and I didn’t see this as having that big an impact, negatively, politically. People weren’t going to vote or not vote for Jerry Ford based on Betty. Also, she’d been through the cancer stuff. I know that was hard.

Smith: In the realm of euphemisms, was there an awareness that she had a problem at that point?

Cheney: No.

Smith: No.

Cheney: No, I mean, I dealt with her a lot, I dealt with the East Wing a lot. I spent a lot of time with the president. There were staff problems in the East Wing, there always are. You bring in a woman who’s been the wife of a Congressman and all of a sudden she’s got a staff and social secretary and everything.

There was the night we were in Germany on a formal visit, staying in an old castle. I got called about midnight by the president to come on down to his room. I went down and there was he and Mrs. Ford in their pajamas and robes and they wanted me to immediately fire the social secretary.

Smith: I bet Nancy really…

Cheney: Nancy Lammerding or something like that.

Smith: She’s gone now, bless her soul, but what a piece of work.

Cheney: I talked them out of it and said, “Let me wait until we get back to Washington.” We were right smack dab in the middle of this big trip, I think
we were coming out of Helsinki, or going to Helsinki, and said, “Here in the middle of the night I fire the social secretary and it’s going to top tomorrow’s lead. We’re not going to get what we need out of it.” So they agreed that I could do it when I got back, but I had to do it.

And then we had been through the bit with the Korean, Park-sung, whoever…

Smith: There was Nancy Howe.

Cheney: Nancy Howe and her husband committed suicide or something? So there were management problems over there. At one point the president told me that he’d sent Rick Sardo(?) over to clean things up in the East Wing. Rick was a Marine colonel who was one of the military aides, one of the senior guys in the military office. Rough, tough Marine, twenty years in the corps, or something like that. About two weeks later I walked into my office one morning and there is Rick Sardo. He is a basket case. He’s been over there and they’ve worked him over and given him the East Wing treatment over there and that was one Marine that had taken all he could. We sent him back to the Pentagon. He wasn’t up to the task. Those were tough assignments.

Smith: I just finished doing an oral history project for the White House Historical Association in which we interviewed all the surviving White House social secretaries, who are a fascinating group of people. You really can trace the evolution of a lot of things. But, clearly, one of the things that emerges is the use of state dinners and other devices for political ends. We talked a little bit about that in terms of ’76. How were East and West Wing relations coordinated? Whether or not it was social times, but speeches, or travel - how did that work?

Cheney: I’m trying to remember. When we would put together the guest list for state dinners, and we had a whole bunch of them…

Smith: Because of the Bicentennial you had an unusual number.

Cheney: Because of the Bicentennial. And when the Queen came, we had to accommodate more people, so we set up a tent in the Rose Garden, and Bob Hope was there. These were great events. Everybody wanted to come. It
generated a problem with the Cabinet because Bill Simon thought he ought to be included in every state dinner, and Bill didn’t take no for an answer. The president had established a policy, aside from Henry, the secretary of state, that we were going to rotate Cabinet members to these deals. So Simon raised all kinds of hell, but we stuck with it, wouldn’t let him go in.

These were sought after invitations, and I think Maria Downs became the social secretary, and she was somebody who was very easy to work with. She was very close to my secretary, Kathy Emboly(?), they knew each other. I still hear from Maria to this day. We could work through Maria with just about anything we wanted. These guest lists would be put together and there would be recommendations that would come in from various places. The Fords enjoyed doing it and I’d say we did more, probably that summer, than we did the entire years of the Bush administration.

Smith: But your impression was that Mrs. Ford enjoyed her job as First Lady.

Cheney: Yeah, I thought she did. And, as I say, I was unaware that she had any problem. If there was a problem there, it wasn’t obvious at the time.

Smith: Mentioning Bill Simon. One of the really defining things about the Ford presidency, first of all, is the caliber of the Cabinet, and the people around him. But, secondly, his degree of comfort with strong, sometimes contentious, egos, and how he used the Cabinet and advisors. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Cheney: Yeah, he was, there was no question, he was comfortable with strong people, and with debate, discussion about the issues and so forth. He enjoyed that. We’d have a tough economic issue to decide and we’d get the economic policy council, or whatever we called it, get them together in the Cabinet room and there would be a big debate. He usually would not make a decision there, he’d end up back in his office and he relied on a few key people lots of times.

In the economic arena it would be Greenspan, maybe Jim Lynn. Sometimes Arthur Burns. But lots of times he’d say, “Get Alan over here,” and we’d get Greenspan in and then the two of them would sit down and talk about the
bigger meeting. Everybody got a chance to be heard in the bigger meeting, but he’d sit down and have that close relationship with somebody he really trusted. And Greenspan is about as good as you could get in the economic arena.

Smith: Alan Greenspan tells a wonderful story about one day he went over. Simon and Arthur Burns were discussing Simon’s idea to sell some of the gold reserves and they got into it. I mean, really got into it. Ford listened to this whole thing and then, ten minutes later, Greenspan’s phone rang, “Come on over.” And he walks into the Oval Office, and Ford says, “What the hell was that all about?”

Cheney: Yeah, he would do that. But one of the things I was always struck by, and I think the president appreciated this, too - in his later years we talked about on more than one occasion, the extent to which people who were important in later administrations, sort of got their break, or were an important part of his administration. We used to see in our annual dinner - I probably attended there on more than one occasion - where he had people like Jim Baker, who’s our campaign chairman who ends up, obviously as Bush’s campaign chairman and secretary of treasury. Secretary of State Rumsfeld, two tours as secretary of defense, myself, Scowcroft. You could look at the first Bush administration and a lot of what you got there were people that were trained by Jerry Ford. He had some great people that agreed to sign on for him, and then served in later administrations.

Smith: I have to ask you, because the one sort of down side of that - it must have been really awkward for him and Paul O’Neill, in the later Bush administration. Was that ever discussed?

Cheney: He never talked to me about Paul afterwards. We all had a fondness and affection for Paul. And I’m partly responsible for what happened to Paul because I recommended him to the president to be secretary of the treasury. A lot of other people supported it – George Schultz, Greenspan and so forth. But I got him down to meet with President Bush, and Bush really liked him, and we went through that whole exercise and got him on board as secretary of the treasury, and then it didn’t work. And I’m the guy who had to call him and
tell him that it wasn’t working and the president wanted to make a change.
Paul was fantastic in the role he was in, in the Ford administration. He was the
deputy director of OMB. You could have had anybody to be director of OMB
and Paul was the go-to guy, career guy, came up through the ranks, and one of
the best I’ve ever seen on the Federal budget.

I knew him also because we were both CEOs together. When he was running
ALCOA, I was running Halliburton, and I felt badly about the way it came
out. In the end, there were a couple of problems. One was that Paul didn’t
tend to be a macro guy in terms of economic policy. He was more like a
budget officer or a CFO. And the other problem was that the administration,
Bush administration, the administration I was part of, didn’t, especially in the
early years, effectively use Cabinet members in key policy decisions.
Economic policy would get made by a group of guys in the White House, but
the secretary of the treasury wouldn’t even be in the meeting. I think that was
frustrating for Paul, too. It was one of those things that was a great idea,
everybody thought it was a great choice; turned out not to be, and it wasn’t all
Paul’s fault.

Smith: You can notice, too, Ford’s affinity for O’Neill in those OMB days, the fact
that Ford was the last president who could get up and actually introduce his
own Federal budget. Which, when you stop to think about it, is pretty
mindboggling.

Cheney: Oh, yeah. That was a great event that day, and it was a deliberate effort on our
part to knock down that whole notion that Ford wasn’t up to the task. Lyndon
Johnson had said he’d played football without his helmet, or some such thing.

Smith: Describe Ford’s intelligence.

Cheney: He was very, very comfortable with intellectual arguments, with bright
people. We had some great sessions up in the solarium that Bob Golden
organized, where we’d bring in outside experts in various subjects and sit
around on a Saturday morning and talk about complicated questions -
immigration patterns into the U.S. - interesting stuff. He was never
intimidated by a guy like Henry Kissinger, obviously one of the brightest
people that ever served in those posts. He had a great ability, I always felt, to get along with foreign leaders. I know some of those relationships lasted a lifetime.

Smith: You think of people like a Jim Callaghan, who was an old Socialist (Labor), and Helmut Schmidt, and Giscard, who’s not the warmest personality in the world. And yet the one thing they agreed on was they all held Ford in enormous regard.

Cheney: And for years they would all come to this summer deal we did, and still are doing, out in Beaver Creek. There was stuff he knew. He could tell you how many park rangers there were in the National Park Service in 1954. He knew that stuff. And he was, of all the presidents I worked with, he was, without question, the best prepared on the budget of any of them. On the day that we had him brief the press corps, that was I guess, the first time since Harry Truman, when the budget was much smaller, that the president had gone out and done the briefing himself. Usually it was the Cabinet and OMB director. I remember we had all of them arrayed on the stage up there that day, but the president did the brief over in the State Department auditorium. And it was a great performance. It really helped us put to rest this whole notion that was out there that Ford was a bumbler, stumbler kind of a guy. He got a raw deal from the press in many respects. Here was this guy who was a great athlete, football player, skier, and the press would run over and over and over again footage of him falling on the ski slopes or slipping on the stairs coming out of the plane.

Smith: Did it hurt him? I know he never publicly let on.

Cheney: He never let on publicly that it did. It made me angry. I can’t believe it didn’t, but he’d tell jokes about it. Go do the show with Chevy Chase. Now, having been vice president for the last eight years, you get to be a punching bag for the Jay Leno’s and David Letterman’s of the world, it goes with the turf. I happened to be watching Jay Leno last night and now he’s doing to Biden what he used to do to me. The vice president is a standing joke. But the president, it bothered me when they did it to him. Partly because I thought it
was such a distortion of who the guy really was, and partly because it was a problem for us in terms of trying to manage the campaign and his poll ratings, and everything else. And then we get into something like the Polish question in the second foreign policy debate.

Smith: You take the words right out of my mouth, because clearly he was very, very stubborn about it. You were clearly making headway in that campaign. People forget how far behind you were at the outset, and you were really making it up. There was a consensus that you won the first debate, and then I guess, I think was before the second debate that Carter had his famous *Playboy* interview that further slowed his momentum.

Cheney: Lust in his heart.

Smith: Yeah, exactly. And then you get this, the Polish question. And they did give him an opportunity in the course of the debate to…

Cheney: Max Frankel came back and asked him a second time. No, I was with him that night in the Green Room before he went on, and then sat and watched it by myself in his Green Room while he was out on the stage. Saw him make that mistake: “Poland is not dominated by the Soviet Union.” Frankel had been trying to get at the, or Ford thought Frankel was asking about the Sonnenfeldt Doctrine. I don’t know if you know about the Sonnenfeldt Doctrine. Helmet Sonnenfeldt and the State Department had been over and briefed our ambassadors in Europe and the argument about the doc was it supposedly involved our recognition of some sort of legitimacy of the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe.

Ford was primed to shoot down the notion that that was administration policy. He misunderstood, I think, the question. But what he’d pulled up was an answer that he’d been primed to give on the Sonnenfeldt doc. Basically, it came out that Poland is not dominated by the Soviet Union. And then Frankel came back and he repeated it. After it was over with I rode with him in the car back to the house where he was staying in San Francisco. I think Henry called him in the car or something and praised his performance. So I dropped him off for the night, then I went down to the St. Francis Hotel, where Stu and I
and Scowcroft were supposed to go brief our press corps – give them the spin. I can remember walking up on the stage and Lou Cannon, from the Post, hollered at me from the back of the room. He said, “Hey, Cheney, how many Soviet divisions are there in Poland?” and it was downhill from there.

The next day we flew down to Southern California. I went up and talked to him in the cabin of Air Force One, said I really thought this was out of hand. Carter was having a field day, the press was going bananas, we’re getting phone calls from the Washington office saying what the hell are you guys doing out there? I said to the president that we need to go down and make it clear that you understand that Poland is still under Soviet purview. And he threw me out. So I got Stu and took Stu back up, and he threw both of us out.

We landed in California, we went through the day and finally we got him to – it was at breakfast the next morning with businessmen or something, as I recall – and he was primed to stand up and say that Poland is not dominated or whatever, to give the correct answer. And he did, but then he adlibbed something on the end of it, “if they are,” or something like that. Well, the press went bananas again. We finally got in the Valley someplace there doing a rally in front of a courthouse. I was over with the press and they were just having a field day.

So when the rally was over with, the president got finished speaking, we took him back into the mayor’s office in the courthouse. Stu was with me. Sat him down and said, “Mr. President, this is just killing us. You’ve got to go out and explain that you understand who the hell is running Poland at this point.” I said, “I want to call the press bus around, pull them over here in the parking lot and we’ll hold an impromptu press conference. You can go out and do your mea culpa.” He said, “Okay, damn it, I’ll do it.” So, we waited a couple of minutes, got the press all lined up, and then we got ready to go and I was walking behind him as we went out and I said to him one last time, I said, “Now, Mr. President, you have fixed in your mind what it is you’re going to say?” And he spun around on his heels, jabbed his finger in my chest, and said, “Poland is not dominated by the Soviet Union!” and then laughed like
hell, went out and delivered his lines the way he was supposed to and that was the end of the story.

But he had a sense of humor about himself under those difficult circumstances. He didn’t like having to apologize, he was very stubborn. Stu, he’d be around over in the corner laughing his fool head off, watching all this back and forth.

There is a picture, a favorite news story in Kansas City. This is the morning that Ford has announced that Bob Dole is going to be his running mate. He and Dole came up with this scheme that we’re going to go to Russell, Kansas the next day and do a big rally. I’m appalled. Everybody is strung out, we’d been working this convention, we’d been in this huge fight, we finally won, and I said, “Mr. President, this is going to be the first stop of the whole campaign. It’s got to go well. We cannot have a train wreck out there. There isn’t even an airport in Russell, Kansas.” We’re going to go in fifty miles away. I said, “Where in the hell am I supposed to get advance men. What are we going to do about a crowd and so forth.”

Dole was there listening to all of this back and forth, and Stu was, too. I think I’ve got a picture of it. They are watching me argue with the President and he finally got to the point where he said, “Damn it, Dick, do it.” So I said, “Yes, sir, Mr. President.” We had people on buses and we were trekking them into Russell, Kansas, and went all night and bought radio announcements all over the western half of Kansas. We just really busted our butts trying to raise a crowd in this little Podunk town where Dole is from.

The next day we’re flying in by helicopter to Russell, Kansas, and there is a humongous crowd. I mean, there are people everywhere. Those advance guys did a great job. And the president reached over and tapped me and said, “See, Dick, I told you we’d get a crowd.”

Smith: One last Kansas City question. To this day, there is still debate over whether the Reagan camp made it a condition of their meeting after the nomination that Reagan not be asked to be on the ticket. And my understanding is that that is, in fact, the case. But there is some effort, I think, to suggest wiggle
room after the fact. Some people around Reagan, not necessarily Reagan himself, and we talked about this a little bit with Stu, suggesting why didn’t you ask Reagan? If you’d asked him, he would have said yes, and all of this. What is your recollection of that?

Cheney: Well, by the time we got to Kansas City the relationship between Reagan and Ford was strained, to put it mildly. I don’t think Ford – Ford found it difficult to accept the proposition that Reagan had actually challenged a sitting Republican president for the nomination. He didn’t like it, he didn’t like Reagan. Before we went to Kansas City I’d done a poll - I had Teeter do a poll, about twelve candidates for vice presidents. Ford had asked me to run the search. We had Ann Armstrong on there, we had John Connally on there, and Dole and Baker and all the usual suspects. And I’d also had Bob do questions on Reagan. And what it showed, overwhelmingly, was that the best choice you could make was Reagan. That’s what the data showed.

I took it up to Camp David. I don’t remember whether Stu was there or not, Teeter was, and briefed Ford on the data on Reagan and tried to make a pitch that he really ought to consider Reagan for his running mate. He didn’t want to hear it. The relationship at that point was, as I say, severely strained and he made it very clear that he didn’t want to hear anymore talk about Reagan for vice president. This is before the convention. Got to the convention and I’d worked a deal with John Sears that whoever won the nomination fight would go to the hotel room of the loser that night and we’d have a unity meeting, bind up the wounds of the party, for the sake of the press and so forth.

The night after we’d won the 16-C fight, and it was clear we were going to win the nomination, I had Bill Timmons contact Sears, and Sears agreed, but he had two conditions. One was that it had to be a one on one meeting, didn’t want anybody else in the room except the two of them. And secondly, we had to promise we would not offer the vice presidency. I went back to the president and confirmed to both of those conditions, and then had Bill convey that back to Sears. Now, Sears was the interlocutor, he was the guy, and if he was doing this on his own, and Reagan really was dying to have it, I’d find it really hard to believe.
Ford went in and he had with him a list when he went in to meet with him. I
don’t remember whether Stu went in or not. He wasn’t all that well regarded
in the Reagan camp. But Paul Laxalt greeted us as the Reagan guy, then the
two of them met and one of the things that came out of that was that Reagan
reacted positively to Bob Dole. He was on Ford’s list. We had another
problem which was about the same time. There was a revolt developing in the
ranks of the state chairman, and they really wanted Reagan on the list. We had
to find somebody to dampen that down. We had the normal meetings that
went on all night as we got advice from people on who ought to be the
running mate. Rockefeller and a whole bunch of other people participated.
Different groups would come in.

Smith: Was Ann Armstrong seriously considered?

Cheney: She was on the list of people we polled about. She cost us about twelve votes,
the simple fact that she was a woman. Twelve percent of the vote.

Smith: Really?

Cheney: Yeah. The country still wasn’t in a position where a woman VP was going to
work. But anyway, when the president went to bed, there were a lot of people
who thought it was going to be Howard Baker. The next morning, I was
staying right there on the floor, just a few doors down from him, he called me
down. I remember Betty was still in her bathrobe. The president was still
going dressed. He told me, he said, “Dick, I’m going to go with Bob Dole.
Get me Dole on the phone.” So that’s how we ended up going with Dole.

Smith: Did he explain the rationale?

Cheney: Part of it was that it was a way to cap out. First of all, Dole was acceptable to
Reagan, which was important. Secondly, it was a way to sort of cap out the
movement for Reagan on the floor among the state chairmen, because Dole
had been national chairman, Republican national chairman. He was known to
everybody and getting out there fast with the Dole announcement was – he
would be acceptable. I think those were the main considerations why we went
with Dole and why he made that decision. I think he’d seriously entertained
Howard Baker as a possibility, but after a few hours of sleep, that next morning he decided on Bob.

Smith: At the end of the campaign, did you think you had a 50-50 chance, or better than a 50-50 chance?

Cheney: I thought we had a chance. I’ve always felt very good about the campaign, to this day.

Smith: Mark Shields says it’s the best run campaign he’s ever seen, and that’s coming from…

Cheney: Yeah, he’s no fan of mine.

Smith: That’s an unusual observation.

Cheney: But he felt good about it because we gave it our absolutely best shot. And it was almost an impossible task from the outset. With Watergate, and never run before, and the standing in the polls, thirty points down, Labor Day behind Carter. But we really felt like we’d put all into it, and it was a great group of guys working the campaign. We loved Jerry Ford and loved working for him. He had people like Spencer and Baker and so forth, and these guys became lifelong friends out of that experience.

Smith: Two quick things at the end. He went home to Grand Rapids and at that point, I guess really lost his voice, or was losing his voice. It’s been said that there was a desperate, frantic appeal last minute to go to Ohio, which, of course is where he came in so close. Does that ring a bell at all?

Cheney: I seem to remember campaigning in Ohio. Yeah, he found out about the talking car and he loved it – he’d pop open a roof so he could stand up – and have a microphone there. I rode around for eight years with a talking car and never used it once for talking to people. I remember we’d been driving down the street and you’d see him stopping their cars and start talking to people. They would start running for the exits, they didn’t know what the hell was happening. But he loved that.
He got towards the end, he had lost his voice. Ohio was a special problem. We lost Ohio. And we lost it in the southern belt, the Bible Belt. If you go down along the Ohio River, there are a lot of counties down there that are really more southern than they are northeastern industrial. That’s where we lost Ohio. We needed one other state. If we got Ohio, I think we needed four more delegates or something like that.

Smith: Would he review, for example, the TV spots and all that? Was he signing off on all of that?

Cheney: I think he signed off on a lot of the spots. I remember we showed him the TV spots, the storyboards, for example, on the concepts.

Smith: And then the Election Eve broadcast, I think it was broadcast from Air Force One, with Pearl Bailey and Joe Garagiola. Those relationships were clearly very special.

Cheney: They were, and we were looking for a way to maximize our impact. When you’re thirty points back, you start to do the arithmetic every 24 hours. You’ve got to persuade another million people or something to shift their loyalties. And we came up with this concept. We had Edith Green, Democrat from Oregon, who was a good friend of his from his House days, Joe Garagiola, who was great, and a couple of other people – especially the two of them. And we would go in and hit a town in the morning and get footage of all of this and then we’d buy a half hour of time on the local channel and have them talk. They’d run footage of what we’d done earlier that day, and then you’d have Ford and Garagiola and so forth doing the whatever it is we were doing. Basically trying to pedal the ticket. And it had some impact. It was a way we could get a larger audience.

The other thing, we were to some extent constrained by the new campaign law. We had to worry about how much we were spending. We actually ended up with some money in the bank when we finished, but we were so concerned about not going over, that that affected it as well, too.

But then at the last, the tail end of the campaign, we went home to Grand Rapids, for that rally down at the old Pantlind Hotel the night before the
election. That worked out. The next day we went and the president voted early in the morning, as I recall, and then we had breakfast at the little restaurant where he always had breakfast on election day. Then went from there to the airport. At the airport there was this beautiful mural that had been painted by the city fathers, I guess, on the wall. Ford got up there and spoke, got very emotional. The whole crowd got emotional. Hell, the press corps is crying. I mean, that’s a crusty bunch. It really was a remarkable moment, and it was almost as though that were the climax, not the election that night.

When we got on the airplane and flew from Grand Rapids back to Washington across the eastern half of the country, there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. It was one of those beautiful fall days. You know that people who might otherwise stay home were going to be out to vote. We started to get some results in the afternoon, but it wasn’t gone by any means. I think we expected that it was going to be hard.

We stayed up until about two o’clock in the morning. Bob and I basically were working out of my office, going up and taking up returns to the president, who was upstairs. He had Jacob Javits with him and I think maybe Garagiola was probably there. We finally decided about two o’clock in the morning to shut it down, that we weren’t going to make any statement that night.

Got up the next morning and clearly, we’d lost. He had lost his voice. I can’t remember – I think the sequence was: we went into the office, had a picture taken with the family standing behind the desk, and had a statement. The family then went out with the president, into the press room and Betty got up and spoke on behalf of the family because his voice was gone. And then he and I went back to the Oval Office to call Jimmy Carter. He called him from the desk, and I sat over by the fireplace, there was that telephone over there by where the president usually sits. He got Carter on the phone, and could just barely whisper. He introduced me and it was my job to read the concession statement to Jimmy Carter, which I did not enjoy doing, but I did. That was the end. That’s how it all wrapped up.
Smith: Who would have imagined that thirty years later you’d be sitting in a pew with the Carters at the funeral.

Cheney: At the funeral – yeah.

Smith: I’ll tell you, Rex Scouten, very professional and very discrete, but told one wonderful story about election night. It was around two o’clock in the morning and the president – because he was up there on the second floor with them – and the president is going across the hall, I guess to go to bed. And Rex followed him. He just wanted to say something consoling. He said, “Mr. President, you have spent your entire life in service to this country, in uniform and during the war…

Smith: The nomination of Justice Stevens – which really does stand out as maybe the last time it was handled that way. Not least of all, as he points out, in his confirmation hearings no one asked him about abortion, which is pretty extraordinary. And I was amazed to find out that he had not been interviewed by the president. How did that come about?

Cheney: In my experience, now, which includes watching the Bork battle back with Reagan, and Scalia, Clarence Thomas. I was with ’41 when he announced Clarence Thomas up in Kennebunkport that day. Then in screening candidates for President Bush, I chaired the committee that reviewed everybody’s credentials. Stevens was sort of the last of the old process, if you will, way of doing things, in the sense that it was all pretty much turned over to Ed Levi, who was then the attorney general. The bar associations still played an important role in those days. And pretty much what emerged with John Paul Stevens, and I like the guy, I’ve seen him socially and so forth, and he’s really a first class gentleman. He is totally, totally, out there to the left in terms of his views, and I don’t know that there is much he has voted for that I would agree with him on. But I think the president was looking for a first class jurist, if I can put it in those terms, and I don’t recall that politics entered into it. This was not unique with Ford, it was more the way things worked in those days. And it was before the abortion decisions.
Smith: I wonder whether, in some ways, if it was almost an extension in some ways of the Levi pick. You had a Justice Department that clearly needed to be cleaned up to be sure that jurisprudence was seen as not tainted by politics or cronyism.

Cheney: I think there was more the view that there was the law, and judges interpreted the law and made decisions accordingly, and that there wasn’t a political dimension to it. And there hadn’t been for some time.

Smith: But that’s a lot given his role in the whole Bill Douglas impeachment.

Cheney: You mean Ford’s role.

Smith: Yeah, Ford’s earlier role. I’ve always wondered whether he regretted it.

Cheney: My impression of those controversies, though, dealt more with the personal qualities, or flaws, ethical lapses of individuals, and it didn’t really have much to do with whether they were conservative or liberal or believed in an expansive view of the Constitution or a strict constructionist view. It just wasn’t an issue. Those kinds of considerations weren’t a big deal back in the early ‘70s, until after you got by Roe v Wade, and some of those other issues that where, today, you could have the most qualified jurist in the world, but if he’s wrong on a couple of those issues, there are elements in the Senate who will never vote for him no matter what.

Smith: And people do forget, but he introduced Judge Bork at Bork’s confirmation hearings.

Cheney: The president did, yeah. I had forgotten that. One of the interesting things on Stevens – just a little sideline – we’d run into some trouble with the courts on military commissions and so forth, and set up to deal with terrorists after 9/11. But if you go back and look, the military commissions questions came up after World War II – the court ruled at that time that they were okay, and relied on those precedents for what we did this time around. And then the court came back and shot us down. A vote against approving these back in the ‘40s was Justice Rutledge from, I think, Wisconsin, who voted in the negative, and in the minority, but his view or the view espoused by him was
the one that prevailed in the most recent set of decisions. The guy who was his law clerk, back in the ‘40s was John Paul Stevens. I’ve always been intrigued with that. He went from being a clerk in the ‘40s on the losing side, and then when he was writing the decisions on the majority…interesting tidbit.

Smith: The fall of Saigon. We talked a little bit about it, but in terms of what that must have been like for Ford. Mel Laird, again, it will come as no surprise, I suppose as the architect of Vietnamization is entitled to think whatever he thinks, and he loves Jerry Ford, but he resents his failure in the spring of 1975 to get Congress to approve whatever it was – 700 million dollars in military aid. And again, it just seems hard to believe in that climate – and the best evidence of that was the moment the city fell they tried to pull the plug on any resettlement funding. Plus there was a debate going on in the White House between Kissinger and some of those, including in the speech shop, who wanted to put this behind us, maybe prematurely. What was your recollection of that?

Cheney: I’ve talked with Henry about those days, too. It’s come up - I’ve talked with him four or five times a year for the last several years. Kissinger comes to see me and we talk about everything. Lots of times he harks back to those days, the Vietnamization, and so forth. Draws on lessons from that experience in terms of what we were doing. I don’t believe he ever felt Ford did anything other than go flat out to try to get the resources that were needed so that the South Vietnamese could stay in and fight.

I guess the thing I felt, what stands out in my mind is the speech at Tulane. This is right after we’ve finished the evacuation, whatever it is, of our people from the embassy and so forth. It’s really close after that. It was a speech the president gave that sort of said that it’s over, it’s behind us. It’s done now, we did that, we’re going to move on. I can remember being with him when he did that speech, and there was a great sense of relief because it was a conflict that had dragged on and on and had been extraordinarily expensive - fifty-eight thousand American lives. It was clear we weren’t prepared as a nation to do any more than we’d already done. There wasn’t the feeling, if there was a
feeling out there that, gee, if we’d just tried harder, we might have prevailed. It was, I think, a national sentiment that was reflected in Ford’s view, that I shared, which was, we gave it our best shot, now it’s time to move on. I take issue with my friend Mel Laird.

Now, in 1966, this is three years before he becomes secretary of defense, I’m working for the governor of Wisconsin, and late one night Mel is with us. We’d done a fundraiser clear up in northern Wisconsin for the party, and we’re flying from there down to O’Hare in a small plane, to get Mel and make it possible for Mel to make a connection back to Washington. There are just the three of us and the pilot. And he was warning Warren Knowles, who was then my boss, to be very, very careful about Vietnam. “Don’t get too far out,” he said, “They are screwing it up. The administration is messing it up.” He said this one is going to go south on them. He was pressing it in his forecast and then he found himself three years later secretary of defense.

I’ve heard him talk about it in meetings of former secretaries of defense. He refers to it as that damn war. I always felt Mel had a very unpleasant experience. I think he did as good a job as he could, I don’t mean to be critical of his performance, but it was a real bummer of a time to be secretary of defense – having to go through all through of that. He did the best he could, but he had a very bad hand to play. But I don’t think there was anything Jerry Ford could have done to alter that outcome. I think the die was cast.

Smith: But, by all accounts, Ford was angered by Congress’s attempt to shut the door in terms of resettling refugees. And he pretty much put together this kind of crazy quilt coalition, and it was George Meany and the American Jewish Congress and others who finally got some funds out of Congress. One of the really touching things at the time of his death was to read tributes from Vietnamese-Americans, some of whom literally had come in the first wave, who thought of him as their president because he’d rescued them and their families. And the fact that that staircase is in the museum, in spite of Henry Kissinger’s thinking…

Cheney: The one up to the helicopter.
Smith: Oh, yeah. But, again, you wouldn’t expect it from Ford. Ford said, “It’s part of our history, we can’t forget it.” But more than that, that staircase is every bit as much a symbol of the desire for freedom as the piece of the Berlin Wall that’s out on the front lawn.

Cheney: Yeah.

Smith: When you saw him in later years, he obviously was very proud of his alumni. Did you have any discussions about Iraq and Afghanistan?

Cheney: No. I don’t recall any conversations about Iraq or Afghanistan. We used to see him every year at the reunion dinner in Washington. Then we’d do the Beaver Creek thing. I think Lynn and I have only missed one of the Beaver Creek sessions in twenty-five years or whatever it’s been. And for several years they had us stay in the house with them there at Beaver Creek. We had our bedroom and they’d always put us there. The last few years, Alan and Andrea would come and they would stay in the house. And I actually swore in Greenspan for his last term as Fed chairman in the living room of the Ford house there in Beaver Creek. The audience was Andrea and Lynn and Jerry and Betty Ford.

Smith: By all accounts, they were beloved figures in Vail, the Fords.

Cheney: Absolutely. Yeah, he and I never talked about Iraq or Afghanistan. I don’t know what he thought about them. He was careful, he never got involved in sort of commenting upon what the incumbent was doing. We did some special things with him. We had, I think the first year I was vice president we put up a big tent on the lawn and had the big dinner at the vice president’s residence.

Smith: I remember. Happy Rockefeller came back.

Cheney: Happy Rockefeller was there. We gave her a tour. Then we did it in the Rotunda of the Capitol one year. Did it at the White House one year. I always was involved in arranging those, put them together.

Smith: He was thrilled, the ninetieth birthday down at the White House. And then, very poignantly, I think it was the last time in Statuary Hall, where I think you
and Secretary Rumsfeld were singled out. I’d written his remarks that night, and I guess afterwards he said, “That’s the last time I’m speaking in public.”

Cheney: It was hard for him.

Smith: He was angry at himself.

Cheney: It was hard for him. He’d started to show the years by then. But, no, he was great and I always felt that, I hoped, and think it was true, that he was proud of the service I rendered because he got me started. He signed me on that Sunday in the West Wing. I was all of thirty-three years old. A year later he made me chief of staff. We went through a lot of good times together and a lot of hairy times. When I ran for Congress, he came to Wyoming to help. I got him set up with a lecture at the local community college and then he stayed with us at our house in Caspar there. Actually used the bathroom upstairs and the tub overflowed and we got water in my office. We never told him that part of the story.

Smith: He was not a mechanically deft…

Cheney: The curtain wasn’t inside the tub or something. And then he went from there up to Jackson and was the keynote speaker at the Republican state convention. This is 1978. I’d worked it out with him that I didn’t want him to mention me in his convention speech. We wanted to have all of that be totally nonpartisan. We were refighting the Republican battles of ’76, because we had Reaganites and Fordites and so forth in delegation, and he handled it beautifully. It could not have been better. But I think he loved seeing me run for Congress, to say he’d had a lot to do with that.

Smith: Was Congress his first love?

Cheney: I think so. I think he would have loved to have won the presidency again. It just wasn’t to be. We gave it our best shot.

You mentioned a minute ago, of finding myself in the pew with Jimmy Carter. I suspect, I don’t have any reason to believe this, I know he was heavily involved in planning his funeral, and you may know more about it than I do. I had a phone call from Jack, I guess, asking me if I’d do certain
things, and deliver a eulogy in the Rotunda at the Capitol and that sort of thing. But when I think back on it, the day that he put, well, you spoke that morning, and Rumsfeld and Carter in the church in Grand Rapids. And then we went out at graveside and I’m standing there with Jimmy Carter, and I had the opportunity over the years on more than one occasion to let the president know that I didn’t think much of his friend Jimmy Carter. I thought he was a turkey. And I often wonder if he didn’t chuckle to himself when he made those arrangements and know exactly what he was doing – that I was going to have to be sharing the day with Jimmy Carter.

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

Cheney: I remember the last time I talked to him. That was a special moment because I called him and told him we’d been successful in naming the aircraft carrier after him. I got to deliver that message. He obviously was ecstatic with that. But this was towards the end. He was having good days and bad days. But he loved that fact. John Warner had called me. John had been working it on the Hill, and he called me and Jack Marsh had been involved and a bunch of them. They wanted to know if I wanted to call the president and tell him that there was going to be a USS Gerald R. Ford. That was the last time I talked with him.

Smith: Was it tough delivering that eulogy in the Rotunda? You did it very well.

Cheney: I loved that speech I made that day, and John McConnell was crucial and instrumental in it. No, I really felt good about being asked. I talked in there about, I remember opening by saying that we had the opportunity, because he was given the gift of a long life, to tell him many times in his presence how much he meant to us and what we thought of him. So I felt very good about doing it, about being asked to do it.

Smith: Plus, you know, poor Lyndon Johnson, who dies two days before a peace treaty is announced. Gerald Ford lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his way of thinking on the pardon – not that he lay awake at night worrying about it. But the amazing thing was the Kennedy Library.
After that he said, “For twenty years everywhere I go, people asked the same question. They don’t ask anymore.”

Cheney: He loved that fact that they gave him that award.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Cheney: Well, I’m a huge Jerry Ford fan. The opportunity to work with him when I did, under those circumstances, in the aftermath of Watergate, coming in as he did under the twenty-fifth amendment – it’s unique in our history. I think you’ve got to give him enormous credit to some extent for what didn’t happen. For all the train wrecks that were avoided by virtue of him being there and his presence and his willingness, for example, to step up and pardon Nixon, knowing full well the political burden that he’d bear as a result of that. So I give him very high marks.

Smith: Perfect. This is great. Thank you.
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Smith: It’s hard to know where to begin, so let me just toss a question out. In some ways I feel like I know more about your mom than I do about your dad, and yet I read somewhere the president said probably your dad was the person who had the greatest influence on him, of anyone in his life. Tell me about your dad, and what were the qualities that presumably not only got transmitted to Jerry, but to you and your brothers.

Ford: Hopefully.

Smith: Well, I think probably.

Ford: There is no question that, in my opinion, I think Dad was a predominant force in the development of any characteristics of Jerry’s that have gotten note – such as his integrity, obviously. Even the small point like being on time. We never had to worry about Jerry when I’d establish a golf game. He was there. There was a little problem with brother Tom, however. It’s just a comparison. Jerry, Jim and I were extremely punctual. Tom didn’t get the message.

Smith: Was that something your dad drove home?

Ford: Oh yeah, if you said were going to be home at such and such a time, even if you were a boy, you were there at such and such a time. No, it’s time wise, but if you were given a job to do, it was expected to be done, period.

Smith: To someone who didn’t know your dad, describe him – both physically and in other ways.

Ford: For those days, he was a relatively big man. He probably was six-one or two when he was in his youth and weighed over two hundred pounds. That was pretty big in those days. He was a very, very hard worker. Put in hours like people couldn’t believe. Then he got involved in community service and
politics. Put forth the same amount of effort there. Yet, obviously in his opinion, was some concern for his life and safety of the members of his family because they just, about two years ago, found a revolver that he buried up in the attic. It was his because it had the newspaper wrapped around it. This was in the attic of the house we lived in on Santa Cruz, and this was the time when they were “fighting” the McKay machine. There were things done that people question now, but there is no doubt in my mind that they did happen.

Smith: That is fascinating. Would it be fair to say that Jerry got his interest in politics from your dad?

Ford: I couldn’t be absolutely sure of that, but I would bet ten to one that he definitely did. He saw Dad’s involvement and Jerry was, like the three of us, encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities as well as being involved in everything that we could involve ourselves in. Growing up - Boy Scouts we were associated with in the high schools or the junior high schools. As each one of us came up, we became scouts and subsequently Eagle Scouts because Jerry had established a pattern, which I think was influenced very significantly by Dad.

Smith: Jumping ahead, but I have to ask you, how did your dad get involved politically? Then tell me about Frank McKay.

Ford: I can’t tell you much about Frank McKay, but I think my dad became involved politically when Bill Ver Meulen and a lady by the name of Koeze, and a couple of others – I can’t remember right now – were very involved in the effort to destroy the McKay machine. That was, to my knowledge, Dad’s first real involvement. I think he got involved partially through church and partially through business. The people who knew him asked him to get involved.

Smith: What was the McKay machine?

Ford: It was, strangely enough, a Republican machine. But there was some dubious projects. One of which was the first waterline to Lake Michigan. Tales are
told of truckloads of materials that were signed for that were never delivered. That was part of the presumed connivery of the McKay machine.

Smith: Did they have pretty much a hammer lock on…

Ford: They had a very definite hammerlock on the elections. Once the elections were completed, the individuals that were elected, cow-towed very definitely, to whatever Mr. McKay apparently determined what was right for whomever.

Smith: The story is told, didn’t Jerry get an appointment one day with McKay?

Ford: Well, I’m not real privy to that. I know that he got an appointment with McKay, to inform him that he was going to run against Bartel Jonkman. And Mr. McKay kept him waiting, I think two or three hours, and then when Jerry saw him, it was like a five minute discussion in which Jerry presumably said to Mr. McKay, “I’m going to run against Bartel Jonkman.” I understand his reply was “Well you’re wasting your time.” Or something to that effect.

Smith: Presumably Jonkman was part of the McKay organization – or at least was the incumbent.

Ford: At least was the incumbent with great support from Mr. McKay.

Smith: Tell me about your mother.

Ford: As I look back at it, I wonder how in the dickens she raised four boys. I mean we were pretty independent souls, and she put up with all the idiosyncrasies which we possessed.

Smith: Such as?

Ford: My own idiosyncrasies, I had two of them. One of them, I hated vegetables, and I oft times remember I was instructed not to leave the table until I finished my vegetables. Fortunately my good buddy, the dog, whose name was Buddy, got more vegetables than any dog in Grand Rapids, I think. I also had another peculiarity; I loved, for some reason, to apply adhesive tape, whether I needed or not, on various parts of my body. She overlooked all those little idiosyncrasies, which each one of us possessed, I’m sure.
Smith: Did Jerry have idiosyncrasies? He had a temper.

Ford: He had a temper before the war! But he changed after. I’ll give you two instance: when he’d come back to take a vacation after he graduated from college, it was out at Yale, I was eleven years younger, but I was available for tennis and then I caddied for him in the mornings for golf. Then he and a couple of others would play tennis, normally every afternoon that he was in town. His temper I can remember vividly (which he denied). When he was in a sand trap, there was a big tree limb that went across the top of the sand trap and he took two shots to get out of it. The third shot just barely got out. With this he went, psst, and wrapped the club around the tree and left it.

So, in my opinion, all of us had tempers, definitely. I had a short fuse. In fact, my short fuse was probably worse than Jerry’s. But just to make a point: one time my only claim to fame was as a reasonably good tennis player. Dad ascertained that if I could control my temper I’d be a much better tennis player. So he thought if Jerry could play a little tennis with me – that perhaps he could show me that losing one’s temper would be detrimental to my game. I was either thirteen or fourteen at that time, and he hadn’t played tennis in probably ten years. Unfortunately, it was the only sport at which I really excelled. After about fifteen minutes, I was not the one who was throwing the racquet – Jerry was. So that was an indication of his temper before the war.

Smith: So the story about your mother getting him to read the Rudyard Kipling poem If - as if that were kind of a cure-all – is that a little bit of an exaggeration?

Ford: I don’t think so – I think that’s true, because she was directing it at his temper. My younger brother, Jim, never had the temper, but Tom did, and I did, no question. But after the war, Jerry didn’t. I remember one of his campaigns back here in Grand Rapids. He had a political luncheon down at the Kiwanis’s Club, as I recall, in south Grand Rapids. A friend of mine invited me to be his guest and he gave his little speech and a minister who was in attendance in the back of the room, stood up and made some… I was thinking, you’re not going to last one minute. I was waiting for him (Jerry) to explode, come off the dais, and he just said, “Well, Reverend, obviously you
and I have some points of disagreement.” I thought, “Oh, wow.” That was a new insight into my brother.

Smith: He was a very disciplined person, wasn’t he?

Ford: Emphatically.

Smith: You saw that – he took care of himself all his life. He was a workaholic.

Ford: Absolutely. Which I think, getting back to your previous comment and question, I think that Dad was a workaholic and sometimes my wife accuses me of being a workaholic. I’m sure that applies to my brothers Tom and Jim as well, and it came from Dad.

Smith: And yet, there is the story when your mom passed away, in church, they went home and found her appointment books which were filled for the next month – is that true?

Ford: Oh – she was a goer! In fact, the best story I can tell you, after all four of us were married she took my sister-in-law, Janet, and my sister-in-law, Barb, Tom and Jim’s wives, and my wife to Chicago for a weekend of shopping on the train. They got there, roughly at twelve o’clock or so and had lunch. Mom, I know, wanted to take them to Marshall Fields, because she was from the Chicago area. All three of them declined – said we’re going to take a little nap. So the next day she tried to get them to go out early to go shopping with her. They did go with her in the morning, but in the afternoon when she went back again, they declined. So, for two half-days out of three, my wife and my sister-in-laws were resting while grandma was out shopping.

Smith: Was she that way, pretty much throughout her whole life?

Ford: Emphatically, yeah. She was very busy socially, and particularly in a garden club. She was big on gardens, very big on gardens. We had a garden in the back yard on Santa Cruz that was probably a yard wide and was on three sides of the back yard, with a gate coming in the backyard. That must have been close to ninety feet, at least – maybe a hundred feet and that deep. Mother and Dad would work there every Saturday and every Sunday afternoon. In my
case, I ascertained that was something I was never going to do. So my appreciation for flowers is not that great.

Smith: Were any of your other brothers pressed into service in the garden?

Ford: No. We were never asked.

Smith: Really?

Ford: They were quite content to do it all. I mowed the lawn, when it was my time, but…

Smith: What chores did you boys have?

Ford: Before the war, when we lived on Union Street, I remember I was only maybe six, seven years old at the time – eight or nine, I guess. I remember that Jerry’s responsibility was banking the coal-shoveled fire furnace. That was his job every night. I know that, and probably became my brother Tom’s job when Jerry was elsewhere employed.

Smith: Walk me through, because I know you lived in a number of houses. What is the first house you remember?

Ford: First house I was in was Union Street, and from Union Street we went to 2163 Lake Drive, and from there we went to 1011 Santa Cruz and from there to 959 San Lucia.

Smith: Let me back up. What are your memories of the Union Street house?

Ford: I remember Jerry and Tom had a route in which they sold magazines, and I can remember seeing the two of them go out with those newspaper sacks full of magazines. I guess they were delivering them, as far as I know. I remember that, and I can remember in my case getting knocked over by a Model-T, or something Ford. It ran right over me, but never hurt me – like that. That’s about the only two or three memories I have of Union Street.

Smith: You would have been how old at that point?

Ford: I was born there, obviously, and we moved out in, I think ’28 to Lake Drive.
Smith: Now that was sort of the upscale – kind of moving up in the world – pre-Depression house?

Ford: Yeah, that’s right.

Smith: And what do you remember about that place?

Ford: It was virtually a brand new house. I think it was only – we moved there in 1933, and I think the house was probably built right in the end of the good times, just before the Depression. So the house was very big, by our standards as compared to where we slept on Lake Drive – the four of us slept in one room. Now moving over there, we had two to a room, and eventually, one to a room – so it was quite a change.

Smith: I’m just trying to construct in my own mind, the story where, once really hard times hit, where – didn’t your dad lose the house?

Ford: I think he did, but that was before I was born. I don’t believe, in fact I’m certain of it, obviously, moving from Union to Lake Drive – those were my early years, and I’m not aware of anything before that. But I’ve heard tales of that.

Smith: Tell me about the paint factory. Because that opened right about the time that Wall Street collapsed.

Ford: It was six weeks before the collapse, and he borrowed money to buy it from a man by the name of Simmons – Simmons Wood Finishes. They had two separate manufacturing specialties, one of which was material for the furniture trade, such as fillers and stains and varnishes. They had a very small line of house paints, etc. for the painter. My father at that time was office manager of Simmons Wood Products, I guess it was called. Which became subsequently Grand Rapids Wood Finishing. But he went to that gentleman and, again, as I understand, said he’d like to buy out the painter side, and Mr. Simmons was apparently quite happy to unload it. So they did. And as I said, they were in business for six weeks before the crash came.

Smith: And then what happened?
Ford: All I can remember, truthfully, it seems odd that I can, I was, at point in time, six or seven years old, but I remember the meals became much plainer. I have a recollection of milk not being as available, but that’s the only two things I can recall.

Smith: Now in terms about the business, the story is your dad didn’t want to lay anyone off.

Ford: I understand that’s true, also. As far as I know about it, he did not. He promised them, I guess I’d call it bonuses, when the company got on its feet, and which I also understand, he then honored and paid them.

Smith: But, then, when the Depression really hit hard, did you move to a smaller house, or did you stay in the house you were in?

Ford: The house on Lake Drive, a big wooden edifice, but with the restriction that the four of us slept in one loft-like deal. So then when dad moved us in 1933, it was quite an upscale. Then they stayed there until maybe 1952, in the house on Santa Cruz and moved to San Lucia.

Smith: You, obviously, know the story better than anyone, of how your brother found out about his (birth) status. Did you know? He was what, sixteen or seventeen at the time?

Ford: Yeah, seventeen.

Smith: What did you know?

Ford: I knew nothing about that. In fact, people think it is rather strange, but I personally never knew that brother was my half brother until I was probably twenty-four, twenty five. My brothers Tom and Jim knew, and when I asked them they said, “Oh, yeah, we knew it.” But it wasn’t any big deal and was never discussed and I certainly didn’t feel any differently towards him than I did my other two brothers.

Smith: It’s interesting, because he always referred to your dad as his father, never his step-father.
Ford: Oh, yeah. Emphatically. He took the name Junior, as you are well aware, and Art Brown, the individual who, in my opinion, was the most important factor in the genesis of this museum, was probably one of his closest friends, I think.

Smith: Of course, he had some pretty unpleasant experiences involving his birth father, but you weren’t aware of those at the time?

Ford: Not aware at all. Never heard it until I read it in print.

Smith: Never talked about it?

Ford: Never talked about it. He may have talked to guys like Art Brown about it, but unfortunately Art has passed on. He would have been a fabulous source of anecdotes, I’m sure.

Smith: Was he a popular kid?

Ford: Oh, no question about that. I’ve only known, in my lifetime, four natural athletes, personally. He was one of them. He could do anything athletically. It was incredible. I can remember times we’d go on picnics or something – I can’t even remember where – but they’d ask him to throw horseshoes, and he’d win. And he hadn’t thrown horseshoes, I know, since the last time he’d did it the year before. He was an accomplished athlete, obviously, in football and basketball and track. But he was also a great swimmer. There was a Grand Rapids swim team that I saw a picture of. A guy name of Bubby Rose had it, and he was on the Grand Rapids swim team in 1928. I wasn’t aware of that, but I saw the picture.

Smith: It must have stuck in your craw, if not in his, that later on, in the presidency, to be depicted as this kind of bumbler.

Ford: Oh, nothing angered me more than LBJ’s famous comment about, been too long without a (football) helmet. Chewing gum, and too long without a helmet. That was indicative, in my opinion, of some of the uncharacteristic comments from the other side. They normally didn’t do that, because he was so well liked on both sides of the aisle. But occasionally some guy, particularly the midnight commentators, would make reference to falling
down the steps at Geneva, I think it was. Not mentioning that there was a rain
storm and also that his knees, at that point in time, were gone.

Smith: Did it bother him?

Ford: Not as much as it did me. No, he fluffed it off. Just said, “It’s politics,” or
something to that effect.

Smith: Did he have girlfriends?

Ford: Yes, he did. He had some girlfriends in high school that remember. I think her
name was Mary Ann Hondorp – I think was one of his girlfriends – at least
there is no other reason for me to remember the name. Then, of course,
everybody’s well aware, he dated a gal by the name of Phyllis Brown for
quite a while.

Smith: Who, I understand went on to have multiple marriages, and I guess toward the
end – when she volunteered to drop by the office and was not encouraged to
do so.

Ford: I think that’s true.

Smith: Do you think Mrs. Ford – she had no reason to be jealous, obviously – but do
you think she was sensitive about Phyllis?

Ford: I think because people kept asking about it. I don’t see her jealous, I just don’t
think she thought it was an appropriate subject.

Smith: When he wanted to go to the University of Michigan, I take it there was really
no money in the family to support that.

Ford: There surely wasn’t. But, as you know, he got a job at the hospital, I think it
was, and then he got $100 from Harold Steele, who was a friend of my
father’s as well as being coach at South High School. Then my aunt and uncle
sent him two dollars each week, which helped a lot in those days. As I said,
his job helped him also. Then he came back in the summers.

Smith: I think he said from time to time he sold his blood.

Ford: Yes, he did. Yeah.
Smith: Did you know Arthur Vandenberg? How visible was Vandenberg in the community?

Ford: Well, he didn’t have to come back to Grand Rapids very often. He was so solidly entrenched here that he spent more of his time campaigning on the east side of the state. But as I think has been indicated previously, everybody believes, as do I, that after my father, Arthur Vandenberg was probably the next most influential male person in his character development.

Smith: What was it about Vandenberg that you think influenced your brother?

Ford: I saw just a little bit of it after the war. I can’t remember a specific conversation, but I think Jerry admired the way he could accomplish things with members of the opposition and not have it be a knockdown-drag out discussion, or with repercussions later. I think Jerry admired that style, and I believe it’s exemplified by the very close relationship that he and Tip O’Neill had. They could fight like dogs on the floor of the House, but they were great buddies afterwards, I know they were. I saw on many occasions, the camaraderie between Tip O’Neill and Jerry.

Smith: He clearly had developed an interest in politics by 1940. He is in Philadelphia shouting, “We want Willkie!” in the convention - the first convention he would attend. Which is a little ironic given the fact that he is sort of an isolationist, and Willkie’s politics were not that. But he was obviously swept up in the whole Willkie movement.

Ford: I do not know this, but I suspect that because Dad was starting to get involved in politics at a very minimal level, that he was aware of it. Dad was supporting Willkie, and, to a degree, I’m sure that influenced him and he became somewhat more determined to pursue a political field.

Smith: After the war he came back here and set up the law practice with Phil Buchen. The way this story is told, that’s all kind of a precursor, almost an automatic first step toward a political career. By that point was it pretty clear that he wanted to go into politics?
Ford: We lived together – we shared a room, after the war at Mom and Dad’s house on San Lucia. I was aware of the fact that he was out, and this would have been in ’46-47, so for a year and a half, maybe, we shared that room and I can’t say that I was aware of the fact that he was anything more than peripherally involved – I knew he was involved in something political – but I didn’t know what it was.

Smith: This raises a question, did he play his cards close to the vest? Was it something that he…

Ford: No, it’s like the fact that I didn’t know he was my half-brother. If you didn’t have anything to say that was important, you just didn’t say it.

Smith: Now that’s about the time that he met Betty.

Ford: That is correct.

Smith: Do you remember that?

Ford: I remember he was dating her.

Smith: It seemed to develop pretty fast.

Ford: Apparently, yeah. He got back in ’45, they were married in ’48. I was married the year before. He was my best man and my other two brothers were involved as part of my wedding. I knew that after the church he was going to pick her up to go to the wedding. That was expected.

Smith: Let me ask you, maybe you can clarify something, I know that he had asked her fairly early in ’48, he indicated he wanted to get married. But he couldn’t tell her when, and he couldn’t really tell her why he couldn’t tell her when. And, of course, he was going to run for Congress. Now there are two versions of the story, and they are not mutually exclusive. One is, he really wanted to take Jonkman by surprise, which he pretty much did. And the other is, he really didn’t know, at that point, how conservative Dutch-Calvinists would react to his marrying a divorcee.

Ford: I think that’s true.
Smith: In those days that would have been, or could have been an issue?

Ford: Oh, I know it was an issue in those days. And would have been, I suspect, a very significant impact on his electability. There isn’t any question about that. That just wasn’t done, and particularly in the circles of the Christian Reformed, the Dutch Reformed churches, and for that matter, the Catholic churches. With those three churches, the Catholic Church being predominant on the west side of the river and the Dutch and Christian Reformed on the east side of the river, he’d have had a very difficult time, I think.

Smith: That’s fascinating. Now, I realize you can’t answer this, but at some point he must have come clean with her, or she figured it out or something. Do you think they ever had that discussion about why you didn’t ask me?

Ford: I think she probably figured it out.

Smith: Obviously, it didn’t stand in the way of their getting married or being very happily married.

Ford: No, not a bit. After it was a fait accompli, I think then, that he’d been in there for two years and – big deal.

Smith: What do you remember about their wedding? For years there has been this story that he showed up with one brown shoe and one black shoe. The variation is he showed up a black suit, but with brown shoes, dusty shoes from campaigning.

Ford: I think that’s true, but I’m not sure.

Smith: Do you think she knew what she was getting into, in terms of marrying someone for whom politics would always be at the center of his life.

Ford: Well, I think that she envisioned the life of a normal Congressman as it was portrayed in newspapers and magazines in those days - but not to the extent of the fact that he would be gone for so many, many days each year. I don’t believe Betty anticipated that, and that was a difficult position to put her in.
Smith: I sensed, in later years, he had a greater awareness of the burdens that were placed on her in terms of raising the kids. Basically she was left, in many ways, to raise the kids while he was out on the road.

Ford: Yeah.

Smith: Did you sense unhappiness?

Ford: No, not a bit. They’d come back for summer – we had a cottage down at Lake Michigan – and the deal was, the first nine weeks of summer from the first of June on, my other two brothers and I would rotate: first third, second third, third third, and Jerry always got it from the second week in August through Labor Day. So we would see him every year for as long we kept the cottage, and whenever he came back to Grand Rapids, if he wasn’t speaking at some dinner or something like that, which quite frequently he was. But when Mother was alive, he pretty much squired her on engagements when he came home.

Smith: Was he good with the kids?

Ford: Oh, yeah. They all adored him. He did everything right and didn’t make any mistakes, in my opinion. So I guess they got used to being raised to some extent by their mother as opposed to, well, there’s Dad.

Smith: Of course, it reversed the roles. It sort made her into the disciplinarian.

Ford: Yes, it did.

Smith: Which carries its own burdens.

Ford: Even the little bit of time that my family went down to spend just maybe a day with them, it was Betty that was directing the kids hither, thither and yawn. We went down there a couple of times, maybe three or four times, I guess, and each time, when Jerry was there, Betty was the disciplinarian.

Smith: Were you surprised at the degree of success that he had in the House? It seems that almost from the beginning, the old Bulls sized him up as a workaholic, a work horse, not a show horse. This is a guy who asks more questions and does his homework and we can trust him. And they invited him
in, whether it was CIA oversight, or whatever. They gave him a lot of responsibility, even if he wasn’t a household name. A Kennedy or a Nixon – they weren’t interested in Congress – they had their own objectives. But it seems like almost from the beginning he was singled out for a lot of responsibilities that a young Congressman might not necessarily have.

Ford: I think that one of the things you notice, is, just as you said, he was a workaholic. I can’t remember which general said it after he retired, but it was before Jerry was anywhere in the hierarchy of the House. There was a general quoted in the newspaper that I read that said, “Congressman Ford is more knowledgeable on the Defense budget than anybody in Congress.” Well, that certainly would have been obviously recognized by the powers that be in the House, and they rewarded him accordingly, in my opinion.

Smith: Did you always know – was his ambition always to be Speaker?

Ford: I would say, yes, I knew that. There was never was any discussion about his running for president. Never. I never heard a word about that. I think, as he has reported, the only thing he was interested in was basically becoming Majority Leader of the House or House Speaker.

Smith: Did he talk to you at all about his work on Warren Commission?

Ford: A little bit. I personally had some questions about the final conclusion, but if I recall, the conclusion says, in essence, based on the evidence available, it is our opinion that Lee Harvey Oswald committed the crime. I think that’s a very, very accurate depiction of the efforts of the Warren committee. I asked him a couple of times, it just didn’t seem like that guy could get off two shots, or something like that. He said, “All I can tell you, Dick, is we believe he did.” That was the end of the discussion. But it was a minor discussion topic – not very big.

Smith: His relationship with Nixon, obviously it evolved. Did he talk about it, in later years? One sensed that, there is this Boy Scout quality in your brother - an inclination to believe that other people are as honest and decent and trustworthy as you try to be. It may not be the best trait for a politician trying
to get things done in Washington. When the Nixon tapes were released, the thing that you sense bothered him the most was the language on those tapes.

Ford: The language bothered him and the duplicity that was obviously part and parcel of the tapes. I think the fact, not only the swearing, but the fact that he’d been lied to - I think that those two factors were absolutely devastating to Jerry.

Smith: Is that naïve?

Ford: No. This is our upbringing, I think. I think that we were taught to believe that everybody is right and good, and until they prove differently, you must accept them on that basis. But by the same token, once they’ve destroyed that illusion by factual efforts, then, obviously in his case, Nixon, per se, was done. And I know in my own personal cases, individuals that I think of over the years, I reacted absolutely the same way. Guys that were close to me on one occasion, then lied, ceased to be friends of mine – period. I’m sure that’s the same thing Jerry had.

Smith: And your sense was that it really did destroy the trust that had existed?

Ford: Oh, there is no question in my mind. Maybe it didn’t, but not in my mind.

Smith: It is interesting, because I know Mrs. Ford was quoted as saying the day that the Nixons left, and they moved in, in effect, was the saddest of her life. I assume that is a reflection on the personal level – these friends who were being publicly…


Smith: Let me back up. Before he became vice president, obviously Watergate happens. Did you talk about that with him?

Ford: My own personal relationship with Jerry, from basically the youngest age, was – we didn’t talk about things – and I didn’t ask him about things. So as a consequence, of perhaps all the people that he knew, I think I was one of, maybe the only, individual that never discussed politics with him - except with one exception, never. Because I saw him down at Lake Michigan wander
into the water, and standing there trying to enjoy himself in maybe two or three feet of water, and people coming up and talking to him. I saw it on the golf course, I saw it on the tennis courts, and so I, personally, never, ever, discussed politics with him.

Smith: As part of that, he wouldn’t necessarily volunteer opinions – at some point he must have – as this thing began to close in on him…

Ford: I said that I didn’t, but Jerry, during all the time of the Watergate problems, when he was vice president, he’d come into Grand Rapids, we lived on almost a direct route from downtown out to the airport. Every Sunday night, or most every Sunday night that he was in town, he’d stop and sit down and say hello. My wife would, as soon as he was seated, start in and just bewail the faults of Mr. Nixon. “Jerry, you can’t believe that, can’t believe that.” I remember he said, “Well, Ellen, you know, he was raised by the same standards that we were raised, and unless I find out differently, I have to believe him.” It didn’t make any difference – the next time he came into town, my wife would start in on him again.

Smith: Did she ever say, “I told you so.”

Ford: I don’t think she ever did.

Smith: Do you think he was surprised? When the tapes were released, that had to have come as a shock. That is not the way you were raised, the language - as you said earlier. Was there a point beyond which his faith was shattered?

Ford: This is my guess: I think about two to three months before the tapes were exposed he had reached the conclusion that Mr. Nixon was not being honest with him. I think he then, as a good party man, was put in an extremely difficult position of trying to deny that while had occurred, he had to support Mr. Nixon, but not appear to be grabbing for the presidency.

Smith: You are right. It is an impossible position because, at the back of his head, much as he didn’t want to acknowledge it, there had to be the knowledge that this could play out in such a way that I find myself in this office and what’s
the good of destroying my credibility in a lost cause - a cause that I no longer believe in. It was an impossible position that he was in.

Ford: You phrase it succinctly.

Smith: How did you find out he was going to be vice president?

Ford: Somebody called us about five or ten minutes before and said you’d better turn on the TV. I have no recollection as to who that was.

Smith: You go back and you look at that and it’s unbelievable. I think of Mrs. Ford, what she must have gone through, and the kids, too. Because literally, they were told to be in the East Room in two hours, and be introduced to a national television audience. It just turned their lives inside out, I assume.

Ford: Oh, I’m sure. They must have been in a fog. What do you mean we’re going there?

Smith: Any yet, the next day, he came back for the Cedar Springs Flannel Day Parade.

Ford: Yeah, he did. That’s true, because he’d made a commitment to do it. He came and I think that is typical of “I said I’d be there, so I’m going to be there.”

Smith: You obviously were following this very closely, can you remember what you thought? This is going to end up with Nixon leaving.

Ford: But I thought, it would be postponed past the – as I remember, he pardoned him on December 9th?

Smith: He becomes president on August 9th. Nixon announces he is leaving on the 8th, the swearing in is on the 9th and it was a month later that the pardon took place.

Ford: In September, obviously. Your question was whether I had suspected, and when I suspect it – I had no inkling that he was going to pardon him – none.

Smith: Go back a month earlier – when Nixon resigns. How did you find out that your brother was going to be president?
Ford: As I said, about ten minutes before, somebody called us and I can’t imagine who – somebody called us and said you’d better turn on your TV – so I guess that’s how we knew.

Smith: Okay – so that’s not the vice presidency, but the presidency.

Ford: Yes.

Smith: He didn’t tip you off that this is about to happen?

Ford: No – no way.

Smith: When was the first time you talked with him after all of that?

Ford: Probably three weeks would be my guess.

Smith: Really?

Ford: Yes. I figured that everybody in Kingdom Come was calling him, and he didn’t need one more call from a brother. I don’t know, very frankly, if Tom or Jim called. Tom might have, Tom was a little more politically involved than Jim and I were.

Smith: How would your parents have felt?

Ford: Oh, they would have been extremely proud, no question. In fact, I think Jerry said the biggest regret he had was that Mom and Dad didn’t live to see it. There is no question that that is probably true.

Smith: So he certainly never asked your advice about the Nixon pardon?

Ford: No way. He did not.

Smith: Were you surprised when it happened?

Ford: Oh, yes. No doubt about it. Absolutely. It shocked me. My first reaction was the same as everybody else’s – how could he pardon that crook? That was the expression used in the newspaper and elsewhere, and it was probably indicative of my feeling as well.

Smith: Were there other people in Grand Rapids who felt the same way?
Ford: Oh, amen. I would bet that 50% of the people that voted for him over the years were as flabbergasted as I was. We didn’t necessarily think that he’d done the wrong thing. It was just that, well, maybe he should have waited a little bit longer and made sure that there weren’t some other things going to come forth. So the precipitousness of the action was, I think, just overwhelming.

Smith: Did you discuss that then or later?

Ford: Nope, I never did. Again, my philosophy, I guess was rather strange for a brother, but I felt very strongly that everybody and his brother, every time they saw him was, “why are you doing this…” I just felt that everything he did, as far as I was concerned, was basically the same as I believed and would do. So there was no use my having any comment.

Smith: Did you find yourself defending him at that point against…?

Ford: Oh, yeah. I was a little vociferous in my comments to individuals who described his motives as anything other than pure and clean. I had some contentious discussions with quite a few people.

Smith: Who thought there had been a deal…

Ford: Thought there’d been a deal, or something, there’s more coming, or he should have waited another month to make sure, etc.

Smith: Then, of course, two weeks after the pardon, comes the news of Mrs. Ford’s cancer surgery.

Ford: Yeah.

Smith: What a month.

Ford: I can’t imagine how they ever got through it.

Smith: How did you find out about that? Was that also through the media?

Ford: No, I think, as a matter of fact, Jerry called us on that. Didn’t talk to me – I was on the road, I think. But he talked to Ellen and told Ellen.
Smith: He must have been pretty profoundly affected.

Ford: Ellen indicated that, yes.

Smith: When did you visit him in the White House?

Ford: Oh, boy. The family visited him twice in the White House, if I remember correctly. The first time was maybe six months afterwards when I took all our family up there for a weekend. They had to go out to dinners, but we were there with them for one dinner out of the three nights we were there, and had a great time in the White House. Then I went there on one occasion by myself when I was in the area. Then the last time we went, it was not to the White House. We all went to Camp David and Tom and Janet, and Barb and Jim, myself and Ellen, went up to Camp David along with Gail’s mother and father. We had a great weekend up there at Camp David. That was special.

Smith: They really liked it up there, didn’t they?

Ford: They did because people couldn’t ask him, “What’s your opinion on this…what’s your opinion on that.” He got up there and I think they looked at it as a true retreat.

Smith: Were you aware at all of any of Mrs. Ford’s problems during that period.

Ford: Yeah, on occasion, when I’d see them, she appeared a little bit non-attentive. But, that was always after dinner, or maybe before dinner. I attributed it to being nothing but, “she’s had a drink, maybe,” or “she can’t handle it as well as the next person.”

Smith: I guess when she quit, he quit, too, didn’t he?

Ford: I believe that’s true. I don’t know that, but I believe that’s true.

Smith: Tell me about the ’76 campaign. Remember, at the very end when they came back here out of the airport and he kind of broke down. It’s funny because Marty this morning said, “I wish he’d done that earlier in the campaign, I wish he’d shown those emotions.” It might have been very politically advantageous. What are your memories of that event?
Ford: When he arrived?

Smith: Yeah, and at that point did you think he just might pull this thing out?

Ford: Yeah, on election night. He was downtown and I think Betty was with him, and they were at an election eve party that we were at. We didn’t expect him to come back to Grand Rapids, but he did. I thought, up until the very end, that he might pull it out. I tell you, really, truly, my feelings were - it was a big disappointment, and I understand it - but for his health it probably saved his life. I can tell you in 1976, when we went down there to Camp David, he was in the poorest health I ever saw him in, up until a couple weeks, obviously, before he died.

Smith: Really?

Ford: Oh! He was gaunt, he was tired, he was beat. He’d been working trying to get re-elected twenty hours a day, sometimes. So, he physically was just beat to a rap – terrible. So I was happy, from that standpoint.

Smith: How long do you think it took him to get over that? It took him a while.

Ford: Yeah, probably two weeks, would be my guess, he’d 95% forgotten about it. I can attribute that to athletics. I really, truly can. You give it your best effort, and if it isn’t successful, there is nothing more you can do about it. You tried, and you tried as hard you can – as long as you believe you did – then c'est la vie. So I think that that was ingrained in him for his competitiveness as an athlete.

Smith: Were you surprised when later on he and Jimmy Carter became friends.

Ford: Not particularly. I wasn’t too surprised. They certainly weren’t for the first four years, because Jerry campaigned, as you know, for Reagan, almost as hard as his campaigned for himself. It was incredible.

Smith: Which is pretty generous considering what…

Ford: Oh, you bet your boots. I thought it was more than generous. But I think that Jerry recognized that President Carter’s hometown values were pretty much the same as ours.
Smith: I was talking to Marty, too, about whether there was criticism locally when they decided to go live in Rancho Mirage, instead of coming back here. I’m sure you ran into some of that.

Ford: I ran into a lot of it.

Smith: What was it like?

Ford: I attempted to explain it to a lot of people, but basically, like myself, if I can get away from here for six months a year, I'm going to do it. The difference was that they didn’t want to keep going back and forth somewhere because, as I explained to people, of the neck problem that Betty has. You’ve seen it when she talks, she has to move her whole body. I remember, very specifically Jerry telling me that they had gone to the Eisenhower Medical Center - I don’t know exactly what the problem is in the cervical area - but Jerry told me that the doctors there told them they could attempt the operation, but the success was no better than 50-50 and it might be considerably worse. So they felt that, you can live with it. But it was aggravated very significantly by cold weather. So that’s what I told people. In my opinion, that’s why they chose California.

Smith: Yeah. When they had the intervention and everything that followed, did that all come as news to you?

Ford: Yeah. Except, when they went to Moscow and Betty got the tour of the palace, she was obviously in distress, not herself. So when Ellen and I saw that, I think frankly, we were immediately hopeful that they would have an intervention shortly, or soon.

Smith: Isn’t it extraordinary what she’s done since?

Ford: Oh, incredible!

Smith: And wasn’t he proud?

Ford: Yes, he was, and rightfully so. She’s done a heck of a job. A fantastic job.

Smith: The wonderful thing is, he’d joke about it, but she got the Medal of Freedom long before he got the Medal of Freedom. There was never any rivalry. You
sensed that he was just – recognition and medals and all at that point didn’t mean that much to him anyway – but to see her recognized meant a lot.

Ford: Yup, I agree.

Smith: I got hoodwinked into the effort when the Kennedy Library was going to give him the Profiles in Courage award. He wasn’t going to go. He wasn’t going to go to Boston, and it took several people, including, I think, Mrs. Ford, to make him appreciate just what a historic – and it’s almost like – well, he said afterwards, people don’t ask me about the pardon anymore. It’s like that was…

Ford: …it’s over.

Smith: It’s over, yeah. When the Kennedy Library recognizes you…

Ford: He probably figures it might set up again – he probably weighed that chance against the award.

Smith: But he was very modest, wasn’t he?

Ford: Emphatically. Again, I go back to athletics. He never made any big deal about his accomplishments, even his football accomplishments, which were pretty noteworthy. But the other athletic accomplishments that he had, he never made a big deal about it. He was just, as you said, he was modest.

Smith: Tell me about how this place [Ford Library and Museum] came to be here., I guess he’d been sending papers over to Ann Arbor. Was there, in fact, an assumption that the whole complex was going to be in Ann Arbor?

Ford: A gentleman by the name of Art Brown was the genesis of this museum, and he was a teammate of Jerry’s at South High School. He approached Rev. Lyman Parks, who was the mayor at that point in time, and said that perhaps the mayor would be interested in appointing a committee to consider the possibility of some sort of recognition of the president, like maybe naming a park after him, or putting a bronze statue up or something like that.

So, Rev. Parks contacted Jerry’s office. Jerry’s office called me and Jerry said, would you come up with a list of names for people that could be put on
the Ford Commemorative Committee – it wasn’t called that at that time – it was subsequently called the Ford Commemorative Committee, and get back to me. So I contacted good friends of mine, Mary Ann Keeler, Kay McInerney, Don Matheson, and called Jerry back and gave him the list. He then added Bob Griffin, I remember very specifically. Jordan Shepherd was another I recommended. But then Jerry put Carl Morgenstern on the committee and I think we had about twelve at that time. Joe Sweeney might have been on at that point in time, but I think he was on a little bit later. Then Jerry called and added to the list Rev. Parks, and then the committee was officially formed and Carl Morgenstern was elected as chairman. He got Fred Meijer to be on the committee, which was the wisest thing they ever did to help get the thing going. Fred was a tireless worker for this museum, just incredible.

At that point in time, after the committee had been formed, Phil Buchen was the contact and we wanted to get some of the materials down here to display to build up some enthusiasm for the naming of a park or something like that. Phil directed me to contact the archivist, who was the director of the museum at that time, or the library, I can’t remember his name. He was not particularly cooperative, and in effect, said that, “Well, Mr. Buchen says,” or something like that, so we wrote a letter to Phil and we thought the matter had been taken care of. Then as we got going, the committee, they said, Fred Meijer particularly and Mr. Morgenstern, “Well, maybe we ought to build a museum,” and I contacted Jerry and he said, “Well, that’s never been done before, and I don’t know if the archivist will approve.”

Smith: In fact, splitting the facility.

Ford: Yeah, splitting them. It’s going to make the raising of funds that much more difficult. Well, see, which was fine. Subsequently he called me and said, in effect, “I think you should go ahead – it has potential. If you can see some means of generating the necessary funds for a separate museum edifice, go ahead.” So Fred Meijer got going and contacted a number of people and we thought we had the thing locked in because we had formed the committee by that time. I was down there at Thanksgiving in ’76, and Jerry reaffirmed, very
significantly, that there was no question that he wanted the museum here in Grand Rapids, if it could be accomplished. There were several other comments back and forth, and the legality of it and how the funds would be split, and if someone contributed a million dollars, then sixty percent going to Ann Arbor and forty here – there were some things to be worked out. But eventually the committee did get going and we obviously were successful, but there were a lot of times when it was touch and go.

Smith: One of the things that brought him and Jimmy Carter together - people talk about the imperial ex-presidency – the fact is, you are out of office, and all of a sudden, you’ve got to raise millions and millions of dollars, and I think President Ford said it was the hardest thing he ever did.

Ford: Oh it was, no question about it. He no longer had any clout, so to speak. We approached the city and the city said it was against the law for them to give any money, but what they would do, is, if we would pick the site, they would run through imminent domain, and acquire the land for the site. The county said they couldn’t give us any money because it was against the law, but they would build the pool. So they built the pool, the city condemned and then purchased by imminent domain, all the buildings along here, and then we went to the state. Fred Meijer, Mr. Morgenstern and myself, and I can’t remember the other – it might have been Jordan Shepherd – my brother Tom had gotten out of politics by then, he had been defeated when they gerrymandered this downtown district. He’d found a job after eight years in the legislature with the Senate Finance Committee. The chairman of that was Senator Hart – not the Phil Hart over at Detroit – but Senator Hart, and I don’t believe there was any relationship.

So, we went down there and made a pitch to him, which happily brother Tom, I’m 99% certain, had pitched him before we got there, so the job was a little easier with Tom being down there. Senator Hart said, “Well, we can contribute a million dollars, but that’s all.” Well, that was a big, big million dollars. It was just about the last amount of money we got, as I remember. It was the last significant amount of money we ever got, obviously. The committee at that point in time, had been enlarged to what it is down there,
but a lot of effort by a lot of people. And, a lot of testy meetings went on, I’ll
tell you that. But when it was finally dedicated in ’81 it was well worth the
effort, obviously.

Smith: He was very proud of the place, wasn’t he?

Ford: I’m sure he was, I know that he, in the end, was happy that the museum was
built here.

Smith: Was there ever any doubt about the gravesite? That it was going to be part of
the complex?

Ford: No. That was in it from the beginning, as far as I’m concerned. He’d indicated
that he wanted it and it was maybe a subject of discussion with him and Betty
for maybe a day or two, but he called back extremely promptly and said,
“Yeah, set aside the site.”

Smith: In his later years, he came back to town frequently, so I assume you saw him
pretty often. Would he still try to drop by and get together when he was in
town?

Ford: When he came back in town, most times Ellen and I’d have dinner with him
and when my brother, Jim was still alive, he would join us. Tom, by that time,
was living in Lansing and his wife was down in Carolina, so he was never in
town. But I’d say, yeah, out of every six times he came into Grand Rapids
we’d have dinner with him at least three or four of those times.

Smith: And he did come frequently? When I was around, I thought he was coming
back pretty frequently.

Ford: I’m just guessing. When you say frequently, I’d say four or five times a year.

Smith: Which to me, I think that’s pretty frequent. I couldn’t get over it, for the 25th
anniversary when we did that series of lectures and he came back from
California to introduce Justice Stevens and Alan Greenspan. Then of course,
the Billy Graham event.

Ford: You wouldn’t have known, I don’t believe, that that day, Justice Stevens and
Jerry and I and Marty played golf.
Smith: What was that like?

Ford: Justice Stevens was my partner, and I was very grateful. He had a much higher handicap than I happened to have. I was supposed to be the one winning the holes, but he did and not me.

Smith: What was the interaction between the two of them.

Ford: Oh, it was good natured kidding. More so than I was used to on a golf course. But Jerry admired Justice Stevens, no question about it.

Smith: By that time had he gotten over his temper on the golf course?

Ford: Oh yeah. As I said earlier, the temper he had before the war was never in evidence again. Never.

Smith: When he came back for his ninetieth birthday, did you sense his health was beginning to fail.

Ford: No, I didn’t. Other people said something, but I didn’t think he was. In fact, I was obviously in denial because the only thing I saw was, I went out to California when maybe he was eighty-nine years old. He knew that myself and Dr. Bob Brown, who was on the committee, were coming out. Bo Schembeckler was with us and another friend of ours from Grand Rapids, and we wanted to have lunch with him. So Mike Ford brought Jerry and we had lunch with him. He and Shenbeckler were at the other end of the table and they talked animatedly for almost two hours – with a little bit of lunch in between. Mike kept saying, well, we’d better get going Dad. I thought well, gee, he seems to be doing pretty well. But other people said he didn’t move as well. I said, “Well, he’s eighty-nine years old.” But I didn’t see it, as other people did.

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him or talked to him?

Ford: Oh, talked to him – yeah, I talked to him probably a month before he died, would be my guess. It was not more than a minute or two because I could detect very easily he was extremely tired. I just said, “How you doing – and are you sneaking out for any golf?” “Naw, but I’m going to try.” “That’s
great.” In hindsight I should have known it, because I remembered distinctly he went from eighteen holes to nine holes to six holes, I guess down to three holes, and that should have been the tipoff to me. In hindsight I see it, but I didn’t then.

Smith: At the end, during his final illness, were you tipped off before he passed away, or did you get a call then?

Ford: No, I think we got a call. I’m not real clear on it. I think we got a call – it was morning time here, if I remember correctly, from Susan, I think. She called. But not before he died. I knew he was in poor health and I knew that he was sleeping a lot, but didn’t know that that was anything other than temporary.

Smith: You must have been overwhelmed by the reaction, particularly here, but elsewhere as well.

Ford: Oh, yeah. In regards to here, the whole family was aware of it, obviously, and my family was as impressed as I was. The number of people who were standing in rows going down Lake Drive, and when they made a final swing through East Grand Rapids, which is where he lived, they were ten and twelve deep. I expected we’d see maybe one-deep lines all the way, and it was fantastic. I’ve commented on that oft times to people and they’ve said, “Well, yeah – I believe it.” It wasn’t a good weather day either and the time, till two or three o’clock in the morning, people were still streaming in there. Fabulous.

Smith: And in Washington – what do you remember about…

Ford: Same thing – you expect a number of people at the church, but the number of people that were standing alongside the street, driving out to the airport, I never would have suspected that.

Smith: Didn’t the procession stop outside the White House – the morning of the service at the cathedral, where the staff were standing outside?

Ford: Yes. That was very impressive also – fantastic.
Smith: I’ll never forget, when were planning, the one thing he was adamant about, there was to be no cortège through the streets of Washington.

Ford: I would have known that – you could have asked me.

Smith: Why do you think?

Ford: Again, it was the modest temperament – his character. He, I believe, felt that was just too pretentious, not his style.

Smith: The service at the cathedral was very imposing. Maybe I’m biased, but it seemed like the service here was more personal.

Ford: Oh, I think that’s true. Oh definitely. A number of my friends had called and wanted somehow to get seating arrangements, and I said, I don’t have anything to do with it. “Well, I’ve been a member of that church for so many years,” and I said, “So have I.” But I said, “I have nothing to do with it.” I might even have said, “Call Marty Allen,” or something.

Smith: Mrs. Ford – it was pretty amazing how she held up that week.

Ford: Yes. You could see that she was extremely tired when we went over to the Amway Hotel. You could see that she was extremely tired - and understandably so. Those four or five days of very stressful, difficult times, and she kept going through it. It was the poorest health I’ve ever seen her in.

Smith: Do you keep in touch with her?

Ford: Yeah, I call her about once every month and a half or so just to say hi, and how you doing?

Smith: My sense is that she is still grieving.

Ford: I don’t know if she is grieving, I know she is still missing him, very definitely, and I guess that’s the normal reaction. Extreme grief and just missing him.

Smith: One final thing – maybe an off the wall question – but, if you were going to tell people something about your brother that might surprise them. Something
that the public image doesn’t necessarily communicate – something about him that’s really essential that they ought to know – what would that be?

Ford: Something that he probably didn’t even know. I think he was almost idolized by his younger brothers – he just set the standards so high, which in retrospect, I’m very grateful for. Mother and Dad did not really involve themselves in how well we were doing at school, or how involved I was in athletics, or in extracurricular activities, but his image and things that he’d done, we tried to emulate. Whenever I would see him, when I was still in school, he would always ask, “How you doing?” or something to that effect, and then transfer it over to athletics, “How you doing in basketball?” - whatever.

Smith: Was he the kind of big brother you could go to for advice?

Ford: I never had occasion to do so. I think that if I had, he would be very willing to have given it, but I just never did. Oh, there was one isolated time that doesn’t apply.

Smith: Do you miss him?

Ford: Oh, yeah – you bet. He was always fun to be around. His comments, in my opinion, were always concise, and some degree of gravity to them, which I think was typical of him. Say what you’ve got to say and that’s it. So, when we’d be sitting around the table with the family, he was in the discussions no more and no less than anybody else.

Smith: I’ve been told you’re more politically conservative than he.

Ford: Oh, yes. I think brother Tom was more conservative than Jerry, but I would like to correct that a little bit. Jerry always called himself, I think, a social liberal, and a conservative financial individual, and I think that pretty much covers the whole Ford family. There are limits to where I personally would disagree with him, without anything specific, but spending money on some other country when some of our own people have problems as great. There is a certain financial limit that you just have to draw as being the limit.
Smith: For example, when Mrs. Ford, in the White House, the famous *Sixty Minutes* interview, where she said some things that were pretty controversial at the time what did you hear from - this was a pretty rock-ribbed conservative area, itself – what was the reaction locally?

Ford: It was pretty favorable actually. Even some of my very, very devout Catholic friends and some conservative Dutch friends, said, well, she said it. I think my reply was, “Yes, she did.” I would then maybe soften it a little bit, “Well, it’s time it was brought up and maybe some of these discussions ought to made.”

Smith: It is amazing how she almost overnight, without intending to, really changed the role of First Lady. Simply by being herself, I think she made it easier for other people to be themselves.

Ford: Again, this is my opinion, I can’t substantiate it, but I think that is characteristic of this area of West Michigan. I feel that modus operandi now permeates the people in this area. They’ve had such good examples of unselfish people doing so much for this city that they are willing to not make any one big issue of such paramount importance that it divides us.

Smith: When he was in the White House, he was looked upon as the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge. But it was a different kind of conservatism – it was economic conservatism. It was a very healthy skepticism of what the federal government could do constructively, it was paying attention to the bottom line fiscally. But on a lot of “social issues,” I’ve often thought that his generation, particularly Midwesterners, thought that there were a lot of things - what I call a decent reticence - there were just things you just didn’t talk about. To talk about abortion, those were just things – that’s a family matter – that’s not something to be part of the political agenda.

Ford: Nope.

Smith: In those later years, when he and Mrs. Ford would go to the conventions, and they were pro-choice, every four years they’d be lonelier and lonelier and lonelier. They were simply being true to themselves and to that different kind of conservatism.
Ford: Well, as you full well know, I think he vetoed sixty-seven appropriation bills, and Congress overrode him on what was it – fifty-seven?

Smith: Actually, he had a better record than that. He got two-thirds of those sustained.

Ford: I thought it was fifty-seven that was sustained.

Smith: Yeah, very close to that.

Ford: Which was indicative of his conservative background. I think that people in this area look at any candidate more from the standpoint of his financial approach to any problem, and then social issues. You’d better adhere to this line first, now we’ll talk about that line. And I think that is typical, myself. It certainly is in my determination of whom, or for whom I’m going to vote. I can be a little bit not as hard lined over on this side as this side – the right.

Smith: It is interesting because, you go back to sports, back to athletics. He said himself, if he could do things over, he’d probably would have spent more time learning communications and all of that – public speaking. People testify to the fact, almost every year, he’d come back, often before the Michigan-Ohio game. He’d go over to Ann Arbor with no fanfare and he’d give a pep talk to the team. People who were there have testified, not once, but repeatedly, that he was as eloquent and persuasive and powerful and everything else, in that setting, where he was talking sports, and character, if you will – cheering them on – then he was the most gifted natural speaker in the world.

Ford: I’m not surprised. I’ve never heard that, but I’m not surprised. Anything in which he believed fervently, as he did in University of Michigan football, he would praise that particular facet very significantly and with great feeling.

Smith: We’ve covered a lot of territory.

Ford: The last comment I would make - for Mr. Morgenstern, and Jordan Shepherd have passed on – they were the two most influential members of the Ford Commemorative Committee that built this edifice. I know you are going to talk to Fred Meijer, but I would encourage you to have him tell you some of the problems, which he was more cognizant of than I am. Because of his
generosity, we were able to fly down to the Truman Library and the Hoover Library to see them as some sort of a guide for us. In the blackest and bluest days, he was still cheerful, saying, “We’re going to make it, don’t worry. We’re going to make it.”

Smith: And that’s what you need.

Ford: Yeah.

Smith: Is it true that he was offered land on the outskirts of town?

Ford: Oh, absolutely. Fred Meijer offered him a big orchard out there in the corner of Nap and the East Beltline. It was a great site, would have been fabulous. There was another parcel on the corner of I-96 and the East Beltline that I think where the West Michigan Heart Building is now, that was also offered. But the committee determined that this would be a great building block for the rest of downtown. That’s when they approached the city and county and said, “Can you help us?” Then they started going to individuals for contributions. So Fred Meijer can be much more insightful than I can on that.

Smith: Isn’t that interesting, because that’s a real part of your brother’s legacy, the revitalization of Grand Rapids.

Ford: Well, the community did recognize that and felt that this would be, in preference to the other sites, which were great, this one, if we could get it, assuming the city could get it through imminent domain, would be far better for everybody.

Smith: If you can try to imagine this town, with this place not here – think of all the history that would not have happened. All the things that we now take for granted.

Ford: The unfortunate thing, this is not history you would know, but there was a building just to the north of here and it was a building that was one of the first buildings for a machinery company. There was a German schoolhouse and the intent was for it to be built as a museum after this was in. It was going to be built by the Jackoboices family and furnished to what it looked like in those days. Tragically and unfortunately, it burned down, and when it burned down,
then we were able to acquire that property to the north here with a little help from the government, obviously. That would have made a great addition to this area – to have had that German schoolhouse which was at one point in time, probably as big a schoolhouse as there was in the city.

Smith: Last thing, since you mentioned schoolhouses, tell me about South. I know you didn’t go there, but South – there’s this sort of legend about South High. I mean in the sense that South High was a very diverse, in many ways more representative school, and that your parents felt strongly that Jerry would get a different kind of education going to South than maybe to Central.

Ford: I think so, because in those days South was the working class families and Central was all the big furniture manufacturers and their offspring attending Central. So Central had a reputation of, the old expression “a little bit more on the snob side.” I guess that’s probably fair. At that point in time you look where all the big family homes are that are now converted to apartments. Those houses in there are, fortunately, a lot of them still around, but that’s where the big manufacturers and the bankers and lawyers built their places. They are gorgeous, fabulous houses. Have you ever gotten up there?

Smith: Yeah.

Ford: They are incredible.

Smith: It’s got to be one of the ironies of history, that your brother secured the money for that Calder sculpture. I don’t think of him as being a Calder-kind of guy. Although after the fact, he understood what a great boost to the city it was.

Ford: Very true. I think I was with him. I wasn’t sure it was going to be a big asset, but it is.

Smith: Modern art doesn’t strike me as being his cup of tea.

Ford: Interestingly enough, the space astronaut statue out here… I was the committee chairman when that piece was picked… we interviewed about six or seven artists for their conception of what would be proper and correct for this and the only thing Jerry said, “Make sure that it’s representational.” So I think we accomplished what he was looking for.
Smith: Well, I heard the story that it is a space man because he didn’t want a statue of himself. Have you ever heard that?

Ford: No. I don’t think so. Never. I was committee chairman, so that never was a discussion. I think he would have felt that that was too much.

Smith: No, no, that’s my point, that it is a space man because he didn’t want – I guess there were people who said, well, let’s put a statue of the president, and he didn’t want a statue of himself.

Ford: I agree with you – he didn’t. But the subject never came up. I knew that he wouldn’t want one of himself and he specifically – the only thing he said was, “Make it representational.” So he learned something about art in the meantime – obviously, like we all do.

Smith: I can only imagine when he went up there and visited with the Rockefellers, I can just see him seeing Nelson’s art collection which is not representational.

Ford: Hardly, or when he went to the gentleman’s in Palm Springs – Annenberg. He went inside there one night – I was going to have dinner with Betty and Jerry and they very kindly insisted that I come along and, even I was overawed by the art that they had. It was incredible. It is nicely displayed, almost like the entryway to a museum, but as we came in, I followed Jerry and Betty around and we saw every piece that he had. They were all fantastic, but you’re right, I think he was into the representational mode.

Smith: That’s a perfect note on which to conclude. Thank you.

Ford: You are welcome.
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Smith: I guess the obvious first question is, how did your path cross that of the Fords?

Garbarino: When I was living in Trammel Crow’s house. I was married and my wife and I were living in Trammel Crow’s house.

Smith: And who is Trammel Crow?

Garbarino: Trammel Crow is a real estate developer out of Dallas, Texas. We had been living there for a couple of years and we received a call from Mrs. Crow stating that President and Mrs. Ford would like to view the house. They were thinking of staying there over the holidays. They’d always come up for Christmas with their family. That’s the first time we met. We gave them a tour of the house.

Smith: Was he in the White House then or was this after?

Garbarino: No, this was 1980. This was after. And so what had happened was they loved the house, but they decided to stay at another home in Vail that they’d been staying at for years, the Bass house in Vail Village. And, then Leonard Firestone, Ambassador Firestone, stayed in that house. The Firestones asked me to come up and manage their new property in Beaver Creek. And so I moved up in 1983 and that’s when I really got to know the Fords. I lived in Ambassador Firestone’s home at the time.

Smith: It’s clear from people we’ve talked to in the desert as well as up here that, although he may not be a terribly familiar name to the public, Leonard Firestone’s a very significant figure in the Ford story.

Garbarino: Yes, they’re good friends with the family. In fact, it’s a very interesting story. When the Fords invited President and Mrs. Clinton out back in 1993, Leonard Firestone, Ambassador Firestone, offered his house to the Clintons and
Ambassador Firestone went to his home up in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. And also when they had the AEI Group come up in June, we would have dignitaries stay in Mr. Firestone’s home as well.

Smith: And he and Mrs. Ford were really co-partners in creating the Betty Ford Center.

Garbarino: Exactly. They were and that was really important to Mr. Firestone. And that was a real bond, too, with Mrs. Ford and Ambassador Firestone.

Smith: Was the house that was built up there truly a joint venture? Was it something that Mrs. Ford took the lead in designing? What was your sense of how it came to be?

Garbarino: My sense was Mrs. Ford took the lead in it. She really did. She was very particular and she knew exactly how she wanted things. My job was to make everything fine when they did arrive. If things weren’t quite right, President Ford would just take me aside once in awhile and laugh and say, “Dick, maybe we should do this a little differently,” and whatnot. But it was her house.

Smith: In terms of the layout and the look?

Garbarino: The layout, yes, and everything.

Smith: One senses it was a house built at least in part for entertainment.

Garbarino: Right. At that time, President Ford didn’t ski any longer, so they would come up the end of May, June and stay until October. Then the whole family would come up at Christmas. And at that time, Richard, when they would stay at the house, very few people came out for the summer like they would. People thought of Vail-Beaver Creek as a winter resort, not so much a summer resort. And it just kind of started to pick up more, but they would stay all summer.

Smith: That’s interesting. That raises a question. What did they do with their days? I mean, were there enough friends around to socialize with?
Garbarino: A lot of Vail friends. Of course, she was involved in the Betty Ford Gardens and in the early 90s, they had built the Gerald R. Ford Amphitheater. They were involved in that and a lot of projects in the valley he volunteered his time on. And Mrs. Ford would, at times, make impromptu visits at different AA meetings and whatnot.

Smith: Really?

Garbarino: Yes, she did. I was very impressed with that. She would do that as well.

Smith: She must have been the ultimate celebrity spokesperson.

Garbarino: Yes, she would just go in and as they’d introduce themselves, she would. So they really integrated themselves into the community with a lot of different charities. But they loved the summers up here. Before President Ford passed away that last summer, he wanted to come up one last summer. They wanted to see the view from their bedroom of the ski runs. That was important.

Smith: And, of course, you know, everyone was telling them, including their doctors, “You shouldn’t do this.”

Garbarino: Yep. He shouldn’t have been up.

Smith: If there’s anything such as a typical day, what was a typical day like?

Garbarino: A typical day for them is he would swim early in the morning. He loved swimming. Back when I’d teach skiing up here, I threw out my back and he got me into swimming and let me use the pool. I went from there to a larger pool and whatnot to use. But he would swim and he would read, I would say, four newspapers a day. So, he would read. They’d have lunch. He’d play golf. When he was home. Initially, right after the house was built, I would say the first ten years, he travelled quite a bit, too.

Smith: And the mail. I mean, it’s legendary. In some ways he never stopped being a congressman in the sense that you answer your mail promptly.

Garbarino: Yes.
Smith: And there are funny stories in the desert, after 9/11 and the anthrax scare - he didn’t get Saturday mail. And he didn’t understand why he didn’t have Saturday mail because people worked Saturdays as well. I don’t know whether they did up here as well.

Garbarino: Yes, they did. Somebody was up there.

Smith: You answered your mail. And so, literally, there were members of the staff, it may have been Secret Service people, who put on those spacemen outfits and got his mail for him so he could have his Saturday mail.

Garbarino: Oh, they’d pick up the mail and, of course, you’d have the x-ray machine in the Secret Service area. I remember being there a number of times. They were really watching how they were handling things.

Smith: Were there ever any security concerns, particular concerns, or scares? I mean, he was someone who had been the target of two assassination attempts. I wonder whether that made him any more, or Mrs. Ford, any more security conscious.

Garbarino: I think they felt very secure up here. You saw how you entered the house up in that cul-de-sac. As you enter the house, you have the one road up and back. When they would leave, I would live in the house by myself. I remember one time I was back checking on things and the swimming pool and a gentleman was on the deck looking in the house. I went out and I introduced myself and he said, “I heard this is the President’s house.” I said, “Yes, it’s President Ford’s house. You shouldn’t be up here.” But I’ve never had any really anybody too bold.

Smith: Were tourists more or less a constant presence?

Garbarino: Yes, especially right after the house was built for the first few years. A lot of people came out. A lot of people were aware that the President had a house there because, then, as Beaver Creek built up, the Ford house was one of the first houses up here. So, people knew President Ford had a home up there but
they weren’t quite certain where. Beaver Creek security did a very nice job of not saying where the house was.

Smith: People forget, before the Kennedy assassination, former Presidents had no Secret Service protection. So the Eisenhowers in Gettysburg originally had tourists knocking on their front door, wanting to have their picture taken with Ike and Mamie.

Garbarino: Oh really?

Smith: Yeah. And I just wondered whether you ever had anything of that kind of interaction with people.

Garbarino: No, I never really did. It was just that one gentleman that came up to the pool. Nobody really knocked on the door. It was pretty quiet when they took off and I would live in the house. They would leave and I would live in the house throughout the winter until they arrived and then I would leave again and then come back, for security purposes, as well as managing the property.

Smith: What was her day like?

Garbarino: Mrs. Ford’s day was very similar in the sense that she would read as well as the President, but she would go out a lot to visit friends, luncheons, and, again, whatever events that she was invited to. She was quite busy. Actually. I was impressed with both of them for their age, how active they were.

Smith: Do you think that was deliberate on their part?

Garbarino: Maybe so. They were very active.

Smith: Fight the aging process in some ways by being active.

Garbarino: By being busy and him being active, reading and swimming. He’d go out and hit golf balls. They would take the dog for a walk around the cul-de-sac, down the hill, up the hill. Very active.

Smith: It was my sense when I was around him, that they almost went out of their way to have younger people around them, that maybe that was a little bit of
part of the process of staying tuned in, at least, to a younger culture. I mean, he was certainly always a fiscal conservative. Clearly. But in terms of a lot of social issues, I’ve often wondered whether it was that the Republican Party just kept going further to the right, leaving them where they were. You know, she’d been outspoken on issues in terms of a woman’s right to choose, but they were also outspoken on gay rights and things that you didn’t expect to hear from a former president, much less a ‘conservative’. What was your sense of their views, their attitudes? How much of an influence was she on his outlook? And having kids, I mean, relatively young kids and grandchildren, which also kind of keeps you plugged in, as opposed to sitting with a bunch of old guys at the country club all day long, griping about the state of the world.

Garbarino: It was interesting because they really loved having the kids and the grandkids up. But they were very open-minded. She was very open-minded to anything, anybody, she was very much that way. And I think she influenced him that way as well. It really struck me because, at first I thought he was pretty conservative, but then he seemed open to a lot. He would laugh at a lot of what young people do and whatnot and sometimes he’d just shake his head. But he was pretty open-minded. Both of them.

Smith: You think he remembered he’d been young once?

Garbarino: I think so. I think he always had a glint in his eye. You know, especially if for any reason he thought was in trouble with the missus, I would see that glint.

Smith: Explain to me - maybe it’s just a case of opposites attracting, but punctuality was a religion for him.

Garbarino: Oh, yes.

Smith: And that’s not the case with Mrs. Ford. Any stories? Any observations?

Garbarino: Well, it’s really interesting because I would travel with him the last few years. When he would have engagements and whatnot, the family asked if I would
travel with him as an aide. And that was an eye-opener for me. You learn a lot about somebody when you travel with them. When I was managing the property, I would see him once in awhile, every couple of days, and we would chat about things. But when we were on the road, it was an eye-opener for me. I knew he was punctual and I would have the trip sheet from Penny. Sometimes, I’d call Penny with questions. But what struck me, he was very punctual, but yet when we would go somewhere, wherever he went, he would stop and he would talk to the doorman, he would talk to the bell man, anybody within the hotel we went, he was “Hi. I’m Gerald Ford.” And he struck up a conversation with them. “Where are you from?” I was amazed with that, even though there was a time we had to be here or here or there, he would take that time. That impressed me. So, I saw him in a different light. But yet, when we had to be from point A to B, I’d make sure the breakfast is in the room at a certain time. We’d have the newspapers out. And then, “Okay, it’s time to go now” and then we’d go.

Smith: There are those who say you didn’t disturb him when he read his papers.

Garbarino: The newspapers were big. And I had to make sure that we had the right newspapers at the hotel at a certain time so he’d have the newspapers at breakfast. And then we’d go over the schedule and then go from there. He’d want the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, if we were in Michigan, we’d have the local newspapers, too, for wherever we were at. He was quite a reader. But, you’re right, he had to have that newspaper in the morning and he was very much into his routine. Of course, I think we all get that way when we get older. He really had a routine down.

Smith: She was not a punctual person.

Garbarino: No.

Smith: I mean, it was part of her charm, but clearly, 50 plus years of marriage didn’t budge her. Was it a kind of almost a running gag?

Garbarino: Yeah, I think it was.
Smith: He clearly adapted himself to her schedule.

Garbarino: Yeah, you could see him roll his eyes when we were leaving from point A to B and she still wasn’t quite ready yet.

Smith: Is that perfectionism on her part? For instance, one thing that I think would surprise people is that she found public speaking to be a real trial in a lot of ways. No one would ever guess, but it’s like any really good stage performer, if they don’t have butterflies in the stomach, they’ve lost something. And that anything she could do to cut down that margin between perfection, which is what she wanted, and how she felt. I just wondered whether that was part of it, or whether it was just a force of habit.

Garbarino: You know, I think she was a perfectionist. She wasn’t ready to leave until, if she was with a hairdresser or whatnot, she knew she was ready to leave. She was confident that she felt good about herself and everything was perfect. Then she would come. And I think he realized that, though, too.

Smith: And clothes mattered to her, didn’t they?

Garbarino: Yes.

Smith: I mean, she loved clothes. She wore them well, obviously that makes a difference. She’d been a model.

Garbarino: She had a great sense of humor. And what really astounded me, was, one time, Richard, I had a gentleman over to the house, we were looking at doing work around their tub area in their master bath. And you had to step up about two feet. This was when she was in her 80s and she would just jump up. She was flexible! And the subcontractor I was with was just astounded. But because of her dancing, she was so very limber, very quick, but also had a great sense of humor.

Smith: One thing that would surprise people, she had, shall we say, a much more ribald sense of humor than he did.

Garbarino: Yes.
Dick Garbarino

June 24, 2010

Smith: To the point where Ann Cullen, for example, talked about how he’d come in and say, “Alright, girls, what are you laughing about now?” and they would tell this dirty joke, which just sort of soared right over his head.

Garbarino: Exactly. That happened a couple of times. Mrs. Ford was just roaring and she would look at the President and say, “I’ll tell it again to you later, Jerry.” And he would just walk away. It was really funny.

Smith: Everyone says he had a sense of humor. Though he was not a gifted joke teller. How would you describe his sense of humor?

Garbarino: Very dry, but you hit the nail on the head. He wasn’t a real joke teller.

If we would travel somewhere, we would go to the plane or the limo going somewhere, he would ask, “Dick, do you mind calling Betty?” And I would give him the phone because I knew he didn’t know how to use it.

Smith: A cell phone?

Garbarino: Yeah, and whatnot. And then it was really interesting. We’d talk more business than anything else. Once in awhile, I’d see something in the paper, if we were flying somewhere and say, “Look at this” and he’d go “Ha ha ha” and go back to his newspaper again.

Smith: He was not a high tech guy.

Garbarino: No, he was not. In fact, Mrs. Ford was.

Smith: Really?

Garbarino: Mrs. Ford was. I mean, I would go to Mrs. Ford and say, “You know, I think we need to do this. This, mechanically, is going to be an issue.” And I would tell her about it. I would tell him about it, but he really didn’t have the interest that Mrs. Ford did.

Smith: For example, was she computer literate?
Garbarino: Yes, she did use the computer. I remember she did use the computer and, oh gosh, that was ten years ago and she was using the computer quite a bit. Very computer literate.

Smith: And I think Penny said he got to the point where he could play solitaire on the computer and he could get email, but he couldn’t send email.

Garbarino: Yes, that’s true.

Smith: That was sort of the dividing line.

Garbarino: I’d email him, but he’d never respond.

I’ll tell you a funny story. I was out in Palm Springs back in 1993 visiting them and they took me out to lunch at a restaurant called the Thunderbird Country Club. Before we left the house, Mrs. Ford said, “Dick, this is the oldest country club in Palm Springs, and, by the way, there are a lot of old people there.” And we were laughing. We had lunch and towards the end of the lunch, the waiter came over and put a note in front of the President. I noticed it because I was sitting between President and Mrs. Ford and there was, I think, it was either Ann Cullen or maybe Penny was with us, I’m not quite certain. And he took the note up, read it, set it down, and we kept talking. And I could just see Mrs. Ford’s curiosity and finally, she said, “Jerry, what was the note about?” And he took a glance through the dining room and he said, “Somebody here knows who Deep Throat really is.” I thought I was going to die. But he said it just so straight. And he looked at me and I said, “Sir, do you get that often?” and he said, “More than you think.” He just made a comment, he said, “Look around in this room. Do you see anybody that would know that?” The waiter didn’t say who it was from or whatnot, but it was really funny.

Smith: The last time that they’d met with the Foundation, I think it was actually here, maybe in 2004 or 2005 when they had their annual meeting. It was right at the time that the cover finally got blown on Deep Throat. And I think it was not quite official, but there was all this feverish speculation. So, anyway, it they went through the whole meeting and everything else. And then he had
his informal remarks at the end, summing it up, and he said, “Now, I just want to close this evening with an announcement.” And everybody kind of sat back. He said, “I’m Deep Throat” and he walked off and sat down. Everyone was silent for a second and then they realized it was a gag, but no one expected it, which made it ten times as effective. And he got better. Well, you saw him on the road. He got better as a speaker, I think, with age.

Garbarino: Right. In the evenings, we would go over his speech. When we’re on the airplane, usually we flew private and corporate airplanes and he would sit next to me. I’d notice he’d have 3 by 5 cards and he’d go over it and over it and over it and then that night, usually in the hotel room, he would want to read it. And I remember seeing him before and seeing him, obviously, speaking with different groups and he looked much better, I thought. I thought he did a good job, especially with his age. He did well. I was really surprised with that.

Smith: He loved to travel, didn’t he?

Garbarino: Yeah.

Smith: I often thought his health was really pretty good up until he was about 90.

Garbarino: Right.

Smith: And then, I guess the doctors told him, “You’ve got to cut out the travel.”

Garbarino: And so did the family. The family was really concerned. I traveled with him when he was in his middle 80s and at that time, he would do well with it. He loved it. He loved being on the road. He loved speaking. He really enjoyed it. But then I think the family realized, you’re right, the doctors and everybody else, when he was around 89 or 90, said he should cut back. Then I just traveled with him to functions - to the White House for his 90th birthday party.

Smith: Tell us about that.
Garbarino: That was really interesting. We stayed at the Willard. We were there just for two days.

Smith: That was always the hotel they liked.

Garbarino: They really loved the Willard.

Smith: They never used the townhouse that’s provided up at Lafayette Square.

Garbarino: Not when I was with him. We always stayed at the Willard Hotel. We were back there for that function. We also went to Capitol Hill for his 90th birthday and then we were at the White House that night for dinner. A very nice dinner, really, really interesting. And Bush gave a very, very nice speech and whatnot and then they were all in the main dining room for dinner, the East Room, I guess. And then Penny and I went on with the agents and had a nice little tour of the White House from there.

Smith: I’m told that there were still some members of the permanent White House staff who had been there when the Fords were there and were grateful for the chance to reconnect. We’ve been told from a number of people in the White House that that staff really cherished the Fords. I don’t think every family that lives in the White House has the same kind of rapport with the staff, but I think they did.

Garbarino: Yes. And it was interesting, too, when I flew back with him for President Reagan’s funeral. When I went back with him for President Reagan’s funeral, I saw some of the older Secret Service agents, some of the agents who used to be on his detail and whatnot. And they’d all just, “How’s he doing?” I think they really enjoyed him. He traveled a lot. They couldn’t keep up with him a lot sometimes with all the travel. They were just amazed at how he could travel.

Smith: Did he talk about Reagan?

Garbarino: Did he talk about Reagan? No, not to me personally, he really didn’t. What was interesting was, after the funeral and we got on the airplane coming back, I was struck all of a sudden, they were concerned, I guess, they were
approached by the Air Force and how they wanted to handle things when
President Ford passed on. And it was interesting, that conversation, that they
were having when that was going on. But what struck me about that, too, was
when we were back there and the coverage I saw on television they were
talking about the love story between the Reagans. And what I realized when I
was on the road with the President, there was a real love story with President
Ford and Mrs. Ford. We would barely get off the airplane and he’d ask for
my phone, like I told you earlier, to talk to Mrs. Ford. We’d get to the hotel,
he’d call Mrs. Ford. Before he’d go to sleep at night, he would call her. And
that struck me, because, again, I never saw that until I traveled with him. That
was a true love story between the two of them.

Smith: The week after he passed away, I think millions of people were introduced to
it for the first time.

Garbarino: I agree with you wholeheartedly.

Smith: I’m getting ahead of myself, but the fact that there was so much reaction.
You know, for someone who’d been out of the public eye for awhile, and I
thought it was a combination of things, including the fact that there was a
whole generation who were being introduced to him for the first time. They
were seeing these old clips and they were comparing it with the ugliness of
today’s politics and he looked pretty good. Plus, they saw the Ford family
and the obvious closeness and, you know, the values and the love story that
existed between them.

Garbarino: The love story was really interesting. I remember we flew back and we
watched the funeral services in Simi Valley for the Reagans, and it was quite
emotional to watch, especially seeing Mrs. Reagan in person and how she
looked just tired. You could tell she was very tired. But I told my friend that
was watching with me that night, I said, “You know, the real love story,
nobody really talks about the Fords, but that’s quite a story in itself.” And
then, what really struck me, too, was I never knew that they had such a close
relationship with the Carters. I never realized that until one trip I was on with
President Ford. He asked me what I was doing the following day when we
were flying home and if I could come up to the house. He said, “The Carters are going to stop by.” They would stay in Crested Butte, Colorado in the summer. And I’ll never forget sitting in the Secret Service area where you had that one window where you could look out at the drive and the Carters pulling up, getting out of the car, and the Fords walking out the door and all hugs and they really, genuinely liked each other. And I harkened back to the ’76 campaign when, at that time, it was nasty. Not compared to what we see today, but it was interesting.

Smith: It’s strange. I did the last eulogy in Grand Rapids and if you’ve ever been in a situation like that, you’re in a fog. The thing I’ll never forget I could hear Rosalyn Carter weeping in the pew. And I thought to myself, “Who, thirty years ago, would’ve imagined this is how the story ends?”

Garbarino: Isn’t that something?

Smith: And that wasn’t faked. When we left Washington and flew back to Grand Rapids, President Carter was walking up and down the aisle of Air Force One with the Fords’ youngest great grandchild on his shoulder. An amazing scene.

Garbarino: See, I was on Air Force One that whole trip. I remember that. That was amazing, wasn’t it? Yes.

Smith: And then you say, “Gee, why can’t we have statesmen instead of elder statesmen?” Why is it that we have to wait until they’re no longer politically viable for these kinds of relationships to blossom?

Garbarino: I agree and when I told people about that meeting, they couldn’t believe it. People my age said, “Really? They are?” I said, “Yes.” I was very pleased seeing that and they just enjoyed their company.

Smith: Let me ask you something; obviously you don’t have to answer this. I only heard him speak disparagingly about two people. One of them was John Dean and the other was Gordon Liddy.

Garbarino: And I can probably understand why.
Smith: Yeah, in both cases. Did he ever let his hair down in that sense and talk about other political or other figures?

Garbarino: No, but I remember what struck me, one time I was with him on a trip and that was at the time President Bush 43 was thinking about going into Iraq and there was all these rumblings. We were on a trip and I’ll never forget he questioned that. He really questioned the wisdom of that, because, gosh the names of some of the people escape me, but the people from Bush 41’s administration were writing columns and saying “No, this shouldn’t be done.”

Smith: Well, Brent Scowcroft was outspoken.

Garbarino: Brent Scowcroft really was adamant against that. He was reading this and in his own mind, too, he said, “I don’t think this is right.”

Smith: And it must’ve been awkward, at least, because so many of his people, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Paul O’Neill, for a while—

Garbarino: He had a great photograph, by the way, Richard, of Alan Greenspan, Vice President Cheney, at that time he was chief of staff, and Rumsfeld. And Mrs. Ford gave it to ________ and it was really interesting. In 1977, it was taken. And I agree with you. I think it bothered him because he knew some of the players and he didn’t understand that. I could tell he wasn’t real comfortable with that.

Smith: That’s interesting. He was still a party man, but the Carter relationship is all the more in some ways unusual because they had such diametrically different approaches to the role of a former President. Obviously, if a president asked you to do something, he’d do it. And he demonstrated that in a bipartisan way. But he was loathe to interject himself into a situation, particularly foreign policy, where there’s only one president and only one secretary of state. And he clearly, until the end of his life, cherished the relationships with Cheney and Rumsfeld and Greenspan. Those relationships were never damaged in any way by any of these potential policy disagreements.
Garbarino: No. The Cheneys were up every summer. And that summer when I think he was with Halliburton at the time, in the private sector, they were up here every summer and very nice. You know, he made it a point to introduce me to everybody. I was really very proud of that. It was very nice of him to do that. If I happened to be in the area, “Dick, I’d like you to meet so and so.” It was really interesting to be part of that. And, one day, Richard, I remember walking into the house and I went to the upstairs living room and they were on the speakerphone with President Clinton when he was in the hospital and had heart surgery.

Smith: Really?

Garbarino: On the speakerphone in the living room and “How are you doing?” I was struck by that. I had no idea and I guess the Clintons really appreciated the fact that they invited them out for the Bolshoi Ballet because Chelsea really, at that time, was into dance. And they were very good hosts to the Clintons and I think they maintained that relationship.

Smith: It’s interesting, because I was involved in the periphery at the time of the whole Lewinski thing when he really took heat from the Right, President Ford did, for this Op-Ed piece in *The Times* that proposed, in effect, a formal rebuke by both Houses of Congress nationally televised and then the country would move on. We would short circuit impeachment.

Garbarino: He didn’t want to have to anything to do with that. It was interesting.

Smith: Who were his close friends?

Garbarino: Obviously, Leonard Firestone was a very close friend. Dee Keaton, who had the house on the other side of the Beaver Creek house, they were close friends. Kaiser Morcus, at the time. He had a hotel here in Vail. Now he’s the President of some Palm Springs restaurants. They seemed to be close friends. But he really kept in touch a lot with Jim Callaghan.

Smith: And there’s another kind of opposites attracting, because you stop and think. Here’s a kind of a classic old line Labor Party socialist. And Helmut Schmidt
was certainly as far to the left. And Giscard, whatever his politics might be, is not exactly a hail-fellow well met. And yet they all seemed to just click.

Garbarino: They always enjoyed their time together. They would come up to the house and they would all just get together impromptu on the decks of the homes and whatnot. Callaghan was a very interesting fellow. I used to take him on hikes and drives. He always loved going to Leadville, Colorado. He loved the history.

Smith: Really?

Garbarino: I’d take him to Leadville, to Aspen, and back here. Then he reciprocated. It was very nice. My wife and I went over to England and he took us through Parliament and, in fact, I sat next to Neal Kinnock, and Callaghan leaned over and he said, “He’s going to be an up and comer.” And I just laughed. Remember when Joe Biden got in trouble for plagiarizing his speech? But it was interesting because they were just so down-to-earth when you brought them here to this level in Beaver Creek. It was really interesting how the dignitaries took it all in and were relaxed, very relaxed. I think a lot of it had to do with the Fords and the Fords introducing them to some of the people in town, and everybody got along quite well. It was really interesting.

Smith: What was his role in the World Forum? I mean, aside from the fact that it probably wouldn’t have existed without him. What was the World Forum?

Garbarino: It was a group of past world leaders along with corporate heads. To be honest with you, Richard, I don’t know who worked with him in putting that together. It was the AEI Group, I know that. They were the ones that put it together, but he was always the figurehead of that. How much more of a role he had, I couldn’t quite honestly answer that. But he was the one that brought the groups together. It was very interesting.

Smith: What were they like as grandparents?

Garbarino: Very good grandparents. In fact, I would ski with the grandkids because I still teach skiing up here part-time, but he would always make a point in
calling me from the desert and say, “Dick, would you mind skiing with a couple of Mike’s kids?” Very close to the kids. Very excited when Jack had the two boys, Christian and the oldest son. One of the really interesting stories is he would take them down to ski school when it was busy at Christmas. He would have each one of his granddaughters, Mike’s daughters, holding their hands, standing in line with everybody else. He could’ve easily tried to break through the line or had the agents take him up to the front of the line. He had the agents stay outside. He stood with the two granddaughters and the reason I know this is I had friends of mine that worked ski school and they’d tell me these stories. How impressed they were and how nice he was with everybody. That he made sure his granddaughters were all set, they were with their instructor, and then go up and pick them up afterwards.

Smith: One of the really poignant stories we have is from the gal who they hired as their cook, Lorraine Ornelas. And she’d gone through the Betty Ford Center. And she’d never seen snow and she’d never been on an airplane and was petrified at the thought. So, when they were coming up here, the President got the pilot of the plane and they walked around the plane explaining all of the engines, everything, how safe it was, and all that. Then, when they get up here, he took her to the ski school, got her ski lessons. They literally made her part of the family.

Garbarino: Sure.

Smith: And she said, “I learned so much from President Ford, but above all, I learned about discipline and having a purpose in life.” And that’s a pretty good lesson.

Garbarino: That is, because Lorraine had an interesting background and for her to be thrown into this was fascinating. They loved her.

Smith: Well, it’s mutual. What was Christmas like?

Garbarino: Christmas was a lot of fun. It could be a bit hectic with all the kids in ski school and the different events, Christmas tree lighting in Vail every year. He’d participate in that for the town of Vail.
Smith: Was there room in the house for all the kids?

Garbarino: Yes. Yes, room in the house for all the kids. Quite a gang there. That’s when I was on Defcon 5 always wondering what was going to happen. But it worked really well, because the house was very comfortable. And that was very special to them. They’d usually come up for about three weeks.

Smith: Really?

Garbarino: Yes. It was really interesting. You know, we talked about his schedule. One winter, he had a date set where he was ready to leave, they’re going to go down to the desert, usually a couple of days after New Year’s Day and we had a heck of a snow storm. Vail Pass was horrible and the airport was closed. And he would get antsy. When he was ready to go, he was ready to go. He would get very antsy. And I’ll never forget, one time I said to him, “Look how beautiful it is outside, sir. It’s amazing.” He said, “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right, but you know I was scheduled to leave today.” And I said, “The worst thing you could do is get in your car because you can’t get out of Eagle Airport. If you get stuck or if you get in an accident between here and Denver, you’re stuck in a car for five or six hours. Enjoy the view. This is beautiful.”

Smith: Do you think it was a little hard for him to slow down and smell the roses?

Garbarino: Yeah, exactly. “We have no control over this weather, but,” I said, “boy, it’s beautiful.” And it was. It was absolutely beautiful outside. Then he was kind of relaxed about it.

Smith: He was a fiscal conservative. I mean, that’s a euphemism in some eyes for ‘tight’. I often wondered whether the experience of the Depression seared into him as a very young man the value of money, the importance of not wasting anything. He was not the world’s biggest tipper.

Garbarino: Yeah, I understand that.

Smith: I mean, nobody’s perfect.
Garbarino: Yeah, exactly. He and my father remind me so much of each other in that way. They both grew up in the Depression. I admired him because he kept an eye on the utility bills for the house. I mean, of course, you have a house in the winter up here and gas heat can be quite expensive. But I would get a call once in awhile if a bill was more than the last bill. And I would say, “Well, sir, it was colder this month.” But he would keep track of those things. But it didn’t bother me because my father was the same way. He came from that generation.

Smith: Yeah, it was nothing personal.

Garbarino: It was nothing personal at all.

Smith: It was almost in the bloodstream.

Garbarino: I think so. I think it was. As far as tipping goes, if we went out to restaurants together or whatnot, I never saw how he handled that.

Smith: We’ve heard stories from various golf courses that suggested that he was not a spendthrift. He left the White House with very little and he’d never had much. And I assume didn’t ever expect to have much. And some part of him must have been kind of pinching himself that he had been able, among other things, to provide for his family in the way that he obviously wanted to, and enjoyed the success that he had.

Garbarino: I think he realized he had a great marriage. Very fortunate to be where he was.

Smith: Did you ever hear about Phyllis?

Garbarino: Phyllis?

Smith: Phyllis, the old girlfriend from 60 years ago.

Garbarino: No, I never heard about Phyllis. But he was so down-to-earth. That’s what I liked about him. You could tell, sometimes, he was overwhelmed with the house itself and whatnot, but he felt very fortunate to have what he had. But family was the important thing to him.
Smith: Before I forget. We were talking about friends. Frank Gifford and Kathy Lee were good friends and I know that when they went through their problems, highly publicized, that the Fords called and told them they were praying for them and wishing them all the best and just lending a kind of quiet support. Which also brings up this question. Again, I don’t think a lot of people automatically assumed, because he didn’t wear it on his sleeve. But the importance of faith to both of them. That was a significant factor in their lives.

Garbarino: Yes. I’ll never forget. I think it was his 85th birthday party that they had at the lodge and the Giffords were there right when that was all going on. And they were just involved in everything. Clint Eastwood and his wife were there. A number of people were there. It was really interesting.

Smith: That’s interesting, because this community, one senses, is accustomed to seeing celebrities all the time. Did the locals sort of leave them alone?

Garbarino: Yeah, they would know who he was. They would never really bother him. I think what bothered me more than anything was when people would go up and say, “Hi, Jerry.” I have this in my mind how I kind of cringe when they’d say that. But he’d turn around and say, “Hello. How are you? How’s your day going?” He would get in line like everybody else in the supermarkets and so would Mrs. Ford.

Smith: Really?

Garbarino: Yeah. People would see them and would be excited to see an ex-President and some of them would approach him, some of them wouldn’t.

Smith: I assume autographs were the bane of his existence. I mean, not necessarily the kid who wants the autograph, but the professionals who are selling his signature.

Garbarino: There were?

Smith: Yeah. When you traveled with him, what kind of buffer were you between him and the public, generally?
Garbarino: When we’d initially go, we’d get out of the car and people would come up to him and want to shake his hand and whatnot. He would receive everybody. Very seldom did anybody want his autograph when I was with him. He would talk to them and move on and talk to the next person, but he would stop and take his time and chat with everybody. And, of course, when I was with him, too, when he was getting a bit older, he would get tired pretty easily and would retire in the room and we would go out to dinner or else we would have dinner in the room. Then when he’d go out to play golf, after he’d give a talk, the norm was he would give a talk and then we’d play nine holes of golf. And people would approach him all the time on the golf course. But he was very accessible, I thought. That’s what impressed me. I didn’t expect to see that. I don’t know why I didn’t expect to see him as accessible as he was and just willing to talk to anybody.

Smith: When you would go out golfing, did he dress conservatively? Did he have the crazy tangerine—

Garbarino: You know, he was more conservative. I saw some of his clothes. He had a pair of pants with Bob Hope’s face all over the golf pants. But he was a pretty conservative dresser.

Smith: Also, it was well-known that he never threw away clothes. He had old suits.

Garbarino: He had old suits when they couldn’t come up anymore and we decided to put the house on the market. Susan came up and we went through some of the clothes. I mean, there were things we found that I thought, “Oh, my God.” He would keep everything. And that, again, came with that generation, I think. My dad was the same way and would just hold on to whatever he had.

Smith: Did he call you Garbini?

Garbarino: Call me?

Smith: I’m told that on occasion, he would call you Garbini.

Garbarino: No, instead of Garbarino, what’d he say? Garbino. I think it was Garbino. It wasn’t always Garbarino, but he was pretty close. Then he’d have Garbarino
right on the money. Penny and those guys would laugh. They had a nickname for me - Gambini. That kind of thing. But he was pretty right on with it. I was divorced and I had a young daughter. I'd have my daughter periodically and they were just always so kind. They always wanted to see Danni and before she left here, I’ll never forget, Mrs. Ford said, “We want to have a picture taken of Danielle.” Danielle and her mother moved back to Iowa. And Danni was out of school and I had Danni out, she was 12 years old. Mrs. Ford went up, beautiful clothes, dress changed, President Ford made it a point to go up and put on a nice shirt and I have a beautiful picture of the three of them on the deck of his house. They didn’t have to go through all of that trouble. They could’ve just walked out on the deck and had a quick shot. Those are the kind of people they were.

Smith: That’s revealing. How did he deal with aging? Was it frustrating?

Garbarino: He was getting frustrated because you could tell he had a hard time walking. He had two knee implants. I think with aging, he would get frustrated. That’s when once in awhile he would have a little temper tantrum periodically - because of that.

Smith: I was going to ask you about his temper because he spent a lifetime controlling it. But nobody controls it always and I wondered if you’d seen it.

Garbarino: I saw it a couple of times, but I wish I had his temperament in the sense where he would just blow up and then five minutes later, “It happened and I’m over it.” He would let it go.

Smith: Like a summer thunderstorm. It comes out of nowhere and it’s gone.

Garbarino: Oh, exactly. If the private airplane was late in getting to the airport to pick him up or this or that, then he’d get real antsy and sometimes he would lose it but then it would go away. But then he would be fine five minutes later. I was always amazed at that.

Smith: Toward the end, how did you feel? Clearly the doctors were telling him, “You shouldn’t come up here.” Did they talk about that at all?
Garbarino: He would tell me on the phone before they’d come up, I’d usually talk to him and once in awhile I’d go down to the desert and see them before they’d come up. But he told me on the phone, I’ll never forget, towards the end, he said, “They don’t want me to come up, but we want to come up.” They were determined to come up.

Smith: Between the Fords, the Ford family, the staff, Penny, you, the cooks, Secret Service, where did people stay? Hotels? How’d people get around? Where did people park up at the house? How did that work, that many people in that small an environment?

Garbarino: That’s a good question. Penny and the staff would have their own apartments throughout Vail. Obviously the Secret Service would usually stay at the Charter Hotel. If they were up for Christmas, they’d have apartments throughout. The cook, Lorraine, would stay in the house. So, there was very limited parking up there, but they would park just in front of the house. Let’s see, Penny, Ann and Judy each had their own separate cars up there, but they all had apartments throughout the Vail Valley, yeah. That was about it for cars up there. The cook would always live up there. Once in awhile they’d have a cook that wouldn’t live in the house, but that was where the cook would stay. With them in the home. That’s how they would arrange that up there as well. And he would get upset if there were too many cars around there because he was really conscious of the neighbors. And especially when we had a group up for the World Forum, he was always concerned there was going to be too much disruption. And I knew all the neighbors and I would just go around and tell everybody what was going on and what was happening. Steve Fossett was great. He would buy pizza for the guys because they would do the checkpoint right in front of his house. That’s when Fossett was doing all the balloon trips and whatnot.

Smith: Did he offer to take the Fords up in a balloon?

Garbarino: No, I don’t think he ever did. He had dinner with the Fords every once in awhile. He was really nice. The Fords really liked him. I thought I’d heard the one time Fossett crashed his balloon off the coast of Australia, he almost
made it around and he lost his passport and everything. I guess President Ford was instrumental in getting him back here from Australia and somehow working with the State Department. But they always liked Steve. And it was a pretty close neighborhood up there as well.

Smith: You traveled with him in those last years. You know, he took some heat from people for ‘commercializing’ the former presidency. Specifically, people criticized him for serving on boards.

Garbarino: Yes.

Smith: Our sense is, after talking to a number of folks, that he was never window dressing on any board. I mean, he took those very seriously.

Garbarino: Exactly. Yeah. In fact, a lot of his travel was going to different board meetings. He never missed a board meeting. He was really upset if he couldn’t make a board meeting. But when I traveled with him, we didn’t really go to any board meetings at the time. He was just asked to speak or go out of town.

Smith: I guess they would go every December to New York and she would shop and they would see shows. I think they liked New York a lot.

Garbarino: They liked New York. I never went with them on the trip. I was supposed to go with him on one trip, but it was canceled. It was more of a business trip. Mrs. Ford wasn’t going on that trip. But I went with him to D.C. and different other trips.

Smith: Did you ever go with him on foreign travel?

Garbarino: No, I never went with him on foreign travel. Penny would go with him on foreign travel as well. They didn’t go overseas that much when I started working with him. It was just his age and he really didn’t want to fly that long and we made sure everything was so or that a corporate jet was provided for his comfort as opposed to commercial.

Smith: The last summer up here, was it tough? Was it kind of touch and go?
Garbarino: It was very tough. Then he went to the Mayo Clinic for a period of time. I think he had a couple of mini strokes. And so he was up at the Mayo for a good part of it. Then they went directly from the Mayo as I recall back down to the desert. And that was it. That was his last time up here and that was the summer of 2006.

Smith: And my understanding was that he went to the Mayo because he had said something to the effect that, “I don’t want to live like this.” And the folks at the Mayo Clinic had convinced him, notwithstanding his age, that they could in fact address the problems, circulatory problems and all that. And I guess when they got there, they decided otherwise. And then I think actually Mrs. Ford wound up having some leg surgery done.

Garbarino: She had to have a leg stint. I think that was it as well. Because the doctors sat next to me on one of the legs on Air Force One. I was with the physician that worked with them up at the Mayo Clinic. Yes, so she had issues as well at that time. And Mrs. Ford was having more and more problems with oxygen. What was fascinating about President Ford, as I mentioned earlier, he would swim at that pool at 85 100 feet in his late 80s and 90s. He made it a point to go up and swim every day. It was that last summer, obviously, he couldn’t. Then he really, really was slowing down. That’s when he went to the Mayo. He wanted to get up here one more time. They came up and they went to the Mayo Clinic and then back down to the desert. The last time I saw him was about two or three months before he passed away. I went down to the desert that fall, I think it was October. And he was pretty excited. Rumsfeld gave him a model of the fleet that was going to be named the Gerald R. Ford fleet, one of the smaller carriers. He wanted me to see that when I met with him the last time. It was pretty emotional because when I saw him that one time, I thought, “You know, I don’t think I’m going to see him again.” And sure enough, that happened. You could just see where he was just very, very tired. But he was a very interesting man to work for.

Smith: Do you miss him?
Garbarino: Yeah, I do. I do. In fact, I made the comment the other day, I said, “It’s not the same.”

Smith: Do you think a lot of people in Vail feel that way?

Garbarino: I think a lot of people feel that way. A lot of people feel that way. I was glad they named the Gerald R. Ford Village Hall of Beaver Creek after him. Just small things. I was driving back from Denver and you see the Gerald R. Ford Highway. You glance at that and all these things go through my mind. And the way he treated my daughter. My daughter is Navy ROTC and going to the University of Wisconsin. And I said, “Wouldn’t it be something, Danielle,” because they loved her, they really were so kind to her. And I said, “Wouldn’t it be something if you served on one of his ships named after him? That’d be amazing.” But, no, that was quite an experience in my life. Twenty years.

Smith: Two last things. Can you think of a story or anything that might surprise people? That might tell people something about him that might come as a surprise? Also, how sensitive was he to the Chevy Chase caricature?

Garbarino: You know, it’s really fascinating. It was back in the 80s, he came out with that book *Humor and the Presidency*. I don’t think it really bothered him that much. I think at that time during the campaigning, it did a bit, the way he was treated on Saturday Night Live. I think people would be surprised how athletic he was. I remember, Richard, and I was living in Vail at the time in ’77, I was watching him ski one day, and this was when he was President. And I think it was ’77, he’s making absolutely beautiful turns skiing. And the press corps was down at the base of the mountain. Beautiful turns and there’s not a camera, not one shot of those beautiful turns. The moment he caught an edge on his ski and accidentally just fell sideways, that’s when the shutters flew. That’s when everybody was taking the photos and I don’t think people realized how athletic he was. What a good athlete he was. He was a beautiful skier, very nice skier. A man of his age doing it. I learned a lot from that one moment. I thought, “This is what it’s all about, isn’t it.”
Smith: Well, you have to develop a thick skin.

Garbarino: That’s what struck me, too. You have to have real thick skin. But that’s one thing I don’t think people really realized - how athletic he was.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Garbarino: That’s a good question. Probably as one of the most honest men that ever served our country. And, knowing him personally, and up front with everything, you just had to be straight with him and he was straight with you. Honest.

Smith: He deliberately made an effort to see the good in everyone. I think that was part of what he was brought up to believe.

Garbarino: To see the good in everybody.

Smith: To see the good in people. But I’m wondering whether that left him vulnerable in any way to people who thought, rightly or not, that they could—

Garbarino: That they could take advantage of him in a sense?

Smith: Yeah.

Garbarino: You know, I never saw that. I can’t say that I ever did. It could’ve happened, but I never did see that. He found the good in everybody. It’s really interesting. Once in awhile, you know, you could see him shake his head after he met with somebody, but then he had something good to say about them afterwards. But that’s how I’d like to see him remembered, as a really fascinating, very bright man. But very honest as well.

Smith: We saw the pictures on TV from D.C. and Grand Rapids and everywhere else. What was the reaction locally when he died?

Garbarino: I was fascinated by the lines. I was fascinated when we arrived in Washington that first night, that evening, and the people that were along the highway going into Washington. But what really struck me was the group in Grand Rapids. We were sitting at the Amway, the Grand Rapids Amway, and
the line of people waiting to pay their respects…but what really struck me, too, was the family, with the kids standing in line greeting everybody coming through. They did the same thing on Capitol Hill as well. That said a lot to me for the family. That struck me. It really did.
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Smith: Thank you so much for doing this. How did your path cross that of Gerald Ford?

Penny: Well, David Kennerly is the prime reason I ended up working for President Ford. There was a young man named Jerry McGee who was at Ogilvy & Mather at that time who called me and said, “Would you want to do some library footage for the new President, in case he wants to run for the office?”

Smith: What is library footage?

Penny: It means to travel around with the new President. Just stock footage so that if there was stuff on him where people would say, “I can make commercials from his presidency.” And as you and I both know, the circumstances of him becoming president were the most unusual in the history of the country. I had my contacts in Washington and having been there previously in ’64, I called up and I spoke with several of my friends, both at the agency and at the Department of Defense and they said, “Don, this is perfect. You get down there and if you can be of any help, we’ll let you know. Just tell us when you are coming.”

So I went down there and one of my handlers at the agency suggested that “be of whatever help you can to them, you obviously have background with [__________]. You know the people in town.” I had met Howard Baker and Bob Dole early on and was writing humor for a number of people like Sam Nunn and guys on both sides. Bill Bradley, whatever. And as luck would have it, when I went to see the President the first time in the residence, everybody is taking pictures of him and I and three or four people from my production company and so forth. I just jokingly said, “Sir, would you mind if I sat on your lap while we took this shot?” And Jerry Ford, as you know, I used to tease him by saying, “You sound just like Tommy Smothers, ‘Well, I’m from the Midwest and I don’t pretend to be a [__________].’” Anyway, I sat on his
lap and I have the photographs. I have wonderful pictures and it was an immediate click. I said facetiously after this, “You know, it was like Pinocchio and Jiminy Cricket, you and me. Or Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear.”

Smith: Why do you think that was? Was it opposites attracting?

Penny: I just liked the guy a lot. He sensed that. He said, “You know, I appreciate – you’re like me in a way.” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “I can sense that you’re a sweet kid.” I said, “Yes, I grew up in Brooklyn pretty much on the streets playing stickball.” And he said, “Well, I grew up in Grand Rapids and I prefer street kids to academics.” He said, “I think maybe I’d like to talk to you about making speeches because I’m real comfortable talking to you, or anybody, one on one; but I’ve got to tell you something, Don, when I walk out into a theater, I’m never quite who I want to be.” I said, “Well, that’s pretty normal, most people don’t need applause. And the last thing they want to do is get out in front of a crowd and be sort of like sorted out and made an individual. I understand that.”

This man had genuine humility. He was, as I said facetiously, the difference between actors and congressmen is wardrobe. The egos are understandably large. Jerry Ford possessed a great talent to listen. I watched him with people, men and women. And I sensed immediately, within minutes, they trusted him and he put them at ease. Now as a director working with professional actors, the first thing you say to them is, “Don’t act, just react.” Jerry Ford was the best reactor because rather than jumping in, he’d listen to you and hear you out.

Smith: What about him - as the relationship began to develop - what was it? I assume there must have been some things about him that diverge from the public image. For lack of a better word, the Washington label, the stereotype that everyone gets tagged with. Did you ever sense - am I’m seeing a guy that I’m seeing in the media portrait?

Penny: Actually, I knew him to be always Jerry Ford. I never saw him, ever, ever put on any air. I remember his naïveté when I first started working with him and he was making a speech and [droning speech pattern], and said, “Sir, you are
what we refer to as a humfer.” [Ford] “What’s that?” “That’s a guy who hums and talks at the same time.” [Ford] “What?” I said, “Let me explain. You are from the Midwest and you have a tonal thing…Words have colors and when you learn how to use those colors in verbiage…” [Ford] “I don’t understand what you’re saying.” I said, “Okay, sir. Say ‘screw you!’” [Ford] “Why?” I said, “Just say it with anger.” [Ford] “Screw you.” “There’s no anger there. These words have meaning, they are important. There’s passion. What you are lacking right now is that emotion. And I know you do it purposely because you want to be perceived as very calm, and that ain’t what attracts people. And so if I can suggest to you that you need to learn how to take a written piece and turn it into a spoken piece, which means you have to be an actor.” [Ford] “Oh, God, I’ll never be an actor.” I said, “I already know that. That’s why I came up with the line that we’re going to give you a charisma bypass.” And he looked at me at one point and he said, “Oh, so I’m an old warhorse, can you make me a better one?” I said, “You’re doing that already.”

I was never more proud in my life than when he went into that old [Senate] chamber years later and did a twenty minute speech and was terrific – because he listened and he learned from a guy who knew how to get a performance out of an individual, whether it be an actor or a CEO.

Smith: That’s part of this larger narrative. Almost, a trajectory. It seems one way of looking at Ford’s two and a half years is as someone who came into the office in many ways unprepared, and with a certain set of life experiences and a skill set developed to a high degree on Capitol Hill. And then he had to learn how to be president. And it’s just not being an executive, but it’s all of the theater that goes with the office.

Penny: He never learned how to assume the mantel. I remember when I first saw him with Kissinger, and Kissinger said, “Well, Jerry, in this situation the president would do this and do that,” and after three or four times I said to him – well I didn’t like Kissinger, I thought Kissinger to be full of shit and being in the Kissinger business, primarily. And Ford, “Well, well you know he’s very important.” I said, “Yeah, I know, I know how important he is. He got the
Nobel Prize after having killed 30,000 people in Cambodia. Bullshit. You ask me, being from Brooklyn, okay?” And three or four weeks later I was in the room with David Kennerly and Kissinger said, “Well, Jerry, in this situation,” and Ford, knocking his pipe against, said, “Uh, Henry, I’m the President,” same naïveté, [Kissinger] “But I never meant anything.” But he put him away.

Jerry had that worth, truth and sincerity, and you can’t beat that. George Burns was asked by Johnny Carson when he did the *Sunshine Boys*, he said, “Well, you were always a standup comedian, now you’re an actor.” “But what’s the difference?” He said, “Well, being an actor means you really have to relate to truth, and once you learn how to fake that, you got it made.” Jerry Ford never learned how to fake anything and that was a great strength for me in terms of working with him and making him feel words in the heart as well as coming out of his medulla. I said, “You know, you’re a lot smarter than you look and sound.”

Smith: That brings up another question; tell me about your sense of his intelligence.

Penny: Oh, very smart guy. I used to like to tease him because, as I said, when he was sitting down, making a speech and they were shooting him, there was a dullness. Then he got up, he’d rolled up sleeves - he was a handsome guy - and he started really talking and so forth, and we weren’t shooting him. I said, “Whoa whoa, stop. Mr. President, you’re energy is one hundred percent better when you are standing up and speaking, like you’re a football coach.” [Ford] “Well, I am a football coach.” I said, “I know, sir, I’m trying to say that when you get up…” [Ford] “Okay, so what do you want me do?” I said, “Just get up and let it come out.” He was immediately one hundred percent better.

Smith: It’s interesting, the people who saw it, and I, unfortunately never did. But up until the end, almost every year he would find a way to get back to Ann Arbor before the big game with Ohio State. He invariably would go out and give a pep talk to the team. And people who have seen it, who have no reason to exaggerate, say literally, it was night and day. The image of Ford speaking, and then you have a football coach, in effect. And it was passionate, and it was eloquent and it was moving and the kids were blown away. But it was literally, two Fords.
Penny: My wife is a Buckeye, not just a Buckeye. You know those people in the Midwest are abnormal when it comes to… I believe that the Lord never intended for more than ten people to be in one place at one time. When you have 100,000 people screaming bloody murder – and I said, “Americans have learned how to do war, we call it football and we don’t have too many fatalities.” But the point was, when Susan, my wife, said, “Mr. President, you know, I’m a Buckeye.” There was a pause, and he said, “Susan, there aren’t more courageous, wonderful ballplayers than the kids from Ohio State. I happen to be a Wolverine, and I want to tell you something. When those twenty-two boys get out there and play, they are all Americans. Of course, I pretend like I’m…but the bottom line is, I’m just as proud as punch of all them.” I just thought, wow.

Smith: You talk about a naiveté. I’ve often thought, here’s a guy who had spent twenty-five years in Washington, and you don’t get to be where he got without some ambition and a lot of insight, etc, etc. Yet here’s a guy who goes into his first press conference as President, having totally convinced himself that the reporters were going to want to talk about Greece and Cyprus and inflation, and everything except what they all wanted to talk about, which was Richard Nixon. And my sense is it was that experience and his anger, partly at himself for how he handled the questions, that was a tipping point. Two weeks later came the pardon. Is it naiveté? Is it that stubbornness; is it that ability to convince yourself of something? Is it the Eagle Scout that believes the best in everyone? What combination of qualities takes a politician who spent a quarter of a century in Washington and takes that set of expectations into the lions den three weeks into his presidency?

Penny: I asked him in front of Kissinger – we were having a meeting about speeches he was going to be making. And I said cold - we were given permission to ask questions - “Mr. President, why did you pardon Nixon?” And Kissinger almost said, “Well, I don’t think we should…” And President Ford said, “Don, when I came into this office, the first question people were asking me each day was, ‘What are we going to do about Nixon?’ And I finally called Phil Buchen and I said, ‘Phil pardon him.’ And Phil said, ‘Jerry, on what basis?’ On the basis I’m pardoning him. I’m the President. Pardon him. I can’t
do this job if people keep coming in here and telling me what are we going to do. The bottom line is, I don’t want to hurt the man’s feelings. He’s been hurt enough. He’s paid the price. He’s the only president who’s resigned in office. Please pardon him.” Phil Buchen was confined to a chair, he wheeled out and that was it.

Afterwards, I said to the President, “If you say what you just said to me to the media, to anybody, they’ll know you are telling the truth. There’s no deal.” And he said something I’ll never forget about this thing, “I didn’t want to hurt him anymore Don, I didn’t want to hurt him anymore.” And I knew; I was in tears. I thought what humanity. You see, that’s the first thing. People perceived him as a politician. He wasn’t. Jerry Ford was a naval officer, football player and one hell of a human being. His feelings changed. He said, “You know, when I was a youngster I was an isolationist. I thought Lindberg knew what he was talking about. I figured the last thing we wanted to do is go back to Europe and fight another war. Of course, I was as wrong as everybody else who perceived that we didn’t belong over there. Well, we didn’t have any choice, we never did. Did we handle it well? Hell, no.”

What pleased me about him was, yes, he was naïve, but he was not only intelligent, he was educated. I could talk with him about history, because that’s my thing, and at one point I said to him, “The speech you are going to give today to the tank corps – Ft. Campbell, Kentucky – had a couple of errors in it, sir.” [Ford] “What do you mean?” I said, “Well, whoever wrote this speech didn’t really…” [Ford] “What are you talking about?” He said, “Come to lunch and we’ll talk about it.” I walked into a couple of guys in the Pentagon, “Okay, Don, what’s the problem.” I said, “Well, the opening of this speech is when our troops went to fight with French and the British in World War I.” “So?” I said, “We never fought with the French and the British. General Pershing said to Marshall __________, we’ll do it on our own, and then went to ________ and blew the hell out of those bastards and that was the war.” And he said, “Okay. What else?” I said, “Well, the second paragraph says in the great tank offenses in World War I.” “What’s wrong with that?” “There weren’t any. There was the Battle of Cambrai in 1916 where the Brits sent over 200 tanks and the Germans shredded them and
killed everybody. I wouldn’t call that a tank offense because some of guys
you are going to be talking to are probably either there or know about that.”
“Okay.” I felt like Woody Allen with all these stars and everything. And
afterwards he had a big laugh; he said, “I’m glad you did what you did
because it helped me.” Relating to his naiveté, he always played it very cool.
When he had the big fight with Schlesinger and fired him.

Smith: Was that just bad chemistry?

Penny: No, it was a thing called arrogance on the part of Mr. Schlesinger, who
obviously - and this is the other thing, when I would sit in some of these
meetings. After that I would say, “Mr. President, I don’t know if I should be
in these meetings.” He said, “You’re my writer, Kennerly’s my photographer.
I want the pictures and I want the input that you’ll get from these things,
because, Don, you said it to me correct, you’re not from politics and you don’t
care about politics. You’re from the entertainment world and the
communications world. I need you to know as much as you can know before
you put stuff on paper.” And we had writers like Pat Butler, who is a
wonderful writer, who as a youngster got fired every day because I kept
talking to him and Bob Hartmann, was his name…

Smith: Tell us about Bob Hartmann.

Penny: Whoaaaa, Bob Hartmann.

Smith: Clearly a polarizing figure.

Penny: We became friends through Cary Grant, as a matter of fact, at the convention,
after many, many months of difficulty. When I first went to the White House,
Hartmann called me and said, “Get over here.” He said, “You’ll report to me.”
I said, “Bob, are you a comedy writer?” “No,” he said. I said, “I don’t report
to you, Bob. And I don’t work for the White House.” I wasn’t, at that point; I
was working for the Campaign to Elect. Hartmann was a bully and a prick.

Smith: And a drunk.

Penny: Ford said to me, “You need to talk to Bob before noon.” I said, “Why’s that?”
He said, “Because he drinks.” I went to Brent Scowcroft and I said, “Brent…”
And he said, “Don we all have the problem,” and Rummy said to me, “Oh, I’m so glad you’re here!” I said, “Wait, wait. Don’t put me in the middle,” which is what they did. So Hartmann and I had a major confrontation where it almost came to blows. John Osborne called me and he said, “I heard you and Hartmann had it out.” I said, “No, we had it in.” Doug Smith, who is one of Hartmann’s fellows, called me to say that Hartmann is very upset and, “If I were you, I’d listen to everything he had to say.” I said, “I’d be happy to do that, but anybody who pushes me around – see I’m from Brooklyn – I don’t _______ somebody, I’ll punch him in the mouth.”

And the bottom line is, I said to Bob Hartmann in modesty, “Bob, what I want you to know is that I’ll be happy to talk with you, because you are a good speechwriter.” He was, he wrote good speeches, and I said, “But your perception – you’re smarter than I – is wrong. For example, Bob, how much money have you got?” He said, “Well, I’ve got a lot of money. I’m very wealthy and I earned every penny of it.” I said, “Now, let me tell you something. I don’t need you, I don’t even need Jerry Ford, but I think he needs me, so I want you to step back and shut the fuck up.” [Hartmann] “Well, you don’t have to use that kind of language.” I said, “Yeah, I do. Because you see, in language, there aren’t dirty words – there are dirty people, but the word is strong and I’ve been trying to tell Jerry Ford how to use those kind of words with passion, without saying the word.”

Smith: What does it tell you though, about Ford’s – on one hand I guess you could say loyalty – but you could also say judgment; that he was willing to adapt the presidency to Bob Hartmann’s peccadilloes.

Penny: That’s exactly what he said to me, “Don, I’ve known him a long time, he’s a good man.” And I said, “Mr. President, he’s a good man and a fine writer, but he’s a bad boss. He’s not a competent leader, and the problem with him is that you’ve got him in your mouth and you’ve got to make a decision - either him or me. And he’s been with you for thirty years, so I don’t have much of a chance there, except that I know what I’m doing in that area and he doesn’t. You make the decision.”
And at the convention, when he made the speech, I took Bob’s authored speech and we rehearsed it and he did it real well. Cary Grant came in the room and said, “Hello, Don. How are you?” Both Hartmann and the President said, “How do you know him?” And Jerry answered, “Well, Don was second unit on Operation Petticoat and we’re old friends,” and so forth. Well, I saw a new respect come from Hartmann and I saw Jerry Ford giggling, saying, “Oh, that’s nice.” At which point, Hartmann, to his credit, said to me, “You did a hell of a job on the rehearsal.”

Smith: It is universally regarded as, if not the best speech Ford ever gave, the best performance Ford ever gave.

Penny: Hellooo….

Smith: And what did you have to go through to get there?

Penny: Oh we fought like cats and dogs. It was Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear. He would go, “Ohhhwwww,” And I would say, “Naaaa, naaaa, don’t do that, don’t do that.” [Ford] “Well, if I want to do that, I’ll do that.” On the second debate, when he said, “Poland is not under the influence…” Brent Scowcroft and Dick Cheney put on Bob Barrett’s army uniform, which was twice my size, as a joke. Ford looks up, he says, “Okay, I’m laughing. What is it you really want?” I said, “Sir, I know…” and these two guys are pushing me, Cheney and Brent – these are two giant guys, and I said, “Mr. President, I know what you meant to say, what you meant to say was that in their hearts and minds, the Polish people, like all human beings, are free. But sir, if you go to Poland, on any given streetcar you’ll see a T34 tank with a Russian soldier in it. They are under the domination of the Soviets.” “Well,” Ford said, “I am not going to change what I said.” I said, “Sir, remember the line, ‘I am not a Lincoln, I’m a Ford’? Well, it’s about time you started thinking about trading up. And if Mr. Lincoln were here with me he’d say, ‘Jerry, listen to him.’” Because I had something going, too, which is the truth. And to answer your question, this is one smart guy. And if he didn’t believe it, Mrs. Ford would say, “He’s right.” And I did that any number of times when she talked about things that he felt embarrassed about. Like abortion or whatever.
Smith: Was that just because where he came from, in his generation, in his family values, you just didn’t talk about those things?

Penny: He knew and felt exactly the way she did.

Smith: Really?

Penny: Oh, yeah. Jerry Ford, I said, “Sometimes you are very liberal.” [Ford] “I am?” I said, “Oh, yeah. You have this wonderful open mind and I see, for example, being from Brooklyn, a Jewish kid, and you once asked me, ‘Why are Jews so funny?’ and my answer was, well, it’s hard to kill us when you’re laughing.” He said, “Yeah, you people are real smart.” I said, “We’re not any smarter than anybody else, but we keep looking over our shoulder because over the past 5,000 years a lot of folks have wanted to do us in because we’re a perfect target, and we ain’t the only ones. Looking all over the world and what they did to certain people and countries in Europe. They would have wiped them out because they were minorities.” I keep having to refer to the fact that his native intellect was massive. Jerry Ford grew up in a hard way. The woman who took him out when he was just a tiny little infant from being around a man who was abusing her. She had enormous courage and he inherited that.

Smith: Did he ever talk about that?

Penny: Once or twice to me. That’s how close we got.

Smith: I was going to say, that was sort of a sacred memory.

Penny: Twice he said, “I never talked to anybody in my life about it. How come I’m talking to you?” I said, “I don’t know, but I’m honored and hope you know you can trust me with what you’re saying.” And even as we speak now, I would never want to do anything. But to his credit he said, “Don, you know, I grew up not much better than an orphan. And when I was a kid a teacher in school said, ‘There is somebody who wants to see you down at the drugstore.’ And I went down there and it was my father, my real father. And he gave me five dollars and I never saw him again and I was pretty angry about it.” I got that pretty clear. And he said, “Jerry Ford, my dad, my stepdad, he was a good man and he gave me trust.” And you know when people come from a broken
home, they don’t trust. Kids don’t trust. I’ve had many friends who grew up and said to me, it’s always been a great thing, “Why am I talking to you now?” And I said, “I don’t know. I’ve just got to tell you all my life I’ve had the great privilege of having somebody say, ‘I trust you.’” There is just no greater compliment.

Smith: Well, of course. You mentioned anger. He had a temper.


Smith: What did you do to prompt it?

Penny: The very thing you asked me about, I kept saying, “Say it again. Say it again.” [Ford] “No.” I said, “Say it again.” Finally I said, “You can throw the desk at me, it ain’t going to change anything.” He said, “God damn, you’re the most stubborn little bastard I ever…” I said, “No, sir, you’re the most stubborn, big bastard.” And somebody wrote an article saying, “Big Jerry Ford needed little Don Penny.” And I took that as a great compliment. As I said before, at one point he said to me, “You’re my conscience.” I said, “Sir, that’s not true. You’re your conscience. I’m just, if you will, just picking at you, saying, ‘come on, stop.’”

Smith: I take it there was some part of him that instinctively rebelled against practicing because it seemed artificial?

Penny: Oh, yeah. I said, “You know, you and Frank Sinatra have something in common.” He said, “What’s that?” I said, “You don’t like to rehearse.” Now when I played Jimmy Carter, I teased him, I said, “You know, Jimmy Carter’s going to do this. [fast talking]” and you’re going to go [slow mumbling], and listen carefully to this guy because he’s got his facts down.” Now Jimmy Carter’s intellect was one tenth of Gerald Ford’s. Jimmy Carter was busy parking if he wanted his car in places and making sure that nobody had this and had that. He was an incredibly limited man in that he had serious ability, having graduated from the Naval Academy.
I was amused when I became friends with Jody Powell, saying, “I’ve got to tell you something, he’s claiming to be a nuclear physicist. There aren’t any in the Navy uniform. Then they changed that to a nuclear engineer, there weren’t any of those either. He was aboard a U.S. submarine as a laundry and administrations officer before he took a hardship discharge to run the peanut thing, which he never did. Two guys from Plains ran the operation. As his mother said, “There’s not much there in terms of business.” And to his credit, Carter, like a number of the presidents I became familiar with, like Reagan, had what I call an intellect to a certain point, an IQ about 90, not more.

I worked for Reagan for thirty years and I was always amused by the fact that Reagan, being the actor he was, looked at his father-in-law, Loyal Davis, and did him. Loyal Davis said to Ronald Reagan, “There are five words: the budget, (and so forth). Stay with those five words, Ronnie, and if they want to talk about something else, just say, ‘Get back to it.’” And Reagan, to his credit, one day we were working on a Gridiron speech and he’s sitting there behind the Oval desk and I’m working and he looks at me and he says, “Not bad for two broken down old actors, is it?” And I looked at the President and said, “That’s funny,” And he was great.

Jim Baker and Don Regan before he left, would come in. At one point when Baker came in, he was just taking over. He said, “Mr. President, this is today’s agenda if you want to change any of these meetings and so forth…” The President said, “Well, that’s okay.” And when Baker left he said, “Why were they thinking I would know anything about agendas?” At one point he was reading and he says, “Don, what’s parity mean?” I said, “You mean parody, or parity.” He said, “P A R I T Y.” I said, “That means equality. You get six, I get six.” “Oh! God, I guess I should have known that.” I said, “Well, I’ve got to tell you something. We are all just heavily flawed, including you.” He used to say if they treated him in Hollywood the way they treat me in Washington I never would have left.

Smith: Not to get off on Reagan, but because I did the Reagan Library, it was interesting - a guy who would ask questions – of George Wile – like, “What makes the Blue Ridge Mountains blue?” Which, when you stop to think, it’s a
perfectly reasonable question. And that the guy was comfortable enough with himself to ask a question like that. History casts them as adversaries but Ford and Reagan had a lot of similar qualities.

Penny: I wrote a joke that Ford would say: “Reagan and I have a lot of similarities, we both played football. I played for Michigan and he played for Warner Brothers.” There are no retakes in the Oval Office. The jokes were easy for me. Now Reagan’s wife, Nancy, was real pissed off at me because I’d spent thirty years with him and there I was on the other side of the fence. She never forgave me for it until a certain time came later on when he was President and she said, “Don, we need your help.”

Smith: They always remember how to get hold of you when they need you. That’s bipartisan.

Penny: And the one thing that struck me, we were talking about Jerry’s naiveté; Bill Lukash came up to him at the convention. He said, “Now, Betty’s got the nerve problem _________. When you two go out there, ________ and so forth, whatever you do, don’t pull her arm up in the victory thing. Don’t pull her arm past…” [Ford] “Okay.” They went out there and Ford grabbed her arm and I saw her wince, and I said to Lukash, “God damn it.” He [Ford] went back into the dressing room and went into the bathroom and he cried. He was so upset, having forgotten. And that’s when I realized who he was. In some ways he was a little kid, his enthusiasm - he meant well - and her courage.

Smith: Did you know about her problem, however defined?

Penny: Oh, I got into trouble with her. I saw her slip a pill and take a martini and I said, “Did you just take that?” and she said, “Yeah.” I called Bill Lukash and he came up. And she said, “You ratted on me.” I said, “Yes, m’aam.” She said, “Don, why did you do that?” I said, “Betty, you can’t drink liquor and take pills. You are poisoning yourself.” “Well, why didn’t you just tell me that?” “Well, m’aam, I’ll tell you the truth, I felt that both you and Jerry Ford were drinkers.” I’m a Jewish kid from Brooklyn, ________ was all I knew about and I never wanted to drink that crap. I didn’t know what to do.
Bill Lukash and I became good friends. We worked out in the gym. And I just thought this is a great guy and we became good pals. He and Bud McFarland and I were in the gym together and we became buddies. And he also said the same thing. So you’re in show biz? And everybody was interested. Like with President Johnson, at one point he said, “Who is this actor that Lynda is going out with?” And his name was George Hamilton. And he says, “An actor? Uh huh. What is he?” I said, “He’s an actor, sir.” He asked the question, “Well, why isn’t he in Vietnam?” I said, “Why?” And he said, “Well, he’s young enough to be in the army.” Well that night George Hamilton and Lyndon Johnson had a few words and that was the end of George Hamilton. But whereas Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter and George Bush had their own peculiarities and talents, Jerry Ford was of all of them, the most natural man I have ever met. This is a man who had no pretensions, and who had great strength because he came from truth. It’s all he ever did.

Smith: You told Tom Brokaw, a wonderful story involving a tailor in Georgetown.

Penny: Saul ________________.

Smith: Yeah. Why don’t you relate that?

Penny: One day I was talking to Mrs. Ford. I said, “I don’t want to insult the President, but (whistle), he’s wearing those powder blue leisure suits with the big things and he has these shoes with socks that have clocks on them and these….Jesus Christ, Mrs. Ford.”

Smith: She was very clothes conscious.

Penny: She gave me a picture of him in shorts with a little bangs haircut. And I said, “Even then the pants were too short.” I said, “Mr. President, I’m a natty guy from Brooklyn, you know. And I’m a little disappointed in your outfits with the white belts, with the thing…” [Ford] “So?” “Well, I’ve got a friend, Ralph Lauren, in New York. I’d like to bring him down and have you look at some suits and ties.” [Ford] “Okay.” And then he forgot about it. And Saturday mornings I’d go up and have a cup of coffee and he’d be watching a game.

Smith: College football.
Don Penny   December 13, 2009

“This little Jewish tailor, he’s got a number on some outfits, he’s coming over from the men’s clothing store,” I’ve forgotten the name of it.

Smith: Britches?

Penny: Britches. I’d gone over there and Saul had fixed suits for me and we’d become good buddies. “Okay, fine.” I went to Saul and I said, “Saul, I’d like you to come to the White House and fix up…” He said, “No, I don’t think so.” I said, “Saul, it’s not like the camps. You’ll get in, you’ll get out. I promise you.” He shows up; Ralph Lauren had sent down a bunch of suits and the manager of Britches had brought all the stuff over, the President is looking at all these suits. He said, “Don, how much does this suit cost?” I said, “I don’t know, sir. Four or five hundred dollars.” [Ford] “Five hundred dollars? My first house didn’t cost five hundred dollars.” I said, “Mr. President, you have to…” And Mrs. Ford said, “Jerry, just shut up. Just shut up.”

Well, okay. Before Saul came over the President is watching a ballgame. I said, “Mr. President?” [Ford] “Yeah, Don?” “I just want to tell you that Saul is from the camps,” and I did the whole thing. “________________, I’m watching a ballgame.” Saul comes in and shakes hands and he’s afraid to look. They go into the bedroom of the residence, and Saul is fixing the pants and so forth. I’m watching TV with Kennerly and Mrs. Ford is making us a grilled cheese sandwich. I look in this thing and I see these two guys in there and I see them. Ford is talking to Saul and I see Saul get up and I see the men embrace. Saul puts his arm…the President. Kennerly and Mrs. Ford do a ________________, so she must have known something. The two guys come out, both guy’s eyes are red. I walk in, Kennerly and I and two Secret Service guys are walking Saul back to the car in the West Wing. I said, “Saul, what the hell happened?” He said, “I was fixing his pants and he said to me, ‘Don told me about Auschwitz and the camps and so forth.’” And he repeated everything I ever said that I thought he hadn’t heard a word of. That was Jerry Ford. So I take him to the car and go back up and he’s watching the game again. It’s Saturday morning. I said, “Mr. President?” [Ford] “What?” “Can I?” [Ford] “What?” “I just want to tell you I think you are a terrific guy and I
love you.” He said, “Don, I think you’re a terrific guy, too, and I love you. Now can I watch the ballgame?” “Yes, sir.” Jesus Christ on earth.

Smith: That also goes to another topic that we’ll talk about a little bit more. He was the least self-dramatizing of presidents.

Penny: Oh, jeez, could he be blurry. I said, “Mr. President, don’t you care…” [Ford] “No.” “Aren’t you?” [Ford] “No.” “What do you care about? I just want this.” For example, one day during the Bicentennial I said, “You know, I think we should give Robert E. Lee his citizenship back.” He said, “What?” I said, “Well, you know, after the Civil War some fifty-sixty thousand Confederate officers signed an amnesty that we’ll never fight again. And to his credit, Robert E. Lee signed it, too. But a congressman pigeonholed it and it was never…Jack Marsh, Jim Cannon. Jim Cannon from Brooklyn is going to get Robert E. Lee his citizenship back? Okay, that’s great.

And we went down there with this piece of paper and put it at Washington _______. Dean Percy and I went in and put it up there and there were twelve flags on – not even on, what do you call it? Flagpoles. On branches because the Confederates didn’t have any flagpoles at the end. And the sarcophagus was then at the Washington ______ before they moved it. And Ford said, “How did you know about…?” I said, “Sir, I can read and I majored in college in history. And my mother’s family is from Atlanta, Georgia, and they were there in 1845 before the Civil War. One of the few Jewish families in Atlanta, and my ancestors had a company that made kitchen tables, wood tables.” Gate City Table Company, which still exists. They now make it out of Formica and stuff like that. So he said, “Oh, so you know about the Civil War?” I said, “Yes, I do.” And we talked about the fact that he and I had been born not that long after World War I. I was never more impressed with a human being in my life, or such simplicity, and I was so taken with the fact that men and women in his company would sense it.

Smith: How important was Mrs. Ford?

Penny: She was and is the mainstay of his life. In the second debate at William and Mary, I think it was, I was exhausted. I was very tired. I was sort of sitting in
a chair rehearsing, working with him, and I must have fallen asleep. The next thing I knew, the President picked me up out of chair and put me in the bed and Mrs. Ford was at the door. I got up and she said, “He loves you more than he loves me.” And he looked at her and he said, “What?” I said, “No, he loves you most.”

She said to me one time, she said, “When we first started dating he’d been with everybody in Washington and here’s a guy who was handsome as he could be; and we started going out.” And obviously, he’s all man. And I said, “No.” He was scared to death of marriage because of what he’d been through as a kid. He was not a trusting person in terms of a marriage. He had not seen a good one. And he married her. She was herself a woman who was a veteran in that she married a man older than herself who was in a wheelchair. From what I understand, she took care of him. She had a great love for him; she truly, really loved him. And he would say, “Oh, Betty.” At one point we went to a State Dinner and the singer was a young Mexican girl.

Smith: Vicki Carr.

Penny: Vicki Carr. We were dancing, Vicki and I. Vicki’s husband at the time, was Danny Moss, a friend of mine and the manager of a business. And I was dancing with Mrs. Ford, the President was dancing with Vicki Carr and she innocently said to him, “What’s your favorite Mexican dish?” And he said, “You are.” And Mrs. Ford’s hand grabbed my hand and so forth. She walked me over and she said, “This is Don Penny, our best dancer.” As she was going away I heard her say, “You are….,” And I thought, oh jeez. And he said to me the next day, “You got me in a lot of trouble.” I said, “I didn’t do anything,” and that story has been retold many times in different ways, but that’s what happened.

My mother and dad met them, Rosie and Max, I took them up to the residence and Mrs. Ford – because my dad was sort of like a New York cab driver, knew everything. Never in doubt, always knew. And after they left, Betty and Jerry were sitting there and they said it must have been tough being Max’s son. I said, “Yeah, it was tough. My father knew everything.” Because he said, “Jerry….,” And I thought Jesus Christ; he’s the President of the United
States. At one point when she went to the hospital he was just so beaten up. He talked to me about that because like a lot of guys, he didn’t know how to handle it. He can handle anything.

Smith: This was the breast cancer surgery?

Penny: They had a sincere and great love and you could see the man when he was with her. Same thing I felt with Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter. They related to the women.

Smith: People have often paid tribute to her courage and her candor in making it possible, really, for women to discuss what had been kept in the closet. But, in fact, he also, by his reaction had an enormous impact on how men responded to this.

Penny: And to his credit, I said to him, “You know, I’m a metrosexual, sir.” He said, “What’s that?” I said, “It’s a guy who’s in touch with his feminine side, who’s not an asshole. And isn’t a macho jerk and the testosterone does not flow. I listen.” [Ford] “Oh, well, I’m very aware of women.” I said, “Yeah, I laughed when Kennerly said you were in Texas and all these great looking…he said, ‘Does this get you turned on?’ I said, you know, I’m older but I’m not dead, David.”

Smith: What was the relationship with Kennerly? Was Kennerly almost a member of the family?

Penny: Oh, yeah. The President loved David. How could you not?

Smith: Was part of it because he could play the smartass?

Penny: Which he did brilliantly.

Smith: The irreverence?

Penny: David Kennerly is a remarkable person. I got to know him and I said, “Jesus, if you had any humility, you could be president,” because it’s true. Ford listened to David. David had been in Vietnam and was a pretty savvy young fellow. He was in his twenties when I met David, I remember with the Mayaguez situation, David said to him to him - he had all these four-star
generals, he said - “Wait a minute, how many of you guys in this room have been in Vietnam?” And nobody had. He said, “I think this is the work of a local commander. I don’t think this is the Cambodian government.” He was right. And Ford, to his credit – I wasn’t there – but he said, “How many people are we going to lose? And I guess it was General ____________, I’m not sure which one it was, said, “We could lose forty-fifty guys.” “How many guys we getting?” He said, “Forty-fifty guys.” So we’re killing a lot of boys to get ______________.

Everybody left and I understand that Ford sat there with his head hanging and he said, “David was going to tell me. This is not an easy job, is it?” It was then that I think he first realized what he was about in that job. And at one point he looked up from something he was reading and he said to me, “Don, I can do this job.” I figured, oh God. I had this vision of like eight years in the White House – I said, “Noooo ____.” But his humility, as you said, when I first met him, he took the job because they gave it to me.

Smith: Did they wait too long to take Reagan seriously? One gets a sense that the campaign was very slow in getting off the ground.

Penny: When I got there I realized that the campaign was being run poorly. Grey Advertising and a couple of guys come out twice a week. And I said to David, “David, these guys, the drags are terrible.” I brought back Jim Jordon who was one of the guys from BBD&O, and Charlie Welsh who was my good buddy, who was the head of Wells, Rich, Green. Then they hired two fellows whose names escape me, to do the campaign.

Smith: There was Bailey-Deardorff.

Penny: Bailey-Deardorff was hired. It was too little, too late. I raised some money in New York for him, but he was tight. And to answer your question, if we’d had another four months we would have won.

Smith: Where were you on election night?

Penny: I have a photograph of me and President Ford. I was up in the residence with him. We walked into the bedroom and it was a November night and there was
the Washington Monument and I was really upset. The first thing I said, I
looked up at him, “You don’t look anything like it.” He said, “What?” I said,
“It’s a joke, sir. The Washington Monument.” He said, “Don, you know, we
have a lot of work to do yet.” And Mrs. Ford came in and there I was with the
Fords, my ex-wife was there, Charlie Walsh and Susan. I have the
photographs. I was crying and I said, “I’m so sorry.” He said, “It’s okay, it’s
okay.” And that was the measure of the man. That hurt him deeply.

Smith: It took him a while to bounce back?

Penny: Oh, yeah. It was a terrible experience.

Smith: We’re told the next day, and for some time thereafter that he was angry at
himself, and he said, “I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer.”

Penny: He didn’t like Jimmy Carter. And that’s why I was surprised when they
became friends. He said, “Don, I misjudged him.” See, that’s the thing I liked
about him. When he was wrong about something he said he was wrong. Oh he
was so much fun. We got in the elevator and _____ went burrrrr and all the
Secret Service guys would break up and laugh and then the doors would open
and it’s a lot of _____________ and so forth. He said, “Oh, don’t do that. It
gets me __________.” One time we were in the elevator and Kennerly was
saying, “You know, you have to do the radio thing,” and he lost his temper.
“God damn, David, I know I…..!” And he looked at me because I was
______, and he said, “Well, you know I knew…” I said, “Okay.” But I
laughed because Kennerly was shriveled up and was hiding in the corner and
Ford was really upset. He was a big fellow. He had a temper.

Smith: The public didn’t see that very often, did it?

Penny: Well, he made sure they didn’t. It was part of his makeup. Again, he wouldn’t
talk about the abortion stuff, because he’s like, a guy. Guys, for the most part
- I’m part of a caregiver’s thing now that my ex-wife has cancer – guys sit
there and don’t talk; the women talk. And the lady who is the counselor said
simply, “You’re talking about it?” And I said, “Yeah, because I’m feeling.” I
do counseling over at the VA with a bunch of guys, Richard, who are in their
seventies – black men, for the most part, with a sixth grade education, who
haven’t got a nickel to go get a cup of coffee. That’s how old I am – I speak of a nickel cup of coffee. Now it’s a dollar-fifty. But I sit there and the anger in these guys, the frustration, there’s a lot of testosterone going around in that room. President Ford is basically a very shy man.

Smith: Really?

Penny: Oh, yeah.

Smith: What makes you say that?

Penny: I’d see him do a brilliant job of being outgoing when he was cringing. Saul was a good example. Afterwards, Mrs. Ford said to me, “The President wants you to invite Saul and his wife to the Israeli State Dinner.” “What?” “Yeah, invite him.” So I went to Saul and I said, “Now you’re going to go to the dinner. Now, the first thing, when he comes down the stairs and goes by, don’t grab the jacket and give it a whatever.” And he laughed and he said, “Don, a State Dinner.” We’re standing there and (music begins) he comes down and so forth, and Saul, and his wife’s name is Esther, history right there? Okay. And after the dinner we went into the hall and went to the Marine Commandant, and said, “Do you know Hava Nagila?” He said, “Sure.” Now that opening thing is eight guys can walk in with the Israeli flag, Star of David, all look like my Uncle Al, and Rabin and so forth, playing Hatikva, the national anthem. And, of course, we were all in tears.

Here’s Saul and Esther – they were in the camps. Now they are in the White House with the President of the United States. Anyway, the Marine Commandant starts playing, and I get in the middle of the floor and I’m dancing doing the ______ with Rabin and Saul, the three of us. Ford comes over and he grabs me, “How do know how to do that?” I said, “I’m Jewish.” He said, “Funny, you don’t look it.” The place just broke up.

At the end of the evening, if you remember Yankee Doodle Dandy with George M.? I tapped down the stairs with it, I called my daughter who was then eleven years old and said, “You wouldn’t believe tonight.” And Ford went upstairs and I went up and had a drink with him, and he was very touched. He said, “You know, there weren’t a lot of Jewish people in Grand
Rapids.” I said, “I understand.” He said, “We had Jewish people, but to ask you a big question, I met so many different people here,” which leads me to the best Gerald Ford story I’ve got. Which was when Giscard D’Estaing was coming.

Smith: Which would seem to be temperamental opposites.

Penny: Exactly. But the President and I were rehearsing a speech and he says, “And I want to welcome the French president, Mr. Justin…” I said, “Hold it. What did you say?” He said, “Justin …” I said, “You mean Giscard D’Estaing?” He said, “I said that.” I said, “Sir, you didn’t even come close. And do me a favor. See, remember when we were in Iowa and you said, ‘It’s great to be here in Iowa…Ohio,’?” I said, “Sir, just say it’s great to be here because you fluff a lot and people don’t like it when you say it’s great to be in Ohio and we’re in Iowa. And here, sir, you’re really going to blow this whole thing with Giscard D’Estaing.” [Ford] “No I won’t.” I said, “Yes, you will.” [Ford] “No I won’t.” “Yes, you will.” [Ford] “NO I WON’T.” “Okay. Okay. Can I just tell you how to do it?” (Ford sighs) “It’s four names.” [Ford] “Four names?” “Ja Scarred Des Tang, Ja Scarred Des Tang,” then I did him, I did the speech. “It’s a pleasure to welcome Mr. Ja Scarred De here, Des Tang… I got it…and it’s a pleasure to welcome Just Scarred…” “Close, try again.” [Ford] “Jess Scarred Des Tang. Giscard D’Estaing.” “You got it!” And I said to myself, I know he’s going to blow it. He got up and I’m standing in the back, _______________ He said, “I want to welcome Mr. Justin Garston to….”

Jesus Christ, because everyone was saying, “What did he say?” Frenchman gets up, to his great credit, he says, “Monsieur President, I want to tell you how much I admire the fact that you are the first politician to pronounce my name correctly.” And Gerald R. Ford looks over at me and he goes….everyone is saying, “What the hell is going on?” That’s Gerald R. Ford. He was never impressed with himself for a minute. And when he did something he thought was good, he went, “Hey!” Like whoa, like a football player would say, I scored! I scored!

Smith: Did he grow in office?

Penny: He was who he was.
Smith: Did Reagan make him a better candidate?

Penny: No, it made him a worse candidate.

Smith: Really?

Penny: He was very intimidated by Ronald Reagan.

Smith: But the notion that Reagan forced him to become a better speaker and to do all of this.

Penny: Oh, in that sense, being a football player, he realized, “I’ve got to play a much better game here.” And he was __________, and in that case, he would pay real attention. And to his credit, Hartmann was a real value. The only thing that Hartmann’s problem was, he was very angry at guys like Rummy and Dick who he perceived as enemies. Because, in fact, he had been with Ford for thirty years. And to his credit, he was a Navy captain; I was a lieutenant commander at the time, but…

Smith: Is it safe to say he was possessive of Ford. Not only protective, but in some ways – understandably – possessive.

Penny: In my heart, I believe that Bob Hartmann thought he was a smarter man than Gerald Ford. And you know what? He may have been. But his main problem, I used to call him the Snow Toad, (croaking). And of course, humor is a major weapon and I used it because Bob Hartmann was a terrific target. And whenever he’d attack me, I would turn it around and put it right back at him. And I said to him, “You want to do comedy with me, pal? Okay. We’ll check our wits at the door, but be aware of something. I’m going to get you.”

We were going up a bunch of stairs to an airplane thing and he had said something really mean to John Osborne, “Heck, Penny’s not even a writer.” And I said, “You know, you’d better stop putting me down, because you’re putting down the President.” He said, “His latest new thing is a comic from Hollywood,” and he said, “Well, you little son of a bitch.” And I said, “Pal, if you want to take this out…” and Dick Cheney grabbed me, took me into the men’s room, hysterically laughing, and I got two arms over Cheney and I said, “Let me go back I’ll kill the son of a bitch.” And he said, “You could.”
But at that point I realized that Hartmann had intellect, there’s no doubt about it. He could write. And as you say, he did it for thirty years and at one point he says, “He’s mine!”

Smith: Yeah, that’s what I mean.

Penny: And finally I said to him, “Bob, Jerry Ford was a football coach and you were his coach, weren’t you?” That’s when I got through to him. He said, “Jesus Christ, yes.” That’s when we stopped talking to each other. Bob Orben, who was the head comedy writer and so forth, who was a terrific guy, not really funny to me, he was writing whiz-bang jokes and whatever. But he was there before I got there and I related to him. He was a nice man.

Smith: But I understood that it got so bad at one point that there was the Hartmann speechwriting team and then there was this sub rosa speechwriting team, which included Gergen at one point. And the President was willing to tolerate this. We’ll find a way to make it work.

Penny: See, that was the thing about him. I think he saw us as a football team. Defense, offense, and at one point he flattered me tremendously, he said, “Penny, remember what you are.” “What do you mean?” He said, “You’re a quarterback.” I said, “You think so?” He said, “Absolutely. You’re calling plays here. And I’m going to block for you. And that’s when he said, ‘You’ll stand in as director of communications because Bob Reno (whatever his name was) is out.’” Before Gergen took over I would do what I had to do each day and it was then I realized this man has a real sense of teamwork.

Smith: For the last nine years I’ve been working on a biography of Nelson Rockefeller.

Penny: Oh boy, another pal.

Smith: And I was going to ask you if you had any interaction with Rocky?

Penny: I met Rockefeller when I was thirteen years old when I was the hat check boy at the 21 Club. My uncle, Jerry Burns, was one of the owners of the club, and it was Burns and – I’m trying to think of the other family – Kreindler, who owned 21. I was Donny, the boy who took the coats. I was going to Dwight
Prep School in New York, and so the Rockefellers were nice people and started 21. People don’t know it, but Nelson Rockefeller was in college with Jack Kreindler and they had a place called the Black Cat during prohibition, where they did their thing. The Rockefellers sold Kreindler and Burns three brownstones on Fiftieth Street. Then they realized they’d made a mistake because they were going to build – this was 1930 – and they gave them ten grand for the three brownstones, where they built 21 brands and whatever.

Rockefeller and I had an experience many years later. I’m walking around late at night in the EOB, and you know, the walls are ______________ I would go (horn sound), and I’m walking around, going to ______ and walking past the Vice President’s office and there he is in shirt sleeves at two o’clock in the morning. And he says, “What the hell are you doing?” I said, “Marching, sir.” And I realized…and he looks at me and says, “Um, I know you. Donny at 21. I’ll be God damn, what are you doing here?” I said, “Well, I grew up, sir, somewhat.” He said, “No, obviously you didn’t.”

So the next morning Ford is calling me, he’s laughing and he’s saying, “Rockefeller called up and said you got a kid in here named Don Schneider, who I know as Don Penny, but I knew him when he was at 21,” and so forth and so one. Ford calls me and says, “You’ve got to stop marching.”

Smith: He was not a happy vice president.

Penny: No. He realized he had made some big mistakes in his life, and being a politician was really…his brother who ran Chase…

Smith: David.

Penny: David was another guy I was friends with. I had an account with Chase for twenty years as a PR working with Tom LeBreck(?), who is the president. Carlson was one of those guys I was a little concerned about because he’s smart, I wasn’t sure, being an interloper, whether I had credibility with what I felt was the middle management guys – like John, because John had a tough way to go. He had Ron Nessen – in itself an effort – and he’d been there I guess for the previous guy, I’m not sure. Anyway, where were we?
Smith: About Nelson.

Penny: Anyway, his conclusion to me was, Gene – I’m trying to think of his last name – the guy from Chase with whom I worked with very closely. Gene…

Smith: Champion?

Penny: No. Gene…grey-haired guy, I’ll think of his name. And he was the guy working with and for Rocky. But he was an incredible gentleman, and so was Happy, and they treated me and Susan, my lady, then, not my wife, but became my wife, very well. He was a terrific guy. He had a lot of anger. He was real pissed off. And of course, Ford tried everything he could…and it didn’t work too well.

Smith: And he went to his grave convinced that Don Rumsfeld did him in. Because remember, look what happened: George Bush got deep-sixed at the CIA, Rumsfeld got a Cabinet slot, his guy got the chief of staff job, and Rockefeller was dumped.

Penny: It’s unfair to accuse Don of doing anything like that. I had a couple run-ins with Don. A very close friend of mine was an acting army secretary, Les Brownlee and deserving of the job, as opposed to the man Harvey who got the job who didn’t know a God damn thing about it. And as you and I both know, a lot of guys got jobs they shouldn’t have had and they took them instead of saying, I’ll stand in front of instead of behind this guy. He knew what he was doing. (?) And I was always impressed with the fact that John was a youngster, but he was doing exactly what he needed to do. And he was one of the few guys I thought who was not there for himself. Because the thing that bothered me the most when I came in as an interloper, so to speak, and this was a fourth rate corporation, which the White House has always been. And some of the stuff that went on, I thought, Jesus, if this was a regular company, that guy would be out on his ass.

Smith: What was the difference between how Rumsfeld ran things and how Cheney ran things?
Penny: The best joke that Cheney ever said at the dinner, when he said, “Well, there’s Don Rumsfeld, who is (whatever),” and he looks at me and he says, “There’s Dick Cheney, my assistant.” These guys, at certain points, started believing their credits. I don’t know how John feels, or he would feel, but what disturbed me the most and what Brent Scowcroft said about both. He said, “You wouldn’t recognize him, Don. They are not the guys they used to be.” I came after 9/11 to realize how really upset they were, and between you and me, scared shitless. And would you be any different? I don’t think so. And to his credit, Dick Cheney is still, if you will, trumpeting the call, which I think is not wrong. How he did it, Rummy did it? Arrogance is always as deadly as a bullet in the heart.

Smith: It must have been awkward for Ford.

Penny: Oh, Jesus Christ. When I talked to him about it – and there again, I was humbled by the fact that he talked to me. I teased him after, I said, “You are becoming very Jewish,” because it was like King David. He said, “Don, you know how I feel about them.” I said, “Sir, they’re your boys, as I am.” He said, “That’s right.” He said, “Do I agree with what’s going on? Of course not. Have I tried to say anything? Well, Don, he was aware of the fact that I knew that when the elder Bush talked to Dick he said to him, ‘I don’t want my son questioned by the media as to whether he’s talking to me, because I don’t want that.’ That’s why you are going to do the job of finding the next vice president. And when they can’t find one, you’re taking the job because I’ll talk to you, Dick. And you’ll talk to him.” And poor old Dick, dope that he is, took the job, putting himself in a rock in a hard place. And to his credit, he took it very seriously because Dick is another kid from Wyoming. I wish he was as smart as his wife. He also scared the shit out of me when he got so sick. I said to him more than once, “What do you need this for? You’ve got money. Come on, Dick. The girls are fine,” and we went through the thing with Mary when she announced. And he said, “Alright, so a liberal Jew is going to tell me what to do here?” I said, “I’m going to tell you, keep your mouth shut and act like an adult.”
Smith: It’s interesting about the Fords – as the years went by and the party moved farther and farther to the right, particularly on social issues, they became an island of sorts. It wasn’t just abortion, he is to this day, I think, the only president to sign a gay rights petition. And I wonder, did he change? Did she change him over time? Or was it a combination of the party went farther and farther to the right, and they were in some ways marooned. As I said in my eulogy, most of us get more conservative as we get older. Our sympathies narrow along with our arteries. With him, it seemed to be the exact opposite.

Penny: He made the analogy to me of Lyndon Johnson because he and I talked about Johnson. He said, “Don, when he was considered a turncoat – it was like Richard Russell – after all those years of siding with the no civil rights crap, and all of a sudden he turned on them and made it happen.” He said, “Don, I’ve learned a great deal about this job. I’ve learned through the experience I’ve had with Lyndon Johnson.” I didn’t realize Johnson treated Ford badly. And so did a lot of other people who perceived themselves to be much smarter and they weren’t. And of course, I never had the chance to say to Lyndon Johnson, “You made a mistake about Jerry Ford. First of all, you didn’t play football.” And the bottom line is, he didn’t play for Warner Brothers. We’re talking about the real deal here. I agree with you that he grew as he aged, but to answer your question as to whether she had an impact on him – no. I think he had an impact on him and he went to her and said, “I see your point.” I watched him, I know you could say he grew, but become more experienced. And you and I both know that intellect is important, but experience makes the difference.

Smith: Tell us about the last meeting you had with him.

Penny: Penny Circle said come down. He came in, he was obviously on his last legs. My daughter was there and he took her hand; I’ve got the photograph right here, and he’s holding her hand. And I saw my old friend, my dear old friend, getting ready to go. I put my arms around him and hugged him. I’ve got one picture of the way he hugged me, and that was Sunday. He said he didn’t hug anybody.
My wife and I walked into the dinner, that June dinner, he was at the other end of the hall and he was talking to Colin Powell, and he saw me. And he walked over and he picked me up off the ground and hugged me. And Susan said, “He loves you.” And I said, “Yeah, I love him, too.” He not only changed my life, it was sort of a redemption to see a man who truly cared first about his country. It’s so easy to say he was a great American, and a great patriot. He gave me myself back because I had become quite cynical, as had a lot of people, and Jerry Ford gave me – well, I once said to him, “You know, I once said it would take the President of the United States to convince me that I had any talent because my father was such a hard taskmaster.” And Gerald R. Ford said, “You are a talented boy, Don.”

Smith: Were you surprised by the outpouring when he died? Because he’d been out of the public eye for quite a while and yet, it seemed almost to build as the week went on.

Penny: People came to know, don’t you think, Richard, that this man who was given such an incredible task and punished for it, and laughed at and made to feel less than. And he hunkered down and got through it. He was not so much my hero, although he came close to being that, because I didn’t want to be him, I just wanted to be around him.

Smith: I can’t let you go without asking, did he resent the jokes? I mean, you only have to be human to…

Penny: I’m sure that when I wrote that thing for him at the dinner where Chevy Chase was there, and Bob Orben gave him the line, “I’m Gerald R. Ford and you’re not.” And I did some gags. I put some silverware in front of him, and he pulled the silverware and dropped it on Chevy Chase. He had him then. Chase was begging for mercy. We had the fake speech, he dropped it and ______ came running to get the speech. When Chase did the jokes, I was there. Ford was hysterical. He was laughing. He said, “He’s a funny guy.” I said, “Yes, sir, but he’s making you look silly.” He said, “No he’s not. He’s not, Don. It’s okay.” And all during the time that I watched him, like the time he gave Brezhnev the parka, it was an example of one smart dude. Brezhnev said, “(speaking in Russian) No, I can’t take it.” Ford says, “Oh, yeah, you can.”
And from that point on, there was no problem with the negotiations. Jerry Ford was the most natural human being I ever met. And to his credit, I think he went to his Maker feeling comfortable.

Smith: He had a good life.

Penny: He lived an important life. A lot of successes in the world, very few importants. Gerald Ford was an important. As he said, “I am a football coach.”
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Smith: Thanks for doing this. How did your path cross that of Gerald Ford?

Wilson: Well, it was interesting. I was at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

Smith: You were another Midwesterner? Was Wisconsin home?

Wilson: No, I’m from Kansas, born and bred in Kansas. Started my whole career at the Kansas Historical Society and then went to the Eisenhower Presidential Library. That’s how I got with the National Archives in ‘68.

Smith: Is it safe to say that the Eisenhower Library had a bit of a reputation as a training ground within the agency?

Wilson: Yes, that’s true, which was kind of unusual given the fact of the location and the administration, which I won’t go into detail. But I think part of it was because, when LBJ set up the Johnson Library, he had to kind of give a little due to every other presidential library in order to get what he wanted. And, so, there was a big staffing input in the late ‘60s.

Smith: Was that the golden age?

Wilson: That was kind of the golden age, yes. So, I was from Abilene and was at the State Historical Society finishing my dissertation. It was kind of an interesting opportunity. Because of some family problems and my father’s death and everything, they recruited me to go back out there as a historian.

Smith: Go back out to the Eisenhower?

Wilson: Back to Abilene and to join the Eisenhower staff, which I did. I spent nine years there and gradually became Deputy Director of the library.

Smith: Now, had the President passed away at that point?

Wilson: A month before, but I had met him on other occasions and really got to be close with Mamie and David.
Smith: Maybe closer than Steven Ambrose.

Wilson: Maybe, certainly a more balanced view. So, it was going home for me and worked out pretty well. I was Acting Director for a couple of years while the Director was on leave, so I had a good basis for administration work. It was kind of an unusual period where, you know, of course, you go to get a Ph.D. in the 60s and think you’re going to teach. Public history was an emerging field at that point.

Smith: Looked down upon by some academics?

Wilson: Looked down upon by quite a few, but it was a great opportunity for me, personally, because there was no competition up there, having the degree and some experience in the archives world. It kind of put me on a quick path, which probably ended up my being such a young Archivist [of the U.S.]. Nevertheless, it was good training ground and, in fact, it was kind of the golden age of training period. The GSA would send all their people [for management training]. For example, I got to spend a summer at the Truman Library. I did a lot of training courses – anything you could imagine for leadership and management activities.

Smith: I noticed - correct me if I’m wrong - part of that golden age included the fact that those libraries, the older libraries had, as a dedicated member of the staff, an oral historian.

Wilson: That’s correct. Mack Byrd was the [Eisenhower Library’s] oral historian at the time, who was a rather senior scholar, but once Columbia kind of closed down, the library took over a lot of that oral history. And we did quite a few. I was involved in some of that early planning and activities.

Smith: You said you became close to Mamie and David.

Wilson: Yes.

Smith: There’s a stereotype of Mamie. Tell us something about Mamie that might surprise people.
Wilson: A very warm person. She was a character in her own right. I don’t think she ever got out of bed before eleven in the morning.

Smith: And loved soap operas.

Wilson: And loved soap operas and she liked to have her evening cocktail. But there was a travel issue. She had a problem with her inner ear. She would often come out there and spend long weekends and was very faithful to the library in its early years. The funniest stories, though, evolved around her Secret Service which she considered her children. They’d have to tuck her in at night and everything else.

Smith: I’ve heard rumors that they were not above fixing her dishwasher - that they were domestics as well as agents.

Wilson: Absolutely, and she regarded them as domestics and chauffeurs and other things, and most of them were with her for the whole time. It wasn’t like they rotated like they do today.

Smith: I assume that’s just the outgrowth of a military wife.

Wilson: I think so.

Smith: I mean, you have a staff.

Wilson: Absolutely, and they took it that way. They loved her. It was a very warm relationship. David was an interesting personality because he was working on his grandfather’s biography at the time. He was a strong researcher, a very dedicated researcher. He would come out for two or three weeks at a time and do research. I can remember he would love to bring his kitten along and he’d ride and his hands were all scratched up from being in the car with the cat. Because we’re contemporaries, I kind of became his keeper when he was in town, so I’d take him to the country club to play golf. We timed it one year so he came out for the member-guest golf tournament. He’d never played in a tournament in his life. He’d always played with his father-in-law, whom he called Mr. Nixon.
Smith: Really?

Wilson: M-hmm. Always Mr. Nixon. So, he said he really didn’t know anything about competitive golf because, if they didn’t like the shot, they just took another. So, when we went out to play - I can remember the first tournament - we went out and he got up and hit a booming drive, just a beautiful shot. Of course, a little crowd had gathered and somebody said, “Terrific shot,” and David just turned around and said, “Well, it should be. My grandfather spent a million dollars to have me be able to make that shot.” But, he was a delightful person to have around. We spent a considerable amount of time together and he did very good research. His grandmother, though, was always upset that he didn’t take the bar.

Smith: Really?

Wilson: And would tell him that every time she saw him.

Smith: Do you think the Eisenhower connection either prepared you for or in some ways recommended you to President Ford?

Wilson: Yes. I believe that’s certainly the case. It was interesting. In that selection process, President Ford made it very clear he wanted a professional historian to lead the library. Partly that was driven by the University of Michigan saying, “We want your library here, but we want somebody that’s qualified to be on the faculty and that can be part of the cadre there and be an adjunct to the University.” Interesting thing. He set up David Matthews as the chairman of the search committee and David, of course, was the young Ph.D., former president of the University of Alabama, the bright, shining star on the watch.

Smith: It’s amazing. We interviewed him a year ago and he still looks young.

Wilson: He’s amazing. David and I got to be very good friends and had a close relationship, but I wasn’t sure I wanted that. The Archives was pushing this. David Matthews, you know, urged me to send in a resume. I can recall David telling me that they said, “This is the one we want to look at.” So, I received a phone call to go to New York to the Astoria. Astoria?
Smith: The Waldorf?

Wilson: The Waldorf. And, I mean, I’m 34-years old, 35, and I’d never been to New York.

Smith: Really? You are a Midwesterner.

Wilson: Yeah, I was a Midwesterner. I went east to college to graduate school in Cincinnati. That was east. And, so, I got on a plane, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to do this.

Smith: Was it in part because of the bifurcated nature of the institution?

Wilson: No, that didn’t bother me. A two-year presidency, you know. They [the National Archives] really pressed me hard to take the Nixon project on and I refused that because I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life in litigation. So, I wasn’t sure what the motivation was, but I was kind of the candidate for the Archives at the time. So, I agreed to go. I was so nervous. I mean, I’m staying at the Howard Johnson in downtown New York City. I go over there and get there a little bit early and David Matthews and President Ford were meeting and having coffee. Fortunately, the Secret Service outside the door were like Mamie’s, they were characters. They put me at ease. They started telling jokes, they were kidding me, and I relaxed, and by the time I got in there, I was very comfortable.

And, I say this about President Ford, he immediately put you at ease. There was something about him, maybe it was the Midwestern part of him. At the same time, there was always a reserve with him. You know, it was an interesting combination. He could make you feel very comfortable in any meeting setting and any kind of thing, but I never got very close. It was seven years with him and I really wasn’t close like I was later with George H. W. Bush - became part of the family. But it was a very cordial meeting. David asked very good questions, and I think in some ways I was interviewing them as much as I was being interviewed, because I had to be convinced that I really wanted to do this and take this on. And he convinced me. He said, “I’m committed to making this a first-rate presidential library. I will be
involved. I will be engaged, even though I live in California and Colorado. Whatever you need, I will be available to be called upon.” And just the ideas that he threw out. One thing, I think President Ford was always underestimated for his intellect in terms of creative ideas and looking to the future, not looking to the past. That always struck me. So, it was very cordial.

Smith: Did he explain why this institution, uniquely, was in two cities?

Wilson: No, he wasn’t defensive about it at all. He said, “I really feel strongly that Grand Rapids is my home and that’s where the museum portion should be.” And, of course, at this point, the library’s already been built and the museum was nearing completion. So, I’m coming in not to design or plan the building. I’m coming in to be the first director. So, it was a case of not really having to explain all that much. It wasn’t an issue in those days. It became an issue after.

Smith: Won’t it be ironic if the system evolves to the point where foundations build museums and the archival portions are in D.C.

Wilson: Are centralized.

Smith: Yeah.

Wilson: Yeah, and I wouldn’t be surprised if that isn’t the model. In fact, with the new law or requirement, I think they’re driving it to that. Or the endowment requirement that’s 60% now. Incredible. I mean, we struggled with the 20%, [at the George H.W. Bush Library] really negotiated very hard.

Smith: One of the things, of course, about that time in his life and thereafter, he took a lot of heat for ‘commercializing’ the former presidency. And I don’t know if he ever talked about that with you. The component that almost got left out was that he had to raise the money to build the museum in particular. And those were dollar amounts that he had never dealt with, certainly in his political career.
Wilson: Absolutely. We had examples of pledges being made on the back of golf score cards. He worked very hard at it and I think this was like many presidents, you’ve got to put them in the context of their times. This was not an unusual thing. He was a fairly young man when he left office.

Smith: Without money.

Wilson: Without money. Never had an opportunity to make any money. Certainly didn’t have a big campaign chest to carry into a retirement package. So, I never felt he was that defensive about it and I never challenged him about it either. I thought he always handled it very appropriately from my perspective as library director at the time. So, at any rate, they did offer me the position and I came away very convinced that this would be a good, fresh opportunity.

Smith: Were you more impressed with him than you expected to be?

Wilson: Yes. That was my first meeting with him and that respect and that admiration continued to grow the more I dealt with him. A remarkable man in many ways.

Smith: What do you think the public didn’t know?

Wilson: The public didn’t know that this man had a great mind and steel trap memory. I loved to tell the story about my third year there. We were going over the budget for the next year and I proposed this budget and made some alterations and he said, “Don, two years ago, this was the number that you used here and now you’re projecting here.” He said, “That’s fine, but can you give me a little more explanation of it?” You know, I had to fumble through my papers to go back and look at those numbers and review it.

Smith: Was that the old appropriator at work? The Appropriations Committee?

Wilson: I think it was the Armed Services.

Smith: Armed Services?

Wilson: Yeah. I think that he had a way with these numbers and an ability to recall. The other remarkable thing about him in my tenure with him was that he
really was reluctant to look back. He was always wanting to look forward. And I can recall specifically one time I mentioned that we ought to do a conference, a symposium, on the 25th Amendment and succession. And he looked at me a minute and he said, “Don, good idea, but wait until I’m gone. We don’t need to do that while I’m living.”

Smith: Really?

Wilson: He said, “I want to look at current events. I want to look at how we can impact current activities in the political scene.” And that’s where I think you had the evolution of the Jimmy & Jerry Show.

Smith: Did that begin during your tenure?

Wilson: Yes.

Smith: I shouldn’t editorialize – I think one of the things that is left out contextually, for example, of Tom DeFrank’s book and some of the interviews that were done at the time of his passing - it’s easy to go back to 1980 and find all kinds of things he said in public. But the fact is, over a period of time, that changed. One of the things they had in common was that Ronald Reagan ran against both of them.

Wilson: I think that’s right, but I think more than that, Richard, the former presidency is a small select fraternity and they share so many experiences. One of the most poignant times that I had at the library, was the first time President Carter came to the library to do this joint program with President Ford. And, he took him through the museum and they went into the Oval Office area. I was taking them through, guided them into the room and they were chatting away and all of a sudden, there was this silence. To me, it seemed like ten minutes, but I’m sure it was about two minutes. Neither one said a thing. Neither man said a word to each other, just looked at the Oval Office. And I looked back and there were tears in both of their eyes. It was so moving to me and I didn’t say anything. I just walked out and we went on with the tour. So, I just felt like that was a bonding moment.
Smith: It’s a great story. In advance of that, was there any trepidation? I don’t mean on his part, but maybe on yours?

Wilson: Yeah, mine. Sure.

Smith: How was this going to go?

Wilson: How was this going to go? And, even after - I think I’m editorializing a little bit – I was a little bit shocked at Carter’s presentation at the University of Michigan when he was alluding to the fact that Ford and he could solve the Mid East problems. I think the bond there was the fact that they were closer on foreign policy, that there wasn’t a lot of distance there. They could agree on a lot of the things and a lot of the domestic [differences] had taken a back seat by then with the Reagan era. So, I don’t think there was any kind of tug of war there philosophically. They were both looking kind of outward and into the future. But I’m still amazed at the personality difference and how well they got along, because, in my opinion, President Ford had no ego and President Carter does.

Smith: That’s an interesting observation. In another way, they had a lot of shared values. I mean, in some ways, a small town in Georgia and West Michigan are not as far removed as might appear.

Wilson: I think Grand Rapids is a little different than Plains, but yeah, the rural values. And I think you had this Dutch Reform kind of reserve and this Southern Baptist kind of religious parallels there. Because both were fairly conservative religious values.

Smith: Yes.

Wilson: And I think that probably played into it a little bit as well, but it was a true friendship and one that maintained itself over the years. Not with some of the other former presidents. Not in the same way.

Smith: Clearly, Jimmy Carter has always been a party of one, and I’m sure there were other former presidents who scratched their heads and wondered, “How can Jerry Ford have this—?”
Wilson: Yeah, I worked for a couple of them. But I think this was an amazing ability of President Ford’s and I think a lot of it had to do with the fact that he never displayed any ego. I mean, I’m amazed to this day that Henry Kissinger and President Ford were such great friends and it was a mutual admiration. It wasn’t just friendship, it was a mutual admiration. There are not many people who can say that about Henry Kissinger.

Smith: As you say this, it occurs to me that there’s ego and then there’s a particular kind of self-confidence which is sufficiently confident in itself it doesn’t require the trappings of ego.

Wilson: No, and he was very comfortable with himself. And I think he was comfortable with this and I think that was never more apparent than in the ability for him to pardon Richard Nixon. He took such heat over that and such vilification out there, particularly in the media. That brings to mind another story; one of the poignant moments of my career there. That was when Fred Friendly was visiting. Fred Friendly, of course, the president of CBS News, had started this series on the Constitution and we were there to do a program on the Constitution. I was taking him through the museum and we came on the Nixon pardon letter which was on display there. And, again, we had this moment of silence and thoughtfulness as he stared at that letter. And Fred turned to me and said, “Don, you know, I thought he was dead wrong.” This was thirteen years after the event. He said, “Now, I know he was right.” And I thought that coming from the top of [a major] news media - that showed me how much self-confidence he had to have in himself to make that decision.

Smith: Time was good to Gerald Ford. I mean, he could’ve been self-confident as anyone, but it still had to have been a source of considerable gratification to know that over time people had moved in his direction.

Wilson: And I think you and I both agree, Richard, that it really came forth at his funerals.

Smith: And before that the Profiles in Courage Award, which caps the whole story.
Wilson: I couldn’t agree more. He was a person I’ve always admired tremendously. Now, his involvement as the library went on through the formative years I arrived there, to the day the museum was dedicated - we set it up and I had to make the two work, the going back and forth. And I can’t tell you how many trips I made back and forth.

Smith: Did you come to have second thoughts, not about the job, but about the physical arrangement?

Wilson: I had second thoughts about the distances, yeah. It was hard to administer a library and museum 120 miles apart. Some of that was the fact that, as we entered, we left the golden age of presidential libraries for the austere age. There was not a lot of staff. You had to have people you could really depend on in both places to carry out the kind of programming you wanted to see done. I felt my first obligation - my first duty - was to incorporate the library into the University of Michigan and I think we did that pretty successfully. We had a lot of help from faculty and we had a lot of help from the administration. [President] Shapiro was excellent and others. But, again, we were almost separated from the university by being on the North Campus, so the partnership with the Bentley Library became more and more important as we went through that era. Of course, that eventually paid great dividends for me when Bob Warner became the archivist of the United States. He was the former director of the Bentley Library.

Smith: Was there ever consideration given to actually having the library incorporated in the university library system, in effect, turning out the federal NARA oversight? Was that envisioned as a down the road possibility?

Wilson: No, never in my tenure there and I was there ’81 to ’87. In ’85, I of course moved to Grand Rapids because we lost the museum curator - director and I felt the library was in solid hands and the museum needed to be incorporated more with all the things that were going on in Grand Rapids at the time of the new museum and Amway and Grand Valley State moving down. There was a lot of hands-on needed, so I spent the last two years over there. There again, it was a lot of back and forth and it never failed that the weather changed at
Lansing. When it was summer, it started raining. If it was winter, it started hailing, sleet or snowing. So it was always a challenge.

Smith: He really thought of Ann Arbor as a second home, didn’t he?

Wilson: Yes.

Smith: I mean, the university had a much larger place in his heart than mere nostalgia.

Wilson: Right. And I think that showed with the fact that he agreed to help with the capital campaign for the university, which didn’t help the library a lot. It kind of hurt the library, in fact, but he felt so strongly about his experience at the University of Michigan. Interestingly, you didn’t get that same feeling of Yale. I mean, he was proud of Yale and proud to be a graduate of Yale, but it was the undergraduate years at Ann Arbor that I think made the indelible impression on his life and went with him all his life.

Smith: I only heard speak disparagingly of two people.

Wilson: I bet I can guess one.

Smith: One was Gordon Liddy and the other was John Dean.

Wilson: No, I didn’t guess it. I had another one.

Smith: What was your experience?

Wilson: Mine was with Secretary Schlesinger.

Smith: Ah, yes. Was it just chemistry?

Wilson: Chemistry, because there was never anybody I suggested for a program or suggested to bring to speak or anything else except Secretary Schlesinger [where he objected]. And I think it was that they just clashed. I don’t know what it was.

Smith: We’ve talked to a number of people who suggested that the polite word is ‘professorial.’ Another word is ‘condescending.’
Wilson: Yeah, and it surprises me a little bit because you had a lot of other people around him who could be a lot more professorial than that. And, it was interesting because there was never anybody in Congress that he ever [spoke about negatively to me].

Smith: Maybe it wasn’t simply that Ford thought he was being condescended to. But having spent as many years as he did on the Armed Services Committee, he particularly resented being condescended to on a subject that he knew.

Wilson: Yes, I think that’s probably right. I never met the man. Obviously, he never participated in any of the library events.

Smith: We’re trying to get him to sit down for an interview.

Wilson: It’d be interesting. I think there’s probably an untold story there that may go back to the congressional days a little bit. I don’t know.

Smith: When I said my sense is that he hated to fire people, Henry told us, “Not Schlesinger. He didn’t hate firing Schlesinger.”

Wilson: Rocky relationship. But that’s the only one that I ever [heard] of the cabinet, of the congressional - I guess I never had a really good conversation with him on Dean or the other one.

Smith: His relationship with the university - while you were there he agreed to be a part of this big fundraising effort?

Wilson: Yes, and that caused some controversy. I guess more internally than externally.

Smith: Internal in the university?

Wilson: No, more I think—

Smith: In the Foundation?

Wilson: In the Foundation. Yeah. I mean, there were some raised eyebrows. Nobody would ever come out and verbally criticize, but there was a “I wish he hadn’t
have done that,” “That’s too bad because that really makes it more difficult for us.”

Smith: He was a true fiscal conservative.

Wilson: Yes. Yes, he was involved in every discussion of endowments, every discussion of finances. And as I told the story about the budget, I mean, I would sit down with him every year and we’d go through the budget item by item. I didn’t work with many people like that, although, I’ve got to say George H. W. Bush was a little bit that way.

Smith: Really?

Wilson: Yeah, very detailed oriented.

Smith: Probably none of them at the beginning can imagine over time that the endowment needs to grow to the point that they have, what with Washington cutting back. And if you want to do any kind of substantial programming, you’ve got to turn to the Foundation.

Wilson: Yes. As long as I was on that Foundation side of it, I fought that tooth and nail. I thought there were some areas where that was legitimate. But I thought and still believe there are core issues at a presidential library that the government is responsible for - for the Archives to be maintaining. That’s why they’re created. If not, then they need to change the mission and focus. As you say, there may be that coming down the pike - where their whole concept [of Presidential Libraries] has changed.

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

Wilson: Some. It was limited and it was interesting because, in those years right after the presidency, I think there was a clear understanding [between them] that the clinic was hers, the library was his. And he was very respectful of that and she would come to events. She would come and participate, but she never was, I felt, that involved. I don’t know what your experience was, but I never got her. Now, Susan was and Michael was. Mike I had most of the contact with, I think, in terms of the family. And, of course, his [the
President’s stepbrother was quite involved because he lived there. Other than that, the family didn’t participate to a great extent. But she was certainly very gracious and accommodating whenever she was on site. She would make appearances and do certain things but you could always tell there’s that line that, “Okay, now I want you to do this over here and of course I’ll help you with that.” Never involved in active fundraising. She would be a hostess at some of the events, but she never really participated in some of the programs.

Smith: The gravesite was always part of the plan. Any references to planning?

Wilson: Oh yes. Yeah, I’ve served several presidents, former presidents, and, you know, we would have at least once a year a meeting on the funeral arrangements. What they wanted to do with the gravesite or how it was to be set up. Now, we were always very circumspect in those early years, where a lot of people didn’t know what it was out there. We didn’t really advertise it as the future gravesite or anything else. But certainly with the Army, we had to review plans, we had to do that and he would participate, and it didn’t bother him.

Smith: Did you ever see his temper?

Wilson: I really didn’t ever experience it myself.

Smith: Heard about it?

Wilson: I heard about it and I saw where I could see it, but always it was very business-like when I was with him. I mean, I was never in a situation where I saw that. He would express disgust or he would express, “Well, that’s not the way I want to see it” or something like that. But it was never what I’d call a temper at all. Not like LBJ’s legendary temper.

Smith: Sense of humor?

Wilson: Good sense of humor and a lot of people underappreciated that. A droll sense of humor. And he would love to tell stories every once in awhile and he’d sit in his office down there and he’d get in there and tell stories. And, particularly, around his confidants, Rumsfeld, Cheney. He always kided.
You know, we even had a conference on humor in the presidency and he loved that.

Smith: And Chevy Chase showed up.

Wilson: And Chevy Chase showed up, yes. He could laugh at himself. He really could. There again, he was comfortable with himself. There was not the ego factor. And he and Chevy Chase became very close. I mean, certainly during the events, there was a good camaraderie there and there was a good sort of feeling.

Smith: He must’ve been very proud of that place.

Wilson: Yes. And I think particularly the museum. It was a beautiful setting on the river.

Smith: Contributing to the revitalization of Grand Rapids.

Wilson: And I think that was important to him, that he saw this as a way that helped revitalize the downtown part of Grand Rapids and give back a little to the community. Now, at the University of Michigan, it’s a lovely building, but it could be any university building. I mean, it’s special inside and it’s a kind of special place, but it’s not unique like the one in Grand Rapids. And the Grand Rapids building is a beautiful building and a beautiful setting and certainly is a key component to the downtown area of the city.

Smith: Now, you became Archivist [at the U.S.] from the Ford Library?

Wilson: Yes.

Smith: How did that happen? Was he involved?

Wilson: It was a lot easier becoming director of the Ford Library and Museum than becoming Archivist, as you recall. There were a couple of false starts. John Agresto was - my nomination was announced—

Smith: By President Reagan?

Wilson: Well, no, by the Detroit Free Press.
Smith: Okay.

Wilson: And that day was turned around by Don Regan and John Agresto was named. It turns out it was a battle between the California Reagan group and the White House Reagan group. And I was the candidate of the California Reagan group.

Smith: Even though you were at the Ford Library.

Wilson: Even though I was at the Ford Library, which is another story I’ll tell in a minute. This was, remember, late in his second administration. This was the only agency created by Ronald Reagan during the eight years of the Reagan administration. The only federal agency created. It was a very small agency. The only significance to the close associates of Ronald Reagan was the fact they wanted to get this legislation for a presidential library through Congress without any controversy. To do that, they felt they had to have a professional historian and not a political appointee at the National Archives, who was responsible for certifying the recommendation for the legislation. So, particularly, Ed Meese and, to a certain extent, [Mike] Deaver and some others, but probably Ed Meese and even the Hoover Institute people, were kind of pushing me. Because, you know, there weren’t that many academics out there that had the credentials that would be acceptable to the historical community, or the archival experience to be acceptable to the historical community, that could be nominated. Because this was the first nominee as a new agency out from under GSA - as an independent agency and presidential appointment. The Senate wanted to set a term of ten years. The House wouldn’t do that, so it became serving at the pleasure of the president. But it should be a professional appointment, that would not change with the change of administrations. Kind of a judgeship, if you would. So, I was the trial balloon. Anyway, when Agresto was named ahead of me, I mean, I’m sitting out here in Grand Rapids and, “Fine.” I think I have the best job in the world anyway, so it’s not a heartbreaker to me.

Smith: And who was John Agresto?
Wilson: John Agresto was Bill Bennett’s deputy at NEH. He was Bennett’s candidate and Don Regan’s candidate. At any rate, I said, “Fine” and thought it was over. Well, Senator Mathias and some others became concerned. They were captured by the historical associations and the Society of American Archivists and others and put a hold on the nomination. So, he never got the hearing stage and after a year, when Don Regan left the White House, Senator Baker came in. This was becoming an embarrassment. Here’s the library legislation that needed to go up and we don’t have anybody there to handle it. So I guess because I was the number two - at any rate, that’s how it came about a year later. My name went forward and I think it had a lot to do with Senator Baker calling President Ford and saying, “What about Wilson?”

Smith: Did you have a chance to review the transcripts?

Wilson: I can remember when I went to ask President Ford, I said, “I’ve been asked if I would accept a nomination to be Archivist of the United States.” And he chewed on his pipe and he looked at me and said, “Don, you’d be a great archivist. I’d hate to lose you. Now, my only question to you is, do you want to get in bed with those bastards?” Which tells volumes, but I’m not sure it’s time to tell that yet.

Smith: But it does say a lot because, by now time’s gone on.

Wilson: This is ’87, this is ten, fifteen years.

Smith: I’ve always wondered whether one of the contributing factors was that he and Mrs. Ford were politically marooned long before the end of their lives. And part of it was the party went over here, and he stayed where he was. My sense was he evolved on an issue by issue basis and I assume she had something to do with it. I assume having children and then grandchildren had something to do with it. But I’ve always wondered if the first necessary element was carried over resentment against what he used to call the ‘hard right’. Not in a purely personal way, but in a philosophical sense.

Wilson: But I think he was much more of a moderate Republican and one that we’ve seemed to have lost in the ensuing years. I think H. W. Bush came out of that
same school of thought and evolved. In certain issues he was over on far more of a conservative side, and on other issues, he was not. And he would bend with the needs of the country as would President Ford. What I called a pragmatic politician. And I think we’ve lost a lot of pragmatic politicians in the current environment. I think you have a position here, you have a position here, and there’s no movement or tendency to gravitate to another position based on the needs of the time.

Smith: Did you ever see him together with Tip O’Neill?

Wilson: Yes. And I got to know Tip O’Neill better under President Bush. He was friends with all of them and they all admired him and he was to me the epitome of the pragmatic politician. I think they learned from him. I really do. I think President Ford took a lot of lessons from him and I know President Bush took a lot of lessons from Tip O’Neill.

Smith: That’s interesting. So, when you got the job, how was that in terms of the relationship with President Ford. Did he, in fact, accept it?

Wilson: Oh, yes, and we worked together in terms of coming up with the new director. That’s when I recommended Frank Mackaman and they went through the whole process. I think it was a good arrangement for the time being, but I think he wanted to take the library beyond what Frank’s capacity was to do that. And that’s not saying anything negative about Frank, but he just came out of the Everett Dirksen [Senate] and I think he never mentally left the Everett Dirksen Center concept and was trying to apply a lot more of that to the Ford Library than probably was going to be acceptable to the Foundation or President Ford in the long-term. I think in the short-term it was fine and a comfortable relationship. But I think in the long-term, they wanted to be more dynamic and that’s when it went to you.

Smith: I have to tell you, I didn’t have quite the friendly reaction from some Reagan folks at that point.

Wilson: And in terms of transition, no, I would go to the meetings, annual meetings, as archivist and it was very friendly. And I was on a pretty close basis with the
Ford Foundation members as well and the family. But I think, Richard, what you brought up is a very important point in that through my seven years there, six and a half or seven years, it was always a business-like relationship. I mean, certainly friendly and certainly supportive. He never questioned, second-guessed, or challenged anything I recommended. I mean, it was a very comfortable working relationship and I could’ve spent my twenty years there very easily and probably some days thought I should’ve. But, at the same time, there was not a day to day interaction or even phone calls. It was always if I needed him, I usually went through Bob Barrett or a channel to get to him and he would respond. But it wasn’t what I’d call an intimate working relationship that I had later on with H. W. [Bush]. But that’s different personalities and that was a lot of different views. But certainly he ranks up there as one of the most respected men in my life, and influences in my life, because I just admired him so greatly.

Smith: Were you surprised by the amount of reaction at the time of his death?

Wilson: Yes. I was surprised and gratified because I thought he deserved every bit of it and should’ve received a lot of the recognition long before. But it was surprising.

Smith: Because he’d been out of the public eye for awhile.

Wilson: He had been. He was a remarkable man athletically. I mean, I would see him with his knees almost as big around as his calves before he had his knee replacements, and he was in pain for a lot of those times, but would never show it and just kept going. I mean, he was like the Energizer bunny. Tremendous energy.

Smith: It’s odd. I’ll never forget at the last service, when I did the final eulogy - the thing I remember is Rosalyn Carter weeping. And I thought, “Who would’ve thought thirty years ago that this is how the story ends.”

Wilson: It’s a great tribute to him.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?
Wilson: I think he should be remembered as a man of great courage. A man of strong leadership skills. I think he was without doubt the right man at the right time as he put it in his own words to ‘heal this nation’. It had to be a horrific period for him to go through and it took a man of great courage and stamina to do that. I believe that the nation finally came to appreciate that during that time. He was a devoted civil servant. He spent twenty-five years giving. As he said, he wasn’t going to run again before he became vice president. He said “I’m going to be a lobbyist and make some money. I have a family that deserves that” and for years he traveled [for the Republican Party]. He did all the party activities that needed to be done. I just think it kind of epitomizes the public servant that you’d like to think represented us in Congress.

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

Wilson: I’m trying to remember when the last time I saw him. The last time I saw him was at the dedication of the George Bush Presidential Library in ’97. That was it. And we had a very nice reunion and I took him through and we had a great time. It was a good experience.

Smith: And he got along well with his fellow members of the ex-presidents club.

Wilson: He really did. I think more than any of them, he was the cement.

Smith: Facilitator?

Wilson: He was the glue that held them all together. Although, you’ve seen what’s envolved with H.W. and Clinton and that’s genuine. That’s not put on. Again, I’ll tell you a funny story, because right after the event, as I took the former presidents through on the tour and the President said, “Don, you take them through,” and he’d hang back with Scowcroft and Powell and so I’m taking them through and afterwards, he said - Bill Clinton, who was President Clinton at the time - it was a great museum. I’m really pleased. And President Bush looks over at him and says, “Bill, when you get ready to build yours, this is your man. Here’s the man who fired me, basically, as Archivist. He said, “Here’s your man.”
Smith: I’m sure it was nothing personal.

Wilson: No, he knew what he was doing. So that afternoon after the event, after we were wrapping up, I said, “Mr. President, I really appreciate your sentiment there, but I don’t think Bill Clinton is going to ask me to do anything with his library since I was fired on his watch, basically.” I was urged to resign. And he just laughed. He knew exactly [what he had done]. It was his sense of humor.

Smith: It wasn’t as if Clinton had a candidate to replace you, as we know.

Wilson: As we know, that was not the case. And I don’t think it was Bill Clinton, in all honesty. This was Senator Glenn’s staff that was bound and determined to get me out of there.

Smith: Do you worry about the future of the presidential libraries?

Wilson: I do. I’m concerned. And I’m concerned because I think it’s a great institution that has served the public extremely well in educating what you like to call a ‘civic minded’ public that’s not getting that education in the classroom. And, that’s much of what I’m trying to do now in my ‘retirement years’ - trying to pass on a civic legacy that really is underappreciated these days in my estimation. And I worry about the future of our country if we don’t understand our history better and if we don’t understand what these leaders were doing within the context of their times. You’ve got to know the context of their times to know how great as leaders they were. And, to do that in a Smithsonian-type setting is just not going to cut it. So, I worry that because of any short-sightedness on the part of Congress that they worry about - which is not even one weapon in this modern warfare annual budget - to not maintain these cultural institutions is a disaster in the making.

Smith: Perfect!
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Smith: First of all, thanks so much for doing this. You have a unique position in the Ford story because you’re one of a dwindling band who can talk with authority about Ford’s years in Congress, and indeed, were instrumental in his becoming Minority Leader.

You came in in ’62...

Rumsfeld: Right. I worked in the House of Representatives from 1957 to 1960. One of the Congressmen I worked for was Bob Griffin of Michigan. So there was an earlier connection.

Smith: So you had contact with Ford earlier.

Rumsfeld: Slightly. Gerald Ford was way up there and I was staff assistant to a couple of Republican Congressmen. I did, however, have an interesting connection though to Congressman Ford; one of the pilots with me in the Navy, Jim Dean, who was shot down by the Chinese, was from Grand Rapids. His wife went to Representative Ford when I was working on the Hill and came to see me. So I had an awareness of Gerald Ford back then. Some years later, 1974, Henry Kissinger and I were going into the Peoples’ Republic of China after we left Vladivostok, where President Ford had met with General Secretary Brezhnev. I was going through some papers and there was my friend Jim Dean’s name. Kissinger had been asked by the government to raise the question as to whether Dean’s body was found or whether he was in prison and if so, if they would release him.

Smith: You were part of a pretty impressive group of Young Turks, who arrived on the Hill in ’60, ’62, ’64, many of whom went on to great things in the party and nationally. Tell us about those people. You had people like John Lindsay and Charlie Goodell and, of course, Mel Laird had been there a bit by then. Bob Dole came on in ’64.
Rumsfeld: No, Dole came in ’60. He was two years before me.

Smith: ’60 – okay.

Rumsfeld: Our offices were next to each other.

Smith: Were they really?

Rumsfeld: We’d walk back and forth to votes when they’d ring the bells.

Smith: Is it safe to say he was more of a rock-ribbed conservative in those days?

Rumsfeld: Dole was a reasonable conservative. He had a wonderful sense of humor that never really showed in his presidential campaign. The American people never really got to know him, I don’t think. Candidate Dole for President was a different Dole than I knew as my friend next door when we were in Congress.

Smith: The point is, the Republican Party, and for that matter the Democratic Party, fifty years ago, unlike today, each party had a left and a right wing. There are obviously different portions, but the Republican Party in the early ’60s – the center of gravity was in the Midwest. You were just beginning to make some inroads in the South.

Rumsfeld: And the ’64 election, when we lost so many people in the North, and we picked up four or five seats in Alabama and several other places. I think one in Mississippi.

Smith: How difficult was Goldwater in your district to sell?

Rumsfeld: Difficult. My district was heavily Jewish. It was in the northern part of Chicago: Rogers Park, Evanston, Wilmette, Glencoe and Skokie, where the Nazis used to demonstrate against the Jewish community. Barry Goldwater, despite his name, was a concern to the Jewish community in the United States. A wonderful man, personally. I enjoyed working with Barry Goldwater. I supported him. Of course, when it was over, I won, but not by a lot and we ended up with only 140 Republican members in the House of Representatives in January, 1965, after that election. And there were so many Democrats, as I recall, some of them had to sit on our side of the aisle in the House. It was a reverse landslide from a Republican perspective.
Smith: So, you were thinking about making some changes in terms of the leadership?

Rumsfeld: Well, it actually started before then. Bob Griffin came to me after I’d been elected in 1962, even before I’d even been sworn in, and told me there was going to be a Republican caucus. He said “We’re going to run my friend Jerry Ford for GOP Conference Chairman against Charles Hoeven of Iowa.” He asked me to help round up votes for Ford among freshmen Congressmen. So I became a rabble rousing bomb thrower before I was even sworn in. I went out and tried to recruit, and did, recruit some votes for Gerald Ford. Of course, it did not make my delegation chairman very happy – Les Arends, who was the number two under Charles Halleck, Hoeven being number three after Arends in the Republican leadership hierarchy.

Smith: How do you win a race like that?

Rumsfeld: Those leadership races are tough; they all know each other well. I was the vote counter for Ford. Goodell, Griffin, and I were organizing for Ford. I kept the vote count on members of the House – the 140 Republicans. I either had them recorded as being for Ford, leaning Ford, unknown, undecided, leaning Halleck, or for Halleck. We checked the members regularly. I gave the report I kept to the Ford Library. Have you ever seen this document? It’s in my handwriting. It’s interesting. In fact, I had the book copies. I sent Ford the original.

Rumsfeld: It went to the Ford Library, because President Ford asked me repeatedly for it. It shows our conclusion as 40 each member.

Smith: And did people lie?

Rumsfeld: Oh, my goodness – yes! And of course, we triangulated, we’d have three or four different people check on each one of them to find out where they were.

Smith: What do you promise?

Rumsfeld: I think we were in the committee room – a big room. Back in those days they had kind of a condescending attitude about women members of Congress, so they had three women Representatives be the vote counters. The three female members of Congress sat at the front with the ballot box. Every member
walked up and dropped his or her vote in. There were 140 Republican members elected. As I recall there were 139 in attendance, but when they counted, there were 141 votes. Not a good thing. It was awkward. They had to have a complete new vote and very carefully watch as people were putting their ballots in the box.

Smith: No hanging chads.

Rumsfeld: That’s right. Ford was elected by a one, two or three vote margin. Very close.

Smith: Why?

Rumsfeld: Why? Because when you suffer a defeat like that in ’64...First, a lot of people don’t want to serve if it is that one-sided. If you are in a very small minority, you don’t have much voice; your votes don’t make much difference. The goal was to try to put in office somebody who would be comfortable and hospitable to Republican members offering constructive alternative proposals that would be generally incorporated in motions to recommit, to give Republicans an opportunity to put forward Republican positions. And the feeling was that the Halleck hierarchy was not interested in that. Charlie was a decent man. He was intelligent and had been effective in his own way. But, the Congress had Everett Dirksen, the senior member of the Illinois delegation in the Senate, and Halleck in the House. They had the Dirksen-Halleck press conferences every week. We thought that Gerald Ford would present a face for the Republican Party that would give us a better chance of increasing our numbers. Why be in Congress unless you are striving to be the majority party? Why would you not want to accomplish that? We felt we would have a much better chance with Gerald Ford.

Smith: It has been suggested to us by more than one individual that at least a subliminal factor was, Dirksen was a kind of guy who almost got along too well with LBJ. That Dirksen from time to time was perceived to perhaps be in the president’s pocket – or at least a little bit too friendly, or too willing to make concessions.

Rumsfeld: I’ve heard that. He was a master legislator. He even managed to help me get a bill passed in the overwhelming Democratic Congress. It was legislation to
celebrate Youth Christian Temperance Week. I had the Women’s Christian Temperance Union in my district and they wanted to have this done. I put in the legislation and Everett Dirksen was the only Republican who was chairman of a Senate committee when they were in the minority. Every other committee except for the one that decided what would be celebrated in our country. He was a master. His saying was, “The oil can is mightier than the sword.”

Smith: Woodrow Wilson had a wonderful expression. He found it very annoying, that there was Better Homes Week and Gardens Weeks, and Be Kind to Your Animal Week, and Wilson suggested they ought to pass a Mind Your Own Business Week.

What was it about Ford that inspired – because I assume this was not an ideological contest, per se – more generational?

Rumsfeld: It was clearly generational, and presentational. But Gerald Ford was the member we could find who we believed could win, who had the chance of beating Congressman Halleck.

Smith: Were there others? For example, over the years it has been suggested Mel Laird might have seen himself as a candidate.

Rumsfeld: No. Mel ran for conference chairman to replace Ford, and, as I recall, defeated Peter Frelinghuysen for conference chairman when Jerry Ford gave up the conference chairmanship to run for minority leader. Everyone liked Ford. He was respected. He was a serious person. He didn’t spend a lot of time on the floor of the House of Representatives and we had some trouble because some members didn’t know him. He’d been around a while, but he spent a lot of his time on the Appropriations Committee and the Defense Appropriations Committee particularly.

Smith: And I assume those feelings basically existed on the other side of aisle, as well, toward Ford?

Rumsfeld: Sure.

Smith: I mean, friendship, respect.
Rumsfeld: Yes. Of course, it was a different time. I had as many friends on the other side of the aisle as I did on the Republican side. We all did. I’d go down and play paddle ball with Tiger Teague of Texas and Albert Thomas of Texas and John Dingle of Michigan, all Democrats.

Smith: It’s interesting to hear Alan Greenspan talk about some of the factors that led to the change. He said one of them, he thinks, is the jet plane. Because now members from the West Coast, instead of bringing their families to live in D.C. – that’s something that you hear over and over again – that, in fact, families were brought to the District.

Rumsfeld: And much less so now. You try to have a gathering for an evening celebration for some purpose and to include members of the House or Senate on a Thursday or Friday or Saturday or Sunday, you don’t get anybody. They’re not here, the overwhelming majority. Unless they live in Virginia or Maryland, they’re not here. That’s one thing. The jet aircraft.

Another thing, I think, is the gerrymandering that has been developed to a fine art in our country. Today there are relatively few Congressional districts that are considered contestable. The threats that members feel tend to be in the Democratic Party from the left, and in the Republican Party the threat comes from the right. That tends to polarize the situation, and you don’t have this pressure, or natural political process that led people to work things out in the middle and to try to fashion compromises that would make sense for the country. So you end up electing people who tend to be most representative of their political party as opposed to their district. That’s, I think, maybe as or even possibly more important than the jet aircraft.

Smith: One senses that for Ford, pragmatism was not a dirty word. Consensus was not surrender. That at the end of the day, and I’ve heard him say this countless times - at the end of the day, people sent you here to get things done. And you worked as hard as you could to advocate your position, but you were willing to cut a deal most of the time. And that does seem to be largely absent today.

Rumsfeld: There is certainly much less of it today.

Smith: The amount of time you spend raising money clearly is different from…
Rumsfeld: Oh my goodness, I should have added that. These members, they have to raise millions of dollars now. And every day, or so, they have to dedicate a portion of their day to raising money. I never had to do that. You only run every other year, but these people are campaigning twenty-four months in every term. It is a different environment. And, of course, Congressman Ford developed very close friendships with people like George Mahon. When people criticized George Mahon, who Jerry Ford sat next to hour after hour on the Appropriations Sub-committee, Ford was uncomfortable. He didn’t like it.

Smith: There are wonderful stories. He and Hale Boggs would debate each other at the National Press Club and they would ride down together, decide on the way, “What are we going to debate today?” They’d have their debate, and then they’d go and have lunch and go back to the Hill.

Rumsfeld: Hugh Scott and I co-chaired the Republican Truth Squad in the 1968 election. Hubert Humphrey was running against Richard Nixon. We had a plane and followed Hubert Humphrey everywhere he went. He would make a statement and then he would get ready to go to his airplane, but he’d always stop by and say hello. We had nice visits, and then we’d have a press conference and we’d beat up on Humphrey. But it was always in a gentlemanly, but substantive way – where we would disagree with each other, but we were not disagreeable.

Smith: I think two weeks before the ’76 election, President Ford visited Humphrey in the hospital and was told, “You’re going to get some votes out of the Humphrey household.”

Rumsfeld: Is that right?

Smith: Yes.

Rumsfeld: He was a wonderful man, Hubert Humphrey. He was a happy warrior. He really was. He had an excellent sense of humor.
Smith: What was the emerging Republican position, if there was such a thing, on Vietnam during the mid to latter part of the pre-Nixon presidency? How did you grapple with that?

Rumsfeld: In the House?

Smith: In the House.

Rumsfeld: It was ambivalence and a mixed feeling. It was a feeling that the Tonkin Gulf Resolution that President Johnson carried around in his pocket and waved under people’s noses as having given him the authority to do that which he was doing, was a stretch. It was a feeling that he was unfair in the 1964 campaign against Goldwater. He had the ad where a little girl was picking petals off the daisy with a mushroom cloud behind her, implying that there would be a nuclear holocaust if Barry Goldwater were elected. Those of us on the Republican side felt that was unfair, and over the edge. I don’t remember the precise words, and I don’t want to be unfair, but he clearly left the impression that if he were elected, he would not increase the troops in Vietnam and that Barry Goldwater, if he were elected, would.

I remember going over to Cam Ranh Bay, as a member of Government Operations Sub-committee on military operations, and talking to the people who were building this port in Cam Ranh Bay. We asked them, “What’s the port going to accommodate?” They said, “It will accommodate 500,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam.” And there was Johnson saying just the opposite. I don’t know what we had then, I think we had less than a hundred thousand troops there in that election period.

The feeling was that President Johnson was not being straightforward with the American people, and that is something that many were uncomfortable with. I was uncomfortable. We did not want to be unsupportive of our country or the men and women serving over there, and for the most part we were supportive. But there was clearly discomfort with the president.

Smith: Do you have a sense of what his relationship with Ford was?
Rumsfeld: No. Except that he made some quite negative, derogatory remarks about Gerald Ford playing football without a helmet, and that type of thing.

Smith: What about Ford’s intelligence?

Rumsfeld: Well, that is interesting. I’m seventy-six years old now, so I’ve lived a long time and most, if not all, of the Republican presidents in my adult lifetime have been criticized as being not very swift. Think of Dwight Eisenhower – I don’t know how people got away with it, but they complained about his syntax and played too much golf, and wasn’t a clever Eastern elite. Here’s a man – think what Eisenhower did for this country. Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford, they made fun of him not being smart. Gerald Ford went to University of Michigan and Yale law school and was an accomplished, knowledgeable person about the things that he paid attention to – like the budget. He probably knew more about the federal budget than any president in the history of the country.

Smith: Do you think there is a bias, a cultural bias – sometimes when I was in Michigan, I came to the conclusion that people make the mistake of thinking that because some people, say in Michigan, talk slow, they think slow. That there is that – some of it is Eastern elitism – no doubt about it.

Rumsfeld: Of course. I’m from the Midwest, so I would not think that way.

Smith: No, I’m saying outsiders looking at Midwesterners.

Rumsfeld: Yes, I hear what you’re saying. But think of Ronald Reagan. His letters came out and people saw in his hand writing what a fine, thoughtful, insightful person he was. It was Clark Clifford who called Reagan an amiable dunce. And George W. Bush went to Yale and then to Harvard Business School – obviously an intelligent person.

Smith: We now know that Reagan made a career out of being underestimated. I’m wondering if there was anything of that in Ford as well.

Rumsfeld: No. He was straightforward. There wasn’t guile there. He was what he was. He was a wonderful human being.
Smith: Did it hurt him – the Chevy Chase and all of this? It’s one thing to have a thick hide, but did you sense that it hurt him?

Rumsfeld: Sure it hurt him. I was with him in Salzburg when he got to the top of the stairway in the rain, going down from the airplane, going to see President Sadat of Egypt. Always a gentleman, the President took Betty by the arm. Then an Air Force sergeant handed him an umbrella. He ended up going down a long slippery set of stairs, holding onto an umbrella and Betty instead of the rail. And here is this man who is a graceful athlete - I played tennis with him, I skied with him, I knew his capabilities. He didn’t get mad at me, as chief of staff of the White House. He didn’t get mad at the Air Force sergeant. When we got to the house and went inside he said “Rummy, I am so mad at myself.” That was typical of Jerry Ford. He didn’t take it out on others. He knew it would be the dominant story of his meeting with Sadat.

Smith: In fact, I think Kennerly tells the story because he was there. Needless to say, a number of people pointed a finger at the photographers and the president said, “Well, of course they took the picture. If they hadn’t, they would have lost their jobs.”

Rumsfeld: Exactly.

Smith: Can you imagine Lyndon Johnson reacting in that way? He always wanted to be Speaker of the House.

Rumsfeld: Yes, he said that and it made sense for a person who had served there that long. On the other hand, I don’t think he thought twice about accepting the vice presidency. His horizon, until he was asked to be vice president, was to be Speaker of the House. Fair enough. When he was asked to be vice president, he didn’t say no, I want to be Speaker of the House. He said yes.

Smith: Can you think of a moment, post Watergate break in, obviously, pre-August 8th, when you concluded, if you did, the Nixon presidency was unlikely to survive?

Rumsfeld: Oh, I know precisely when it was. I was living in Belgium. I was U.S. Ambassador to NATO. I didn’t understand French or Flemish, and therefore
the local television went over my head, and papers in English arrived late. I was off with my family somewhere and my wife got a *Herald Tribune*, and started reading it. She didn’t want to read it in the car because our children were there and we had a young son, and he’d met President Nixon, and she didn’t want to stir up the youngsters. She said to me, “You’ve got to stop and read this.” I said, “Fine, in a while,” and we kept driving. We were heading towards the house of the Belgium Ambassador to NATO, Andre de Staercke, in the South of France. Finally we stopped. I read the paper and I knew. It was before any announcement had been made. I think it was the day before Nixon resigned. That night the paper indicated to the country he was going to resign the next day and that Vice President Ford would become president the next day at noon.

Smith: So the smoking gun tape had been released.

Rumsfeld: Apparently. I missed those tapes and hearings being overseas. I didn’t follow much of it.

Smith: One of the things we found in doing these interviews, is how many roads lead back to Fred Buzhardt. Mel Laird told us, because he’d been Buzhardt’s counsel at the Pentagon. And when Laird came back in the Nixon White House.

Rumsfeld: Buzhardt had been Laird’s counsel.

Smith: Yeah. But when Laird came back into the Nixon White House, somewhat reluctantly, he hadn’t been there a month when Buzhardt saw him and said to him, “I’ve been listening to these tapes. The president is into it up to his neck.”

Rumsfeld: Is that right?

Smith: And then we asked Al Haig, because I’ve always assumed Haig listened to some of the tapes. I’ve assumed that Haig listened to the smoking gun tape. Haig said no. He said, “Fred Buzhardt gave me some expert advice. He said don’t ever get caught alone in a room with a tape.” Haig insists that the initiative, “on the pardon,” that Haig’s document with all of the options, was
something drafted, not at his instigation, and he claimed not at the president’s instigation, but something that Fred Buzhardt on his own crafted…

Rumsfeld: Interesting. See, I missed that whole chapter of our history.

Smith: You were summoned back, when?

Rumsfeld: I was. Well, I read the paper and then we drove to Ambassador de Staercke’s house, who was the dean of the North Atlantic Council. My secretary had called and said that Vice President Ford’s office called and wants you to return to Washington, D.C. fast. So now, it would have been probably five or six o’clock at night, European time. So I had my office at NATO in Belgium make arrangements for me to fly back. They ended up sending a military plane to the Nice airport early the next morning which took me to London. Then I took a commercial flight to Dulles and landed at 1:05 PM, one hour after Ford had become president. I was met by someone from Ford’s office with an envelope and a note saying I was to be chairman of this transition team - Ford’s transition to the presidency.

Smith: Let me go back with one question. Given your long standing and very close relationship, during Ford’s brief vice presidency, those eight or nine months, did you ever have a discussion with him about the possibility of his becoming president?

Rumsfeld: No, not that I recall. It was such a wild thought that a president of the United States would resign. It had never happened. I would go back to the U.S. every six weeks or so from Belgium to work with Secretary Schlesinger and Secretary Kissinger and occasionally see Vice President Ford, see people on the Hill and figure out what I needed to do at NATO to fit in with U.S. policy. Occasionally, I’d go see Howard Baker, who was a good friend, or Bryce Harlow. They were the two people I might touch base with.

Smith: The Wise Man.

Rumsfeld: Yes. Occasionally, I remember seeing George Schultz, who was a very close friend. I remember being with him one night and Clark McGregor was there. We were having a dinner with Milton Friedman who was a friend. Every time
the subject came up you could see it progressing from not much to something, and then to something quite significant. But I don’t remember ever discussing it with Vice President Ford. I can remember distinctly talking to Bryce Harlow and Howard Baker.

Smith: So you came back on the 9th – did you see the president on the 9th?

Rumsfeld: I did. I was ushered into the White House and told that he wanted me to manage his transition to the presidency. He told me who would be the participants. They were, as I recall, Bill Scranton, who served in the House with President Ford. Rogers Morton, who served with both of us in the House. Jack Marsh, who also served with both of us in the House, and who had served on Ford’s vice presidential staff, and whose office had been just down the hall from me. He was a Democrat – dear friend, and fine man. President Ford asked me to get going.

Smith: Let me ask you because there is this extraordinary scene when the swearing in took place – Leon Parma was one of the people who was sort of shoehorned into the room with some of the Congressional folks and he noticed, he told us, and other people have confirmed it – once the ceremony ended, there was a receiving line and then there was a reception in the state dining room. And he said you could watch the Nixon people just peel away and go back to their offices.

Rumsfeld: Interesting.

Smith: And it raises the larger question of how you were going to integrate the existing White House staff with whatever newcomers there were going to be. One senses that the president wanted to be fair to people who shouldn’t be tarred indiscriminately with the brush of Watergate. And yet, there was political pressure to make changes.

Rumsfeld: He felt strongly, that he did not want people to be unfairly treated, or to be rushed out under a cloud or a taint or an impression of possible wrongdoing. It was a very complex, multidimensional set of problems he faced. The whole time there was a special prosecutor that was active. He had a large staff and was busy trying to find out who’d done something wrong. Everyone in the
place, including the vice president, who’d been selected by Richard Nixon, and the vice president’s staff, and the White House staff, all had been there. And the question was, as Howard Baker said, “What did they know? And when did they know it?” And nobody knew for sure.

By then, of course, Erlichman, Haldeman, Colson, and Mitchell were gone. It was a tainted White House. It was a discredited White House and the Gerald Ford was suddenly the president, but the tainted White House was still there and he was sitting on top of it. He felt, and I think rightly, like he had stepped into a flying airplane and he didn’t know the crew. The ones he knew he liked, he’d been around them in the House. He had no inclination to think badly of people, generally. And he felt a dilemma. He felt the need for continuity and reassurance in the country, so he took a series of steps that emphasized his clear desire to reassure the world and reassure the country.

And he felt, at least a lot of people were telling him he should feel, a need for change. So continuity and change were tugging him in different directions, and that he needed to reassure the country, but also a need to undertake the kinds of changes that would move the White House, the presidency – the institution – from an illegitimate, tainted on, to a legitimate, untainted presidency. If he did not make sufficient changes that people could see and feel, it hurt him and, in my view, it also hurt the people who stayed because there was still a cloud. They were still in a tainted White House and the only thing to make it and everyone still there untainted would be to have sufficient change for the people to see it as a Ford Presidency, and I felt, he had to do it soon, and do it decisively. I’m not talking about fifty percent, or anything like that, but to do it in a way that no one who left would be seen as leaving because he or she had done something wrong but leaving because we had a new president and he wanted a new team.

He needed to bring in his own team. But, for whatever reason, Jerry Ford being Jerry Ford, tilted way over to continuity as opposed to change, and did not make the kind of changes he needed to make to reassure the country that he was presiding over a legitimate Ford presidency, not a continuation of a Nixon-Ford presidency. He was sworn in and said he was going to keep
Henry Kissinger. Henry is an enormous talent, but the way it was done was almost a sign of weakness to do it before he was ever sworn in as president. He announced he was going to keep Al Haig before I was back in the country.

As a result he had the two most visible symbols of the Nixon administration since Erlichman and Haldeman had gone, as Ford’s first two decisions. Then he announced he was going to keep the Nixon Cabinet. He did a series of things favoring continuity instead of change that I think were quite harmful to him. Our transition team tried to urge him to recognize that he needed to get better balance between continuity and change. Bill Simon, as I recall, came in and recommended that the whole Nixon Cabinet resign as a way of ensuring nobody went out under a cloud, so there would be a new president and a new team, and they could be off running on the country’s business.

But President Ford wouldn’t do it. He had an open door policy. A staff member could walk in, someone the president had known for ten years, and say “I don’t want to leave right now. I’d like to stay for three months, but I’ve got to leave after that.” As a result there was no impression of change. It was unfortunate.

Smith: And that doesn’t even begin – it hints of this spokes of the wheel concept.

Rumsfeld: I haven’t gotten to that. He announced that.

Smith: There is this notion that it took him most of his presidency to outgrow the Congressional mindset.

Rumsfeld: Yes.

Smith: Which has many admirable things. The personal qualities that people were drawn to, that they found trustworthy is a wonderful story. The first day they had left the house in Alexandria and were finally moving into the White House. And the president’s first day on the job, he walks up to the West Wing, to the door, and there’s a Marine there standing, saluting and opening the door. The president walks over and sticks out his hand and says, “Hi, I’m Jerry Ford, I’m going to be living here. What’s your name?”

Rumsfeld: Yes.
Smith: Now, that’s Congressional, in some ways. But that’s also Gerald Ford, I guess.

Rumsfeld: It was.

Smith: But, we’ve been told, for example, that when you were invited to come in and sort of put things in order, that one condition of that was that the spokes of the wheel were going to be replaced.

Rumsfeld: Oh, I had to. It was a terrible concept. I knew it wouldn’t work. It worked fine for a minority leader. It works fine running a Congressional office.

Smith: And basically, what was it?

Rumsfeld: It was the theory that he would have the Cabinet and the senior staff all have an open door policy, and be able to come in individually and deal with him directly as he did as minority leader. So in walks some cabinet officer and says to the President, with no one else in the room, “I’m thinking about endorsing this piece of legislation,” And Ford would say, “that sounds fine to me,” and the Secretary would go off and do that. And then a month later I find out about it or the general counsel finds out about it, then the decision gets considered within the White House staff and they find out there are many reasons why he can’t do that, but he’s already done it. Then when the President finds he needs to reverse the decision the Secretary feels he has to resign, because he had the rug pulled out from under him. The president said he could do it, and it was embarrassing, when the decision had to be revoked because it hadn’t been properly staffed out beforehand.

The President became a better executive every day he was there. And by the time he left office he was a very good executive. But he had begun by announcing he was going to be the anti-Nixon. He was not going to have a Haldeman or an Erlichman. He was not going to have the palace guard.

Smith: Which appeared to be change.

Rumsfeld: Yes. He had appeared to have all spokes of the wheel approach him, where the spokes all come to him. I said to him, “Well, that’s just fine. You know what happens in the center where all the spokes come in? The grease gets
overheated and has to be changed. If you have someone doing it for you, that’s one thing, you can change him. If it’s you, you can’t change yourself and it’s just going to burn you up.” I told him it wouldn’t work. So I went back to Belgium.

When my father died, and I came back for the funeral, President Ford asked me to come to the White House and talk. He said, “I’ve got to change Haig.” The hostility between Ford’s vice presidential staff and Haig were a serious problem. I wasn’t in the country, so I didn’t know. But he said, I’ve got to change Haig. You’ve got to do it.” I told him I wouldn’t think of doing it with anything approximating spokes of the wheel arrangement. There’s no way for it to be successful. He said he’d get off it but he needed a little time to turn it around.

Smith: So he was willing to, even at that point, sort of acknowledge mistakes?

Rumsfeld: Exactly.

Smith: And move on.

Rumsfeld: Yes.

Smith: What was it about Bob Hartmann that was so polarizing? Because, clearly he and Haig were put on the planet to annoy each other. That’s putting it mildly.

Rumsfeld: Yes.

Smith: If you hear Haig today, he’s still hot under the collar.

Rumsfeld: Well, you know, no one likes to have people leaking things to the press and damaging you in those jobs. Those jobs are tough enough, but if you have insiders working against you, they are impossible.

Smith: And was that perception, at least, there?

Rumsfeld: That was the perception. I wasn’t around during that period. But that is what Al felt, and I think that’s what probably the president felt. He felt it was volatile. He couldn’t have it like it was.
Smith: In retrospect it’s so easy to say this, but it’s not dissimilar to the selection of Nelson Rockefeller. If you thought for five minutes, of the temperament of these people. Al Haig couldn’t stay. For Al Haig’s sake, he couldn’t stay. And certainly for Gerald Ford’s sake, which is not to minimize the heroic service that Al Haig rendered during those critical days.

Rumsfeld: He did a terrific job for the country. Oh my goodness, yes.

Smith: And likewise, Rockefeller was never cut out to be number two. He should not have been told that, “You’re going to have domestic policy,” that you’re going to be the domestic Henry Kissinger, which I think, in part was, because Kissinger wanted to make sure he wasn’t poaching on his terrain. And Rockefeller wasn’t totally honest with himself as to why it took it. Someone close to him tried to talk him out of it. Because I think he asked for a day or so to think it over and he called this person, very close advisor, who went over all the reasons why it would be a disaster…

Smith: And Rockefeller acceded to all these, and then at the end he said, “But, Bill, you don’t understand. This is my last chance.” And when you get down to all that was said and done, that’s why he took it.

Rumsfeld: Well, it was a shame for the president to pick somebody and then not be able to nominate him a year later because the convention wouldn’t accept him.

Smith: You know, Rockefeller went to his grave believing that you were responsible.

Rumsfeld: I know, but he was paranoid about things like that. He imagined things. I had nothing to do with it. Absolutely nothing. The president didn’t tell me who he was going to decide to select, but it became very clear that he couldn’t get Rockefeller nominated.

Smith: Plus, I’m also told from some people in this project and in my other research, you recall at one point, I guess fairly early in ’75, the announcement was made that there was going to be at least a halt in new domestic programs. In a sense, get the country…

Rumsfeld: Yes, the President was vetoing bills right and left.
Smith: Yeah, and of course, Rockefeller was taken aback. And at least one person said one contributing factor to that was, every Thursday at their lunch, Rockefeller would come in with a new program, usually with a large price tag attached.

Rumsfeld: But as you point out, Rockefeller was not designed to be a vice president. He’d been governor of New York. He was a Rockefeller. He was used to having people work for him. He was used to paying people to work for him. And he was used to getting his way. And if he didn’t get his way, he didn’t like the people who had disagreed with him. I don’t think he was used to having people disagree with him.

Smith: Did he get personal in that sense?

Rumsfeld: Oh, yes, very.

Smith: By the way, I don’t think he aged well. There are lots of folks who say that Rockefeller in the mid Seventies, was not the Rockefeller of the Sixties.

Rumsfeld: I didn’t know him then. I knew David Rockefeller and liked him. I knew Laurance and served on a board with him and liked him. But I never did know Nelson until he became Vice President. But I started out trying to figure out a way to be helpful to him and to try to how to make it work. It is a tough job being vice president. It takes a certain acceptance that you’re vice president and not president. I’m told by Lou Cannon that his staff would be dumbfounded at his inflated idea that he was really going to be the president for domestic and non-national security affairs. And he would say this. And they would shake their heads and think, no way. There can only be one President.

Smith: And the irony is, someone who had spent as much time in D.C. as Nelson had – he’d worked with presidents, he’d been in the White House, he knew how it worked.

Rumsfeld: He didn’t. He had no idea how the modern White House worked. He didn’t. He went and told people that I had designed the spokes of the wheel arrangement that Gerald Ford had adopted.
Smith: Really?

Rumsfeld: Yes, he didn’t understand anything about what was going on. And it was too bad. He was tough on people.

Smith: For example, any idea, I assume, has to be staffed out.

Rumsfeld: If you want to protect the president and have a coherent administration, ideas need to be staffed out.

Smith: And was that a source of controversy?

Rumsfeld: Oh, my Lord, sure. He walked in to see the president. Apparently the president, of course, was not a seasoned executive at that time, and I wasn’t in the room. I said fine, they could meet, I don’t need to be in their meetings and I felt it would be good for them to have that relationship. But the problem was he would either suggest to the president that he ought to have an energy proposal…

Smith: The Energy Independence Corporation.

Rumsfeld: Or, the president said to him, “Why don’t you tell me what you think about energy.” And Rockefeller would go off and come back in with a package that was his energy proposal.

Smith: A hundred billion dollars.

Rumsfeld: A hundred billion dollars. He showed it to the president. The president says, “Gee, Nelson, thanks, that’s nice.” And I come into the office half an hour later. Ford gives it to me. I said, “What do you want me to do with it?” He said, “Well, let’s staff it out.” So I staff it out. Well, my goodness, you’d think I’d committed a crime. Nelson Rockefeller said, “If you staff that out, you’re sandbagging me. I’ve already staffed it out. The staff’s already for it.” So I started checking with people around the White House to see if they were for it and, of course, I don’t think any of them had told Nelson directly they were against it. Because no one told Nelson they were against something of his, they just didn’t do it or they would be bullied and punished. Except me.

Smith: Why?
Donald Rumsfeld  March 31, 2009

Rumsfeld: They were afraid of him. He hires peoples and he dispenses largesse. He’s Vice President of the United States. And he talks right over you. He was animated, energetic, enthusiastic and forceful.

Smith: He was an intimidating guy.

Rumsfeld: He was. And people were intimidated. So the president said, “Well, I think he’s talked to these folks,” So I’d check with those folks and they’d say, “We think it’s a terrible idea. It’s going to sink out of sight like an anchor up on Capitol Hill.” And I’d finally go back and tell the president the truth and the president would say “Well, here’s where we are. I’m going to have to send it up to Congress.” It was more his relationship with Nelson at that point even though he knew it was not going to pass. And Nelson was out to the press saying I was sandbagging him. So I said, “Mr. President you do what you have to do, but you’re going to look silly sending this thing up there because nothing is going to happen. It’s going to just die.” And it did. And it should have.

Smith: Brent Scowcroft tells the story about how you could say no, very politely, and he would come back over and over.

And Brent liked him. He found him kind of a character, but he got this idea - because he was paranoid about a number of things. He was convinced that Bill Colby, for example, was a Soviet agent.

Rumsfeld: Yes.

Smith: When the Metro was being dug, he came up with this idea that if they just created a spur, it would be secret, no one would know about it, under the White House. Brent sort of listened to him, and humored him. And he explained very gently why that was probably impractical, why you probably couldn’t keep that a secret. Rockefeller kept coming back.

Rumsfeld: Well, you know, he probably knew that when they built the pyramids, they’d kill everyone who did the construction and knew the secrets.

Smith: Were you late in awakening either to the likelihood that Reagan would run, or the formidable candidacy that he would wage?
Rumsfeld: First of all, I, for whatever reason, I suppose because I’d been ambassador to NATO, and I was sitting in on the NSC meetings at the president’s request, I did not pay close attention to the political side. Dick Cheney did. And he was good at it, he understood it, and he liked it. But, no, my interaction with the president was that he was concerned about that, and asked me to go over and I think, suggest to President Reagan - I met with him in the Madison Hotel, inviting him to become secretary of commerce. Ford had meetings with him from time to time. No, the president was clearly concerned about it, and sensitive to it, and I’m sure his political people were, as well.

Smith: The whole Alexander Solzhenitsyn flap – it’s still confusing, but apparently at some point the president evidently did, in fact, invite him?

Rumsfeld: I think I was out of the city or someplace. I was not engaged with it. I believe Dick Cheney was, I recall the NSC advised that Ford not meet with him. It was probably because of their interaction with the Soviets at the time, on détente, and whatever else they were dealing with. And so, a regret went out. It obviously ignited a firestorm. I believe he was speaking to a labor union group or getting an award. The next thing you know, the people in the White House start trying to overcome the National Security Council’s recommendation that the president not meet with Solzhenitsyn. I wasn’t in any of these meetings that I recall, but at some point the president or Dick Cheney or somebody in the White House, invited Solzhenitsyn in, I think, and he declined.

Smith: Yeah, I think that’s it.

Rumsfeld: Does that sound about right?

Smith: The whole relationship between the president and Secretary Schlesinger, was that just bad chemistry? It’s been suggested that Gerald Ford knew a lot about defense. He’d spent many years immersing himself in the subject, and perhaps there is a certain professorial quality, about the secretary and it just didn’t quite mesh.

Rumsfeld: Yes. He never told me, he, being the president. He never told me precisely what his problem was. But if the two key players on the National Security
Council, after the president, are the secretary of state and the secretary of defense. It was clear that President Ford had a very close relationship with Henry Kissinger. He developed an excellent working relationship with him.

Henry had two positions. He had the National Security Council staff and he had the secretary of state’s staff. So, of the three players, Henry was two of them. So Henry, as the National Security half, would decide who would go to meetings. And I would attend frequently at the President’s request. I don’t know whether it was the president or Henry decided they wanted to have a separate meeting on a subject that clearly deserved something that would be engaged by the Department of Defense with statutory responsibility. It could have been the president because he wasn’t comfortable with Jim, or it could have been Henry because he wanted to further his positions and could do so much more easily in a limited audience. I don’t know the answer to that question.

All I know is, that when I would go in and try to get Jim into the meetings and see that the Department of Defense was represented, that the president was stiff about it, often.

Smith: I assume that was very unusual.

Rumsfeld: It was, but he (Ford) simply didn’t enjoy being with Jim. And I don’t know what caused it, whether it was something that had happened between the two of them when he was in the Congress, or when he was vice president. But the only time I saw a real spike in Gerald Ford on the subject was when – well, a couple of times. One time was when apparently Jim Schlesinger made some remarks about George Mahon, Gerald Ford’s friend. And he (Ford) had a minimum of high regard for that. There was also a situation that came up, I think, during the Mayaguez – no it was maybe during the…

Smith: The fall of Saigon?

Rumsfeld: Maybe the fall of Saigon, when he felt Jim was responsible – I did not think Jim was responsible for whatever went wrong – I’ve forgotten what the detail was. But there was some miscommunication, and I felt it was not Jim’s fault, but the president took it to be Jim’s fault. That was the only other time I ever
heard any specifics. But it had to be something deeper than that; that had happened.

Smith: You know what is interesting – the fact he didn’t tell you the source of the problem, because there is something I noticed in the later years – but I’ve asked some other people who tend to confirm this: lots of politicians love to gossip, and my sense was he actively discouraged it, didn’t engage in it.

Rumsfeld: Correct.

Smith: Would change the subject politely if it came up.

Rumsfeld: That’s right.

Smith: And, indeed, Bob Barrett said, “None of us will ever know what things he took with him to the grave.”

Rumsfeld: Yes, that’s true. But, it was too bad because Jim is, of course, a talented guy and a valuable contributor in government, and could have benefited the administration, had he been able to play a traditional role in the NSC process.

Smith: Let me go back, because when you came back - were you in town at the time of the pardon?

Rumsfeld: No, I was back in Belgium.

Smith: You were? It will come as no surprise to you that Mel Laird thinks he could have solved that, too. Mel’s got a plan for everything. And his plan was, he told Jerry, “Don’t do this, don’t rush into this…”

Rumsfeld: So he knew? Mel did?

Smith: Like the day before.

Rumsfeld: Is that right?

Smith: Yes. And Laird’s plan was, he was going to get together a bipartisan delegation from both Houses. They were going to go to the White House and they were going to ask the president to do this. The problem with that is, unless you put yourself inside that supercharged atmosphere, it seems to me, I
don’t know how any trial balloon could have survived. I mean, I don’t know how the president could have “prepared” the country for the pardon, because the first sign that it was coming, there would have been the uproar that, in fact, ensued. Was there an alternative?

Rumsfeld: I don’t have any idea.

Smith: Did you ever discuss it with him?

Rumsfeld: No, no, no. It was all done. It was history by the time I came back. My view of it is that Mel might be right. That it is conceivable that if – you’re right, it would leak – but we know it was a terribly damaging thing to him the way he did it. So let’s just accept that.

Smith: Right.

Rumsfeld: Now, let’s muse as to what might have happened. Is it conceivable that he could have gone to the special prosecutor and acclimated him to the idea? Is it conceivable he could have talked to some members of the Supreme Court? Is it conceivable he could have talked to the Democratic leadership, and let it leak? And let it go out there. He hadn’t done it, therefore, you’re not going to have the firestorm and the volcanic eruption that occurred and the resignation of your press secretary, who you’d appointed five minutes earlier.

His staff – he didn’t have anyone on his staff who could support him on it because he didn’t tell anyone on his staff, except for three or four people, as I understand it. Benton Becker and I don’t know about Bob – probably Bob Hartmann, he probably wrote something. You’re saying Mel, I didn’t know, but he told relatively few people. And since we know that the way it was done turned out to be quite damaging to the president, one has to at least be willing to explore the possibility that there might have been a way – it may have taken longer, it may have been harder on Richard Nixon, which he did not want to be hard on Richard Nixon.

He issued instructions to his staff – he didn’t want people saying negative things about Richard Nixon. He wanted to treat him in a dignified, respectful way. He felt he’d been a colleague and someone he’d worked with and he
didn’t want to see him badly treated by his administration. And letting it get
out for a week or two or three or four, would have been very uncomfortable
for Richard Nixon.

Smith: The irony, of course is, if he had waited a couple of months, when Nixon was
at death’s door, maybe there would have been a different climate.

Rumsfeld: Conceivably.

Smith: Needless to say, he was advised not to visit Nixon in the hospital.

Rumsfeld: By me.

Smith: Tell us about that.

Rumsfeld: He wanted to call him from time to time. He wanted to visit him, he had a
very admirable, human, desire to not see a person he considered a friend,
down, hurt, wounded. And I said, “I agree. That’s nice. And I don’t disagree
with your natural human emotions, but the fact of the matter is, you’ve got to
become President of the United States on your own feet, standing on your
own ground, and not have this be seen as the Nixon-Ford administration. Or
you’re not going to be a successful president and that’s not good for the
country, and you’ve got a higher purpose. And you can do it without in any
way being negative or harmful to the former president. But he did things
which caused great damage to himself, great damage to his administration,
great damage to the people associated with him. That has taken this ship of
state off course, and it’s your job to put it back on course. And to the extent
you diminish your ability to do that, you’re harming him, and you’re harming
yourself, and you’re harming the country.”

Smith: Is that part of the process of learning to be president? In other words, the
difference between a Congressman who could act on your own, sort of
heartfelt instincts, and a president who, in some ways, has to be ruthless?

Rumsfeld: Not ruthless. He has to recognize what the priorities have to be for the
country.
Smith: It’s an indulgence for him to go visit a friend, if it results in the consequences that you described?

Rumsfeld: In that case, yes, if it diminishes your ability to govern, at a time that you have to be able to govern.

Smith: Had he heard from the family? What was the sort of mechanism by which he learned that Nixon was in bad shape?

Rumsfeld: I don’t remember. I know that there were constant phone calls. The whole staff was Nixon staff. The relationships between Ron Zeigler and the people that had transferred out to San Clemente with President Nixon were all friends of ours and friends of the people in the White House, and so it was constantly coming in. And there were request after request after request, one type of thing and another.

But, I mean, the same thing happened with Tip O’Neill. Tip O’Neill, a good guy, a friend of mine, a friend of the president’s. He liked him. I walked into the Oval Office one day and the president said, “Here, Rummy, I’m going to go to Tip O’Neill’s birthday party on Thursday.” And I said, “Fine, I’ll staff it out and figure out how we do that.” So, the next day I come back in and I said to the president, “I’m awful sorry to tell you this, but you’re not going to be able to go to that party. That party is being paid for by some folks you do not want to go to a party paid for by them.” And, “Damn it, Rummy, I’m going to go! Tip’s my friend, I’m going to go!” I said, “That’s just fine, but you’re not going to go to the party. You are the President of the United States. This thing is being paid for, it’s fine for Tip to do it, he’s a politician, he’s a local politician and he can do what he wants. But you cannot go to that party, given the fact that this party is being paid for by people who you do not want to be associated with, and we will not let you be associated with. If you want to go to that party, you’re going to have to walk up there, but I’m damned if I’m going to let you go to that party.”

And he just was determined to go to that party. He just – Tip’s his friend – and he’s darn well going to go. He didn’t go.

Smith: Tell us about his stubbornness.
Rumsfeld: Oh, it’s kind of appealing. He’d get a little red dot on his cheek, and he was stubborn. Oh, the worst example of stubborn was the Max Frankel question in the debate, where he just would not, could not, back off and accept – I mean, here’s Scowcroft – I wasn’t there – but Scowcroft and Cheney are just looking him in the eye and saying, Holy Mackerel. And Frankel looked him in the eye and said, “You’re not really saying this, are you?”

Smith: He gave him a chance to back off the limb.

Rumsfeld: He gave him a fair chance, you bet. And instead, he grabbed the nettle and beat him with it. “You bet your life I think they’re not subjugated,” or whatever he said.

Smith: And then it took days to get him to…

Rumsfeld: Oh days, days. And finally he heaved a pencil at the door, and Cheney said or Scowcroft said, somebody, that he heaved the pencil and then laughed, and said, “Alright, we’ll clean it up.” It was too bad, but that’s a perfect example. I guess we’re all like that in one way or another. We get something in our mind. I was stunned to listen to it again the other day for some reason – the Max Frankel question. I forget why. And it was so clear, and he gave such a chance, and then the comments he made the second time around were just so far off base.

Smith: And all he had to do was say, “I’ve been to Poland. I looked into their eyes. They don’t think they’re dominated by the Soviet Union.”

Rumsfeld: Yes, but I know why he said what he said, because all of the Congressmen from ethnic districts like I was and he was, every year on Captive Nations Weeks, we’d get up there and say, “We do not concede that the Poles are permanently subjugated…” He just kept leaving out the word permanently. He had it in his mind. I’ve said all those things, but I always knew they were subjugated, but I never conceded that they were permanently subjugated and that we would throw them up to the Soviets for the rest of their histories.

Smith: The fall of Saigon. It will come as no surprise that Mel has some history about that, too. Mel loved Ford, but he still, to some degree, blames him. Mel
believes that it would have been possible, in the spring of 1975, to have persuaded Congress to appropriate several hundred million dollars for the South Vietnamese.

Rumsfeld: Boy, he sure wanted to – President Ford. He didn’t persuade them, and they didn’t do it.

Smith: But not for lack of effort on the president’s part.

Rumsfeld: I can’t say that, I wasn’t involved in it that much, but I know that the president wanted to, and he went up and asked. And I think there were those who suggested he not ask because he would be defeated. And he said, no, we want to do that, and I think he did go up and make the request. Is that right?

Smith: I think it is right.

Rumsfeld: I think so, isn’t it?

Smith: And he certainly was outspoken himself, sort of denouncing the Congress for not doing it.

Rumsfeld: I think the funds that he asked for were not funds to continue, they were funds to be used to assist the people who were helpful to us while we were there, and were kind of a closeout fund. I don’t know what Mel’s position that he thought he could get the funds and win the war.

Smith: I think he thought, even at that point, that somehow the fall of Saigon could have been avoided militarily. You are right, that after the fall Congress pulled the plug and wants to forget that we were ever there. That, I think, is my candidate for Ford’s finest hour - when the president reminds the country that we have a tradition of providing asylum to victims of oppression, and he puts together this crazy quilt coalition – you’ve got the American Jewish Congress, and George Meany, and I think some state governors. Anyway, they campaigned and, in effect, shamed the Congress into restoring funds to bring out a substantial number of Vietnamese.

Rumsfeld: Yes.
Smith: I take it there was a debate inside the White House – there was the famous speech at Tulane where the president, in effect, says, “The war is over,” and the kids, of course, all go wild. And there apparently had been a real back and forth. Kissinger didn’t want him to say that and Hartmann wanted him to say that, and, it was being played out on that level. At what point did it become clear to you that this was, at this point, a rescue operation, or likely to be? How rapidly did this situation develop?

Rumsfeld: Once the signal is out, that it looks like it might be the end, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and you kind of hit a slope and then it accelerates and compounds. And people behave rationally, fearfully. In the case of people who are helpful to us, they’d fear what’s going to happen to them. In the case of people who are against us, they behave rationally, and they seek opportunities to have it be a disaster and accelerate. It was a terribly sad time for any American to see the people being pulled off the top of the building by helicopters. It was heartbreaking.

Smith: What was it like for him?

Rumsfeld: Oh, it had to be just heartbreaking.

Smith: Were you going through daily meetings and everything?

Rumsfeld: Oh, my goodness, several meetings a day. Yeah. And then there was confusion at the end. As you may recall, where it was announced that the Americans were all out, and I got a call or somebody did from Schlesinger saying that they weren’t out. We still had some X number of Marines who were the ones on the ground guarding the embassy to keep it from getting ripped apart and people trying to pull themselves into the last helicopter. And finally the president agreed that we should go down and say they’re not all out, in case something happened to those folks. But it was a terribly tough time for me and I know for him. And I think for everybody.

Smith: Few presidents have ever walked into the Oval Office with as much hanging over their heads, including things not of their own making. He had to clean up Watergate, restore trust that had been shattered, he had an economy that was going into the dumper, and…
Rumsfeld: Right now, you read the papers today and they frequently refer to the ’74-’75 economic situation. In the papers about what’s going on now, it was a tough economic time.

Smith: Plus you have this whipsaw, because apparently, at first, inflation was defined as the enemy. And then almost overnight, it turned out well, no, recession is looming.

Rumsfeld: Stagflation.

Smith: How would you describe his command of economics?

Rumsfeld: He was comfortable meeting with the economists. I’d been deeply involved in it in the Nixon administration when I was director of the Economic Stabilization Program, and so, I was close to Alan Greenspan and all of the economic people that he would be dealing with, and therefore, in some of those meetings, and [he] was comfortable with them. He had dealt with them before and knew some of them.

He had Bill Seidman as his economic advisor, and of course, Bill Simon was secretary of treasury and was the principal economic spokesman. We were fortunate that Alan Greenspan had been nominated by Nixon was confirmed after President Ford came in, at our recommendation. I had talked to the president about it and said Alan Greenspan’s nomination was pending as the chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors and we want to encourage the Senate to promote that and put it forward, which they did.

But, it was a funny time. You had these summit meetings that were hastily put together and when the economists get together and agree, watch out. These people came from around the country and the next thing I knew, there was this speech being done by Bob Hartmann and it had not been washed with Greenspan and the other people in the administration. The people in the administration, there was Simon – the people that had statutory responsibility for these areas – it had not been sufficiently washed with them, and the president, unfortunately, was faced finally with this awkward situation of having to deal with a speech that had been written but not staffed out. And it
was unfortunate. I, at the last minute, urged him not to do it, not to give that speech.

Smith: Was that the Whip Inflation Now?

Rumsfeld: Yes, and to say that this was so important you were going to take more time and think it through and put it off until we had a package that we could be proud of. Unfortunately, he went ahead and it was almost ridiculed, which is tough. Few things are more harmful than ridicule for a politician.

Smith: I tell you, though, remember the ’75 State of the Union address – he did something no president before or since has done, and probably never will – when he started out by saying, “The state of the Union is not good.”

Rumsfeld: Hartmann wrote some very good speeches with him – the two of them as collaborators. There is no question that the president gave some excellent speeches. And to the extent they were that type – directional as opposed to substantive – Hartmann could do an excellent job with them. They worked well together.

Smith: Was part of the problem simply that Hartmann saw himself, not without reason, as kind of the ultimate loyalist, and it’s a very, very, short step to becoming possessive and to maybe thinking that you’ve got, if not a monopoly, then at least a patent pending on knowing what’s best for the guy you’re so devoted to?

Rumsfeld: Well, I’m no psychiatrist or psychologist, and I don’t venture into those areas really, but, he, with good reason, felt a very strong loyalty to President Ford. He’d worked with him in House, he’d worked with him as vice president. He saw with a good, clear former journalist’s eye, that the staff that existed in the White House was not Ford’s staff, it was Nixon’s staff. And he, as the guardian of the vice president, and the guardian of the new president, distrusted most of the people – not for any good reason, but on principle.

He distrusted them with respect to the extent of their loyalty to Gerald Ford as opposed to their loyalty to Nixon and the Nixon White House. And I think the effect of that on Bob was to cause him to maybe feel kind of like you’ve
described, and also maybe to find ways to try to make the president look good at the expense of some people that the president was working with. But it never works that way. It doesn’t make the president look good. It makes it look it’s a disorderly house.

Smith: And the ultimate irony is that that White House was so determined not to have another Haldeman, that Hartmann, in some ways, reproduced a little bit of the Haldeman, for lack of a better word, paranoia about people.

Rumsfeld: See, my impression is a little different. My impression is that Hartmann was the ultimate loyalist to Ford, and Ford tolerated it.

Smith: Yeah.

Rumsfeld: That Haldeman, while he was a loyalist to Nixon, he was doing Nixon’s bidding. And I do not think that Hartmann was doing Ford’s bidding.

Smith: Okay. That’s an important distinction.

Rumsfeld: And I think that is a distinction. And I give Haldeman credit for trying to be true to what his president wanted – not that it was a good thing to want, necessarily.

Smith: The speech process – I’ve talked to a number of people – the whole business surrounding the New York City fiscal crisis, there was clearly a tug of war going on. Ideological and, my sense is, you had Hartmann and Bill Seidman and by implication, the vice president in one camp. And folks like Bill Simon and Alan Greenspan, who wanted to take a much tougher approach toward the city. Now, I’ll preface this; years later Hugh Cary said to me, “You know, Jerry Ford has never gotten the credit he deserved, because in fact, it was his tough love approach that ultimately drove New York to do the very difficult things that it wanted to avoid.” Is that your characterization?

Rumsfeld: I agree.

Smith: But how intense was that debate?

Rumsfeld: Well that article that said “Drop Dead, New York, Gerald Ford,” which he never said, which he never would have thought of saying, was harmful. Now,
he didn’t lose New York by much, I don’t think. I’ve forgotten. But it left an impression that wasn’t true to what he’d said.

Smith: But it was the speech that he delivered at the Press Club, over which there had been this, sort of ideological and policy tug of war. Do you recall that?

Rumsfeld: I don’t. I know you’re right – that the vice president wanted New York to receive some largesse and that Bill Simon was very strong on the other side. I don’t remember how others sorted out on it. Do you?

Smith: So then, finally, there comes the shuffle at the end of 1975. I think you indicated you were very reluctant to go to the Pentagon.

Rumsfeld: I was.

Smith: And, presumably, going back on what you said earlier, you really would have preferred, your own part notwithstanding, that this had taken place much earlier.

Rumsfeld: The president should have made the changes he wanted early. And it would have left the impression of a Ford presidency instead of a Nixon-Ford presidency.

Smith: And yet, I think you would concede, in time he put together a stellar Cabinet.

Rumsfeld: A good group. Absolutely. I thought that the timing of it was awkward for the people he was naming. He had a Democratic Congress – they’d have to get confirmed. From my standpoint, I agreed philosophically more with Schlesinger than I did with Henry on détente. And the Strategic Arms (SALT) negotiations. And I told the president, I said, “Look, I’m clearly not going to make recommendations that are going to be notably different from Jim Schlesinger’s. I agree that the budget has to go up. I think he’s done a good job.”

And when I talked to Paul Nitze about it, with the president’s permission, Nitze said, “Look, you don’t have any choice,” and he said, “The president doesn’t have any choice.” I said, “Why?” I said, “He could wait, he could get through this period.” And he said, “No, no, the President of the United States
has to have a secretary of defense in whom he has total confidence.” And Nitze was a friend of Jim’s. And he said, “They don’t get along, it’s obvious. And Kissinger and Schlesinger don’t get along.” And he said, “The president has to have someone he has confidence in. It has to be someone who can do the job, and it has to be someone who can get confirmed. Tell me two other people that fit that template.” And, you can’t.

It just happened that I happened to be there and knew the president well from Congress, and had been involved with those issues pretty steadily for a period of years. And liked Henry Kissinger and was perfectly willing to work with him, but to not necessarily agree with him on everything.

Smith: Was Kissinger upset about, in effect, losing one of his hats?

Rumsfeld: Sure. He was understandably concerned that it would diminish his ability to conduct the foreign policy of the country on behalf of the president. If you’ve seen us losing something, one post, and that’s why he was adamant that it be Brent Scowcroft who succeed him. And so people would see it as him really still being there.

Smith: It put Scowcroft in a somewhat awkward position.

Rumsfeld: I suppose.

Smith: Or at least potentially. Tell me something, because here it’s almost like you’re riding two horses. You’ve got détente, whether people want to call it détente or not, but you’ve got this pursuit of détente, and at the same time, you’ve got these proxy wars going on, particularly in Africa.

Rumsfeld: Right.

Smith: How do you ride those two horses? How do you have a coherent foreign policy called détente when the Cubans are doing what they are doing and Angola and…

Rumsfeld: It’s hard. I was more in the Reagan side of those issues. I felt the word détente was harmful. Not because it was French, but because it left an impression of a relationship that was admittedly not normal with the Soviet Union, by a darn
sight. But acceptable. It was a relaxation of tensions, and you do that with somebody that you find at least moderately acceptable. And here they, the Soviets, were engaged in mischief around the globe, subjugating Eastern Europe, and the Russian Republic. But worse than that, what bothered me, was that I knew that the Soviet Union was investing an enormous fraction of its gross national product in defense, and producing increasing numbers of things – ships, guns, tanks, planes – and that we were doing the opposite. That we’d come down and had been declining in terms of our investment. And that we were still suffering from the denials that occurred during the Vietnam war when the Johnson budget was not increased sufficiently to take up the slack for all the money that was going into Vietnam, as opposed to going into defense investment and capabilities that would enable us to deter and dissuade the Soviet Union from mischief in the world.

And I felt that we had to increase the defense budget, and we had to reverse the trends which I saw as adverse to the United States. Henry felt that it was important that we be able to say, and the president tended to side with him, that we were the strongest nation on the face of the earth, and that enabled us to do more in foreign policy, and it also, with the increasing drum beat coming from the right with Reagan, it was a counter to Reagan.

The truth was, we were in kind of a band of rough equivalence, as Schlesinger characterized it, and I did. But the trend lines were wrong. They were coming up and we were coming down. And while we were in this band of rough equivalence, our circumstance was adverse, and I felt that unless we were willing to face that, we would not be able to persuade the Congress to raise the funds, invest in the funds, appropriate the funds that we would need to avoid sliding into an inferior position. I felt that détente, the concept of détente, took the edge off of the need to invest and reverse those adverse trends.

Smith: Sure. It is a little bit of cognitive dissonance.

Rumsfeld: It is. And while you can say that it was a perfectly rational position if we’d been clearly superior, and then when you’re in that position, you can operate and say, “Well, let’s have a relaxation of tension.” We can afford it, and we’ll
try to work out things with them. But if you’re sliding down and they’re coming up and you start saying, “Let’s relax tensions,” it’s from a position of relative weakness, and weakness is provocative, and so I was concerned about it. And obviously, it put me in a very difficult - in my confirmation hearing and in my remarks - because Reagan increasingly picked up what I was saying and took it to a position that was adverse to the president, which I didn’t. And it was a complicated time for all of us.

Smith: And in the end, in some ways the president almost backed out of détente.

Rumsfeld: He stopped saying détente completely. And he also agreed to increase the defense budget.

Smith: Now, that’s interesting, because I’ve heard Colin Powell say that a number of weapons systems that came online, that were actually used during the first Gulf War, either were initiated, or preserved in the Ford years

Rumsfeld: Oh, they were. Absolutely. He did a good job. The stealth airplanes were in their early stages. The M1 tank, the main battle tank that was so successful in the Gulf War was something that I approved, with a turbine engine and a 120 mm cannon as opposed to a 105 mm.

Smith: And wasn’t one of the sticking points at Vladivostok…?

Rumsfeld: Cruise missiles.

Smith: Cruise missiles. What was the background?

Rumsfeld: Well, that was an awkward situation for me, also. The cruise missile, I, for several reasons, felt was a very interesting weapons system. You could put a nuclear weapon on it or a conventional weapon. You could launch it from the air, an air launch cruise missile, you could launch it from the ground, a ground launch cruise missile, you could launch it from the sea, and you could launch it from under the sea. So that flexibility was very attractive and they had good precision.

Now, the problem with it was, if you are trying to limit weapons, and you’re in negotiations, that thing that makes the cruise missile so attractive, its
versatility, its flexibility – conventional, nuclear, land, sea or air – makes trying to control it almost impossible. So what you have to do is give it all up. So if you were engaging in a negotiation on deployed nuclear weapons, you have to include all cruise missiles because they have the potential to be nuclear weapons. I was unwilling to have cruise missiles barred, and a new weapon is never something that the military is terribly interested in. It’s funny, they like what they have and they want more of them, but there was not a strong basis for it. And the U.S. came close to agreeing to give them up.

Smith: At Vladivostok?

Rumsfeld: Yes, or in negotiations subsequent. I was uncomfortable with that, and President Ford was terrific. He came to see me after he was out of the presidency. I was chief executive of a company in Chicago. He brought me one of his [dog] Liberty’s puppies. He brought me a copy of his book, *A Time to Heal*. We got in the car and he said, “Rummy, here’s my book. You’re not going to like it.” I said, “Why’s that?” I said, “I bet I do.” He said, “Well, I kind of hold you and Brezhnev responsible for our not getting a SALT deal.” And I looked at him and I said, “Mr. President, I can live with that.” And he laughed. He was such a wonderful, warm person.

I was in that awkward position of representing what I believed to be the situation that was most logical from the Department of Defense, and he, the president, had to make a decision, and he did not feel that he wanted to overrule that, and therefore there was no SALT deal.

Smith: We’re in the home stretch. Were you at the ’76 convention?

Rumsfeld: It’s another one of those Rockefeller myths that I was trying to become vice president that he promoted actively with the press. He was a busy little beaver when he wasn’t working on energy.

Smith: Was he a big leaker?

Rumsfeld: Oh, my goodness gracious! He was. But in any event, I had been told that when I was young, I had tonsillitis, and the therapy of choice in Chicago was to zap you with radiation. And that people who had that ended up getting
tumors in their thyroids. I noticed that my thyroid had a tumor, I could see it. So I had voluntary surgery, I think a week before the convention or something like that. I was apparently under consideration for VP, but I purposely decided to have that done then, and I ended up going to the convention, I think, for one day at the request of the president. He wanted his whole Cabinet there, and I went there.

Smith: How did he deal with the Cabinet? Because you’ve obviously seen different presidents, different styles. We’ve been told stories about how he’d have meetings in the Roosevelt Room and have Jim Lynn there and Cabinet officers, who would basically make a pitch for the program, and the president, like Solomon, would decide.

Rumsfeld: Sure he would. Yes. But most Cabinet meetings were in the Cabinet Room, not the Roosevelt Room. But the smaller meetings were sometimes in the Roosevelt Room or in the Oval Office and I’d go in and plead budget needs and meet with him. But he was comfortable dealing with people. An awful lot of the things were budget matters that he dealt with, with people. And generally, you’d try to have the relevant people in the room with you so that things didn’t backwash like they did on the Rockefeller energy program. And you’d have them right there and they could hear the president and see the interaction and hear the arguments. I liked Lynn in meetings when he was running the budget. I liked Henry in meetings when we were discussing something that was of a national security nature.

Smith: Justice Stevens’ nomination, which really stands out thirty years later as almost the last time that a president – I’m not suggesting that he had no concern for his ideological persuasion – but you got a sense that it was his brilliance, his intellect, his raw legal talent, that led to his nomination.

Rumsfeld: I have no recollection of it. Excuse me, do you know when he was nominated – Stevens?

Smith: Unintelligible.

Rumsfeld: When did I become secretary? November or December? November 20th?
Smith: So you would not have been…

Rumsfeld: And when was he nominated – after that? I have no recollection of any discussions about Stevens, but I do know that Ed Levy was the president’s attorney general, and Ed Levy was from Chicago. And, as I recall, Stevens was from Chicago. And my guess is that Ed Levy knew him well and was undoubtedly the principle player, along with Phil Buchen, as to who would make these decisions. And I’m sure the president received a recommendation from Ed Levy.

Smith: He never interviewed him.

Rumsfeld: Is that right?

Smith: He never interviewed him and you know, the Justice told us that in his confirmation hearings, no one asked about abortion. And, of course, this was three years after Roe v Wade, which – it’s a different planet. We’re about out of time. I want to ask you because you had what must have been one of the last meetings with the president. You saw him and you had some very important business to transact. Tell us about that. It was about a month before he died.

Rumsfeld: I’m trying to think. Joyce and I were in Taos, New Mexico with all of our family – children and grandchildren – and I had talked to the president and I don’t remember why, a month or two before. I remember he called me asking me to do a eulogy when he passed away, as I suspect he did to you. But for some reason I talked to him. It may have been about the USS Gerald Ford. But in any event, I was sitting there Thanksgiving and we were in New Mexico, and I said to Joyce, “Let’s fly over and see him.” I think it was the Friday or Saturday of that weekend, and I had some USS Gerald Ford hats and a picture of what the ship might look like, that I’d brought from Washington, and we just flew over and spent half a day with him.

I remember walking in, he was in a chair, one of those chairs that had different angles and reclines and could go kind of sit up. He heard my voice at the door and he yelled, “Rummy!” (loud) like that. And he kept needing someone to lift him and move him in the chair because he couldn’t manage it
- to get comfortable. He was uncomfortable. But he was wonderful. We talked about the USS Monterrey, which he had served on, and the difference between that and the USS Gerald Ford.

Of course, I, when I carrier qualified in the Navy, the carrier I landed on for my first six carrier landings was the USS Monterrey. It was the ship they had at Pensacola for student aviators to land on to qualify to become Naval aviators. But we had a wonderful talk, Joyce and I did, with Betty and the president, and I think Steve was there. We talked about old times and talked about the ship. We talked about his service on the Monterey, and I guess the typhoon that he went through – and had a wonderful time.

Smith: Was there any talk about current events – did he talk about Iraq?

Rumsfeld: No.

Smith: Reminiscing more than…

Rumsfeld: Just reminiscing.

Smith: Did you think it was probably going to be the last time you saw him?

Rumsfeld: You know, it turned out he died a short time thereafter, and I felt so fortunate that we’d gone. He was a dear friend.

Smith: How should he be remembered?

Rumsfeld: Oh, I think probably as an official who served his country in the military and the legislature and in the executive branch with what I think anyone who dealt with him would have to say was a basic human decency, and integrity that is admirable, and not always found in public service. That he was not about Gerald Ford, he was much more about the country, much more about the ideas that he was interested in. That he had a tolerance level for criticism and understood and had a respect for the dynamics of the political process in our country. And was not uncomfortable living with that. It didn’t mean you liked all aspects of it. It didn’t mean you respected all aspects of it, but he was a person who had experienced a great deal, and understood our country and loved it.
I think he’ll be remembered as somebody who came in at just a terribly difficult time and managed to help right the ship of state, and put us on a steady course at a time when we had gone through a wrenching experience of Vietnam, a wrenching experience of Watergate. The first president to have to resign in our history, and I guess maybe the second vice president who had to resign in our history, and he did it with good humor and he did it with courage. And he did it every day that he was there and with an increasingly skillful deft hand.

Smith: Terry O’Donnell said, and it’s apropos of what you said, leading up to this. He said, “Gerald Ford would have been a great second term president.”


Smith: He’d mastered the job?

Rumsfeld: He had. He’d gotten very good at it and he enjoyed it. He was comfortable in it. And he almost won it.

Smith: Bob Barrett said, “The thing afterwards, was he’d go around the White House and said, ‘I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer!’”

Rumsfeld: Is that right?

Smith: Yeah. But, in time they became friends, too.

Rumsfeld: Sure.

Smith: I can’t thank you enough.
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Smith: First of all, thank you so much for doing this.

I guess the first obvious question is what was the path that eventually crossed with Gerald Ford on Capitol Hill?

Downton: When I graduated from high school, I went to Davenport College in Grand Rapids, now Davenport University, I believe. But at that point in time, it was Davenport College. We had to do a research paper on a place we wanted to work that we didn’t know anything about. I was taking a legal secretary course and I pretty much knew everything about court reporter, legal secretary, whatever. So, at that point in time, *The FBI Story* was on TV, the weekly with Efrem Zimbalist, Jr. We had watched that as a family and my younger brother said, “Why don’t you write there and at least get some information?” They had women working there. “And you can do your paper and we don’t have to listen to it anymore.”

You know, I didn’t know what to do. So I did. I wrote in and I got a lot of information from them along with an application. So my father said, “Why don’t you fill it out and see what happens?” So I did and the next thing I knew, I was being investigated by the FBI to see whether or not they would consider hiring me. Well, they offered me a job in Washington, D.C. in their print division to begin with, much to the chagrin of the people at Davenport College because they already were going to place me with a law firm. So, they said, “You’re not going to go work for the FBI.” And I said, “Yes, I am. I’m going to Washington, D.C. I’m going to work for the FBI. And if it doesn’t work out, then I’ll come back.” And so I did. I was very young at that point in time.

My parents took me to Washington, D.C. The FBI were fabulous to work for. I have only good things to say about that period of time. That was still with
John Edgar Hoover as the director. When my folks took me, they wanted me to at least know someone in Washington, D.C. At that point in time, my father had a friend who was a fellow pastor, and his sister, Ruth Mahder her name was, worked for Congressman Ford on Capitol Hill. He had just become Minority Leader. So we went up to Capitol Hill on Saturday and Ruth’s not working that day, but we met the people on staff and what have you.

Ruth called me later. We got together and what have you, it worked out great. Well, about a month later, I had a call when I was working for the FBI from the administrative assistant, Frank Meyer, his name was. And he wanted to offer me a job as secretary to the press secretary. At that point in time, because he was Minority Leader, he needed to expand his staff. And, one thing, when you work for the FBI, you promise to stay for a year. It’s an unwritten acknowledgment, but you do do that. And so I told Frank, “Oh, no, I couldn’t even think about that.” He said, “Well, why not?” I said, “Because I promised to stay for a year and I like my job. There’s no reason for me to leave.” And he said, “Well, if that’s the only reason not to, I’ll have Congressman Ford call J. Edgar Hoover.” I said, “No! I don’t want you to do that. No. I like my job. I’ll stay right where I am.” I said, “No, thank you.”

I didn’t think anything more of it until I was home at Christmas time in December and I got a call from Frank. He said, “Dorothy, when is your year up?” And I said, “In January.” He said, “Okay. Now, I have another job I want you to consider,” and that would be actually being one of his secretaries. He gave a lot of dictation to both Ruth Mahder and myself, but he was getting busier and busier and needed more help. I said, “Well, I’ll be happy to come and talk to you about that.” So when I got back to D.C. after Christmas, I went up and talked to Frank. We had a wonderful visit. I ended up staying at the FBI for one year and two days. So, I met my promise.

I started then working with Frank. And, like I say, a lot of dictation and I learned how to do a lot of the constituent letters and whatever. I started doing them, some on my own, he would give me some to answer on my own and whatever.
Smith: I assume mail was critical.

Downton: Yes, it was essential. We took every letter we got seriously, whether it was a request for a tour, or information, a social security problem, whatever. Yes, it was very serious. And Frank would dictate a lot of the letters to Ruth and myself and then we would type them up and Congressman Ford would sign them. He would take them home with him, usually at night, and sign them in the car on the way home, because he had a chauffeur as Minority Leader. So Frank would come through and pick all of our mail up from our outboxes and he’d package them up and Congressman would take them home and he would read and sign them and bring them back the next morning.

Smith: Now, were the District offices and Minority office separate, or was it all in one place?

Downton: He kept us all together on Capitol Hill. He could’ve had a separate congressional office and minority leader office, but he decided to keep us all together. So, I believe at that point in time some of us were paid as congressional staff and some as minority leader staff. But he kept us all together. We were in H230 of the Capitol, a wonderful, wonderful office. We had the best view of Washington, D.C. You could look right down the Mall. It was beautiful. We were there for seven years and I continued doing a lot of the correspondence and whatever.

Whenever Congressman Ford would want to make a speech on the floor, he would sometimes ask Frank because he wanted to dictate to someone. So Frank would say, “Dorothy, would you take the dictation?” I said, “Sure!” You know, I was young and it didn’t matter to me. I thought ‘sure,’ it didn’t scare me. We got along very well. So I would go into his office and he would dictate whatever it might be and I would type it up and he’d take it with him to the floor. I believe that’s how he got used to working with me, because of the dictation.

When Frank passed away in August of 1972 right during the election campaign, Congressman Ford came back to Washington, D.C. He had been in Grand Rapids at the time campaigning. Frank had always helped him on
the campaigns. He came back and he took the staff all together. He got us all together in his office and he said he didn’t want to hire another person to run his office. We all knew what we were doing and he was going to ask his personal secretary at that point in time, Mildred Leonard, to be the administrative assistant and help run the office. He would be more actively involved in that. And he was going to ask me to be his personal secretary to take over a great deal of what Mildred had been doing. And I believe that is why he did that because he was used to working with me taking dictation and whatever. We got along very well and so there was no problem.

Smith: Tell us about Mildred.

Downton: She was a very, very dedicated lady. Very, very nice. Very strong Catholic. In fact, I believe her sister was a Sister in the Catholic church. Very, very nice lady. Worked long hours. Dedicated, loyal, kept things confidential that needed to be confidential. Just a real nice lady.

Smith: Was it difficult for her to make the transition to the White House?

Downton: I think it was in the fact that she had worked so closely with him for so very many years and then all of a sudden she was up on the third floor of the Oval Office area. She still did a lot of his personal correspondence because she knew a lot of his friends from Grand Rapids and whatever. She did a lot of the personal correspondence and she would usually see him about once a week and he would sign the personal letters and this, that, and whatever. I think that was hard for her.

I believe at that time in President Ford’s view, he thought it would be easier for her because she wouldn’t have all the stress of the schedule and things of that nature. She, when he was Minority Leader, completely handled the schedule. Did everything. And then, when Frank passed away, she continued to do that in addition to going through the correspondence, things like that. So she had a great deal to do when he was Minority Leader. Less so when he became vice president. That, I think, is when that started to change.

Smith: And tell us about Frank. Had he been with the Congressman a long time?
Downton: He had been with him for a long time, I understand, yes. He was a wonderful gentleman. He was from, I believe, Grand Haven, if I’m not mistaken. When he passed away, I believe his wife moved back to Grand Haven. And he was a wonderful gentleman. Very Christian Reformed. Very strong. He made sure that the young people on the staff wrote home every week. He said, “Now, you must stay in contact with your family. I want you to be sure you write home once a week. Either that or call home whenever.” He was very strict in that regard. He ran a tight ship. He really did.

Smith: What were the rules? What was the climate like?

Downton: Frank did not participate in a lot of things that other administrative assistants did. At the time, the administrative assistant ran the office. That was the title and usually it was a man. And they would have groups, you know, where you would get together for lunch and things like that. He never participated in anything like that. He ate lunch at his desk. He came in probably at 7:00 in the morning. Started in on the correspondence. Made sure everything was taken care of. Everybody knew what they were doing. He’d hand out the mail and whatever. He was very aware of what Congressman Ford’s schedule was. He made sure he would stay on time or whatever. He ate his lunch at his desk and he was probably there until 5:30, 6:00 every night. And usually after Congressman Ford left, then he would leave.

But he was very, very strict. He would sit in his office in shirtsleeves. He would take his jacket off and he would have his shirtsleeves rolled up and he would be going back and forth between the Congressman’s office and whatever. But he was a very easy person to work for. You know, for instance, when we would take dictation, we would go over to another room so that we wouldn’t be interrupted with phone calls and this or that or whatever. He was very easy to work for. But yet you knew when he asked you to do something, you did it. He was strict and he wanted you to be there on time. And you would leave on time or whatever. They were also very concerned about the safety of the staff to be sure that we didn’t have any problem. If we had a car, I didn’t when I first started working there, but when I got my first
car, I was absolutely thrilled. And Frank was able to get me a parking spot right in front of the Capitol building.

Now, I understand it’s all barricaded off, that there’s not even anything allowed there. But it was right on the bottom of those huge steps you walk up. And when I would come in the morning, the officer would move the little marker, and I’d go in and he’d put it behind my little Volkswagen and it was great. Now, I know that’s not even allowed. After that, then, he was able to move me. It’s all done on seniority and whatever, he was able to get me into the parking structure. And so that was great. But they were very, very concerned, he was very concerned about the safety. When I took the bus, he was concerned, “Where do you get on and at what time?”

Smith:  Congressmen Ford travelled a lot because of his Minority Leader position. When he was in the office, did he see constituents?

Downton:  If he was in his office and a family would come to visit, yes, he would. Yes. The gal who took care of the tours and things of that nature was Anne Kamstra. She was from Grand Rapids. So when someone would come in, she would immediately identify where they lived and what they did and whatever. She was very, very good at helping them. And she was the receptionist and so if he was in, yes, and he was available, she would introduce them and they would go into the office and they would have a photo taken. We had a little Polaroid camera. He would be either sitting at his desk and they would be around him, or he would be standing by the window and they would be around him and she would take the photo.

He would take the time, yes. He felt if someone took the time to come see him and he was there, he wanted to see them. It may have only been five minutes, but yes, he enjoyed that.

Smith:  For all the travel and demands of the job, probably more than the congressman of today, he still tried to get home.

Downton:  He did, yes. He went home quite often. And, well, he had to campaign every other year. And when he would go home, they had, I guess you would call it, an old motor home or a bus that Frank would drive and they would go from
spot to spot, every little town. They didn’t just go to Grand Rapids, they
would go wherever they needed to. At one point in time, he had part of
Ottawa county, which is where I lived, and he would go through every little
town and invite people to come. They would do this regularly, spend days
doing this. And any problems they had, veteran problems, social security
problems, whatever, “Please come and talk to me.” And then he would pass it
along to someone in Washington who would work on it and whatever. He
was home a lot. He did. He spent a good deal of time in the 5th District.

Smith: And you knew that his great ambition was to be Speaker of the House?

Downton: Yes, yes. Exactly. Yes, and I always felt bad that he was not Speaker of the
House. He would’ve been a tremendous Speaker, I believe.

Smith: How did he get along with John McCormick?

Downton: Oh, he got along very well with John McCormick. He was such a nice
gentleman. And he would give the impression of being very stern because he
was this tall, handsome gentleman and he could give the impression of being
quite stern, but he wasn’t. He was very, very polite, even to us. I had
mentioned when President Nixon was inaugurated and he made his
ceremonial visit to Capitol Hill, Speaker McCormick invited our staff over as
Minority Leader staff to meet President Nixon and have a photo taken and
whatever.

He arranged everything for us. He was a very, very nice gentleman. I think
Minority Leader Ford got along with him very, very well. I do believe. He
also got along very well with Hale Boggs.

Smith: Tell us about that relationship.

Downton: They seemed to just hit it off very well. They actually did the China trip
together and Frank went along. Frank went along on that China trip that Tip
O’Neill and Congressman Ford did. I believe Hale Boggs was Majority
Leader at that time, if I’m not mistaken, and President Ford was Minority
Leader. And, at that point in time, they were breaking history, by making this
tour through China. And Frank had gone along as did Hale Boggs’
administrative assistant. But Frank took cassettes along and he dictated things that they did and saw and whatever. So when he came back, I transcribed those. I spent several days doing that project, but it was fascinating to see what they did and how things went there. It was very, very nice. But they got along very well, him and Hale Boggs.

Smith: Everyone talks about how different it was then than it is now. And you do sense that there was more social interaction? That, for one thing, members tended to bring their families with them to Washington. That’s no longer necessarily the case.

Downton: Right.

Smith: Hale Boggs and President Ford would debate at the National Press Club and the story goes they would ride down together to the Press Club and decide what they were going to debate. Get down there and have their debate. Go have lunch and go back to work. You wouldn’t imagine that happening today.

Downton: I don’t think nowadays, no. I think the rapport is different now. In those days, and we’re talking, what, 30 years ago perhaps, I think that they realized that they could get along even if they disagree. He had some very strong friendships with people on the other side of the aisle and they would disagree on policy, but they would still be very close friends. And I think that was one of his strong points that he could compromise. When he was Minority Leader, he could talk to some of the people on the Republican side and say, “Come on, now, we’ve got to give a little here.” And he did a lot behind the scenes that I don’t think people realized how much he really did to promote agenda and this, that, and whatever to help move things along. He really was quite a very good facilitator in that regard.

Smith: Really?

Downton: Yeah.

Smith: He was really fiscally conservative.

Downton: Oh, yes.
Smith: Pro-civil rights?

Downton: Yes, he was.

Smith: The party of Lincoln.

Downton: Yes, absolutely.

Smith: What was your sense of his relationship with LBJ?

Downton: I think that was rather tense, myself. I don’t think that you would consider that necessarily a warm friendship. He did ask him to be on the Warren Commission, which he took very seriously. He was, I believe, the youngest person on the Warren Commission and he took that very seriously. He really did. It was very nice of President Johnson to ask him to do that. But I don’t believe there was a strong friendship, or I don’t think there ever could have been. I think President Johnson was just such a different type of personality. It just didn’t click. It just was like it just didn’t work.

Smith: You know, he made the famous cracks about Ford’s intelligence.

Downton: Playing football and all that. Yeah.

Smith: Yeah. Was that out there? How did the Congressman deal with that?

Downton: Well, he handled it better than we did, because we, as his staff, would take it personally. And he would say, “Oh, no, don’t worry about that.” And he handled anything like that very well. He had really thick skin for that, much more so than we did. Like I said, we took it very personally. When he was president and he would have some of these very unfavorable editorial cartoons, he would not take offense. In fact, every once in awhile, he would have the artist autograph it. And he would have it framed and we would hang it my office. And he would chuckle at it when he would come in and look at it. He had a wonderful ability to hear criticism and to not be personally affected by it.

Smith: It’s quite a gift.
Downton: I could not do that. I would take it personally. And I didn’t like that at all, but he handled it very well. He was very even-tempered, I think, in that regard. I’m sure it hurt, but he didn’t show it. He could handle that very well. I admired him for that.

Smith: And there was Everett Dirksen. They were very different.

Downton: They were very different. And I think Everett Dirksen was so outspoken and so out in front of everybody and in everyone’s face and I think when they started doing their Ev and Jerry commentaries, I think everyone thought, “Oh, well, Everett Dirksen’s going to take this over and nobody’s going to listen to what Jerry Ford has to say.” Well, after awhile, they did listen to what Jerry Ford had to say because he would let Mr. Dirksen go on and say and rant and rave and say whatever he had to say, and then he would very calmly say whatever he wanted to say and what the House members were thinking and whatever. And it came across just fine. I think the longer he did that, the better he got at it. And he let Everett Dirksen have the spotlight and he didn’t mind. That also was a very rare gift.

Smith: Very rare.

Downton: Yes.

Smith: Especially in Washington.

Downton: Yes.

Smith: Did you get to know Mrs. Ford at all during this time?

Downton: Yes, not so much at that point in time. I got to know her more later. But as time went on, she would come into the office if they were going to an event that evening. The chauffeur would pick her up and then come and pick him up. Sometimes she would come into the office and whatever. As I say, I got to know her more later when we were in the White House. And then obviously when he was former president, I had more interaction there. But at that point in time, as I said, she would come into the office. I would talk to her on the phone every once in awhile if she needed something, what have you. But at that point in time, when he was Congressman and Minority
Leader, she was pretty much with him in the evening and things like that. She did not have her own staff at that point in time. When he became vice president, I believe, is when she actually got someone to start to help her with her schedule and things like that. And then obviously in the White House she had her own staff.

Smith: And we’ve heard, I think from the kids themselves, it was not unusual for him on weekends that he would come into work.

Downton: Oh, yes. Yes.

Smith: And they’d hang out in Statuary Hall.

Downton: I used to say as long as the mail was delivered, he was there to see what was in the mail. And this happened in California, too. I worked on Saturday. Mail is delivered on Saturday. You have to see what’s in the mail. He was the type of person who I finally decided he cannot relax until he’s done with his work. He was very orderly, very disciplined. He read his newspapers. Loved to read the newspaper. He’d read his magazines. He wanted to see what came in the mail. He wanted to stay current. He didn’t like being behind.

And so mail was delivered on Saturdays, so why wouldn’t we be there to look at it? So when we were in the Capitol Building as Minority Leader, when I joined the staff in ’67, we worked every third Saturday. Frank had it arranged so that we didn’t work every Saturday. He was here every Saturday, but there were two or three of us there every Saturday. We’d get the mail and this, that, or whatever. And, yes, if he was in town, he was there, too, and sign mail and look at mail, whatever it might be. And, yes, the kids would come along and they could roam. In those days, you could roam around the Capitol. You could look at all the history and all the beautiful statues and whatever. You could learn an awful lot. What a wonderful place to roam. Now, I don’t think you can do that anymore.

Smith: Penny Circle tells a funny story. At the time of the anthrax scare following 9/11, the postal service finally said, we’re not delivering the mail on Saturday.
And he couldn’t understand why they weren’t delivering the mail on Saturday.

Downton: No, no, I’m sure.

Smith: And it got to the point where, literally, a couple staffers would put on these outlandish spaceman-type outfits and work going through the mail.

Downton: I believe it.

Smith: And, you know, it’s Saturday and it’s mail duty.

Downton: I believe it. When I was in California, I was there until November of 1980, and if he was there, I worked every Saturday. Not all day, but until noon, one o’clock, whatever it might be, until we went through the mail to see if anything was there, whatever, he was there. He’d often go play golf in the afternoon or something like that. But if he was out of town on Saturday and came back Saturday night or whatever, then I would usually stop on the way home from church on Sunday and see him after church on Sunday morning. Then he would go on and play golf or whatever. He always wanted to know what’s going on, what’s in the mail. He didn’t want to miss anything and he wanted to stay current. He didn’t like getting way behind.

Smith: Very disciplined man, wasn’t he?

Downton: Oh, very disciplined, yes. Yes, very disciplined. Very much so, yes. As I say, he couldn’t relax, I don’t think, until he was done with his routine, his reading the newspapers, the magazines, the mail, signing the mail. You know, doing whatever it is he felt he needed to do. I think that was his comfort zone. I really do. He loved it.

Smith: Now, the relationship with Richard Nixon must have evolved over time. Obviously they’d been friends. They’d been colleagues.

Downton: I believe they started the same year.

Smith: I think two years apart.

Downton: Two years apart?
Smith: Yes.

Downton: Okay. Was Nixon first?

Smith: Yes.

Downton: Okay. Alright.

Smith: But it must have gotten complicated over time.

Downton: I think it did get very complicated. I think I enjoyed the period of when he was vice president because he travelled. Well, Nixon hardly left the White House. And he travelled a great deal. In fact, Mr. Ford was a great baseball fan. He loved the Detroit Tigers, as did I at that point in time. He threw out the first ball for the baseball season when he was vice president, and it happened to be in Cincinnati. It was the game when Henry Aaron tied the baseball homerun record at that point in time. He was going to fly to the game and that’s one of the few times that I went with him on a trip. He invited my husband and myself, Dave and myself, to go with him to that opening day game because he knew I liked baseball. And then he gave me the bat he got from the Cincinnati Reds. He gave me that bat. He says, “Here, I think you should have this.”

We had a wonderful time. We didn’t stay for the whole game. We saw Henry Aaron hit his homerun and then we left, but we had a wonderful time. There had been a hurricane or tornado, I think, somewhere in the area, Pennsylvania or Ohio, and we flew over that in the airplane so we could see that from the air and report back to the president on what he had seen as damage and this, that, and whatever. Cincinnati was fine. There was no problem there, but there was in the path that we took when we went there. I remember seeing that. That was one of the few times I travelled with him and that was fun. We had a good time at that game.

Smith: Was he more relaxed out of the office?

Downton: He was, yes. Yes, he was. He enjoyed his sports, I know. He liked the Tigers, he followed the Detroit Tigers. And, of course, Michigan football. He would watch every game if he could and whatever. Follow that very
carefully. Oftentimes, if I would be there on a Saturday afternoon, he’d have the game on TV. He’d be watching whatever was on TV. Things like that. He loved that a great deal. But when he was vice president, he was gone a lot. Like I said, Nixon hardly ever left the White House. So he was gone. He went. He was out there doing what needed to be done publicly.

I think he did a very good job. I think, served Nixon very well. I’m not sure that everyone would’ve been as aware of the situation as President Ford was. He was very in tune to what was going on to the point of excusing himself from a cabinet meeting when they started talking about whatever was happening and this, that, and whatever and he felt he shouldn’t be there to participate in the discussion. I think he was very in tune to what was going on and I think he did his best to, I don’t want to use protect the president, but to let the president do whatever he needed to do in his own time.

Smith: When Watergate first occurred, what was the sense in the office?

Downton: Well, I think at first nobody thought anything of it. It seemed like just such an insignificant, stupid thing. And it was like, “Well, why is everybody making such a big deal about this?” And then the consensus was, “Well, why did they have to do some stupid thing like that?” There was no reason to do this. I mean, it was not a close election. And, “Why in the world did they have to do this?” That’s, I think, what everybody thought. “How stupid” and “Why would somebody want to do this?” It was just ridiculous and that’s why we couldn’t understand why.

Smith: Did you sense his attitude changing? I mean, clearly people found out more and more and then, in particular, when the tapes were released, some of the transcripts of the tapes, a lot of people were shocked with Nixon’s language.

Downton: Oh, yes. Yes.

Smith: Did you get a sense of how the Congressman and then the vice president was handling all of this?

Downton: I think, I noticed it more of him when he was vice president, but I think he, as far as I saw, became quieter. He didn’t say anything. He just listened and
watched what was going on. He didn’t say anything. He was very, very, I
don’t want to say withdrawn, but he just didn’t say anything.

Smith: That’s interesting, because he was in an almost impossible spot.

Downton: Oh, he was in a very, very awkward spot. He was in an extremely awkward
spot. And I don’t think people realized how awkward it was for him, because
he did not want to be vice president. He wanted to be Speaker of the House.
And that took away any chance of him being Speaker of the House. Here he
was now vice president to an increasingly unpopular president and, as you
say, he is seeing all and hearing all of these things that are being released in
transcripts and tapes and whatever. He did, he became quieter. He didn’t say
very much. I think he realized, “Well, okay, I’m going to have to do what I
have to do.”

Smith: Do you remember anything that would indicate before he actually became
president that he expected that to happen?

Downton: Honestly, no. The only clue I had was, I think, perhaps two days before
Nixon resigned. He went on TV at night and gave a speech that he was going
to resign the next day. I think two days before that Vice President Ford called
me in the office. He said, “Dorothy, do you know where the Bible is that I
used when I was sworn in as vice president?” I said, “Yes, I know where it
is.” He said, “Well, where is it?” I said, “I have it in my safe” because we
had a safe in the office where I kept things of that nature, actually. He said,
“Good. Are you sure it’s there?” I said, “Yeah, it’s there.” And he said,
“Why don’t you go and get it? Why don’t you bring it to me?” And I said,
“Oh, great. Good.” I said, “Do you want me to put it back?” He said, “No, why
don’t I hold onto it?” I said, “Okay.” And he just looked at me and I looked
at him and smiled and he said, “Thanks for keeping it for me. I’m glad you
know where it was. I appreciate that.” I said, “You’re welcome.”

And I think he may have asked me if I remembered what he had it open to
when he was sworn in as vice president. I don’t recall now what it was, but it
may have been his favorite proverb, Trust in the Lord. I’m not sure, but I
think he may have asked me that at the time, because I believe his son Mike picked out the passage, if I’m not mistaken, for vice president. And, so when I handed it to him and I think he asked me that at the time and then I specifically said, “Would you want me to put it back?” He said, “No, why don’t I hold onto it.” And, so I don’t know if he left it in the office. I think he took it home with him.

Smith: It sounds like it was one of those times where what you didn’t say was a kind of communication.

Downton: Yes. Exactly. Yeah, because at that point in time, like I say, we just looked at each other and smiled and I go, “Okay.”

Smith: Did people in the office - I mean, it’s human nature - obviously, you’re going to speculate what’s going to happen and what’s going to happen to you.

Downton: Absolutely.

Smith: Was there much of that? And, did he try to damp that down?

Downton: If any of that was going on, he would not have approved. He would not have liked that. I think everybody just kept doing their job and kept quiet. And especially, at that time as vice president, he had a bit of a larger staff than the staff of Minority Leader and Congressman. Now we’re the staff of the vice president. He had a lot of a staff, so he did not have as much contact with each person any longer, to know each one by name and whatever. We were on the second floor, I believe, of the Office Building. At that point in time that’s what it was called. I think now it’s called a different name. We had a wonderful suite of offices. It was great. I really enjoyed that period because it was almost easier for us. He travelled a lot. I’d see him when he came back, you know. We did what we needed to do and whatever. It was a, I don’t want to say, relaxing period of time, but it was not as stressful, obviously, as when he became president.

Smith: Let me go back to the beginning of the vice presidency. Spiro Agnew resigns, which must have come as something of a shock because it’s the first
time it happened. And then, in very short order, he’s nominated. Now, what are you recollections of that period?

Downton: Well, that is very interesting because at that point in time, that week when Agnew resigned and Nixon was going to appoint the first vice president of that amendment, the 25th amendment, I believe, Dave and I were home here in Michigan. Dave was meeting my parents and asking permission to get married. And so we were not in Washington, D.C. at that time. But, believe it or not, and you will believe this, on Friday night Nixon was on TV to announce his vice president. Dave and I had come back. Dave had to work on Saturday and so did I. I had to work that Saturday; it was my Saturday. And so Friday evening we were at Dave’s sister’s home in Bowie, Maryland and letting them know how things went with my folks and this, that, and the other - our wedding plans and whatever. So we turn the TV on and listening to this.

Meanwhile, as we were driving home, we heard Hugh Scott, I believe, say, “Well, I don’t know who’s going to be vice president, but it’s not going to be Jerry Ford or me.” And Jerry was standing right next to him at that point in time. And so, I’m thinking, “Oh, okay.” So, I wasn’t too worried at all. And then here we are watching the TV that night and I was flabbergasted, because, like I say, that took away any possibility of him being Speaker of the House. But I can also see where he wouldn’t say ‘no.’ I mean, if the president asks you to do something, you do it. And I don’t know that he was his first choice. I don’t think he was. I’m quite positive he wasn’t.

Smith: John Connally was his first choice.

Downton: Yes, that’s what I understand. But apparently he was talked out of that by his staff and whatever. I don’t know if that hurt him at all to think that he was not his first choice. Probably not. I think he just realized, “Well, if I’m going to do this, I’m going to do it the best I can do.”

Smith: Well, apparently the people who had a lot do with it were Carl Albert and Mike Mansfield who went down to the White House and told the president, “The one person we can confirm quickly is Jerry Ford.”
Downton: Right. And I think that is because of the high regard they had for him being able to work with, like I said, both sides of the aisle. He had very, very close friends on the other side of the aisle and that didn’t matter to him. And I think that remained. He had some extremely close friends such as Tip O’Neill and whatever. And I think they gave President Nixon very good advice. I don’t know that John Connally would’ve been approved. It would’ve been a long, drawn out affair and we don’t need that.

Smith: Tell us about a very important person in this story and also, frankly, a very polarizing person in this story. And that’s Bob Hartmann. When did he arrive? What was his role and the relationship that he had?

Downton: Actually, Bob Hartmann joined the staff when he was Minority Leader. The press secretary was a gentleman by the name of Paul Miltich. He was Minority Leader before he needed a press secretary. Nice gentleman. He did a lot, wrote a lot of the speeches and whatever. Several years later, as Mr. Ford got more into the Minority Leader position, Bob Hartmann joined the staff. He then started doing a few of the speeches, some of the press releases. He was doing a lot of work behind the scenes with the leadership and whatever being sure that everybody knew what was going on and whatever. He dealt a lot with the congressmen, the minority staff, let’s say.

When President Ford became vice president, Bob Hartmann became chief of staff and he was the type of person who knew what he wanted to do and he would do it no matter whose feelings would be hurt. He could be very brusque. I always got along with him very well. His secretary, he had two secretaries, Neta Messersmith and Gail Raiman. I got along with both of them very well. They were very close friends. I got along with Bob Hartmann very well. I never had a run-in with him. I never had a disagreement with him. I knew where he was coming from and he knew what I did. And I think he respected me for what I did for President Ford. But he did rub a lot of people the wrong way.

Smith: Even his critics acknowledge his loyalty.

Downton: Yes.
Smith: I mean, in fact, almost a fault. There was a sense that people become almost possessive.

Downton: Yes. Yes.

Smith: And I wonder if that was part of that dynamic. That Hartmann, from his own perspective, had every reason to believe that he played a unique role and was totally loyal to the president. But that can almost block your vision in some ways.

Downton: Yeah. But I think what happened was I think he enjoyed the period of vice president, when Ford was vice president. Because he was chief of staff. He had an excellent assistant, Frank Pagnotta, who could do anything. I mean, you could ask him the silliest question and he would know where to get the answer. He was very good at getting things done. And, so, he had a very good person underneath him. Mr. Hartmann was not exactly a detail person, but Frank was. And so, therefore, that worked out great. His strength, and I always thought this, was his speechwriting. He wrote the speech that President Ford gave both when he became vice president and president. And I think those are outstanding speeches. I think he did an excellent, excellent job.

I think when President Ford became president, I think Mr. Hartmann was sort of put in a box, not by President Ford, but by others and he resented it and I would’ve as well, if I were him. But I think he had a hard time getting out of that box and I think that hurt him a great deal. He was an excellent speechwriter. He, I think, was brilliant in how he could use the words that President Ford was so familiar with and down to earth, you know, and talk to people normally and not talk above their heads and whatever. They got along very well.

I think President Ford knew how to handle Mr. Hartmann. I think he realized how valuable he was. He did not want to hurt his feelings, because I remember at one point when he was president and it was time for the State of the Union message, there were different versions of the State of the Union message. One was Mr. Hartmann’s and one was the other folks’ and
President Ford’s right in the middle of the staff conflict. He had asked me, he said, “Dorothy, are you doing anything tonight?” I said, “Well, no.” He said, “Well, would you mind coming back to the White House after dinner?” And I said, “No.” And he said, “I’m going to give you some dictation and I’m going to ask you to stay and do it and then you can come in late tomorrow.” I said, “Well, do you mind if Dave comes with me?” because we only lived four blocks from the White House and I was going to walk back and forth. So I said, “Do you mind if Dave came with me?” He said, “No. No, not at all.”

So, we met back at the White House, like 8:30, 9:00 at night, and he had these two versions of the speech and he took parts of one and the other and put it together as what he wanted to say and he dictated it to me. He went back to the residence when he was done. Then I stayed and typed it up and put it on his desk so it was there. Actually, I put in our drawer. He had a drawer in the credenza right behind him. It was my drawer and everyone knew that was my spot. So if I had something for him, I would put it in there. If he had something for me, he would put it in there. So I put it in there so he could have it first thing when he came in in the morning.

I understand that’s when he called the people together the next morning and said, “This is what I’m going to give.” And handed it to them and let them do it into the version for the large text and whatever that they use. And so, that was an awkward time. That was very awkward. That was difficult for him because he didn’t necessarily like confrontations on his staff. And that was bothersome to him.

Smith: Well, a waste of time, obviously.

Downton: Oh, absolutely a waste of time.

Smith: He’s got more important things to do.


Smith: That raises the larger question because there is almost a trajectory of his presidency. I mean, you could tell it in a lot of ways, but one thematic
approach, piecing together from what a lot of people have said is, he went into the office never having been an executive.

Downton: Right.

Smith: And, of course, originally he thought the spokes in the wheel, that in some ways he could transplant a congressional office organization to the West Wing. And that didn’t work for a number of reasons. But in a larger sense, a story of his presidency is his learning to be president, which is a unique job.

Downton: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: Your memories of the 9th of August; were you in the East Room?

Downton: Mhmm. Yes, we were. In fact Dave and I and, actually, I believe, Bob Hartmann’s secretaries Neta and Gail and I believe we were sitting right behind the Ford children in the East Room. We were not there for Nixon’s farewell or anything like that, but, yes, we were there for the swearing in. We were still in the vice president’s office, so we came over and we were there. I must say, I enjoyed that because it was one of the few times that we were seated and we’re not standing somewhere in the background or wherever.

But it was very, very nice and we knew how historic this was. I had every confidence that he would do a very good job just being a normal, down-to-earth person. Not the airs and graces and whatever. I thought this was going to be a very good progression. This was going to be good, you know. He’s going to handle this. We went back to the VP office and I think it was later in that day that I got word that he wanted to see me, you know, to see whatever it was or whatever. We went over to the West Wing because we had to see what the situation was. The awkward thing was that, and this was very true, and I can see it from both sides, but of course I’m looking at it from my side, the Nixon people did not want us to stay there. They did not like us. They didn’t even like us as the vice president’s staff. We were considered beneath them because we were normal folks, so to speak, and we came from the Hill and they had this adversarial relationship with the Hill.

Smith: And from Grand Rapids.
Downton: Oh, yes, and in Grand Rapids. We were in the boondocks. And we obviously resented that because we were proud of where we came from. We were proud of his 5th District and how well he represented it. And we were proud of Michigan.

Smith: Were there, and I don’t mean names, but was there an incident or did people say things?

Downton: I think it was more an attitude. I mean, as I say, the vice presidential staff grew and so we were getting more and more people on our staff and in just walking around the Old Executive Office Building. We never went to the White House. We were always in the Old Executive Office Building in the vice president’s office. Just walking around and just seeing the atmosphere and the attitude. It was oppressive in some regard because they did not want us there. They did not like us. At one point in time, they referred to us as the “Drug Fair people”, the lower-crust working people. You know, I was like, “Oh, come on, there’s nothing wrong with us!” You know, we had been on Capitol Hill, we knew what we were doing, but we weren’t in their mindset.

Smith: This leads us into this larger question. We talked to a number of other people. One was Leon Parma, who was sort of shuffled into the East Room for the ceremony and he vividly recalls afterwards there was a receiving line and I think there were people invited down to the State Dining Room for the reception. And he said you could watch Nixon people peel off.

Downton: Yes. Yes.

Smith: And you can understand.

Downton: Oh, yes, you can, but the funny thing is they didn’t want to leave. I mean, they didn’t want us there, and they didn’t want to leave but yet they weren’t exactly fond of President Ford. And so what was going to happen? I mean, you got to give this a chance. And they didn’t want to do that. And President Ford graciously offered for many of them to stay in their present positions or whatever, but it was very awkward. It was not an easy transition at all. But then, this was the first time this had happened so we were breaking new ground. And we got through it. We probably as the vice president’s staff got
closer. Because it was we’re no longer the Minority Leader’s staff, no longer the vice president’s staff, now he was now the president. And we probably got even closer and whatever. And we worked through it. But it was not an easy time. And it was not an easy time for the country. I mean, everyone didn’t know what was going to happen. But I think President Ford handled it beautifully. And we were all very proud of how he handled that period.

Smith: It’s very interesting because one of the first things he does is he brought in the Congressional Black Caucus and George Meany. Understanding the power of the symbolism of inviting people who had not been in the White House for a while.

Downton: Exactly. They had been shunned. And he also got rid of the tapes. There was no taping of his conversations and that wasn’t necessary.

Smith: The story that there was so many microphones in the Oval Office, they didn’t find one for a week or something like that.

Downton: I just find that incredible. I really do. But, no, that was all gotten rid of and whatever. That wasn’t necessary.

Smith: Do you have a sense of what the relationship was with Al Haig during that period?

Downton: I think he got along with him well, but I think he also realized this was not going to be a long term relationship, which I think Al Haig would’ve enjoyed. He would’ve wanted to stay. But I think he finally realized this wasn’t going to work.

Smith: It’s interesting because Haig, when we interviewed him, sort of put the onus on Hartmann.

Downton: Oh, did he? That’s interesting.

Smith: And he went to the president complaining seriously about Hartmann. And, the president, as Al repeats it, says, “Al, you’re going to have to let me do it my way.”
Downton: Exactly. No, he would not like that. He did not like those types of confrontations.

Smith: And Haig, sort of excitable, said, “Well, that answers my question. You don’t want me to stay.” Which, you know, judging from things we saw later in Haig’s career, it’s not terribly surprising.

Downton: No, it’s not. No, it’s not.

Smith: But you could also have said that chemistry would not have lasted very long.

Downton: No, not at all. No. In fact when you speak of chemistry, the chemistry was better when Cheney was chief of staff than when Rumsfeld was.

Smith: Really?

Downton: Uh-huh. From what I could see, yes.

Smith: What was the difference between the two?

Downton: Well, at that time, Rumsfeld was very hands-on, and very much in every office and whatever, and very much in control. And Cheney, when he took over, I believe Rumsfeld was secretary of defense and then Dick Cheney became the chief of staff. And it was just more relaxed. He was open to listen to everybody and whatever. It was just a much calmer feeling, I think. It was a better relationship for everybody, I think, including Mr. Hartmann and John Marsh and all and Phil Buchen and, I mean, everything was much calmer. There wasn’t this, I don’t want to use the word sense of urgency, but there wasn’t this “Why’s Big Brother watching me?” or anything like that. It wasn’t this fear of Rumsfeld always watching everybody and everything and having his finger on everything.

Smith: And yet, it’s amazing because Rumsfeld is a bureaucratic master. And the funny thing you hear from so many people is he never left fingerprints. He had his fingers in everything, but he never left fingerprints.

Downton: Yes, he had other people.

Smith: Yes. Yes, inside the bubble
Downton: Right. Exactly. He was a master. There’s no doubt about that. And I don’t mean that against him, but, I mean, it was more cohesive, I think, when he became secretary of defense. And Dick Cheney, everybody now, I mean, I hear people about mention Dick Cheney and whatever. He was a great guy. I got along with him great, he and his wife. And when he came to California several times when I was still with former President Ford, he was not at that point in time the Dick Cheney that most people think now. I think the White House did very well with him as chief of staff. And I think everyone was comfortable. They knew what they were doing. I think they had a good set up, but it took a while to get that in place. It did take a while. The transition was difficult.

Smith: Do you remember, he became President on the 8th. There was a trip to Chicago, a VFW Convention, and the amnesty program which took a lot of people by surprise.

Downton: Oh, yes. Yes.

Smith: Then on the 8th of September, there was a pardon. What do you remember about the discussion? Was there a point, where there was an on-going discussion about pardoning Nixon? Or was that something developed only at the end? How do you recall?

Downton: From what I understand, I had not heard any discussions about it or any talks about it. I heard about it on Sunday night on the news, just as everyone else did.

Smith: Really. So you had no idea?

Downton: No, I had no idea that that’s what he was going to do. I believe he dealt with a few people on that and having negotiations and whatever. I always thought at the time, what disappointed me was Jerry terHorst was his press secretary. Nice guy, great guy. And I was disappointed in his reaction. I understand where he was coming from, but I wish he wouldn’t have left, because I think he would’ve done a very good job as press secretary. I really do.
There is a school of thought that that wasn’t the only reason that he left. That the job was overwhelming and that he really hadn’t anticipated just what the demands of that job would be.

Exactly. Exactly. But it came about – like his resignation letter. He got that and I thought, “Oh, this is not a good thing.” I understand where President Ford was coming from. He totally thought that this would put an end to it and the sooner the better. I think perhaps, looking back, of course anybody can look back, I think perhaps it would’ve been better if Nixon would have been formally charged, or something of that nature and then done the pardon. But to do the blanket pardon for whatever could be out there, I think that really upset some people. I really do. Unfortunately, I think some people did not forget that. He really did think, honestly, that this is the way to get this thing over with and get Nixon out of here and not talk about it and not have it be the source of conversation and whatever. That was in his soul, I think. And bless him for doing that, but I think it probably would’ve been better received if he would’ve waited a little bit.

And remember, Nixon almost died that fall from phlebitis.

That’s right.

And if Ford had done it then, maybe there at least would have been some degree of civility.

Right.

Exactly.

But, like I said, we can look back at that, and it’s easy to do, but at the time he sincerely felt, “Let’s get this over with.”

And he was lucky enough to live long enough to realize that most people would come around to his way of thinking.

Yes, in fact even, I don’t mean to say even, but even Ted Kennedy, when he got the award, the Profile in Courage award, acknowledged that was the right thing to do at the right time. And that was a huge acknowledgement coming
from the Kennedy family. And I have to give him a lot of credit for doing that because it is true. It did get it over with and whatever, but it also set him up for a lot of people who were very, very upset. I think perhaps he did not realize the depth of - I don’t know if I should say the word hatred, but maybe it is hatred - that people felt towards Nixon and how he had let people down and they weren’t going to forget that. They wanted something more, I think. And that’s too bad. That’s sad. But, what’s done is done, and I just think now people do realize that really was the courageous thing to do.

Smith: He also had to pick a vice president.

Downton: Yes.

Smith: Were there others considered besides Nelson Rockefeller?

Downton: Yes, there were. I believe there were at that time.

Smith: George H. W. Bush was supposed to be one of the names.

Downton: And also ________ Mann, when he ran for election, I should say. And Rockefeller stepped aside and there was a whole other discussion of who it would be. Howard Baker was mentioned, he was senator from Tennessee, I believe, if I’m not mistaken. And actually, at election time, Ronald Reagan was mentioned, too, as his running mate. Even though they had the very contentious primary battle, there were people who wanted Reagan to be his running mate. There was a lot going on there.

Smith: Did you have much contact with Rockefeller during his vice presidency?

Downton: I met him, yes. I didn’t actually sit down and visit with him or anything like that, but I would see him, shake hands with him, whatever. Wonderful gentleman. I know, like we had talked earlier today, he didn’t want to be vice president, but he did it. And he did a good job. He did. He was, I think, very good at that point in time for President Ford. They’d meet weekly, at least weekly. They’d keep each other up to date and whatever. He changed the seal of the vice president. Did you know that? Yeah, he did. He was a neat guy. I really had a lot of respect for Nelson Rockefeller. And then when it
was time for the election run and he stepped aside, I had a lot of respect again for him.

Smith: Did you see any change at all in the relationship between the two men?

Downton: No, I didn’t. I thought they complemented each other in that regard. I thought they did a good job.

Smith: Mrs. Ford’s breast cancer surgery - that must have caused a shock.

Downton: Yes, yes, it did. It did a great deal. That was a Saturday and I did not work that Saturday. President Ford was going to have a meeting, I believe.

Smith: It was the inflation summit.

Downton: Yes, he actually told me on Friday, he said, “Don’t bother to come in tomorrow because I’m going to be busy.” I had no idea that they were also going to be going to the hospital. But he said, “Don’t bother to come in tomorrow, because I’m going to busy all day, so enjoy your day.” In fact, I think Dave and I took a trip into Williamsburg, if I’m not mistaken, just got out and went for a little drive. And we heard on the radio then about her surgery. And, thankfully, it worked out well. I admire her greatly for how she handled it and how open she was. Actually, Happy Rockefeller then, as a result, had, I believe, a double mastectomy, if I’m not mistaken. I believe that she really set the standard for being able to talk about breast cancer. And I also have had a mastectomy.

Smith: Can you describe - I think people today don’t appreciate just how closeted a subject it was.

Downton: Oh no, it was just not spoken at all. It was something you’d talk about very privately with your best friend, but hardly even with your husband. You just wouldn’t do it. And the fact that Mrs. Ford was so very open and even had a picture taken in the hospital in her robe and whatever, throwing a football. And whether he got mad at her…because he didn’t want her to do that.

Smith: Yes, because it was too much strain?
Downton: Yeah, because it was. But I’m not sure which arm she used, but I mean it was because, like, “Don’t show off. That’s not a good idea. You don’t need to do that.” But I think that was her way of saying, hey, it was going to be alright. She handled it beautifully. I remember when I had my surgery, I was a resident here in Michigan, I was no longer with them, Mrs. Ford called me. And I thought that was just so nice. That was a neat thing to do. We had a nice conversation on the phone. And I think she has helped a lot of women in that regard. But you are so correct, it was not spoken of. I mean, maybe best girl friends, best men friends, but you would not hardly even talk to your brother about it or your father. You just wouldn’t do it. And even the day she was to go to the hospital, she met with Lady Bird Johnson and her daughters and she didn’t even tell them. She gave them a little tour of the family quarters and whatever and she didn’t tell them. Her bag was packed right there to go to the hospital. You know, she was tremendous in that regard. A wonderful, courageous example for women.

Smith: I’ll ask you one thing and get it out of the way. Were you aware at any time during the White House years that she had other problems?

Downton: A little bit. But I can understand how easily it could happen. I think the combination of the medicine she was taking and whatever, and a drink or two, I think, was very difficult. I noticed it more when we were in California, when we first moved out to California.

Smith: One explanation has always been that she thought, “Oh finally, we’re going to have this normal life with my husband.” And actually he was travelling again.

Downton: He was still travelling. Yes, he loved to be on the go. He enjoyed, I think, that period of time after the White House when he’d give speeches and travel. He was on several boards of directors and he took an active interest in that. He didn’t just lend his name for that. He’d be gone for 5, 6 days at a time and he did fine. And, of course, she was home and that was difficult for her.

Smith: By then the kids were grown up.

Downton: Exactly.
Smith: So she was alone.

Downton: She was alone, yes. Yes. Susan got married when we were first in California, she was alone. The boys were gone and whatever. She still had a staff, you know, someone to help her with her correspondence and things like that, but it was quite different. And settling into a whole new area and whatever. And, yeah, that’s difficult, too. There was no longer a lot that she could do and I think I noticed it more there. Although she continued to have, and I will always remember this, she had continued to have a problem with her neck and her back, her pinched nerve and that is painful. That was a continuing problem that I know that she has dealt with and I think that has contributed to some of the medication that she took.

Smith: Were you surprised by the intervention?

Downton: Actually, I was very glad that it happened. I remember at that point in time, I had to call Mike and be sure that he could come. And I remember at the time, I think I had to get him out of a meeting he was in. And I said to whomever I was talking, I said, “Look, I really need to talk to him. This is his dad’s personal secretary. I really need to talk to him as soon as I can.” So, they got him, you know, and I explained to him, I said, “Look, your dad really wants you to get here.” And he did. I give him credit. He did. And they were there. And I know it was difficult, I know it was a difficult time, but they got through it and she went off to the clinic and came back stronger than ever. And then she went ahead with her Betty Ford Clinic and whatever. That’s an amazing thing to do.

Smith: It truly is a remarkable story.

Downton: It is. She is a survivor of phenomenal proportions considering what she has gone through what with the cancer and the drugs and the alcohol. She is phenomenal in that regard. She is a survivor.

Smith: She tells people, the hardest thing is he’s gone. “I don’t know why I’m still here.” And she’s clearly still grieving.
Downton: Oh, yes. Yes, but there’s still some things she’s got to do. There’s still reasons for her to be here, which is good. I talk to Lee Simmons every so often and he still checks in on her and helps and this and that and whatever. So he pretty much keeps me up to date on what she’s doing. He said the family is there quite a bit, the boys and especially Steve is nearby. So that’s good.

Smith: The intervention obviously had to be planned in advance, pretty intricate in getting all the kids together and so on and keeping it a secret.

Downton: Yeah, pretty much. I don’t believe she was aware of it at all.

Smith: So was that something the president was involved in?

Downton: He, I believe, and the doctor had talked about it. And then I think Susan was the spearhead and was very prominent I think in helping him, and then got the boys involved and whatever.

Smith: And I guess he stopped drinking, too, didn’t he?

Downton: Yes, he did, which I give him credit for.

Smith: And, later on, there’s this story he and Susan, something came up about smoking. And he quit his pipe because he was concerned about her smoking. Basically, they made a bet. And he, again, going back to the discipline of the man.

Downton: Yes. He was very disciplined and very, as I say, couldn’t relax until he was done with what he needed to do. But he was also very detailed. He really was in what I did with him which was one of the reasons we got along as well as we did because we were both very detailed people. We did fine. He was very detailed, very accurate. Very aware of what was going on.

Smith: Was the fall of Saigon, was that the worst day of the presidency?

Downton: I think that would probably be a pretty good assessment. That was a low, low period. Yes, that was disappointing.
Smith: You’d seen it coming for a matter of days, if not weeks. And it was clear there was a debate. I know Kissinger wanted him to sort of go down with all flags flying and there was another camp that said you’ve got to separate yourself from this thing. It’s a loss. Did you sense those tensions?

Downton: I didn’t so much at that point in time. I learned more about it later. But you could definitely tell that there was something going on, that something that was terribly occupying his time. It was a very, very difficult time. I don’t think he’ll ever forget the helicopter leaving the embassy and whatever. I just don’t think he would ever forget that image and what it meant. That was tough.

Smith: What was Kennerly’s role?

Downton: Oh, he was everywhere. He had free access. I think there were only a couple of times when he was not welcome in the Oval Office, maybe only two or three times. But he was the type of person that you wouldn’t know he was there. Like, I know some of the pictures he had taken of me with President Ford, I didn’t realize he was in the office at that time doing his thing. And then he would come show me later. “Oh, Dorothy, do you like this? You can have this.” Or “Here’s a photo I took,” and I didn’t even realize he was there.

Smith: He was a bit of a smart-aleck. I say it because, not critically, I say it because it tells you something about President Ford that he wanted to have at least some of that around.

Downton: Yes, I think it was good for him because he could joke with him and I think he realized he’s going to help me not take myself too seriously. And you need that, you need that to be able to do that. And Kennerly, we all called him Kennerly, no one called him David or Dave. I think President Ford did, he would call him Dave a lot. But we all called him Kennerly and he was such a character, you never knew where he’d pop up. But he was an excellent photographer.

Smith: And, remember, before the fall of Saigon, the president sent Kennerly over to Southeast Asia because he knew he’d get an honest appraisal. And he did.
Downton: Exactly. Isn’t that interesting? Isn’t that something?

Smith: The *Mayaguez* must have been some of the flip side of the fall of Saigon the way it turned out.

Downton: Yes, thank God. Yes, that was very tense. There were some tense moments, but he handled that beautifully and came through that very well. That was very, very good.

Smith: There’s probably no such thing as a typical day, but if you could sort of distill the routine that you went through, what was your day like?

Downton: Well, I would usually get there about eight and if he was not in the Oval Office, I would go in check my drawer. We had a drawer in the credenza behind his desk where, in a lot of the photos, you could see pictures of the children and Mrs. Ford and whatever. There were two drawers in there and the one drawer was my drawer. And anything he had for me, he would put in that drawer and vice versa. If I had something for him, I would put it in there. So, if he was not in the office at that point in time, I would go in and check and see what was in my drawer and whatever. We had a system when I was in, not the office where Nell Yates was, the receptionist, and Terry O’Donnell who kept the schedule. I was not in that area. I was on the other side where there’s a door that goes into a hallway and on one side is the men’s room and on one side is a little kitchen where the steward could get tea, coffee or whatever. And then on the other side of that was a doorway into my office. And so that’s where I was, I really had a very private office. In order to get in that office, I had to go through the little kitchen area, so I was well protected. I had bulletproof glass and everything else. So I was by myself and in a very private office.

Oftentimes, when he would come into the bathroom, he would then knock on my door and see if I had anything for him that I could briefly give him or this or that or whatever. I would always seem him at lunchtime. He would come in. We had his private study, we called it, at the end of that hallway. We created a private study for him and in there we had his album collection or his stamp collection, things like that, just to make him feel nice and comfortable.
We had, for instance, when Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip came, well, then the queen gave him an autographed photo, silver frame. He had several of them from Helmut Schmidt in Germany and Anwar Sadat and whatever. He would have them in there and on his desk and whatever just to make a nice presentation. He ate his lunch in there, read magazines, papers, and whatever. So then I’d always see him again at that point in time at lunchtime. Then he’d go back in again and do his afternoon schedule.

Then, when the swimming pool was built, he would take a swim before he went back to the residence. So he would go in through that little area and through the study and then go out that way to the swimming pool. So then he’d stick his head in again and say, “Anything else I need to know before I’m off” and this, that, or whatever. So I would usually see him at least three times a day, first thing in the morning, at lunch, and before he left. When he travelled, then he would call, of course the White House switchboard could get me wherever I was. But he would call often when he was campaigning or whatever. I didn’t travel with him other than, like I said, to the opening day baseball game, but I stayed there and did what I needed to do with the banking, bill-paying, whatever it might be. And he’d call for updates and this, that, and whatever, so we would talk, even in California when he was former president, when he was travelling, like I say, for four or five days at a time, he’d call several times a day.

Smith: What parts of the job did he enjoy the most?

Downton: That would be hard to say. What’d he enjoy the most? I can tell you what I think he enjoyed the most. I think he enjoyed meeting with people and listening to others’ ideas and, “How can we solve this problem? What can we do to take care of this?” I think he enjoyed that give and take. He enjoyed meeting the various basketball teams, the national championship basketball teams and whatever. He enjoyed that.

Smith: Sports.
Downton: Yeah, he loved that sort of stuff. Pele or whatever, yeah, he enjoyed that. He enjoyed that. I think he very much enjoyed meeting some of the foreign dignitaries. He hit it off with some of them very well.

Smith: Who comes to mind in terms of having almost instant chemistry?

Downton: Helmut Schmidt in Germany.

Downton: He just got along with him just great.

Smith: And it’s funny because their politics were very different.

Downton: I know, I know. He thoroughly admired Anwar Sadat. He thought a great deal of him. I think he really thought a great deal of the man, the French president, Giscard d’Estaing.

Smith: Giscard.

Downton: Yes, they’re also two different personalities, but they seemed to get along very well. They really did. He admired Queen Elizabeth, I know, a great deal, just admired her whole being, I think.

Smith: And that visit was memorable in a number of ways.

Downton: Oh, yeah. It was, it was very nice.

Smith: There were a few SNAFUs. Could have contributed to the…

Downton: But that makes you human, too. I think he thoroughly enjoyed the July 4 bicentennial celebration. The pageantry, I think he really enjoyed that. I think that whole patriotism and 200th anniversary and whatever, I think that really meant a lot to him. Yeah, he enjoyed that period.

Smith: Do you have a sense of what he enjoyed the least about the office?

Downton: Probably the staff bickering. Probably the in-fighting. That bothered him because it was like, “This isn’t necessary. You’ve got this job and you’ve got this job and don’t argue. Each do your own thing.” He didn’t like that. He didn’t like any conflict like that on his staff. I think that he just didn’t like that at all. That bothered him.
Smith: He had a temper which I think he spent a lifetime pretty successfully controlling.

Downton: Yes.

Smith: But not always.

Downton: You could tell when he was angry.

Smith: How did that manifest itself?

Downton: I could usually tell looking at his face. And if I were presenting a question or whatever and I didn’t get a detailed answer that I wanted, I could look at his face and think, “Okay, don’t ask anything more” or “Enough’s enough.” Or, at one point in time, we were going through a number of his collection items. This was after the election and so we needed to decide where these things were going to go, to the Museum, to the Library, to California, wherever. And I think he was just plain getting tired, and he’d had enough of this. At this point in time, it was probably 6:30, 7:00 o’clock in the evening and he wanted to go back to the residence and I just looked at him and I could tell, okay, that’s enough. Let’s stop for the day because we don’t need to do anything more. You could tell, I think, from his face, I could tell. Because when you work with someone that closely, you can tell their mannerisms and their look and whatever.

Smith: What about his sense of humor?

Downton: Oh, he had a very good sense of humor. And I think that’s one of the reasons that he got along as well with Kennerly as he did because they had this joking type of a relationship which I think was good. But as I had indicated earlier, some of these editorial cartoons that I took offense at, he would laugh at. And he’d have me get them framed and hung in my office so he could look at them every so often. He did not mind that.

Smith: Did he wait too long in ’76 to take Reagan’s challenge seriously? Was there a sense that either maybe he might not run or maybe wouldn’t be as formidable a foe as he turned out to be?
Downton: Well, I think that period of time may have been, in President Ford’s mind, he may have been thinking back to his Minority Leader days when they always used to say that the 11th commandment was not saying anything bad about a fellow Republican. And I think he didn’t realize that Reagan was as committed, that he was actually going to do this. And once it took hold, I think he realized, “Oh my, I’m being challenged in my own party.” And we had to go forward, we had to get into it, but it may have been like you said a little too late when it got going, unfortunately. I think that was tough. That hurt him. I think that hurt him. I think for a good period of time that became very strained. Because I remember once when I was still in California and Reagan was going to do some type of a commercial or an ad for the fellow who was running I think for governor at the time, and they came to President Ford’s office so they could do it together, it was very strained. Very, very strained.

Smith: Just the body language?

Downton: Yes, yes. And the poor guy for governor was completely out of it. He didn’t win. But it was very awkward, very strained. I think that hurt him to think that he would be so publicly challenged by someone in his own party. But he got over. He really did. There were many other times when he met with Reagan when Reagan was president and they would meet people together and whatever. He was always very cordial, very warm and whatever. I mean, he was not the type of person who held a grudge.

Smith: In November of 1976, obviously they had come from way behind. A lot of folks thought that it was a toss-up by election day. Where were you?

Downton: Actually, after he went to the residence that night, then I did go home. And so we continued watching on TV. There are still those who think that if he would’ve asked for a recount in Illinois, it could’ve been a different result. But he didn’t want any part of that, which I give him credit for. He could not talk anymore, he lost his voice at that point in time. The next morning, when it was still somewhat in doubt as to what was going to happen, I was in the office and Dave came with me that day, he was in the office with me, and President Ford came walking in the office. This was I think right before their
announcement. And he said, “Well, it’s over.” And I said, “It doesn’t have to be it!” And he said, “Yes, it’s over. We’re going to do the announcement.” He gave me a big hug, he shook Dave’s hand, and said, “Thank you for all you’ve done. You helped me.” He was very gracious in that regard. But it was hard. I mean, it’s not easy to lose a national election, I don’t care what party it is. It’s not easy because you’re so into it. You’re so involved and there’s no way you can sit back and say, “Oh, okay.”

Smith: Did it take him awhile to get over it?

Downton: It did. He was quiet. He was thinking what he was going to do. I think he was quiet. I remember the day, you know how they do a formal come to the Oval Office and do a formal visit and whatever and it was the day when President Carter was going to come. I went in that morning and I had said to him, “Are you going to bring” I think I called him Mr. Carter, because he was not then president or whatever, President Elect, that was just not necessary, I said, “Are you going to bring Mr. Carter in to show him my office and your study?” And he said, “No, he’s coming here to see the Oval Office and I will show him the Oval Office.” I said, “Okay.” I thought this is really unusual. He just really cut me off.

So I went back to my office and I said to the steward on duty, “You know Carter is coming here today for a visit.” I said, “Would you have time?” - those silver frames I mentioned earlier, they get very tarnished. I said, “Would you have time today to clean up these silver frames just in case? We want everything to look real nice.” He said, “Oh, sure. Sure. I’ll take care of it.” And he did. Everything looked great. So, maybe about 11:00 o’clock, 11:30, I heard the door open. It was opened very hard. And I heard President Ford say, “Here’s the head” because, both being Navy men, that’s the term they used. He said, “Here’s the head and here’s the pantry and here’s my personal secretary.” And President Ford opened the door and he stood in the door and ushered President Carter in.

So I stood up and shook his hand and he said, “Hi, I’m Jimmy Carter.” And I felt like saying, “I know who you are. You don’t have to do this. You’re not campaigning,” or whatever. But I just said, “How do you do?” and whatever.
And then he said to me, “Where are you from?” And I said, “Michigan.” And he said, “Oh,” - you know, like that’s got to be the worst state of all fifty states as far as I’m concerned. And President Ford, bless his heart, said in a very commanding voice, “You don’t have to worry about her. She’s going with me.” And the look on President Carter’s face was, “Oh, I didn’t mean it that way.” But it was an awkward moment, and I really appreciated him stepping up and saying what he did. He stood in that doorway and didn’t go anywhere. And when Carter came in, I showed him the photos, the things on the wall and whatever, and he got quite a kick out of that. He thought that was really nice. But President Ford definitely said, “Oh, you don’t have to worry about this situation. She’s not going to be here.”

Smith: You wouldn’t think that day that they would become good friends.

Downton: No, not at all. It was very tense. I mean, he did what he needed to do, but from the way he cut me off that morning when I asked, “No, he’s coming to see the Oval Office. That’s what he’s going to see.” It was like, this was not his nature. And so I thought, “Oh, this isn’t going to play this way.” I’m glad that I did ask [the steward] and all because he did show him the study and everything looked great and that was a nice gesture on his part.

Smith: Do you remember the last days at the White House?

Downton: Yes.

Smith: What was that like?

Downton: I remember the last day, January 20, because I was in my office at the time clearing up, making sure I had everything that I needed to take. I was temporarily going to be in the transition office off on Lafayette Park and I wanted to be sure I had everything sent. And about 10:30 or so, 11:00 that morning, the White House telephone people came in and they needed to start changing the phones, and whatever. And so I thought, “Well, okay, this is about time.” And so I gathered up everything, made sure they had everything. Dave was with me at the time to help me carry what I needed to carry out and over to the other office. And so we left the White House and went over to the
transition office there off Lafayette Park and got settled in. I was there for just a few weeks before we moved to California.

Smith: A couple of things and then we’ll wrap it up. You were in California you said through 1980?

Downton: I believe I left in November of 1980.

Smith: Clearly there had been this flirtation in ’79, early ’80 with running again. How did that evolve?

Downton: Well, what bothered me was when he came to the convention in Detroit. The Republican convention was in Detroit. And they had all of this talk about him being Reagan’s running mate. You know, and I’m in California getting upset. I was like, “Oh, no!” And so he called on the telephone to check on everything and I said, “What in the world is going on? I don’t like what I’m hearing.” He said, “Well, what are you hearing?” I said, “That you’re going to be his running mate!” And he just started laughing. He just said, “Dorothy, don’t believe everything you hear.” And I said, “Oh, okay. That’s all I need to know.”

Smith: That’s good enough for you.

Downton: Yeah. That’s good enough for me, yeah.

Smith: Had he thought about it? Had there been people who came to urge him to run for president?

Downton: I think there were some that did who said, “You should challenge. You should do it.” But I think the more he thought about it, it was like, “No, this is not what I need to do.”

Smith: Presumably Mrs. Ford might’ve weighed in.

Downton: Oh, yes. Yes.

Smith: She had no desire to go back into the political world.

Downton: No, no. They had served their time and done a tremendous job.
Smith: And of course this was just after the intervention and everything had taken place.

Downton: Exactly. Exactly. So she was still healing, they were both still going through that period. You know, where they needed time. And it worked out fine.

Smith: He seems to have adapted to the new life very easily. Whatever regrets he had, he seemed to have put behind him.

Downton: He did, because he kept busy. And see, I think this was his nature, too. In fact, I remember several Fridays where we’re getting ready to leave and he’d say, “So, we’ll see you tomorrow.” And I was like, “Tomorrow’s Saturday. Do we really have to come in tomorrow?” And he said, “Well, sure. There’s mail.” As long as he kept busy, he was fine. But he needed things to do. He needed his reading. He needed his newspapers, his magazines. One thing very nice that President Carter did do is that he did keep him updated. We got an update every week delivered by the Navy, actually, through San Diego. And he’d have to sign for them. And after he read them, he’d have to destroy them.

So he was kept up to date and that was very nice. He appreciated that a great deal. And those sorts of things, I think, helped fix that relationship. They became, as you said, very good friends and that was good. He did not hold a grudge. It was not in his personality, not his temperament. That’s all to his credit.

Smith: I remember, there’s a story, up in Vail, he walked to the post office to pick up the mail.

Downton: I believe it. I do believe it, yes. He was incredible. I think that work ethic was instilled in him at a very young age by his parents and he couldn’t break it. Why would he? It served him very well as a congressman, as Minority Leader.

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

Downton: Yes, actually, he came to the University of Michigan for the dedication of the business school that one of his friends was supporting. Several years ago,
actually, it was my birthday, November 11th. I think it was in ’04, one or the other and he came and Mrs. Ford came, and they were going to be there for the dedication. Lee Simmons had told me they were going to be there and he said, “Come on over and see us.” So, I went over. That morning, it was an awful day, raining and whatever, but I went to the Campus Inn and they had arranged with the Secret Service to let me come up on the elevator and whatever and I met with Lee and John Nunn was there.

I visited with him and we had a nice visit. And I sat and chatted with him for maybe 15-20 minutes or so. Perfect gentleman. I took along photos to show him our house and things like that and he wanted to know what Dave was doing and I told him he was a railroad engineer. And he was astounded. I said, “He loves it! He loves it.” But we had a wonderful visit, just the two of us and he asked a lot of questions. I told him I was working for the Associated Press at the time. And he says, “You are?” And I said, “Yes, but I’m not a reporter. I’m an administrative assistant.” He said, “Oh, I know. That’s just fine.” He was in very good health and, like I say, a perfect gentleman.

Smith: Plus he loved to be back in Ann Arbor.

Downton: Oh, he loved it there. He did. It fit him like a glove. And when I got up to leave, I said, “Well, I’ve got to get to work and you’ve got things to do, so I’d better get on the road.” And I still remember, he was sitting on a couch, I was on one side and he was on the other and he stood up. I said, “You don’t have to get up.” And he said, “I have to get up to give such a nice lady a hug.” And I thought, “Oh, that’s really sweet!” And that’s the last time I saw him.

Smith: That’s a nice memory to have. Were you surprised by the reaction when he died? I was with the media part of the week and then with the family, and I know people in the media were amazed that there was this much reaction and it seemed to build as the week went on.

Downton: Yes, indeed. The folks here that I worked with at the Detroit AP, I think they were very surprised. They were on top of everything and we had our Washington correspondent and our Lansing correspondent. They were all in
Grand Rapids. I saw them all at the funeral in various spots doing their job. Our photo editor and photographer were there. We had excellent coverage. I think they were surprised at the amount of outpouring and the genuine caring that people in western Michigan showed, the fact that they were there all night long in line. I think they were astounded. I remember our Lansing correspondent say she was shocked when she saw how many people came out in January weather with children in strollers, and they were there all night long. She was amazed. And these are hardcore news people who it takes a lot to amaze them.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Downton: I think he should be remembered as a great man who did what he needed to do for the country. Not always what he wanted to do, I mean, he really wanted to be Speaker of the House. That was not in the cards for him. But he did what he needed to do. He did what he thought was best at the time. I believe he used his best judgment. He went forward and I don’t think he had second thoughts then. I think he just kept going. He was a very compassionate man. Very, very disciplined man. Very religious man.

Smith: That didn’t always come across, did it?

Downton: No, that didn’t always come out. It didn’t, but he really was. He was very religious and I think that goes back to his mother, actually, and his stepfather. I think the upbringing in Grand Rapids, that is ingrained in you. It’s a quality that I think a lot of people today are missing, unfortunately. A very well-meaning man. I don’t think he had a mean bone in his body. He did what he thought was best at the time, and I hope he will be remembered in that light. He had some tough things he had to deal with and I think he did an excellent job. I was proud to be part of his staff and to be with him and to help in whatever I did. It was an honor.

Smith: And it sounds like he was a good boss.

Downton: He was a very good boss. He was strict. He was all business, but he was, he was a good boss. We would kid about working late or working on Saturday or Sunday, like I say, but we got used to it. That was part of it that was
ingrained in him, and so then we did it. But, yeah, he was very detailed. I admired that a great deal. We got along well, we really did. I enjoyed it.

Smith: One last thing before I forget: Did he find it hard to fire people?

Downton: Yes. No, he was not comfortable with it. He was not comfortable, as I said earlier, with any in-fighting on the staff or any staff problems. In fact, I think that was one of the few times that Kennerly was not allowed in the Oval Office, was when I think it was with Secretary Schlesinger and he had to ask him to hand in his resignation. I think that was one of the few times he was not allowed in the office.

Smith: And that relationship was just, again, the chemistry didn’t work.

Downton: It didn’t, no, it didn’t jibe at all and you knew that. You knew that. You could see that from the different personalities. And that happens nowadays and you just need to move on. But he was a very caring man, I think. Very strong and determined in his own mind. He knew what he wanted to do and he did his best to do it.

Smith: He said that his greatest regret was that just as he had mastered the job, that he really learned how to be president, then he lost it.

Downton: Yes, then he was out of it. I still think that if that campaign would have lasted maybe two or three more days, I think that we could’ve had a different turn out. I really do. Or another week, or whatever. But if he had had three days, because he was coming on strong. He really was, he was really coming on strong. But it wasn’t to be and we made the best of it.

Smith: Well, they had a pretty good life afterwards.

Downton: Yes, they did. They had a good number of years, which is really good.

Smith: And really he kept his health right up until the last couple of years.

Downton: He did. Like, when I saw him, he was great. He was moving all around on his own and not needing any help. Like I said, “You don’t need to get up,” from the comfortable couch, but he insisted. He said, “Yes, of course I do.”
So, yeah, he was very much his own person. I think he was comfortable with who he was and I think that means a lot, too.

Smith: Especially to that office.

Downton: Oh yes. Yes.

Smith: Because we all see what happens to people who aren’t comfortable with themselves.

Downton: Exactly.

Smith: Dorothy, this is wonderful, really.
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Smith: First of all, tell us about the road that led to your involvement with the Ford campaign in ‘76.

Bailey: Well, John Deardorff and I had started a political consulting firm, Bailey-Deardorff, in the late ‘60s after we both worked for Nelson Rockefeller in 1963 and ‘64. John stayed on as executive director of the party in New York and I went to Washington as staff director for the Wednesday Group of House Republican liberals. But we’d planned to create what Deardorff first called Campaign Consultants, Inc. It was the first national Republican political consulting there was; which became the first national political advertising firm, and we had some remarkable early successes. Whether we lucked into it - I tend to think we lucked into it - but in fact, we got pretty good at it. But because we were the first and because we had won a number of early races like Ed Brooke and Dick Schweiker and people like that, a lot of people came knocking on our door. We had sort of a pick and choice of candidates to work for and in that case, if that’s true, then your record ought to be a winning record.

Smith: Have you ever worked for a candidate you didn’t much like?

Bailey: In 1970 we got so big for our britches that we staffed up before we signed on the candidates. A big mistake because that gives you a burden of overhead costs that you have to meet, and therefore you have to have races, and therefore you have to work for certain candidates, whoever those candidates are. And we ended up working that year for two or three candidates in races that they didn’t win and probably shouldn’t have won. They weren’t bad people but we weren’t excited about it and we never made that mistake again. By and large our rule became, if you can’t vote for them, if in fact, you were registered to vote in that state and if you couldn’t vote for him, why on earth would you work for him?
In 1968 we had the opportunity to work for Nixon’s presidential campaign and turned it down because we didn’t like him. It doesn’t mean that he wasn’t a good president, in many respects, because I think he was. But he obviously had a paranoia that was dominant.

Smith: That’s interesting because, fairly or not, I assume by that point, you were tagged as at least moderate to liberal Republicans.

Bailey: We were tagged fairly as liberal Republicans. In fact, I still call myself a liberal Republican and I’m probably the only one around.

Smith: But see, that’s fascinating, and it gets back to your comment about the Wednesday Group. For today’s political junkie, describe a time there were enough liberal Republicans to form a Wednesday club.

Bailey: We had a Wednesday Group in the House which consisted of – at its high point – about two dozen members who some would call themselves liberal. Most would call themselves moderate or middle of the road. But the fact of the matter is, by today’s standards within the Republican Party, they were certainly liberal. This was John Lindsay, before he was mayor of New York was a Republican congressman from Manhattan who was among this group. Mac Mathias from Maryland, Brad Morse from Massachusetts.

Smith: Was Charley Goodell in that group?

Bailey: Charley Goodell was not in that group, although I think he was invited to be in that group. But he chose not to go quite that far to the left.

Smith: Until he became a senator.

Bailey: And this was a group that worked on a whole bunch of issues. They were very much against the Vietnam War, they were very much against the draft. The staff wrote a book with them, for them, on how to end the draft; which became the formula by which the draft was ended in this country.

Smith: Is it safe to say these people were, whether they wanted to be or not, labeled as Rockefeller Republicans?
Bailey: Well, they certainly were labeled as Rockefeller Republicans. For some that was not a fair description. Bob Ellsworth from Kansas was in the Wednesday Group and very active in it, but he was a very active Nixon man, for example. He was one of those that met with us to invite us to join the Nixon campaign, in fact. But this was a pretty liberal group of people. Browning Reed from New York – by today’s standards totally unacceptable within the Republican Party. They wouldn’t even be talked to.

Smith: That raises a huge question. And that is, how did this group get along with, and more importantly, how did Ford, as House Republican Leader, get along with this group?

Bailey: Well, Ford’s leadership in the House was the result of his easy going, welcoming personality. He was not an ideologue in any sense of the term. He was a pretty conservative guy, but ideology did not dominate his world. And therefore he got along with moderates in the House. He was able to talk with them; they were able to talk with him. And this was a group that was instrumental in getting – I’ve forgotten even what the leadership fight was - but Charlie Halleck became the Republican leader largely because this group encouraged and pushed him along.

Smith: Okay, first Halleck had beaten Joe Martin back in the late ‘50s. Then after the Goldwater disaster Ford knocks off Halleck.

Bailey: I think some of this group helped Halleck in the first place, and then helped Ford against Halleck.

Smith: Right. That makes perfect sense.

Bailey: You’re bringing it back to me. I mean, the fact is that both Halleck and Ford were pretty open people and they were open in the middle. Open to the right and open to the left. And were not ideologues in any sense of the term.

Smith: There is such a focus – understandably – by the media and others on ideology as the defining component in these contests. I guess the older I get, the more I wonder if generational factors aren’t at least as important, particularly in an institution like the House.
Bailey: I’ll tell you one thing, Richard, that I think is enormously important that has been lost here, and it doesn’t have much to do with generation, and it doesn’t have much to do with ideology. New members of the House now, and this has been true now for close to twenty years, fifteen years, anyway – new members of the House tend to leave their families back in the district. They don’t come to Washington with their families, with their wives. And the reason they don’t is that they are told that it is so busy that they won’t have time to do that.

But one of the factors is, and I don’t mean as a conscious decision by Gingrich or others, but one of the things that was changed when he caused that to happen was, when the wives stay home back in the districts, they are not here to be sort of the social glue that brings a whole bunch of people together. I mean, there were dinner parties where Democrats actually went and had dinner with Republicans – can you imagine such a thing? And they liked each other. They got to know each other. There was a social life that enabled people then to talk to each other when they saw each other on the floor. I don’t believe that Republicans talk to Democrats. They don’t.

Smith: But another factor – when you stop to think - forty years ago, if you were a newcomer, whether it was the House or the Senate, particularly the Senate, but the House as well – the fact of the matter is, each party had wings. I was talking to Vice President Mondale about this – Bob Dole talks about when he arrived here, he was told to be sure and spend time with Senator Stennis. He’ll show you the ropes. But even within your own caucus, if you were a Mondale arriving in Washington in the mid ‘60s, there was still a substantial Southern conservative – hostile to civil rights – wing of the party. And by the same token, there was a liberal wing of the Republican Party, so that inside the party you had to learn to work with people who were your ideological opponents.

Bailey: Probably the biggest difference in politics between the years when Bailey-Deardorff was active and today, is that in both houses of the Congress there were a whole variety of people, in both parties, who were more interested in getting things done on their particular areas of interest, than they were in perfection of some ideology. It just is true. And Bailey-Deardorff became, and
this is bringing it back to your first question, Bailey-Deardorff became particularly effective for some reason that I’m not sure I quite understand, in working in gubernatorial campaigns and candidates for governor. Governors actually govern. They have to do something. They can’t sort of just pontificate all day long.

Smith: Or play to the base.

Bailey: They have to get things done and the way they get things done, particularly in states where the members of the two parties are competitive, is to work with people on both sides of the aisle to form their majorities to get their legislation through. To me it was very instructive the other day when the (Sotomayor) nomination in the Senate was approved. There were nine Republican votes for her. Those nine included four of the six former governors; former Republican governors who are in the Senate and those four were all from states like Ohio and New Hampshire and Tennessee and Missouri that are competitive with both parties. Governors understand that in order to get anything done, you’ve got to work with the other side.

The two governors, by the way, former governors in the Senate who didn’t support her were from South Dakota and Idaho, where governing tends to be a one party function. So there is a different mentality entirely to those who are effective in that office. Same thing is true of mayors and same thing is true of presidents. Somehow we’ve allowed legislatures to sort of pontificate and think that ideology is everything; and in fact, my judgment seriously gets in the way of good government much of the time.

Smith: Gerald Ford, when he was in office, was widely seen as the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge. In very short order, however, he was virtually marooned in his own party – I mean once out of office. But even in ’76, he was targeted by an almost successful insurrection on the right. One senses that if it was purely an emotional decision – if you consulted people’s hearts rather than their heads or their pocketbooks – that he might not have prevailed at the convention. Did Watergate create the vacuum in which, for lack of a better word, the hard right was able to seize the initiative and define the party?
Bailey: Well, Watergate certainly helped. It is very interesting. Nixon will be forever remembered by Watergate and justifiably so. There’s not any doubt about that, but what is truly interesting is that his domestic policy legislation accomplishments and proposals were radical by comparison to his party and by comparison to what the Republican Party stands for today.

Smith: I’ve often called him the last New Deal president. He’s the ultimate pragmatist, some would say cynic – and he was the last president, arguably, to be guided by the long shadow of FDR and what was perceived to be the New Deal political consensus about the role of government. So COLAs and OSHA and EPA – all of that expansion of government wasn’t necessarily because Richard Nixon in his heart particularly wanted it, but because his political calculating machine told him that that’s what the consensus required if he were to be re-elected.

Bailey: And so when Nixon was rejected by the country and by his party, it was convenient also to reject most everything he had worked for. But I think the Goldwater movement before Nixon’s presidency had laid the basis and there was this charismatic fellow, who was elected in ’66 in California as governor, Reagan, who was remarkably effective.

Smith: And there are many who believe to this day, that he actually came a lot closer even in ’68 at that convention in Miami; that if it had not been for Strom Thurman holding the South, and for whatever happened in New Jersey - people forget how close a run thing it was.

Bailey: And so comes 1976. Here you have this natural heir of the Goldwater, of the Republican Party, particularly the Republican Party that had been freed of Nixon. I mean, remove Nixon from the Republican Party and then what’s left – the natural heir to that is Ronald Reagan. There isn’t any question about that. But he’s not the president. The sitting president, the incumbent President of the United States is Gerald Ford. Who is not, by the way, an ideologue. He is not.

Smith: And is it fair to say that Reagan, which is part of the dynamic why these two men really never much cared for each other, went to each one’s definition of
legitimacy. That is to say, Reagan really did believe that the Republican Party is a hierarchal place and it was his turn. That he was the natural choice and Watergate only enhanced that. That philosophically he was where the Republican Party was and was going; and therefore, to break the Eleventh Commandment didn’t really count because there was a greater good. Whereas, obviously, the Ford partisans said you don’t challenge an incumbent president, particularly one who is trying as hard under such difficult circumstances. Plus, he’s the only Republican that has a chance of winning in November.

Bailey: I’ve never thought that the challenge by Reagan against Ford in the primaries was inappropriate. It would mean that if Ford wasn’t the better person in my judgment to be the candidate(?) but nonetheless, I didn’t think that was wrong. What may have been wrong was how little support Reagan gave to Ford after he was chosen, because that was something that was unfortunate.

Smith: Did Reagan make Ford a better candidate? Because the argument has gone on for years that Ford, by being pushed the way he was, became a better speaker, became – fill in the blank.

Bailey: It is certainly true that he became a better speaker. It is certainly true that the Reagan candidacy helped him focus. It was also a significant distraction in the sense that all the political thought process – I don’t mean the President’s himself – but everybody else’s thought process – was about how to get the nomination, not how to win the election. There were a lot of things that if the Ford White House had gotten an earlier start on, I don’t think Ford would have faced the difficulties that he faced against Carter. I think also, that the Reagan challenge created such a divide within the Republican Party, that was one of the reasons why Ford was so far behind, so late in the game. But I do think you can argue that Ford became a better candidate because of some of the things that Reagan did. But his candidacy was all the more difficult because of what Reagan did.

Smith: There is a school of thought that says that the Ford White House waited too long; that they were somewhat naïve; that they tended to underestimate either the probability of Reagan actually challenging him; and/or Reagan’s strength
once he did. That it was a White House that perhaps was asleep at the switch, to some degree.

Bailey: Well, clearly, they underestimated. And I think, clearly, they severely misjudged whether the primary battle was over once they had won the very early battles. I’m not a good one in all of this Richard, because you know we didn’t join the campaign until the convention or immediately thereafter. And one of the reasons that we didn’t join the campaign, I suspect, I don’t know, nobody has ever said this to me, but it’s bound to be true, that Bailey-Deardorff was so moderate and so liberal that we would become an issue in the primaries.

Smith: What do you remember of the convention? Because we’ve heard from a number of people who have bittersweet memories; who recall a convention of a party that was clearly very, very divided. And that did not necessarily leave Kansas City healed.

Bailey: Oh, they were divided. There wasn’t any question about that. I don’t really remember those parts of the convention. We were there to do a bunch of filming and taping and we were there to get as much as we could get for potential use in the general.

Smith: Let me go back. How were you hired for the fall campaign? How did that happen?

Bailey: As a practical matter, the Ford campaign had no money. They could not hire an agency for the fall campaign until they were the nominee of the party under the very new campaign finance laws. So, once the California primary was done, they had been through two or three agencies, and we don’t need to discuss them. Some of them were bizarre. Teeter and a couple of others told us clearly that we were going to be hired immediately after the convention. And to come to the convention and get this done and start working on the plan now because you’re it.

Smith: Who was running the campaign at that point?
Bailey: Our sense was that at that point, the people that we had contact with, that in effect running it, were Teeter, Cheney, Spencer.

Smith: Tell us about Bob Teeter.

Bailey: The class act of politics. I mean there were pollsters and then there were pollsters. This is a fellow who understood the statistical theory, understood the shortcomings of polls, but also understood what polls could do. And he was remarkably accurate, remarkably even tempered, an absolute joy to work with, and he would never, ever disagree with you directly. In fact, I thought about this many, many times; if you watched Teeter in a meeting, and somebody said something that you knew that Teeter disagreed with, Teeter would say, “That’s right, and?” and then he would launch off in the exact opposite position. His capacity to communicate effectively was brilliant. And he had the very deep trust and affection of almost anybody who he ever worked with and for.

Smith: And that transcended ideology?

Bailey: Yeah. If you asked me today, what was Teeter’s ideology? I have no idea; I have none.

Smith: Now, Stu is a powerful figure. We spent about six hours with Stu.

Bailey: Six enjoyable hours?

Smith: Just a delight. Lots of laughter, a few gasps along the way, but the semi-famous story about what he went in and told the President – do you know what I’m talking about?

Bailey: I’m not sure. I don’t think I ought to admit that I know until I know what it is.

Smith: Okay. He was not terribly happy, I think he was going through a divorce, and he sort of took this job in part just to get out of Dodge. And he arrived and he found chaos. But, it’s the end of a week and it’s not been a great week and it’s a lousy, dreary, rainy Friday and he has this unenviable task of basically dissuading the President from going out and campaigning, pressing the flesh as much as he likes to. He’s tried all sorts of euphemisms, and he was in the
Oval Office and the only two people there besides him and the President was Dick Cheney. Finally, Stu being Stu, he just sort of snaps because the President is not getting it. Stu says, “Mr. President, you’re a great president, but you are a fucking lousy campaigner.” And, one, the fact that he could say it to Ford tells you volumes; but it’s the sequel that makes the story - because in the Germond-Witcover book that appeared, that story was there. And Stu was embarrassed, angry, humiliated. He called Cheney to chew him out for telling him this story. Dick lets him go on and on and on and he finally says, “You know, Stu, there was a third person in that room.” And the fact that Ford told the story on himself multiplies the impact. I mean, it tells you a lot about Stu, but it tells you even more about Gerald Ford.

Bailey: Exactly. It’s one of the dominant facts of the Ford campaign that, until the very end, until the last few weeks, wherever he would go, his poll numbers went down. It’s just astonishing.

Smith: What were the factors that you attribute that to?

Bailey: I have no idea. Well, I shouldn’t say that.

Smith: Well, the factors that led – what we’ve heard is one of the themes of the Ford presidency is the learning curve involved in having spent a quarter of a century in the minority, in the House, and in effect, outgrowing that and learning to be an executive, learning to be a president. At the same time that all this learning is going on, in the furnace of a white-hot campaign, the part of Gerald Ford that loved, as long as he was able to do it, getting in a plane and going to some obscure place on the map, and talking to an obscure audience and eating undistinguished food, and delivering undistinguished oratory - that was just mother’s milk to Gerald Ford. And that presumably carried over. Plus there are those that believe that the White House speech operation was subpar in some ways. Anyway, the combination of all those things…

Bailey: Here’s my view of the reason his polls suffered whenever he went anywhere. It wasn’t a negative reaction to him as much as it was a reminder that he was the president and he succeeded Richard Nixon, and that if you focus on Ford,
you like Carter. If you focused on Carter, Ford had a chance. That was certainly true throughout the general election. One of the theories of the campaign as far as we were concerned, was keep the focus on Jimmy Carter. If the question in voters’ minds was do I know enough about Jimmy Carter? And then Gerald Ford would be elected president. If the question was do I think that Gerald Ford ought to be re-elected, then Jimmy Carter would win.

Smith: Let me understand though; was that primarily because people saw Ford as Richard Nixon’s heir, as Richard Nixon’s pardoner, or because of some set of qualities that Ford…?

Bailey: I think it’s a combination of things. Part of it is this is Richard Nixon’s choice and Richard Nixon is a traitor to this country. That’s the worst possible, right? Part of it was, to independents anyway, and to those in the middle, Nixon led us down the wrong road. It would be wise to put all of this behind us, let’s move on to something else. And part of it was that Gerald Ford – they really didn’t know [him] and some of the things that they got to know about him such as the pardon and such as Saturday Night Live and so forth, were not particularly attractive. So you put all those things together, and you don’t want the public focusing on Ford, you want the public focusing on Carter. Now, does this mean that everybody voted that way? No. But that group of people undecided, in the middle who were going to swing, could conceivably swing one way or the other, all fell into this description, whereby if the election was going to be determined by those people, you wanted those people thinking about Jimmy Carter and who is this guy?

Smith: That raises a couple of things because what may be the single most effective jingle in modern American politics. Maybe it was all about redefining Ford, or reminding people why they ought to like Ford, but “I’m feeling good about America,” brilliantly both in a head-on way and a soft-sell fashion, reminded people by the summer of ’76 that the mood of the country very different from what it had been two years earlier. And some responsibility, some credit for that had to go to the man in the White House.

Bailey: Well, there isn’t any question that that was part of what was true and people, I think, saw this. They didn’t equate it necessarily with Gerald Ford, but it’s
very difficult when you are speaking to young people, and I’m sure you’ve had the same experience, you’re speaking to young people and they can’t imagine what the hell you are talking about when you talk about the state of the country in 1974 and 1975 and what it had been through for the last ten-twelve years. Just an incredible period of time where the emotions of the country had been rubbed raw. After the Kennedy assassination and the civil rights riots and Bobby’s assassination and Martin Luther King and the civil rights laws and Vietnam and Watergate, suddenly there was this calm. And there was this calm guy who was President of the United States.

Smith: And the press thought it was dull.

Bailey: Correct. And by comparison, it certainly was. But to most people, you could make that argument. You didn’t want to overdo it, but you could make that argument and the music was not about Gerald Ford, the music was about the country.

Smith: Where did it come from – the idea and the execution?

Bailey: I wish that Bailey-Deardorff could claim all the credit in the world; we can’t claim any of it. It was a guy by the name of Bob Gardner in San Francisco, an advertising guy who had been there during the primaries, who wrote it and we loved it. Everybody loved it. We had also had some experience in working with music in campaigns, and we thought it was the right thing to do and used it as the backdrop for both five minute stuff and for thirty second and one minute ads and used it throughout the campaign, I suspect in your lifetime and mine, it probably is the most familiar piece of political music that either one of us can think of.

Smith: Let me go back. This notion of fashioning a campaign strategy to re-elect a candidate who had this impact on the voters, for whatever reason; and in a sense, making it about his opponent and not him. At some point, presumably, you must have been in the business that Stu had been in. I mean, finding the language to explain this to the principle. How did the strategy get set, what was his reaction, and was this something that happened after the convention?
Immediately after the convention, we had been working on it immediately before the convention and during the convention, but immediately after the convention, we gave to the President and to Jim Baker, who then came on to take charge, basically, and to Cheney and to Teeter and to Spencer and the whole crew, gave to them an advertising plan and we said, “Look, we haven’t got enough time to debate every day what we ought to do. We need to have a plan that says here we are on the 20th of August, or whenever it was, and here’s the election and here’s what we’re going to do and here’s what we’re going to do and here’s what we’re going to do. And we’re going to go do it, but we want you to see this plan and to sign off and say go do it. And as long as we do that, when we’re done with something, before it goes on the air, we’ll bring it back and let you see it.”

By the way, President Carter never looked at any of his advertising before it went on the air. Amazing. We’ll show you what we’ve done, but we want you to see it in advance. We don’t want to have this debate every morning at seven o’clock. And when we come up with an idea that is contrary to this, then we’ll debate it and discuss it. We just simply said that’s the way we operate, and in this particular campaign we haven’t got enough time to approach it any other way. So we gave them this advertising plan, which is exactly the plan that was followed with one exception on one ad. We can talk about that. But part of the theory was, you know, America has a president it doesn’t even know. This is the only guy - and we weren’t telling anybody any secrets – the only guy ever been in the White House that has never run nationally and therefore the public really doesn’t know him. They don’t know him, they don’t know his family. They don’t know all the things that they normally know about a president or a candidate for president. They don’t know as much about him as they know about Carter in many respects.

Is part of that because – I always describe Ford as the least self-dramatizing president in memory?

A large part of it. I mean, this was an ordinary guy. This is a wonderfully simple, straightforward, ordinary guy.

David Broder said he was the least neurotic president in my lifetime.
Bailey: Correct.

Smith: And did he pay a price for that?

Bailey: Well, I don’t know.

Smith: In the short term?

Bailey: Yes and no. The reason I say I don’t know is that if you make Gerald Ford neurotic, then what have you got?

Smith: But how do you dramatize vanilla? Or decency? An Eagle Scout – how do you sell…?

Bailey: One of the things you did, and this is part of what we did, was to tell the story of Gerald Ford and his family. Back in those days there were such things as five minute spots and we did them and we had the music and we had great footage and we had great people. The whole family was like him. They were ordinary, honest-to-God people.

Smith: Let me ask you because I remember, twenty-five years later, the reaction from people who did not know the story about his mother and his birth father. In some ways he was an astonishingly contemporary figure in that he was the product of a broken home with a gutsy mother who was ahead of her time in a great many ways, and all of that. But that part of the family story, I don’t think, really ever got through to the public. Was it because you didn’t talk about those things in those days? Was he reticent about it? Or because no one thought it was politically advantageous?

Bailey: I don’t think it was because it was a conscious decision not to talk about that because it was dangerous. What is true, one of the prices that we pay for the kind of advertising world that we’re in is that you have to make choices as to what you say and what you don’t say. I don’t mean choices about keep telling the truth and ignoring falsehoods or whatever. It is more when you’ve only got thirty seconds, or only got sixty seconds, or you’ve only got five minutes. What is it that isn’t known about this guy that you want to be known. And if you had to make choices, the clear first choice was get the family out there, because that’s an all-American family.
Smith: Including Mrs. Ford?

Bailey: Absolutely. Absolutely, because her story resonated with people.

Smith: Was there a divide in the White House? One senses that when the famous *Sixty Minutes* interview was done there was a disconnect between the immediate reaction – because everyone fights the last war – the immediate reaction of people in the White House who thought, “Oh my God,” and the startling, to them, reality that America had changed and was changing. That particularly post-Watergate, her candor, her outspokenness, epitomized almost more than anything Gerald Ford himself could do, the desire to restore honesty, authenticity, whatever you want to call it, to the White House. They didn’t realize what a political asset she was.

Bailey: Correct. And frankly, I’m not sure that anybody in the campaign appreciated it. But there was an instinctive judgment that made the Nixon paranoia - cover it up, hide it, don’t let anybody see the truth - was exactly the wrong thing to do with the anti-Nixon candidate. And therefore, the notion of openness and candor and let it all hang out was essential – politically essential. If you could not trust this guy, how in heaven’s name are you ever going to vote for him? You have to have that measure of trust, and trust only comes from candor.

Smith: Did she help with woman voters?

Bailey: A lot.

Smith: There were those famous buttons, “Vote for Betty’s Husband.”

Bailey: Sure. I don’t think it was as prominent as in later years. We’ve come to think about the gender split and so forth. I don’t think that was as prominent in those days, but I don’t think there is any question that she was talking about things and experiencing things that women across the country knew about.

Smith: Yeah. I want to ask you – I’m jumping around here – but, you mentioned in your book about a five minute ad that, I guess, never ran. Tell us about that and what it was supposed to do and why it didn’t run.
Five minute ads were four and a half minutes in length – the first thing you learn about them, and they were common on network TV. Remember than in 1976 most TV was network TV, not cable. They ran in the last five minutes, last four and a half minutes of an hour segment. And so they tended not to interrupt prime time, but they tended to be five minutes of eight, or eleven twenty-five, or something like that – some time period like that. The interesting thing about a five minute spot - I’m spending some time on it because I think it’s important for you to distinguish. Two interesting things about a five minutes spot: one is, with thirty second advertising, in order to make your point, the campaign has to run the ad often enough so that you can see it probably three, four, five times, because you are not tuned into it. It comes and goes, and more often than not, you don’t even get the point. But if you see it five or six times, it can start to sink in on you. Five minutes, by and large, you only really need to see once, because if it’s well produced it gets your attention, “Ah, this is interesting,” and you settle in and you start to understand what is being said.

The certain thing about a five minute spot, the difference between it and thirty seconds – I can make a thirty second spot, Richard, to get you to vote against my opponent – in thirty seconds. Because all you really need to know is one thing to vote against him. But if you’re going to vote for somebody, you need to know more than one thing, you need to know their personality, you need to know their stands on issues, you need to know quite a bit about them. You need to know a kind of full story. So thirty seconds is great to get that one thing across that causes you to vote against somebody.

Five minutes is a lot of time to get a story across with a beginning and an end that reinforces. In that context, there were three or four five minute ads that were planned for Ford. And then one, and this is the only diversion that there was from the initial advertising plan that we did for the campaign, it struck me that there was an opportunity to do a five minute ad that would run in the last week of the campaign that was so powerful that it could reach out and grab hold of you and shake you and turn people’s votes around. Now, that’s a very risky thing to do if you are ahead in the polls. You don’t want to turn people’s votes around, but if you think you’re going to lose, then if there is a way to
reach out, responsibly reach out and grab you and shake you and make you not so certain of how you were going to vote; whether you were going to vote for Ford or Carter or are undecided. If you could turn the whole electorate into undecided, if otherwise you were going to lose, that would be pretty good because you had another chance at it.

There was one opportunity that we had, and that was to create a five minute spot that emotionally rang all of those bells of the last twelve years. Of the assassinations, of the wars, of Watergate, and to reinforce emotionally with people what they had been through. To take them through that again, and shake them in a way that caused them to rethink how they were going to vote. Now, if you could do that, it would be pretty interesting.

There was an opportunity in September - we were filming where the President was speaking before a crowd at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, and he was giving a sort of standard stump speech to a crowd of mostly students, but a lot of others. Very enthusiastic and so forth, and Betty Ford was there and it was very exciting and just as he was saying the words about trust – and you have to trust your president, it’s not good enough to say trust me, trust must be earned, it was the words he was using – and that really was a comment about Jimmy Carter’s being an unknown person. Just as he was saying this, as we were filming it, a shot ran out and the President looks up and looks down and he keeps speaking, but he kept looking around and there was a bunch of scurrying and the audience was looking and everybody was scared to death.

This is a president who had already gone through two assassination attempts, and it was an instant reminder to everybody in the room of the assassinations that we had been through and yet he keeps making this point about trust, trust must be earned. He gets to the conclusion a few seconds later, and people stand and applaud and he wipes the sweat off his brow and looking up in the gallery and everybody then realizes that, in fact, it was a cherry bomb - that some prankster had set off a cherry bomb in the audience. There was a sort of sense of relief, but what an interesting opportunity because we captured every bit of it on film.
So I went back to New York and with some very competent editors put together some man in the street stuff about how Ford had really done remarkable things and the economy was looking up, we were at peace and all that kind of stuff. And then some introduction of Ford and how he is seen by a variety of people and then it brings to this audience in Ann Arbor and he is speaking, and there is no introduction of this. There is no warning on the film of this, and suddenly there is this shot and it just horrifies you. And then things calm down a little bit and the announcer says, voice over says, “There is a new calm in America these days,” I can’t remember the exact words, “After Vietnam, after Watergate, after all we have been through, when a president can parade openly through the streets of Dallas,” the picture shifts to a president in an open limousine waving with a very thick bullet-proof vest, I might add, waving to the crowds in Dallas as his car goes through the city, “There has been a change that’s come over America. The people and their president are back together again.” And then he gets out of the car, and now we have morphed into another scene, I think it’s in New Orleans or maybe Mississippi, I don’t remember which, but he’s getting out of the car and diving into the crowds and you pick up a sentence of his from the convention speech and so forth and wrap it up.

But basically what this was an effort to do was to say to that voter, “Do you understand what this election is all about? Do you remember what we have been through? How are you going to vote? How are you going vote? After all you have been through and now you have a president that has calmed the waters of this country, how are you going to vote?” And so I finish it and we put this together, of course, at a time when we were way behind in the polls, but throughout the production time and by the time we take it to the campaign, and to Jim Baker and Spencer and Cheney and the rest, there are now maybe three weeks left. We had started closing the gap significantly and were making some steady progress. I showed it for people in the campaign and they just went crazy. First of all, the Secret Service just has a nightmare and I’m respectful of this, I mean, in their mind, it is inviting the nut cases to come forward. But in the campaign, Jim Baker in particular just thinks this is nutty, absolutely screwy, I have a screw loose someplace.
Smith: He understood what you were trying to do?

Bailey: Yup. But he said, you’re going to lose the state of Texas. And I said, “Well, forgive me but aren’t we going to lose the state of Texas anyway? He said, “John Connally tells me that we will carry the state of Texas. But you can’t make a reference to Dallas that way without losing the state of Texas.” We did lose the state of Texas by 500,000 votes.

Smith: Was that an unfortunately Texas-centric viewpoint for the campaign manager to have?

Bailey: Well, it’s not unusual. Jim Baker is great, but he’s like all the rest of us. You start talking about my state, then I’m going to have better views about my state than you do. I know more about my state than you do. That’s the view of everybody.

Smith: Did the President see it?

Bailey: I don’t know, not from me.

Smith: Which raises a larger question, how did that work? He presumably passed judgment on his own...

Bailey: We provided to the White House, to Dick Cheney, and to the campaign all the ads before anything ran, and I’m absolutely certain that he looked at all of them. I don’t know to this day whether he ever saw this ad. Among other things, it never ran, so nobody would ever feel that it was necessary. There was another very big doubter for very interesting reasons. Bob Teeter did not like the ad; he was really worried about the ad for two reasons. One is he wanted to see, and perfectly appropriately, he wanted to see if he could, how a focus group would react to the ad. Because here’s this theory that everybody is going to change their minds. Okay, fair enough. His second theory – and I’ll tell you how the focus group turned out in a minute – or I’ll tell you how they told me the focus groups turned out in a minute. The second reason was be wary about Texans talking about Texas and be even more wary of Michiganders talking about Ohio and Ohioans talking about Michiganders. Now, you know as well as anybody, that there is no bigger sports rivalry than
there is between Ohio and Michigan. Now, I’m an Ohioan, Teeter isn’t – he’s a Wolverine – he’s not only from Michigan, he’s from Ann Arbor. So his view was that this would cost us the state of Ohio. If you show all those University of Michigan students and Ford speaking at the University of Michigan in an ad, you’ll lose Ohio.

Smith: Fascinating.

Bailey: Now, I think – I can’t prove it – I think that’s an exaggeration.

Smith: That does raise a large question. Are campaigns, like government, better at preventing things from happening than making them happen? When creativity rears its ugly head?

Bailey: It is true in government that almost anybody can shoot it down. If it’s up there, it’s going to be shot down. And in this case, there were a number of people who had some serious doubts. And in the end, by the way, I was among those who agreed that it should not run, but not for the reasons that they gave. Remember that this was designed for a campaign we felt pretty sure we were going to lose. But in the last week we were gaining so much momentum that it was perfectly believable that we were going to win the election, and you know as well as I do that on Saturday before the election, the Gallup polls put Ford ahead. So the conclusion was that we shouldn’t run it and this was intended for the last week, and I agreed with it, that we shouldn’t run it. Maybe I was also bowing to the inevitable because they did hold a focus group and the focus group just hated the ad. My reaction to that was, “Yes, so they hated the ad. So what’s the next conclusion?” Because if you show an ad to a focus group and then ask their opinion of the ad – what are they going to say?

Smith: This is my problem with focus groups: it’s like keeping a diary. Keeping a diary is a distortion. You may set out to be as truthful and honest a reporter as possible, but the very fact that you are keeping a diary is…And a focus group, by the same token…

Bailey: If you are going to take a test after you’ve seen something, you’d probably watch it a little differently, but it doesn’t really matter. The whole theory of
this ad was, of course they are not going to like it. That’s why it was designed to shake them up. If it was designed to shake them up, of course they are not going to like it. That’s what they are going to tell you. That doesn’t mean that it doesn’t necessarily work to our benefit in the long run. And let me add one more thing: when I said this, of course, they would just go bonkers. I said, “You understand, I’m not saying that as a result of this, that Ford might not lose much bigger than he would otherwise. What I’m saying is, force voters to rethink when you know collectively what they think now is going to hurt you, and when they rethink that, it might hurt you more.

Smith: You can imagine, or at least I can imagine sitting here listening to you, I can imagine an ad that would eliminate the Ohio-Michigan rivalry, almost in the style of the famous daisy ad. A series of sledge hammers, black and white images that would absolutely hit you over the head with a two by four about the turmoil of the last decade. I mean, just as simple as that; that in fact brings you to this oasis.

Bailey: It was an extraordinarily emotional moment for this country. And that if you could cause people to remember what they had been through and then cause them to realize that after all they had through, my God, there’s this nice guy who is President of the United States and I feel good.

Smith: You said - by the way, I think you’re right – the last minute Gallup poll that showed Ford ahead may very well have contributed paradoxically to his defeat. Why do you believe that?

Bailey: It goes back to something I said earlier. I think the basic thesis of the campaign, from my standpoint, was that it was going to be decided by people in the middle who, if when they went to vote, the dominant thought they had was, “I don’t know enough about Jimmy Carter,” then Ford is going to win. Those same people, if the dominant thought or the first thought they had is, “That guy Ford really shouldn’t be president,” or “Ford was chosen by Nixon,” or “Ford was…,” whatever. Then Carter was going to win. If they’re thinking about Carter, Ford’s going to win. If they’re thinking about Ford, Carter’s going to win. And as long as the polls – we didn’t have twenty polls a day, which we do now – but as long as the polls seem to say Carter’s going to
win, Carter’s going to win, Carter’s going to win, then my thought as one of those voters in the middle is, “God, who is this guy? I really don’t know enough about him.” And so that’s the thought that’s going to be on my mind when I go vote, so I’m going to vote for Ford.

Smith: Wasn’t it also true that literally days before the election there were some economic numbers that came out. Alan Greenspan dubbed it The Pause, which may be fine in theoretical circles, but given the heightened emotions of that period, it just reinforced people’s doubts about the recovery, and the President. You had come so far, but when it became clear that you had come that far, people just kind of sat back and said, “Well, do I really want four more years of this?”

Bailey: One of the undeniable things about a close election, Richard, is that you can find a hundred, if not a thousand, reasons to explain what happened. I think there were some economic numbers that might have contributed. I think the poll might have contributed in a negative way for us. I think and I have said this publicly, so I might as well say it again, I think that the performance of Bob Dole in that campaign, particularly in the debate with Walter Mondale, probably cost some voters. I don’t know how many who were planning to vote on Ford, they were thinking about Ford, they were thinking about Ford, they get in the voting booth and they realize that they can’t vote for Ford without voting for Dole and they go the other way. I think that’s possible. There are so many explanations for any election that is that close.

Smith: You had an alternate vice presidential candidate in mind, didn’t you? Or at least if you could have made the selection?

Bailey: It wasn’t ________, it wasn’t John, but it is our understanding that the group that met with the President on the night before he made his selection public, left that meeting believing that Bill Ruckelshaus would be the vice presidential choice. Now, others that you’ve talked to probably have already told you what happened. I don’t know exactly what happened, but obviously the next morning the choice was Bob Dole. Although Ruckelshaus was called, it’s my understanding he was called and told to get himself to Kansas City.
Smith: Really?

Bailey: Bill Ruckelshaus would be a very interesting interview for you.

Smith: Absolutely. And he presumably would have been the surest defense against the Nixon hangover?

Bailey: I think so. Let’s put it this way, what does Bob Dole do for you in terms of the Nixon hangover? I think the answer is nothing. Bill Ruckelshaus is clear evidence of a sort of anti-Nixon behavior.

Smith: Do you think they were worried about a floor fight? And if they’d gone with Ruckelshaus there might have been?

Bailey: Quite possibly. And when I say I don’t know what happened, I suspect there probably was some communication with Reagan or Reagan’s people that caused Ford to pull back. That’s my guess.

Smith: Yeah. I have to ask you about the New York Post headline, “Ford Ad Man Linked to Porn.” Far be it from the New York Post to try to…

Bailey: This was before Rupert Murdoch bought the Post, that’s how bad this story is. We did a bunch of man in the street commercials.

Smith: Where did that come from? Was a technique that you had used in other campaigns?

Bailey: Yes, we had done that in some other campaigns, and we liked to think that we sort of invented it for the political genre, anyway.

Smith: Why don’t we see that more today?

Bailey: Lazy. Or maybe they don’t understand that real people, not reality TV, but real people are probably the last believable people there are in terms of politics, anyway. We can talk a little more about that, but we did them sort of coast to coast with a film crew that had worked with Bailey-Deardorff for years; cameraman, soundman, and assistant. The soundman was a fellow by the name of Michael Scott Goldbaum, and he worked out of New York and he was spectacularly good. I had suggested to him that he take all of the sound
tapes of those interviews and, if he wanted to, do some work and put together some radio commercials of man in the street, and get them to me and I would be happy to take a look at them and see if we could play some.

And so he was doing that in his studio in New York under a gigantic poster that said, “Ford is Making Us Proud Again.” But that wasn’t all he was doing. He was also interviewing for lead roles in some porn film that he was doing. And so he would have women come in and be interviewed and auditioned for the job. Obviously, we didn’t know anything about this, but somebody at the New York Post discovered it and a woman reporter by the name of Lindsey Van Gelder, went and applied for the job. Now, I don’t know how deep into the interview she went…

Smith: It sounds more like a porn name than a reporter’s name.

Bailey: In any event, I got this call, this is now the Thursday before the election, I get the call. I’m in New York at a production studio and I get a call from the New York Post saying, “Did you know that your soundman is doing this, and what in heaven’s name are you up to? Do you know about this?” And I said I don’t know anything about it and so I put the phone down, picked the phone up and called Michael and asked him. He told me everything about it and I said, “You do understand that you are fired, absolutely fired now? Done. Don’t ever talk to me again. I don’t want to see your face, I don’t want to hear your name. I don’t want to have anything to do with you ever again.” I called the woman back at the Post and told her that and so I didn’t get very much sleep that night. I know that the story is coming out, I’m flying back into Washington the next day, but on my way out of the hotel I grab the paper and there is a banner headline, “Ford Ad Man Linked to Porn,” and “He’s Fired On the Spot.” That’s what it said. And I’m thinking, oh my God, this is the Friday before election in an election where we are so close.

Smith: Of course, it might help you in New York.

Bailey: And so I fly back to Washington and I come into the Ford offices and by that time they all had knowledge of this story, but they also had knowledge of the Gallup poll coming out the next day and they were all giddy. Everybody was
terribly amused that I was really upset about this story and what it might cost. Everybody was trying to calm me down. But I went into my office and sort of had my head in my hands and there comes a knock on the door, and there’s a friend named Jed Summer who worked for the campaign. And he said, “Doug, listen, it looks like we might win on Monday, or it looks like we might lose. And if we lose, I just wonder whether you’ve got a position for me in any of your work.”

Smith: Have you ever considered the possibility that it might have been that story that undid your lead in the Gallup poll?

Bailey: Yes, it has occurred to me. The fact of the matter is that you can’t imagine that happening today without it being picked up by everybody and being made front and center cable news and bloggers and millions strong. Nobody, nobody to my knowledge, other than the New York Post, carried that story. Nobody picked up on it. Nothing. Zap. Nada.

Smith: That is amazing. The debate - there were three of them. We forget there were three of them and two of them went fine. And one of them went fine for the most part. But, anyway, the famous Polish gaffe. You had been involved – I assume you were part of a team. How did the preparations for the debate go?

Bailey: There was the sort of standard preparation for the debate that you can imagine somebody standing in for Carter and so forth. And I didn’t have anything to do with any of that. I didn’t attend those sessions, but Teeter and Cheney and I, a couple of days before each of the debates, would meet with the President and say, “Look, here’s what we think you might try to focus on more than anything else. If there are a couple of points that you can make, these would be the points to stress.” This was not an effort to – we didn’t want to over-prepare him, and he knew all these subjects, obviously, inside and out, and it wasn’t necessary to do all of that. But it was worthwhile, we thought, to stress a couple of things and to stress a couple of things to stay away from, and a couple of things to try to hit.

On the foreign policy debate, we were very excited because in the first debate Ford was expected to lose badly, and he at least held his own and most people
thought that he had won, maybe because they expected him to lose and you get into that. But that was on domestic policy and the only thing that people really remember about that was a twenty-eight minute pause because the sound went out and there is the President of the United States standing there for twenty-eight minutes not doing anything and the guy who wanted to be president standing there for twenty-eight minutes. When you think back about it, you think how odd is all that?

In any event, we were very excited about the foreign policy debate because this was one where Carter had no experience – zero. And that Ford had an advantage could seize, and our conclusion was that the way to seize it was to put Carter on the defensive. While Carter would try to put Ford on the defensive because Kissinger was a controversial figure, Ford should put Carter on the defensive because of lack of foreign policy experience and the whole point was that Kissinger is my secretary of state and will be my secretary of state. I know that will upset some folks, but that’s going to be the way it is and I think America needs to know that from me just as they need to know from you Governor Carter, who your secretary of state will be. That’s particularly true because you have no experience whatsoever in foreign policy. And I don’t mean that you ought to tell anybody tonight in this debate, but before the election, they have a right to know who your secretary of state will be.

Smith: The paradox of this was, you’ve won the convention by defeating the concept that you had to name your vice president. So much for consistency in politics.

Bailey: Yes, consistency – what has that got to do with anything? Teeter thought it was exactly right, Cheney thought it was exactly right, I thought it was exactly right. The President agreed - it’s exactly right. That really makes good sense. And he made a few mental notes to himself, and he was ready for it. So comes the debate, - the debate hall was in San Francisco, wasn’t it? I’m not there, I’m in St. Louis doing some still editing, not only a preoccupation, but an occupation. But I watched the debate, of course, and in the very first question, Carter’s answer included the comment that Henry Kissinger is the President of the United States, and he sort of takes off on Kissinger a little bit.
Comes to Ford and Ford doesn’t say anything, it was an opportunity, but he didn’t seize that opportunity.

Then in one of the next questions, the next question to Carter, I believe, was a question from Richard Valeriani of NBC News, who said, “You really don’t have a whole lot of experience.” This was not a planted question. He said, “You really don’t have a whole lot of experience, Governor, in foreign policy, and therefore, wouldn’t it be appropriate to tell the American people who your secretary of state would be, your secretary of defense, and your national security advisor?” And Carter said just what you would expect him to say, “Oh those are decisions that ought to be made after the campaign, not in the middle of a political campaign and we’ll get to that after November.” Sort of the standard expected. But it was a massive opening for the President who chose to use his rebuttal time to talk about Israel and something that Carter hadn’t said about the Middle East.

And I’m just going crazy, so much so that when in the debate Ford later said something about Poland, or implied that Poland was no longer under Communist control, I didn’t pay really that much attention to it. I was really so upset about his not taking the opportunity that I didn’t see the size of the mistake. And then when the New York Times reporter, I think, gave him an opportunity to clarify and he didn’t do it then, it was clear that he had misspoken. Why he had, I have no idea. But then I do know why he didn’t – there is some Dutch in him and he just got stubborn. He was not going to admit that he had misspoken; he had said what he intended to say; it didn’t come out quite right; but he wasn’t going to admit it. Whereas, anybody who has anything to do with politics knows that the public does not expect their officials, whether they be president or congressman or anything else, to be perfect. And if they admit to an error and a gaffe, it doesn’t amount to a hill of beans. He could have put that behind him in short order. And, in fact, it took him a week, I think, to explain that he really had misstated and that he was sorry.
Smith: And repeated, heroic-foolhardy attempts by both Cheney and Spencer to impress upon him the need to walk this thing back. And literally, they were thrown out of the cabin on Air Force One more than once.

Bailey: When he finally did it, then we started – it wasn’t that Carter was gaining any during that period of time – it was just an absolute dead heat. There was no movement in the polls.

Smith: The momentum had stopped.

Bailey: Momentum absolutely stopped dead and the moment he retracted the statement, or corrected it about a week later, the momentum started again.

Smith: What was contributing to that momentum? Doubts about Carter?

Bailey: Almost all of it was doubts about Carter.

Smith: Is some of that in a way an extension – people forget – of the race for the Democratic nomination? Carter lost most of the later primaries as people began to entertain some doubts.

Bailey: There was never great excitement in the Democratic Party about Jimmy Carter. There was not. I don’t mean that negatively toward the guy, there just wasn’t terribly great excitement about it. And one of the things that happens in an election, is when you’re not excited about the guy, even though you might vote for him, if you feel that he doesn’t need your vote, you might vote for somebody else. And that’s what happened in those later primaries. It wasn’t as if Carter didn’t have the nomination; I knew he had the nomination, but, “I’m not excited about him, so I’m going to vote for Jerry Brown or somebody.” But that was a real signal that Carter did not have a sort of uniform support within the Democratic Party.

Smith: We learned subsequently, of course, that George McGovern voted for Ford, Bess Truman voted for Ford, and when the President went to visit Hubert Humphrey in the hospital, he said, “You’re getting some votes out of the Humphrey household.” It was kind of fudging, but it’s almost as if the people who knew him the best…
Bailey: Most of those people who knew Gerald Ford well, or even slightly well, also knew Richard Nixon well, or slightly well. And to them, the comparison was just overwhelming. This guy is sick and this guy is just the most natural human being alive. And that comparison was so compelling that anybody who knew both of them…

Smith: There is an argument, and it goes back to Broder’s remark about the least neurotic president, Bert Russell said that in many ways Ford was the president that Americans said in the abstract they wanted, but either didn’t fully appreciate, or understand or whatever at the time. And that it was really only after the fact, in some ways, when he died, that you saw a lot of this surface. And I mean by that, by that time the contrast with the ugliness of our current politics, the contrast with – a whole generation was being introduced to him for the first time and they saw these clips and they were comparing that against what they had experienced in recent years in the White House and it looked pretty good.

Bailey: Right.

Smith: And it contributed, I think, to some of the crowds that were…because this guy was out of the public eye for thirty years.

Bailey: I think there came to be an appreciation of – there is another way of looking at this. That Ford was the first sensible, sane human being to be president in quite a while, or at least in a calm America. But looking back, he was also maybe the last, because whether you start it with Reagan or you start with Bush or somewhere, there had been just a sort of long run of very tumultuous times – different kinds of tumult that they had known earlier. But compared to what went before him and what has come since, Jerry Ford, my God, he’s my president.

Smith: He’s been called Eisenhower without the medals. This is a kind of centrist, undramatic.

Bailey: Steady.

Smith: No flash.
Bailey: One of my favorite Ford stories, it just sticks in my mind so completely and has no historical value whatsoever, but I’ll tell it. I was with him once in the White House with a group of half a dozen women and I can’t remember why they were there, but there was some political award they were giving him, or he had agreed to meet with them to service some political contact purpose. It was in some kind of small room; we were all sitting there and the President comes in and he shakes hands all around and he sits down for a few minutes; and then he gets up and he obviously wants to leave. And the women, of course, want him to stay just as long as they can keep him there. And so they keep talking and he starts backing out of the room, just getting closer and closer and closer to the door. And as he’s doing that, he goes right up against the door jam and bumps his head against the door jam, sort of like a Saturday Night Live Chevy Chase thing, and I thought to myself, “Isn’t that Jerry Ford?”

This is the anti-Nixon. Nixon never took a step that he hadn’t plotted out absolutely in advance. Here’s Jerry Ford, walking backwards and not caring where that door jam is. It was just a perfect little vignette of Jerry Ford as an average guy. He is an average, nice guy, without any of the Nixon paranoia, without the self-importance that dominates this city.

Smith: A couple quick things and we’ll let you go. 1980 – there was speculation about a Ford race.

Bailey: There was a point when John and I thought, we had done some work with Howard Baker who was sort of in and out and proved not to be going anywhere. And there was some talk occasionally about Ford, and John and I thought that if he was going to do it, now was the time, he’s got to do it within the next two weeks was our conclusion. I don’t remember ever being asked to do this by anybody, but we called him up and said, “Can we come and see you?” And so we went to Rancho Mirage and Alan Greenspan was there that weekend. And so he sat in on the meeting and basically we said, “Okay, here are the pluses and here are the minuses. Here are some reasons to do it and some reasons not to do it. Is it some kind of a lead pipe cinch that you could be the nominee? Absolutely not. But if you are thinking about it, you’ve got
to do it now.” I don’t remember exactly when this is, but sort of like the middle of March, maybe the 20th of March.

Smith: Of ’80?

Bailey: Of ’80. Very late in the game, but, you know, a former president getting into the race, he would clearly have some focus. We were not encouraging him to do it. Part of me, of course, wished that that would be the case, but a part of me recognized that one) that it was very unlikely; and two) that unless he was really…. As I remember it, the President said that he had thought about it a little bit. What he said was that he had, at some times, been inclined to do it, but that on balance, he thought that it was not the right thing to do because it was really important to change presidents. And that his challenge to Reagan would be a distraction from the job at hand. A little of irony and whether he was aware of the irony of what he was saying in terms of Reagan’s challenge to him, I don’t know.

Smith: It has also been reported that Mrs. Ford only half jokingly threatened to divorce him.

Bailey: Oh, I absolutely don’t doubt that. And frankly, she was not in that meeting. Always very cordial to us and very cordial that weekend to us, but she was not in that meeting. And I have no doubt that she had no interest whatsoever, and frankly, I think the President was probably just being pleasant to us.

Smith: Well, the bell rings and the old warhorse heads for the track.

Bailey: And, of course, he’d like somebody to come around and say, “Maybe you ought to think about running.”

Smith: Or save us. Did you see him in later years?

Bailey: I saw him a couple of times. What a levelheaded, even-going guy he was. He did decide in that meeting – by the way Greenspan was flat out against it, totally against it for whatever reason.

Smith: Do you remember why?
Bailey: No, not particularly. And as a sitting president, he could barely hold onto the nomination running against Reagan, after Reagan had basically thought that he had sewed up the nomination that would have been a very difficult chore. And would have made Ford – I don’t mean that this was part of his decision at all – but if you look back now on history and think of Jerry Ford, that is likely to be a dominant fact if he chose to challenge Reagan and not win, that would have been a dominant fact in how he was remembered. So it was a very unlikely thing to have happen.

Smith: They had a good life, too, by then. They’d had the intervention, she’d licked her problem, they were happy.

Bailey: Yup, absolutely.

Smith: Were you surprised at all by the reaction when he died because of the extent of it? Again, given the fact that he had been out of the public eye for quite a while, that there were the kinds of crowds that turned out. I know the media – people were surprised to see.

Bailey: I can’t say that I was surprised. The fact is that, and maybe it’s just that, I ascribe to other people the feelings that I’ve had. But he is so anti-the stereotypical figures that you think of in politics and in Washington, that it is, I think, not surprising that there are an awful lot of people who warm to him. I was thinking of that the other night when Ted Kennedy’s funeral procession went right by there and across the bridge. A big crowd. Ted Kennedy drew a kind of affection from a certain kind of people for quite different reasons, but Ford drew the same kind of affection for his own reasons. In many respects it is interesting; he and Carter were very much alike as human beings. As human beings, very, very, much alike. And, in fact, you can take the whole sweep of fifty years from Jack Kennedy on and the only two normal people – I think you could conclude that the two only normal people who were in that job were Ford and Carter.

Smith: What do you remember of election night ’76?

Bailey: I remember being more disappointed by that election than any I had ever been in because the stakes were so high for the country, and everybody who had
worked in it, including me, was just totally and completely exhausted. We had
done everything and the campaign had gone remarkably well.

Smith: And the final broadcast, it is very unusual, on Air Force One, with Pearl
Bailey and Joe Garagiola.

Bailey: It was John. The whole Garagiola fandango over the last week, ten days, was
due to our production.

Smith: Was that because Garagiola, for whatever reason, just sort of relaxed the
President?

Bailey: Absolutely. It was like he didn’t have to be in charge. Garagiola was in charge
of the program and all he had to do was be there and show up and do his
thing. He didn’t have to worry about it because he liked Joe and Joe liked
Jerry.

Smith: And Pearl Bailey?

Bailey: I don’t know that relationship at all.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Bailey: Well I hope he is remembered, and I think he should be remembered as a
person who brought the country back from the brink. It’s very difficult, I
think, to appreciate how close to the edge the country was – sort of
psychologically and in a whole variety of other ways. Even that five minute
spot that we talked about earlier - I show it to people now and they don’t get
it. And they don’t get it because they don’t understand what it means to have
a president assassinated and have race riots in the cities, and for the country to
lose not three thousand or four thousand people in the war, but fifty-nine
thousand dead, and not a sexual game in the White House, but a serious legal
infraction by the president in an effort to cover it up and lie to the American
people.

All of those things, when that all happens within ten-twelve years, it kind of
brings the country to a point where if it doesn’t have the right kind of
president, lord only knows what will happen. And Jerry Ford was the right
kind of president. I don’t know what went through Richard Nixon’s head
when he picked him, but he was a kind of savior for this country. I’d like to
think he would be remembered that way.

Smith: That’s perfect.
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Smith: How did your paths cross originally with the Fords?

Mr. Lynch: We got involved with the Crystal Ball and bidding on things and charitable functions and they were involved with that.

Smith: Now was this after they’d left the White House?

Mr. Lynch: Yes. And we took a trip to the west coast with the Fords, with about seven or eight couples. I think it was a fundraiser.

Mrs. Lynch: That’s right. You used to play golf with him also.

Mr. Lynch: That was later, but first we went to the west coast on a golfing trip.

Smith: Did you expect to be intimidated at all?

Mr. Lynch: No, I was never intimidated. He was just a great, great guy.

Mrs. Lynch: They were wonderful.

Mr. Lynch: He loved us and we loved them.

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah, they were really so much fun to be with.

Smith: That’s interesting. What kind of fun?

Mrs. Lynch: Well, you know, they had a great sense of humor and we traveled and things would happen and they didn’t get harried about it and neither did we.

Smith: Can you think of anything? It’s well-known that she had a somewhat more ribald sense of humor than he did.

Mr. Lynch: She was funny.

Mrs. Lynch: Yes. You know, he was so good on these trips when we would go overseas. We went mostly Mediterranean, Greece, Italy, and places like that. And
people would come and just interrupt him while he was eating. This used to bother her because she was worried about him. But he would stop and talk to anybody who came along and said, “I’m from Michigan,” or sailors or just tourists. He always had time for them. Always. And it was difficult because, you know, we were all together. There’d be a big group of six or seven of us, maybe five, well, of course, not counting Secret Service. They were kind of funny, too. I always admired the fact that he was really good about talking to everybody. I mean, he had no reason to. He wasn’t running for anything anymore.

Mr. Lynch: He never complained about anything. He had a knee operation and was still on a cane when we were on our first trip to the Mediterranean and he was going up and down a lot of stairs. It was amazing. But we always hit it off from the very beginning. He was just a very approachable guy.

Smith: Did he talk politics?

Mr. Lynch: Never.

Mrs. Lynch: He didn’t, but I would ask him. Frank wouldn’t ask him much, but I would ask him.

Smith: Did he ever talk about Nixon? For example, did you ever ask him about the pardon?

Mrs. Lynch: I’ll tell you about an incident, I don’t know whether I should or not, but at one point we went to Rome and we were at the American Embassy. Peter Secchia was the ambassador then. They had kind of a question and answer bit with all the people who worked at the embassy and one of the questions was, “What was the most difficult thing that you had to do as president?” Apparently he said something and somebody didn’t hear him and they said, “Pardon?” and he said, “That’s it!” But he didn’t discuss it, no.

Mr. Lynch: I think he knew when he pardoned him that he was probably not going to be reelected. But he did it for the country, I think.
Mrs. Lynch: Yeah, he did. He had a noble soul. He really did.

Smith: Who were his friends here?

Mrs. Lynch: Oh, my gosh. Everybody was his friend.

Mr. Lynch: All the old timers in Vail. It was a different village then. Everybody knew everybody.

Smith: Describe Vail then and how it was different.

Mrs. Lynch: It was just like a big family party. Everybody knew everybody else.

Mr. Lynch: It was the best of times. It’ll never be the same. It was a little more rustic, but then again it was down to earth and there wasn’t any caste system out here. Everybody was the same, whether they worked on tables or were multi-millionaires, it didn’t matter.

Mrs. Lynch: You could be at a party with the President of the United States and the head of big corporations, a few ski instructors, a bartender, you know, people who just ran their own businesses. It was really nice. Really nice.

Smith: We’ve been told that one of the things that they particularly appreciated - it was a town accustomed to dealing with celebrities, and people were pretty good about leaving them alone.

Mrs. Lynch: They were. They really were. There weren’t people taking pictures of them all the time or anything like that.

Smith: No autograph seekers?

Mrs. Lynch: He didn’t do autographs. I don’t blame him. It was bad enough he had to talk to everybody.

Smith: I think part of it was that he realized that there were people who were selling them, the collectors who were profiting.

Mr. Lynch: He was a very humble man. He was.
Smith: What makes you say that?

Mr. Lynch: Well, he never had airs. He never had it where “you can’t expect me to do that” or “somebody is out of order” or something like that. I’ve never seen the guy angry.

Mrs. Lynch: Oh, I’ve seen him angry.

Mr. Lynch: He’d get angry if he didn’t get his lunch on time.

Mrs. Lynch: He had a terrible temper. Very rarely, but when something bothered him—

Smith: What caused it when you say you saw it?

Mrs. Lynch: Usually he’d get grumpy if he didn’t eat.

Mr. Lynch: It was a sugar thing, I think.

Mrs. Lynch: I don’t know what it was, but it could be a very small thing. He wouldn’t get mad and “Do you know who I am?” It wasn’t stuff like that. It was small things that most men get mad at, but when he got mad, he got mad.

Mr. Lynch: He was just a great guy. He was a man’s man. No question about it.

Smith: One of the things I observed over time in that most of us tend to get a little more conservative with age. Maybe it’s nostalgia, maybe we have more to conserve, whatever. And he certainly was always a fiscal conservative. But on a lot of social issues, you wonder whether it was the Republican Party just kept moving to the Right and they stayed where they were…or whether, for example, going through Mrs. Ford’s problems and all the compassion that that called forth - whether that affected other parts of his world view as well. But by the time he died, it wasn’t just a woman’s right to choose, but gay rights - I mean, things you don’t associate with the Republican Party.

Mrs. Lynch: I think Betty had a lot to do with that. She was the so-called broad minded, more liberal one of the two and she had a terrific influence on him. He was crazy about her.
Smith: Tell me about their marriage.

Mrs. Lynch: Oh, they were just wonderful. I mean, they would have a minor tiff about every couple of weeks or so, but they had a very, very good marriage. But she did have a very big influence on him. She was smart. She had accomplished a lot. She’d been through a lot and I think he admired her for that.

Smith: One wonders whether he felt any degree of guilt for all those years when he was climbing the ladder and he was on the road. She basically raised the kids.

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah.

Mr. Lynch: But, so did everybody in those days. That was not _________ bothered by that.

Mrs. Lynch: They would sponsor or be at all of these shows and one time we were at a show - it was a singer and I don’t remember who it was – but he requested that they play for him, dedicated to her, You Are the Wind Beneath My Wings. And it was kind of sad because we were all, you know, kind of weepy about that because most people won’t do that. You know?

Smith: That’s a wonderful story because, I think one of the things people came to realize the week of the funeral - everybody knew about the Reagans – but the Fords really did have a great love affair.

Mrs. Lynch: Oh, they really did.

Mr. Lynch: Hell, she lasted through all that … All those affairs in the capital and then Palm Springs.

Smith: We’d been told at ABC, beginning at St. Margaret’s in the desert, “Don’t be surprised if you see her in a wheelchair.” Of course, we never did until the very end and then only briefly. And then she made that long walk all the way down to the gravesite.
Mr. Lynch: She was standing up for all that time.

Mrs. Lynch: Man, I don’t know how she did that, either.

Smith: The next week, the story is, she came back to the desert and someone commented on that and she said, “I just did what my husband would’ve wanted me to do.”

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah, exactly. And it was a wonderful service. That was another great thing. It wasn’t hokey or overly sentimental. It was just the way they were. I remember one time we were on a ship and she said to me, “What are you going to do now?” It was right after dinner. And I said, “Well, I’m sorry, Betty, but I’m going to the bar” and she said, “Well, just because I don’t drink doesn’t mean I don’t like to hang around bars.”

Smith: Really?

Mrs. Lynch: That’s what I mean by fun. She was so much fun.

Smith: Yeah. But I would think that would be an extraordinary test in some ways.

Mrs. Lynch: She never had a drink in her hand or anything like that, but she could go anywhere and be friendly and nobody would notice. It was very nice. And, of course, Europe, they were very grateful to him for a lot of things he did.

Mr. Lynch: He saved Italy.

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah, Italy and France.

Smith: So, would he be recognized by “men on the street”? Not just Americans over there?

Mr. Lynch: Oh, yeah. When we were at the Parthenon over there, people would clamor from all over the place. It was unbelievable. He was waving.

Mrs. Lynch: And when we were at dinner with Jim Callaghan, the former British Prime Minister—
Smith: Of course, they came back every year for the World Forum. And, on the face of it, you think, Jim Callaghan is a classic, old line, Socialist, Labor Party, you know. Helmut Schmidt was certainly to the left. Giscard is a toplofty aristocratic type. Yet they all seemed to hit it off with President Ford.

Mrs. Lynch: And they were quite fond of him. We sat between them and we were all talking and I was listening to what they had to say and they were all very good friends.

Mr. Lynch: Callaghan was a charmer, though. He was smart. Of course, his wife had Alzheimer’s which is kind of sad.

Mrs. Lynch: She was there, though.

Smith: Really?

Mrs. Lynch: See, that’s what I mean when I say they’d come out for him.

Smith: What was he like on the golf course?

Mr. Lynch: Like everybody else. He was fine. He was a pretty good golfer. I mean, they made fun of him, but he was the best athlete we’ve ever had by far.

Mrs. Lynch: He was a great athlete!

Smith: Did he or she ever say anything—?

Mr. Lynch: Never.

Smith: Because I wonder if she was bothered by it more than he was.

Mr. Lynch: And he was a great dancer. He was a great dancer.

Smith: Was he?

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah, he was a very good dancer. Excellent.

Mr. Lynch: Of course, that shows you what the damned press can do.
Mrs. Lynch: We know she was a dancer, but he was a very good dancer.

Smith: Did she say anything? I mean, you said she minded it more than he, but, you know, the whole Chevy Chase business, the whole caricature of him as bumbling—

Mrs. Lynch: She would make a crack that was not _____ that was just her in annoyance, but they never really criticized anybody. At least not in my presence.

Smith: It’s interesting that you say that. I only heard him speak disparagingly about two people and the worst epithet he could come up with is, “He’s a bad man.” One was Gordon Liddy and one was John Dean.

Mrs. Lynch: Well, I heard him say something about someone who cheated at golf, but I’m not going to say the name.

Smith: Interesting that it was the cheating that did it.

Mrs. Lynch: It was the cheating. Yeah.

Mr. Lynch: Everybody knew about it for crying out loud.

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah, well, he’s still alive, Frank. He might shoot you.

Mr. Lynch: I don’t care.

Smith: He really was an Eagle Scout, wasn’t he?

Mr. Lynch: Yes.

Mrs. Lynch: He was a very noble soul, I think. For instance, we were strolling along the French Riviera. I mean, you know the French Riviera; everybody is naked, by God. And I don’t know whether it was the Secret Service or other people of the party that said, “Hey, Mr. President, come down and take a look at this” and he just went, “I’m not interested in that.”

Smith: There’s a wonderful story in Tom deFrank’s book that sounds so much like him. When Frank Gifford and Kathy Lee had their problems, the Fords called
and said they were praying for them and wanted to be there for them, be of help and so on. And someone who was visiting with the President, who had been on the White House staff, remarked, “Out of everyone I know in Washington, everyone I’ve worked for, you are the only person who I know has been totally faithful to your marriage vows.” And Ford got quiet for a minute and then said, “Well, you know, there are ten things that can happen. Nine of them are bad, and the tenth you can get taken care of at home.”

Mrs. Lynch: Well, that’s like that reporter that said to him, “How often do you sleep with your wife?” and he said, “Every chance I get!”

Smith: And the funny thing is, when they moved into the White House and it became clear that they were sharing a room, there were concerned Americans who wrote in to protest. But things were changing. Just stop to think about the impact she has had.

Mrs. Lynch: A huge impact.

Smith: I mean, it’s hard for people today to realize how forty years ago people didn’t talk about breast cancer.

Mrs. Lynch: Or any kind of addiction.

Smith: She’s had more impact, arguably, on how ordinary people live their lives than a lot of presidents have had.

Mrs. Lynch: Well, I remember two things. They gave us a book that, on the cover was President Ford dancing with Queen Elizabeth. And Betty said, “You know what they were playing when they were doing that dance? The Lady Is A Tramp.” She’d gotten a big kick out of it.

Smith: You wonder if the Queen did.

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah. Another time she said, they were coming up the elevator with the Queen in the White House and it opened and there’s Steve in his underwear
running around for some reason. You know, a teenager. And they gasped and the Queen said, “Oh, I’ve got a few of those.”

Smith: The maternal language is universal.

Mrs. Lynch: Yes. And you could see that, you know, their attitude made people just cozy up to them somehow in just a regular way.

Smith: How were they as grandparents? Did you see them with the grandchildren?

Mrs. Lynch: Oh, they were crazy about their grandchildren. Yeah. As a matter of fact, at the funeral, I met the great grandchildren. So, they loved their grandchildren.

Smith: And, of course, that house they built was big enough, so all the kids could come for Christmas. That was an annual tradition?

Mr. Lynch: Yeah.

Mrs. Lynch: Oh, yeah. They all came for Christmas. Well, at least most of them came. When Susan got divorced she said, “Susan’s going to undo what we didn’t want her to do in the first place.”

Smith: That’s a classic line.

Mrs. Lynch: But it was just short little things like that. She never would amble on or go on and on about anything really.

Mr. Lynch: I remember one time in Venice and Betty was sitting, I think, next to me for some reason and whenever she got a drink, she’d push it to me. One guy was trying to figure out who the heck am I and I said, “I’m Betty Ford’s designated drinker.” So we got a laugh out of that.

Smith: Did she talk about what she’d gone through at all?

Mr. Lynch: Not to me.

Mrs. Lynch: She did to me, but I don’t want to repeat something that I felt she was just sharing to me.
Mr. Lynch: She’d throw out (?) terse kind of comments sometimes, but she wasn’t a moaning—

Mrs. Lynch: She had a very hard time and she mentioned a few things that she regrets, but, basically, it really wasn’t her fault. She was on pain pills or something for something else and that happens, whether you want it to happen or not.

Smith: My sense is that they were both very compassionate people.

Mrs. Lynch: They were. They were, because if anybody got sick or if they had a friend who was having a hard time or something - Betty had a lot of friends that would come here to visit her for a week or so. You know, just old, old friends that they were being nice to and they were always calling you if you were sick or write a note or something. It was always something really nice that they would do. She used to call me all the time, especially if I was sick.

Smith: I assume one of the difficult things of being 92 is you’ve probably outlived most of your friends.

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah, and I don’t know who’s guarding her, but you can’t near her. Even Sheika can’t get near her. Because I used to call her on her birthday, but the last couple of times, they’d say, “She’s doing something else,” or “She’s in therapy,” or “She’s sleeping,” or something. So, I thought, “Well, maybe they really don’t want to be bothering her.”

Smith: I don’t think she’s ever gotten over his loss.

Mrs. Lynch: No, I don’t think so.

Smith: She’s told people, “Just tell them I’m retired.”

Mrs. Lynch: Well, it’s tough if you’re 92 and she’s very frail. She was frail when she was running around.

Smith: But isn’t it interesting, because she does look so frail, so vulnerable, and yet, at 92—
Mrs. Lynch: She’s tough. She’s very tough. I don’t mean that in a bad way. She’s got that fiber. She really does.

Smith: It sounds like they were fun to travel with. And, you know, with traveling, you can’t control things.

Mrs. Lynch: They were just fun and it was never a problem. In fact, you know, if you’ve ever traveled with them, you know that everything kind of goes smoothly and the traffic doesn’t bother you or anything else because, you know, you’ve got all these Secret Service people. I said to her, “I’m never going to go anywhere without you” and she said, “Well, that’s okay with us.”

Mr. Lynch: They were just fun to be with. There was no deep causes or wrangles or anything like that. It was a joy.

Smith: I take it they were involved in a lot of things in the community.

Mrs. Lynch: Yes, they were and they would show up at everything. That’s another thing that was really good. Of course, it was the Ford ski races and the celebrity cup and Ford & Friends at the amphitheater and the golf; something was always around him, which was good for us.

Mr. Lynch: And he always showed up, whether it was cold or inconvenient or horrible. He’d be there.

Smith: There are those who say that they did as much as anyone in terms of establishing Vail as a summer destination.

Mrs. Lynch: Yes. Yes.

Mr. Lynch: Vail wouldn’t be here without those two.

Mrs. Lynch: Really. Because he was an avid golfer and he was a terrific skier, too. He was a great athlete. I mean, he was a football player. Those stupid press people. Don’t cut that out.
Smith: She must’ve enjoyed building the house up at Beaver Creek. Word is that she had a lot to say about the design.

Mrs. Lynch: Yes, she picked out every little thing.

Smith: Well, he got his pool house and he got his study.

Mrs. Lynch: Of course, that’s one thing you could see as you went up on the chair lift. He knew people would say, “That’s where the Fords live” if they knew. He had that long skinny lap pool because he did that every day, no matter what.

Smith: Even toward the end when he would have to have a Secret Service agent with him to help him out of the pool…for someone that age to be that vigorous athletically—

Mrs. Lynch: One time we were visiting them in California and we had to go to church, so we had to borrow their car.

Mr. Lynch: You’re going to tell them this? This is inside a gated community and inside a house with Secret Service men _______ the car.

Mrs. Lynch: And Betty calls up the Secret Service and said, “Those stupid Lynches locked the keys in the car.” So, then they made up this big story about the Secret Service had to go to the jail to find a guy who would break into the car. You know.

Mr. Lynch: This thing went on and on and on forever.

Mrs. Lynch: We never lived it down. “Here come the stupid Lynches who locked the keys in the car.” It was really funny.

Smith: You had running gags with them?

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah. Well, that was a running gag. “Don’t lock the keys in the car.” That’s too funny. That was a little embarrassing.
Smith: Now, Beaver Creek, I take, was an outgrowth of Vail? Sort of a logical extension of Vail?

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah, it wasn’t that logical, I don’t think, but they started it and its got a different feel. It’s more European in the sense that there’s more high rises and big beautiful houses. It doesn’t have this homey, little village-y feel that Vail has, but they were very happy over there. Of course, the Firestones were right next door.

Smith: And they were great friends, weren’t they?

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah, and of course, they were next door, also, in the desert.

Smith: Dee…?

Mr. Lynch: Dee Keaton.

Smith: Dee Keaton. Yeah. He was clearly a good friend. Who is Dee Keaton?

Mrs. Lynch: I’m not sure. He lived on ________ Court, too.

Smith: Yeah, he was part of that group.

Mrs. Lynch: And who’s the guy who lives in the—

Mr. Lynch: He was in the financial business and then he got into a violation of the civil codes, financial codes, and he ended up going to jail for a year or something.

Mrs. Lynch: I didn’t even know that. I mean, I never knew him.

Mr. Lynch: The guys from here, John Purcell and the others got on a line with the convicts as he was handing out stuff as they went to visit him. Got on the line and went through with them. Got up and there was his friends. He was there for about a year. White collar. He was quite a guy.

Smith: How did they handle getting older?

Mr. Lynch: Who? The Fords?
Smith: The Fords.

Mr. Lynch: A hell of a lot better than any of us.

Smith: I sensed that they liked to have younger people around them.

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah, they did. That’s right.

Mr. Lynch: They were active, even when they were older. They’d be at the shows at the amphitheater.

Mrs. Lynch: They didn’t get pushed around, either, because, you know, they had these things that the hair people or whatever would promote and they would say “Come over here and sit here, and they’re going to sit there.” And we usually sat with them. So when they said, “Oh, we don’t have room for them,” she’d say, “Well, if they don’t sit here, I don’t sit here.” So, there was no problem about what they wanted to do or being pushed around by anybody. And, at the same time, they never pushed anybody around.

Mr. Lynch: You know, I can’t ever recall them ever pushing anybody around.

Mrs. Lynch: No, they never did.

Mr. Lynch: And that’s not usual for powerful people.

Smith: Did they have favorite restaurants? Favorite places that they went? We know about the Left Bank.

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah, we always went to the Left Bank. I can’t remember. Oh, one time, they’d never been to the Gas House, so let us take them to the Gas House, which we did.

Smith: And what is the Gas House?

Mrs. Lynch: Of course it was such a dump! It’s on the corner and it’s a gas station and there’s a sign that says “Eat Here and Get Gas”.

Smith: Not exactly presidential.
Mr. Lynch: A cheeseburger type thing. I mean, he loved the cheeseburger as you know from all the stories.

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah, there was all this talk about the Gas House. I had heard horrible stories where they sold drugs and everything else, but I don’t know for sure.

Smith: So, they enjoyed the experience?

Mrs. Lynch: Oh, yeah, they did enjoy it. Then the Greenbaums were here. They were very good friends with the Greenbaums and they had a place in Beaver Creek, also, at the Village Inn or whatever that place is. A beautiful, beautiful view.

Mr. Lynch: Right on the mountain.

Mrs. Lynch: They had a lot of good friends here. There are so many I can’t even remember. Of course, a lot of people who were connected with the Betty Ford Center they were very friendly with.

Mr. Lynch: Didn’t the Greenbaums come with us to the Gas House?

Mrs. Lynch: I don’t remember. I can hardly realize that I remember any of these things.

Smith: You’re doing great. And he would light the Christmas tree every year.

Mrs. Lynch: Yes, that’s right.

Mr. Lynch: And, you know, it isn’t easy when it’s nine o’clock at night and it’s 20 below zero and he was there.

Smith: The last couple of years, the doctors really didn’t want them to come up here, but they were adamant.

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah, they came no matter what, but they didn’t stay as long. Of course, the kids came, Jack and Steve and Mike came more, I think, as they got older because, I think, they were worried about them.

Smith: So they would come and sort of keep an eye on them?
Mrs. Lynch: Yeah, of course, we all had lunch with Pepi here and all these old guys were lined up and Steve took a picture and it looked like Mount Rushmore only, you know, fifty years older with Pepi and Frank and all these men. There were just about ten people there or maybe eight. I forget all else who were there, but it was a funny picture. Steve sent me the picture and he said, “What do you think of this?” I forget who the other old guy was.

Mr. Lynch: I don’t know. I see all these old guys and I find out that I’m older.

Smith: Aging is rough.

Mrs. Lynch: It’s horrible.

Mr. Lynch: You have no idea.

Mrs. Lynch: It’s really horrible. I can’t imagine what it’s like to be 93.

Mr. Lynch: I was a scratch golfer and I played golf the other day and it was the worst round of golf I ever had in my life.

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

Mrs. Lynch: I’m trying to remember that.

Smith: Was it that last summer? That last summer was kind of rough. They did go back early.

Mrs. Lynch: And we did see them very, very briefly in the desert, because we had The Vintage in Indian Wells. I know it was very brief because they were not well. It was hard.

Mr. Lynch: I cannot remember.

Smith: He was a proud man.

Mrs. Lynch: He was.

Smith: I mean, his appearance—
Mr. Lynch: The way he would carry himself.

Smith: Yeah.

Mrs. Lynch: And he was a good-looking young guy, you know.

Smith: Yeah, he’d been a model.

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah.

Mr. Lynch: Yeah, he was handsome.

Mrs. Lynch: And he knew it.

Mr. Lynch: So was I. What happened?

Mrs. Lynch: I’ve almost shut the last time out of my mind because it was so hard, not only to see them get older, but to get older, myself.

Smith: It was a little bit like looking in the mirror?

Mrs. Lynch: We couldn’t do the things we used to do.

Mr. Lynch: It’s scary. Your body doesn’t respond, simple as that.

Smith: Were you surprised at the amount of reaction at the time of his death? You know, he’d been out of the public eye for awhile.

Mrs. Lynch: I wasn’t surprised because I knew a lot of people felt about them the way we did and I bet they had more close friends than almost any other ex-president. They’d sort of go off into the sunset and had their own little coterie and that’s it, but the Fords were always open to people.

Mr. Lynch: But, he was very popular. When we would travel and, as I said, at the Parthenon, everybody from all corners of the world loved him.

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah, they did.

Smith: Was he a good sailor? You said you’d been on boats.
Mr. Lynch: Yeah.

Mrs. Lynch: Oh, yeah.

Smith: He’d been in the Navy.

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah, they were both good sailors. I forget what they called him. They called her ‘Big Mama’. “Where’s Big Mama? She’s late again.”

Smith: Had they agreed to disagree about punctuality?

Mrs. Lynch: That was a slight bone of contention, but he had the Secret Service complaining about it, so he felt that they were his stand-in, I suppose, because he never would do much. He just did something else.

Smith: I suppose by that time he was used to it.

Mrs. Lynch: Yeah, he did get used to it.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Mrs. Lynch: I think he should be remembered, first of all, they were both in very trying circumstances and they weathered it very well. I mean, he was appointed vice president and was in the limelight all of a sudden. He was just this congressman from Michigan and he handled it very, very well and he did make that noble move for the pardon. And it was probably more difficult for her and she handled it well and she handled her problems well. And she didn’t make a big secret. Everything that happened, they were very open, very friendly, they were very good people. And, as I say, they were noble people, because they certainly rose to the occasion. People always make nasty cracks about any ex-president and they’re still doing it, but I think they’ll be remembered very well, because he didn’t make any huge, big – I mean, any one of us can have a slip of the tongue – but, still, the way the press treated him, he didn’t deserve.
Mr. Lynch: I remember him - it’s funny to say this - not on a national or international level, I just remember that he was a hell of a nice guy and a good friend and a pleasure to be with. I enjoyed his company immensely, probably more than anybody else, and we just didn’t get into the political side of it.

Smith: Perfect.
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Smith: First of all, thank you for letting us take a few minutes to talk. This will wind up in the Ford Library archives. We will get you a transcript to review.

You said you came to DC in 1956.

Carlucci: Right.

Smith: A very different town?

Carlucci: Yes, indeed. My first apartment was over in Anacostia and none of that had been built up. The area around the Navy Yard was practically jungle. And there was no Kennedy Center. It was a very, very different place.

Smith: Dwight Eisenhower’s in the White House?

Carlucci: Yes, he was. He was in the White House and John Foster Dulles was Secretary of State.

Smith: And you were in the Foreign Service?

Carlucci: Yes, I had taken the Foreign Service exam and came in at the bottom of the Foreign Service.

Smith: What does that mean?

Carlucci: It means that you start off as a vice counsel or a third secretary, depending on whether you’re assigned to an embassy or a consulate and you start to work your way up the ladder and hopefully to the top.

Smith: The top being…?

Carlucci: Well, the top being today career ambassador. I’m not sure I made that. It’s unclear. I think I was a career minister when I retired.

Smith: What were some of the positions you held along the way?
Carlucci: Well, overseas, I served in South Africa, the Congo, Zanzibar, Brazil and Portugal, the latter as ambassador. I also served in some seven different departments of government.

Smith: Now, let me ask you about Portugal. Was Salazar still alive?

Carlucci: No, I was in Portugal during the Ford administration.

Smith: Which is when the revolution occurred?

Carlucci: Well, what happened is that Henry Kissinger was Secretary of State and he didn’t like his ambassador to Portugal. He thought he was too soft on the Communists. The Communists had virtually taken over the country. The President was a Communist sympathizer, the Prime Minister was an out and out Communist and the ambassador, at least in Henry’s eyes, was weak. So he fired him and for reasons that are still unclear to me, I was plucked out of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and shot over to Portugal out of a cannon.

Smith: Really?

Carlucci: And had to cope with the, as they say, then Communist regime. And gradually we worked our way out of that through the electoral process. Henry and I had some differences.

Smith: How did Kissinger formulate and/or communicate policy?

Carlucci: It was very much ad hominem. I mean, Henry was the towering figure in the State Department and he made it quite clear that Portugal could not stay in NATO if it was a Communist country. He called Mario Soares a Kerensky to his face and his theory was that Portugal should be isolated. My analysis of the situation convinced me that Portugal could be retrieved from the Communist hands and that we needed to push for elections and the democratic parties, particularly the Socialists, would win the election. Henry and I had several exchanges on this score, some of them quite heated.

Smith: Face to face?
Carlucci: Oh, yes. Yes, I told him that his statements were pushing Portugal into the arms of the Communists. And he said, “Well, if you’re so damned smart, you make the statements.” And I said, “I will.” It was that kind of dialogue. I did have a conversation with Don Rumsfeld, following which Henry told me that the President wanted to see me. Following which we reached an agreement to give my option an opportunity. Thereafter was very supportive.

Smith: Now, Rumsfeld at that point was still chief of staff?

Carlucci: Right.

Smith: And had you known Rumsfeld?

Carlucci: Oh, yes. We went to college together.

Smith: I’m just trying to get the sequence of events. You and Kissinger have a fundamental disagreement, it sounds like. Did you bring that to Rumsfeld’s attention? Did he contact you?

Carlucci: I brought it to Rumsfeld’s attention made no commitments and didn’t say what he was going to do. But in my next meeting with Kissinger, Kissinger told me that the President had asked to see me, so I assumed that was a result of my conversation with Don Rumsfeld.

Smith: Tell me about your meeting with the President.

Carlucci: I didn’t meet with him. I told Henry that since he and I had agreed, there was no need for me to meet with the President.

Smith: Did you ever have any word from the President concerning your performance? Your ideas? The situation generally in Portugal? Was this all channeled through Kissinger?

Carlucci: It was all channeled through Kissinger. I saw a press quote years later, when a coup attempt took place in Portugal, President Ford commented to somebody on his staff that he thought that it’s a good thing that we have a good ambassador in Lisbon. So I had known Jerry Ford for some time.

Smith: How did you first know him?
Carlucci: When he was in the Congress.

Smith: Was this before he was Minority Leader?

Carlucci: Basically, it was when he was Minority Leader. I remember we had a meeting when I was in OMB and I think he was chairman or ranking on the agriculture committee. I wanted to do something with the food stamp program, reduce it, and I called on him. I think that was our first meeting. That would’ve been way back in 1972.

Smith: It was during the Nixon presidency?

Carlucci: The Nixon presidency, yes.

Smith: Okay, he would’ve been Minority Leader. What was your impression?

Carlucci: Very favorable. He listened. He understood the issues. And he gave a very tempered and sensible response. I can’t remember the details but I liked him instantly.

Smith: Now, he was on Appropriations for many years.

Carlucci: He really understood the intricacies of government. I can remember one time, Cap and I went over to protest a budget decision and we sat down with Ford alone. And he ran through the government program better than I could, even though I had served in OMB. He really was very sophisticated in terms of how the government operated.

Smith: Isn’t it a shame in some ways that that didn’t communicate itself to the general public?

Carlucci: It is because he was masterful. He made his own decisions. He didn’t have a lot of staff around him briefing him. He just dominated the subject.

Smith: Let me ask you because you were there while Watergate was unfolding. The people who weren’t around Washington then, in the last months of the Nixon presidency - what was the mood like within the government?

Carlucci: Very depressing. I can remember I was out at Aspen at one of their courses. I was Undersecretary of HEW and I called Cap Weinberger or he called me, I
can’t remember who initiated it. And we discussed whether the appropriate thing was to resign. And I can remember Cap saying, “Well, this won’t last much longer in any event, so it’s probably best not to resign.” But we were thinking of that as a possibility.

Smith: Was he disillusioned?

Carlucci: Cap?

Smith: Yeah.

Carlucci: Yeah, I think he was. Cap was a person of good spirits and absolute loyalty to the Commander in Chief, but I think in this case, he was disillusioned.

Smith: It’s interesting, because, I think there’s a little bit of the Boy Scout in Ford. And I think the thing that shocked him was the language on the tapes, and the fact that Nixon lied to him.

Carlucci: Well, that’s what hit me. I was at the particular Cabinet meeting where he lied to his Cabinet and I thought that was just outrageous.

Smith: About what?

Carlucci: About Watergate and whether he knew about it. I was very impressed with Nixon. I had known him as a foreign service officer. I had been director of OEO. I’d been deputy director of OMB. I thought he was brilliant and quite effective, although as you know, his language was very coarse and he would fire for effect. He’d say, “Go run a tape on those bastards.” And if you knew him well enough, you’d say, “Well, we don’t need to do that.”

Smith: One theory of how the Watergate break-in happened is that Haldeman knew him inside out, knew when to disregard orders. But a Colson, let alone a Liddy, would’ve saluted and done whatever they were told.

Carlucci: There’s an interesting book by Bud Krogh that he just wrote a couple months ago that recounts his mental process in dealing with Nixon’s orders. And he now says he was completely wrong. But when he received an order from the President, he automatically thought that when it came from the President, it was legal.
Smith: Do you think John Mitchell took secrets with him to the grave?

Carlucci: Possibly. I wasn’t that close to the Watergate episode to make a real judgment on that.

Smith: At the time of Nixon’s resignation, Ford’s swearing in, do you remember where you were?

Carlucci: Well, I think I had just come back from Aspen and I was in Washington with Cap when that took place.

Smith: Weinberger didn’t stay on terribly long, did he, into the Ford Administration? Several months? A year?

Carlucci: It was a couple of years.

Smith: Was it?

Carlucci: Yeah, it was David Mathews that took over when Cap left. But he stayed on for awhile.

Smith: And did they get along fine?

Carlucci: Ford and Cap?

Smith: Yeah.

Carlucci: Oh, yeah, very well. But it was hard not to get along with Jerry Ford.

Smith: You know, we hear that. What was it about Ford that --?

Carlucci: Well, let me tell you a story about the man. When I was undersecretary of HEW, Cap was on travel, and a bill had reached the President’s desk, it was a social services bill. And I was summoned over to brief the President - just basically Jerry Ford and me. I don’t think anybody else was in the room. And he said, “Frank, what about this bill?” And I said, “Mr. President it’s a bad bill. Let me tell you why it’s a bad bill.” And I went through it piece by piece and I said, “But I must tell you, if you veto it, you’ll be overridden in a minute.” He said, “Well, that doesn’t concern me. If it’s a bad bill, I must
veto it.” And he vetoed it and he was overridden in a minute. An extraordinary man.

Smith: Guts.

Carlucci: Yeah, a lot of guts.

Smith: And he was a real fiscal conservative, wasn’t he?

Carlucci: Oh, yeah.

Smith: I mean he was a traditional fiscal conservative.

Carlucci: As you said, he was a bit of a Boy Scout. And he was as straight as an arrow. And no question that he saved our country from great difficulty and that his decision to pardon Nixon was courageous and probably cost him the presidency.

Smith: There’s a parallel between what you described as his willingness to veto a bill, even though he knew it’d be overridden, and it might in the short-term cost him politically, with the much larger decision to pardon Nixon.

Carlucci: It’s the same thing. He was a person of principle.

Smith: What was the problem with Ford and Jim Schlesinger? Was it just personal chemistry?

Carlucci: I don’t know because I was on the domestic side. Well, I was in Portugal during that period and my contact with Jim was limited to courtesy calls when I’d come back on consultation. I do remember one Cabinet meeting before I went to Portugal when I was undersecretary and Cap was away and I attended in his place. And seeing Jim Schlesinger talk to the President in what appeared to me to be a condescending tone. And I thought, “My goodness. How long is that going to last?” But I have no inside information.

Smith: To be fair to Schlesinger, was that typical?

Carlucci: That’s Jim!

Smith: Is he just professorial?
Carlucci: He talks to everybody that way. He talks to me that way. He’s a lot smarter than the rest of us.

Smith: And doesn’t hide the fact.

Carlucci: That’s right.

Smith: Okay, that explains it. Did you have a sense of the Kissinger-Ford relationship?

Carlucci: No, other than that one observation. I was not involved in the Defense Department at the time, so I had no sense of the relationship.

Smith: And then, of course, Kissinger loses one of his hats. I mean, Brent Scowcroft is made national security advisor. As someone who’s held that job, I know what Ford’s rationale for splitting the job up was, how would you explain - is it a good idea to have two people hold those separate jobs? Or can it work with one person holding those two jobs?

Carlucci: I think it’s a mistake to have one person in the two jobs.

Smith: Explain.

Carlucci: I think Henry, in retrospect, concedes that.

Smith: Really.

Carlucci: And that’s why Scowcroft became national security advisor. They’re different functions. It’s been written in a couple of books, including George Schultz’s book. George and I had some difficulties when I was national security advisor and he was secretary. He in essence took the view that the national security advisor shouldn’t chair meetings, shouldn’t meet foreign ambassadors and shouldn’t travel. And I said that I did not sign up to be an executive secretary and said, “George, I’m just not going to pay any attention to that.”

There was a certain amount of tension though George concludes in his book that I ended up being okay. But he said that he had some difficulty with the concept. There was always that tension. I think it’s by and large a healthy
tension. At one point, George told the President he’d resign. And I went to
the President and said to Ronald Reagan, “What do you want me to do?” And
he said, “I don’t want George to resign.” So we tried to work it out and
indeed we did.

But there’s always some tension between the national security advisor and the
secretary of state. But I think the President needs that tension in that they’re
different jobs. Secretary of State is out front, he’s the public representative of
the administration on public policy. The national security advisor is a
coordinator, he shouldn’t be running programs. He should be presenting
policy choices to the President and seeing that the President’s choice is
implemented. That’s a very different function than secretary of state, so I
think they should be separate.

Smith: Well that dovetails with Ford’s rationale. I mean, he had to reassure
Kissinger that it was nothing personal, he wasn’t being demoted. But Ford
believed very strongly that they were two separate functions and that they
complemented one another.

Carlucci: I agree with that.

Smith: I’m curious. When you were in Portugal, was General Franco still alive in
Spain or did he die while you were there? He died in November ’75.

Carlucci: He died while I was there. Portugal set the example for Spain. If Portugal
hadn’t gone democratic, it’s really questionable whether Spain would’ve.
And Spain set the pace for Latin America.

Smith: In terms of the evolution away from dictatorship to democracy?

Carlucci: Absolutely.

Smith: That’s interesting. Do you give Franco any credit at all for in effect creating
an environment where that peaceful evolution was possible?

Carlucci: I’m not enough of an expert on Spain to answer that question, honestly. I
certainly give the king a lot of credit. Most Spaniards do. Whether Franco
deserves some of the credit is over my pay grade.
Smith: I’d be interested because, even thirty years later, Spaniards are still adjusting, rewriting their history, redefining the meaning of the dictatorship. How do the Portuguese today deal with both the Salazar period and the Communist sequel?

Carlucci: The Portuguese are very proud, justifiably so, of their move to a democratic system. Here is a tiny country that had a vast empire. Divested itself of that empire; overthrew a fascist dictatorship; went to the brink of Communism well it was all but taken over by the Communists; went to the brink of civil war; drew back and installed a fully functioning democracy which has survived to this day. All in the space of two years with very little bloodshed. It’s a remarkable achievement and it’s a case where the credit is due to the people themselves. They did it. So they’re justifiably proud of what they did.

Smith: The Angola situation, were you consulted at all? Hadn’t Angola been a Portuguese colony?

Carlucci: Yes, and I had some dealings with the Portuguese on Angola, particularly the resettlement of the Portuguese refugees who fled Angola. There was quite a number of them. And it was a difficult issue for Portugal to resettle them and we provided the air lift for them so I was involved to that extent.

Smith: And I believe it was in Angola where Congress actually voted to cut off funding for US support of anti-Communist forces.

Carlucci: That was the Tunney amendment. It was Tunney and there was one other senator in the Midwest, I can’t remember his name, but there were two of them that pushed through that amendment.

Smith: Was that part of a broader post-Vietnam reaction?

Carlucci: Reaction against covert action of any kind.

Smith: Of all the messes Ford had to clean up the CIA, or at least forge a new identity in some ways for the agency. There was the Church Committee investigating. There were obviously a lot of stories appearing in the press about past abuses by the agency. How would you characterize that? Was it inevitable?
Carlucci: It was very damaging. Just like some of the things that are being done today are very damaging.

Smith: You see a parallel?

Carlucci: Oh, yes. Damaging to the morale because people say, “If we obey orders and we’re going to be investigated by some subsequent administration, why should we take any risks?” And the Church Committee led to the phrase, I’m not sure who exactly coined it, ‘rogue elephant.’ If you read the Church Committee hearings, you’ll find out that the CIA was anything but a ‘rogue elephant.’ The actions that people are critical of, the toothpaste for Lumumba and cigars for Castro, were basically ordered from the top level of the administration and the CIA was simply ordered to implement them. And the case for the poisoned toothpaste for Lumumba - the CIA man in Leopoldville - I was there at the time working with him. He simply put the toothpaste in a safe and forgot about it. He wouldn’t carry out that order.

So it’s a serious mistake to blame the CIA personnel for implementing what an administration orders them to do, particularly if they get opinions from the Justice Department that say it’s legal.

Smith: ’76 is the Reagan challenge to Ford. You were in Portugal and out of politics?

Carlucci: I was totally uninvolved.

Smith: When did you come back?

Carlucci: I didn’t come back from Portugal until the Carter administration when I was made deputy director of Central Intelligence.

Smith: Did you see Ford at all in his later years?

Carlucci: I saw him at social occasions. There was an annual dinner that they had in Washington where I saw him. I think I saw him once on a train; he was traveling with Frank Zarb. But it was sporadic contact.

Smith: Let me ask you maybe an awkward question. Obviously there was a very intense fight between Reagan and Ford in ’76 and there was some speculation
briefly that Ford might challenge Reagan in ’80. As someone who was in the
Reagan administration at very high level positions, did you have any sense
about the relationship that existed or did not exist? We’ve gotten conflicting
reports as to whether there were some lingering hard feelings…whether Ford
was kind of a non-person.

Carlucci: I can honestly say I never heard Ronald Reagan even speak of Jerry Ford.
When it looked like we were going to get into serious negotiations with the
then Soviet Union, Howard Baker said to me, “Frank, you’d better prepare
President Reagan.” And knowing Ronald Reagan absorbed the spoken word
better than the written word, I asked him if I could bring some people in and
he said, “Who are you thinking of?” And I said, “Well, how about
Kissinger?” He said ‘no.’ “How about Brzezinski?” He said ‘yes.’ And it
occurred to me, I said, “How about Richard Nixon?” He said, “By all means,
bring him in first.” And we smuggled Richard Nixon into the White House.
I’ve got a picture of it downstairs. And he and Reagan and Howard Baker
and I spent an hour together discussing the Soviet Union. Reagan felt a
companionship with Nixon, but he wouldn’t have said, “Bring Ford in.” And
it just wouldn’t have occurred to me to suggest it either. It just wasn’t that
kind of relationship.

Smith: Yeah. How do you think President Ford should be remembered?

Carlucci: By a grateful nation for the courageous act he took in saving our country. Our
country was in deep trouble and to have a man of his integrity and courage
step up to a non-elected presidency and make the decisions he made is a
blessing for all of us. I think he should be remembered with great respect and
reverence.

Smith: That’s perfect. Can’t do better than that.
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Smith: Thanks so much for doing this. We really appreciate it. Tell us a little bit about your background.

Ursomarso: I was an advance man for President Nixon. Two people I went to college with worked in the White House. One was Fred Fielding, who later became famous as the legal counsel to Reagan and Bush. And the other one was Sally Brinkerhoff, who I went to school with and she was working in the advance office. So, she said, “Why don’t you volunteer and help us?” So, I volunteered doing trips for Julie and Trisha and the president.

Smith: We were talking to one of your colleagues yesterday who volunteered the observation that Julie was the ‘good’ daughter.

Ursomarso: Julie was great.

Smith: People have always said Julie was the best campaigner in the family.

Ursomarso: Yes, in fact, I wish she had run for governor of Pennsylvania or some office, but she never wanted to do that, so she never did. Anyway, at that time, Red (Cavaney) was in the advance office and so I got to know Red. And then Richard Nixon resigned and President Ford came into office. I had one more trip that I was doing as a volunteer, but now it became a Jerry Ford trip.

Smith: You had not, for example, worked on any of the vice presidential trips?

Ursomarso: I did some, but not very many.

Smith: Okay.

Ursomarso: So, Don Rumsfeld became chief of staff at that point and I said to Don, “If you want me to, I’ll come in full-time.” And he said, “Yeah, that’d be great. Come in.” So, I joined full-time and then Red became the chief of advance. Of course, I was in there with Bob Goodwin and some other people.
Smith: Let me ask you a question, because it sounds like you’d be in a good position to comment on this. Clearly, one of the challenges that the new president faced was meshing a White House staff that was still overwhelmingly Nixon people with his own people from the Hill and others, like Rumsfeld, who were brought in from the outside.

Ursomarso: Sure.

Smith: How much strain was there between the old crowd, for lack of a better word, and the new comers?

Ursomarso: I would say there was considerable stress. And, I think it was caused in part by the fact that the Nixon people had been trained a certain way and operated in a certain culture. President Ford’s beliefs and his culture were different.

Smith: How so?

Ursomarso: Well, he did not believe that anyone should be impolite or heavy-handed, that anyone should do anything that was not proper, and he was very interested in being a more open president. He didn’t want to be protected in a cocoon. He wanted to be non-imperial. So, the old group was in one culture. I had not been a full-time Nixon person, so when I came in, I was a Jerry Ford person. So, I listened to him and I listened to Don and tried to get a sense of what the President wanted and listened to the President himself because he would tell you.

Smith: We’ve been told that, among other things, he made it very clear that he did not want local people inconvenienced or for lack of a better word, stomped on as sometimes can happen with Big Foot coming out of Washington.

Ursomarso: Well, sure. Absolutely. The problem was, though, that many of the Nixon people had the experience and the background, so when you looked for somebody new to replace a Nixon person, you might’ve come up with another Nixon person. And that was a problem. And there was quite a bit of tension between Bob Hartmann, the speechwriting operation—
Smith: We’ve talked to a number of people about Bob. Clearly, he was a polarizing figure. I’m wondering, to begin with, if there’s a very thin line between being protective and being possessive. He had always seen himself, understandably, as protective of Jerry Ford, sometimes protecting Jerry Ford from his own instincts…whether that shaded over into a kind of possessiveness that didn’t translate from the Hill to the White House.

Ursomarso: Well, you’ve summed it up exactly as I see it in my mind. You have the feeling that staff people for congressmen may not necessarily be presidential staff people. And Bob Hartmann wasn’t warm and fuzzy. He wasn’t grumpy, but he was just—

Smith: We’ve heard ‘gruff’.

Ursomarso: Gruff is a good word. I’ll give you one example. When we were on the road, we would have to be up at a certain time to be at the motorcade, let’s say, at 8 a.m. So, we’d get to the motorcade and everybody’s there including the President, but Hartmann is not. So, the President would say, “Go find him” and the motorcade would wait while I would go find him. And, of course, he might’ve overslept. But then I learned that I had to go before and get him up and make sure he was up and ready to go because it wasn’t fair to keep the President waiting. And then he said to me, “I appreciate that you’ve taken an interest in me.” And the President was happier because, you know, we could go. So, he was a friend of the President. They had a relationship which I think was good. He wasn’t afraid to speak to the President and tell him his mind, which I value. I think that’s a virtue.

Smith: And maybe that answers my next question because, as you know, it got to the point where Ford, in effect, had dueling speechwriting operations.

Ursomarso: Right.

Smith: Which, on the face of it, doesn’t make a lot of sense organizationally. It raises the question: what was it about that relationship that caused the president of the United States to, in effect, tolerate the situation? Can you be too nice to be a president?
Ursomarso: Well, the President was nice, but he was very strong-willed and very stubborn when he needed to be. I guess the best example I think you’ve spoken about was the speech when Nixon resigned, and whether to include the words “our long national nightmare has ended.” And Hartmann was the one who said to the President, “No, you have to put this in here because this isn’t more than reality and this is what you need to say.” So, he would stand there and speak to the President, tell him his mind, and hold his ground, which, as you know and I’ve seen and you probably have, when people go into the Oval Office of the president, they melt. I mean, they just turn into pabulum and they don’t present their views and won’t hold their ground, which can be a very difficult situation. But Hartmann wasn’t that way. Jack Marsh wasn’t that way. Of course, Don Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney. I have some pictures of Dick Cheney and the President going at it pretty hard over certain issues.

Smith: Talk about stubborn – we’re jumping out of sequence, but that’s the nature of the beast here – but the famous incident following the Polish gaffe and the efforts made by numerous people, including Cheney, over the better part of a week to get the President to back down.

Ursomarso: Correct.

Smith: And Cheney, among others, has told about all but being tossed out of the office.

Ursomarso: Oh, yeah, but he argued the case. But that is an example of the President’s stubbornness. In his mind, he knew what he thought he had said and he couldn’t connect up what was happening with the press and their interpretation. That period of time I remember distinctly. We wasted some days and we lost our momentum in the campaign as a result of that. When he came out of the debate and was getting into the car, I think Dick talked to him and, right at that point, he was indicating that we had a problem, but the President wasn’t focused on that the way he should’ve been.
Smith: And you wonder whether he was feeling good about getting through the thing. And then, of course, Kissinger pours kerosene on the fire by telling him what a brilliant job he did, playing the courtier.

Ursomarso: Right. I don’t know if you’ve interviewed the political consultant.

Smith: Stu Spencer?

Ursomarso: Stu Spencer.

Smith: We spent six hours with Stu Spencer.

Ursomarso: Well, Stu was a very astute political person and he quickly would get in. And if he’d listen to Stu, who was there with Dick – we were all there, Red was there – and hadn’t turned himself around, I think it would’ve had a more positive impact than that.

Smith: Do you remember where you were? Were you out there for the debate?

Ursomarso: Yes. I was the advance man for all the debates.

Smith: Did you know instantly when you heard it that you had a problem?

Ursomarso: Yeah, I was in the holding room where there was a television screen. We were there.

Smith: Was Brent Scowcroft part of that group?

Ursomarso: Yes.

Smith: Because Brent talks about how he knew instantly.

Ursomarso: Yeah, he knew. We knew when he got to the car, when he was going, an instant antenna had gone up.

Smith: If you go back and look at the tape, the amazing thing is that Max Frankel gave the President three chances to pull back.

Ursomarso: He did. To his credit.
Smith: Very generous.

Ursomarso: Pretty generous. But that then just reinforces, when the President was stubborn and he got his mind set, it was difficult to change his mind.

Smith: Did you ever see his temper?

Ursomarso: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Smith: What would cause it?

Ursomarso: Well, there were two times that I saw it. During the campaign, he would stand on the back of the train and make a speech. It was the last speech of the day - it must’ve been about 7:30 or 8 o’clock at night, its dark, and there’s like 10 people at the back of the train listening - and he’s up there giving this speech. So, I went over to the steps and I pulled his cuff indicating to stop and he kicked me. I mean, you know, he was an old football player. You know he wasn’t fooling around. And he didn’t have any voice, he couldn’t talk anymore, nobody was there, it was dark, the press had finally gone, and he was still at it. So, that was one manifestation of his temper.

Smith: Was that late in the campaign?

Ursomarso: That was the last few days of the campaign.

Smith: Okay.

Ursomarso: The other thing he would do is he would bite on his pipe and you could see his jaw move. He wouldn’t necessarily say something, but his demeanor would change. He’d bite on the pipe and sit there and you knew he was steaming. And, oftentimes, that would happen when other people were present, not staff people, but guests or when we were in some meeting or something and so you had to figure out what was bothering him and try and find a route to a solution, if there was one.

Smith: What were the things that bothered him? We were talking to Mary Fisher. She remembered one day, for some reason they were leaving without the
newspapers, the local papers, something as minor as that. But he was a newspaper addict.

Ursomarso: He was. Well, if he was tired, he could be not on an event keel. On the campaign trail, I would water down his drinks. I mean, I would make sure he didn’t get a strong drink so that he could make the speech that he had to make and sit through the dinner. And he would get mad.

Smith: He knew it’d been watered down?

Ursomarso: Yeah, he did. He’d say to me, “Get me a real drink.”

Smith: That’s interesting you say that. Is it fair to say everyone drank a lot more then?

Ursomarso: Oh, absolutely. Reporters, political people, everybody. They smoked and they drank. Now, Jerry Ford liked to play cards, so at Thunderbird, he would play golf and then they would go in the locker room and he would play cards with Leon Parma and that crowd. So, they played cards, they drank a little more, and they smoked.

Smith: What did he drink?

Ursomarso: He’d drink a martini. That was a good drink for him. Sometimes, he’d drink a gin and tonic if it was hot.

Smith: I know you were on the other end of it, but we talked to someone about Bob Dole. Hal Bruno was in the room with Bob Dole after the vice presidential debate and a call comes through. It’s the President and he’s had a couple pops, is how I’ll put it. His voice is just a little slurry and he’s telling Bob what a great job he did and so on. And Bob Dole thanked him and as soon as he hung up, he said, “I wonder what debate he watched.”

Ursomarso: I think the drinking was for relaxation. Now, I remember one time, Air Force One landed in San Diego and the door came open and I was standing at the bottom. It wasn’t a crowd scene. It was what we call the official off-stage. He comes down the ramp and his fly is open. And I walked up and I said,
“Mr. President, how are you?” He said, “Oh, I’m fine.” And I said, “Your fly is open.” I knew what had happened. He’d been on the plane and, like you would do before you get off the plane, you go to the bathroom. Then, somebody probably distracted him and he got off. So, he would do funny things like that.

Smith: Did he thank you for it?

Ursomarso: Well, he kind of gave me, you know, the look.

Smith: Describe his sense of humor.

Ursomarso: Great. Just great. Loved to listen to a joke, tell a joke, and laugh. The other day, I said to Jack Ford, “You know, I miss your father’s laugh because he would just let loose.” His voice was a little higher pitched, as you know, and I could just hear him in all these different hotels and holding rooms and on the airplane. And he was a very easy laugh. He was enjoying himself. He enjoyed himself. He enjoyed people.

Smith: He liked people.

Ursomarso: He did. He did. We would set these crowd scenes up and we would have it set so maybe he was supposed to do this much and he would want to do the whole line, just like with the Rangerettes. He didn’t want to say ‘hi’ to one, he wanted to say ‘hi’ to them all.

Smith: Now that you’ve mentioned it, tell us the story about the Rangerettes. This was, I assume, at the time of the Texas primary?

Ursomarso: Yes, this was in Texas during the campaign. In Texas, there’s a town called Tyler and Tyler and an adjoining town, Kilgore, have Rangerettes, who are like cheerleaders but they’re dressed up in cowboy outfits with short skirts and cowboy hats. So, he was going to Tyler Junior College to give a speech - a pretty good speech, as I recall - and, after that, he went outside. I had the Rangerettes lined up in the sun and gave him a cowboy hat to wear, which he put right on. And he started going down the line and the first Rangerette
kissed him. He kind of looks around and he went down the whole line and kissed, I would say, fifty Rangerettes and he had lipstick all over his face.

Smith: This was not in the schedule?

Ursomarso: No. And the girls were delighted. I mean, they loved it. It wasn’t him kissing them, they were kissing him. And he looked great, this big, tall guy and the girls looked great and he was walking around with them. So, then we go to the helicopter and he turns to Terry and he says, “Terry, I’ve got to do something. I’m in trouble.” We said, “Well, what?” He said, “Well, when I get back, Betty’s going to see that and she’s going to be mad.” So, we said, “Well, we’ll order up some flowers and when you go to the White House, you can give her some flowers and maybe she won’t be so mad.” He said, “Okay, I’ll do that.” But, he would get into it. We would create these events like the one with someone playing Abraham Lincoln for the train. He would love to do things like that. Loved children.

Smith: Stunts.

Ursomarso: Yeah. I have one picture when an elephant attacked him. There was a movie star named Connors.

Smith: Chuck Connors.

Ursomarso: Chuck Connors the rifleman.

Smith: Yes.

Ursomarso: So the picture is him, Connors, and an elephant. Well, the elephant trunk starts attacking the president and he’s beating back the elephant and laughing.

Smith: How appropriate considering what he was going through with the primary challenge.

Ursomarso: Yes. He would get into these things.
Smith: Let me ask you a question and I realize its pure conjecture. There’s still a debate over whether the Reagan challenge ironically wound up making the President a better candidate.

Ursomarso: I understand. Well, go back to New Hampshire. Reagan was a candidate in New Hampshire. Red sent me up to New Hampshire because we would do the events, but when we’d do pre-advances, we would do surveys. So, I went up to New Hampshire and went to two or three Reagan speeches and listened to them and tried to extract out what exactly was happening so I could come back and they could craft our counter measures or what we were going to do in New Hampshire. We worked on that pretty hard.

Smith: So, this would pass for opp research?

Ursomarso: Yeah, opposition research. This would be what you did in those days. You’d go out – I didn’t do anything bad or illegal, I just was sitting in the audience and I would listen to him make the speeches. And the President won New Hampshire.

Smith: It was very close.

Ursomarso: Yeah.

Smith: In retrospect, do you think that the White House was slow to realize, first of all, that Reagan was serious about running, and, secondly, how formidable a challenger he might be?

Ursomarso: I think, as a general statement, candidates are slow to understand the significance of their competitor’s strengths. We just saw that with Mike Castle and Christine O’Donnell. Now, the other piece you have is, because you’re president in the White House, you have a double insulating bar, so you’ve got double insulation. It’s like R-18 insulation and so that is a factor. To give you an idea of the isolation of a president, when he went to Helsinki - we had this forty nation conference - and we were standing there and I said, “Mr. President, do you want a mint?” And, at that time, there were like little plastic things that held mints and you had to flip the top. I gave it to him and
he looked at it. And he had no idea how to open it because he had not been in
the store, had not driven a car; he had no contact with everyday reality. So,
you take that small incident and you move it up and now you have a situation
where it’s difficult for a president to maintain contact. But he had a secret
weapon; he had Betty Ford and he had young children.

Smith: Tell me about their influence.

Ursomarso: Well, they were people who were not staff or their friends, so to speak, on his
side, who could speak as they wished. And they did. And, I take that to be
something that was a definite asset.

Smith: Did you see examples of that? Mrs. Ford famously said, for example, in the
60 Minutes interview when Morley Safer said, creeping around the subject,
“Do you ever tell him, ‘Honey, you weren’t very good today?’” She said,
“Oh, all the time.”

Ursomarso: I think that the relationship they had was a good one. I heard her say things to
him like you’re talking about. I heard her make suggestions on issues that
were contrary to what you would think, but, as you know, there was a
problem for a period of time in terms of her being overmedicated.

Smith: Was this something you were aware of at the time?

Ursomarso: Oh, yeah, absolutely. I have a picture there of his doctor - I don’t know if
you’ve interviewed Dr. Lukash or did he pass?

Smith: He did.

Ursomarso: He was his physician and I think he took care of the President and Mrs. Ford.
I’m not a physician, but I know when a person is on the ball or not. And I
think she had a period of time when there was too much medication in her.
The other thing would happen was, they, as a couple, wouldn’t always
communicate essential information between each other. So, you had Mrs.
Ford who, in effect, had her own staff in the East Wing. We’re over there in
the West Wing. And I made the assumption that things were occurring in
terms of conversation which did not occur and then she would sometimes say,
“What’s going on? What are we doing?” And I’d say, “Well, didn’t he tell you?” And she’d say, “No.”

Smith: Talking about opposites attracting. He was the most punctual of men and she was never on time for anything in her life. We’ve heard all sorts of wonderful stories in the family about how everyone worked around Mrs. Ford. There’s Mrs. Ford time and everyone else’s time.

Ursomarso: She was ready when she was ready.

Smith: Yeah.

Ursomarso: That’s kind of what it was.

Smith: Was it a kind of perfectionism?

Ursomarso: No. She was a dancer; she was interested in the arts. Those aren’t precision crafts in the sense of a businessman. She wasn’t used to a schedule in the sense that she had to be at a certain spot at a certain time. He was trained in the sense that business and politics train you to be that way. And I think many successful executives or politicians have the same problem because the wife just doesn’t understand. The other thing is that much of their social life was work. I mean, their time was taken up doing political events, doing White House events, big dinners. It sounds like it’s glamorous, and it is. It sounds like its glorious, but you’ve got to show and you just can’t say, “Well, I’m going to stay home tonight and read a book or be alone.”

Smith: Let me ask you in a broader sense your sense of what the mood generally was when she did the famous 60 Minutes interview. In this town, everyone always fights the last war. And particularly with the prospect of the challenge from the Right, there was an immediate, almost kneejerk reaction, “Oh, my God. What has she done?” But it didn’t take terribly long for some poll numbers and mail to come in that suggested that, “Maybe she’s on to something. Maybe she has a constituency out there that we were perhaps overlooking.” And, particularly for an administration that defined itself by the effort to be
open, to be honest - she, in some ways, came to symbolize that trait more than anyone else.

Ursomarso: I think that’s right. When a person genuinely tells the truth about their beliefs, it’s apparent. It’s clear. So, in other words, this wasn’t a political maneuver, it wasn’t a subterfuge, it wasn’t a concocted thing. She was simply stating her opinion. And he respected her individuality and the fact that she stated her position, which was contrary to what a politician would’ve said. It became a good thing. And people see it.

Smith: Was there an initial reaction?

Ursomarso: There’s always people running around throwing their hands up and saying ‘Oh, my God. Why?’ You have to ‘Whoa. Time out. Let’s see what happens.’ But, I think his opinion was she was entitled to her opinion and she was entitled, in his mind, to say it.

Smith: And the same with his children?

Ursomarso: Well, the kids, sometimes he would try and beat them down a little bit, but as far as she was concerned, he wasn’t going to manage her.

Smith: We all think of the Fords as the most normal family in the White House, but you stop and think, here’s Jack, who’s got Bianca Jagger hanging around…

Ursomarso: That was David Kennerly. I don’t think it was Jack.

Smith: Well, okay. He was a virtual member of the family, right?

Ursomarso: Yeah, David. Yeah.

Smith: Yeah.

Ursomarso: Yeah. I mean, I was on Air Force One once and the phone rings. The steward comes back and says, “David, you’ve got a phone call.” And I said, “Who is it, David?” And he says, “Bianca Jagger.” I said, “What the hell is she doing calling Air Force One?” So, I wouldn’t give that to Jack. I’d give that to David.
Smith: But the kids, I mean, Mike was always off—

Ursomarso: Quiet.

Smith: Quiet and doing his thing.

Ursomarso: Yeah. Great.

Smith: And Susan was a teenager growing up in the White House.

Ursomarso: She was. Pete Sorem would tell this story. Pete Sorem has passed, but he was an advance man for Mrs. Ford. I’ll tell this story quickly. He had gone with Susan to a dance and his beeper goes off. He goes to the White House phone and picks it up and says, “Hello” and he said, “This is the President. Tell Susan to come home. It’s almost twelve o’clock.” He says, “Okay.” He puts the phone down and goes out to Susan and says, “Susan, your father called and he wants you to go home now.” And she said, “Well, I’m not ready.” She doesn’t go. So, here you have the most powerful figure in the world trying to get his daughter to come home from a dance and she says ‘no’. And that’s what I mean about the family bringing him down and making him stay grounded.

Smith: That’s a perfect segue because, in the eulogy, I talked about how most of us, as we get older, almost unthinkingly tend to get a little more conservative. Maybe it’s when we have something more to conserve, we get a little more conservative. And my sense with him was he always remained a fiscal conservative. I mean, a true blue, veto-wielding conservative. But on a lot of ‘social issues’ - part of it was the Party moved so far to the Right, but it wasn’t just that. I don’t think he just stayed where he was. I’ve often wondered whether it was the influence of Mrs. Ford, whether it was the influence of the kids, and/or two other things. One, because he was so involved with her in the work of the Betty Ford Center, he saw all of these good, decent, honorable people who happened to have a problem. And it was all about fixing their problem, not passing judgment on them for having a problem. And the final factor, I’ve often wondered, was the Reagan challenge. He talked often about the ‘hard Right.’ Whether that in some ways
made it easier for him to move, for lack of a better word, a little bit to the Left. It wasn’t just abortion or the ERA. To this day, he’s the only president who signed a gay rights petition. I mean, he took positions that you did not expect, given his profile in the White House.

Ursomarso: Well, I have the back door into that, because I was Reagan’s first director of communications in 1981 and I had come through this period. And as I recall, in 1975, the unemployment rate was 9.1% and inflation was 11%. Today, it’s 9.5% and inflation is zero. Jerry Ford proposed the tax cut. Didn’t get exactly what he wanted, but he got the tax cut. So, the question is, was Jerry Ford a conservative? And, in my view, he was a moderate conservative.

Smith: Yeah.

Ursomarso: Ronald Reagan, on the other hand, articulated a more conservative position on certain core issues. So, how far were they separated? I don’t think they were as far apart as one would think.

Smith: Right.

Ursomarso: I think, as a result of how Jerry Ford came into the presidency unelected, and hadn’t had the benefit of a campaign to hone the issues, and Ronald Reagan who, on the other hand, had been campaigning for twenty years, had honed his issues down to a pretty narrow target. President Ford was trying to deal with all these other issues, you know, the gasoline, petroleum, inflation, and all the issues that were out there. He was not set at one ideology point. I credit him for having the ability to maneuver and to better understand the congressional force that was at his tail.

Smith: Plus, remember, on August 9th, 1974, ideology was the last of his concerns. It was all about restoring the basic trust of the American people in their government.

Ursomarso: Yes, of the constitutional government which we have. I believe that as a president is stronger – if you have a person like Ronald Reagan pushing you, if you have a Congress which is not all yours. I think Obama today is weaker
in some respects than if he had one of the Houses controlled by the opposite party as Richard Nixon had. So, I think your point is correct. If you have a force which is pushing you and forcing you to define who you are with the voters and define your issues, that’s helpful. It isn’t helpful when you lose.

Smith: Exactly. One of the things that has come out of this project is that Ford wasn’t the kind of guy to actively nurse a grudge.

Ursomarso: No.

Smith: But, clearly, not very far below the surface, and you didn’t have to scratch very deep - there was a resentment about what he thought Reagan didn’t do for him in the fall campaign in ’76.

Ursomarso: Well, he said he would help and he really didn’t. He just laid back. Now, I don’t think that was a calculated maneuver. I think that Mrs. Reagan didn’t have the desire to push and so she held him back.

Smith: Stan Anderson, who ran the convention, told us the night of the acceptance speech that the President sent him up to the Reagan box to get the Reagans to come down. And, before he could finish the sentence, he heard her say, “Don’t do it, Ronnie.” I mean, clearly, there were bruised feelings at that point; I’m sure, on both sides.

Ursomarso: There always are. I mean, I remember having dinner with George Bush, the father, after he’d lost the election and he was just absolutely upset and agitated. And I said, “Gee whiz, can’t you just get past it?” He said, “No, I can’t get past it.” So, it is very deeply felt.

Smith: And, in fact, in the case of President Ford, there are a number of people who told us it took him a while to bounce back.

Ursomarso: It did.

Smith: Did you see that?

Ursomarso: Yes, because after he left office, I did a couple of trips and I remember one time going up to the room to get him and he had his jacket off and he was
laying on the sofa in this room. He was just laying back. And I said, “Are you ready to go?” And he said, “Not really. I’m not ready to go.” And I said, “What’s the matter?” And he said, “Geez, I’m just kind of not feeling up to it.” And I said, “I can understand that because of what you’ve went through, but you’re a past president. You still have people who like you and they’re expecting to see you, so let’s go down.” And he said, “Yeah, yeah, you’re right. I shouldn’t be feeling sorry for myself.”

Smith: That’s something.

Ursomarso: He said that and he knew. I mean, he was intelligent. He knew he was going through a phase. I think, also, he went through phases - he felt his children’s issues and problems. He so cared for his children that when they were having things, it impacted him as a father.

Smith: It's fascinating you say that, because I’ve often wondered if there wasn’t some unspoken kind of guilt. He’d been away so much when they were growing up. Just the nature of the work. He wasn’t unlike a number of other executives in that generation.

Ursomarso: Well, I was that way. I left my kids and my wife and went out and did politics. There are people who do that. I don’t know if he regretted that. I mean, isn’t there this story – I wasn’t there when he was getting married – that he left his wedding reception to go give a speech? I think he did. No, it was his rehearsal dinner and he left to go give a speech. I think that’s correct. But I don’t think that he was regretful. One of the things that Red may tell you and I noticed was every week he wanted to do something. He wanted to go someplace. He had to have an event and I remember one time Red and I were talking with him and we said, “We don’t have anything on the schedule.” And he said, “Well, why not?” And he sort of gave Red a little bit of a thing and said, “No, I want events every week. I want to go.” So, in his mind, that was part of who he was as a politician and he had to go out and do those things. The concept of leaving your wife home to take the kids in my generation, that was okay.
Smith: Yeah.

Ursomarso: It wasn’t like today where the wife works. That’s what you did. Your wife stayed back there and handled it.

Smith: Sure. Before we move on, I want to nail one thing down. In asking whether Reagan made him a better candidate, specifically, someone who had never run outside of a safe district, imbued with the values and the style, if you will, of West Michigan, forced to become a better communicator. Did Reagan’s challenge force Ford to become a better speaker, to devote time and energy to things he hadn’t done in the past?

Ursomarso: Well, did you interview before he passed Bill Caruthers? Did you ever get to him?

Smith: No.

Ursomarso: Bill Caruthers was, for lack of a better word, what was called the president’s television advisor. It was Bill Caruthers and a man named Mark Goode. I think both have passed. And they were out of Hollywood. They had originally worked for Nixon and they were high-powered television people. I mean, they knew lighting and they knew this and they knew that. But they also knew how to present yourself. So, I believe that Bill and Mark worked with the President on some issues of clothing, some physical appearance issues.

Smith: Mrs. Ford said he was so proud of the fact that he had suits that were older than his kids.

Ursomarso: Yeah, he did. He had terrible sports coats that were just like pants and the things you used to wear. So, they worked with him. Now, you go back to this battle among the speechwriters - that was a battle not only on issues, but it was a battle on style, it was a battle on presentation. In the advance office, one of the things that we had to do is present him in the best light that we could. So, that meant did we have to rehearse a speech, did we have to rehearse for the debates, did we have to define the words a little better. We
all worked on that to the extent we could, so that was part of what we did to
make him look as good as he can. I believe he did grow. I believe he
developed. He realized that he wasn’t a congressman anymore, that he wasn’t
going to events with twenty-five people. I mean, we put thousands and
thousands of people in and he knew he had to perform to a standard. So, I
believe that I saw him grow.

Smith: That raises a larger question about the Ford presidency. There’s lots of ways
of looking at it, but it seems one reasonable way is the trajectory of someone,
not unlearning his congressional skills - keeping the best of those - because
that’s who he was, but learning to be an executive.

Ursomarso: Right. See, he didn’t have that training. A congressman doesn’t have that
because you’re not directing. Now, I will say that it’s fortunate that he had
Don Rumsfeld, who was a very good executive. Dick Cheney was a very
good executive. He had some people around him. Red was one. Terry

Smith: We’ve been told that Rumsfeld was his coach in many ways.

Ursomarso: He was. They had a relationship going back to when they were in the
Congress together, which was a very good relationship because they had gone
through some political wars. They understood each other. My relationship
with Don Rumsfeld, I believe, has led me to conclude that he is an honorable
man. People say, “Well, he only had himself.” I don’t believe that. When he
was working for the President, he came in there and I believe he did his
darnedest to make sure that the President looked and acted and made the
decisions that he should have made in a timely way. So, I give him more
respect than some of these commentators.

The same with Dick Cheney. One example would be, someone would come
up to the President and say, “Can you come and visit?” or “Can I do
something?” And he instinctively said ‘yes’ when he should’ve said ‘no,’
because he was trained. Oftentimes, Terry and I and Red would try to get in
between him or keep people a little bit distant so they wouldn’t hit him
because he would always say ‘yes’ and then we had to undo it. And then he stopped that after awhile. He grew. He realized that he couldn’t do that anymore. He didn’t have the time and there were other things he should be doing. So, he learned that. He learned how to give a better speech.

You’ve probably seen the speeches that were on the half of a page. They never typed the speech down the whole page. Terry would carry this book with the speech in it and there was only half. So, he learned to look up and not to read to the bottom of the page. He learned to look up. He learned not to have a drink before he was going to give a speech. You know, all those things, he did.

Smith: Presumably, one of the first lessons you learn, maybe painfully, is that every single word that comes out of a president’s mouth matters in a way that’s not true with a House Minority Leader.

Ursomarso: That’s right. That’s exactly right, because you have the press pool that's right at your throat and they’re there all the time.

Smith: But he got along with reporters.

Ursomarso: He did. He loved them! His instinct would be to go over and talk to them and we would have to say, “No, no, no, no. This is a campaign. We’re moving.” He would want to go and talk. In Palm Springs, we had some cocktail parties around the pool and we would invite all the press over. He’d be scheduled to be there for maybe forty minutes and he’d stay there. Walter Cronkite was there and all these reporters and he would just have a hell of a time. Enjoy himself and talk to everybody. That’s who he was. There was no ‘I’m better than you’ or any of that with them. The other thing he liked was, you know, he’d gone to the University of Michigan and Bo Schembechler was the coach and he liked to go to the locker room and liked to go see the rehearsals and then he’d talk to the players.

Smith: It’s funny. I never saw it, but we’ve talked to a number of people who did it became almost an annual event, usually close to the Ohio game. But he’d find a way to be back in Ann Arbor and invariably give a pep talk. And it was
like a different person speaking. He was eloquent and persuasive - just a whole different level of discourse.

Ursomarso: Yeah, I think that because he had a higher-pitched voice, I think that was a factor because, when you listened to him, he was up higher than some of the other public figures. But, in terms of his persuasive ability to tell a story or to tell a joke, I think he was more than adequate, much more.

Smith: Did you see any of the incidents that bothered him (or didn’t bother him) - you know, the caricature that Chevy Chase produced?

Ursomarso: Well, I was the advance man for the Salzburg trip and I was standing right there at the bottom. He came all the way down the steps. There were three steps left and he fell on three bottom steps because, when he came, he came right at the military aide and me, and the military aide got him. He didn’t fall down the whole steps, but if you look at the news reels and you listen to the stories, it looks like he came out the door and fell down all the steps. Of course, you know what he said when we asked him what happened. He said, “Well, Jerry, didn’t you see it?” And he said, “Well, Betty pushed me.” That’s what he said. So, he had a sense of humor about it. In actuality, what happened was the heel came off his shoe, it separated from his shoe, and caused him to slip because it was raining.

Smith: Plus, he’s holding an umbrella.

Ursomarso: He’s holding an umbrella for her.

Smith: Over her.

Ursomarso: Correct. Which was what he was trying to do and he wasn’t balanced, but as the old football player, when he fell, he rolled with it. He didn’t stiffen up or anything. He wasn’t hurt.

Smith: There’s a wonderful sequel to that. There were some quick to blame the photographers. And the classic Ford response was, “Of course they took the picture. They would’ve lost their job if they hadn’t.”
Ursomarso: Yeah. So, his sense of humor was intact on the thing. No president that I’ve worked for watches where he walks. They all don’t look and they have a tendency to misstep. That’s why the president’s movements are choreographed down to the foot. And, if you go back to the library, you’ll see diagrams that are in the files there where we’ve diagramed every step that the president’s going to take and, in some cases, built ramps if we had to because they don’t look. Nixon was that way. Ford was that way. Reagan was that way. All the ones that I’ve been close to were that way.

Smith: When he got up, was he embarrassed?

Ursomarso: Well, you know, he’s there, but he had to make this speech and he got up and did it. It didn’t faze him. So, I don’t think that the criticism was correct. Now, the other side is, he then had other missteps that he took, but they were for lack of attention. He was thinking about something else and he would stumble or he would fall. In the case of the assassination attempt in Sacramento, if you watch the video, you’ll see we immediately began a run. I mean, a sprint.

Smith: Let’s walk through that. That morning, as I understand it, it was sort of an almost impromptu decision. It was a beautiful day.

Ursomarso: No, no. I was the advance man. It wasn’t impromptu. I had sent in to the advance office a chart just like I’m talking about which said he was going to walk through the park.

Smith: From the hotel?

Ursomarso: From the hotel. I’d sent it in for approval. What happened was, I said, “If it’s a nice day and if things are looking good, let’s go through the park. That takes us back to that desire to be a more open president and be with the people.” And, so, I sent the chart in for Red and Dick Cheney and everybody to approve it. And they didn’t come back and say, “Don’t do it.” So, that morning, when he was finished - I think we had a morning meeting - I said to the president, “Mr. President, do you want to go through the park or do you want to go in the car?” And he said, “No, hey, I’d like to walk.”
“That would be more fun.” And I said, “Well, there’s some people out there. Let me get with the Secret Service.” Larry Buendorf was the lead agent and they had put up some barrels and ropes, so we walked. It was my idea and it didn’t turn out as well. Anyway, he was enthusiastic for it and we did it.

Smith: Walk us through that scene. Were you part of that group?

Ursomarso: Well, we started to walk and we’re going through this park which is in front of the capitol. It’s like a grassy area.

Smith: He’s on his way to see Governor Brown?

Ursomarso: No, he’s on his way to make a speech before the legislature and see the governor, which were the couple of events that were going on. So, as we’re going to the park, Larry saw this woman out of the corner of his eye. She had a red hood on. I saw her because I was right beside him. And then she came up with a gun.

Smith: Did you ever see the gun?

Ursomarso: I saw the gun.

Smith: You did?

Ursomarso: I saw the gun. Yeah. And Larry quickly reached over to grab the gun and this piece of skin got between, I think, the hammer and where the bullet would be. But instantly the Secret Service yells “Gun!” As soon as they yell “Gun!” they almost picked the President up and everybody and we just ran. Well, he’s running faster than anybody, the President is. I mean, he’s gone and we’re going. Then we got away and we slowed down.

Smith: Did he know?

Ursomarso: He knew something was up. I don’t think he saw the gun. I don’t know. I don’t think he did, but he saw her.

Smith: He saw her?
Ursomarso: He saw her. Well, he had to see her because she was kind of goofy. She had this red thing on her head or this red dress and everything. She just stood out.

Smith: Do you know if they ever shook hands?

Ursomarso: Well, we were shaking hands. He never got to her.

Smith: Okay.

Ursomarso: He never quite got to her because we kind of jumped and ran. So, we ran into the capitol and we went to the holding room. In the holding room was Don Rumsfeld, me, - I think I have a couple pictures - Ron Nessen, and the President. And we said, “Gee whiz, that wasn’t very nice.” And Don said, “Mr. President, are you okay? Are you shaken?” And the President said, “No, I think I’m okay. Nothing happened to me. I’d just like to freshen up for a minute.” So, I think we gave him some water and let him wash his hands or maybe even go to the bathroom or something. I don’t know. And so I said, “Don, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for that to happen.” He said, “No, don’t think about it. It wasn’t your fault. You were trying to do what we wanted to do.” And I said, “Well, I appreciate that.” And Larry even came back and stood post. He just recovered and I guess some other agents hauled her away. I saw him come back and standing post. I said, “Larry, are you okay?” He said, “Well, my hand’s all bloody.” He showed me his hand, it was bandaged. And then the President went in and gave his speech. He went through the thing.

Smith: And never mentioned what had happened.

Ursomarso: No, he went through all those events. Then we got on Air Force One. I have a picture where he and I are sitting at the table on Air Force One having a drink and he’s telling them his feelings on what happened and what he saw. And we’re discussing the day as it went and he was fine. He was like it was something that happened and, like in football, there was a play and it wasn’t a good play and he got up and went ‘What’s the next play?’

Smith: Presumably, he thanked Buendorf.
Ursomarso: He did. He did thank him. I mean, he knew that Larry had reached out and got the lady. He thanked everybody.

Smith: He always struck me - and it’s a hugely admirable trait in every profession but politics - as the least self-dramatizing of men. I mean, the theater of politics was not his métier. He was who he was and he wouldn’t pretend to be something else.

Ursomarso: Right. The way I think about it is there are big ego presidents. Lyndon Johnson was big ego. He overpromised. Obama’s big ego. The big ego presidents overpromise and under deliver. Jerry Ford under promised, in my opinion, and over delivered. Because he didn’t have that big ego to feed.

Smith: Then again, part of the modern presidency, call it public persuasion - there’s a theatrical element. Classic example: he clearly practiced and practiced the acceptance speech. He understood the theater of that. Do you think he got more comfortable with that aspect of the presidency, the public performance part of it?

Ursomarso: Yeah. I remember, the first State of the Union message that he delivered.

Smith: When he famously said, “the state of the union is not good.”

Ursomarso: Right.

Smith: Something no one will ever repeat.

Ursomarso: He understood completely the role of the president, what that speech meant, what the role of the congressional audience played, the national audience. He knew the difference between speaking to a local audience and a national audience. He understood it because he wouldn’t have said some of the things, I think, that he said in those speeches had he been talking to you or me or some other group. So, he clearly understood who he was speaking to. One of the initiatives that the presidents do and several have done and President Ford did is they try and go over the press and speak to the people. He understood that concept. He understood that if he had his message filtered through the press all the time, then he wasn’t getting through. So a lot of these events that
we did, these crowd events, some foreign trips, we were “speaking over” and he understood that.

Smith: You mention foreign trips, so I have to ask you about the trip to Japan. Here’s history being made. Visiting our wartime enemy and meeting with the emperor and laying the groundwork for the first ever visit by a Japanese emperor to the United States. But, let’s face it; the only thing that people were interested in was the length of his pants.

Ursomarso: And that was an unfortunate mistake because, typically, the stewards deal with his clothing. He thought he had a suit of clothes which in reality he didn’t have. I mean, the clothing issue with President Ford is a whole subject.

Smith: Tell us about it.

Ursomarso: Well, he had sport coats and pants and shirts and a conglomeration of things that he wore. I think back in the 70s, weren’t we coming out of that disco phase with all those—?

Smith: Leisure suits.

Ursomarso: Leisure suits and everything else.

Smith: White belt, white buckles.

Ursomarso: Right, right. Now, I was on that trip to Japan. I went on that trip. I have some pictures there that I can show you. But he grew out of that; he finally got out of those clothes. Now, where those pants came from, I don’t quite understand how that could happen. But it happened.

Smith: Did anyone’s head roll? I mean, what was the consequence of that?

Ursomarso: No, I don’t think anybody’s head rolled. I mean, among us, it was funny in a sense. Didn’t seem to bother him as much as it should, but those kinds of things happen, I guess. I don’t know how. That would be Bob Barrett. You’d have to ask him because the military aide supervises the stewards. They’re military people. The people that run the White House mess are military. We’re civilian staff people, so that was in between our bailiwicks.
Smith: Are there other foreign trips that sort of stand out?

Ursomarso: Well, let’s see. We did Japan, which was a lot of fun in many respects. We did Helsinki, which was the forty nation event. That was a monster event because there were forty heads of state that had to arrive at one location. And I said, “You know, if one of these agents starts firing his gun, this is over,” because the agents were piled deep and security and heads of state and everything. I said, “This is chaos. We’re going to go somewhere else.” So we went underneath and came in down in the garage. I remember it wasn’t where you wanted to be with too many people with guns. He did well on that trip. In fact, that trip was where he toasted with Brezhnev and I got the glasses and sent them to the library. I kept those two glasses. Of course, that was Kissinger and the President on the whole issue.

Smith: And, remember, this is a classic example where he took a lot of heat at the time and, thirty years later, it’s seen in an entirely different light.

Ursomarso: He was right where he should’ve been. Now, he took that up because, I think, Nixon was SALT One. This was SALT Two coming in from a different phase, and they had some serious negotiations. We stayed in the ambassador’s residence and we used the dining room for the negotiations and I was able to hear what they were doing. And they did very well. The Russians were pushing him around.

Smith: He’d spent twenty-five years in the House Appropriations Committee, the Armed Services Committee, which apparently is the backdrop to the problem he had with Schlesinger. I mean, the chemistry was not—

Ursomarso: Well, Schlesinger was a pure, unadulterated egomaniac. He didn’t deserve to be in the same room with the President. It’s a shame.

Smith: Yeah. Condescending?

Ursomarso: Yeah, he was condescending, he was surly, and he thought he was intellectually superior. All the things you can conjure up, he was just the
wrong man in the wrong position. President Ford did not suffer fools gladly, if you want to put it that way.

Smith: Especially fools who thought they were smarter than he was.

Ursomarso: Yeah, and that was the other thing, because, you know, people say he wasn’t intelligent. He graduated from Yale Law School. He was as intelligent as anybody. Intelligence is made up of a different number of components. And President Ford could see through you. If you were not telling the truth and if you were not acting properly, or trying to throw your weight around, he didn’t like that. That wasn’t his style.

Smith: People talk about the Eagle Scout, and there’s almost a little bit of condescension in that. He persuaded me, for example, he was genuinely shocked - not Claude Reins in Casablanca shocked v genuinely shocked that Richard Nixon lied to him.

Ursomarso: Well, sure.

Smith: And I think he would be shocked anyone would lie to him.

Ursomarso: Well, sure. The nation was shocked.

Smith: It wasn’t in his vocabulary.

Ursomarso: Yeah. When you say he didn’t hold a grudge, I think that is correct. He did not hold a grudge and he did not believe that people would be devious and that people would lie and that people would do things which just were not proper.

Smith: That raises a different kind of question. I’ll give you a specific example. Here’s someone who spent twenty-five years in Washington, knows the city inside out, knows how things operate, and has certainly come up against any number of devious people. At his first press conference as president on August 28th, he sincerely believes that the press is going to want to talk about Cypress and Turkey and inflation and all of these things that he’s trying to deal with. In fact, the only thing they wanted to talk about was Richard Nixon
and his tapes and his papers and his legal prospects. And I’ve often thought
that press conference was the tipping point. I think there would’ve been a
pardon, but I think Ford came out of that press conference angry, mostly at
himself, because he didn’t handle it well. But I also think he came out angry
that ‘Is this what I’m going to have to deal with?’ And I think it crystallized
emotions that were already there. The pardon came ten days later. Is it naïve
to believe what he believed or is it just the optimist in him?

Ursomarso: I don’t know. The only thing that I could say is, if you go back and look at
the history of his family, his being adopted - I mean, he was a person who had
confronted adversity, emotional adversity, several times. And he never turned
sour. He didn’t get nasty. He didn’t get mean. He didn’t get upset with
people. Personally, he might have disagreed with their position, but he was
an upbeat, sunny person. His personality was sunny. He got strength from
people. I remember when I would put him in the crowds and I’d go along the
line with him, he would get stronger.

Smith: And that’s a mark of a true extrovert.

Ursomarso: Yeah.

Smith: The opposite of Richard Nixon.

Ursomarso: Correct. The opposite. He took strength and, as I say, he grew and became
stronger as the controversies confronted him. And, the other thing was, he
knew, being in the Congress, he’d never get 100%. He knew he wasn’t going
to get a full loaf. He knew he could ask for it, but he knew he had to negotiate
back to positions that were going to be less. That was the case with the tax
cut bill because the Democrats put in provisions which he didn’t agree with
and he either had to take the bill as a whole and eat their provision or veto it.

Smith: There was such a period of change going on with the Watergate Babies in ’74.
Carl Albert and Mike Mansfield and he had a handshake deal. It wasn’t easy
to get to, but they got to it, about the pace of decontrolling natural gas prices,
part of the energy policy. And they came back sort of shame-facedly a week
later and told him they couldn’t sell the deal to their caucuses. That’s a new
day in Congress. And the great irony, here’s a guy who was a child of the House, who always regarded that as his true home in Washington, who had spent two and a half years in many ways fending off congressional encroachments on the executive…

Ursomarso: Right. He began a period of change in the relationship between the president and the Congress which Nixon precipitated, because, now the imperial president was gone. Now the president had to be something more. Just because he was president didn’t mean he was going to get his way. Now, the problem in that story you tell is that President Ford was a handshake guy. If you shook hands and agreed, that was it. So, now, that whole culture of handshake, keeping your word, now is beginning to erode. And so he was transitioning out of that and, for him, I don’t think it was as easy as we would expect.

Smith: I only heard him twice speak disparagingly of anyone and the worst he could come up with was “He’s a bad man.” That was the worst epithet he could come up with. One was Gordon Liddy and one was John Dean, which is interesting in itself. Did you ever hear him speak—?

Ursomarso: I’m trying to think if I heard him. Under his breath, a couple of times, I heard him say “that son-of-a-bitch” but it wasn’t that directed necessarily at the person as what the person was asking him to do, if you follow me. Because there were people who would keep shooting at him and they wouldn’t quit and he would get mad and say, “Tell that God damn…” That kind of thing.

Smith: With Ike, Ann Whitman, his secretary, used to say, “Watch out. It’s a brown suit day.” You know, you stayed away from the President if it was a brown suit day. Whereas Penny Circle used to say it was a three “God damn it” day or a four “God damn it” day.

Ursomarso: Yeah, he’d get to that because people would just not give up. No, it wasn’t his style to vent and get to feeling very negative about people and verbalize it. He didn’t curse. If you listen to the Nixon tapes, Nixon cursed repeatedly, time and time again. Ford wasn’t that way. He would on the golf course - I
remember when he hit the ball and hit the guy in the head and he cursed a little there. But his natural style of speaking was not that way. He just wasn’t that kind of person. You would think that, being a football player and the locker room deal, he would, but he wasn’t. He wasn’t. He was very careful. People around him did worse than he did and that would bother him sometimes.

Smith: Really?

Ursomarso: Yeah, he’d say, “Shut up, guys.” I heard him say, “Shut up. Be quiet.” He would get aggravated when you would have one group and then another group was talking over here in the corner. Of course, on the road, we had a lot of situations where there were small groups of people. It wasn’t like being in the White House. When you’re on the road, it’s different, because you’re out there. But, no, he was a sunny, bright guy.

Smith: He didn’t like gossip?

Ursomarso: No, he didn’t want to hear rumors.

Smith: And he didn’t like bickering.

Ursomarso: Didn’t like bickering. No. Did not like bickering. He liked to look at nice women. He would get a chuckle out of that and when we were on the road on the train - we had women who were flight attendants be the conductors on the train, you know, to keep everybody happy. And afterwards he would like to have his picture taken with all the girls. He loved that. Mrs. Ford didn’t like the fact he liked it.

Smith: Was that the famous Vickie Carr incident?

Ursomarso: Yeah, the Vickie Carr thing. When he looked at her too long. But he didn’t have any vices like we talked about with Jack Kennedy that I ever detected and I was in situations, seeing things that, if anything was going on, I think I would’ve known about it. The other thing I wanted to say - you were talking about his ethics. The CIA horrors, all those things that he stopped, I think was another indicator of the character of the man because he found out what
was going on. He didn’t like a lot of it and he said, “No, it’s going to stop.” So, he would sign the findings and he would take great care in what people were doing. Unlike Ronald Reagan who had problems with Iran Contra and some other presidents. I don’t think Jerry Ford would’ve stood for that and I don’t think the staff around him would’ve stood for that.

Smith: It’s interesting that you mention that, because, of what became known as the Halloween Surprise, the big three shuffle where Schlesinger was eliminated and Bill Colby was as well. We’ve been told by people who were there, Colby went in like a gentleman. And the President offered him an ambassadorship and he said ‘no, thank you.’ But it was a very gentlemanly thing. That was not apparently carried over when the President and Schlesinger were together. One sensed that Colby was a little bit of a fall guy for the agency.

Ursomarso: Well, it’s very hard to tell because, even today, the direction that the president gives determines the amount of swag room that you have. And every director and every staff person has a certain amount of swag. You have to know your man and you have to know where you’re in bounds and where you’re out.

Smith: Sure. For example, that’s one area where you would imagine there really would be a discernable difference between the Nixon and Ford administrations.

Ursomarso: I don’t believe the Ford administration people, would’ve pushed the envelope as hard as Nixon did in certain cases. President Ford could give you maneuvering room, and he did give people maneuvering room. But in certain respects, you had to know when to stop.

Smith: Also, he was clearly comfortable surrounding himself with people who had, not only stellar IQs, but larger-than-life egos. And he put together one of the most impressive cabinets in memory.

Ursomarso: He did. One of the biggest egos was Henry Kissinger, of course. We were on a trip and he was unhappy and he said, “You’re fired.” I said, “No, Mr. Secretary, you can’t fire me.” He said, “Why not?” I said, “Because I work
for the President. I don’t work for you.” So, you had people like that who had these big egos. What I believe President Ford did is he could listen to people. There’s a difference between talking and listening and I saw many meetings where he sat there and he listened and he really listened. He wasn’t thinking about something else or he wasn’t, you know, looking at his notes or waiting to get out of there. He would sit there and he could listen. Well, that’s kind of unique, particularly here in Washington. And he could go off and think.

I remember, we had time we called ‘staff time.’ Staff time was the President was not face-to-face with anybody. He was on his own and he could have some time. President Ford used it. He didn’t just, you know, constantly need people around him to flatter his ego. He could sit there. He could read things. Comprehend documents. I mean, sometimes I felt like taking the briefing books away from him because the guy would have a whole day and you’d be dead on your ass and I’m a young guy and I’m dead and he’s trying to read these books and get his homework done.

Smith: We’re all used to thinking of Bill Clinton as this kind of human tornado. But Ford had amazing energy. I mean, stamina and energy. They’re not necessarily the same thing.

Ursomarso: Well, he had the ability to make a comeback. In other words, he’d go along through one series of things and you sort of have a little lull, but then he could come back when everybody else was going down. I don’t know how he did that. He was in good physical shape.

Smith: He took care of himself.

Ursomarso: He took care of himself. He didn’t have any ailments like diabetes and wasn’t on any drugs, so he was more healthy, mentally and physically. I think that was to his advantage. He liked to play golf. I mean, he liked to be outside. He liked to breathe fresh air.

Smith: And probably being an optimist is good for your health in a lot of ways.
Ursomarso: Yeah, I think that’s part of it. Several times, when I’d give him options like the walk, he would always want to go outside as opposed to being inside. Always wanted to walk as opposed to not. And, so we did a lot of walking. In Helsinki one night, he came down and he said, “I’m going to take a walk.” And I said, “Fine, we’ll go take a walk.” So, we went out about 10:30 at night and we’re walking. The Secret Service is going along with the limo in the street and there are those steel poles that come up, they’re like parking barriers. We’re walking along and the limo doesn’t see the pole and rams into this pole, destroys the car and the President said, “What the hell happened?” I said, “The car ran into a pole.” He said, “Oh, okay, let’s keep walking.” So, we walked maybe five, ten blocks through Helsinki at night just because he felt like he wanted to walk. He would talk and tell stories.

Smith: I assume every president realizes they’re in a bubble and there are advantages to the bubble and there are disadvantages to the bubble. And there must be, at some visceral level, the need to get outside the bubble.

Ursomarso: Right. And there were times he could, but very few. Playing golf was one where he could get outside the bubble.

Smith: Was Camp David? I mean, it’s inside the bubble, but you—

Ursomarso: It wasn’t an obsession with him. I don’t believe it was the way it was with some other presidents. He used it. Vail he loved. He loved to go there. We would go there when the snow was on the ground and when the snow wasn’t on the ground and he just loved it. I mean, he would just really relax. And he loved putting on his sweater and the winter stuff and being out there. Even when his heart was failing, he wanted to go back, as you know.

Smith: We were out there for a week, and I never did adjust to the altitude. And the thought of him at 90 swimming and going up to that swimming pool every day. You know, it got to the point where the agents were in the water with him. But it’s just phenomenal.

Ursomarso: Yeah, we did a trip to Jacksonville, Florida, where I think we met Sadat. I think it was Sadat. But, anyway, when we’d go on trips, we would try and put
him in a house where there was a swimming pool. And I put him in a guy’s house, Luther Coggin’s house, and it had a big swimming pool. We went there and his family left. So, he’s out there swimming and he banged his head on the side of the pool. You know, he’s swimming his laps back and forth, but he wanted to swim. He wanted to be where he could get some exercise. The pool at Vail, he loved it. He loved to swim. It’s a shame they took the pool out at the White House. He didn’t have one.

Smith: Well, then they put the outside one in.

Ursomarso: Yeah, outside. It’s funny. One day, when I was working for Ronald Reagan, Charlton Heston visited and I came and I said, “Charlton, did you come to walk on the water?”

Smith: That first year, say, of the Reagan presidency, you hear stories about Ford people not getting calls returned, that sort of thing. Was there any kind of carryover?

Ursomarso: Well, no, what happens is the president designates one person on his staff to be the contact of former presidents.

Smith: Okay.

Ursomarso: In the case of Reagan, who do you think he designated? David Gergen.

Smith: Oh.

Ursomarso: Well, David Gergen had been a Ford person way back. There was a relationship, he’d been a speechwriter.

Smith: And Nixon, too.

Ursomarso: Yeah, and Nixon, too. So, I didn’t perceive that there really was a problem because David’s job was to keep the President informed of what was going on, talk to him, handle requests, make sure everything’s okay. So, to my knowledge, I don’t know that President Reagan and President Ford talked that much, but David was doing all the work. So, I would think that Ford was satisfied.
Smith: And then, of course, it was in the fall of ’81 with the Sadat assassination when they all came back to the White House.

Ursomarso: Yes. Well, Sadat and President Ford – and I did this stop, as I told you, to Salzburg – they got along famously. They genuinely liked each other.

Smith: Really?

Ursomarso: And they sat with their pipes. They were both pipe smokers and they talked and they talked and they smoked. They had a good time.

Smith: One of the most touching things in President Carter’s eulogy, he talked about when they were leaving Camp David. They were in the helicopter, I think he was with Sadat. And the one person they called was President Ford.

Ursomarso: Yeah. Now, Mrs. Sadat still lives here in Baltimore. I saw her a couple of years ago. They were great people, whatever you want to say about their views and situation, and Ford and Sadat got along fine. They had a great meeting there in Salzburg. I think one day Barrett took the President out to play golf in Salzburg. But the foreign leaders that I was able to observe with Ford, I don’t think he had problems with anybody.

Smith: Were you in the White House when the Queen was there?

Ursomarso: No, I don’t remember being there with the Queen.

Smith: Of course, the Bicentennial brought all sorts of folks.

Ursomarso: Well, yeah, we did the shifts and all that stuff for the Bicentennial. He got along with Brezhnev. I saw that.

Smith: Was he a little bit of a bully?

Ursomarso: Well, he would do things that were kind of interesting, like he’d run out in the driveway and stand in front of the car. You know, he was kind of trying to put on a show. Some of it was childish, in my opinion, not very statesman-like. But the Russians were like that. They were a little bit different. In
Helsinki, he had to meet all these foreign heads of state and he did fine with all of them.

Smith: And the Pope then would’ve been Paul?

Ursomarso: The Pope was Paul and he went to visit the Pope and, I guess, Terry can tell you all the stories about that. But he went in to visit the pope, Scowcroft and Terry fell asleep on the bench outside the office. We’d been traveling quite a bit and they just passed out, both of them. I have a picture of them sleeping on the bench. I think they missed the Pope. Because, when you travel, you get a little tired with jet lag.

Smith: Of course, you did see him right after he left office.

Ursomarso: Yeah, I did. I did a couple of trips with him.

Smith: There was never any doubt that he was going out to Rancho Mirage. Before, of course, the plan was they were going to go back to Grand Rapids and so on.

Ursomarso: I never heard anything different than that.

Smith: Was Leonard Firestone, you think, a catalyst in that decision?

Ursomarso: Well, there were a couple of people out there. Leonard Firestone, I think, lived next door to them. There was another guy, Leon Parma, and there was Fred Wilson. Fred Wilson had a big house up on top of the hill up above Thunderbird Country Club. Ford stayed there a couple of times with him when we went out there. But, I think the driving force was Mrs. Ford, who wanted a drier climate, and I think she liked it more than anything else.

Smith: Yeah.

Ursomarso: I think that was part of it, as I understand. I never had a conversation with him that he was dying to go back to Michigan.

Smith: Well, I know when I was there, he was so good about coming back.
Ursomarso: Well, he did. He did and, in fact, there’s two pictures there of two events. One was in Traverse City, Michigan, where we had a parade and he was standing in the car with Senator Griffin, Mrs. Ford, and Mrs. Griffin. And they were going down the street on this parade route and he’s actually waving to people and calling them out by name. Unbelievable. Just absolutely unbelievable.

Smith: That’s the old congressman.

Ursomarso: And then he did that again. We went to a parade, I believe, Holland, Michigan. They have a parade where you walk in wooden shoes. They give everybody a pair of wooden shoes and he did the same thing. He called people out by name. I couldn’t believe it. I mean, not just one or two, but a lot of people. “Hi, Harry! How are you doing?” He would know all these people, which I thought was astounding.

Smith: Did you see him in his later years?

Ursomarso: We had a meeting every year in June which I would go to. But, as time went by, he became less, as you know, able to attend.

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

Ursomarso: The last time I saw him was when we had a meeting in Palm Springs and he got up and he said, “I’m Deep Throat.”

Smith: We made him practice.

Ursomarso: Yeah, you made him practice. That was the last time I saw him and then he was gone. Now, unfortunately, what happened with the funeral, Red and Terry and I and others were on the group planning the formal funeral. We planned the whole thing. There were some others involved. And then Red was getting married in Hawaii. Terry O’Donnell was to go to the wedding. I was the best man. Ford passed. Terry didn’t go to the wedding. I stayed with Red in Hawaii because I was his best man and I missed the funeral. I sent Thym Smith up to do the work. He was press advance man who now works for me. So, the last advance, I missed. The one I wanted to go to.
Smith: Were you surprised at how much public reaction there was at the time?

Ursomarso: I was surprised.

Smith: He’d been out of the public eye for a while.

Ursomarso: He’d been out of the public eye for a while. He had pretty much not been in the news. But there we go back to - what is America? America is normal people like Jerry Ford who have a feeling for their presidents and for their government and they can see a good person and they know a good person.

Smith: Another factor - I think there was a whole generation discovering him for the first time, seeing those grainy clips. They contrasted it with the ugliness of politics today, and he looked pretty good.

Ursomarso: Yeah, he does. He does stand up very well and I forget, I mean – at my age, I talk to people and they don’t know Reagan, they don’t know President Ford, they don’t know Nixon.

Smith: You mention Watergate and it’s a blank.

Ursomarso: It’s a blank. I believe that someone sent me a poll and it was a poll taken when President Ford first came in and I believe his approval rating was 70-some percent. And then they took a poll after the funeral and he was right back up. So, he had gone here and he’d gone down and then he came right back up.

Smith: Time was good to him. Contrast it with poor Lyndon Johnson who died the day before the Vietnam peace agreement was out. Ford lived long enough to know that on the pardon most people had come around to his way of thinking. And even those who didn’t respected him and the motives behind the action.

Ursomarso: Time was good. The only issue that sticks in my mind is that there were people who accused him of making a deal beforehand. And I don’t think that’s true. I don’t think he would do something like that.

Smith: There were also critics, people who thought he commercialized the ex-presidency by being on boards and so on. Of course, they didn’t know that,
one, he didn’t have any money when he left office. And, two, he had to raise what must’ve seemed to him like a God awful amount of money to build the library and the museum.

Ursomarso: Right. And Ronald Reagan, who’s taken a million dollars per speech…I remember when the administration was coming to the end and Don Rumsfeld was Secretary of Defense. I went over to see him. I said, ‘Don, we’re done. We’re leaving.” He said, “Yeah, I think so” and he put his foot up on his desk and he had a hole in his shoe. I said, “What are you going to do now?” He said, “Well, I’m dead broke. I’ve got to find a way to make some money.” And I said to myself, “Here’s a guy who gave it everything he had, didn’t make any money, had a hole in his shoe. And Jerry Ford was the same way.” He gave it everything he had.

Smith: There’s a wonderful story someone told us. In the first 48 hours of his presidency, he said to someone apologetically, “Do you know when I get my first paycheck?” He had kids in school and he literally was living paycheck to paycheck.

Ursomarso: Yeah, I can believe. When we went to Vail, we were going out to where Breckenridge is and he said, “You ought to buy that over there.” He was talking about 500 acres that was for sale for nothing. I said, “Mr. President, I don’t have any money.” He said, “Well, I don’t have any money, either.” And then that real estate turned out to be worth, you know, hundreds of millions of dollars and turned into what is now Breckenridge. And he was looking at it.

Smith: He had an eye for business.

Ursomarso: He did. I being in the automobile business and he being from Michigan, we had something in common that we could talk about. He was very interested in real estate - whether it was a golf course or a piece of real estate, he would look.

Oh, I wanted to tell you one story about John Wayne. The President gave a speech at Pepperdine and John Wayne was on the podium with him. After the
speech, John Wayne said to the President, “Can you give me a ride down the Pacific Coast Highway?” The President said, “Yes.” So, John Wayne and the president are in the car going down the Pacific Coast Highway towards L.A. Terry’s in the pilot car behind and I’m in the front police car and my radio comes up and Terry says, “We’re going to stop at the next gas station.” I said, “What?” He said, “We’re going to stop at the next gas station.” I said, “Why?” He said, “Well, John Wayne wants to get out.” I said, “Okay.” So, I pulled the motorcade over - this is like forty cars – into this gas station. John Wayne gets out and is standing at the gas pump and we pull away. I called Terry and I said, “Terry, what was that all about?” and he said, “He only lives a couple of blocks away. He wanted to get out and walk home.” You asked when was the last time I saw Jerry Ford - that’s the last time I saw John Wayne.

Smith: But he got along fine with celebrities like that?

Ursomarso: During the campaign, we had a lot of celebrities that came on board, as you know, and he was fine.

Smith: Pearl Bailey clearly had a unique role. What was the origin of that?

Ursomarso: She sang once at the White House, I think. Or somehow he got to know her.

Smith: We’re told that she and Mrs. Ford had a very close relationship.

Ursomarso: That may be the case. But we were picking up movie stars left and right. We were picking up Olympic athletes.

Smith: I’m sure there were jocks he must’ve been thrilled to meet.

Ursomarso: Jocks. We picked up players. And he would like them to ride in the car with him. Some presidents didn’t want anybody in the car, but Jerry Ford did. The famous one was that Fred Biebel who broke his fingers when the Ford’s limo was hit. Remember that?

Smith: No.
Ursomarso: They were in Connecticut and they were at a political event and some guy ran a stop sign and ran into the limo. Of course, they didn’t have their seatbelts on and Fred Beibel who was the state chairman got a broken finger in the thing. But he always would want people in the car with him.

Smith: Gregarious?

Ursomarso: Yeah, he would rather have somebody.

Smith: You can’t imagine Richard Nixon wanting to have company.

Ursomarso: No, he didn’t. He didn’t.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Ursomarso: Well, you have stated it better than I have. He saved the country that was in a constitutional crisis. He’s a patriot for that one thing. I was working for President Reagan the day he was shot and, as you know, chaos and all that. There was a time where there couldn’t be a constitutional crisis unless good people stepped forward and adhered to the constitution. And, in our history, that has happened and Jerry Ford knew what his job was, he stepped into it, he handled himself in a dignified and proper manner. I don’t know what more you could ask. And people, particularly, presidents are defined, not by many, many acts, but sometimes by only one.

Smith: That’s true.

Ursomarso: And the other part of it is that some presidents are identified by only one slogan or one line that exemplifies what their whole administration was about. The New Frontier or however you’re going to define it. So, Jerry Ford was defined by that, but there wasn’t a slogan other than Watergate which has a negative connotation. He got caught up in a bad wave in a backwater and he swam out.

Smith: What was it like to be around the White House when Saigon was falling?
Ursomarso: The White House is a funny place because great events are occurring and there is not a lot of commotion in many cases. There aren’t people running around. There aren’t people yelling.

Smith: It’s not like *The West Wing*.

Ursomarso: No. They aren’t screaming. The president has his office and then has the Situation Room where discussions can occur. But when people go into those meetings and they come out, they couldn’t talk about anything. So, the place where you get the impact, in my opinion, is outside at the events. Reagan at the Berlin wall. John Kennedy in Berlin.

Smith: On the speech Ford gave in Tulane where he basically said as far as the United States is concerned, the war is over?

Ursomarso: Yeah, you get the impact when the public reacts to the events or something occurs that brings it home to you. A demonstration. When Obama went to Paris and that big crowd showed up, that’s where you see that something’s happening here. What is going on? But, in the White House itself, other than David Kennerly running around taking pictures—

Smith: What does that tell you? Because Kennerly is a unique player in this story. Almost a surrogate son. A resident smartass. And someone who will absolutely give it to you with the bark off.

Ursomarso: Right. The President sent him to Saigon.

Smith: And isn’t that revealing?

Ursomarso: Yeah, that he wanted someone – well, David wanted to go, but the President let him and sent him on the trip. There are, in the White House what I call ‘countervailing forces.’ There are people within the White House who, in spite of whatever position they hold, play a different role. And so David was theoretically the White House photographer, but he wasn’t. He was more than that.

Smith: Yeah.
Ursomarso: Bob Barrett, for awhile, filled that role. There are people where there’s more there than you can see. Well, the only way you can see it is to be on the inside of the envelope and look at it. Otherwise, you have no idea what’s going on. Now, Ford, to his credit, allowed those people to excess. And he enjoyed them. I mean, some of the stuff that David Kennerly and Barrett said, you wouldn’t say to a president. But they did. And he allowed that to occur, which gets us back again to his character. He was a man of character. He was content. He didn’t have any ego to massage every day. He knew what he was. He knew what he wanted to do. And he was happy.

Smith: Yeah.

Ursomarso: The guy was happy. Just look at his desk, you see his pipes were lined up and his papers were there. He was loving it.

Smith: Were you around him at all at the time of Mrs. Ford’s breast cancer surgery?

Ursomarso: I was, but I was not as close then, before. That was a big thing for anybody.

Smith: People have often talked, understandably, about the example that she set and how many lives she may have saved. He also set an example, in effect, for how a husband should behave.

Ursomarso: Absolutely. And as I say, they say it’s the Betty Ford Center, but for all practical purposes, it’s both of their centers, because they worked on that together.

Smith: There are stories of their annual alumni weekend, and he could be found grilling hotdogs, the soldier in the ranks.

Ursomarso: Yeah, on the Fourth of July, we had fireworks on the White House lawn and he would have all the people in. I think he was more a family guy in his mind. Maybe in actuality, he didn’t do all the things, but I think he was. I loved the guy. He was just a great person to be around. He was a very nice, kind person.
Smith: David Broder said he was the least neurotic president of his lifetime. And
then he said something really interesting. He said, “You know, Jerry Ford
actually was the president who we say we want and we only realized after the
fact that we were losing.”

Ursomarso: Yeah, see, he didn’t run. He didn’t have that burning ego and so he was
different. I think he was a valuable person, not only for what we’re talking
about, but also as a prelude to what happened later in terms of Ronald
Reagan, in terms of the things that occurred. You can go back and look at
Jerry Ford; he was trying to solve those same problems that we’re trying to
solve today.

Smith: Perfect.
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Smith: Tell me about your naval service – how it began.

Weston: World War II started when I was in high school. I was a senior and wanted to join up and my dad says, “Show me a diploma first.” So in June I signed up; I was seventeen. Got in the Navy. At that time they weren’t shipping guys until they were eighteen overseas, so I went to school at Navy Pier, the aviation mechanics school. And then I went to gunnery school, that was in Hollywood, Florida, and then I went up to Willow Grove, outside of Philadelphia, then I went aboard ship on the Monterey in June of ’43 in Camden, New Jersey. I stayed the whole war on the Monterey. The Monterey had the honor of having the most nautical miles of any ship, any man of war, in the Pacific during World War II. So we had the honor of leading the fleet in for President Truman to honor the fleet coming back from the war.

Smith: Really?

Weston: Yeah.

Smith: Describe the Monterey. What kind of ship it was, what it did.

Weston: Okay. The Monterey started as a cruiser. There was nine of them designed as cruisers, and they decided they didn’t need cruisers, they needed carriers. So they redesigned them while they were being built. They never finished them as cruisers. It was really named the Dayton as a cruiser, and finished as the Monterey as a carrier. There were nine of them. Princeton class carriers they called them. So we had a cruiser hull; we were fast. We could go thirty-five, thirty-six miles per hour - thirty knots.

Smith: As an aircraft carrier, we were in many sea battles (12 battle stars).

Weston: While I was there I was a mechanic on planes; I was a carburetor specialist, worked on the planes as a mechanic. That’s why I didn’t have much contact
with Jerry during the war, because he was ship’s company. He was navigator and athletic officer and a gunnery officer.

Smith: And what were those functions?

Weston: Well, he was on the bridge when he was navigation; when he led athletics or exercises, he was doing that. Otherwise, when we were in general quarters, he was due out at the gun mounts and aircraft guns. That was his function.

Smith: How large a crew?

Weston: Fifteen hundred men.

Smith: And what were conditions like on the ship?

Weston: Not too bad. I was a kid.

Smith: Was it an adventure?

Weston: For me, it was good. I mean, when you’ve seen a little action, you didn’t get scared until afterwards. You’d get the shakes when you figured what you went through.

Smith: Could you be prepared for what you were about to experience?

Weston: Not really. You never knew what was going to happen.

Smith: What were the dangers that you confronted?

Weston: Well submarines were the worst. And then at night the Bettys would come in with torpedoes and try to torpedo us.

Smith: Explain to a generation that doesn’t know: what were the Bettys?

Weston: Bettys were twin engine bombers, Japanese. They were a torpedo; they would come at dawn on the horizon and try to torpedo you. I saw about three ships get torpedoeed or dive bombed – you know – kamikazes. We traveled in a group, usually anywhere from one to four carriers, six or eight. Toward the end of the war we had sixteen carriers out there, man of war carriers.

Smith: And where were you in the Pacific?
Weston: Where was I? I’ve got a history here. I can’t tell you unless I read it to you. I was all over. The first, I think, battle we were in was the Marianas, when the Marines went in on Marianas Islands. I can’t remember – we were all over.

Smith: Were you part of the fleet at Leyte Gulf, when MacArthur returned?

Weston: Yeah. I was in the typhoon. Of course, Jerry was in that, too.

Smith: Tell us, was that the scariest?

Weston: The waves were so high, you just said your prayers. You have no idea of what the feeling is. You think you’re gone.

Smith: Did weathermen alert you to the fact that you were about to go this?

Weston: Halsey, the fool, took us into it. They wanted to really burn his butt, you know, but they didn’t.

Smith: Tell us about Halsey.

Weston: Well, I don’t know the man, but there are write ups about him. Nimitz saved his butt because he wanted to sink the Japanese fleet, and he was following them to get them. We went right into this typhoon. It was his fault.

Smith: Did anyone tell you that you were about to go into a typhoon?

Weston: No.

Smith: So it was a surprise?

Weston: You didn’t know what was going on. Your job was to work on planes.

Smith: So the weather was a surprise to you? This storm was a surprise?

Weston: Yeah.

Smith: And what time of day? Did it break during the day?

Weston: Well, it seemed to me it broke just before breakfast. Went down to eat breakfast and the tables – they had fold up tables and benches – they were sliding down the deck.
Smith: At what point did you realize – presumably you ran into rough patches all the time?

Weston: Then they would put us on general quarters. We had to report to our station for general quarters, which is “enemies in the area.” But there was also a warning for the storm. We went up there and we started tying down the planes with three-quarter inch steel cable. They broke loose and the gasoline from the tanks caught fire. We caught fire. I was in the hanger deck during the fire and explosion. I was lucky; I was behind a stack when there was a fire and explosion right there. But I helped push the planes over the side – that was the easiest way. We raised the curtain, I hankered up and we just shoved them over so they wouldn’t burn.

Smith: Really?

Weston: Some of them would be on fire while we were pushing them.

Smith: How many planes would you ordinarily carry?

Weston: We had about forty-five planes. I think between forty and forty-five. It wasn’t a big carrier. It was what they called medium class.

Smith: And a big carrier would carry?

Weston: Would carry sixty to eighty, ninety planes.

Smith: And ordinarily they would all be out on hangar deck?

Weston: On the hangar deck or the flight deck. They had them on the aft part of the flight deck to get ready for launching. The first ones would launch by catapult. And then after they had catapulted a bunch off they had enough room to take off and you’d taken weight off. We’d always head into the wind, get the most lift for the planes.

Smith: I’m intrigued. The storm went on, was it prolonged?

Weston: Two days.

Smith: Two days?
Weston: There was a write up in *Readers Digest* on it. I don’t know if you’ve ever read that.

Smith: I haven’t, but thank you.

Weston: I have a lot of papers for you to see.

Smith: Perfect, thank you. So this was a day and night and day…

Weston: And the next morning after the storm, the sea was like a mirror. You couldn’t believe it.

Smith: Is it worse at night?

Weston: You never know. At night you are lucky because you are in your bunk. We had bunks four high, and you can strap yourself in. You go to sleep you’re so darn tired.

Smith: Even while the ship is…?

Weston: Oh yeah. You get used to it.

Smith: Were most of the planes lost?

Weston: Yeah. The waves were so heavy they washed right over the flight deck. We had a chief petty officer that washed overboard. The next wave caught him and washed him back aboard.

Smith: You’re kidding? Really?

Weston: Yeah.

Smith: Did you lose people?

Weston: We lost five, those were on the hangar deck where I was. They got caught in the explosion or crushed; either caught fire or crushed.

Smith: By the planes exploding?

Weston: The gasoline fires from the tanks, with the gasoline. They broke loose, they were banging into each other. The gas started leaking out of the tanks and the scraping of the metal caught fire.
Smith: Did you, at that point, think it was maybe a little bit less of an adventure than you had bargained for? Or more of an adventure that you had bargained for?

Weston: Yes, you betcha.

Smith: And you almost lost Ford.

Weston: Right. They sent him down; he was on the forward part of the hangar deck. I actually never saw him down there, because it’s quite a long hangar deck. But they tell me that there is an article someplace that the captain sent him down to help, to see what he could do to get the good of the planes down there on the hangar deck.

Smith: Again, for people who have never been on the ship: hanger deck and flight deck. What’s the difference?

Weston: Well, the flight deck is where all the planes take off from and land on. The hangar deck is the next step down. They have elevators; they can bring them down and shove them back in and tie them down. And that’s where we work on them. Every time a pilot comes in, if there is anything wrong with the plane, he makes a memo and then that comes to our officers and that is handed down as a worksheet for us to do.

Smith: So the fires, or the explosions…

Weston: Were on the hangar deck.

Smith: On the hangar deck?

Weston: Yes. Because the plane broke loose down there and then they caught fire.

Smith: And you were in this small, congested area.

Weston: It’s not small, it’s as wide as the ship was.

Smith: And Ford was at the other end of the hangar deck?

Weston: They sent him down. He was actually on the bridge when the storm was going. He may have been navigator at the time, I don’t know. I didn’t associate with him much aboard ship because there are two separate divisions.
And also, he was an officer and I was an enlisted man. So therefore, you didn’t have much in common. They had their corridors and we had ours.

Smith: But now, his athletic skills came into play?

Weston: A lot of times, when we would be out of a bad zone, they would have what they called exercise up on the flight deck. And everybody wanted to go up and he’d be one of the leaders. Actually, he was assistant athletic instructor. You don’t go back far enough. Joe Stydahar – football player – Chicago Bears. Later became a head football coach for San Francisco ’49ers. He was our head athletic director. And Ford was his assistant.

Smith: Okay. And were these regularly scheduled?

Weston: No, whenever convenient, depending on the area we were in or if it was a danger zone or not, whatever you want to call it.

Smith: And what form did it take?

Weston: We had exercises, they had exercises, we had wrestling mats, they’d play basketball. On the elevators we’d hang baskets on and we’d play basketball. And Ford was a great basketball fan. He used to do officiating for – we had division teams aboard ship – and he would do the officiating for it.

Smith: Now tell me again – I’m trying to understand: the divisions, the divisional makeup on the ship.

Weston: I was in the V-2 division, which was plane maintenance. V-1 division was where they moved the planes around and then they had a gasoline division. That was all in the air department. Other than that, everything else was ship’s company. We had the – well, whatever you wanted – we had the catapult people, too. And we had the radio men, the hydraulic men, but they were all part of the air department. And it was kind of a little - between the ship’s company and the air department – there was always a little tension.

Smith: Okay. What is ship’s company?

Weston: Ship’s company is the people who run the ship.
Smith: Okay.

Weston: They are responsible for everything like food and maintenance and whatever.

Smith: Is it a little bit of a hierarchy?

Weston: Well, yeah. They didn’t like the air department because we were preferred. We were above board. Like when we were launching planes, I had to be up there in case the carburetor needed a little quick adjustment, or so. And I was on the flight deck. Some of them never seen daylight, you know, unless there were athletics.

Smith: Just day to day existence – what was the food like?

Weston: Not too bad. One time we didn’t meet our tanker to refuel and to get food. We didn’t get meat and all we had to eat for about a week was green beans and butter – all you wanted. We ran out of bread and couldn’t bake anything. So, to this day, I don’t care much about green beans.

Smith: I can understand. Did you put into ports?

Weston: Oh, sure. We came into Pearl Harbor several times. Tied up at Ford Island and I would go aboard, fly with the planes to Kaneohe Bay, it was a Marine base across from Ford Island, and I’d stay with the planes.

Smith: At Pearl Harbor, could you still see evidence of the Japanese attack, or had that all been cleaned up?

Weston: We never got there until ’43.

Smith: Did you ever visit the Philippines?

Weston: We were on islands – they’d give us four cans of beer and a ham sandwich and put us on some island with a bunch of coral on it. Actually, we never got to any villages or anything. Luzon or something like that – some outer islands, but never got to the main part of the Philippines.

Smith: In the South Pacific – did you ever get around Australia or New Zealand?
Weston: Never got on shore down in that area. We were not too much in the south. We mostly, what we did was send our planes in when the Marines would take over these islands back from the Japanese. Tarawa Atoll, and Macon and there’s several of them.

Smith: You were on Wake Island?

Weston: I was never at Wake. No. Wake was before my time, actually.

Smith: Okinawa?

Weston: Okinawa…

Smith: The battle was late in the war.

Weston: No, I don’t think so. That was another part of the war.

Smith: I would be fascinated to know how the Navy felt toward the Army, and particularly toward MacArthur?

Weston: Dugout Doug, we called him. Old Glory Hound, Dugout Doug – that’s what we called him. That’s the feeling we had.

Smith: And was that in part because he was a showman?

Weston: Yeah.

Smith: That’s interesting you say that, because when Stephen Ambrose visited here, he was working on his book on the Pacific war - which is now on HBO - he said he had talked to hundreds of veterans of the Pacific war and he had never met one who had anything good to say about General MacArthur.

Weston: Well, I can’t say he was a bad man or anything because I never met him as an individual, but that’s just the attitude we had.

Smith: Was some of that a rivalry between the Navy and the Army?

Weston: More Navy and Marines.

Smith: Really? How so?
Weston: Well, the Marines thought they were better men than the Navy men. You had to be a better person to get in the Marines than you could to get in the Navy. So they held themselves one notch above us. We had a Marine detachment aboard ship, about fifteen fellows. But they were in charge of protecting the captain of the ship.

Smith: Of course you didn’t know there was an atomic bomb in the works - did you anticipate taking part eventually in an invasion of Japan?

Weston: We sure did. We were worried about that.

Smith: Tell me about that.

Weston: Well, we didn’t know anything about the bomb until after it went off. All we always heard about was the hell they dug in on the islands. The Japanese – if they were doing that on the mainland - it would be a long war. And we all wanted to go home, naturally. So we were very happy when the war ended.

Smith: I was just thinking, sort of daily occurrences; how did you get mail?

Weston: Oh, well, that came when we had supply ships. They had to refuel us and we had to have oil for our diesel engines to make the ship go, we had to get gasoline for the planes to fly, and we had to get food. And we’d also get mail on those supply ships. Sometimes it would be a long time, three months or three weeks or six months before we got mail – depending on your supply line; dependent on people in the port, too. Sometimes we’d put in on some of these islands out there, and there would be a supply ship there. We’d get supplies that way.

Smith: So a letter from home was treasured?

Weston: Oh, yes, oh very much so.

Smith: Particularly, I suppose, if it was from a sweetheart?

Weston: Well, yeah. I had a couple of girlfriends I wrote to.

Smith: How aware were you of the rest of the war? How much information did you get about the bigger picture?
Weston: They would announce it on the PA system. Sometimes they would announce we’re headed into attacks the next day. We’d have to have our planes ready at dawn. They would be actually in the dark getting them wound up. They’d take off just before it got light for bombing. And they’d come back and land and refuel it and bomb more.

Smith: But in terms of a geopolitical war, what’s going on in Europe and what’s going on in the bigger picture?

Weston: Actually, we didn’t hear much.

Smith: Really? So you were pretty isolated?

Weston: Oh yeah, very much so, aboard ship. You only heard what they told you.

Smith: Were there people on board who didn’t want to be there?

Weston: Oh, yes, several of them would fake sickness and stuff like that. And some of them, nerves got to them.

Smith: Really?

Weston: Yeah. We had one fellow, he got this alopecia, lost all his hair and became bald because he couldn’t take it. I was very fortunate, I wasn’t smart enough to…I was young, I felt sorry for the draftees that came in. They were thirty, thirty-two, had families, children, and a wife, and they brought them out there.

Smith: What was discipline like on board?

Weston: Pretty good because most of the guys felt that they had to do their job to get the war over with. So it was pretty good. You had a few of them when we’d pull into Pearl that left the ship. They’d hear about other ships going back to the States and they’d go aboard and they deserted.

Smith: Really? There were deserters?

Weston: Yeah.

Smith: What punishments were meted out?

Weston: I have no idea, because…
Smith: You didn’t see any of your crewmates punished for infractions?

Weston: No, no punishment that I ever saw.

Smith: How long were you on the Monterrey?

Weston: About two and a half years.

Smith: To the end of the war?

Weston: Right to the end of the war. In fact, I was there when we came back after the war ended, the fifteenth of August, and we went into Tokyo Bay, and I saw the Missouri in the distance where they signed the thing. We pulled in, in the morning and left that afternoon for the Philippines. We picked up prisoners, we picked up people that were sick and took them back. We came back to New York via the Panama Canal.

Smith: So you were there when the bomb was dropped?

Weston: Oh, yes.

Smith: How did you find out about it?

Weston: They announced it over the PA system.

Smith: How did they describe it?

Weston: It was just mindboggling. You had no idea what an atomic bomb was. They told of what happened, how many people were dead, and it really kind of scared you in a way. Because what are you going to do?

Smith: What was the reaction?

Weston: The reaction was good because it hastened the end of the war. So the reaction was good.

Smith: And then of course, with the second bombing in Nagasaki…

Weston: That did the job, yeah.

Smith: And then came the news. Did someone say the war is over? The Japanese surrendered?
Weston: On the fifteenth, we launched planes and within an hour they had on the PA system that the war is over and we had to get the planes back.

Smith: Were you part of Task Force 58?

Weston: Yeah. I’m going to tell you some stories. We had Third Fleet, Fifth Fleet, and Seventh Fleet – are you familiar with that?

Smith: Yeah.

Weston: Task force – you know that’s all one fleet, don’t you?

Smith: Turkey shoot.

Weston: Yeah, it’s the same ships, depending on the admiral in charge.

Smith: Oh, really?

Weston: Nimitz was there, it was the Fifth Fleet, I think. When Halsey was there it was the Third Fleet. And then they had Kincaid and somebody else, too. And it depended on the admiral leading the fleet at the time. We didn’t have three fleets out there; we had one fleet with different admirals. I’m sure you guys know that.

Smith: No, I don’t. Was Nimitz admired by the men?

Weston: Yes. Nimitz was admired much more than Halsey. There were the old timers, the real – what you call the people that were in the Navy for…

Smith: Career. Career people.

Weston: Career – they liked Halsey because he was their kind of guy. But to the rest of the people he was a glory hound. He wanted to sink the Japanese fleet, that’s what took us into that typhoon. I’m sure you know that; you’ve heard that before.

Smith: The war is over; you say you came back through the Panama Canal?

Weston: Yeah, we went in to Tokyo Bay, picked up our Marines, which they had taken in for the occupation; we sat there the day of the signing, and immediately left for the Philippines. We picked up people that were sick or wounded and so
forth; go to Pearl Harbor. From Pearl Harbor to Panama; and up to New York. And we led the fleet into New York City for Truman to review from a presidential yacht because we were the ship with the most nautical war miles of any ship during the Pacific war.

Smith: All drawn up in uniform for the review.

Weston: Oh, yeah. We had to line up on deck and wear whites. You’ve seen carriers where the guys are.

Smith: Where would Ford have been in something like that?

Weston: Well, he would be with the officers, too, but he wasn’t aboard anymore. He got off after the typhoon, you know.

Smith: Oh, okay.

Weston: Ford didn’t stay until the end of the war. After the typhoon, we pulled into Bremerton, Washington. See, we had four screws on our ship. You know what screws are? We lost three of them in the typhoon. So we had to come into Bremerton to dry dock to get repaired. And he got off the ship at that time, I think. I’m not sure. You fellows probably know that, when he got off the ship. I’m sure it was either there or in Pearl Harbor on our way back.

Smith: Okay.

Weston: The article I have says he went to Glenview, Illinois, that’s where he was stationed when the war ended. You have that probably.

Smith: No, that’s helpful. Did you have contact with him in later years?

Weston: Oh, sure, after the war. The contact I had with him was after I got out of college. I didn’t see him the first three or four years, after the war because he was in Girimich. But then he ran for Congress. We bought a trailer; we were in a trailer park at Holland, Michigan. I don’t know if you are familiar with a Coast Guard station that’s out there. His folks, either his brother or his folks, had a cabin in the hills behind the state park and we used to come over and I’d go right past the cabin to the beach from my trailer. And when he was (vacationing) there in the summertime, I’d run into him many times or I’d see
him in a little store there. I used to pick up groceries on the way home. Then after I got my drug store, he used to stop in and say hello whenever he spoke at athletics banquets. He was a great politician to speak at athletic banquets or graduations when he was a congressman. He did a lot of that. And then ran into him up at Cadillac, Michigan a few times skiing. Lee Rotary – I was in Lee Rotary and he would speak at our Rotary meetings. He was a great one to do that.

Smith: Did he change over time?

Weston: No. Jerry was always Jerry. We were never close, but we knew each other. Whenever he’d see me, he’d say, “Hi, Frank.” After he got to be vice president, I never saw him again. Before that, many times.

Smith: How has this area changed since then?

Weston: How has it changed? The biggest change I’ve seen is the Dutch aren’t as Dutchy as they used to be. They are more open.

Smith: Now tell us, we’d love to know. How Dutch were the Dutch fifty years ago, and how did it manifest itself?

Weston: Well, they never went to the movies or danced. When TV came out, they didn’t go to TV. They didn’t trade with you if you didn’t have a Dutch name. They were very clannish. There is nothing wrong with the people; they are good people. They are clean people, they maintain good homes, but they just – within themselves – they had strong beliefs. Very Dutchy. This town was that way. Now they go to shows now, they watch TV and they dance.

Smith: Whether that’s progress or not, we’ll leave it to others to decide. Were you surprised when he died at the amount of reaction that there was?

Weston: Oh, yes, very much so. He was well respected, nationally and locally. He was one of the finest presidents we’ve ever had, I believe.

Smith: Did you ever meet Mrs. Ford?

Weston: No, never met Mrs. Ford. I met the boys one time in a barbershop in Holland, when they were pretty small.
Smith: Was he with them?
Weston: No, he had dropped them off and he was going to pick them up because I got to talking to them.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?
Weston: Very highly. I had a lot of respect for Jerry, knowing his background and everything.

Smith: There were a lot of people who were bothered – the image of him as a klutz – because, in fact, physically, he was a natural athlete.
Weston: Well, he was a stud when he was a kid.

Smith: Good basketball player?
Weston: He was good at most anything he did. He had a good body and he maintained it. He was a good athlete. Like I say, athlete because he was eleven years older than I am.

Smith: How did your experience on the Monterrey affect you?
Weston: Well, the Navy taught me one thing: I went out of high school into the Navy, and I didn’t have any other form of education, and they had these fellows who had one year of college – they made them ninety day wonders – and they were in charge of us. And we had to teach them what to do, if you know what I mean. So I made up mind when I got out of the service, I wanted to go to school and get an education because I thought it meant more to have that college. It would give you a break in life and I saw it there. So that was the biggest thing I learned about the Navy.

Smith: Do you keep in touch with your old shipmates?
Weston: Actually, I don’t have any of them left that are alive. I used to keep in touch with a few of them, yes. But they are all gone.

Smith: What do you think it means to be part of the Greatest Generation? How do you feel about that title?
Weston: Well, I think we are very fortunate to be that. I don’t think there’s going to be that much luck for the next generations to come. They are going to have a rougher time. My wife and I always say we lived during the good years.

Smith: Really? Now that included the Depression and the war?

Weston: Well, I remember the Depression. My dad worked on WPA – fifteen dollars a week and groceries. I can remember going with a car, going to the stores and getting groceries as a kid.

Smith: But you say you lived in the good times?

Weston: Well, I do, I think so. Hey, I was real lucky. I bought my first car when I was thirteen, going on fourteen, you could get a driver’s license. I drove to the police station with my dad, in my own car, to get my driver’s license on my fourteenth birthday. And I was working at gas stations; I worked at Gracewil Country Club and the Highlands out here caddying. I worked in drugstores, I set pins in the bowling alley, had a lot of good experience. You could buy a Ford Model A when I was a freshman in high school for $25.00.

Smith: Do you think, in fact, that the Depression and the war fostered a sense of community that maybe is missing today?

Weston: Oh, yeah, at the time relations got together and friends for picnics and stuff. You don’t have much of that anymore. It’s hard to get the family together because they are spread out so much.

Smith: We’re a more materialistic culture.

Weston: Oh, yes. I think television has spoiled the world.

Smith: Amen. That’s the perfect note on which to end. This was wonderful. Thank you so much.
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USS Monterey
Smith: OK. Maybe the easiest way to frame this, given the limited amount of time and unlimited amount of subject, is to ask you where you were on August 9, 1974 and where the country was in terms of energy, energy policy or lack thereof.

Zarb: The day the President was sworn in?

Smith: Yes.

Zarb: I was at OMB in the Old Executive Office Building. Paul O’Neill had an office right next to me. We were summoned to the White House that morning. President Nixon and his family appeared, teared up, and told us he was resigning. We watched, then Vice President Ford, walk him to the helicopter to leave for California. That afternoon we were back in the White House for the swearing in of the new President. So that day will be forever etched in my memory.

Smith: Did any of that, by then, come as a surprise to you?

Zarb: No, by then, it had not. But a month earlier, I remember Paul coming into my office with the Washington Post. Paul asked, “When is the man going to straighten this all out?” Hope lingered that he would say, ok here are the tapes, you see I didn’t do anything wrong. That was three or four weeks before the resignation, it was eerie because you could see it coming.

Smith: A death watch?

Zarb: Yes. People at the White House fence, rather than being festive tourists, would hang on to the fence and look in quietly. Yes you could feel it coming.

Smith: Had you had contact with Ford during his Vice Presidency?
Zarb: Yes. I was at Office of Management and Budget and he would come in from time to time with requests from some of his congressional colleagues to get a project passed. Sometimes they were pretty good, other times they were sheer pork. I remember telling him one time that he was a great Vice President but a lousy picker of pork, which he knew and he would laugh. He knew exactly how I was going to respond. So the relationship was really good-natured. I was so proud to be in the same room with him. My being in Washington to begin with was a complete accident so my being there with the Vice President – I was in awe.

Smith: How was it an accident?

Zarb: I was an Executive Vice President and Partner of the securities firm, C.B.W.L. in New York. We had done some acquisitions and I ran the back office; which got some publicity. I had only been to Washington once, and that was a one-day tour. So I knew nothing of politics. I got a call from a man who said “my name is Fred Malek and I work for the President of the United States”. My first reaction was this is a hoax and I told him I was going to hang up. He said “before you hang up let me give you this phone number and you call back”. Sure enough it was the White House switchboard.

President Nixon had decided to reorganize the Cabinet and he wanted someone who came out of the management world in each Cabinet agency. He ultimately recruited 4 people with my kind of background; I became Assistant Secretary of Labor for management. After a little more than a year, and before Nixon’s re-election campaign, my wife Pat and I looked at our finances and decided we couldn’t afford to stay in government. My firm had asked me to come back and run the Sales Division, so I planned on returning. Before I left, Fred Malek introduced me to the Attorney General, then John Mitchell, who asked me to stay and join him on the Committee to Re-Elect the President. It was a job that finally went to Jeb Magruder. Now I would like to say I saw all that Watergate stuff coming, but that’s not true at all, I was flattered, and if I could have afforded to do it, I probably would have. We
went back to New York, but at the end of 1973 Malek called again. He said
President Nixon was in trouble; they had lost a lot of people at OMB and
needed someone to come back and get through the budget. Shortly after I
went back to OMB the energy crisis hit. Nixon opened the Federal Energy
Office when the oil embargo hit because shortages of oil supply were
compounded by price controls, creating an economic crisis. They needed to
have a federal energy office to allocate fuels. It was a nightmare. I was
asked to continue my job at OMB and also head the new allocation office.
Letters of Delegation of Authority from Secretary of the Interior, Director of
OMB, and the Secretary of the Treasury delegated all their authorities to
enable me to do this job - which was my night job!

Smith: Where was John Sawhill?

Zarb: I’ll get to that. Nixon was getting closer to the end. The Federal Energy
Administration is born. John Sawhill is appointed Federal Energy
Administrator, I am back at OMB, and energy is in my portfolio. John
Sawhill was a very able guy, also from OMB, someone I liked a lot, but he
had a conflict with the President. The issue was gasoline taxes. The
President’s orders were: no gasoline taxes. John took a public position
supporting a gasoline tax, so the President asked him to step down.

Smith: [John] Sawhill favored this as a conservation measure?

Zarb: Yes, as a conservation measure, he [John] was an active environmentalist.
His motives were good. He did promote a gasoline tax publically once or
twice and President Ford simply told John [Sawhill] that it was time to go

Smith: So it’s Ford, who in effect, has this policy disagreement with Sawhill?

Zarb: We should get into that because the President’s policy did encourage higher
gasoline prices. Everything we did under his direction was to try to get oil
and natural gas price controls removed and allow prices go up naturally.
Politically he knew it was a waste of time to propose taxes. Example: Al
Ullman, a democrat who was head of the House Ways and Means Committee, came to me one day and said he wanted to introduce a bill to raise gasoline taxes by 37 cents per gallon. I talked to the President [Ford] and explained that Ullman wanted our help. The President said “give him technical assistance and anything you can to do help, but don’t endorse the taxes”. The Bill came out of the sub-committee at 9 cents, came out of committee at 1 penny, and it was defeated on the floor. He knew that every politician was aware if they voted to increase gasoline taxes, chances are their opponent was going to use that against them in the next election.

Smith: That clearly is something that he, as a Congressman, he picked up and knew.

Zarb: The President wasn’t opposed to the concept of higher gasoline taxes, he knew if we could get prices up it would induce more energy production and less consumption. I was at OMB and had just run the Federal Energy Office during the peak of the oil embargo. There was a man out of the labor movement who was being seriously considered to replace him, but something came up and the candidate did not go to the Senate for consideration. The President asked me, “What are you doing?” to which I replied, “I’m going back to New York, he said “Oh no…you’re not”.

Smith: What do you think, because you saw him from a number of perspectives and with a number of responsibilities shared and you obviously began to form impressions of the man, what did the public not know about Gerald Ford and perhaps still doesn’t know about Ford?

Zarb: Two things. He had a very unique intellect, a mixture of smart and IQ; just the right balance, with an extraordinary level of integrity. I think people then, and probably now, can’t believe anyone in Washington in politics could have the integrity level of Gerald Ford. We knew it because we worked with him. He ran the administration with genuine integrity. There was very little divisiveness in his administration compared to what you see today. He gave me the ability to work with a Democratic Congress because they trusted him. He just displayed this uniqueness of a human being that the public never captured. Here was a man about to run for election in 18 months, fully aware
that raising energy prices would negatively affect his campaign, but did it anyway. The hardest test in life is when you have to do the right thing while knowing it’s not in your personal best interest.

Smith: In some ways he seems like a fore runner of Reagan energy policies.

Zarb: No question about it. I learned so much from him. When we sent this energy package up it was very comprehensive; lots of nuclear power, a lot of drilling for oil and gas, and miles per gallon standards for automobiles. I walked in one day and said “Mr. President, we have managed to piss off both the Republicans and Democrats”. He had this special smile and he said “that means we have it just right”. It was that aspect of him that was so unique, a sitting President who put the country before his own personal ambition. I don’t think the country ever really understood that.

Smith: Do you think, of course we are such a television age and a President is often judged by his style and above all by his words and Ford wasn’t a television president. He wasn’t a glib or particularly eloquent president. Do you think people confused that with a lack of intelligence?

Zarb: Maybe. Presentation was part of it; substance was a larger part of it. He had so many negative things to deal with that he became vulnerable. The environmentalists went to war because they thought the democrats would do a better job of not disturbing the environment. The freshman class in the House was swept into office on the fumes of Watergate; they just wanted to stop whatever he wanted. The media was very unfriendly for a lot of reasons. Most of it had to do with the pardon. Surprisingly one of the important newspapers that supported our energy policy on its editorial page was the *Washington Post*. Ford understood that the energy policy would be a battle. He would tell me we’re going to get this up to the Hill and we’re going to fight like hell for it. He knew we wouldn’t get everything we wanted with full price deregulation, but we’d get a start. Ford’s view was when I am elected I’ll go back for the full plan and with the election behind me I’ll get it. So he was willing to accept the beginning of comprehensive energy policy and gradual price deregulation for the time being. But he told me “once I am
elected they won’t dare turn us down” because the country was still afraid of what another oil stoppage would do to our economy. He had a political wisdom that went far beyond the rest of us.

Smith: That’s interesting because you also look at how things had changed, culture changed during that period. You mentioned Watergate babies in 1974 because there is a story about the gradual de-control of natural gas prices and that basically at one point he had a hand-shake deal with the democratic leadership in both Houses. I guess Mike Mansfield was still there and Carl Albert.

Zarb: We met in the Oval Office, the four of us, on that subject, and agreed on a two year phase-out of price controls.

Smith: And they reached an agreement and obviously nobody got everything they wanted. And then the story is a week later the Democratic leaders came back and said, in effect, we can’t sell it to our members.

Zarb: That’s exactly right. They said “we can’t deliver”. It was the freshman class in the House that was the problem; it gets back to the dynamic of politicians wanting to get reelected. Imagine that. Isn’t that shocking? They knew that if they voted for legislation which was going to increase the price of fuel, it would be bad politics. Never mind what was best for the country.

Smith: But that’s fascinating because it tells you, not only was the presidency, in effect, weakened by Watergate, but the “leadership positions” of the parties on the Hill were also undermined, at least to some degree, by this influx of Watergate produced congressmen.

Zarb: Yes. That is really true. It was the beginning of the end of a time when members of Congress could disagree but ultimately come together to do what the country needed.

Smith: Describe, package, for a 21st century audience, what the Ford plan for energy was.
Zarb: It started with the notion that we have a growing supply of oil coming from an unfriendly part of the world.

Smith: And unstable.

Zarb: Yes, Unstable. And the analysis that we had of the potential for mischief in the Straits of Hormuz, which are narrow shipping lanes that could be blocked and cut off 30% of the U.S. oil supply. The economic turmoil would be substantial. President Ford’s objective was to reduce the amount of imports by a significant amount over the short term and continue to reduce it until we could get it back to a safe level. The only two ways to bring down imports are to use less and produce more domestically. In the 1970’s we would have had to increase the nuclear power fleet considerably to do so. In his 1975 *State of the Union* message; Ford called for opening protected areas in the continental shelf to drill. His proposal to raise prices would have reduced consumption and supported new production.

Smith: For environmental reasons?

Zarb: Yes. He wanted to expand coal consumption at the same time forcing scrubber technology. He wasn’t insensitive to the notion that the environment had to be protected. But we were a country that was very vulnerable to serious, serious disruption. He supported research and development. He put lots of money into that, recognizing that new forms of energy were many years away. Even today “alternative” fuels represent probably 3-4% of the total consumption in the United States. Solar is coming along but it’s going to take a long, long time. Wind has promise, but relies on subsidies. His [Ford] vision was to remove price controls and experience the real price of oil in the marketplace, which would result in new investment, not only in conventional energy but alternate forms as well. Ford’s proposal mandated appliance labeling; requiring manufacturers of appliances to have energy efficiency on labels. Miles per gallon efficiency for automobiles were mandated.

Smith: That was the first wasn’t it?

Zarb: Yes. Detroit was not happy about that.
Smith: What kind of pressure could they bring?

Zarb: They caused their congressmen to oppose us. It was amazing to me. I sat in the Oval Office with the President and the heads of the three major car companies. He told them that we needed to get prices up and it would require a new kind of automobile efficiency. They were very polite, but essentially they concluded…this guy doesn’t know what he is talking about. Whatever we build the American people will buy. Of course the Japanese proceeded to eat their lunch. The President had a holistic view of what needed to be done. He also knew we weren’t going to get a lot of it before his election, but he set the stage for the rest to come after.

Smith: Did you ever notice or did he ever say anything that suggested an awareness, at least, of the irony that this man who had spent 25 years on Capitol Hill, who really by his own boast was a man of the House, should really wind up spending his presidency warding off a lot of the challenges both in domestic and foreign policy that came from the Congress. Was that inevitable given the weakened state of the presidency, post Nixon?

Zarb: Watergate was part of it and the Democrats smelled blood. On the other hand he had an asset in dealing with the congress, which few presidents had, his former colleagues on the Hill trusted him.

Here is an example. In early 1975 Henry Kissinger told the President that the Shah of Iran wanted to sell us oil at a discount to the OPEC price. Ford asked me to follow up. I went to Tehran to start a long negotiation with the Iranian Finance Minister.

The negotiations went on for months in secret and I became concerned that there could be a leak and the Congress would not be happy. I discussed with the President who told me to go see my Senate Oversight Chairman Scoop Jackson and my House Oversight Chairman John Dingell (both Democrats), and tell them what we are doing. I never did learn if Ford called them before my meetings, but Jackson said “sounds like it is worth pursuing”, and Dingell said “worth trying and if anyone in this House raises a question with you, tell
them to come see me”. At the time Dingell and Jackson were two of the most powerful members of the Congress. They trusted Ford.

Ultimately negotiations with the Shah failed because we could not agree on an acceptable price. That led to an interesting moment in the Oval Office. The President asked me to explain to Henry Kissinger why we could not close an oil deal with Iran. I explained all of the numbers in detail including the fact that when the United States government buys anything from another government, it is required by law to use American shipping. That made it impossible to achieve a saving unless the Shah would lower the Iranian price more than they were willing. Henry was clearly not happy and called me a “Nit-picking Talmudic Scholar”. There is a book written by Andrew Scott Cooper titled “The Oil Kings” where this incident is covered in detail. Although Henry and I are good friends, he was very, very unhappy with me.

Henry was not alone. Consumer groups, environmental groups, and some oil producers all wanted my scalp, but I always knew that the President had my back.

Smith: Do you have any observations about the Ford-Kissinger relationship?

Zarb: It starts with my amazement that Nixon, with all his insecurities, would pick people like Henry Kissinger and George Schultz. These are men who are independent and accustomed to speaking their minds. Kissinger and Ford had a good professional relationship, and Ford relied on and trusted his judgment. The President was also aware that Henry would have strategic interests which often were not obvious. In the case of Iranian oil, Henry’s real objective was to get more money in the hands of the Shah so the Iranians could buy more weapons from us.

Smith: What kind of conservative was he [Ford]?

Zarb: Generally fiscal conservative for sure. He inherited a big stagflation problem so he was somewhat limited in what he could do to reform government spending. He was a sensible moderate on most issues.
Smith: Do you think Mrs. Ford was a factor too?

Zarb: I am sure she was. Where he came from, the kind of people he had with him. They were Republicans, but no flaming right-wingers in that crowd. Everyone was slightly right of center on most issues but not all. And, of course we had Vice President Rockefeller, a real moderate.

Smith: Which is still, as you know I have been working on this book for years and years, and with the passage of time and the benefits of hindsight you can see how everyone with the best of intentions wound up doing something that they probably shouldn’t have done. That if Ford had been more, in some ways secure, less concerned about reassuring, not so much domestic audiences, as foreign audiences, and he was also very conscious of Rockefeller’s capacity to bring good people with him. That was part of the equation. There were lots of reasons that you could in a non-political way justify picking Rockefeller. Rockefeller at the same time wasn’t totally honest with himself as to why he did it. He didn’t want to do it, he hadn’t wanted to be Vice President but at the same time he told someone who told him that he shouldn’t do it, at length, but you don’t understand this is my last shot. And when it all got down to the bedrock there was always that ambition there. But the other thing was...if people had just stepped back and thought, he was a Rockefeller, he had been governor of New York for fifteen years, he was the ueber-executive, that’s not a profile for a successful Vice President.

Zarb: No. And he had visions of his own that were not always consistent with the White House staff. He and I had disagreements but I liked and respected him.

Smith: Tell me. Talk about how energy policy in effect was crafted in your office. Clearly he [Rockefeller] was crafting something else. What was the timing of that and what was it?

Zarb: He never fought us on the stuff we were doing. But, he genuinely believed that the best way to solve this problem was to throw a lot of money at alternative fuels. Now, obviously, it’s hard to argue with the intent here, but he didn’t take into consideration, as we had to do when making the
calculation, that we would be throwing money into new technologies and at
the end of the day most of it would be wasted. The likelihood of producing
energy that would amount to much over a ten year period would be very
small. We needed to solve a big problem with reliable resources. The
development of alternative energy was important but Nelson’s approach
would have failed. To help give us some protection over the short term we
initiated the National Petroleum Reserve.

Smith: And this was a Ford administration initiative?

Zarb: Yes that was. It was part of our 1975 legislation.

Smith: Was there opposition to that?

Zarb: Not really. The oil companies liked it because it boosted the price of oil.
Environmentalists didn’t complain much about the salt domes because it went
into the states that welcomed the activity. There was probably some rumbling
but nothing that amounted to anything. The national security concern put
more emphasis on what we could get done in the next ten years than over the
next 30 years. It was as simple as that. Alternative energy could not be a
primary objective. Jimmy Carter went in a different direction and created the
Synthetic Fuels Corporation. It was scandal ridden from the beginning;
hundreds of millions of dollars were never recovered, and it was shut down.
What Nelson [Rockefeller] wanted to do was actually implemented by Carter
and it failed.

Smith: Is it oversimplification, in a sense, government picking companies, I mean
government trying to seed industries, or simply funding research? What was
the idea of government’s role, I mean how would the money be spent?

Zarb: Well as you know, Obama has had a taste of that.

Smith: Yes. I was going to say…

Zarb: Nelson’s [Rockefeller] idea was to take X-hundreds of millions of dollars and
dedicate them to solar power. And if I had a good solar power idea I could
take it to the government, who would give me the money to implement it.
Now, there were two problems with that. One is solar power couldn’t be forced by money alone, it needed time and technology. It made its greatest strides from the space experience. The same with wind, which has been used in some areas pretty successfully. It’s still subsidized. The economics are getting better in some parts of the country where there is a lot of wind, so that it might eventually stand on its own but it’s a fraction, less than 2% of the total energy base. So his vision was good if you took it to the next 50 years and had smart people making the investments. The problem here is that bureaucrats are the worst people in the world to make those kinds of decisions. They have a chart and they have to check the boxes, once the boxes are checked you get the money and if you go bankrupt…well that’s the risk to begin with. That’s not sound investment strategy.

Smith: Rockefeller came up with something like the Energy Independence Authority, and it envisioned 100 billion dollars and it was really going to be funded by the same moral obligation bonding that had begun to spring leaks back in New York. And, there was clearly a debate within the administration about all of this. How did that unfold and was this seen as competition to what you were doing?

Zarb: Well no. He wanted to add this on. Alan Greenspan and I thought that it was a bad way to throw money at the energy problem so we opposed it. One day we had to make a decision because there was a deadline on the Hill. Rockefeller and I met in his office. He gave me his last pitch and I said, “I have a lot of respect for you Mr. Vice President but I just can’t support this”. When I told him why he picked up the phone and called the President in his residence, who was sick in bed, and said, “I can’t get through to Zarb, we have to come see you”. So there was poor President Ford in bed, looking tired, and Nelson makes his pitch and I make mine. The President said… “Alright Nelson, I’ll tell you what we’ll do, we will send up a request for 50 million dollars”, it was a bone…

Smith: Pilot program of sorts?
Zarb: Yes. Greenspan and I were opposed to that, as was White House Chief of Staff Don Rumsfeld. Rumsfeld had his connections to the Hill so that plan was dead before it even got near the Hill.

Smith: Bill Simon, in his memoir, and I actually remember hearing him tell the story before his death, remembered a cabinet meeting at which he, Simon, finally was sort of carried away by his passion on this subject and I think by his disdain for Rockefeller personally. And, he said, ‘Mr. President…words to the effect of…don’t let him do the country what he did to New York’ and subsequently they had this discussion specifically in which Simon reiterated his vehement opposition and I think he got a call from the President who said ‘Bill lay off Nelson’ and the way the President explained it is ‘you and I both know this is dead on arrival, once it goes to the Hill it’s not going anywhere but let Nelson, in effect, have a bone.’ Does that ring true?

Zarb: Yes. That’s essentially what happened.

Smith: Then of course Rockefeller was upset because the administration didn’t lobby for the idea.

Zarb: Actually if nothing else he was politically smart, so Nelson surely knew what was going on. So he sucked it up and went forward.

Smith: You have that the President quoted in the Daily News “New York Drop Dead” cost him the election.

Zarb: If we had lost New York City by a lesser amount we would have taken the State and won the election. That Daily News quote didn’t come from President Ford.

Smith: Where did it come from?

Zarb: It came from the coalition led by Bill Simon.

Smith: I have been told Bill Simon, Alan Greenspan, in particular, well in fact Bill Seidman told me this story that there was this back and forth and they literally were rewriting the speech, the Press Club speech, and he sighed, would
rewrite it to get in either a very strident anti-New York tone or a much more moderate tone and Seidman thought the moderates had won out and he was wrong. The President went and gave the speech which lent itself to caricature, the famous *Daily News* headline. But subsequently, in effect, the President changed his mind. Or at least he changed his policy didn’t he?

Zarb: Well subsequently, sure. He knew that ultimately we weren’t going to let New York City go bankrupt. It’s a mystery to me as to why those words were put into his mouth. He was smarter than that.

Smith: Really? Hugh Carey once said to me that Jerry Ford has never gotten the credit that he deserved. In effect it was the tough love policy that forced New York finally to get serious.

Zarb: The credit came after the election. John Dingell told me that he was mistaken to oppose the President on price decontrol. He’s had all these years to reflect on that. And of course the Kennedy’s gave him an award and said they were wrong and that pardoning Nixon was the right thing to do. Those are real events and they add up to who the man was.

Smith: Do you think there was a Truman-esque streak in Ford?

Zarb: There was some of that. Some of it was amusing. I told you the story of when I told him we were pissing off both the Republicans and Democrats and he said “we have it just right”.

Smith: He had a sense of humor?

Zarb: Yes. One night Alan Greenspan and I were with him in the Oval Office. We were going to go on TV because he decided to put a tariff on imported crude oil to scare the Congress into doing something. He was going to go on TV to announce the Tariff; Alan and I were going to be there with him. He changed his shirt in the side office, next to the Oval Office. He went from regular cuffs to French cuffs and he had no cuff-links. So I looked at him and said…

Smith: You can’t go out looking like that…?
Zarb: He looked at me and he placed two big paper clips on the cuffs. Then he said “let’s go, we have more important things to do”. I’ve seen gold cuff links in the form of paper clips so he may have started the trend. Yes, he had a sense of humor. He had a sense of caring and sensitivity. We entertained at dinner the Egyptian President, Sadat…

Smith: Yes it must have been.

Zarb: In any case, yes Sadat I think. I sat at the table with Henry Kissinger and some of their people, high officials, because energy was a hot subject in the Middle East. At the end of the evening the President said to me “I’d like you to wait a few minutes, I’d like to talk to you.” He walked the President [Sadat] out and as he came back in, my wife walked over. He put his arm around her and he said “Pat did you have a good time tonight?” She said, “Now that you have asked Mr. President, let me tell you. Every time we have one of these dinners he sits with Henry Kissinger and the other high officials and I sit in the other room with a Congressman who eats with his fingers.” I have the photo of Ford looking at me like ‘what did I start’. In any case, the very next dinner, sitting next to the President of the United States, was my wife.

Smith: Really…isn’t that wonderful! Did you ever see his temper?

Zarb: The one time I saw it flare was when we told Kissinger that we would not do the Iranian oil deal. Henry, you will recall, cared about money in the hands of the Shah to buy guns and tanks from us. I wasn’t smart enough to understand how important that was to Henry. I think the President did. When Henry argued the point further, I saw the President, a little flare when he said “Henry, I’ve told you and told you, no discount - no deal”. It was kind of an edge. That’s when Henry called me a nit-picking Talmudic scholar. According to the “Oil Kings” book; after that meeting Henry went back to the State Department and told Chuck Robinson, his deputy, “I’m a better economist than Zarb and Greenspan and there’s not a full brain between them”. So there were tense moments. The Schlesinger matter, I wasn’t there
but I’m told there was a stirring of anger. John Sawhill stirred some anger in him. I didn’t see that personally but I was told about it.

Smith: Do you think Schlesinger was just chemistry, personal chemistry?

Zarb: Yes.

Smith: One senses that what some would take as an academic sort of stance on the part of Schlesinger could come off as condescending and Gerald Ford knew more than maybe Schlesinger credited him with knowing.

Zarb: Schlesinger was a very able guy, very talented, but he had a natural style which some considered arrogant and that annoyed the President.

Smith: And I would think would be particularly annoying to someone like Ford who could probably put up with a lot but arrogance is probably not…

Zarb: Yes, because he practiced none of it at all. And also you know I had a special sense of loyalty to this guy. When the energy bill was up for signing, passed by the Congress, there was a huge lobby for a veto. The Left didn’t like what was in there, increased prices slightly and authorized some more domestic energy production. The Right didn’t like the fact that we didn’t get full price deregulation. And, the Secretary of Labor John Dunlop was trying to get Common Situs Picketing legislation signed. Both pieces of legislation had the same political dynamic; they were opposed by the extreme right and extreme left. The President talked to me and he said “I want you to recommend that I should sign the energy bill, but I am not going to comment, I want my options open for the next couple of weeks”, which was smart. I did it and took some heat from the Republican right. Secretary of Labor John Dunlop said if Ford does not sign the Common Situs Picketing Act he would resign. The President vetoed Common Situs Picketing, signed the Energy Bill, and John quit. So there was a lot of drama but never any animosity.

Smith: I know it’s totally outside your area but I am just trying to get a sense of the mood of those times when Saigon fell. What was it like around both the White House and official Washington?
Zarb: Beleaguered.

Smith: Yeah.

Zarb: Henry [Kissinger], Rummy [Rumsfeld], Cheney, they worked full time on the subject. Brett Scowcroft was trying to make sense out of what was going on. And then weeks later, except for the hostages, it became a relief. Strange feeling but you could feel it everywhere.

Smith: Plus remember there was also, there was a fight afterwards because Congress wanted to pull the plug on any kind of refugee resettlement and Ford thought that was outrageous, that we had a moral obligation and went to the country.

Zarb: We had a lot of people there who were friends of ours that were stuck there and that always troubled him.

The biggest burden he carried through his presidency and for years after was the criticism of his pardon of Nixon. He talked about it often. But when Ted Kennedy gave him an award and said that the pardon was the right thing to do, the burden was lifted.

Smith: Exactly. He said “You know for twenty years everywhere I go people ask the same questions, but once the Profiles In Courage award was presented to me”, he said, “they stopped asking”. It’s as if the Kennedy imprimatur had made it okay. But it’s a sense that he was haunted in some way by the pardon?

Zarb: No. He was sensitive enough to be uncomfortable with the fact that people held him responsible for an act they thought was inconsistent with American justice.

Smith: Yeah.

Zarb: That bothered him because he knew what he did was right, but he was troubled by views of a lot of people and also the lingering murmur that he did it as a deal ‘if you pardon me I’ll make you President’.

Smith: Right.
Zarb: So that troubled him. The Kennedy Award washed that away. I always liked Ted Kennedy, he was a guy who kept his word, we made a number of deals and I could depend on him.

Smith: But you know someone who takes a lot of heat but who played a vital role at a critical juncture was Bob Hartmann because it was Bob Hartmann who supplied all the suspicion of people’s motives that Gerald Ford lacked.

Zarb: Bob had bad/good days.

Smith: Yeah. But Ford put up with it.

Zarb: He adjusted to it. You may recall the botched draft of the 1975 State of the Union message. The President kept Rummy, Cheney, Greenspan and me there all night rewriting the message.

Smith: Yeah, and remember that’s the speech he famously began, the first and last President to have ever said this, to say “The state of the union is not good”.

Zarb: Well…that’s a time honored principle among CEO’s who take over a company that’s in crisis. Make sure that all the bad news is made public fast because you’ve got to build from that foundation of truth.

Smith: You know the criticism has been made, Rockefeller certainly made it but he was not alone, that the President was, in fact when I talked to Rumsfeld, I think if Rumsfeld would have had his druthers, they would have been quicker to move the Nixon people out and replace them with a distinctly Ford administration. Ford took a practical view that you have to run the government and that there were a lot of people…first of all there were a lot of people who shouldn’t be tarred by their association with the Nixon administration; a lot of very talented people who were doing their job perfectly well and who shouldn’t be punished because of their associations. It goes back to that quality you talked about earlier; Rumsfeld may be being more ruthless seeing the strategic value, the symbolic value of cleaning house.

Zarb: That’s a reasoned analysis. Not cleaning house was the right leadership decision. You need people who are best equipped to do what you want to get
done. The two biggest fighters in the Cabinet were Simon and Kissinger. They took every opportunity to poke each other in the eye. That wasn’t done secretly. It was done up front and publicly, oftentimes with good humor.

Smith: Yeah. Was that just a function of their personalities?

Zarb: And ideology, and turf. Simon thought he should be also the Secretary of State, at least honorary, and Kissinger thought he ought to have some say-so about economic policy. It was always remarkable to me that Nixon brought such strong people into his government.

Smith: Yeah. I was going to ask you…how did that Cabinet function?

Zarb: First of all there was a minimum amount of interagency quarreling. Disagreements were handled openly and honestly.

When I was at OMB before I was appointed to the Energy job, Jim Fletcher, who was running NASA, had this big expenditure to build a thing called the Shuttle. I remember having a meeting with Jim saying you know you are building a truck but you’re not telling us what you are going to put in it. Where are you going to go with it? He said, “Well yeah”. So I said, “No money this time, come back with a plan”. Jim appealed to the President. He brought a sleek model of the Shuttle and before we started he said, “Mr. President I want to show you something, his aid uncovers an easel and under is a photo taken from space of President Ford’s Grand Rapids home. I thought to myself “Ah Shit!” It was over before it begins.

Smith: Pretty good!

Zarb: The President looked at him and said “I’ll tell you what we are going to do. We are going to give him his money”. “Jim I want you to have a full comprehensive plan to Zarb before year end”. He did. In retrospect it was the right answer. That’s the way the Cabinet functioned.

Smith: Yeah. That’s interesting.

Zarb: You can see how he governed. Nobody left that room feeling he was unfair.
Smith: Yeah, and of course he’s famously the last president who could brief on his own budget, he could get up and basically present the federal budget.

Zarb: Yes. Here is an example of how he used his people:

In early 1976 Pan Am Airlines was in financial trouble. The Shah of Iran indicated an interest in buying it. The President called an ad hoc meeting in the Cabinet Room; present in the room were Simon Burns (Federal Reserve Chair), Greenspan, Siedman, Cheney, and me. Ford told us about the Shah’s interest and explained that Pan Am had been the American Flag Ship for many years and raised the question of whether we should allow the sale. He then went around the room and asked each of us to give our views. It was a free-market crowd but the majority said the sale should not go forward. The President thanked us and he went off to make the decision. None of us were airline experts but he did not want airline advice and the sale was blocked.

Smith: You’d said he was a director of a couple of your companies. What kind of director was he? Because you know he took heat as a former President for “commercializing the office” and I think that was a combination of some of the directorships that he took and speaking fees and so on and so on. But, I would be interested in specifically the work he did. As a director, how involved was he and what he contributed?

Zarb: In 1993 I took over a company called A & A, a worldwide insurance and consulting company with 12,000 employees. It was in trouble and it had to be turned around and I asked him to come on the board. The previous board had done a terrible job. Some people told him [President Ford] that he didn’t really want to go on the board of a troubled corporation. I was told he responded, “Frank asked me to go on, I am going on”. He came and he was very attentive, very involved, very supportive, very thoughtful, and did his homework. We turned that company around and sold it. Everybody, including the shareholders were happy. Then I took over the NASD which is now FINRA, the largest self-regulator in the securities industry. It had gotten into a scandal and the SEC had effectively put it on probation, with a monitor in the place and deferred a prosecution agreement. The Chairman of the SEC,
Arthur Levitt asked me if I would take it over. NASD also owned NASDAQ.
I asked the President once again to join the board. And again, although it was
a very troubled company, he never gave it a second thought. We turned it
around.

Smith: Really. What could he bring to those meetings?

Zarb: Intelligence, very good judgment, and absolute integrity. What we needed
were people who have a lot of wisdom and experience, and could help make
hard decisions. He never stopped asking questions, and helped me think
through some very difficult issues.

Smith: Really?

Zarb: He also had a sense of loyalty, which I will never forget.

Smith: One overarching question about his presidency, because one way of looking
at it, is as a man who obviously arrived, essentially never sought it, steeped in
the ways of the legislature, who had to learn in effect to be an executive and a
unique kind of executive, all the political and related demands that portend to
the modern presidency. It is said that he particularly rued the outcome in
1976 because he felt he had just in effect mastered the job and then lost it.

Zarb: He had a plan. He had a plan for his four-year term in office.

Smith: What do you think he would have done if he had been re-elected?

Zarb: I know he would have achieved comprehensive energy legislation, finished
the job he had started.

Smith: Yeah.

Zarb: He certainly had a keen interest in foreign policy and things to do he thought
were unfinished, so it would have been a big part of his future. The economy
was still not back in shape. Most of his Cabinet would have stayed with him.
He would not have had the normal turnover in Cabinet and staff.

Smith: Did you see an evolution in the man during his presidency?
Zarb: I didn’t know him prior to his being Vice-President so I can’t make that judgment.

Smith: Well, this larger question about…Do you agree with him that his presidency was all about mastering the job, this executive position for which he had never really prepared?

Zarb: He had a natural ability to lead and wisdom developed in the political world that gave him an almost automatic capability to switch from congressman to President. When you think of it, he was far better equipped to be president than most.

Smith: Yeah. With the one exception of the presentational aspects, you know particularly television. And one thing, remember, you can’t quantify, but it was in the Ford Presidency that something called Saturday Night Live went on the air for the first time and there is a post-Watergate, there’s a whole different way of looking at the President.

Zarb: Yes, you could say the same about Harry Truman.

Smith: Yes. Yes because it wasn’t on every Saturday night. As it is he had a 23% approval rating at one point, but you are right he didn’t face the same saturation exposure. He didn’t come into our homes 24/7 the way that a modern president does.

Zarb: Yes, I think that’s probably right. But, in the end it was the pardon and a hyper rightwing which defeated him.

Smith: You saw a lot of him after he left office?

Zarb: Yes. We became very good friends. In addition to the two Boards I mentioned earlier we were both on two other company boards. He asked the members of his former Cabinet to join the Gerald R. Ford Foundation Board. That group continues to stay close.

Smith: Do you remember where you were election night 1976?

Zarb: Election night 1976 I was home in McLean, Virginia with my family.
Smith: By that point did you think he was going to pull it out because obviously the campaign was all about catching up.

Zarb: He was getting there. In my heart of hearts, I thought it was a long shot.

Smith: Yeah.

Zarb: There was just too much going on in a short period of time.

Smith: Was the pardon still a factor?

Zarb: It was a factor but I think “New York City Drop Dead” was the biggest negative.

Smith: Well…the Reagan challenge…you know you can argue it both ways because the arguments made that one thing we know about modern incumbent presidents if they have a serious primary challenge it fatally weakens them for the Fall. On the other hand the arguments also been made that the Reagan challenge made Ford a better candidate.

Zarb: Maybe, but the Conservatives sat on their hands during the election which was a big problem. It was a particularly tense convention. Alan Greenspan and I went there together. We had no role to play except be there. The arch-conservatives were particularly angry. No way of measuring it, but switching teammates has a negative impact on how people see you and the sinister motives they ascribe to that switch.

Smith: Yeah. Why…this may be unanswerable. Why is Donald Rumsfeld, in the stories of the Ford Administration, such a polarizing figure? There are people who, fairly or not, just seem to trail after them, you know suspicions, you know conspiracies…

Zarb: The majority of Rummy’s life was in politics. He enjoyed Washington intrigue. I think if there was a straight way to do it and an intrigue way to do it, Rummy would pick the intrigue. It was a game he loved. He was a good Chief of Staff.
Smith: Dorothy Downton, the President’s personal secretary, told us that Rumsfeld tried to get her fired. Why?

Zarb: In those jobs… if you are gonna shoot; you better kill with the first bullet.

Smith: And it tells you a lot about Gerald Ford doesn’t it? Well. We are almost out of time. What haven’t you had a chance to say that you would like to say?

Zarb: Well. I think we’ve pretty much covered it.

Smith: I feel like we have covered a great deal of territory. What do you think in the 21st Century, if you were talking to Presidents or the general American public, what could people learn from Gerald Ford? What’s important for people to know about Gerald Ford?

Zarb: First of all of his sense of leadership was based on real character, it was based on trust. To lead you have to make decisions which are the right thing to do, even if they are not in your personal best interests. If you can’t do that you’re not going to be a good leader. You might be politically re-elected but you are not ever going to be seen as a good leader. Jerry Ford made decisions that were not in his personal best interest but he knew they were best for the country. People are so numb to politics and politicians, that they roll their eyes when you mention his integrity.

President Ford taught me a lot. The most important lesson: The only time doing the right thing is exceptional, is when you do it even when you know it hurts you personally.

Smith: That’s well put. Last thing, pure speculation, how important was Mrs. Ford?

Zarb: We loved her. She was a modern woman who showed the Ford decency, she spent the rest of her life helping others.

Smith: She obviously became a story of inspiration.

Zarb: Yes…and a role model.
Smith: You know…not long before he died he [President Ford] said, I think it was at a Betty Ford Center event, and I think he meant it, he said… “When the history books are written her contributions will be deemed larger than mine”.

Zarb: That’s true.

Smith: Thank you.
Smith: Thank you for letting us come to your home.

Welch: I’m very thrilled to be a part of this because we were really such good friends.

Smith: How did you first meet Mrs. Ford?

Welch: Peggy would know.

Peggy: It was in Alexandria when she came to shop at the store.

Welch: That’s right.

Smith: Tell us about your store in Alexandria.

Welch: Oh, yes! That’s the reason I can live here now. It was in an 18th century house, a large house for then. And it was called Frankie Welch of Virginia. Peggy, were you born there?

Peggy: No. I grew up there.

Welch: You grew up there. Tell us more.

Peggy: It was in a historic home, originally Duvall House, that George Washington had visited. Then it was sold to The Bank of Alexandria, the first chartered bank in Virginia. And the Fords also lived in Alexandria. Do you remember their home?

Welch: I do. A family residential neighborhood.

Smith: It’s on Crown View Terrace.

Peggy: When Gerald Ford became Vice President, they continued to live in their Alexandria home. You delivered clothes to her there many times. And during that period the driver would bring her to your shop.
Welch: Exactly.

Peggy: You have said that your friendship was important to Betty Ford, particularly while she was the Vice President’s wife, because she felt a little isolated?

Smith: When he was going up the ladder politically, he was out of town a lot and we know now that she paid a high price for that. I mean, she pretty much raised the kids herself, didn’t she?

Welch: Peggy knows because she knew their kids.

Peggy: But you also did express that it was hard with him traveling a lot. They had four children and you felt like when he became vice president that she got to see more of him. That she was more a part of, as a vice president’s wife. In the White House they did things together, although, she still needed a friend to talk to sometimes.

Smith: What did she have to talk about?

Welch: Well, she loved clothes and that’s how I came about. We were just good friends before that. She loved pretty things and she was very meticulous as the wife of the vice president and then president. She wanted to look her best and dress appropriately, and waited and listened to my advice. She trusted my opinion.

Smith: She’d been a model, hadn’t she, at one point?

Welch: Yes.

Smith: So, she could wear clothes.

Welch: Yes, she knew how to carry herself and she knew how to meet people and she was gracious and kind. A lovely person. And we had a lot of good times together. We were together every weekend, weren’t we?

Peggy: Not every weekend, but she would call you from the White House to bring clothes and just to visit – quite often in the beginning.
Welch: Yes. That’s true. It was an honor and fun to bring her clothes to the White House.

Peggy: And you helped Susan.

Welch: Exactly.

Smith: How did you help Susan?

Welch: Well, she was a teenager and Peggy was in her early twenties. Susan was a little bit younger, not much, than my daughter Peggy and Genie.

Smith: Was Susan uncomfortable being in the White House? I mean, none of them expected to be there.

Welch: I don’t think so. Susan was very likeable, loveable, part of everything.

Smith: But she also liked to wear blue jeans.

Welch: Well, that was part of the era. So did Peggy. So did Genie, my younger daughter.

Smith: Of course. Was it hard getting her into a more formal dress?

Welch: No.

Smith: When Mrs. Ford had her breast cancer, how did you find out about that?

Welch: She called me to tell me about it.

Peggy: Right, after my wedding. The same summer Mike and Gayle Ford were married.

Welch: Yes, exactly.

Smith: To tell you that it was happening?

Welch: Yes, exactly.
Smith: Was she afraid?

Welch: Well, sure, but she was a stoic type of woman. She was a very wonderful person.

Smith: She’d been through a lot, too, already, hadn’t she?

Welch: I guess.

Smith: Tell me about Mrs. Ford’s taste in clothes. Did you ever disagree about a dress or something? What was she naturally drawn to?

Welch: Well, she was very fashionable, very fashion-conscious, and we had a wonderful relationship through fashion and through friendship.

Peggy: I think this might jog your memory about her style.

Smith: That’s a good way of putting it. Tell me about Betty Ford’s style.

Welch: Well, she liked color. You can see here.

Smith: Were there colors that she liked more than others or were there colors that she couldn’t wear?

Welch: You know, she really was so cooperative with everything. She was that type of person. Peggy can tell us. Peggy has the memory.

Peggy: She dressed in a very tailored, fashionable way versus trendy.

Welch: Yes.

Peggy: You may want to expand on the tailored look that she had.

Smith: Describe for people that don’t know fashion what’s the tailored look versus the lacy and—
Welch: It’s the non-fancy, not fussy look. The tailored look can go anywhere and is timeless and classic. She could go anywhere wearing the clothes we worked together to have for her.

Smith: She was easy to design for?

Welch: Oh, yes. In fact, she was just sort of agreeable and so in to everything. If she was supposed to do something, she did it.

Smith: She liked your scarves. Was that a trademark of yours?

Welch: Yes, it was my business, trademark and business. The first scarf I designed was the Cherokee alphabet and then I designed 4,000 others after that. I designed for many corporations and both political parties.

Smith: Oh, my gosh.

Welch: I was able to put Peggy and Genie, with the help of their father, through college.

Smith: Now, you knew Mrs. Ford before she was in the White House?

Welch: Yes, we were all friends in the neighborhood.

Peggy: In Alexandria.

Welch: And we went to the same church, Christ Church.

Smith: Were the Fords churchgoers?

Welch: Yes.

Smith: Did she talk to you about her concerns about moving into the White House?

Welch: Well, you know, we were so close. It was like sister to sister. We were just very close and we talked about so much.

Smith: Was she comfortable with the idea?
Welch: Oh, yes. Yes, she was.

Smith: Really?

Welch: She liked people and she liked being a part of everything. She did it very tastefully. She was just a very lovely, lovely person and very cooperative. If she was to be interviewed, she gave it her all.

Smith: Let me ask you. This is an awkward question, because you were so close. We all know now, and she’s written about it, in retrospect, she had some problems, even in the White House with the prescription drugs and alcohol, but beginning with the prescription drugs. Was that something you were aware of?

Welch: Not really. I didn’t see her take pills. I didn’t know that part because I guess to me she was just a well-balanced person.

Smith: And she has a sense of humor.

Welch: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. She laughed a lot, too. We did together.

Smith: Had you worked with Mrs. Nixon?

Welch: Yes, yes. I worked with, let’s see, how many First Ladies? Five?

Smith: Well, Mrs. Nixon is somebody who, even now, is not somebody well known. Was she shy?

Welch: She was warm to her friends. Let’s see, who else?

Smith: Lady Bird?

Welch: Lady Bird. I knew her very well.

Smith: Everyone loved Lady Bird. I mean, everyone probably thought being married to Lyndon Johnson must’ve been a saint.

Welch: Yes. And I visited Mrs. Johnson several times after she returned to Texas.
Smith: But Mrs. Nixon seemed to be more remote to the general public. Her friends, obviously, knew her in a way that the general public maybe never really got to know her.

Welch: That’s true, I’m sure. And I designed a scarf for Rosalyn Carter. We had a connection because we were both from Georgia.

Smith: Before Mrs. Ford became First Lady she never expressed fears, doubts, and concerns?

Welch: She liked being a part of everything. If she were here, she would enter into the conversation and be involved in what we’re talking about.

Smith: She liked people?

Welch: Oh, yes, very much so, very much so. She was reticent in some areas.

Smith: How so?

Welch: Do you remember, Peggy? I’m trying to think.

Peggy: She did talk at that stage of her life about her problems to you.

Smith: Sure, sure. Well, remember the famous *60 Minutes* interview where she talked very candidly when they asked about “What would you do if Susan had an affair?” or “Do you think your children have tried marijuana?” or things that mothers all over America were having to deal with, but no one talked about it.

Welch: Yes, yes. She was willing to be honest and open about topics she felt she could add something to.

Smith: And, Mrs. Ford, in effect, probably made it possible for that conversation to take place in millions of homes.

Welch: Exactly.
Peggy: That was her humor, I think, coming out –

Welch: Exactly.

Peggy: - talking about Susan and teenagers.

Smith: Right. And she took a lot of heat for that. I mean, there were people who criticized her for her candor, but in the long run, I think it worked very much to her advantage. Likewise, tell us when Mrs. Ford had her breast cancer, because we gather that was not something that women talked about forty years ago. It was not a subject that was publicly discussed.

Welch: That’s true. Very true. But we knew.

Peggy: And you said she wanted to make that discussable like she did about other issues.

Welch: Yes, she did.

Peggy: That she wanted people not to be afraid to discuss it.

Welch: Yes. Yes, exactly.

Peggy: She had a five year life expectancy with breast cancer back then. And that was thirty-six years ago.

Welch: Yes. I’m so glad you’re here, Peggy. Peggy is my memory, also.

Peggy: And I will help to clarify that Mom has always held confidences well. So, I will say that she and Mrs. Ford had some discussions that Mom would choose not to share. That’s out of respect of Mrs. Ford’s decision. It would be her decision, not my mother’s.

Welch: Exactly.

Peggy: So, you only have shared with Genie and me lightly private conversations over the years. It is important to know that that’s a respect for Mrs. Ford.
And, you know, she did talk to you about being lonely sometimes. I think she was actually happy in the White House. But it happened so fast, she just did it.

Welch: Yeah, exactly. It was just done.

Smith: Plus she saw more of her husband. I mean he wasn’t traveling anymore. They were under the same roof. Remember the wonderful story? People actually wrote in to protest because the Fords shared the same bed. There were actually people who wrote the White House to protest the fact that they were that open about it. But that was just the way they were, I think.

Welch: Yes.

Smith: Did she enjoy being a First Lady?

Welch: Oh, I think so. She liked being ‘on.’ There was a good bit of excitement and overall she enjoyed very much being First Lady.

Smith: She had been on stage, hadn’t she, as a dancer?

Welch: Yes, exactly.

Smith: Did she enjoy the entertaining? The state dinners? All of that? It’s a job. It’s a real job.

Welch: She did. And she loved to dress for it and, of course, being her dresser, being the one she bought her clothes from, it was really wonderful to work with her because she was so with it in that she wanted to look well. It wasn’t hard for her.

Smith: And I assume he was very proud of her appearance and took an interest in her clothes.

Welch: Yes, I would say so. I wasn’t in their bedroom discussing that, but he did. I think he was very, very appreciative of her.
Smith: Let me ask you something, because she was famously tardy. Punctuality was not her thing. Is that because of the perfectionism? You said earlier that she didn’t leave the room until she was perfect.

Welch: Yes.

Smith: For as long as they were married, it had become almost a joke in the family. The President was always on time and Mrs. Ford was not always on time.

Welch: Okay, yes.

Smith: Do you think that in a way reflected her desire to be as nearly perfect before she went out in public as she could?

Welch: She liked looking well because she had been in fashion earlier. She knew fashion. She was very wonderful to work with because when I would dress her for something, she cooperated. You know, she didn’t conflict.

Smith: Did she wear much jewelry?

Welch: She wore pearls and that’s what every woman wore at that time. Not flashy like this, but she wore pearls. That was about it.

Smith: I wonder if he bought her jewelry as gifts.

Welch: I would say so, but I don’t know that.

Peggy: She didn’t wear much jewelry.

Smith: That’s what I mean.

Peggy: She was more tailored and understated.

Welch: Elegant and a very kind and sweet person.

Smith: Did you ever go to her with a problem? We’ve talked about her problems. If there was something bothering you, did you feel comfortable enough to confide?
Welch: I don’t remember.

Peggy: When Daddy died, she came to his funeral, didn’t she?

Welch: Yes.

Peggy: You talked about that because Mrs. Ford knew Daddy and she came out of respect for him and to show you her support and friendship.

Welch: We all appreciated that gesture.

Peggy: Did you talk to her about that? That it was hard losing a husband?

Welch: Yes. Yes, we were that close. We were very, very close. I would say that at that period of time, I was her closest friend. I just remember her smiling and being gracious and lovely and wearing nice clothes.

Smith: Yes. Was that good for your business? I mean, obviously, women knew that you were dressing her.

Welch: Well, I would say it was.

Smith: It couldn’t be bad for your business.

Welch: No. It was nice that she recognized it and she would tell people that she bought her clothes from me. And she emphasized ‘bought’ because some First Ladies had gifts given to them, but Betty Ford paid for her clothes.

Smith: She did? That’s interesting.

Welch: Exactly. Do you remember any stories about that, Peggy?

Peggy: No. At some point, I think he’ll want to ask about the First Ladies gown because I think that’s an interesting part of your relationship with Mrs. Ford.

Smith: The gown that’s in the Smithsonian. Every First Lady has a gown and she didn’t have an inauguration, so there’s not an inaugural gown.
Welch: She was asked to select a gown from the White House years for the First Ladies Hall. So she chose her favorite gown which was in fabric from China.

Smith: I think when they visited China, they were given fabric.

Welch: Yes, yes, yes.

Smith: And then you made it into her dress.

Welch: Yes, I designed the dress and our workrooms worked very closely with me to produce the dress.

Peggy: Talk about the fact how you chose the design of her dress of the Mandarin collar, that you thought it was Chinese inspired and appropriate for the fabric.

Welch: Oh, yes. Exactly. Do you have a picture of the dress?

Peggy: I was going to find it for you.

Welch: You’ll find it. It’s around. Is it over here, Peggy?

Peggy: It’s a lovely picture with a scrap of the fabric in it.

Smith: Oh, yeah.

Welch: And here’s the fabric, too, right here, the green fabric in that little vase.

Peggy: Yes. It happens to be right here.

Smith: And you said that was her favorite dress?

Welch: Yes, it was. It was just a beautiful, beautiful fabric that they brought back from China.

Smith: It’s almost the color of jade.

Welch: Yes, a little lighter. There’s more of this. Peggy has the picture.

Smith: Yes, it looks great.
Welch: You know, I had to get a lot of fabric to frame this, to make that, but it’s a wonderful picture, isn’t it.

Smith: Forgive me, as someone who knows almost nothing about the subject. How many times could she wear that dress?

Welch: You know, she was so practical – that’s a good word – she was a practical person. And she didn’t pay attention to what people thought about how many times she wore it.

Welch: Here she is with the dress and the head of the Smithsonian.

Smith: Forgive me for asking, but I’m curious…Gerald Ford didn’t have any money coming into the presidency. What would a dress like that cost?

Welch: This particular one with this fabric? This was brought back from China, so it was very special, so you really couldn’t buy this fabric.

Smith: Right.

Welch: But a dress made like this on a famous person cost lots of money.

Smith: Several thousand dollars?

Welch: It was a unique situation; I don’t remember.

Peggy: I don’t think you charged her more for the gown.

Welch: No, I didn’t.

Peggy: In this particular instance, I mean, I don’t think the cost of it really was a factor.

Smith: I’m just trying to get a sense of what Mrs. Ford’s clothes budget might have been.

Welch: She loved clothes and thank goodness she did. But she was practical and chose her wardrobe carefully.
Smith: And he sort of indulged her in terms of buying clothes?

Welch: I would say yes. I would say he was just so likeable, so going along with everything, in my opinion.

Peggy: She bought less expensive clothes. She didn’t look for expensive clothes. She was on a budget.

Welch: She was on a budget.

Peggy: Didn’t she talk to you about that, that she needed to ______?

Welch: Exactly. Exactly. And this dress was the dress she chose as her “inaugural dress” for the Smithsonian.

Smith: Did you do dresses for Susan as well?

Welch: She bought from our store along with other stores.

Peggy: Susan bought off the rack. Now, Betty Ford’s dresses were not very often designed. The dress in the Smithsonian was an exception. She bought off the rack. Susan got some prom dresses from you and you helped her with the Seventeen magazine spread, when Seventeen sent the trucks of clothes and a accessories for one of their issues.

Welch: That’s right. Thank you, Peggy.

Peggy: You had fun because you helped Susan pick the clothes for that.

Smith: Were there things that Mrs. Ford hated? I mean, were there things you knew not to bring?

Welch: You know, she was such a lovely person and I say that with all respect and confidence. She was just a pleasure to be around.

Smith: But, just in terms of her fashion sense, I mean, obviously you knew what she liked and what she didn’t like. There must have been things that she didn’t
Peggy: This picture is a little more representative of her general style.

Welch: Yes, and she was so reverent to me and always wore a scarf.

Smith: Always wore a scarf. Okay.

Welch: She wore several of the scarves of mine. And I designed a special scarf for her.

Smith: Yes. Was that year round? Is that seasonal or is that year round?

Welch: Scarves are forever.

Peggy: She probably wore more solids than a lot of patterns, but she didn’t wear ruffles and didn’t wear a lot of florals and prints.

Welch: Yes, though the scarves as an accent were bright and prints.

Smith: When he ran for reelection, was she looking forward to living in the White House for another four years?

Welch: Yes. Yes. You know, she was very amenable, very part of the scene. She liked being part of it.

Smith: When President Ford pardoned Richard Nixon, was that something she talked about at all?

Welch: I don’t think so, no. That wasn’t part of her everyday—

Smith: One thing that might surprise people that I found out years later - for all that, she was accustomed to being part of the scene, she had stage fright when she had to give a speech.

Peggy: It’s not surprising. She was used to being in the background.

Welch: True.

Smith: Yeah. Did the kids enjoy the White House?
Welch: Oh, I think so. Don’t you think so, Peggy?

Smith: I mean, it must be such a radical shift in your daily existence. And it also must be tough not to be spoiled living in the White House.

Peggy: They all were very supportive of both of the parents. They were proud of their father and respectful of that position.

Smith: Did the Fords enjoy entertaining?

Welch: Yes, especially their close friends.

Smith: When she left, knowing they were leaving Washington, was it tough to say goodbye?

Welch: To her?

Smith: Yeah.

Welch: No, because we had a meeting after that in Grand Rapids. I flew in there to be with her.

Smith: The program of First Ladies.

Smith: Did you keep in touch after the White House years?

Welch: Yes, we did.

Peggy: Not like you did when she was there.

Welch: No, not the same as when they were there, but we were good friends. We knew we were friends. It wasn’t pretend.

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

Welch: She had on a green dress.

Smith: I mean, did you visit her out in California?
Welch: No. But I did write to her after President Ford died to let her know I remembered the thoughtfulness when my husband died and that I was thinking of her.

Smith: Do you miss her?

Welch: Yeah, but, you know, we did communicate. We talked in the early years. What else, Peggy?

Peggy: Well, wouldn’t you say some of her openness was because she really did care about her children? Discussing Susan, discussing the boys, that was a big part of her _________.

Smith: Motherhood was a big part of her—

Welch: It really was and she was so sincerely kind to her children and helpful without pushing.

Smith: It’s interesting. In some ways, she’s a traditionalist, but in other ways, she’s ahead of her time. She managed to be both a devoted mother and wife and kind of a feminist pioneer in some ways.

Welch: Yes, very true. She was a remarkable person.

Smith: She bridged that gulf. They were totally comfortable with each other.

Welch: Oh, they really were and I think he adored her and she him.

Smith: It was a real love match.

Smith: Yeah. What size was she?

Welch: Oh, she was very teeny. She was a size 6 or 8.

Smith: And, for people who know nothing about it, what does that mean? What’s the difference between a size 6 and a size—?

Welch: Well, I’m a 12/14 and she was a 6 or 8.
Smith: Now, did she work at that?

Welch: She was very conscious of being well-dressed and that was good for me, good for her, and good for fashion. She really made fashion statements.

Smith: Did she diet to keep that figure? Or was that just the way she was? She didn’t have to work at it like some people do?

Welch: No. She was just such a lovely person. Such a good friend.
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Smith: How did your paths first cross with Ford?

Barnes: You know, I’d heard about him a great deal, obviously, the Republican leader in the House, but it was thanks to Jack Germond at *The Evening Star* newspaper. When Ford became vice president, I’d just moved to the national staff. I had covered transportation at *The Star*, which was actually a pretty good subject. We were building the subway, the Metro, and so on. But he wanted somebody to cover Ford full-time because there was such a great chance that Ford was going to become president.

Smith: Was there a real sense?

Barnes: Yeah, there was. So, in 1975, I started covering Ford a lot

Smith: ’74.

Barnes: No, I didn’t start covering Ford until ’75. He came in in ’74. No, this was before that. This wasn’t ’74, because Ford became president in ’74. This would’ve been ’73. And so I started covering it and that was the first time I’d had any encounter with Ford. Very likeable guy. I mean, he was so different from what we see now in presidents or in Washington. Ford, you know, had come to the House of Representatives at a time when the members of the House and Senate got along with reporters. There’s so much mingling up there in the pressrooms. The Senators and House members come by all the time and you sit in those cushy chairs that you could actually go to sleep in. So, when Ford got to the White House, unlike the people who’d been governor and had found the press to be adversarial in most of the states, he liked reporters, he got along with them. He was cheerful around them. And he was happy to meet with them. So, he’s the last guy who actually I thought had maybe even some friends in the press, but certainly was the last guy who had a cheerful attitude toward them.
Smith: I was involved with the group that planned the funeral, and it was no accident that a journalist spoke at the Cathedral. Originally it was to have been Hugh Sidey. And then, of course, when he passed away, Tom Brokaw. But it illuminates the point.

Barnes: Well, he was unique in that, I think. Certainly afterwards there’s been nobody like that.

Smith: Another thing - perhaps the other side of that coin; Ford has his first press conference on the 28th of August (1974). Here’s a guy that’s spent 25 years on Capitol Hill and he really believes in that climate that people are going to want to ask him about inflation and Turkey and Cypress and all of those things as opposed to Richard Nixon’s tapes, Richard Nixon’s papers, and a pardon. And he goes in and doesn’t do very well and afterward he’s angry with himself. And I’ve often thought that was the tipping point that led to the pardon ten days later.

Barnes: In what sense?

Smith: Well, because it dramatized for him that the fact people were obsessed with Nixon. How obsessed were they?

Barnes: Well, that was the right reaction on the part of Gerald Ford, for sure.

Smith: Was he naïve to believe anything else?

Barnes: Of course he was naïve, but if I thought about it, I’m sure I could come up with other ways that he was kind of naïve. I think he was naïve in one way that occurred to a lot of us at the time in his almost heroic view of Henry Kissinger and Kissinger’s ability to do just about anything. In American history, George Washington is regarded as the indispensible man. Well, for Jerry Ford, Henry Kissinger was the indispensible man. But that’s another story. You know, Washington, at least, and the press corps in Washington, was obsessed with Nixon and obsessed with Watergate. People have talked a lot about this. People could tell you exactly where they were in Washington or what time of night it was when they heard about the Saturday Night
Massacre and when Elliot Richardson was fired. And so there was total obsession in Washington and, ‘What’s he going to do about Richard Nixon?’ I mean, that book was still open. So he shouldn’t have been surprised. I certainly wasn’t surprised as I recall. And he was a little naïve about that, maybe a lot naïve. And I’ve always thought he wound up doing exactly the right thing. I think history has come to the conclusion that he did do the right thing. It would’ve been wrong to have Nixon eating off a tin tray in some prison somewhere.

Smith: Could it also be argued that for all the people who say, “Well, it may have been a deciding factor in his loss in ‘76”…that if you had spent two years going through all of the trials, might it not have been even worse politically for him?

Barnes: Oh, it would’ve been worse for the country, it would’ve been worse for Gerald Ford, it would’ve been worse for all institutions in America except for journalism. It would’ve been great for journalism. The press would’ve loved it, all that extra time to pound Nixon and so on. You know, I never covered the White House until August 9th, 1974 and I was set up for that because Jack Germond assigned me to cover Ford as vice president. Well, of course, Ford was pretty accessible as president. As vice president, he was incredibly accessible, if you went on trips with him.

Smith: Tell us about the plane.

Barnes: Oh, the plane was great. He’d wander up and down the plane sometimes. He’s had maybe just a little bit more to drink than he should’ve and he’d be walking down and talking to people and reporters and he’d be spilling some. He was just such a genial guy who really wanted to like people. And if you want to like people, you’re going to find a way to like them. And he liked even the grumpy guys in the press. The guy that used to try to ask him tough questions on everything was Phil Jones of CBS. You probably interviewed him. But he’d ask Ford some question and Ford would say, “Oh, Phil!” and give it back. He was fun to be around. My view of Ford wasn’t that he was a
great president, but he was a pretty good president. He was really kind of underrated and did some bold things, at least personnel wise, and in the pardon, that really amounted to something.

Smith: Is it safe to say that everyone drank more than today?

Barnes: Oh yeah. I don’t drink now, but I did then. And particularly at the press parties where somebody else was paying for it, then you drank a lot, yes. Drinking wise, it was a completely different world.

Smith: In Tom DeFrank’s book, he makes a big deal out of this kind of verbal slip of the tongue where Ford says there’s some appointment that Nixon had made and Ford didn’t approve of it. And he said something to the effect that, “Well, when I’m there,” and then he took it back. Did he ever say anything that you can recall that touched upon the likelihood of his becoming president?

Barnes: You know, we talked about this all the time. Tom DeFrank and I got to be friends and have been friends ever since then. Of course, he kept up with Ford after that. I didn’t and I’m not sure anybody else did either the way he did, so he knew Ford the best. We’d comment on the lengths that Ford would have to go to pretend like he wasn’t going to be president and that there was no chance of that. There would never be a hint of any criticism of Nixon. There would never be any talk that might create a gap and a conflict with the Nixon White House. Part of that was just pretending that he was just there to be vice president and there was nothing dramatic that was going to happen as a result of that. The reporters would try, you know. They want conflict and one of the hearty perennials in Washington is the great conflict between the vice president and the president. And sure enough everybody tried, I probably did, too, though I don’t remember that exactly.

Smith: It comes as no surprise there are people in the Nixon White House who bitched that he wasn’t defending the president - that he was getting out of town.
Barnes: You know, I heard that, but that was pretty trivial stuff to say that. On the other hand, I think it is generic. But, look, Ford went out of his way to not let any daylight exist between himself and the Nixon White House, whether he traveled around too much or didn’t. A presidential staff is never going to think that a vice president is touting the president enough; even when they don’t even get there. If you remember the 2000 campaign, John Edwards wasn’t saying enough wonderful things about John Kerry. If the job was to not create any conflict at all between the vice president and the president, he did a pretty darned good job of achieving that.

Smith: He clearly was walking a tightrope.

Barnes: Yeah, he was and he walked it pretty well, I have to say, to the great frustration of everybody in the press corps that traveled with him, including me.

Smith: How would you characterize his intelligence?

Barnes: You know, there are different kinds of intelligence. Ford was not a reader, he was not a book reader as most politicians aren’t. And the ones that have been book readers, the two I think of are Jimmy Carter and Gary Hart, things didn’t turn out very well for them. Hubert Humphrey was not a book reader. Most of them were not. And so he wasn’t. Actually the guy that read a lot of books in his past, not when he was president, was Ronald Reagan. He’d been a reader. So, there’s that. I would say this. At the end of the day, he was a lot smarter than he appeared. He wasn’t good at press conferences. The two presidents, maybe three, I think, that reporters have been most dazzled with are guys that can throw around a lot of details. You ask them about a subject and they give you six details about it. Obama’s pretty good at this, I think, though when you get to know those details, there’s not much there. Jimmy Carter was great at it. Richard Nixon was good at it. Ronald Reagan wasn’t very good at it. Actually, neither of the Bushs were particularly good at it. But reporters love it when you can really dazzle them with details. And Nixon was good at it. One of his speechwriters, I’ll think of his name in a
minute, or advisors, that I ran into at Harvard when I had a Neiman fellowship a few years later, told me when he’d have some policy that he’d put out, they’d have a certain impressive number of points, bullet points, whether it be 45 of them or something just to impress reporters. “Look at that! This must really be a substantial policy!” And, of course, the press always fell for that stuff.

Smith: Remember, in ’75, he [Ford] introduced the federal budget. And at the press conference he stayed and he answered every question they threw at him. All those years in the Appropriations Committee gave him that kind of knowledge of the government.

Barnes: Yeah, I went to that press conference. He was pretty good at it. That’s true. But in an impromptu press conference, he was just not good at summoning that stuff. And, look, some people are. Bill Clinton was good at it. Jimmy Carter was actually pretty good at it. It’s no mark of your leadership at all, so far as I’m concerned, and probably at the time he thought differently.

Smith: Well, to the extent that the modern presidency is about communicating, as much as anything, persuasion whatever. Ford himself said, if he did one thing over, he would’ve spent a lot more time on communications. He understood that shortcoming. Didn’t he suffer in a sense from a cultural change? Saturday Night Live goes on the air in ’75 and irony becomes, sometimes, cruelty. Satire finds its way into the mainstream.

Barnes: And Chevy Chase made his name as a comic by imitating Ford as being a physical stumbler, which of course he really wasn’t, although there were a couple of incidents where he did - when he went down the stairs in Salzburg or Vienna or wherever it was on the trip.

Smith: He was holding an umbrella over Mrs. Ford and he had the football knee that went out. Anyway, he stumbles and of course everyone around him was trying to blame the photographers. And, classic Ford, he says, “Well, of course, they took the pictures. They would’ve lost their jobs if they hadn’t.”
Barnes: Well, yeah, no question about it. That’s what’s different about Ford. Can you imagine Ford blaming other people for things all the time the way others have done it? Obama seems to specialize in it. I mean, that’s just not his disposition. That was not his personality. He had a couple little WIN buttons which were harmless enough and that famous 4H speech in North Carolina that was such a disaster. Reporters thought Ford would do some ridiculous things, but they had a generally favorable attitude toward him, not that he was a great president, but that he was certainly adequate for the job and was a good guy to have in there after Nixon.

The other thing that I thought of before that I wanted to mention was that Ford brought in very good people. He was not afraid to have people who were more knowledgeable and smarter than he was. You think of Rumsfeld and Cheney. You think of the role that Jim Baker played in the campaign. I forget who discovered him, but what was he, an Assistant Secretary of Commerce or something like that. And pretty soon he’s the main man in the campaign. He brought in Stu Spencer. I mean, you can think about it. I think he overrated Henry Kissinger.

Smith: People like Ed Levi and Carla Hills. I mean, clearly first rate people.

Barnes: He did and he brought in a lot of them and was comfortable with them. People who he must’ve known at least in their fields were smarter than he was. I don’t think he’s gotten much credit for that. He starts out with Rumsfeld as his chief of staff and then goes to Cheney, which he didn’t have to do. The people he brought in, some people who’d obviously been with him in the House.

Smith: How much of the Ford presidency is a trajectory - of not necessarily unlearning congressional skills, but meshing the best of those with the very different skill set that an executive and particularly a president has to have?

Barnes: It was a little hard for him, but staff wise, he changed pretty quickly. Tom DeFrank always told me that Ford joked with him that after lunch, you
couldn’t really deal with Hartmann. After lunch, he’d be a little tipsy. Ford realized that he needed better people once he got there.

Smith: Classic case. I mean, here’s Ford, who eventually has dueling speech operations.

Barnes: Oh, I remember that very well. And I remember it painfully because I’d written a piece. I mean, my first real chance was at journalism in covering Ford and then covering the Ford White House and so I’d gotten the speechwriting operation to –

You know, I did a tech talk on all that they were doing leading up to the speech. Was it the State of the Union in ’75?

Smith: Where he says the state of the union is not good.

Barnes: Right.

Smith: The last president to ever say that.

Barnes: Of course. And then my story came out the day of the speech or something. Then there was the Dave Gergen operation. It was a completely separate operation where the real speech was produced. So, for me, it was a huge embarrassment and I’m not sure at what point the nominal speech writing operation people found out about it, about the real operation.

Smith: It raises the question of can a president be too nice?

Barnes: Yeah, he didn’t have to have it. He could’ve said, “Hey, we’re going to give this to Gergen and his guys and they’ll do it.” In that case, he was too nice, but you know, it worked out all right. And that was a good speech, actually, the one he wanted. Again, Ford had some pretty good speeches. His speech at the convention in ’76 was a wonderful speech, even well-delivered. It’s hard to go off against Reagan because Reagan’s was very good, too.

Smith: We talked to Stan Anderson, who organized the convention. And as soon as the speech was done, Ford handed him the draft and said, “This is for you.”
He said, “I want you to go up and get Governor Reagan and bring him down on the platform.” Unplanned as far as Anderson knew. So, he couldn’t go down on the floor. Instead he went down into the bowels of the building, went up to the skybox where the Reagans were and he said, “Governor, President Ford would really like to have you join him…” and before he could finish the sentence… “Don’t do it, Ronnie!” from Nancy.

Barnes: Was that right?

Smith: That was immediately and profanely seconded by Lynn Nofziger and less profanely by Mike Deaver. But, Reagan, to his credit, said, “No, I think I’ll go.” And he went and the rest is history.

Barnes: Well, Reagan, I think, realized that that’s what you do. Unlike almost anybody in the political community except the folks that were in his room that night, he realized he had a future. The conventional wisdom among everybody in journalism other than myself, I’ll have to say, I’ve realized that all along, was that he’d run twice. Ronald Reagan always thought it was just once. He didn’t count ’68. And he was old and it was over for him and so on and so he realized that that was an opportunity. I always thought, though I’ve been told differently, that the speech that Reagan gave there was the speech he was going to give - sort of, parts of it - if he’d won the nomination. But it was a pretty dazzling speech, you know, coming out against nuclear weapons.

Smith: Two questions about that convention. We were talking the other day to Peter McPherson, who was Jim Baker’s deputy on the delegate count. And I asked him if the White House was slow to anticipate the Reagan challenge, or to take it seriously. And Pete says something really interesting. He said, “I always thought that what gave it oxygen were two things. One was the refusal to meet Solzhenitsyn and the other was the Common Situs Picketing act.” He thought those two really fed in during ’75.

Barnes: Well, they defeated Common Situs Picketing as I recall.
Smith: Yeah, I mean, he lost John Dunlop, his Secretary of Labor, over the issue, but they were both hot button issues.

Barnes: Well, I remember Solzhenitsyn better than I remember Common Situs Picketing as being a hot button issue. The truth is Reagan wanted to run. His time had come and he figured he was going to run.

Smith: How did he reconcile it with the 11th Commandment?

Barnes: I don’t know that he ever did. And certainly Ford ran tough commercials against him. I mean, remember ‘Governor Reagan couldn’t start a war, but President Reagan could’? They ran that one in California. It didn’t help much, but they ran a pretty tough campaign against him. Well, they were slow to realize that Reagan was going to run. They were slow to react when he actually started running, but they caught up awfully quickly. They really did. And did pretty well. Remember, you didn’t have primaries in as many states as you ultimately did. There were a lot of caucuses. I remember going up to North Dakota for their caucus. It was one that Reagan should’ve won, but the Ford people got there early. And I talked to some of them the night before and he wound up winning at least half the delegates, maybe more.

I mean, look, I’ve always thought, and I’ve covered all the presidential campaigns since then, that Ford ran an awfully good campaign in the primaries and in the fall campaign as well when everything was stacked against him. I mean, Reagan was vulnerable. A majority of delegates, a lot of them were pledged to Ford at the convention, but they preferred Reagan. So, to get them to go with Ford took a real effort and it was an awfully good campaign, I’ll have to say, in both campaigns. Among the best I’ve ever seen.

Smith: Stu Spencer tells a great story, and again, it’s so revealing of Ford because I guess Stu was going through a divorce and life wasn’t very good and he didn’t want to be in Washington, and it was the end of a long tough week and it was a Friday, and it was raining. Anyway, he found himself in the Oval Office along with the President and Dick Cheney, and he had all this polling data which showed that whenever Ford went out on the road and gave the
speeches, his numbers would go down. So he’s trying to think of a
euphemism to stop the President who loves to go out and campaign. And
Ford’s not getting it or he’s pretending not to get it. So, Stu finally says, “Mr.
President, you’re a great President, but you’re a fucking lousy campaigner.”
Now, the sequel is what makes the story, because, the story then appeared in
Germond and Witcomer’s book.

Barnes: I heard about it from Tom DeFrank who had better sources than I did, but
maybe he got it on some basis that he couldn’t use on the campaign.

Smith: The way Stu tells it is that he was embarrassed, he was angry, and he called
Cheney to chew him out for telling the story. Cheney lets him go on and on
and on and eventually he rumbles down and he says, “Stu, there was another
person in the room.” Ford told the story on himself, which is what’s really
revealing. Can you imagine Lyndon Johnson taking that from anyone?

How bitter was that convention?

Barnes: How bitter was it?

Smith: Yeah. You think of the dueling First Lady entrances.

Barnes: I was not the main guy covering the convention and leading up to it,. You
had Jack and Jules with *The Star* and others. I covered the Mississippi
delegation. I went down to Mississippi a few times.

Smith: Tell us about Clarke Reed.

Barnes: Well, you know, Clarke Reed didn’t know what he wanted. I mean, Clarke
Reed obviously preferred Reagan and wound up going with Ford. Remember
who was the executive director of the Republican Party? A young man
named Haley Barber, who was this young ED for the Republican Party there.
And, you know, it was so painful for Clarke Reed, who I’ve run into many,
many times since.

Smith: We heard he basically went into a fetal position at one point.
Barnes: It was the toughest decision I think he’d ever made in his life and I think he preferred Reagan, but he couldn’t bring himself to go for Reagan against a sitting Republican president.

Smith: And did the Schweiker selection provide him with the rationale for not going with Reagan?

Barnes: Partly, but I think he was going to go with Ford anyway, myself. I talked to him a lot and that was used partly as a rationale. But he just couldn’t bring himself to go with Reagan. I think he ultimately regretted it, but he was ___________ and, you know, Ford had better people dealing with him, I think, than Reagan did, because Reagan should’ve gotten him and he would’ve brought a lot of people with him because there was a lot of sympathy for Reagan in that delegation. I mean, Mike Ratzer and other people there. Who was that guy’s name? Who was so ___________? I’ll tell you in a minute. I ran into him in Mississippi a few months ago. He’s written a book. I mean, it created permanent alienation between Clarke Reed and this guy. It was something like Sonny. He was some very successful business man who Clarke really alienated.

Smith: I’ve often wondered when people, in looking back, draw this mythical Reagan. And I often say, “Now, which Reagan are you talking about? Are you talking about the Reagan that was willing to put Richard Schweiker on his ticket in ’76 or Gerald Ford four years later? Are we talking about that Reagan?”

Barnes: Well, Reagan did pull the plug on it on 1980.

Smith: Was it a real thing, because some people think it was a head trip to send a signal to people that Reagan was open to moderates?

Barnes: I didn’t think so. I thought it was for real and I reported on it as such. By that time, I was with The Baltimore Sun and I did a huge, long tech talk on how it came about and then didn’t.

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Smith: There are those who believe that it really originated with Greenspan and Kissinger who saw it as their entre back.

Barnes: Yeah, they did and they wouldn’t admit that at the time, but they certainly did. And so they figured Ford was a pretty good horse to run and it almost happened, you know, until they overreached. Things like he’d pick the defense secretary and he’d have foreign defense (?) was going to be part of the presidency. But it made for a great convention.

Smith: Yeah, but it also overlooks the fact that I don’t think Mrs. Ford would’ve stood for it.

Barnes: I don’t think she would’ve either. And some of the other Ford people realized that it was going and as I recall Jack Marsh did. And maybe I’m wrong about that, but I think some realized that thing was getting way out of hand. And some of the Reagan people did, but I know I reported it at the time and I had no reason to think otherwise. It was a real deal. It wasn’t just a gambit.

Smith: Imagine when conventions were spontaneous.

Barnes: Yeah, I know. Geez.

Smith: Let me ask you. Did Sears make a critical error? Spencer argues that as close as the race was and given the fact that emotionally there probably was a majority for Reagan, if you’re going to try to shake up the status quo, you pick a really intense, emotional issue. You don’t go with a rules change to force Ford to name his vice presidential candidate.

Barnes: In hindsight, you look back and I don’t know that it hurt Reagan. It certainly didn’t help him. I don’t think he got a single vote on that. You know, I mean, Ford had a hundred plus more votes and he had a hundred plus more votes on the rules vote and on the nomination, so it didn’t do him any good. I don’t think the Schweiker thing did him any good either.

Smith: Did they think that they could flip Drew Lewis?
Barnes: Well, that’s what it was aimed at. It was all aimed at Drew Lewis. I mean, I was told in no uncertain terms by, I forget who, at the campaign or the White House that that’s who it was aimed at and they really thought they could do it. Drew Lewis obviously became a Reaganite, was his transportation secretary. Very nice man, I always liked him. Like others, he wanted to be president himself and he probably needed to be elected governor of Pennsylvania first. Remember who he lost to? Milton Shapp. It was ’74 and Milton Shapp made a terrible governor. But, yeah, that’s what it was. Pennsylvania had a large delegation. They had to pry it open and it was fairly miserable. The ironic thing, of course, was Schweiker who’d been sort of a liberal Republican, after that, turned to veer off in a conservative direction. A friend of mine invited me to a group of a people that meet every three or four weeks in Arlington and I may be the youngest person in it, but it’s people like Andy Miller from Virginia and some Democrats, some Republicans, some businessmen, and Richard Schweiker’s in this. He’s still kicking.

Smith: Then there’s the interesting decision by the Ford campaign to basically concede the foreign policy plank, which could’ve been that emotional issue.

Barnes: That was smart on their part, because nobody remembered anything that happened after that. It had no effect on the campaign. It was a smart thing to do and there was really only one person for whom it was a kick in the ass and that, of course, was Kissinger.

Smith: You know the Tom Korologos story?

Barnes: No.

Smith: Well, Tom tells it better than me and he was there. But you can see him…Kissinger, of course, was ranting and raving and I think Rockefeller joined in. Kissinger was talking about resigning, not for the first time. And Korologos is there and he said, “Well, Henry, if you’re going to do it, do it fast because we need the votes.”
Barnes: That’s great. That’s when you really knew it was over, when they threw that out. Because that was the big Reagan difference. It was foreign policy. Hard to believe that now, but it really was. It wasn’t as big of a deal as the Solzhenitsyn thing was. I mean, Kissinger was a real flashpoint for conservatives back in those days because he was détente. I always thought that ultimately Reagan was right and Nixon and Kissinger were wrong. They favored détente, and when Kissinger was denied the “We’re Athens, they’re Sparta”—

Smith: It’s interesting, talking with Brent Scowcroft even today, it was actually a very subtle foreign policy. Because, on the one hand, as they explain it, we’re looking for any weaknesses we can find. We’re looking for any areas of cooperation that are mutually beneficial. But at the same time, we realize the Cubans were in Angola. And, how do you sell that in a primary campaign?

Barnes: It was very hard and he couldn’t sell it. It’s so much easier when you’re not accountable for any of this foreign policy that has to be nuanced to some extent. So Reagan had a field day. And it was stupid not to meet with Solzhenitsyn. I’ve talked to him a few times afterwards and Roger Stone used to arrange these dinners up at Nixon’s when he was at New Jersey. I’d never met Nixon before that, but Ford had been invited to a couple of them and he could’ve met Solzhenitsyn. I mean, Nixon’s belief was you don’t do anything that’s going to anger the Soviets. It’ll be counterproductive. The rhetoric only can be harmful to relations in getting anything out of them. And so the Solzhenitsyn thing was a part of that and I think that was a mistake on his part. And it was a political mistake for sure, but I thought it was a substantive mistake.

Smith: Did Nixon comment specifically on Ford’s refusal to meet Solzhenitsyn? That he thought it was diplomatically necessary for him to not meet with Solzhenitsyn or did he think it was a mistake for him not to?

Barnes: You know, I don’t remember exactly. It’s been a long time.
Smith: Did he talk about Ford at all? Because, remember the week of the New Hampshire primary, Nixon goes to China. The people at the Ford White House were a bit incensed. It’s still hard to nail down exactly what that relationship was.

Barnes: I guess I kind of forgot. As it turned out, Ford would’ve helped himself a lot.

Smith: Speculation: is there anything Ford could’ve done to prevent the Reagan challenge?

Barnes: Yeah, he could’ve offered him a job better than secretary of transportation. Reagan took that as an insult and it was. And this is where I never understood. You’ve talked to Stu Spencer. Why’d he gotten so down on Reagan? I mean, he had a lot to do and had been a critical figure in electing him in the first place, but I just remember talking to him and he would do that during that campaign. I always liked him. Stu Spencer’s a great guy, always fun to talk to, and a terrific guy. But, you know, he would just crap on Reagan like crazy. And I don’t know what happened that he felt so alienated from Reagan. There must have been some explanation for it.

Smith: Then again, it tells you a lot about Reagan that, later on, he was willing to overlook that.

Barnes: Yeah, and brought him in and the Spencer help. No question about it.

Smith: Can you explain to people today who find it incredible, a political climate that, when John Paul Stevens was nominated to the Supreme Court, nobody asked him about abortion.

Barnes: Really?

Smith: Yeah.

Barnes: I’ve forgotten that.

Smith: Isn’t that amazing?
Barnes: I remember that nomination. Ford just wanted somebody who could get confirmed. I mean, he wasn’t necessarily looking for a conservative. And John Paul Stevens, who, in my understanding, was always regarded as a self-absorbed Republican. He didn’t know him. Ed Levi knew him. And maybe Rumsfeld did, too. I’m not sure. But Ed Levi became attorney general and I’m sure Ford had never met him either, but I guess Rumsfeld knew him. And that’s how they finally got to Stevens.

Smith: Someone in the counsel’s office told us that Ford, just off the top of his head, said, “You know who’d make a great justice? Barbara Jordan.”

Barnes: I remember hearing that story.

Smith: But I guess that’s the House speaking, isn’t it?

Barnes: Sure. Oh yeah, what a likeable person she is, she’s so smart, and she’ll bring us all together. I have to say, in Texas once, I did what was supposed to be sort of a debate with Barbara Jordan. You know, you’re not going to debate Barbara Jordan the way you’d debate some liberal in the same line of work you are in. I said some of the things I wanted to say, but I was extremely respectful and of course so was she. She was a nice person. But that’s funny.

That was a real traumatic thing picking a Supreme Court Justice for them because they thought they were really behind the eight ball, but I talked to her a lot during that.

Have you ever talked to a guy named Russ Roark?

Smith: No.

Barnes: I don’t know if he was in the counsel’s office or what. I think Jack Marsh brought him in. He lived in Annapolis. He’s probably not alive any more, but he told me once and I used his quote and I didn’t name him in The Evening Star, “We’re trying to get somebody we can get confirmed. We don’t want a Charles Bronson,” or “We don’t want a this or that,” and he threw out all these names like that. The quote was so great, even other
reporters accused me of making it up, which I hadn’t. Tom DeFrank knew it perfectly well because he used to talk to Russ Roark all the time, too. The guy would give you fantastic quotes like that. But it was purely defensive on their part, unlike Reagan’s picking a nomination.

Smith: Ford never interviewed Stevens, which I find astonishing. He read all of his decisions.

Barnes: I don’t think presidents interviewed them. Of course, now they do routinely and now they interview people they don’t pick.

Smith: A couple of quick things. Rockefeller went to his grave convinced that Rumsfeld did him in and that he deep-sixed George Bush at the same time. That it was all part of a larger effort to set himself up for at least the possibility of being vice president and eventually running for the presidency.

Barnes: I don’t know about the vice president part, but the other part is certainly true. I mean, he’d brought in what’s his name, Republican chairman from Georgia…

Smith: Bo Callaway.

Barnes: Yeah, Bo Callaway.

Smith: Bo Callaway was a Rumsfeld person.

Barnes: At least I thought he was then. Had Bo Callaway been in the House?

Smith: Yes.

Barnes: Yeah, so they must’ve known each other there. But Bo Callaway was not going to go out on his own and run a campaign against Rockefeller who was the sitting vice president without Rumsfeld staying behind it. And Rumsfeld always denied it, but he was certainly a conniver. George Bush, Sr. always blamed Rumsfeld for taking him out of the ’76 race because the White House appointment of Rumsfeld(?), as part of his confirmation process, to be the head of the CIA that he would not be a political figure in ’76. And Bush
believed, because he personally told me this, that he thought Rumsfeld was responsible for it in order to take him out of the vice presidential picture.

Smith: On the other hand, Bush 41 later on said in retrospect it was the best thing that happened to him.

Barnes: It may have been, but I talked to him about this. He told me about this in, I think, '78, when he was starting to travel around the country with just one aide. I went out on a trip with him and that’s when I heard about it. So it was fresh. He really thought Rumsfeld had been the conspiratorial force behind that. Named him specifically. I forgot whether it was on the record or off the record, but, you know, it’s on the record now anyway.

Smith: I’ve been told that because when Rumsfeld wanted to run in ’80 he found, first of all, he’d alienated the Rockefellers and he’d alienated the Bush’s. I think he found fundraising a bit of a challenge.

Barnes: And at a later time, he was talking about running too. I forget when it was.

Smith: Maybe ’88.

Barnes: Yeah, maybe it was ’88, but he just got nowhere. You know, Rumsfeld is an extremely able guy and he’s a guy you would want in your administration, though there are questions that a lot of people have raised about him and the troop levels in Iraq. But Bush (Ford?) liked him. (Ford?) had known him as one of the rising young guys in the House and obviously thought a lot of him and made him secretary of defense. Some people thought that Rumsfeld made himself secretary of defense in that old Halloween Massacre, which was really a pretty big thing for a president to pull off. He hated Jim Schlesinger, who he thought was just completely condescending toward him, and fired him. And I think Ford would’ve kept him. Kissinger with both hats would give him his druthers but thought he couldn’t do it. And, I don’t know, maybe Bill Colby was just collateral damage, but I’m not sure why he had to be bounced.
Smith: It’s interesting because Ford offered Colby an ambassadorship or something and Ford said Colby was a total gentleman about the situation. Unlike Schlesinger, who apparently resisted and tried to argue the President out of it.

Barnes: More reason why Ford would want to get rid of him, because Ford really didn’t like him.

Smith: Which is unusual.

Barnes: Yeah, because Ford could get along with just about anybody, but not some professorial, condescending, I-know-better type.

Smith: Especially for someone who’d been on the Defense Appropriations Committee for 20 years. Didn’t Ford in a sense unknowingly, and again, maybe its part of the House mentality - create a problem with the vice presidency where he basically led Rockefeller to believe that “you’re going to be an assistant president for domestic policy?”

Barnes: It wasn’t just that, though. I mean, that’s another part of it and you’re probably right, but it was bad politically, because they really underestimated the rising conservative forces in the Republican Party. There was enough discontent with Ford himself eventually that Rockefeller wasn’t the guy to pick. Now, I think he probably picked him for the other reason, that Rockefeller was the most able guy, among other things, and probably was. But politically, it was never going to fly. I don’t think that if he hadn’t dumped Rockefeller, that Ford would’ve won the nomination. Reagan would’ve won. Rockefeller was too much of a liability among conservatives outside the East Coast or outside the Northeast, really.

Smith: He was really a good soldier. At one point when Reagan had taken a lead in delegates, Rockefeller turned over the New York and Pennsylvania delegations, which is what spelled the difference. But, behind the scenes it was different. Mac Mathias right after he was dumped offered consoling words and Rockefeller says, “Who wants to hang around with those shits anyway?”
Barnes: I remember going on a trip with Rockefeller when he was vice president and it was a meeting of Republican governors in Wichita or someplace like that. I think there were about twelve of them. But with Rockefeller, when you would travel with him, you had fancier credentials, you had everything. Everything was nice. Even though you were going on the government take, things were extremely well organized and you could tell it was a first class operation. Maybe Ford could’ve pulled it out with Rockefeller there, but I don’t think so.

Barnes: Not really. You know, I guess I didn’t cover him enough to know. Was he? I assume he probably was. You know, it’s hard when you’ve always been in charge.

Smith: And he’s a Rockefeller.

Barnes: Yeah, he’s a Rockefeller and the vice president can be a demeaning job because of the things you do.

Smith: People all forget that Rockefeller’s the guy coached by Dick Parsons, whose parliamentary rulings led to the change in the filibuster rule from two-thirds to 60 Senators.

Barnes: Really?

Smith: Yeah. Rockefeller was in the chair and it was dissatisfaction with that change that prompted Tower and Thurmond, among others, to go down to the White House and express real discontent with Rockefeller. And it’s a story that’s not well-known.

Barnes: Yeah, not to me. Now, which Dick Parsons is this?

Smith: Dick Parsons who ran Time Warner.

Barnes: Yeah, sure. The guy who’s still around, sure. I didn’t know he was a Rockefeller guy.

Smith: Were you at the Polish gaffe?
Barnes: Yeah, I was there.

Smith: There’s some debate over how immediately people recognized that this was a huge mistake.

Barnes: No, I didn’t recognize it. I mean, I was there in the room at the debate. You know, what happens is reporters will go back and other people and they’ll all start talking about it and at some point afterwards, Ford aides have sort of a press conference and talk about it. And I’m not sure whether it came up there. Did it? Anyway, by later in the night, it had become a gaffe after people started talking about it. But, was I struck by it instantly? No, because knowing Ford, I knew what he meant. See, that’s the thing. What he meant was, you know, in their hearts the Polish people, they’re not under the domination of the Soviets.

Smith: He’d been there.

Barnes: Sure. Where he could’ve said, “They may be dominated now in a military sense, but in their hearts, they’re an independent people who will never…” I knew what he meant.

Smith: But it took a week.

Barnes: Oh, I remember. I went on a trip with him afterwards and finally I think the motorcade stopped somewhere when he finally said, “Well, maybe I misspoke.” But to answer your question, it wasn’t obvious to me at the time and I don’t think it was to others. And, for some reason, I think at that press conference afterwards, that it might not even have come up, but by later that evening, it certainly did. It was probably an early debate because it was in San Francisco and so maybe it started early at six or something so it’d be on.

Smith: Part of the problem was, as soon as it was over, Kissinger gets on the phone and says, “Oh, you did wonderful, Mr. President.” Lathering.

Barnes: And so did everybody else at this press conference afterwards. I remember Mark Duvall saying, “The President was great on everything. He won every
question and every issue” and so on. But I guess Ford didn’t think that he’d said anything. I mean, my interpretation of what he was trying to say was what I guess he thought he said.

Smith: And he was stubborn.

Barnes: He was very stubborn about it, so it became a big story for a number of days.

Smith: I meant to ask you earlier. There’s still a debate on this. Do you think on balance the Reagan challenge made Ford a better candidate, or did it undercut his fall chances?

Barnes: Both can be true. They’re not mutually exclusive. The answer is probably yes and yes. I really hadn’t thought of that, but Ford always blamed Reagan for undercutting him and then not doing much during the campaign to help him.

Smith: Is the latter a fair charge?

Barnes: Yeah, about Reagan not doing? Yeah, I think it’s a fair charge, because I think Reagan had promised to do more and he wound up not doing it and they had great plans for him to do things. They wanted to use him in the useful places in the South and as it turned out, of course, Ford only won Virginia and none of these other southern states. Of course, Carter was from the South. Anyway, they thought Reagan could’ve helped him there. They had specific plans for places for Reagan to go and then Reagan didn’t do it. And I think, look, serious challenges to a nomination fight hurt, just the way Kennedy hurt Carter, though Carter would’ve probably lost anyway. But obviously Kennedy hurt him. And I think Reagan hurt Ford, but did make him a better candidate. You know, coming out of the convention, Ford had a great well-run campaign with good ads.

Smith: “I’m feeling good about America.”

Barnes: “I’m feeling good…” Yeah, Tom DeFrank can still sing the whole song.
Smith: We talked to Doug Bailey.

Barnes: He had great media and Doug Bailey loved jingles, loved songs. Bailey and Deardorf. They really put together great ads for the campaign. I remember there was one that was particularly effective. You remember the man on the street ads?

Smith: It was interesting because the dynamic of the campaign was, if you keep the focus on Ford, we lose. The focus has got to be on Carter.

Barnes: They did a good job on that because people didn’t know what to make of Carter. And it turned out that he was a terrible president and I’ve always thought a terrible person, myself, a petty guy full of grudges and hatreds.

Smith: It did surprise me that he and Ford could become friends.

Barnes: But that tells you a lot more about Ford than it does about Carter. Because Ford wanted to be friends with him and he thought they were members of a unique club.

Smith: After the election, it took Ford a while to bounce back.

Barnes: It did.

Smith: And he would go around the White House privately and say, “I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer.” Did you sense that he was really down?

Barnes: Yes, because Ford was such a resilient guy that he had never let things get to him. I was with him on that trip when it was not the fall of Saigon but when they really cut, no, I’m thinking of when Congress cut off the money.

Smith: For the refugee resettlement?

Barnes: No, when they cut off the money for the military aid to the South Vietnamese government, which was at the end. And Ford did fine on that and other things. But losing - you know - had he ever lost an election?

Smith: No.
Barnes: I guess he never had and especially to a peanut farmer, but it really did. You could tell the difference because he was a guy who was always up, was always cheerful. You could see the difference.

Smith: The fall of Saigon, what was the mood like around the White House?

Barnes: I remember what my mood was.

Smith: Was your sense one of humiliation?

Barnes: Well, it wasn’t exactly unexpected. You know, I really don’t remember. I remember, myself, it was when I started to become a conservative actually because I knew no good could come of that, particularly in the short run. I don’t remember there being a particularly gloomy mood around there. It wasn’t a big surprise. It wasn’t a big surprise when the funding was cut off for the South Vietnamese government. When in ’75 did Saigon fall?

Smith: April 28th, 29th.

Barnes: I think it was in the fall when the funds were cut off, which was a huge mistake, I think, to this day. But I don’t remember there being a cloud of gloom settling over the White House.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Barnes: As a guy who was up to being president, was the right guy for the time, handled the things he had to do well, the pardon of Nixon, the straightening out of the government. The hardest part was driving away the Nixon cloud over the White House and he did an awfully good job of doing that. The pardon was only a part of that. You know, just his personality and style and geniality and likeability and belief in the country and belief in the presidency and so on. The ability to get along with the press in a very happy, cheerful way. You know, I didn’t know anybody in the press corps who didn’t like him. You didn’t feel an adversarial relationship with Ford. I never thought an adversarial relationship was what we ought to have with presidents or political figures anyway. We can save that for Al Qaeda. He can be
skeptical, but adversarial is something else. But all those wonderful traits he had were the right traits at the time, and then, although I can think of things he did that I didn’t agree with, I mean, look, there were some things that were Betty’s influence, forwarding ERA and abortion and those issues. Although ERA was a pretty big issue, abortion was a Supreme Court decision issued in January ’73, so there was no big pro-life movement then at all. It took years to build up. It was sort of a Catholic issue then because all the Protestants hadn’t joined. So, I have good feelings about the Ford presidency. He wasn’t a great president, unlike Reagan, who approaches that anyway? But, you know, he fit the bill and, you know, what would’ve Reagan had done? Would Reagan have pardoned Nixon if he’d been in there at that time? I don’t know. I’m not so sure. So, I have very good feelings about Ford. I don’t know. One of the main complaints about him as president are mainly that he wasn’t somebody else. You know.

Smith: A Jack Kennedy.

Barnes: Yeah.

Smith: He wasn’t charismatic.

Barnes: Yeah, all the things that were not particularly needed at that time anyway.
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Smith: First of all, thank you.

Green: You’re welcome.

Smith: Tell us about you before your path crossed with Gerald Ford, and how that path happened to intersect with his.

Green: Well, I suppose our paths crossed relatively early on. I became pretty much a full-time resident of Vail engaged in the real estate development business in the late 1960s.

Smith: Describe Vail in the 60s.

Green: Well, Vail was a little village with unpaved streets, and in the spring water ran down in little streams right down the muddy streets. It was a very exciting place because it was brand new. You had to be half off your rocker to want to be here on any kind of a permanent basis because there were no services, there were no grocery stores, telephone services were interruptible, no television.

Smith: So you were pioneering.

Green: Yeah, we were out front.

Smith: And what was it about the place that made you see such potential? Geography?

Green: No, I’m not sure that I was here solely to realize the potential. I was here because I enjoyed being here. I was here because I found it exciting. I also found quite a bit of challenge here because, in the course of pioneering, there were lots of things to be done. Lots of infrastructure to be built, lots of housing to be constructed and my niche was real estate development. I came here as a real estate developer in the employ of a real estate developer, actually, and then branched out on my own and engaged in my own real estate
activities beginning in the late 1960s. By the time that Vail was launching in
the early 70s, I was pretty thoroughly engaged on my own for my own
account for developing real estate projects.

Smith: This is a speculative question, but I’m just curious. In today’s environment or
regulatory climate, could that happen again?

Green: Vail couldn’t happen at all in today’s regulatory climate. No, none of us
would be here today. This wouldn’t happen.

Smith: Congressman Ford had a condominium?

Green: He did. I did not really know the Fords early on. Our paths didn’t
substantially cross until after I had created a real estate development called
Eagle Vail, which was halfway between Vail and Beaver Creek. I built a golf
course there and it was through that golf activity that I came to meet and
know President Ford.

Smith: Was he in office at the time or was this after he left the White House?

Green: He was in office at the time.

Smith: I imagine the President of the United States showing up is going to be a big
deal.

Green: It was a big deal.

Smith: And somewhat disruptive.

Green: Especially for this little place, it was a big deal, yeah. But there was a
fondness for Gerald Ford the man, the person. He was seen as one of us, if
you will. Much the same with Betty. Those ____ we got to know.

Smith: And did that communicate itself more or less instantly, that personal quality,
or was it something that built up over time?

Green: I think there were really two stages of it. One was that, if you hadn’t met or
become familiar with the President, you’d heard that he was a pretty good
fellow. And then on some occasion, we met and we seemed to hit it off like
he did with so many other people, very much one-on-one, seeming to have known each other for years and then joined one’s company. It was a great time. And that was initially in the context of golf on a golf club that I had built. So, we were very honored, too, of course, to have the President come by and play golf. And we actually played on that little golf course called Eagle Vail. We played some kind of a little golf tournament and I can’t remember what the name of it was, but it became the precursor of the Gerald Ford Invitational. The following year, we wrapped it up and packaged it as the Jerry Ford Invitational and then we went on for another 20 years like that. I then went on to build other golf clubs around Vail and, of course, the President loved to play golf and we extended that relationship into those other golf courses and clubs. Through that association, through ____ that association in the desert in the wintertime and through the tournament, we came to know each other quite well.

Smith: What kind of golfer was he?

Green: A very good average golfer. Powerful. When he made the best swing he could make, he hit the ball a long way. He didn’t have the opportunity to play a lot of golf. He was a mid-teen handicap sort of player. Enjoyed the game very much.

Smith: To non-golfers, it’s a little bit like opera. You see passionate devotees but, not being part of it yourself, you don’t fully understand what it is that makes them passionate. What is it about golf that he, and others, found so enjoyable?

Green: Well, I think it’s several things. First of all, a golf swing is a very complicated maneuver. At the end of the day, the object of the swing is to have a golf club meet the ball on the right plane at the right speed and at the right angle, and having at the same time immediately before that, having the club head travel quite a distance around, behind and down. So it’s a complicated maneuver. When it’s executed properly, it gives you a sense of accomplishment. And when it’s executed improperly, it gives you a sense of wanting to do better, wanting to master it. You know you can master it
because everyone hits good shots some of the time. And we all become convinced that we can do that all the time. So what captivates us is that progression from some of the time to all of the time.

Smith: Well put. We’ve heard from a number of people that the conversations on the course, whatever they were about, were not about business - that it is an opportunity to clear your head.

Green: Not necessarily. No, we would occasionally play golf and talk about business subjects or talk about politics, but it was in a light sort of way. It wasn’t a consuming sort of discussion. It wasn’t a negotiation. Maybe the expression of some opinions or the asking of a question or an observation about an occurrence or whatever.

Smith: He had a temper. Did you ever see it on the course?

Green: Not often, but you’d see it. It was very, very well controlled. I would say that, well, we played a lot of golf together. I couldn’t tell you how much golf we played together, but it was quite a bit and I would say that he honestly, truly, really lost his temper once in all that. Many times frustrated, many times angry, but under control.

Smith: And is it anger directed against yourself for missing something?

Green: Yeah, it’s an anger at one’s failure.

Smith: Never wrapped a club around a tree or anything like that?


Smith: What were his weaknesses as a golfer?

Green: He was not a great player. You’ve probably heard this before or read it.

Smith: It’s not the first time I’ve heard it.

Green: Yeah, it was sort of a known concerning the President’s golf that he was what we would kind of a yippee player. Yippee means the face of the golf club has a little bit of a wobble in it and it’s very hard to get back on the ball square, to
get it lined. He worked very hard at that. He would get very frustrated sometimes missing a short putt, a foot and a half, two feet, and we’d give him a lot of putts, we all did.

Have you ever played?

Smith: No.

Green: If we had a real match going, even the President had to make a putt and every now _________ . Then he’d insist that he play and he’d miss it and he’d get very frustrated at that.

Smith: And he obviously had the opportunity to play with the pros.

Green: Oh, sure.

Smith: There was the semi-famous game with Jack Nicklaus and Bill Clinton in which I guess President Clinton chose to interpret the rules somewhat liberally.

Green: Yeah. They played at the country club at the Rockies that day. I was actually on the golf course when they did it.

Smith: Were you?

Green: Mhmm.

Smith: Were there golfers who were his friends? I mean, players with recognizable names?

Green: Professional players?

Smith: Professional players who were his friends.

Green: Yes, I would say so. Yeah, a number of courses with Jack Nicklaus over the years. Covered the Rockies would be a good example and we played a lot. I’ll never forget, one day I was walking along with Jack, we were designing a golf course at that time, and we were talking about the Jerry Ford Invitational golf tournament and I made some observation to the effect that it’s something
that had a lot of promise as raising charitable funds for charitable purposes. And Jack made the comment that, “You know, this is going to last as long as the President lives and plays in it. When he ceases to play in the golf tournament, then it’s over because we’re all coming because of him. We’re not coming because we have any financial opportunity here” even though they did make a little money doing it. They came because of him.

Smith: Were you surprised when he decided at the end of 20 years to shut it down?

Green: No, I wasn’t. I think it was time. The golf professionals that had sort of started with us in the tournament had gotten past their prime. The newer guys didn’t really know the President and they didn’t know any of us very well. So, it was sort of a generational thing. It lasted for that 20 year span, if you will, of our generation and professional golfers of our generation. When that sort of came to an end and the President really ceased to be able to play what he would consider to be a worthy game, then I think he very correctly said, “You know, that’s enough. We’re done.”

Smith: I’ve wondered, because he was cognizant of getting older and he was a proud man in the best sense of the word. But he’d also seen, out in the desert, Bob Hope’s later years, and I’ve wondered sometimes whether he wasn’t influenced in a sense that, “That’s not something I want to repeat.”

Green: I think, when we actually came to an end of the Jerry Ford Invitational, he was still playing the Bob Hope with Hope. They were still playing golf. I think after that time, he was still playing and we still played some golf after that together.

Smith: How long did you play? How late?

Green: I would guess we last played golf together in the desert in the late 90s, I would say.

Smith: He still obviously enjoyed the game?

Green: Yeah, he liked to play, to get up a game, and every now and then, he’d ask Penny to call me and say, “Do you want to play some golf?” And it got to so
all we did was nine holes. You know, in the last golf that we played together, it would’ve been nine holes. He wouldn’t want to go the whole eighteen.

Smith: How would you describe the roles that the Fords played in this community?
One senses that they were very active, very visible, in both the desert and here. And obviously there are institutions here with their names on it. How does that reflect their activities in the public or civic sphere?

Green: Well, I think that there are several planes on which they had an important influence. A very indirect influence was their simple presence here because the presence of that notable a person who decided to take up partial year residence in this little community in those days said something about who we were. That was very important. That had an impact on the restaurateurs who were doing business at night and how many people came into their establishments. It had impact on me as a real estate developer. People wanted to come to a place where the President went in the summertime. People wanted to play on the courses that I built because the President played them. So there was that indirect role.

On a direct basis, of course, he was a terrific enabler of money-raising in various forms. The Gerald Ford Invitational, one of them, other several ski races that were established under his aegis, if you will, that raised a lot of money locally. So, there was a pretty much continuous stream of fund-raising that went on and an improvement of this community as a direct result of his willingness to go beyond the indirect and directly to influence specific activities.

Smith: I remember hearing them talk about the chapel that was built here.

Green: That was mostly Firestone’s doing. I think they made a contribution to it. In fact, I’m pretty sure they did and I think it was pretty significant, but I think that was more Leonard’s project than theirs.

Smith: Tell us about Leonard Firestone because he was clearly very close to them and integral in the formation of the Betty Ford Center. I guess they were neighbors as well in both communities.
Green: Well, Leonard was a very good friend of mine and we were very close together. Again, initially, I got to know Leonard through President Ford. He’d bring Leonard along and we’d all play golf together. Later on, Leonard was very instrumental in getting me into the Betty Ford Center for a little 30-day stay. And after that we became very, very close friends. I was married at Leonard’s house in Carmel. We had all sorts of social engagements over the years. Became very good friends.

Smith: I’ve been told he was pretty self-effacing. It’s the Betty Ford Center, not the Leonard Firestone Center.

Green: Yeah. Leonard always thought there was only one way to get something done and that was the correct way and if his view of the correct way was different than Betty’s or somebody else’s, then that other way was wrong. He was always sure he was right. I don’t think he’d mind me saying that. And quite often, frankly, he was.

Smith: Had alcohol been a lifelong problem for him?

Green: It had been a problem for some number of years and I think he had to deal with it on several occasions through his lifetime.

Smith: When you were at the Betty Ford Center, did you see her there?

Green: Yeah. Of course, I knew her by then and she kind of dodged me, frankly.

Smith: Was it awkward?

Green: A little, yeah. There was a point, as I recall, when you’re being sort of indoctrinated there and you go to someplace and there she is. In those days, I don’t think she did that for a long time, but this was in the very first years of the Betty Ford Center. This was 25, 26, 27 years ago. And she saw me and, you know, she just kind of didn’t, and I didn’t want to be too familiar. But she was watching out for me.

Smith: She was very much hands-on with that center. It was never just a name.

Green: Very much so. Very much so.
Smith: And he was so proud of her. She got the Medal of Freedom before he did. She got several forms of recognition, and the story is told that the Center has an annual alumni day and you could see the former President cooking hot dogs.

Green: I’ve never attended those events, but I’m not surprised at all. He was very proud of it. And, of course, she did her own golf tournament and he would support that very actively.

Smith: And was that done in the desert?

Green: Uh-huh.

Smith: She never played, did she?

Green: No. But the ladies tour, female pros, would go through the desert and the Monday after the Dinah Shore Golf Tournament, they would do the Betty Ford Invitational. It was just like the Jerry Ford Invitational. The same kind of format except it was a one-day, go-for-it kind of thing. It was a lot of fun and I think it raised some significant money. Leonard’s view always was that we should not bother to go play golf. We should just give him the money and forget about it.

Smith: Let me ask you one thing. A classic sort of opposites attracting - obviously every successful marriage entails illogic in some ways. He was such a stickler for punctuality and she was the opposite. Did you ever see that?

Green: I don’t think I ever really was exposed to that. No. Can’t say that I was.

Smith: So, you obviously knew both of them years before her intervention which was in ’78.

Green: I knew both of them before that, but not well and, especially, not her well before that, more so coming into the early 80s, ’81, ‘82, ‘83, ’84. Around there.

Smith: I wouldn’t expect you would know the answer to this, but I’m curious. There had been some talk in ’79, early ’80, about him running again. I don’t think it
was terribly serious, but they went through the motions of talking to people. The sense that we get is that one reason why it wasn’t terribly serious was because Mrs. Ford wouldn’t let it become terribly serious. This was just a year or so after her intervention and they had a good life. And, why go back even if you could?

Green: I don’t have any personal recollection of her role in that decision. I have no doubt that there was a role.

Smith: During those years his relationship with Jimmy Carter turned around and they became good friends. I’ve often thought one of the determining factors may have been that they both ran against Ronald Reagan. That’s something they had in common. Did he ever talk about his successors?

Green: He was pretty close-mouthed about that. He would talk a lot more about his team in the White House and how they functioned, but he really didn’t talk much about the opposition. He didn’t talk much about his predecessors or successors.

Smith: Didn’t talk about Nixon?

Green: No. I don’t think I ever heard him talk about Nixon.

Smith: Lots of politicians love to gossip. My sense was that he not only didn’t do it, but he would find a graceful way to change the subject when there were people who were doing it. I don’t mean political gossip, such as electoral speculation, I mean gossip gossip, their personal lives and the like.

Green: I think that’s probably pretty accurate.

Smith: Do you think he took secrets with him to the grave?

Green: I don’t know. I guess history will probably guess. Don’t know.

Smith: What did they enjoy? Obviously golf, but what did they do when they were here? Did they have close friends?
Green: They had a number of close friends. I would say that their friends were divided into maybe at least three different categories. One would be people who had been close to them in raising money, either for political purposes or for the Betty Ford Center or for other activities. There was another set that would’ve been the local community. And then there was the political set from the past. But, out of all those sets, there were lots of friends. And they were very, very kind and good about giving dinner parties and inviting very interesting people. Yeah, we had some wonderful nights up in that house.

Smith: I haven’t been up there. Describe the house.

Green: One of the things I remember is that his office was very small. I always wondered really how small it was. I mean, it was not big. It was a wonderful house for entertaining. It had a very nice living room with a great view and a large dining room just off the living room. It was very comfortable house. It was on multiple levels, which was not particularly good as one gets older and I don’t remember if it had an elevator in it or not. It probably did, but I don’t remember whether it did. Nice house.

Smith: And they could have the kids there.

Green: Plenty of room. Yeah. And, of course, Leonard and Dean were right next door.

Smith: Tell us about Dean because the name comes up frequently and it’s not a name known generally. We’ve had someone here today, actually, make the observation that they thought that he was a significant influence on President Ford.

Green: I think he had President Ford’s ear. Dean was a very intelligent man. He devoted a lot of energy during his life to raising money for political purposes for campaigns and did so for the Ford campaign as well. He knew a lot of people and he was the kind of person, I think, that you would describe as one that had good judgment. If you had an issue and were close and you wanted to have another view, you might ask Dean what he thought. That kind of guy. And just all around great fellow. Good guy. Dean was another very close
friend of mine through President Ford, but we became very close friends over the years.

Smith: And I assume Mrs. Ford had her own sort of circle of friends?

Green: You know, I never really observed that much. She did, but I never saw it really in play very actively. I would see more of that in the desert, frankly, during the winters than I would here in Vail in the summertime. I didn’t really keep track of her very well, what she did during the day. I know that she would spend a fair amount of time with Shaika Gramschammer(?) and a circle of friends, but I don’t know how much time.

Smith: How many folks had this dual existence of the desert in the winter and Vail in the summer? Was it an accident?

Green: The crux of that seemed to be those of us that had a pretty active role in creating that golf tournament. It would’ve evolved out of the relationships we had of course with the Fords, but then there was Kaiser Morcus who had a place out in the desert, as well. In the earlier days, you know, we’d just go out there for long weekends and one thing or another and play some golf and have a good time and come back to Vail and spend our winters. It was only in the later years, coming into the mid-90s, I guess, and after that, that some of us actually lived out there part of the winter and had more active times. Bob Barrett was out there in the winter. Leonard was out there. And between Leonard and Barrett scheming to get up golf games and one thing or another, they’d call and say, “Why don’t you guys come out and we’ll have a golf outing of some kind?” and often the President would join in.

Smith: I don’t want to put this the wrong way. Had Leonard Firestone ever worked a job?

Green: I guess so. I never saw him do it, but yeah.

Smith: I know he had diplomatic appointments and all that, but I just didn’t know whether he had a career in the sense that you and I would define the term.
Green: I think in the sense that you and I would call a career, I think probably not. But I think at one time in his earlier life, he did have some kind of role with the company. I'm not sure exactly what that was.

Smith: Let me ask you something. I remember in my eulogy in Grand Rapids making reference to the fact that, for most of us, the stereotype is that we get a little more conservative as we get older, whether it's because we have more to conserve or because nostalgia takes hold or whatever. And with the Fords that didn't seem to be the case. He was always a fiscal conservative. He clearly was very traditional in his approach, vetoing bills as President, and some debate over just how generous or ungenerous a tipper he was on or off the golf course. But aside from economics, on social issues, for example, is it your sense the Republican party was just moving further and further to the Right and the Fords just stayed where they were and looked relatively more 'liberal.' Or did they in fact become more liberal? And was she an influence in that regard? I'm thinking, quite frankly, whether the experience of alcoholism and the compassion that they had for good people who had a weakness affected their broader view of things - whether it was abortion, or more recently gay rights, things where by the end of their lives they stood apart from the rest of the Republican Party?

Green: I think that they became separated intellectually from the party line. I think that as time passed in the 80s and in the early 90s, he became one of very independent judgment, unrelated to Republican Party policy.

Smith: Which is interesting because he'd spent a lifetime as a party man.

Green: But, you know, there's a point where you don't have to do that anymore. I think he was a great team guy. When he was on the team, he played the team's game, very much so. But I think when he was beyond that, that he very freely exercised independent judgment.

Smith: You also wonder how much her views affected his views. Then you figure that they had kids that were still relatively young, and then grandchildren.
That’s got to be a factor in terms of exposing them to different points of view than if they’d sat at the country club seven days a week.

Green: I don’t have any real useful knowledge about what her influence was on his views post-presidential periods. Don’t know.

Smith: How difficult was it for him to come to terms with aging?

Green: You know, I don’t think that he had a particularly difficult time with it. He seemed to me to be no different than everybody else. I mean, everybody has some level of acceptance to have to go through to get the fact that you’re getting older and you can’t quite function in certain ways. But I never noticed that he seemed to be particularly hung up about it.

Smith: He seemed to have really very good health until he was about 90. I think when the doctors said, “You’ve got to really cut back on your travel”, that was difficult for him because he obviously loved it. It’d been a significant part of his life. But it’s interesting that they insisted, against their doctors’ wishes, on coming up here those last couple summers when maybe the more prudent thing to do would’ve been to go somewhere without this altitude.

Green: It might have been more for her benefit, really, than his. I never got the sense that he was particularly uncomfortable being here. He may have been.

Smith: In terms of health, those last couple summers, you didn’t sense that he was having a particularly difficult time?

Green: Not sure that I do, but I never sensed it.

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

Green: Quite well. I called one day to see if he’d like to have lunch in the desert and we chatted about the possibility, I think, and put it off to another day. I think I said, “I’ll call back and we’ll talk about another period.” So I called a bit later and Penny said, “Actually, what he’d like to do is he’d like to take you to dinner.” We wound up going to dinner to his favorite restaurant out in the desert.
Smith: What was it? Do you remember?

Green: The restaurant? Jillian’s. He loved that place. And so we went out to dinner. This would’ve been in April.

Smith: Of that last year.

Green: Of that last year, yeah. And we went out to dinner and typically I recall that as it got along towards what you might think would be the end of the evening, he just kind of said, “That’s enough. Let’s go home.” I think he got tired.

Smith: But he was still mentally sharp?

Green: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, he was good.

Smith: Were you surprised by the amount of reaction when he passed? He was someone who had not been in the public eye nationally for quite some time. There seemed to be a very significant, very genuine kind of outpouring.

Green: No, I wasn’t surprised. He had a great following. I think he was the kind of man, the kind of leader, who was sufficiently ‘of the people that we all felt that we were part of what he was. You don’t get that feeling about a number of leaders.

Smith: No, that’s very well put. Plus, you know, in some ways, time was very good to him. You stop and think, poor Lyndon Johnson died a day before the Vietnam peace agreement was announced and President Ford lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his way of thinking on the pardon, for example. The Profiles in Courage award - when he received it from the Kennedys, he said, “For 20 years, everywhere I go, people ask the same question. And since I got that award, they stopped asking.”

Green: I’ve never heard that. That’s good.

Smith: The imprimatur of the Kennedys.
Final thing, can you think of a story or observation or anything that might say something about Gerald Ford that people might find surprising? A quality or trait?

Green: That’s interesting. I can’t think of a single occasion where I could point to some activity that we engaged in where I could say that that was different than the substance of our total relationship.

Smith: We talked about him being a fiscal conservative. That’s the public word for it. The private word is frugal-to-tight. For example, on the golf course, he was not known for generous tips, to the point where it was kind of an inside joke among some of those who knew him.

Green: Well, yeah, it was conservative, but it wasn’t off-line. I can tell you one thing that would show you something of the nature there. A couple of years in a row, the President put his name on a ski race of some kind that was in Beaver Creek. The ski race had associated with it a Calcutta of some kind, which is a betting format where you could put down wagers on the teams that were racing and had the potential to win some significant money. And I put together a system of grading these teams such that I somehow wound up winning a significant amount of money. The beneficiary of this ski race was the Vail Hospital. The hospital was going broke at the time, out of money, out of cash, literally, on the verge of going under. And as I recall, in this Calcutta deal I won about $20,000. So we all got together for a big dinner and there were, I don’t know, several hundred people there. And Bob Barrett gets up to announce who won various things and I had told him in advance that I would just leave my winnings on the table and let it go to the benefit of the hospital. And so Barrett took advantage of that and announced that first. Then several other people who had won something in this deal, when it came to them, they said, “Oh, I’ll do the same thing.” And a couple of them were people that really could’ve used the money. And I think the President thought that they’d sort of had their arm twisted too hard and he was a little upset about that. It wound up raising $100,000 through the forgiveness of these winnings in this Calcutta thing. It was great for the hospital because it kind of
saved the day for the hospital for awhile. But the President kind of frowned on it in the sense that he thought that some of those people that won some of that money really needed it themselves and were not the kind of people who should be making substantial contributions to hospitals. I mean, there was a line there, a fiscal line.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Green: Well, I think he should be remembered as unique in his presidency in the sense that he had to navigate an extremely difficult path, one for which there was no victory and a substantial probability of high criticism. He did it honorably and he did it in a way that the country accepted it. And I think very few people could’ve carried that off. That’s how I remember it.

Smith: Perfect. Thank you.
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H. Meijer: What we were talking about is your recollection of when you were in Washington for a meeting, and Mom was with brother Doug and me at – what was it, Fourth of July or Memorial Day?

Meijer: I don’t know. I can’t tell you the holiday or what the occasion was, but if it was Cedar Springs, it would have been Red Flannel Days, but it wasn’t Cedar Springs, it was Standale. And I think President Ford was a friend of Howard Stanton, etc., etc. But he stopped or saw Lena on the curb and went up and talked to her. So he must have known who she was.

At that same time I was in Washington, trying to get the station that became WZZM. I was the president of that group, and I don’t think any of us deserved it, but we deserved it as much as anybody else. None of us did, we were just scrambling to get the license. I don’t know but maybe Lena told him, that I was in Washington, but he said, “Betty and Fred are in Washington and here I am in Grand Rapids with you.” Just that comment.

H. Meijer: Now, you mentioned Red Flannel Days, when would you first have met President Ford? Do you think it was Red Flannel Days in Cedar Springs?

Meijer: No, and I don’t know when I first met him. But he was very faithful in coming to the parade on Red Flannel Days. And he was a friend of Nina Babcock and Grace Hamilton, the two women who ran the paper up there. I think they were very staunch Republicans, and in their newspaper they were very supportive of Ford. They knew him better than I did.

H. Meijer: Well, you and Grandpa opened the first store in Grand Rapids the same year that President Ford went to Washington as a Congressman in 1948.
Meijer: Okay. I don’t remember that, but I believe you. I don’t know how we got acquainted, but he knew who I was and I knew who he was because we were never involved in politics.

H. Meijer: Did he come to Rotary at all?

Meijer: Not that I know of. But then – unless I’m hurrying too much – the library came into question. He didn’t get elected; Jimmy Carter beat him. But Ford, I think, was as honorable a man that could be, and I just never saw him do anything I didn’t think was very fine. And he got beat.

When Lyndon Johnson announced – this is another time. I don’t know if that’s later or before, but Lyndon Johnson said, “I’m not going to run for re-election,” he immediately put the arm on everybody and their uncle to do a job for – to contribute to his museum. Money, artifacts, everything. Lyndon was a pretty heavy salesperson. But Ford, when he was defeated, he would not do anything during his lame duck session, from November to January, or whatever it was, for the museum while he was still president.

Then after he was done with his presidency - somehow, I don’t know how I got involved - they wanted to build a Ford Library or Museum. We didn’t know about the library, it was all one building as far as we were concerned. But then later on Ford said, “I want my library in Ann Arbor, and I want the museum in Grand Rapids.” Or we could have had the museum in Ann Arbor with the library. But he wanted it in Grand Rapids. So I think it’s the only presidential library and museum that’s split – where it’s in two different cities.

H. Meijer: Yes.

Meijer: So, I’ll kind of think through the sequence. Now the Democrats are in office, and there were some Democratic bureaucracy who came up here to talk about the museum, and they suggested that President Ford wasn’t elected president, therefore, a building like the Red Junior College Gymnasium on Lyons Street would be all that he really should have. And of course that made us angry because he was playing it down and we liked President Ford. So I don’t think I went to Washington, I think I went to Florida, I went there twice for him. But I went down there and said, “President Ford, you haven’t wanted to raise
money or these things during your time when you weren’t elected and you were out of office, but you’ve got to get some attention to this because these Democrats don’t care much for what you get. And if you want something decent, you’ve got to give us some support.” And from then on he did do that.

Another time – I’m skipping some time now – they were talking and talking and talking about where he wanted to be buried, but nobody wanted to ask him. I think it’s strange because I don’t think that’s an unfair question. And so we went to Florida. He was coming in off a golf course, and I suppose he knew we were coming. I said, “I’m here to ask you where you want to be buried. Do you want to be buried at Beaver Creek where you have a home? Do you want to be buried in Rancho Mirage?” or wherever that was.

H. Meijer: Palm Springs.

Meijer: Palm Springs? Yeah. “Do you want to be buried in Palm Springs, do you want to be buried in Washington? Do you want to be buried in Ann Arbor, where you went to the university? Or do you want to be buried in Grand Rapids?”

“Oh, in the museum in Grand Rapids, of course.” That was after we had it built. That was my whole conversation on that subject. It was easy to ask and got a quick answer.

H. Meijer: You were reminiscing with him once, or he was talking with you once, in a pretty unusually setting – in the men’s room. Was that about the election of 1976?

Meijer: They ran a trial balloon at some time for him to run for president when Reagan got it. And the people that were really pushing him to do it, I think kind of deserted him, because Reagan got the nomination, and I think he was either embarrassed or just plain angry and embarrassed. “Doggone it,” he says, “I’ve been doing all this speaking for the Republican Party and they haven’t paid me anything. From now on they are going to pay me. And I’m going to give it to the museum.” So it was just a little tidbit of history that he emotionally spoke about it. I just thought, well, I got to his emotions. I just found him an interesting man, and I was involved in the location of the
museum. I realize there was a group of us. There was really four of us who were kind of the wheel horses for the Board of Directors for the Foundation.

H. Meijer: You and Jordan Shepherd.

Meijer: Jordan Shepherd became president, chairman, or whatever we called him.

H. Meijer: Or an executive committee, or however you did that.

Meijer: I think that’s what you would call it – whether it was officially that or not, but it became Jordan Shepherd, who was the head of the Foundation, on getting the building built and so forth. And there was Carl Morgenstern, Dave LeClaire, the photographer, and I – the four of us. And we met almost every week for a while to get the museum built. And then when we picked the site for it, I remember touring around. I had Mary Ann Keeler in the car, and there were several of us touring around at the same time. I was driving our car. We looked right behind where Source Club met the street to the airport there.

H. Meijer: Patterson and south of 28th Street.

Meijer: Patterson, south of 28th Street, west side of the street. There was a barn there for years. I think it’s gone now. That was one place. We offered to give them the corner at Knapp and East Beltline, the northeast corner where the little shopping center is going now, because we had it for a store and they wouldn’t give us zoning. So we were going to give that to the Ford Museum if they wanted it.

H. Meijer: Now, you were a little bit of an advocate for that site, weren’t you?

Meijer: I was an advocate for the Knapp site. However if they wanted to put it downtown; I liked that, too. But I had some stipulations. It had to have good access by car; and it had to have parking; and it had to have a green front yard, so it wasn’t just sitting in a sea of asphalt and sidewalks. If we had the property where the museum is now, except for the north side right where his grave starts, I’m not sure where the line was. We had the property where Days Inn and where the Van Andel museum is now. And the city had agreed to give us all that, because we had to have the property free, and because of my insistence, I think they gave it to us.
Then, when we had a bridge – I didn’t know how much parking we’d need, and from our store experience, I wanted plenty of parking. So we had the parking on the south side of Pearl Street, but I said, “Now, if some little kid there is eating lunch by the museum and some runs across the street to the car, it might be run over.” And I said, “We don’t want any fatalities because of the museum.” So that’s how we got the property on the south side from the city. Now we didn’t have any contract written, but it was ours for the Ford Museum. We went down to Joe Van Andel’s office because he was going to be a big sponsor of the public museum, and he practically gave us instructions. He was going to put that museum on the river and they wanted that property. No money if it remained at the old location. 

H. Meijer: You’re talking south of Pearl Street now?

Meijer: South of Pearl Street from wherever Days Inn is – Days Inn and the public museum and ______________, took up the site. So Bob Sullivan property owned it north of the Ford Museum. I remember I was there with Dave LaClaire and Jordan Shepherd and Carl Morgenstern and I, and we were meeting with Bob Sullivan to buy it. And he wanted $2.6 million. They all agreed that’s too much, too much. I called him in a separate room, I said, “Listen, he’s not going to sell it for less, if I can read his mind at all. And either we get it or we don’t get it.” And we got instructions to get the property so we could give that back to the city, which we did. So I called the three in a private room and, whether the $2.6 million was too much or not, we just had to quit quibbling, just nail the deal down. And so I was surprised that Carl Morgenstern, who was a banker, agreed with me. He agreed with me on quite a few things that I would think a conservative banker wouldn’t agree to. But I respect him highly because he had the same vision that the rest of us did, and he was going to see it through.

So, we bought it for $2.6 million, and gave back to the city what they gave us. (South of Pearl St.) But they gave it to us. It wasn’t on paper, it wasn’t a contract. But in the meantime, during all this, some people that wanted it downtown at all costs got very excited, and really chewed me out. But I’m not going to mention names. I said, “Well, I want the same thing you do. But I
want grass, I want access, I want parking room, and I like the setting. But we won’t get it unless we insist on it.” So, anyway, we were all friends. I can’t say I’m friends with Carl and Jordan now because they passed away.

H. Meijer: But you and Mary Ann Keeler are friends.

Meijer: Mary Ann Keeler is kind of an interesting character, and she thought I was opposing downtown. I said, “No, I’m not opposing downtown. I don’t want downtown regardless of what we get.” And so, we got an access, if you think about the location. From the east they have to go through town coming in from the Lansing side. But from the north you can get off there at Pearl Street, from the south you can get off at Pearl Street, and from the west you can get off at Pearl Street. So it’s right in the center there, and it’s a darn good location. Everybody was happy.

H. Meijer: Did you walk it with President Ford before the construction started?

Meijer: I don’t know whether we walked it or not, but he seemed to be perfectly happy with what we were doing, and then we were going to have a bridge made to go across Pearl Street before we bought the Sullivan property because I didn’t want some little kid to get killed going across the street. So President Ford heard about it and he wanted what I wanted, so I got my way.

H. Meijer: And that was to add the north side, the Sullivan parcel.

Meijer: No, before the bridge. I was talking about we wanted the bridge so you could walk across there from the south side of Pearl St.

H. Meijer: Okay.

Meijer: Who is the architect? Help me out.

H. Meijer: Marv Dewinter.

Meijer: Marv Dewinter – and the bridge over Pearl St. would have cost $160,000 – and he had a fountain in front of the Ford Museum designed. And it was supposed to cost something and it cost $160,000 more, I guess. So the county gave us a bridge – the money. So the county agreed to use that money for the fountain, so that’s how we paid $300 or some thousand for the fountain, I
think about $350,000, I’m not sure. And we never got the bridge. It was a
dandy bridge he had designed, but we went through all those arguments and
we ended up all being friends on the committee and pleased that it worked out
as well as it did.

H. Meijer: Now, you would have met President Ford, of course, a number of times when
he was still in Congress. Did you ever get to his office in Washington?

Meijer: No, never was at his office. I really wasn’t that close to him while he was in
Congress and when he was president. He never invited me to the White
House. I went there when Nixon and Jimmy Carter – I think there were only a
couple of times I’ve been there – two or three times.

H. Meijer: But of course, after he left the White House and you became involved in the
Ford Museum, then you saw him pretty regularly.

Meijer: Yeah. I remember - I guess I’m always kind of the radical one - but two
things: when we were building the museum – no, we were taking in money to
build the museum, getting donations – in the meantime, Ann Arbor, U of M,
moved ahead with their library, and we had to delay the Grand Rapids project
because they dug up the museum for the library – they dug up the money for
the library. I didn’t have any part in that, except that we were involved. But
they knew how to get the money. Then they go up with the library next to
Bentley, and I said, “Boy, oh boy, that was fast.”

Inflation was bounding – “as fast as we get the money, we’re losing out on the
cost.” I suggested we start building it without the money. Oh – you can’t do
that – we’ve got to stop, maybe. I said that I suggested we start building it and
stop if we have to. We did that with a couple of stores, too. We did stop. One
in Lansing and one in Battlecreek, I think. But I was surprised that Carl
Morgenstern, the banker, would go along with that, but he did. And so we
started building, and during that time is when, at the library - I guess we were
at the Bentley then, having our meetings, Ford mentioned in the restroom
about he was going to charge Republicans for speeches from now on and was
going to give it to the library.
H. Meijer: Then you said – hadn’t he also expressed some bitterness with Ronald Reagan not campaigning for him?

Meijer: He expressed, I thought, bitterness, because the people that wanted him to come to his trial balloon, you might say, reception, talked him into having it and doing these things, I don’t think showed up for the reception. They went to Reagan instead, somehow. It probably wasn’t the same time, but he was bitter, as I recall. Very bitter. I don’t think there was a lot of love between him and Reagan, regardless of the public face they put on the Republican Party. I was surprised he’d say as much as he did.

H. Meijer: When you picture him in your mind, what stands out about him in your recollections?

Meijer: Well, I got to like him very much. That’s why we loaned him the eagle on a permanent loan in front of the museum. That’s why I bought the Berlin Wall at some point, a piece of it. Ask me the question again.

H. Meijer: When you picture him, or you imagine him, what stands out about him, about his voice, or his manner, or his appearance? What do you think about?

Meijer: Well, you think about political people, and you think about what’s going on now between McCain and Obama, and they are starting the dirt throwing era. But I really think that Ford was honorable beyond, way beyond the normal. He was one of the most honorable guys you could get. And I learned to respect him highly.

Then we got involved in the various other things. His bust, that’s in the Ford Museum, is a copy of the bust that’s in the Capitol, or wherever they have the vice presidents and so forth. But it didn’t start out that way. And I suggested Marshall Fredericks, [I] had a price from him, and I think he probably would have done a decent job. But they wanted a different sculptor, and so we got the bust. There’s a Greek man that was going to pay for the bust. I think it was around $25,000, but they didn’t like the bust. The artist made the real sculptor of it. And I said to him, “Well, take his $25,000 and put it in the bank and get the bust later,” we wanted the bust. No, they didn’t want to do that, I guess, as I remember. So we got another bust. That bust wasn’t any good. Finally, the
third bust they took off a mold or whatever you call it from the ones that were in Washington, and that’s what’s there now. Then when they wanted to commission this bust they said, “But you haven’t got the money.” Well, get it. He’ll do it without the money. Of course I wanted to buy the bust in the first place. He said, “Oh, no, we’ll get it.” I guess they ordered it and then the Greek man wasn’t interested anymore. So I said, in the process, “Okay, well, order it. If the Greek man doesn’t come through” – I never knew his name – “then I’ll donate it.” Then, “Oh that won’t be necessary,” but they were disappointed that he didn’t come through. I donated the bust. So, basically I donated the bust and the piece of Berlin Wall and the eagle out in front and the medallion.

H. Meijer: We need to jump ahead a little bit because you also were involved in the Vietnam staircase on the American Embassy.

Meijer: Yes, but only to the extent that you, Hank and the Mark saw it there and thought that it’s going to be junked because the embassy in Vietnam was shot up.

H. Meijer: We saw it there, but then there was the debate about whether or not it was appropriate for the Ford Museum, and you had some different ideas than some of your fellow trustees.

Meijer: The trustees – I don’t know, were there twenty of them there?

H. Meijer: Bigger now, but probably there were twenty plus at the meeting.

Meijer: Whatever it was. And I’d already – I don’t know if I’d talked to Jerry Ford or whether Marty did, but we knew he’d wanted it, and so I thought after you were there that maybe we could get an agent of some kind to pay somebody $10,000 or something, and just ship it over to the United States. Then they said, the Democrats said, or the State Department said, “That’s government property. You can’t touch it.”

H. Meijer: This was during the Clinton administration now. Madeline Albright was Secretary of State.
Meijer: Madeline Albright, that’s right. Madeline Albright was Secretary of State, and so I knew that Ford wanted it so I brought it up at the Foundation meeting in Washington. Kissinger said, “We don’t want that…” – I think there was some profanity there – “so and so. It reminds us that we lost the war.” And I said to Kissinger, “I don’t think we lost the war. We won the Cold War, and this is just a battle on the way.” Of course, President Ford is sitting there laughing because I’m getting into a little argument with Kissinger. Those are the only words I ever had with Kissinger. And I knew President Ford was in my corner, so anyway, Ford called Madeline Albright and so she arranged that we could have the stairway. Actually, we didn’t really pay any money for it. I don’t know how it got here. The government must have taken care of the whole thing. It’s like several other things I’ve been involved in, we started them and they never cost us anything.

H. Meijer: What did President Ford say to Kissinger? Did he speak up at all in that meeting?

Meijer: I don’t think so. I think he just sat there and laughed, just smiled or whatever it was. You could tell he was in favor of getting the ladder over here. It was kind of a humorous episode. But I didn’t realize at the time, and I should know history better, but poor Kissinger, he had to get ________ with the Vietnam when they’d already beat us. And so when I knew all the facts, I kind of felt sorry for him because that was a tough job. We beat up on Vietnam and then we lost the war. How can we expect them to be very friendly.

H. Meijer: We might be out of questions here.

Smith: You might want to talk about Maury DeJonge. [Unintelligible] Peter, Marty, there were several points dealing with construction where things weren’t going right. And more than one person said that at each of those times, that one person would come in the room and say, “No, we’re going to do this!” and it was you. Can you talk about that?

H. Meijer: Some of the other people involved in the creation of the museum said that you were a voice of encouragement sometimes when people were down. Do you recall cheering on this project?
Vaguely, but I know I wasn’t on the Ford Foundation right at the beginning. Peter Secchia got me on there. And I do think I probably gave it more time, not compared to Marty Allen. I mean, he did a fine job. And I guess he wasn’t on that Foundation either. But I gave quite a lot of time, going to Florida and seeing Ford, and various other things. So many people are busy and I’ve been on boards where I haven’t done much. But anyway, once I got on – and they used to laugh at me – because they always knew where I was coming from - we had this money and they said Ford is conservative. Well, I wanted to invest it in stocks, at least 60-70%, and Ford would want this. The last time Ford was in a meeting with us, and I was expressing myself again, I said, “Well, Lena and I have all ours in stocks. If it goes down, it goes down. If it goes up, it goes up. But you sure don’t accumulate having it just strictly in interest and bonds.”

And I did this with the art museum, too. One lady who promised they would never lose money again – well, the only way you can be sure you don’t ever lose money is to put it as fixed income – and then when the market went up, they were complaining because their values weren’t going up. But anyway, I suggested that, and at one point Ford was in the meeting, in the Ford Museum, and I said, “President Ford, you’ve got a reputation of wanting to be very conservative, and I’ll tell you what we did, Lena and I.” And I said, “There’s no sign it’s prudent, but this is what I believe we ought to do. But it’s your call, it’s your museum.” And he said, “I agree with Fred.” And I think that’s when we went to 70% stocks. I remember that.

H. Meijer: Was there ever a time during the planning and construction of the museum, or in the early days when you thought it might not come about?

Meijer: Well, it was inflation under Jimmy Carter. As people get older, like Firestone, who died, and now President Ford has died, and so forth, if we couldn’t get their attention, and his former Cabinet, like – Kissinger wasn’t involved in this – but people like that. Brent Scowcroft, I’m trying to think – there were a lot of well-known names. I don’t know whether Cheney was on that or not. But I kind of think he was, I’m not sure. And the big meeting was in Washington, and when we had them in Grand Rapids there were not that
many proportionately came. But, yeah, we were discouraged several times because the Democratic administration, the locals, not Madeline Albright, I never met her. But they say, well he wasn’t elected president and they were playing him down.

Then, of course, he was getting criticized for pardoning Nixon at some point. I know that one lady – my mother-in-law – voted Republican all the time, but she voted for Carter because he went to church a lot and he was a good man, and thought Ford was a crook – he pardoned Nixon. And you could easy come to that conclusion, I suppose. But he told me several times, he said, “It’s the only thing I could do. I had to pardon Nixon. Otherwise they would have indicted him. There would be lawsuits, there would be accusations, and I couldn’t get on with any business. And so I pardoned him. Unconditionally.” So he told me that, but he said that publicly many times.

H. Meijer: To the extent that that affected his popularity, did that affect the fundraising for the museum, too?

Meijer: I don’t know. I’m trying to think who was Secretary of Energy – he wanted to make a substantial donation to the museum, but he wanted it in his own name, and it’s still in his own name.

H. Meijer: Are you thinking of Secretary of the Treasury Bill Simon?

Meijer: That’s who I’m thinking of, yeah, Bill Simon. He was dealing with oil shortages, or whatever that was, back in that time. We went to see Bill Simon – I didn’t, but Jack Koetie did, and we tried to be sure we had fuel in our own company. But, yeah, I think one of the best things I did, or the most proper thing, is that we kept right building. And we didn’t stop. We would have stopped if we’d run out of money.

Then I was suspicious of U of M. I didn’t trust them one minute, because they had the money and they were building their library. I said, “They’re going to use the money and we will sit here with no museum.” I was wrong. I mean, there is nobody more honorable than our dealings with U of M. I can’t say enough good about them. But whatever money I think U of M promised Ford, a million dollars for supporting their campaign for a fund drive back then, U
of M never gave us the money. They invested it for us and they did better than we did. And so we have a separate Simon fund, I think, and a separate U of M fund that they administer, and then we have the main fund. But U of M was very honorable and I should have known that, but I didn’t trust them at the time. It proved that I should have.

H. Meijer: You had a bit of business relationship with Frank McKay, and that’s a different discussion. But President Ford’s father was part of that reform group that was fighting Frank McKay back in the 40s.

Meijer: I didn’t really realize that, but I believe it. And so was Mrs. Judd or somebody from far _____________.

H. Meijer: Dorothy Judd and Dr. Ver Meulen.

Meijer: Oh, yes. Yeah, McKay owned our Standale store. We had dealings with him on that.

H. Meijer: I’m just trying to think – when you first met President Ford and before you got to know him well at all, back when he was a Congressman, would it have been at a parade or a community function of some kind?

Meijer: Well, at a parade you just really wave. I don’t know, really, when I met him. I don’t know. I met him later years, I think, his eightieth birthday in Washington, because I know Barbara Bush and President Bush were there, and the younger Bush was there. It was really a party of names. Kissinger and his wife were there – I can’t tell you who all. What was the question?

H. Meijer: I was just trying to think about when you had first met President Ford, back when he was a Congressman.

Meijer: I don’t know, I really don’t know.

H. Meijer: Because you would have voted for him for the first time in 1952, when you moved to Grand Rapids, probably.

Meijer: Probably. But I just had high respect for him that I don’t know how anybody could get to be President of the United States, being as honest and forthright
as he was. And of course, he didn’t get elected, but I think he had high integrity.

H. Meijer: Now, you had some misgivings about the Vietnam War when he was still supporting President Nixon pretty strongly on that.

Meijer: Yeah, and Nixon was in office and the parade from Arlington to the Capitol with a dead soldier’s sign on your chest, I think, and here Nixon appointed me to be chairman of employing, not the handicapped…

H. Meijer: It was the Jobs Commission or something?

Meijer: Some kind of a jobs commission where people that didn’t have the education to hold a job, we were supposed to help them get a job or get an education. And so I was in Washington and had supper in the East Room. There was a big supper. I say I had supper with Nixon. And what I remember about the supper is they had mementoes you could take along, matches and little things. Somebody got mine before I got them. But that was in the White House. But I never was in the White House with President Ford.

H. Meijer: Did you ever have any conversations with Betty Ford?

Meijer: Not a whole lot, but I think she sensed that I was sympathetic, or in agreement with her stands on Planned Parenthood, on the right to have an abortion. I know that’s a touchy subject. I had a doctor talk to me here in town one time when I came out of a country club. He said, “Fred, I hear you aren’t supporting this or that. But you’d be surprised how many people are totally against abortion, until their daughter gets pregnant and then they say, ‘Doc, can’t you do this for us?’” He says, “We are at risk for our license.” And I think that was Dr Vandenberg. He’s passed away now, so he can’t defend himself in case I’ve said it wrong. But I had great admiration for Betty Ford. We were with them to a dinner I think Pete Secchia and that restaurant that went down on the southwest end. I guess it’s in Wyoming. And I was sitting next to Mrs. Ford and she had her addiction problems with alcohol and drugs, and she dropped her pocketbook on the floor, and so forth. And I think she did the same thing in Russia when she was there, before the family got together
and really turned the heat on her, and said, “Mother, you can’t drink anymore and you can’t take these Valiums,” and so forth.

One thing I admire about Ford, from the day that they asked Betty to quit drinking, he never took another cocktail. Not one. No wine, no liquor, no beer, no nothing. If she was not going to have it, he wasn’t going to have it. That’s pretty honorable, I think.

Smith: One final question that Richard likes to ask. Tell us something, maybe personal, that may surprise people about Ford, who never knew him.

Meijer: I forgot to mention, he was here at the dedication of the garden.

H. Meijer: That’s right. We’ll get to Erik’s question, but he helped dedicate the garden. In fact, Erik was here that day, as well.

Meijer: And I think Betty Ford and I forget who, walked through. And I walked through with Mrs. Ford, I think, and behind us came Lady Bird Johnson, and I think Lena was with Lady Bird. She was impressed with how much Lady Bird knew about the plants and flowers. She was knowledgeable. But I think President Ford had been here twice when we asked him.

H. Meijer: If you encountered somebody who was flying in from another state or another country making their first visit to the Ford Museum, and they asked you what President Ford was like – and you get beyond the nice guy and the honest politician and that sort of thing, what would you tell them that they might not otherwise hear about him?

Meijer: Every time I proposed something, I supposed it was what I liked, but he’d agree with me. Whether it be on the money or on the building of the building and all that sort of thing. I do think I gave it a lot of attention, and he was very appreciative of the eagle in front and the garden that got built. I don’t know whether I was involved with that garden, I know that Hillary Snell – is it Hillary is a lady’s name or is that her husband?

H. Meijer: Husband – Connie Snell.
Meijer: Connie Snell. I think she’s the one that laid out that garden. I had this letter Bill showed me just now. I got a handwritten letter from Ford thanking us for furnishing the birthday cake for all the people that came through that day at the museum. And we supported them in many ways, in many minor ways, but I think he wrote me two personal handwritten notes thanking us for that and whatever it was. I don’t remember, besides the cake, what it was.

H. Meijer: Well, and a thank you for bringing the piece of the Berlin Wall to the Ford Museum.

Meijer: I think so. Did he in one of those letters?

H. Meijer: Yes.

Meijer: Okay, I can’t tell you. I gave it a lot of time and I don’t regret it. It was joy.

H. Meijer: Thank you.
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this. Let’s start at the beginning. How did your path cross that of Gerald Ford?

Raiman: Well, my first experience was when I was a student at Kalamazoo College. Sophomore year there was a career service quarter where we go off-campus for a career opportunity where we work—whether it’s in the medical field if you are in pre-med, or legal. I’d been in pre-med and switched to philosophy, so there were some real challenges in terms of a career service opportunity. There was an opportunity if you were interested in political philosophy, an opportunity to work as an intern in the House Minority Leader’s office. I applied for the position, and I was successful in gaining it. I went to Washington—it was in 1971 when I was nineteen years old—for three months, working as an intern in his office.

Smith: And how did you get it? What was the selection process?

Raiman: I believe it was my academic credentials. And I also was from Michigan. But a lot of the students from Kalamazoo College were from Michigan as well.

Smith: Did you interview with him for the job?

Raiman: No, I did not. I interviewed on campus with the individual in charge of the program.

Smith: Okay. And how many interns were there in the Minority Leader’s office?

Raiman: During a three-month period in spring—there was a guy who was there with me who was from Michigan State. I was very fortunate, as they were short one staff person and they asked me if I would take that position. So I did case work in the House Minority Leader’s office for my internship, and the other intern worked in the mailroom.
Smith: What was your first impression of Gerald Ford? Had you met him before?

Raiman: I don’t believe that I had met him before. When I came into the office I had the chance. He greeted us and talked with us initially as an introduction. I was very impressed, and I was very quiet, listening and thinking, “Oh, wow, this is a tremendous opportunity and I want to do the very best I can.” He was very busy as the House Minority Leader, and I was doing my job on the staff.

Smith: And how was the office organized? Who was in charge? How did things function? How did priorities get set, carried out?

Raiman: Well, there was Frank Meyer, his administrative assistant, with whom I worked. Mildred Leonard was his personal secretary. There was Anne Kamstra, who was the receptionist in the office, and there were a number of other people. It was funny because almost all of the individuals in the office who reported to him were older, single women. A number of them from the Christian Reformed religion in that area and were known by other offices on the Hill as the six nuns. It was kind of interesting when I blew in and worked there.

Smith: Now, presumably there was the Minority Leader’s office, but then there was the local office, the office for serving the Michigan district?

Raiman: No.

Smith: They were one and the same?

Raiman: He was unusual. He was a very frugal person, and he had one office. A combination of the House Minority Leader’s office, as well as his congressional office.

Smith: Tell us about his frugality.

Raiman: His frugality? I think it was legendary. It was reflected in how the office operated, being very careful about how you spent taxpayer dollars, which I thought was a very, very good and positive thing. It was reflected, too, in
staff member salaries, though at that time I was getting paid – it was a paid internship - so that was wonderful.

Smith: And presumably answering mail was a religion?

Raiman: Yes, oh yes. I can comment on that because I did case work and was trying to help constituents solve their problems; that was a wonderful opportunity for me. I contacted the different agencies to solve visa problems or veterans problems and other issues. But we would also get mail from people who, you might say, was nut mail, for lack of a better word. Usually on yellow legal pads, written in green Magic Marker on every line.

Smith: With lots of exclamation marks?

Raiman: Yes. And he asked us to respond to all of those letters – to every single one from a constituent, and we did.

Smith: That’s interesting.

Smith: Did you see his temper?

Raiman: I heard it a couple of times although I didn’t see it. I was with him through a number of different jobs, and I certainly saw it a couple of times at the White House. But when I was working for him up on the Hill, a couple times he got ticked off about what on, on the floor of the House, or with certain individuals, and he would vent in his office. But it was not something you ever really saw. He was such a warm, friendly, caring person. He knew every person’s name. He knew about their family and their kids – the elevator operator, the guy who swept the hallways outside of the office, of staff members. And I remember thinking to myself - how can he remember all of this information? I was always impressed by that.

Smith: Did you ever resent on his behalf the whole Chevy Chase business, which was a euphemism for “this guy’s not bright enough to be president?” The
stereotype that was created of a guy who was physically clumsy and not as intellectually adept as he ought to be.

Raiman: Yes, it angered me. It angered me for a number of reasons. One, Ford is the most athletic president that this country has ever had. He was a Big Ten football player, tremendously successful; he was a tremendous swimmer – he swam every day, and he was a great skier. I remember when I was working on his confirmation hearings for the vice presidency, after we were successful, he and the family were going to Vail to go skiing. The Secret Service had a very difficult time because they could not find a Secret Service agent who could keep up with him and protect him on the slopes. They had to send an alert out all over the country to try and find agents who could protect him, who could ski as well or better than he.

But it also angered me because he opened himself up the media. Previously, my understanding was, in the Nixon administration and I’m sure other administrations, they restricted media access – when you could shoot film or not. And Ford just opened it up. So when he tripped coming down the jetway – they’d shoot it and show the same piece again and again. And that angered me.

Smith: Tell me the mood when you arrived in ’71. Those were eventual days, even before Watergate – clearly Vietnam was still very much on the front burner. How did that find reflection in the office?

Raiman: I think that everyone, certainly on Capitol Hill, and all around Washington, was very concerned about Vietnam because of the mood in the country reflected in the media and all of the demonstrations. It was the time of the Black Panthers and the White Panthers, and Rainbow Peoples Party, as well as demonstrations led by the SDS and other groups. So there was a lot of concern about it.
Smith: And some of that, in fact, spilled over to Grand Rapids when you had some urban violence in Grand Rapids. I believe on at least one occasion, his office was taken over by protesters.

Raiman: I’m not familiar with that at all. I was in college at the time. When I came to Washington as an intern I’d already been demonstrating against the war in Vietnam back in Michigan, when I was in college. And when I came to town, it was an interesting juxtaposition because I was in a different role now - I was part of the government.

Smith: Establishment.

Raiman: Yes, Establishment, which I had been protesting against. So it was an interesting juxtaposition for me, providing me with a very good perspective of both sides. And he was always very fair and open.

Smith: How did you and he handle that?

Raiman: Well, we had an interesting experience when I was an intern. I was in Washington with a number of my friends during the big May Day and other demonstrations. There were hundreds of thousands of people in the street. I felt very strongly against the war in Vietnam and I was also protesting against Richard Nixon as president. I’ve got to make that clear.

I was going to engage in the demonstrations the coming weekend, but I felt it was my responsibility to make sure that he knew. I had to be upfront with him. I’m a good Midwestern girl – open and honest – I didn’t want to cause any problems, but I wanted him to know. I also was concerned that if something happened to me; that they would know. It was the Friday before the big demonstrations, and there was a lot of concern in the city because the numbers of protesters were legion and they were not prepared for it. He was in the office and I asked if I could talk with him for just a moment. We literally stood right in the middle of the open area in the office, and I said, “Mr. Ford, I just wanted to let you know that I plan on participating in the demonstrations against the war in Vietnam this weekend.”
Meanwhile, in my peripheral vision I see his entire staff freaking out behind him. And he’s just talking with me. I said, “I wanted you to know this. I’m not stupid, I don’t believe in violence. I just feel very strongly about this and I want to participate and wanted you to know. If I’m not here on Monday, it’s because something has happened to me and I wanted you to know that.” And he looked at me and he said, “Gail, you need to do what you feel strongly about. You need to participate in those things you feel strongly about.” And I said, “Thank you, very much, Mr. Ford.”

Smith: And that’s how you addressed him – Mr. Ford?

Raiman: Yes.

Smith: You wonder if any of his children…

Raiman: I don’t think they were out there. In some ways I always wondered if he had a better understanding or appreciation for that kind of thing because of his children. The whole staff was – oh my God, what is Gail doing? I was just protesting like everybody else. There were incidents because the SDS was there. I did get tear gassed on my way to work on Monday, in the work outfit and everything. It’s kind of ironic. But something I’ll always, always remember, is talking with him about this. I wasn’t sure how he was going to react, but I really wanted to be honest with him, and he gave me his support.

Smith: I’m sure he appreciated your candor. When Watergate first occurred, of course it was widely dismissed. How did it evolve into something larger? During the ’72 campaign, where were you?

Raiman: I was in college, and part of that time I was in school in Europe.

Smith: Okay. So when did you next work with Ford?

Raiman: I had completed my three-month internship and was asked if I would stay and continue working, which is a wonderful compliment. But I was interested in going back to Kalamazoo College and completing my college education,
which I did. When I graduated from K, my plan was to get my PhD in philosophy and teach. But I needed a summer job to make some money and my mother said, “Gail, why don’t you call Ford’s district office and see if you can work there as a summer job?” To which I responded with a huge eye-roll—“Ohhhh, Mother.” But I did it, and the district office called the Washington office about me and it happened. That summer, which was the summer of 1973, I worked in his district office. As each person went on summer vacation, I did their job. And I saw him when he came back to the district, and I participated in some events.

Smith: It’s interesting because, for someone who had a safe seat, plus all the demands of the national job, one senses that he spent more time in the district than he had to.

Raiman: I wasn’t in a position to make that judgment, but he did come back often and there were dinners and events in town. He really wanted to meet and talk with his constituents. He was totally committed to his constituents. When he was in town, different groups would come in, different individuals, and he went out to different dinners and events. So he was there.

Smith: He really liked people.

Raiman: Yes, he did. He loved people, and he really did like getting out and meeting with folks and finding out what was on their minds. That was his job and he really relished that.

Smith: And he was seemingly comfortable with all kinds of people?

Raiman: Yes, from all walks of life. And I can attest to that because I was working in the office when everybody and anybody would come in and talk with him.

Smith: Really? Like?

Raiman: He was very comfortable with people from all walks of life, with different needs. A couple of people who I thought, “Holy cow, should we even be
talking to this individual?” He didn’t spend tons of time with them, but he was always there and paid attention. He was always totally respectful and open and responsive.

Smith: I’ve always wondered what kind of support he had in the African-American community. Obviously, it tends to vote Democratic, but you wonder on the personal level, how’d he get along with people?

Raiman: He was such an open, warm person he just really liked everyone.

Smith: How pervasive was the Christian Reformed culture, for lack of a better word? Years ago it blanketed West Michigan, defined it. In some ways it’s almost amusing to modern sensibilities, and clearly it was something that he had to factor into his own political outlook. To people who didn’t know West Michigan, the West Michigan that produced Jerry Ford, what would you tell them?

Raiman: It was really, truly Midwestern. Very open, frank, and friendly. He was that way. I think a lot of us Midwesterners are that way. We are comfortable and not interested in trying to be important or something we’re not - just being there to serve. And he reflected that Midwestern sense.

Now, the Christian Reformed Church. What they brought into the culture was an increased religious conservatism: no drinking, no dancing, no this. And it was there as an influence, but I don’t see that it had a real impact on him. He was their representative and the local joke is: whenever there are three people in the Christian Reformed community they form their own church, which is more conservative than its predecessor. The Christian Reformed, the Dutch Reformed, it has different grades of conservatism. My step-mother was brought up Netherlands Reformed, so I’m familiar with this. But she broke away.

It was a backdrop at that time and it has changed dramatically over the years.

Smith: But certainly his fiscal conservatism would appeal…
Raiman: Tremendously. They were in sync.

Smith: So the vice presidential nomination – where were you when all that happened?

Raiman: Well, to backtrack, when I was working in his district office in Grand Rapids, he asked me if I would be interested in working for him in Washington in the House Minority Leader’s office. And I said thank you, but no. I’m going to grad school in philosophy and I’m going to teach. And he responded, “Well, Gail, really think about it, okay?” And he left and came back to the district a few weeks later and called me into his office and said, “Gail, I really think that you are much too smart to waste your time getting your PhD in philosophy, and then teaching the rest of your life. You need to come to Washington and work for me and go to law school at night.” I knew how hard he worked and I’m kind of a workaholic too.

Smith: He really was a workaholic, wasn’t he?

Raiman: Yes he was. He worked late as I did. So I was familiar with this. And my thought was, if I did that, I would never get to law school at night. So I told him no, thank you very much, but I’m not interested. And he went back to Washington again and a number of weeks later he came back and he called me into his office to talk about working for him again. I can’t believe this – I was twenty-one years old and I told the House Minority Leader that I would consider it if was a part-time position. I actually said that to him. Which I cannot believe to this day. Anyway, twenty-one and what did I know?

So he said, “Okay, let me check in Washington and I’ll get back to you.” I said thank you, and I didn’t expect anything to happen. So the next time he was in town he called me into his office and he told me he had great news for me. And so I thought he probably had a part-time position, and I was thinking holy cow, now I’m going to law school. So I met with him and he said, “I have a full-time position for you in my political division and you can start right now.” And I said, “I’m sorry Mr. Ford, I told you I really didn’t want to
do that, and I’m going to go to grad school in philosophy. But thank you very much.”

So that was, I think, the fourth time he approached this topic with me, and I figured that would be the last time. My internship ended. When I got on the campus I stood there and had an epiphany. Why am I going to do this? My epiphany was totally disconnected with Ford or anything we’d said. I thought - if I’m going to be here for five years and study all this time, and I’m going to teach for the rest of my life – no, do I want to do that – no. I want to “make a difference”. I was there with my mother and my brother and I said, “I’m not even enrolling. Let’s turn around and go home.” They were very concerned because of my father, who was chief of staff and chief of surgery at Blodgett Medical Center. And as a surgeon, you could probably anticipate he was a perfectionist, and this action was an indication that I wasn’t perfect. A big surprise. But they were concerned because my father was going to be so angry.

So we went home, and boy, they were right. My father was absolutely livid. We got in this huge fight, and it was horrible. We weren’t speaking to each other, and there I am now, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, wondering, “Okay, here I am a philosophy major in Grand Rapids, Michigan in this really terrible economy, and what am I going to do?” And fortunately, for me, I was in the right place at the right time. I think it was four days later, Agnew resigned from the vice presidency, Nixon named Ford to be his vice president, and I got phone calls from Ford’s office saying, “Get to Washington as fast as you can.” I didn’t need to be asked again.

Three days later I was on an airplane, had three suitcases, and I flew to Washington, DC – National Airport – staff picked me up and took me and my suitcases over to the Minority Leader’s office. We had a separate office where we were going to work on the confirmation hearings for the vice presidency. They put my suitcases in the corner and said, “Here’s your desk, Gail.” And then introduced me to Bob Hartmann, who was his chief of staff, who was
going to be heading the confirmation team. I’d be working with the attorneys on Ford’s confirmation hearings for the vice presidency before the House Judiciary and Senate Rules (committees).

Smith: Did that include Phil Buchen?

Raiman: In fact, I’m not sure – my biggest involvement was with Bill Kramer, former member of Congress, with the law firm, Kramer, Haber and Becker. Bill Kramer, Benton Becker, and a gentleman who is now my husband, Bob Hynes who had worked with Ford as Minority Counsel on the House Rules Committee. Bob left the year earlier to go to NBC and Ford contacted him and asked him to take a leave of absence and come back and work with the team on his confirmation hearings at that time.

Smith: Tell us about Bob Hartmann. Because he was clearly a pivotal figure in the Ford story.

Raiman: It is very funny, because when I was an intern in Ford’s office, I really did not see him because he was the Minority Sergeant at Arms of the House, and he had an office downstairs, along with his secretary. One day, though, I had to talk with him about some issue and I remember people in the office kind of twittering, like being a little nervous about calling him on the phone. And I was just an intern. I was like, “Holy cow.” I had no choice, so I called downstairs and he picked up the phone, “HARTMANN.” So I went, “RAIMAN.” And he answered my questions, and I was on my way.

When Ford was talking to me about working for him in Washington, he said, “Gail, you’ll be working with Bob Hartmann. Bob can be a little difficult at times, but he’s a good guy and you’ll enjoy working with him.” Well, that was kind of an understatement, as you probably know. It was amusing, when I look back on it. What I also didn’t know until quite some time later, is that Vice President-designate Ford told Bob Hartmann that I was going to work for him. He did not get to pick his own person.

Smith: Oh, really.
Raiman: Which I find kind of interesting. And I was shocked when I found out. That explained some things, certainly. So I arrived on the scene, just out of college. “Hello, here I am.” And very funny when we started – he was very particular about spelling his name correctly because Hartmann had two n’s and lots of people spelled it with only with one. And of course, when I first came on board I spelled it with one n, and that was one of my first experiences with him telling me I spelled his name wrong. He had put my name on some materials and he’d spelled my first name wrong. Gail is spelled G-A-I-L, but he was spelling it G-A-Y-L-E, and I mentioned to him very politely that he had spelled my name wrong as well. And he corrected it, that was fine and off we went.

He was an incredible mentor. I really looked to him and saw how he handled situations. He had been the Washington bureau chief for the LA Times for fifteen years. So through his working relationships with the news media, having been a member of the news media, I saw how he operated and dealt with politics which was tremendously insightful for me. It was a baptism by fire. When I arrived, it was the first time the Twenty-fifth Amendment was being put into practice. We were really going to be setting precedent with these hearings. The country was ripped apart by Watergate and the war in Vietnam. It was a siege mentality. And it was horrible. And I’m popped down right in the middle of it, fresh out of college. I’m answering phone calls from the Washington Post, from the networks, everything, wanting to know all about the hearings, the details and everything else. I was also trying to deal with people making false accusations, going to the media and having to disprove what these were. One of the things I was responsible for were Ford’s political contribution files, which were locked up in a very safe place. That was one of my responsibilities in terms of checking against accusations. And when I think back on it, Richard, I am just out of college and twenty-one years old, and I had this incredible responsibility.

Smith: What kinds of allegations were you having to refute?
Raiman: Oh, that some organization gave him money or not, or how much, or who gave it – things like that. Whether it was a foreign country – Korea or some big businessman or something like that. And I’ll tell you, I poured over those files backwards, forwards, every way for my job, and I continued to do that when I moved over to the White House with him later, working with the General Counsel’s office. The man was so clean, precise, everything was in its place and there was absolutely nothing that even had to be explained. It was all to the letter.

Smith: Remember Mr. Winter-Berger.

Raiman: Yes, I do.

Smith: What was his story?

Raiman: I kind of remember - because he had leaked this to the media and one of the things he said is he’d come to Ford’s office and spoken with two of the people who were upfront. Their memory is that they never saw him before in their lives. I’m trying to remember if he said he contributed some money or something – I can’t remember. But I checked everything and the whole thing proved totally false. There was something that involved Korea, as well. That was another issue where there was nothing there. But it was fascinating to me that these people would actually lie and put out all this misinformation to hurt an individual’s reputation when there was absolutely nothing there whatsoever.

So I had a baptism by fire in that position. I was dealing with the national news media in the middle of Ford’s confirmation hearings for the vice presidency, and the confirmation hearings in the middle of Watergate.

Smith: Let me get back to Hartmann because Ford’s loyalty to Hartmann was such that at the White House there were, in effect, two separate speechwriting operations. There was the official one which Hartmann was doing, and then there was the David Gergen, eventually Dick Cheney unofficial one. And it’s curious because of what it says about Ford. Clearly there were problems and
he was prepared to accommodate them, in some ways, rather than making them accommodate him. And certainly there were any number of people who thought to themselves, why doesn’t he just get rid of people or whatever. One senses that he was aware of Hartmann’s shortcomings, but they were dwarfed by his contributions and his own sense of loyalty. Is that a fair description?

Raiman: Some of it is. My take, which might be a little different than yours because I was right there where the rubber meets the road through all of this, is that Bob Hartmann was tremendous. I mean, he had Ford’s back and he was someone who would tell him if something was wrong - this looks horrible, this should not happen, you cannot say this, you cannot do that.

Smith: He in some ways saved Ford from himself when Haig was pulling strings, trying to get a commitment on a pardon.

Raiman: Yes. Oh, in many different ways he was doing that. He was incredible. He really put himself at risk and in jeopardy through all different situations. I remember too, when Ford was vice president, I was in the secure area there. The Nixon people would send over speeches for Ford to give all the time and Hartmann would sit in his office and just rip them up. Of course, they hated him because he was not letting Ford be an apologist for Nixon. The pressure was so intense, and if you look back on the record, during that time period, you’ll find that Gerald Ford was very rarely in Washington.

Smith: Right.

Raiman: And the reason why was to get him out of town, so he could speak and do his own thing. And Hartmann was doing the speeches with a different focus, to keep him away from that mess.

Smith: Clearly, there were people in the Nixon White House – and this probably applies to every vice president – particularly under these circumstances, there were people in the Nixon White House who thought the vice president was insufficiently loyal or outspoken, or all of these things. Was there a tension
that you sensed? And I’m not talking about the principles, but at the staff level.

Raiman: Well, definitely, because they – the Nixon people – really wanted Gerald Ford to be an apologist – that’s my view – for Richard Nixon. Now my view is colored because I really did not like Richard Nixon in any way, shape or form. And that happened when I was in college and I felt that way very strongly. I was certainly wasn’t announcing it to the world, given my position, but I saw this every day. And they were frustrated because Hartmann was the chief of staff, and he was the interceptor, and there were certainly attempts to go around him.

Smith: Which is interesting because it explains why long before August of ’74, for example, Al Haig would have reason to resent Bob Hartmann.

Raiman: Yes, oh yes. It was not pretty. And Hartmann was protecting Ford. And Ford was very open, warm, friendly, and a very trusting individual. The fact of the matter is, there are some individuals you cannot and should not trust.

Smith: So Hartmann was performing a function vital to Ford’s success, and in some ways taking a lot of the heat himself so that Ford didn’t have to.

Raiman: He took a tremendous amount of heat. He did. A lot of heat, a lot of flack in the media, particularly, as well. But Hartmann was pretty good at giving flack back through the media as well. He had a particular talent for that.

Smith: Pretty good leaker.

Raiman: That’s what I understand.

Smith: One of the great, overriding enigmas of that period – sure, he wasn’t vice president terribly long – but it’s an utterly unique vice presidency. And he was in a terribly awkward situation. And he was, by nature, a loyalist and all of that. But as you say, he was out of town a lot. So the question arises, he could never have a transition, for obvious reasons.
Raiman: That’s correct.

Smith: He couldn’t say or do anything that gave the slightest impression that he was even thinking about…

Raiman: I was talking to the news media, at least being an intermediary for these calls, because they were so high level at this point. You can’t even imagine. And the questions were, of course, coming up all the time because the media was anticipating what’s happening, with tapes and everything. The whole thing was blowing up. But with Hartmann in this role – one thing you have to remember, and I don’t know what the numbers are – I think Ford’s congressional staff was about fourteen people. But what you have to realize is those were the fourteen people who went over to be in the vice president’s staff. Now, can you imagine the vice president of the United States having a staff of fourteen people? Well, Hartmann hired a few more people, brought Jack Marsh on board in terms of congressional relations and a couple of other people – Jerry terHorst in terms of press secretary – things like that. It was also such a short period of time. You are exactly right about the transition. I remember all the time being so careful to make sure whatever we said or did could in no way be interpreted as desiring a transition –Ford was not interested in becoming president of the United States.

Smith: Hartmann liked a drink or two. After a couple of drinks, did that conversation ever take place? Did he talk about when you were all going to the White House?

Raiman: No. No, he did not. He was very quiet and again, I think it was his loyalty to Ford, and that was not something that I think he would ever have done. Very quiet, everything was kept between people. I was right there in the secure area with the Vice President and Hartmann, and was in the middle of this. Now, what they said to each other was in complete privacy, but there was no…

Smith: Did you ever hear him say anything – the Vice President – say anything that might be interpreted as anticipating a possible change?
Gail Raiman: I remember a situation, I don’t know who it was, who brought something like that up…and he totally and immediately discounted it. That was his response to that.

I have one interesting story – about Ford’s character, during the brief time in the vice president’s office. Of course, at that point they were starting to conduct Secret Service investigations of the staff. I was up for top secret clearance, and they were interviewing everybody under the sun about me – just like they do with everybody. And I went through the process, and I remember being in the office. Bob Hartmann had been in with the Vice President, came out, walked past my desk and said, “Gail, the FBI is not approving you to work here in Vice President Ford’s office.”

If somebody told me that now, I would really be upset. Then, I was very young, but I was also so intent, we were working so hard because of all the crises happening, that I just kind of went, “Okay.” And just kept working. I didn’t have time to sit and really think about it. I recognized there was a problem and what am I going to do? But I was so busy. And I remember going home that night and thinking, “There’s nothing I can really do about it. I wonder what that’s all about, and why wouldn’t they?” And all I could figure out was that protesting against the war in Vietnam, protesting against Richard Nixon were the reasons. There was nothing else really in my background that would have caused them concern, as far as what I saw.

I don’t know how many days it was or what happened because it’s a kind of a blur at this point, but a number of days later Bob Hartmann came over to me and says, “You’re going to continue to work here. The Vice President told the FBI that you were going to continue to work for him.”

Benton Becker told us a wonderful story that when Chief Justice Earl Warren died during that period, and Benton said, “It might be a nice gesture if you went up and paid your respects,” because Warren was lying in state at the Court. And of course, there was the Warren Commission in addition to everything else. And Ford was kind of thinking, well the White House
probably wouldn’t like that very much. But he took it under advice. He clearly was going to think about it. And later in the day Benton discovered through other parties, that the Vice President had taken it upon himself to go up to the Supreme Court and to place a wreath at the casket and pay his respects. And sure enough, Nixon gave him hell.

Raiman: He’s this warm and gentle guy and you’d talk to him and he’d smile and he’d listen. He was a very strong individual. With me – think about this – he doesn’t know me very well; he got me to work for him. I came there, I worked very, very hard; he knew that I was very loyal, and the FBI is telling him they will not approve me. I don’t know what in heck they showed him, I don’t want to see my report, I’d probably get ticked off. He saw it all and they said she should not be working for you, and he told them he didn’t care what they had to say, I was going to. Period. Can you imagine how much that meant to me and how I felt?

Smith: Oh, sure.

Raiman: That was incredible.

Smith: Tell me about the workaholic, because Saturdays he was in the office. There are people who think he would have been in on Sunday if he could get people to work with him. And it was something that continued really to the end of his life.

Raiman: Well, I saw it just when I was an intern on the Hill for the first time, because I’d come in early – I’m an early bird. I’m a workaholic, too. So I was even a workaholic intern, and I’d come in early and I made coffee. When staff realized that I was there early when he was there, they asked me to give him cup of coffee. I hadn’t because I didn’t want to interrupt him. So I’d load up a cup of coffee, take it in, say, “Good morning, Mr. Ford,” and deliver it. Well, what was really funny is that – I’d been doing this for probably about a month – and one of the women from up in the front office talked with me and said, “Gail, if you are giving Mr. Ford coffee in the morning, you really need
to use the very attractive bone china cups and saucers that are there. That’s what we give him his coffee in.” I hadn’t even thought about it. I’m giving him the old mugs that the rest of the staff uses and he never said peep to me. I don’t think he said peep to them. I think they probably wondered why he had the mugs on his desk. My whole point is, he was there early, and would work late. Now, I didn’t see it so much when I was an intern because I left fairly early.

While working on the confirmation hearings for the vice presidency, I left where I lived, which wasn’t that far away, at six in the morning. I was there at seven in the morning to begin work and I used to work until nine, at least, at night. That was during the confirmation hearings for the vice presidency, and that was seven days a week, and it had to be. And he was always there. It wasn’t as if we were working and he wasn’t. He was there sometimes longer than we were. So I didn’t think of it as a good or bad thing, I thought of it as here we are all together.

Smith: Was there ever any significant threat to his confirmation? One gets the sense that it was as smooth as the process could be. Of course, it was the first time.

Raiman: It was the first time and people were trying to sabotage it through the media. And there were members of Congress who wanted to do what they could to make sure it didn’t happen. I remember sitting in the hearings with Liz Holtzman, and if you go back and hear that…

Smith: Was it personal? Ideological? Some combination of the two?

Raiman: I don’t know. But I was so shocked at how mean spirited and personal it was. Father Drinan – here’s this Catholic priest, and of course he’s very liberal, but I was shocked. It was really disappointing for me to see. In preparing for the hearings, we uncovered everything. I remember us having Betty Ford’s dental bills. And we had binders with all this information that we prepared. I helped put the binders together and they were asking about Betty Ford’s dental bills. It was so shocking it was unbelievable.
Smith: The fact that she had been to a psychiatrist, was that in play?

Raiman: No. It really wasn’t. And he was so good in addressing everything. He had the information in his books, and he was very strong in making his statements.

Smith: Did you know at that point that she had a problem, however euphemistically defined?

Raiman: No. Not then. I think there was just a little bit of a buzz when I was in the White House.

Smith: But it was not something in the investigation, the vice presidential investigation – something that came up?

Raiman: No. No there wasn’t.

Smith: So he becomes vice president, then what’s your role?

Raiman: Well, we all, fourteen or so of us, have to clean up all the files and move, get everything together, and move over very quickly to our office in the Old Executive Office Building. It was a very bizarre situation. It had never been done before, there was no transition, it was here you are. And Bob Hartmann was his chief of staff trying to set up this operation, and Bob, with his personality, didn’t want anybody in conflict with him. He wanted to assert that he was, indeed, the boss. I certainly saw examples of that when I was there, having people come in to talk about positions and he was not as warm and welcoming as he could have been or should have been. But his primary focus was the success of Gerald Ford.

Smith: We’ve been told that he, like everyone who has ever held the office, to varying degrees, didn’t really like the vice presidency a whole lot. When you think of his openness and his temperament, and then shoehorn that into this unique circumstance – you really couldn’t say what was on your mind.

Raiman: And he was in a particularly difficult position. Let’s be frank about it. The war in Vietnam continued and every day new, terrible information was
coming out about Nixon, learning that Nixon had lied about the tapes and lied about what he said. And Rosemary Woods – the missing excerpts. Every day it was a new revelation and the media were on a feeding frenzy. And it was every day. In our office where I was, there were sixteen telephone lines, and there were times when every single one of them would be ringing with reporters calling for this, that or the other thing.

Smith: It’s interesting, because one thing I associate with him is unflappability. I assume he maintained that, even under the pressure of that uniquely pressure-full time?

Raiman: Yes, he did. There were a couple of times, I’m sure, when he was frustrated - you could hear something coming from the office, and you’d kind of go whoa, because this was such a rare occurrence. I’m sure he was frustrated, and I’m sure because there were so many things going on with the Nixon people trying to keep him under control, or make him an apologist for Nixon, or say, “Hey, everything is just fine here.” If he remained in town, he would be forced more so to do that, and that’s why I mentioned getting him out of town was key to this. I’m sure he did not enjoy being away from his family, his wife and kids that much, but he was out there. And there were a couple of nice trips that combined some time away, which was good for him, as well. But it was such a difficult time, as you know. One of the most terrible times in this country’s history.

Smith: I only ever heard him speak disparagingly of two people. And the worst he could come up with was, “He’s a bad man.” And one of them was Gordon Liddy and the other was John Dean.

Raiman: I can understand that. I had a friend who worked for John Dean. And she tried her darnedest to not work for John Dean. According to her, he had her going to phone booths around town and being at certain phone booths at certain times, taking messages and bringing them back to the office.

Smith: Why?
Raiman: She didn’t know why. Once she was instructed to go to a movie theater and sit there for some message.

Smith: Really?

Raiman: Really, she could not deal with this. She worked in the Nixon White House. It just reinforced my feelings about that, I must tell you.

Smith: Was there a moment when it dawned on you that this was all going to end badly? That, in fact, the unthinkable is inevitable?

Raiman: With Nixon? To me it was not an “end badly.” I wasn’t sitting there cheering for Ford to be president of the United States, because I know he wasn’t interested in it. But my concern was that Nixon really did need to go, because I saw examples that increasingly showed that it was getting worse and worse. And he was getting worse and worse and more disjointed from what was actually going on. We were overwhelmed because of all the rumors. And I remember getting all kinds of calls about who was in Ford’s office - all of that kind of stuff, and what was going to happen.

I remember Ron Nessen, who was then with NBC news, was one of the calls I picked up. My feeling working with the news media was always been, I’m going to be a straight shooter. And I’m not going to say something that’s not true or lead them the wrong way. And I am pretty good at doing that, but I knew there were certain things that I could not say or was not going to say. And I remember Ron, with NBC News. I was sitting there, picking up call after call, and Ron – I cannot remember exactly what it was – but [he] really asked the question. And I was like, holy cow, now what am I going to do? And what I did was say - as I knew he’d been bicycling on the George Washington Parkway bike trail before, because we’d talked on trips. “Ron, have you done any bicycling on the George Washington Parkway bike trail lately?” Because, Richard, I thought, “What am I going to do?” And Ron goes, “Huh? What?” And he repeated it, and I think he understood that I
couldn’t go anywhere, but I wasn’t going to say anything. It was all happening, and then it just exploded.

Smith: Woodward and Bernstein famously portrayed Nixon in the final stages of his presidency as a man, shall we say, not all together in control. Was that portrait of the president something that people were aware of at the time? Was there a sense that this presidency was coming unglued?

Raiman: It’s a very difficult question to answer, Richard, because you had the media who was feeding that, because they wanted to destroy Nixon. And you had other people who were trying to support him, and he was making it very difficult to do that. And then the rest of us were kind of sitting in the middle going, “Holy cow.” And my sense - and I did not see it because I was not in the White House, I didn’t see Nixon - but certainly my sense internally was that he was not in as great a mental shape as he should be. That was my impression. That’s not a fact, and I didn’t have anybody tell me that.

Smith: Understood.

Raiman: I was not aware of the drinking issue at all, but it just seemed he was not all with it. It was coming apart.

Smith: I understand that within the vice presidential office people were beyond discreet – self-disciplined, buttoned-up. Did Hartmann, for example, remind everyone of the need to be careful in what was said? Or was there that awareness of the constant danger that you were all in, just in terms of the natural kind of gossip that most people would indulge in.

Raiman: We really didn’t. I remember being asked about this numerous times. I was very conscious, and certainly everybody I knew at work there was. We didn’t talk about what we did outside the office. Period. When I met people, I didn’t tell them where I worked.

Smith: Really?
Raiman: Really. I made up stuff because I wasn’t going to tell people where I worked and put myself in a difficult position. I had a situation when I was at the White House, I was called in. My friend, who was head of the FBI at the White House, and I had breakfast together and he was asking me all kinds of questions about had I seen anything or talked with anybody unusual. I’d basically been working on the State of the Union Address 24/7 for the past three weeks. And I’m saying, “No, I don’t know what you are talking about.” And he kept asking me these questions. Finally I said, “George, what?” And he says, “Well, I’ve gotten a call and I’ve been asked to bring you over to the Old Executive Office Building for a meeting.” I said, “With whom?” He said, “I don’t know.” He’s the head of the FBI at the White House – “I don’t know”? And I said, “What’s it about?” “I don’t know.” He was really upset and I was searching in my mind about what could this be – and scared – “Oh, my. Did they see my boyfriend’s car out in front of my apartment at one in the morning?” It was kind of silly. I was really nervous, particularly because he was so nervous. So he made this appointment – this is hilarious – it was George Sanders, who is head of the FBI at the White House. He said, “Gail, I’m going to be at your office, on the first floor of the West Wing, at X time. I’m going to take you over to this office and leave you there to be interviewed for this meeting. I was told I could not be there. I was told I could not even wait for you there. I’m going to be waiting around the hall up where they cannot see me. So when you come out, walk down that hall and I will be there and we will walk back together.” Well, how about that? I’m like – what is this?

So George takes me over to an empty office in the Old Executive Office Building. I walked in, there is a woman at the desk, the receptionist or whatever. And then I’m taken into an inner room, there’s a desk and there’s a guy sitting across with a light and he starts asking me all kinds of questions about what have I noticed unusual, have I talked with anybody unusual, have I…? And I’m answering honestly. No, and I don’t know what you are talking about, and no.
And finally – the guy was turning more and more red – just exploded and said, “Don’t you know what in hell is going on around you?” And I said, “I guess not.” Which made him angry, too. And he said, “There is a Russian spy who has been tapping your telephone.” Well, that was quite a surprise to me. He said, “I can’t believe you don’t know what’s going on right under your nose where you live. He moved in right below you a number of weeks ago and he’s been tapping your phone.”

This evidently happened over Christmas or right after Christmas. Well, for those first three weeks in January, all I did was work on the State of the Union Address. So I’d be going in at seven in the morning and going home at nine, ten or eleven every night. Well, I’m not seeing anything, okay? I’d try to get some sleep before I’d go in the next day. I explained that to him. That didn’t particularly give him any pause, but evidently this happened and he was all alarmed and upset about it. And obviously they found out because they were tapping his phone, and found out he was tapping my phone. I was not concerned because I didn’t say anything, so I felt okay about that. In some ways I was relieved. So I was at least able to tell my friend at the FBI what happened.

This was obviously the CIA, who was not telling the FBI what was going on. I thought that was interesting during this whole time where we were trying to broach the whole topic of détente, which we were so focused on with Mr. Kissinger at the White House.

You also asked a question before that I wanted to address a little bit about the different speechwriting operations in the White House. It is kind of interesting. I have a little different take on Hartmann and his team doing the speechwriting. As you know, because you’ve talked with a lot of people, the President liked to have different views. He liked people to come in and make the case for different sides of the issues so he could hear both sides of the issue and then get the best. A kind of competitive approach. And I don’t think, in some ways, it’s the greatest for team building because you end up having
people vying against each other. But with Hartmann and the team, I worked in that area like they did, I thought they were doing a very, very good job. But I think, in some cases, you have people who, politically wanted to take that over, or get their own view in. The State of the Union Addresses were bloodbaths. I’ve never seen anything like it. They were bloodbaths – just to get your sentence in, or this sentence out. So I look at it all somewhat in that way, in terms of having more of a competition. That’s perhaps a more friendly approach, but to be getting these drafts and different ideas so he would have the benefit of that.

Now how people operated in that system, I had problems with because I saw how up close and personal it was, which I did not like.

Smith: The President clearly was an Eagle Scout in every sense of the world, and chose to find the good in people. Which in some ways leaves you vulnerable.

Raiman: Yes it does.

Smith: And in some ways, Hartmann offset some of that, playing the role…

Raiman: Yes, he did. A very important role, because he really protected him in some ways, or brought him back, or prevented an opposing view very strongly to one that had perhaps more access to the President.

Smith: Which again, puts Hartmann’s role in a different perspective – a very useful perspective. It would also tell you something about Ford’s loyalty to Hartmann. I mean, recognizing the unique service that he provided. Were there people who tried to take advantage of that aspect of the President’s personality?

Raiman: I think so.

Smith: Yeah. It would be surprising if there weren’t.

Raiman: And it also frustrated Bob Hartmann. But you know, the White House is very, very political, and lots of times you’re not getting stabbed in the back,
you're getting stabbed in the stomach. It's an incredible place to work, and you have to understand the level of stress and competition.

Smith: When did you find out he was going to be president?

Raiman: It was right before. Because then I was involved immediately. It was before it was public. It still hadn't been announced, but it was right before because I was helping putting together the list for the ceremony in the White House.

Smith: Okay. And were you at the Nixon farewell?

Raiman: No.

Smith: Because afterwards there was a reception, and you could see the Nixon people staying away rather than going. Which again, you certainly can understand, given the emotions of the time. But it gives rise to a larger question of how much difficulty was there meshing the Nixon people. Rumsfeld was very frank in saying he thought he should have cleared house across the board very early on. They should have been more ruthless. Again, classic Gerald Ford, he didn't want to tar all the Nixon people with guilt – most of them were innocent. Secondly, there were lots of very talented people. And third, he needed some degree of continuity. He needed to keep a government running. So all of those factors came into play, but it does raise a question: how much friction was there between the Nixon people and the incoming Ford people?

Raiman: When I came into the White House, the Nixon people who remained there in their offices – and it was interesting to me, Richard, in fact, I was frankly really disappointed – shocked and disappointed – because of where my office was I could see people going up and down and around the corner and talking. And I would see Ford people coming in and moving in their offices and I would see the Nixon people the Ford people to each other. That really angered me.

Smith: Wow.
Raiman: And I thought, well, who in hell are you? And I’m all for working together, but what happened was, there really wasn’t a lot of working together. They weren’t interested. They felt they were superior, they should be there, a wrong had been done. They were interested, I’m sure, in preserving themselves. But that was one of the biggest mistakes, I believe - that they did not really clean house. Because my view is they worked against Ford internally.

Smith: And that’s where you get this notion there’s “the Grand Rapids crowd,” which was the euphemism for the people on the Hill, the people around Ford who were deemed to be not quite up to the job.

Raiman: Yes. I was part of that crowd, just because I was a member of his staff coming in. But I don’t think that would have had anything to do with it. On reflection, they were really under siege because look at what happened to their boss. But it was mean spirited for the people coming in. That’s what I saw. When we first came over I saw them not helping, not cooperating, but trying to find ways to undermine what Ford was trying to accomplish for the country.

Smith: And where were you physically when you first moved into the White House?

Raiman: I was in what is now the Vice President’s office, and that is on the first floor of the West Wing. At my desk I could look down the hall and see the President’s office, the Oval Office. I had Rumsfeld and then Cheney in the office on the right, and down the hall, Kissinger’s office on the left. So we were in prime real estate.

Smith: Phil Buchen was?

Raiman: Upstairs. And the people in the Domestic Counsel and Government Relations were upstairs as well. It really was Kissinger, Hartmann, Rumsfeld and Cheney and Jack Marsh. And the Oval Office. Those were the guys on the first floor of the West Wing, and then other folks were upstairs and then more over in the Old Executive Office Building.
Smith: Was it different under Rumsfeld and Cheney?

Raiman: Yes.

Smith: How so?

Raiman: I think it was more in terms of their personality and outlook on life. Rumsfeld was going to do what he thought he should do, no matter – he did not take advice or even think about anybody else. Frankly, he was going to do X, Y, or Z. And just do it. And not, perhaps, in the kindest way. Though there are some things, of course, you can’t be kind about. But it really set a tone, and a very adversarial one in the West Wing and other places. Very much so.

Smith: Unnecessarily.

Raiman: Unnecessarily. There are times for it, as I said, and certainly support that. But this was unnecessary - his decision about what should be done or shouldn’t be done - and had a lot of people up in arms. He was not somebody who would listen to anybody’s concerns or other ideas. And when he left and Dick Cheney came in - Dick was schooled by Don – but there was not as much “in your face” behavior.

Smith: Did the pardon take you by surprise?

Raiman: A little bit. Because I knew how people would feel about it, certainly where I was coming from. My feeling was that it was the right decision to make for a number of reasons. One, I personally thought that Nixon was really having psychological problems. In addition to that, we’d get the President’s schedule every day. And every day there were hours scheduled for meetings with Nixon’s attorneys. And how can you run the country when you are spending all of your time dealing with legal questions about the tapes and everything else. And he was spending – instead of running the country in this terrible situation we were in – the first time this had happened with a president and the war and everything else, he was spending hours every day meeting with
Nixon’s attorneys and other people affiliated with that. And that could not continue.

Smith: It’s interesting, because I’ve often wondered if the event that triggered this was his first press conference at the end of August, I think it was the 27th of August. Again, it’s that side of Ford – naïve is a pejorative – but he went into that press conference really believing that the press would want to talk about Cyprus and Greece, inflation, and all those things that he, as president, felt he should be dealing with. But the only thing they wanted to talk about was Nixon. And it didn’t go terribly well, and I think he left kind of angry – mostly at himself. And I’ve often wondered if that was, in some ways, the event. There was going to be a pardon at some point, but it dramatized to him the obsession that Washington had that was never going to go away until he pulled the plug. He was the one person who could make it go away.

Raiman: I don’t have personal knowledge of this, but as you know, Gerald Ford was not somebody polling the public to see what he should do, for God’s sake. His focus was what is the very best thing he could do for this country, and if they are going to toss him out because he’s doing something unpopular, so be it. “I’m going to do the best job I can”. So what I sensed was part of this, which you didn’t mention, was Nixon and where Nixon was in all of this – mentally, physically, and a recognition that – just get him out of there.

Smith: Do you know if Hartmann tried to talk him out of the pardon?

Raiman: No, I don’t know that. I wouldn’t think so.

Smith: What was it like once the news broke? It was a Sunday morning, early, and took the country by storm. I assume the phones were ringing off the hook. What was that like?

Raiman: Well, we were besieged, and there were a lot of angry people. Frankly, even angry reporters were coming at the story from a very skewed perspective. They were particularly interested in “How in hell can he do this?” and “The
country is outraged,” and all of that versus, “Oh what are the reasons behind this?” If I got that question, it was unusual.

Smith: Well, the wound was still raw.

Raiman: It was very raw. Nixon, as you know, hated the media, and it was mutual, it really was. And I’ll tell you, seeing Ford with the media again and again, and you know some of the folks I worked with at the White House, whether it was Tom DeFrank of Newsweek, Phil Jones of CBS and others – Ford was open. He was honest and he told it like it was. And they would ask him the most horrible questions time and again, and there were frankly times I was so surprised, the man just answered them and they were, too. But he was so open and they had such tremendous respect for him, I think that helped. But you had to get over that huge hump, so they got to know him better. They’d ask him – always – about the Nixon pardon, and it was not something he’d planned on talking about, but he would talk to them about it. Rather than these days, as you know, you find a way to deflect it and move on to your other topic. But he respected the questions on behalf of the country.

Smith: How long were you there?

Raiman: I was there until I was blacklisted by the Carter people, which is right up to the end.

Smith: Was the fall of Saigon the worst period?

Raiman: I think so. We had the Mayaguez incident when I was there, and that was certainly very, very difficult. I think I was probably there until three in the morning when this was all happening. We were trying to get more and more information. But I think the fall of Saigon was the worst. It really was just devastating and affected Ford deeply. All of us deeply. It was tough.

Smith: What was the best time?

Raiman: What was the best time?
Smith: The Bicentennial must have had all sorts of highlights.

Raiman: It was fun. During the Bicentennial I was so busy, I can tell you about all of the speeches. I was so exhausted from the Bicentennial that I didn’t even want to go to the events. I’m serious, because I’d been helping and working on the speeches so much that it was again, 24/7. But it was very exciting because it was the country’s bicentennial and there were wonderful celebrations. I think that was great. For me it was just those personal moments where you have a sense of how fortunate you are to be in service of the country with this great man. They were more personal moments, which I think we each had, versus one big event.

Smith: Were people slow to take the Reagan challenge seriously? That he would, in fact, run and that he would turn out to be as formidable an opponent?

Raiman: I don’t know.

Smith: And a variation of that, a question, purely and speculative: Did Reagan make Ford a better candidate? Which is not the same thing as whether he complicated his chances of winning. But did the competition that Reagan forced make Ford, for example, a better speaker, a better campaigner over the long haul?

Raiman: I think he probably did because he had that competitiveness. But I also think, and feel strongly, that – it was amazing to me – Ronald Reagan refused to do anything beforehand to help Ford.

Smith: That really was a problem.

Raiman: And I was very surprised and disappointed, thinking, what kind of man was this? He refused to even give one speech and that was such a disappointment. And he split the RNC in half. Then after everything was said and done with the election, I remember when Reagan was running, Ford was calling him up and saying, “Hey, what can I do to help you?” Which tells you a great deal about the individual. I don’t think I would have it in my gut to do that.
Smith: Were you at the convention?

Raiman: Yes, I was in ’76.

Smith: That was pretty bitter, wasn’t it?

Raiman: Yes, it was tough. It was really kind of scary in some ways, because he had such opposition, there was so much internal…it was tough. It was difficult. In fact, that was my first convention that I had been to, so this was all a new thing for me.

Smith: Did you go out there still uncertain as to the ultimate outcome?

Raiman: Well, I always felt that Ford was going to win. When I got there, seeing some of Reagan’s supporters and the vehemence and everything, was a little scary to me, to be honest with you. I was like, “Holy cow.” The rhetoric and the extremism.

Smith: Did you have any contact with Vice President Rockefeller?

Raiman: Well, just being in the complex. He and Bob Hartmann were good friends, so he would call up periodically. What cracked me up is that I would pick up the phone, and answering the phone, and he says, “Hi, oh Gail, hi! This is Nelson.” And it took me a while to figure out this was the vice president of the United States, and he’s placing his own phone calls and identifying himself as Nelson. So he was a great guy, a very warm individual. I really, really enjoyed working with him in general.

Smith: Mrs. Ford thought at the time it was a mistake to dump him from the ticket. Were there other people who felt that way?

Raiman: Yes. There were.

Smith: You can understand the case.

Raiman: Yes. Because he was so liberal, and they thought they had to have a more conservative individual running.
Smith: But it’s hard to see it actually bought you a lot of delegates. The irony is that Rockefeller, being a good soldier, turned over New York and Pennsylvania, to give you the margin of victory in the end. He didn’t get it from the South, although Mississippi did come through.

Raiman: Yes.

Smith: Did you think at the end of the campaign that you’d win? You’d clearly caught up.

Raiman: I did. I was on the last trip, the campaign trip, which was to Grand Rapids, as a matter of fact. I went to Grand Rapids, with the President.

Smith: It was very emotional.

Raiman: It was very emotional and, of course, we were all just dead tired.

Smith: Had he lost his voice by then?

Raiman: Yes, he had, toward the end. He was an incredible campaigner. I was on the other trips with him, and he could take catnaps for fifteen minutes and wake up totally refreshed. I can’t. Here I am in my twenties, and after these trips he’s running around talking to everybody and it’s incredible – I am walking into walls.

Smith: It’s interesting you say. By all accounts, he had extraordinary stamina.

Raiman: Yes he did. And he could do his catnaps and just wake up totally refreshed. I’m sure there were other people who could do the same thing, but me and a whole host of other people – I was so much younger than he – but I couldn’t sleep, and it’s very stressful, and you’re traveling and you know how that is. You are jumping around meeting people, and you can’t relax a moment at all. It’s dangerous. But was incredible. Grand Rapids was so moving and emotional. I remember I really thought we were going to win. It was very close and I was hopeful and praying. It was devastating. I was so sad and I was so hurt.
I remember going into work the next day and going into Bob Hartmann’s office, and – I probably was crying. And Bob sat at his desk, he smiled at me, and looked at me and he said, “You know, Gail, the sun is going to shine tomorrow.” And it helped. Hartmann really did have an understanding of what happens in politics. Of course, if you are at the White House you are invited to all these parties and everything – and some people didn’t realize that it was because of the position they are in. They think everyone thinks they are wonderful. And there were a couple of individuals on the White House staff who really were enjoying the parties and all these wonderful invitations, and they stopped like that. And they were devastated. Hartmann was like, “Well, yeah, that’s the game. I got it.”

Smith: We’ve talked to a lot of people who said it took the President a while to bounce back. Did you see that at all?

Raiman: About what?

Smith: That it took the President a while to bounce back.

Raiman: Yes. It was a tough time.

Smith: But in some ways it was almost easier for her.

Raiman: Oh, I think so.

Smith: Because she was looking forward to their post-politics life, anyway.

Raiman: Yes.

Smith: This had all been a detour, and they were going out to California and start a new life.

Raiman: But he had been in that role, so he was always traveling, he was always on, he was making decisions for the country, and then, can you imagine, one day you are doing it and then you are not. That’s pretty tough. I think he handled it very well. He ran because he felt it was very important for the country, for
him to be president and continue to bring the country back. So he was personally engaged in this.

Smith: Did you have any contact with the kids?

Raiman: I did when I was at the White House, periodically. With Liberty, the dog, kids would come through the White House. I didn’t do anything with them socially, but I knew them because they would be walking through. When I had Liberty in my office, I’d be talking to someone on the phone and I’d say, “Do you want to talk to Liberty?” They’d freak out. I’d have the dog snort in my phone. They loved it.

Smith: When Mrs. Ford did her famous 60 Minutes interview, the sense one has is that people always fight the last wars, and the immediate reaction was, “Oh my God, what has she done?” But fairly soon some counterintuitive polling data and other responses came in, that suggested, wait a second, maybe there is another side to this, and that she was actually an asset. First of all, for a presidency that defined itself by honesty, secondly, the culture was changing. It was waiting for someone like her.

Raiman: Well, believe me, she was on the cutting edge, out in front, as you know.

Smith: I’m sure it didn’t help you with the Reagan people, but they weren’t going to vote for Ford, anyway. She really sort of came into her own.

Raiman: Well, remember, she was supporting the Equal Rights Amendment, and so did he. That was so far out there, and it was so wonderful. Who was out there first? Well, they were. And what’s interesting to me in terms of that culture, because I’m their kids’ age and that whole generation, before the pill - “What would you do with Susan and birth control?” I’m going to remind you, even before that, they were interviewing her about the living arrangements in the White House and what they were going to do. And you know, the Nixons had separate bedrooms. I think they barely even talked to each other. And she says, “Well, Jerry and I, we’ll move our double bed in there,” and the country and media were aghast, and I didn’t understand – shouldn’t you be sleeping
together if you’re married? It was like a shock, which I found, frankly, weird and funny. I mean, I just didn’t understand that.

Smith: It wasn’t Ozzie and Harriet.

Raiman: And she was very honest and he respected that and honored it and loved her, and what a wonderful symbol.

Smith: Did you have any contact with him afterwards?

Raiman: Yes, I saw him a couple of times, it was funny – well, certainly we had our White House reunions every year, so I’d see him periodically then and have a chance to talk. I saw him afterwards – there was some event like Tip O’Neill’s fiftieth anniversary, and Bob and I saw him there. My husband and I met working on his confirmation hearings for the vice presidency, so we really were brought together by Gerald Ford. And we teased him about it... At first he was like, “Oh…” And I said, “No, no, it’s a good thing.” We saw him periodically, had a chance to talk, when we’d be out at different places. We were in Hawaii once and he was out there playing golf and we were at the same resort. So we had a chance to chat.

And there was another situation where he was speaking somewhere in Virginia, and I heard about it and I thought – there was a woman who worked with me who just really loved Gerald Ford and had bought his book. So I called up, I think it was Pat Ford, who was the advance person, and said, “Hey, just wanted to let you know I’m planning on being there. If there is any opportunity where I could say hi, I have a book I’d like the President to sign for one of my friends. I’m not trying to horn in, but if there is any kind of opportunity.” So what happened – it was very funny – we were at the event and we were in the audience. I was told that it would be after the event, if there was an opportunity, when they would come and get me. So I was at the event with this woman in this big auditorium on a college campus, and I was sitting there and he was speaking, and he was going through the audience and he sees me, and he smiles and notes I’m there. It was really kind of cute and
my friend says, “Well, he sees you, Gail.” And he kept looking at me and I’d
smile at him. And so after it was over, we went in and had a chance to talk.
He was surprised to see me there and it was really wonderful.

Smith: Were you surprised, when he died, at the amount of public response that there
was? He’d been out of the public eye for a while, and yet it seemed to build as
the week went by. I think it was a time when the country really needed to feel
good about itself, for one thing. And I think there was a whole generation that
was being introduced to him.

Raiman: Yes.

Smith: And they were contrasting what they saw with the ugliness of contemporary
politics.

Raiman: I think you are exactly right, but also, a couple of huge points were him
receiving the Kennedy Prize. That was so huge and so important to me, and it
was a real validation that the people who had been slamming him and being
critical - it was recognition of, yes, you were right, we just didn’t get it at the
time. And Bob Woodward, I was at an event which was very interesting at
the National Press Club. Bob Woodward was talking about his conversations
with President Ford, and what an incredible person he was, and how he had
apologized to Ford by telling him he was entirely wrong in what he wrote and
thought and said. Now, that wasn’t covered by the press in attendance, but I
heard it and I wish I’d had my tape recorder. But, again, people who were
really caught up in the moment, you couldn’t help but be in this country, and
making judgments that weren’t necessarily thoughtful. I think over time,
Richard, with more and more information coming out, and as you said,
something other to posit against, it really had a very positive snowball effect. I
thought it was wonderful. And so many people feel that way, and I think he’s
gotten the recognition he’s due. I’d love to see him get even more, but I think
now there is a real understanding and appreciation that he really saved the
country.
Smith: Last question: how do you think he should be remembered?

Raiman: As an individual of the highest character, tremendous personal integrity, wonderful sense of humor, just really enjoyed people and lived his life to find the best way he could serve the country. He was a good friend and a stellar human being.

Smith: That’s perfect. Thank you.
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Smith: Obviously, thank you for doing this.

Walters: Certainly.

Smith: Tell us a little bit about your life before you ever crossed paths with Gerald Ford.

Walters: Well, I was a person who grew up in the Washington area. My father knew Washington pretty well because he worked for the bus line in Washington. He was one of the original people who set up, was instrumental with, the tour industry in Washington by the buses because the people that owned the bus line got the idea that they could get children, school groups in. My father was one of the original bus drivers and had to learn about the history of Washington. And I had an uncle who actually sprayed the lawn for bugs back in the ‘50s. So the history of myself in the Washington area is, this is where I grew up. I had an intimate knowledge of some of the historical deals of Washington, because of my father’s involvement. But the only time I went to the White House was as a tourist, as most people do; never figuring that I’d be inside the gates in any form. After I graduated from college I was in the military, volunteered for the military, came out, became aware of the Secret Services expansion to take over the White House Police, and I applied.

Smith: When did that happen?

Walters: That was in 1970 – ’69, ’70.

Smith: Was it in anyway an outgrowth of the Kennedy assassination?

Walters: Actually, it was an outgrowth of some of the activities that were concerning the Secret Service and the Congress as it dealt with foreign missions. What they wanted to do, what the Congress did in fact, was pass a bill that put the Secret Service in charge of the foreign missions in Washington; also as an
overseer of the uniform division, which was the old White House Police. And those two were being merged into a group called the Executive Protective Service. They were going from the old White House Police, which was probably not more than 150 men at that point, and they were going to have cars and be responsible for the foreign missions within Washington and just out in the suburbs where there were a few missions. So it was an outgrowth of the late ’69, early ‘70s.

Smith: Now, let me ask you, before that - the White House Police – were they limited to onsite?

Walters: Inside the gate.

Smith: They didn’t travel?

Walters: The original White House Police were responsible for the grounds and the facility that was the White House and the Executive Office Building.

Smith: Okay.

Walters: They literally were an organization created back in Lincoln’s administration. From the Metropolitan Police – a derivative of the Metropolitan Police - they became the White House Police Force. They had their own chief who was there and answered really to the chief of staff of the president as far as security for the building. And then they interacted with the Secret Service. In this 1969 law, it took that entity and made it the Executive Protective Service, which made it the uniform division of the Secret Service and combined it with the responsibility for protecting the foreign missions. Then, of course, since the bombing in Beirut and the Reagan administration that force around the White House was kind of expanded outside of the gate to include the sidewalks and the immediate vicinity of the White House. Some of the other responsibilities that are an integral part of the Secret Service – and most people think of the Secret Service with the agents walking around – but in the uniform division the people are at the gates and the uniforms are there and have been there, as I said, the original outgrowth of the White House Police. So I became a member of that force in August, 1970.
Smith: Now, that was an eventful time.

Walters: Tremendously eventful time.

Smith: With the Vietnam War protests that were taking place.

Walters: Yes.

Smith: And the general instability of the period.

Walters: Yes. A very difficult time for the White House Police because there were always people immediately in the vicinity of the fence, principally on Pennsylvania Avenue except where the press were. The press came and went through the northwest gate and that’s on Pennsylvania Avenue. So the protestors, a pretty savvy group, were there in Lafayette Park. Pennsylvania Avenue, of course, was open to the traffic at that time, so there was always concern among Police Park Service and the Secret Service about keeping Pennsylvania Avenue – that the protestors didn’t block the avenue.

Smith: I’d heard the Johnson girls – I guess it probably would be Lucy – from her bedroom she could hear the protestors shouting, “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?”

Walters: Oh, yeah. There were people at work right directly across the street from the White House who would beat a drum. That’s when that started in the Vietnam War era. And it continued on up to today from time to time, with people that are protesting against the war and the drum beat goes on – literally. And you can hear it, you definitely can hear it. I remember being told that President Nixon, at night, even though his bedroom was on the other side of the house, could hear it, because it was so clear.

So as I became a member of the White House, I actually ended up breaking my leg playing some football with Secret Service trainers, and couldn’t, when I graduated, go out and stand post on the North Portico of the White House on crutches in uniform. That wouldn’t work. So they put me inside in a place called the control center, which was a place that controlled all the cameras, the access requests – people wanting to come into the White House for
appointments. All that was controlled, the alarms throughout the buildings, fire alarms and so forth.

Smith: You may or may not know, we’ve just about finished for the White House Historical Association a video-taped oral history with all the surviving social secretaries. Talked to a dozen and they all have wonderful stories to tell. There are some things, obviously, that are constant, but I’ll never forget, one of the second Mrs. Bush’s social secretaries talked about a day she was inside – this was post-9/11 – and a bus bringing a group of elderly women for a reception had somehow managed to dislodge the gate. So they were kind of going berserk about that.

Well, they went inside and I guess there was almost a fight going on in the ladies room over who was going to get their picture taken. She was trying to explain to them and no one was listening to her. And Mrs. Bush was coming down the stairs and her cell phone goes off, and it’s the gate. They had just arrested one of the elderly ladies from the bus who it turns out had two outstanding felonies on her record. That just struck me as surreal on so many levels. But I suspect maybe it’s all in a day’s work.

Walters: Well, I remember the incident, actually. Actually, what happened was the bus tried to get through the gate and it hit the gate cap post and turned it and broke a corner of it off. That had happened a couple of different times, a number of times with large trucks trying to make the turn to come in. One of the truck drivers at one point, got out and was very upset. The Secret Service was checking him out and they found a handgun that he carried because he was a long distance hauler. Of course, they arrested him because in the District of Columbia, you can’t have weapons. So those incidents occur. I’m very aware of them.

I got into this control center group because of the leg. As it turned out, I ended up being in there for five years. During the course of that five years I held different positions in that office, because as I said, we were responsible for all the people that entered the complex, no matter where they came in. We had to get the information on them, check them out, and say they were okay or not to come in. Alarms were throughout the buildings, fire alarms and everything.
So I became intimately involved in all those things that were that office’s responsibility. And in doing so, I became very familiar with the Usher’s office, with Rex Scouten, who was the chief usher, Nelson Pierce, who was his assistant at that time, and some of the other ushers that were in there. Well, as it turned out, two of the ushers, one of them passed away, another one, Stewart Stout, left, retired, and there was a position open in the Usher’s Office. Nelson Pierce called me on the telephone and said, “You know, we’ve gotten to know you; would you be interested in applying for this position?” Well, the opportunity to be involved with the family, as opposed to just the security aspect of the White House, was quite intriguing and obviously, I leapt at the opportunity. Luckily I had just finished college at night school with a business degree and Rex Scouten had just lost the accountant at the National Parks Service who was taking care of the accounts for the Executive Residence. The Executive Residence has its own budget – at least it did at the time. It wasn’t co-mingled with the rest of the Office of the President. And it was monitored by the National Park Service.

So I was in the right place, at the right time, applied for the position and Rex selected me for the position and I moved into the Usher’s Office on Leap Day, February 29, 1976. And that began my stay at the White House. Ten years later Rex retired and suggested me as his replacement to the President and Mrs. Reagan. So I was appointed the Chief Usher in ’86 and then retired in 2007.

Smith: Let me ask you, was there a sense during Watergate that you were under siege?

Walters: Oh, yes. Absolutely. Not only from the protestors, because at that time, having left the war, having kind of put that a little bit behind us because the President had the returning POWs – President Nixon had the returning POWs dinner out on the South Lawn and it just poured rain. Unbelievable. This wonderful, joyous occasion, it just absolutely poured rain. So that was kind of put on the backburner, still smoldering, obviously. There were still discussions going on in France with the size of the table probably still at that time. That was kind of put behind us, but then we got into this whole
Watergate issue and I actually was tangentially involved a little bit in the presidential papers and documents because, well, I was still a police officer. I was one of six or seven police officers that were responsible for the keys to where the tapes were stored.

Smith: We’ve talked to a lot of folks and the name Fred Buzhardt keeps coming up.

Walters: Who is that?

Smith: Fred Buzhardt was the guy who listened to the tapes. He was originally, I think, from South Carolina; he had been Mel Laird’s counsel over at the Pentagon, and he was the guy on behalf of the President who listened to the tapes.

Walters: That may have been prior to my involvement, or concurrent. That name, for some reason, just doesn’t ring a bell. But when I was involved, the tapes, for all the craziness of the places that they could possibly be, were kept underneath the stairwell, across from the cafeteria in the Executive Office Building. There was a small closet there right underneath the stairs, and we had the keys. You had to go get the keys. What happened was, the courts and the legal teams that were involved would request to hear certain portions of certain tapes. And then we had to go in – we were given written instructions by the White House counsel as to which tapes - we would go in and get the particular number and dated tape; keep it in our possession, and take it up to where the Secret Service ________.

The technical security division had set up a tape player, and the counsels, both the White House counsel and the counsel for either the courts or the various plaintiffs, would sit and listen to the tapes that were placed in the tape play by the technician, who was the Secret Service officer. I would stand and watch this whole process and make sure that nothing went wrong, and at the conclusion of the playing of those tapes, the tape would be taken out of the player by the technician, handed to me, and I would take it back downstairs and put it in the appropriate place.

Smith: Do you remember the controversy, almost immediately following President Nixon’s departure? We talked to Benton Becker who was the guy that
President Ford sent out to San Clemente to talk to President Nixon. And Becker has always been the one who claimed credit for preventing the shipment of tapes and papers. That they were, at one point, being loaded onto a truck, to leave the complex and his intervention at the highest levels supposedly prevented that. Does any of that ring a bell?

Walters: I know about some of that tangentially, but I wasn’t involved in it in any way. I know that also there was the one office which was called Presidential Papers, where everything went into a cage and we also had those six or seven officers. We had to once again receive the request from the courts and from White House counsel. And the lawyers could go into the cage, which we opened up, sit at a table, look at the documents, not make copies because they couldn’t take any copying machine or have the pieces copied initially, or they couldn’t make notes. All they could do was read them.

As the process went on later, it got to the point where they could go in and then we had to physically watch them – that they could take notes of what they read. Then later, we actually had a document reader – I shouldn’t say document reader – it was a Xerox machine, for want of a better name, that was brought into the room, and then we had certain pages that we could reproduce and give to them and let them take out. It was a very complicated process, as you well know, over a number of months that that went on. But, at that point, I became a sergeant in promotion process, went out of the direct connection with tapes and papers and everything and out of the control center into other duties for about five months before I shifted over to the Usher’s Office. So I kind of lost a little bit of contact with that. And, of course, that was during the time when President Ford took over.

Smith: What are your memories of August 8th and 9th of ’74?

Walters: Sadness, dread. Nobody knew exactly what was coming.

Smith: Can you describe the scene? There were people outside the gates…

Walters: At that point there were people outside the gates constantly. And I’m not talking about the normal. Twenty-four hours a day there are people outside the White House gates, walking around, taking pictures, there are flashes
going off all the time and everything. But these were large, larger groups of people – anywhere from organized groups to people that would just spontaneously come at various times, depending on what the news cycle was at the time. But surrounding those particular days, I was still with the Secret Service, so there was a sense of dread. What’s happening next? Are people going to come to the gates? Are people going to try and climb over the fences? There was this whole sense of we don’t know what’s going to be occurring.

Smith: You’re clearly in uncharted waters, nothing like this has ever happened in American history.

Walters: Yes, and the word came down that the President was going to resign. He was in his Executive Office Building office, which he used as his working office as opposed to the Oval Office. The word came to us in the control center that the President didn’t want to see anybody. And we thought, okay. No, the President doesn’t want to see anybody. I thought that was quite bizarre, but it was coming from the West Wing; I’m not sure who the communication was put through by. But the police officer that was standing outside - there was a post whenever the President was in the Executive Office Building - who was standing outside on the porch which was down this long flight of steps from West Executive Avenue up to the steps - was told to stand like a squirrel on the opposite side of a tree as the President walked by, literally keep him on the opposite side, so that he didn’t see him when he went past. There was a little bit of a laugh there – that he didn’t, literally, want to be in the presence of people, because he didn’t want to cut through the West Wing.

He went up the steps across in front of the West Wing, and at that time the press weren’t allowed on the North grounds, so there wasn’t a press contingent there. In fact, we were told to seal the West Wing. When the word went out that that was supposed to occur, the police officer who was in that room went around and pulled the blinds shut and locked the door that the press had, normally where the old swimming pool was that went out onto the trades entrance there on the west side. Immediately, we got calls from the fire department because the press were calling and saying they were locked in a
room that was unsafe for fire; the studio executives were calling and why is
the press locked up? We just fended those off and the President eventually
just walked across - it couldn’t have taken more than about fifteen minutes –
and went over into the West Wing, bypassed the West Wing by walking down
that trades entrance in front of the White House and went in through the
ground floor by the doctor’s office and then his normal route upstairs by the
elevator.

So there was this kind of bizarre goings on around the notification, and then
of course, the President’s statement to the staff in the East Room. I remember
that. My wife was actually in the room at that time. She used to work in the
East Wing in the Visitor’s Office, that’s where we met. So she was in the
room, and of course there was a great deal of sadness from the staff, and then
the next day with the President’s departing via helicopter with his V sign.

Smith: One of the truly emotional recurring, almost set pieces, in White House
history, is ordinarily on Inauguration Day when the departing family takes
their private leave of the staff. I guess, for good reasons, there have never
been cameras.

Walters: The White House photographer is there.

Smith: Okay. I’m told it can get pretty emotional.

Walters: It gets very emotional. It is the most emotional day in my life at the White
House. I have obviously had the opportunity to do it a number of times with
different presidents. For eight years you have lived with the family, growing
up if there are children, like Chelsea, watched them grow. Had gotten to know
other family members. That staff, the residence staff, is the only staff that’s
behind the curtain that the Secret Service sets up around the presidency. They
stand outside the doors, the residence staff is behind those doors in a personal,
one on one relationship with the president and the first lady and their family
and guests. So it is tremendously difficult.

Smith: Did the Nixons go through that on the morning of August 9th?
Walters: You’d have to ask Rex about that. I’m really not sure there was a formal gathering. I know that President Nixon and Mrs. Nixon talked to a lot of the staff members because they told me of their occurrences, but I don’t specifically remember a gathering the way we normally had on Inaugural morning. I had the opportunity, in fact, I don’t think anybody else did it, but I started it when I got there and as the chief usher, I took the flag that was flying over the White House on Inaugural morning, and I would take it down and save it for four or eight years. Then the flag, on the day the President was going to leave office - we made a case out of original, with some limited amount of timbers, the original White House wood in the carpenter’s shop. In fact, that’s some of the wood right there that my medallions are in of all the presidents I’ve served.

We took that wood and made a box, a case and presented the flag that flew over the White House on the day he took office and the flag that flew over the White House on the last morning that he was in office, and would present that to the president. And they didn’t expect it because very seldom that’s talked about, or if they knew about it, it’s forgotten. And it’s a very emotional time for them. It’s a beginning and an end. For the staff it’s a beginning and an end. But always for the staff, it’s this is the end, but it’s also the beginning within four hours, because a whole new staff is coming.

Smith: I’m taking it out of sequence, but I assume the first time you went through that ritual was with the Fords.

Walters: When they left.

Smith: When the Fords left. What was that day like?

Walters: Rex Scouten was the chief usher, and he was very close to the Ford family. And I was one of the actors at that time, I was not a direct participant and I hadn’t been there as long, obviously, as the rest of the staff. I’d only been there a little over a year and a half. So I was kind of watching, and to be honest, I was probably more concerned about what was going to happen in the afternoon with the change of administration – seeing one family move out and another family moved in. So at that point, I was kind of monitoring what was
going on as opposed as being directly involved. But President and Mrs. Ford were so wonderful. I mean, they were so down to earth and genuinely liked everybody that was around them. And of course, Susan, having been a young woman growing up there, matured there. It was parting with good friends - more than a formal exchange of pleasantries or something like that. And it was my first one so I was kind of standing in the back monitoring all this. And trying to get my hands around what was coming next.

Smith: Sure. Let’s go back. You, I guess, would have probably been still downstairs when the two assassination attempts took place. What do you remember of that?

Walters: Yes.

Smith: On the face of it, it’s the most unlikely – why would anyone take a shot at Jerry Ford?

Walters: And twice within a short period of time. It was unbelievable. First the association with Charley Manson, which just didn’t make any sense at all.

Smith: Nelson Rockefeller, who was probably never closer to becoming president than the day Squeaky Fromme…and the story is they were telling him what had happened, that she was a member of the Manson gang. And Rockefeller said, “What’s a Manson gang?” Tells you something about the isolating effects of wealth and power.

Walters: And then I really don’t think there was a whole lot with the Sarah Jane Moore – in this day and age, every hair on her head would have been examined. I don’t think it was at that time. It just happened, and to be honest with you, I don’t even remember her background as to what brought her to that point.

Smith: And both of them now released from jail.

Walters: Yeah. But from our standpoint back at the White House, because I was Secret Service with the uniform division, it was like, “Oh, my God!” What everybody had talked about was brought to the table, and luckily a misfire and a person who was standing next to the individual had an opportunity to deflect any motion, and the Secret Service took the appropriate actions. It was kind of
a teaching point that was going on at that time, but there was also the pause that said, “Wow, that was close.”

Smith: Were there any changes instituted?

Walters: Absolutely. I was just going to get to that. That, to me, was a major change in the White House. Up to that point, when the President was fired on within a month or so, it was forty-five days, something like, the presidents would get up and start to do their daily thing in the morning. Late morning they would go to some local hotel and talk to a group and then motorcade back to the White House and that evening or that afternoon, they very likely would go out and do the same thing all over again. The Secret Service was questioning the exposure of the president out all the time, whether it be during the motorcade in transit with the fact that the approximate time of the president leaving the White House was known and the approximate time of getting to the venue would be known, as well as the return. So there was the exposure issue.

Very few of the hotels in Washington had underground facilities where they could get in, so the president was physically exposed as President Reagan was. So there was a great concern on behalf of the Secret Service. The White House staff, and this is speculation on my part, but I think it’s well-founded, was also concerned about the amount of time that this in transit took. So the combination of the two working together, there was a look at what could be done at the White House. How could the White House be changed into a venue where the president could go from his Oval Office to the White House, some hundred yards away, talk to a group that had been cleared, that was surely not going to expose the president to danger, speak to that group in a White House controlled environ, the amount of press that were there were controlled by the White House, not by another entity. The space was defined, so you could only have a certain number of people, and then the president could leave that room and go back and be in the office in what would have normally taken if he had gone out, an hour and a half or so, in twenty-five, thirty-five minutes. That freed up an awful lot of time that the staff could use for other things for the president to get involved in, so they were yeah, this looks good.
The Secret Service was happy about it because they controlled the environment. It also happened that coming into that next year – 1976, the Bicentennial, there were already a number of activities planned for the White House. So that was kind of a trial period. Could the White House handle both physically and according to the presidential desires for their guests, because now these people come to the White House, are guests of the president coming to their house, how would that be handled?

Smith: This is fascinating because this also obviously leads us into the whole Rose Garden strategy. I mean, whether intended or not, maybe one of the unintended consequences was that for political reasons, those around Ford thought he campaigned better from the Rose Garden than he did often out on the road.

Walters: Well, I think that was used as an excuse, certainly to keep the President there, as opposed to going on the road – the two assassination attempts. But from the Executive Residence point of view, it was really the moment at which, as far as I’m concerned, the moment at which I saw the White House go from strictly the president’s house, the home of the president, where social activities were held to a catering entity. The residence staff was called up then to become a catering – instead of the First Lady, as Mrs. Ford had, she’d invite the ladies groups in and they would have tea out on the South Grounds or in the East Gardens. The President would have small groups over. We’d have State Dinners, obviously. But there was an opportunity to have that social intimacy at the White House. And as far as I’m concerning, at that point that started to be lost.

Smith: That’s fascinating.

Walters: And then, of course, in the following administration, in the Carter administration, we had a huge expansion of that when President Carter was pushing the turnover of the Panama Canal. Community groups from around the country were brought in in small groups and there would be two or three states per visit and there would be briefings in the East Room, and we’d start early in the afternoon. Then there would be a sit down buffet dinner sometimes for the participants; question and answer with different defense
department, commerce, all the different agencies. So that began a road of the
White House transferring to, as well as the home of the president, became a
catering operation, which expanded through the years.

Smith: And presumably the Reagan assassination attempt would have only
accelerated that process.

Walters: Well, by that time it had gone to the point where it couldn’t go any larger. By
that time we’d done tents in the South Grounds, and that had become kind of
a regular fixture. We’d done 1976 with the heads of state coming from around
the world. We put a tent over the Rose Garden and actually did, for the whole
summer of ’76, three and sometimes four heads of state a month from May
right straight through to September. And we had to put air conditioning in the
tent. There’s a million stories about tents.

Smith: Let me come to that in a minute. Can we go back for a moment, because you
mentioned about Mrs. Ford having friends in for tea. Clearly, to the extent
that it is a family residence, presumably each family has rooms that they
particular like. My sense is the Fords – and maybe everyone does sooner or
later – but the Fords discovered the Solarium early on. Is there something
about the Solarium that makes it special for all White House residents?

Walters: There are many things about the Solarium. The White House is a formal
house. I mean, built that way and certainly for the first hundred years of the
United States one of the largest houses, if not the largest house in the United
States for the first hundred years of the country. The ceilings are high, the
windows are large; therefore, huge draperies and massive furniture pieces and
everything. The third floor, built in the Thirties - lower ceilings, more
residential. President and Mrs. Ford had come from Alexandria, where they
had a very nice home, but certainly in a more social context. They had friends
over and everything. It’s hard to find that in the White House. To this day, it’s
hard to find this in the White House.

Every family struggles. I’m sure Mrs. Obama is going through that right now.
Struggle as to how take those formal spaces and convert them into…every
First Lady who has written a book talks about it – trying to make the White
House a home. Well, the third floor is a series of smaller rooms, lower ceilings and at the apex of all that, up a ramp, is the Solarium – the Sun Room. Well, who isn’t drawn to a sun room? Glass on three sides, a relatively modest room in the White House, 22 feet by 18 feet, kind of an odd, octagon type shape; a door that went out on the promenade that’s around the third floor.

Smith: Ike used to grill steaks out there.

Walters: Absolutely. And President Reagan sat out there and recuperated. I had my greatest scare of my time in the Usher’s Office. We found out that right behind where President Reagan sat was a bee’s nest and we knew he was allergic to bees. But we didn’t know about it until after he’d already said. We had to hustle out there and take care of the bees quick. But the Solarium is a place that you can be drawn to easily. You can speak as we’re speaking here and be heard around the room. The families can gather people. The third floor usually is not a place where families have their children stay. They are usually down closer on the second floor. The third floor is, other than in the Carter administration – they had their two sons and their wives lived there, but whenever they have friends there that may exceed the capacity of the two guestrooms downstairs, the Lincoln and the Queen’s bedrooms, they are upstairs. Well, if they are going to gather with their guests, do they have the guests come down or do they go up to a place where they can be more comfortable. And the Solarium in all the years that I’ve had an opportunity to be there has had informal furniture in it as opposed to the antiques that are present on the second floor or the first floor, and to some case, the third floor. But it’s much more comfortable. It’s a place, the only place in the White House where I think you’d kick off your shoes and the ladies did frequently, and stick their feet up in the corners of the chair and sit on their legs.

Smith: It’s a real family room.

Walters: It is a family room and that’s why people are drawn to it. It’s got an incredible view looking south to the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial and day or night, you see the planes coming in and out of the airport. All the presidents, I think, that have written about being at the White House talk
about being able to watch the planes come in at National Airport, hearing the
people down on the ellipse south of the White House playing softball and
football. And saw that as a genuine connection to the American people, as
opposed to the bubble they were in. And of course, that’s also true of the
Truman Balcony, which President Truman was beaten up badly for putting in.
But all the families have enjoyed the Truman Balcony.

Smith: It’s funny because President Ford used to talk about being the lowliest
member of the House Public Works Committee, and he was given a tour of
the White House by Harry Truman. First president he ever met. Ford was
always a fiscal conservative, but Truman persuaded him they needed the
money, and of course, in later years, he was very glad that they put the
balcony on the house. Because, I guess like every first family, they fell in love
with it.

Walters: Well, President Ford was also involved in the restoration of the exterior of the
White House before he moved in. Because, as vice president, he was in
charge of – with the Senate committee – had responsibility for the stone that
had been taken over the west front of the Capitol when the Capitol had been
expanded. And that was the same stone that was quarried to build the White
House. So when we made the initial request to start the stone restoration on
the White House, we found out once we took the paint off that there were
numerous stones that were damaged so badly they needed to be replaced. We
got to the architect of the Capitol, and the committee that oversaw that
included the vice president.

Obviously, I think before that, even when he was a representative, he had
some involvement and they agreed to allow the White House to use that old
stone which was kept at a National Park Service facility at Rock Creek Park.
And so we were able to go and use that old, originally quarried stone in the
1790s and brought it to the White House for the restoration of the White
House. So President Ford was involved before he probably ever had any idea
that he was going to be vice president or president.

Smith: What kind of interaction did you have or did you see that he had with the
staff?
Walters: Very informal with the staff; wanted very quickly after he moved into the White House – he and Mrs. Ford both – to get the know the names of each and every butler, maid, the people that they came daily in contact with. And from time to time, obviously the maintenance people who they didn’t see every day, but occasionally. The President made it his personal responsibility to get their names and become familiar with what they did. He interacted with them the way you’d interact with anybody else coming to your house. If you needed a plumber, you got the plumber in and you’d talk with him – where are you from?

Smith: There is a story, and I’m sure there are variations on this, but it must have been one of the butlers who – I think it was a Saturday afternoon and the President was watching football, as was his want.

Walters: Probably Michigan State.

Smith: And he said, “Come on in and watch the game.” He [the butler] didn’t want to be ungracious, but he also had to be professional. But the President made it very clear that he wanted him to come in and watch the game.

Walters: That does not surprise me at all. He would enjoy involving people in conversation. I know the first time I was introduced directly to the President was by Rex Scouten after Rex had already offered me the job. It was the night of a State Dinner. In fact, it was a white tie dinner. I’d never had tails on before; this was my first occasion for that. Rex had me stand adjacent to the elevator to close at evening. Of course, Mrs. Ford being a previous dancer, had the evenings go a little longer than other First Ladies have, and danced.

Smith: That’s true?

Walters: Oh, very much so. We used to change the State Dining Room after the dinner. When the guests moved from the State Dining Room to the East Room, we would spend the next twenty-five, thirty minutes taking everything out of the State Dining Room. And I’m talking about everything, including the carpet, and put a small stage in and put a dance band in – in twenty-five minutes. And then, instead of dancing out in the foyer in a formal kind of context, people would literally come back in the Cabaret Room, which they had just eaten
dinner in. A lot of people wanted to know – they didn’t realize that it had changed. They wanted to know, “How’d I get here?” because it was an entirely different room as far as they were concerned. But that would go late into the night and very early the next morning.

But I was standing adjacent to Rex Scouten, and I had been there since four o’clock the previous morning – and this was pushing two o’clock the next morning, and he introduced me to the President. The President came around the corner and he said, “Mr. President, I’d like to introduce you to the new usher, Gary Walters.” The President put his arm around me, said, “Well, welcome aboard. Where you from?” It was like he’d known me or wanted to get to know me immediately, and not just as somebody that he was going to come in contact with tangentially. And so we’re standing there having a conversation for about three or four minutes, and finally the President put his head around the corner and looked to see if Mrs. Ford was coming. As Mrs. Ford came around, he put his arm around her and said, “I want you to meet the new usher.” He introduced me to Mrs. Ford and she welcomed me and then they proceeded on the elevator and went upstairs.

Smith: Did they seem to be comfortable there? Because, obviously, they’d never expected to live there.

Walters: Yes. By this time and of course they’d been there a period when I came into the Usher’s Office. They’d been there for a while, so yes, they had become comfortable. I don’t know what it was like initially in the first days. I do know that he made the White House staff comfortable along with the police and everybody else that was involved. Because I think it was the week after he was in office, he threw a picnic on the South Grounds for all the Secret Service, for the White House staff who had stayed on transitioning from Nixon to Ford; for the Parks Service, for the groundskeepers, everybody. He came out and spoke to everybody and thanked everybody who was involved in the White House for the trying days that had come leading up to his becoming president, and for the week, or two weeks, or whatever it was, in the ensuing time. I mean he, at that point, made the staff comfortable. And as I said earlier, it is hard to find people that were any friendlier.
Smith: There are stories, of course, of them early on going over to talk to the telephone operators to thank them for what they did. There is a wonderful story – of course they lived in Alexandria for the first week.

Walters: Giving Mrs. Nixon time to get things cleared out.

Smith: Sure, exactly.

Walters: Rex is the one that knows all about that. I can tell you a great story about my first direct interaction with President Ford. When I went into the Usher’s Office there was usually a period of six weeks of orientation, learning what went on, how you interact with the different entities. Of course, I’d been there for a number of years so obviously I knew the Secret Service element, the security element – how to get people in and out and how to move people. But I had to learn the operation of the residence and how things go and how to protect the family’s privacy and who could come and who could go. So there’s a learning period.

Well, the Usher’s Office has the chief usher and three assistant ushers. Those three assistant ushers work on a rotating basis. One comes in early in the morning, is relieved at two o’clock in the afternoon and then stays there until after the family is finished with them for the night, and then a little longer just to close things out, in case there are any late messages or anything coming over. And then the third person has off.

I’d worked some of the rotating schedule, but we’re there. The President goes to Camp David, we’re still there sitting in the chair. So I went through the six week training period, and I was feeling pretty comfortable. So Rex, the chief usher at the time said, “Okay, this Sunday you will start on your own without having to be under a learning circumstance.” So I’m sitting there on a Sunday morning, the phone rang. I picked up the phone and answered, “Usher’s Office, Gary Walters, may I help you?” “Yeah, Gary, this is the President.” And he was reluctant to say the President. But he said, “This is the President.” I didn’t know whether to stand up or salute. I started to get up and my knees hit the desk, and I said, “Yes, sir, how can I help you?” And he said, “Well, I don’t have any hot water in my shower.”
Immediately things are flying through my mind – oh my God, the President of the United States has no hot water, and I’m thinking, is he going to get upset? I said, “Mr. President, although the plumbers aren’t here, our engineers are here twenty-four hours a day. I’ll be more than glad to come up at your convenience, if so, right now, and see if we can repair it and get the hot water.” “Nooooo, there’s no problem – I haven’t had any hot water for two weeks.” And I’m thinking to myself, “Oh my God, he hasn’t had any hot water for two weeks.” He said, “It hasn’t been a problem, I’ve just been going down the hall and using Mrs. Ford’s shower.” I said, “Well, Mr. President,” knowing what his schedule was, he was going out to church. I said, “Mr. President, if it’s alright with you, then when you go to church, I’ll have the fellows come up and see if we can fix it for you.” He said, “Don’t worry about it, it’s no big deal. If the plumbers are going to be back on tomorrow, just have them fix it.” I said, “Certainly, Mr. President, but I’ll see if we can’t get it fixed while you’re gone.” He said, “Fine, I’ll talk to you later, goodbye,” and he hung up the phone.

I think at that point perspiration was coming off my forehead and I call the engineers and say, “President has...” and the old sage down in the engineering shop, one of the fellows that was there, he said, “Don’t worry about it Mr. Walters. We can take care of it.” So the President and Mrs. Ford – I escorted them out and they got in the limousine and off they went to church. I knew they were going be gone probably fifty, fifty-five minutes. I went up with them immediately to the President’s shower. The old sage from the engineers office walks in and he reaches over and puts his hand next to the what they refer to as a mixing valve, where they twisted it from cold to hot. And he pounded on it with his fist. And he said, “That should fix it,” and sure enough, out comes the steaming hot water. I said, “Is this a trick that people are playing on me?” He said, “Well, from time to time with the hard water in Washington, there’s a spring in there and it builds up calcium and it won’t allow the valve to work all the way. So all you’ve got to do is loosen it up.” And I’m thinking, here the President has been for two weeks without hot water and all it took was a pounded fist on the valve mechanism and it straightened it out. But that was President Ford.
Smith: Can you imagine Lyndon Johnson waiting two weeks for his shower to be fixed?

Walters: No, oh jeez. Well, Rex Scouten tells a story about the water pressure wasn’t high enough. And there’s a wonderful story that the plumber and Rex tell about that. Rex wanted to check it out before the President had an opportunity to use it before he came back from Texas. He said he turned it on and it pinned him against the wall of the backside of the shower, it was so hard. He said, “I don’t know how anybody – you had to have leather skin to use the shower.” But President Johnson came back and evidently liked it. Thought it was the greatest thing because they put an extra water tank in and pressure hoses and all kinds of things.

Smith: In addition to the official training, I assume there’s a kind of unofficial, almost tutorial that takes place with regard to each family. These are things to keep an eye out for; these are their likes, dislikes. Is that so?

Walters: It was that training period that I was talking about. For the first couple of weeks I just was kind of the tail to Rex Scouten, the chief usher. I walked around and followed him and listened to everything. Went to all the meetings and just kind of took it all in. Then the next four weeks I’d sat with the duty usher, morning, evenings, weekends, and so it was an osmosis kind of procedure where you get involved. Then eventually I started answering the phone and they’d listen to the conversation and help me along. So the principle activity of the Usher’s Office is the first family. So that comes first; learning their likes, dislikes, wants, needs, anticipating those, if you can. Being there.

I made it my place, whenever the family was moving, any member of the family, and I knew they were going to be moving, I would be at the foot of the elevator when the elevator doors opened in case they wanted to express something to me. Most of the time just said, good morning, good afternoon, good evening and the conversation was at that point theirs to carry on, to stop, to continue on reading a book or whatever they were doing. So the most important responsibility of the Usher’s Office is the home of the president.
The catering operation, the food and beverage operation, the tours, the house open as a public museum, those are all secondary.

So learning the family’s activities and taking care of their needs so, hopefully, they don’t very often have to ask for things to be done. You can anticipate what needs to be done. In fact, after my story about the shower, I initiated a weekly thump on the mixing valves in all the showers in the residence as a maintenance activity. So trying to anticipate those activities, is first and foremost in the home of the president and his family and those personal guests as opposed to the official guests that come for activities. So that was not hard to learn, because it was the primary concern.

Smith: There’s a story, and of course you wouldn’t have been there at the time, but when they first moved in and I guess Mrs. Ford was walking through, the second floor hall, and ran into someone on the staff, custodial staff, I guess and said, “Good morning,” and there was no reply. And she went to Rex and said, “Do they not like us?” And he explained that it was just a different atmosphere under the Nixons. And I guess the word went out that this is a different tone.

Walters: At the start of a new administration, it’s tough on the staff. The staff is trying to provide for the family. They’re trying not to take the previous family’s wants and dislikes and transpose them on the new family that has just moved in or has been there for a short period of time. So they are reluctant to do anything that would give a discomfort. I mean, that staff – I talk about them as much as I can because they are spectacular people. And they are there as servants to the presidency and not the president. And they want there to be the least amount of disruption that they can cause to the family’s private life is where they want to be. President Nixon – the story that you told gives the impression that President Nixon didn’t want to interact with some of the staff.

Smith: No - and I’m glad to correct that.

Walters: And that’s not the case. He became intimately concerned about the families, the butlers, the staff and things. But the staff – it’s one of those “Don’t speak unless you’re spoken to,” and then you might want to be cautious about what.
And so I don’t know who that person would be, but it doesn’t surprise me that that would be the case. And it also doesn’t surprise me that Mrs. Ford would have that kind of reaction. That she would expect people to be as friendly as she was.

Smith: And I assume it’s also a different house when there are children around.

Walters: Always. Yeah. It brings a different dynamic to the house. Of course, it was hard to deal with Susan because she was not a young child. She was in high school when she came to the White House. The junior prom was held at the White House. And then the boys were in and out and they were obviously older than she and grown. So they weren’t really children from that aspect.

Smith: Steve tells a story about, obviously early on, when over dinner his folks asked, “What are you doing this evening,” and he said, “I just thought I’d turn in early.” Well, he didn’t exactly do that. He invited some friends over and they celebrated and the next morning, at breakfast or whatever, the discussion was, “Well, how was your evening?” And the President sort of pushed – I guess he’d already gotten the bill for Steve’s early evening. And with it the realization that first families pay for their own food.

Walters: First families pay for all of their food, dry cleaning, anything that’s personal, of their family and their personal guests. He wouldn’t have had the bill that quickly. What he would have had was an inventory of what would have been taken out of the storeroom, if there had been some beverage that may have been involved, and he probably asked the butlers in the morning. The President was known to get up and go out and want to do his own bagels in the morning. That was his thing. He was going to go out and put his toast or bagels on, and of course, the butlers - that was their job. So they were trying to get there before the President and trying to gauge when he might be coming in so that they could already have it ready for him and he didn’t have to worry about cutting the bagel and putting it in the toaster.

Smith: English muffins.

Walters: English muffins, that’s right. That’s what it was.
Smith: The English muffin story – the theory always was that he may very well have enjoyed getting up early and cooking his English muffins, but in any event, he was going to cook his English muffins because Mrs. Ford was not an early riser.

Walters: Well, it didn’t matter what time it was, that was his desire to go in the kitchen. And of course the butlers were of a want to have the President walk in the door and have the toaster pop the English muffins up and they’d pop them on the plate and give them to him, with his preferred coverage whether it be butter or apple butter, or whatever. And I think there has always been an interaction between the butlers and the first family. They are the crown jewel, if you will, of the residence staff because they interact so closely with the family.

Smith: Are most of them African-American?

Walters: Have been up until a few years ago when we had Alfredo Sands(?), who was from Spain originally, who came. And we’ve had a number of other butlers that have been from other parts of the world and have been American citizens, obviously. And it wasn’t until the George Herbert Walker Bush administration, that we integrated women as part-time butlers; not full-time butlers upstairs. That will happen at some point. And that was the tradition up until that point. A lot of the early ones, and you have to think about it – there were only six butlers at the White House that were full-time, and the maitre d.

A lot of them came into the White House when President Truman moved back into the White House in the ’48-’52 restoration. So in ’52 you brought these new people in that were relatively young, 52, 62, 72, 82, so that’s thirty years – that was a career. And most of the residence staff that comes stay there for less than a year or their whole career. And the majority stays for their whole career. So it was in that late ‘70s, early ‘80s that there was a changeover because the White House had been closed down for those years ’48 to ’52, so you count that out to ‘82, thirty years and some of the people who had been at the Blair House obviously had stayed on.
Smith: And presumably one of the qualities necessary to succeed in that job would be discretion.

Walters: Not one, the primary consideration is discretion. You have to pull the teeth of the butlers to get them to talk. Within the last six months, Gene Allen, one of the butlers who retired shortly after I became chief usher, because he’d finished his time, and just a wonderful man, they had a little story in the paper on him. And he won’t talk. He tells a few stories that are certainly not off color by any stretch of the imagination, are pretty straightforward about how the presidents would ask him about his family and everything. But there has, to my knowledge, and you could check this out, never been a tell-all story by any of the residence staff. And there are ninety-three people on the residence staff. And of that ninety-three, probably thirty-five had daily contact with the president, first lady, or their family.

Smith: Is that in part a reflection, not only on their professionalism, but of their pride?

Walters: Oh, absolutely. They carry the mantle of the presidency with them from the time they start working there until their death.

Smith: And it has nothing to do with politics?

Walters: Nope.

Smith: Totally non-partisan?

Walters: It is the pride in serving the presidency. Now a lot of those early butlers that were around the White House came from the Pullman group. When Pullman trains started to go away in the ‘30s and the ‘40s, some of them came to the White House. So they had service in their veins. And exhibited that through other people and taught other people what service was about. And that really stayed.

Smith: It’s fascinating to speculate on. I mean, during the period of the civil rights revolution. The kind of cross-currents that must have been going on in that house, and yet again, I’m not aware of anyone ever really describing it.
Walters: No. The residence staff is a family in and of itself. The people that work there, when they come to work each day, they don’t know how long they are going to be at work because the world situation, quite frequently, dictates. And there are a lot of long, extensive hours that that staff put in, in support of the president and the president’s activities. And they spend probably – not probably because I know they did, because I did – spent more time with that group of people than they did at home with their own families. And the camaraderie, it didn’t matter; old, young, black, white, Hispanic; it didn’t matter. There was a job to do in support of the president and the family and that just went forward and had to be done. And the pride was, yes, you are absolutely right. It was a very prideful thing that everybody carried with them.

Smith: Tell me about the Bicentennial, because that must have been an extraordinarily concentrated set of challenges and rewards.

Walters: Certainly, with all the heads of state coming. Of course, the Congress set up that the Capitol was going to be the shining light on the Bicentennial celebration. Well, that very quickly changed to the White House with the heads of state coming and the state dinners and the putting up of the tent to cover the Rose Garden. Extraordinary to have the Queen come.

Smith: Of course there are more stories about that dinner. The famous incident with the Marine band – and I was told after that, that the band never played without its musical agenda being carefully checked out.

Walters: You’ll have to talk to the social secretaries about that.

Smith: I think it’s safe to say, without spilling any beans, that that was one of the stories we heard.

Walters: Certainly that was just a ‘one of those things’ that seems so minor, and there are so many details that are being handled…

Smith: Did you know, when the band struck up…

Walters: Muskrat Love.

Smith: Muskrat Love and The Lady is a Tramp.
Walters: Yup. Captain and Tennille.

Smith: Remember what Maria Down said? Maria said that Susan picked the music.

Smith: Oh, I didn’t remember that.

Walters: Well, see, that was something obviously the social secretary did with the First Lady and other staff, whoever. But as soon as I heard it, I thought, “I know this is a hit song, but this just does not seem the right venue.” So there are incidents that occur like that, but there are so many details associated with that.

One of my most vivid memories of that period of time: Rex Scouten and Maria Downs, there was going to be this dinner and I don’t remember right now which head of state was coming. It was in the Rose Garden. And there was a tornado warning in Washington. Of course, we’re outside in a tent. A tornado. These things don’t appear to fit together very well.

So, I walked from the Usher’s Office, just inside the North Portico and I was going to the East Wing. I went down the steps, outside of the East Room, down the steps to the ground floor and went through the corridor because I was going to the East Wing. I had some activity that I was going to be dealing with in the East Wing, and it may have been with the social secretary’s office. And as I rounded the corner into what some people call the East Garden Room, which has a set of doors that open up into the East Garden Room, there was Rex Scouten, the chief usher, and Maria Downs, the social secretary, both with their backs to me having a very quiet conversation. And they had their hands up on the mullions of the window and they are just standing there silhouetted against the outside, and these unbelievable black clouds in the distance. And it was just one of those private moments of the chief usher and the social secretary commiserating about what should we say, not allow some of the people to attend a dinner and bring the dinner inside, which we weren’t prepared to do, or leave it go that this storm was going to pass by.

Of course it did, and we went ahead and had the dinner outside. But that’s one of those moments that have always stayed with me. It was a very poignant moment that encapsulated all the details, everything that these two people
went through to make this one event proper for the United States, for the President, for the head of state that was coming to visit, and it was all going be possibly washed away by a simple storm.

Smith: There’s a story – Dick Cheney semi-confirmed it – but I don’t remember the original source. Of course, this was also at the peak of that pre-convention campaign. It has been said that it’s probably a good thing that Her Majesty didn’t see the guest list because a substantial portion of it were delegates and their spouses and their families. Let’s face it, one of the advantages of being an incumbent president is, you have some nice perks to offer to people. Was there a sense the campaign was interwoven with these events?

Walters: Luckily the chief usher and Usher’s Office doesn’t get involved in the guest list. It’s strictly the purview of the social secretary and her interaction with the staff. But it happens all the time, at least fifty percent of the guest list is people that have some kind of business involvement with the foreign country that’s being hosted, or some Congressional committee that’s involved. That’s part of what these events were for. Certainly they were a celebration of the United States and the visiting head of state from a certain country, but they are also business meetings. And they went a long way. Social affairs, yes; but also business affairs.

Smith: Had Emperor Hirohito’s visit taken place before you came on board?

Walters: I was there because that was a big luncheon in the East Room, where they did a big horseshoe table. I remember that very distinctly. I was there then. All the pomp and circumstance and all the gold that was used; we brought out gold from every place in the house to cover the table for that event. White table cloths.

Smith: The horseshoe – you associate the horseshoe with the Eisenhower era. Wasn’t it Mrs. Kennedy who broke it up into smaller tables?

Walters: Smaller tables – ten person tables, yeah.

Smith: Does the horseshoe come back from time to time?
Gary Walters   September 14, 2009

Walters: Yeah. Quite frequently. Because it lends itself – first of all, everybody is sitting at the same table. In the East Room it allowed us to get people on both sides of the table all the way around, and it gave a different formal atmosphere. It was a luncheon, not a dinner. So it gave a different atmosphere to that event. And being in the East Room, the largest room in the White House, it allowed us to get a lot more people at that table by putting it in that form.

Smith: Heads of state are almost swallowed up in the formality. There’s a human being inside this office who is trying to connect with other human beings I’m trying to get a sense of the humanizing events and personalities that are otherwise very stylized and in some ways remote.

Walters: Of course, the state dinner is the most formal event the United States has. The arrival ceremony is also the most formal military that the government has. So there’s a lot of effort that goes into those. I think from my seeing what each president and first lady do, it’s almost by rote. This is a formal event and you go from point A to point B and then you do this and then you go to point C. So the formality overtakes the formal and the social aspect of having this event; really overtakes the humanity that’s involved.

I think the one that probably did the best job of that that I saw initially was Mrs. Reagan. When she came into office, she wanted the state dinners to be an intimate affair, the lights were turned down lower, and she always invited personal friends. She changed that considerably. And of course the Fords were just absolutely inundated. They didn’t have a chance to – I mean, the Bicentennial year, like I said, we were doing three, four a month and sometimes multiple in a week of these formal events.

The President, of course, had had an opportunity earlier in the day to sit down one on one with the head of state, head of government, and have an informal or formal conversation and gotten to know them. But usually the First Lady hadn’t had that same opportunity. Sometimes they have a brief coffee, but there always were other people involved or something. The first few are tough, I think, on all the presidents and first ladies. But after that, then they have shown their form. And that’s where the social secretaries – I’m sure in
your discussions with them – in trying to develop what that form is going to be.

Smith: Do you have in terms of your own experience any entertainers in that period that stand out in memory? We know, for example, that the Fords developed a very close friendship with Pearl Bailey, who became almost a member of the family.

Walters: I think that the notoriety and the availability of the kind of talent that the White House opens allows the families to make some acquaintances over and above what they may have had a opportunity before that - with President Ford, obviously having been in Congress and in the vice president for an opportunity. But the White House opens a little bit – the doors open a little wider and if they have an opportunity to sit down and directly interact with the entertainers, some of them can become quite close to them. And all of them try to pick entertainers that are of their style. I mean, if they like, or maybe if they don’t like, opera, you’re probably not going to see an opera star perform at the White House. So they are of that genre.

Smith: Did the Fords have distinct tastes that you can recall?

Walters: Not that I can recall, because, once again, at that point I wasn’t the chief usher, and I was still in my learning process. I know that Maria Downs was very close to Mrs. Ford and they were very close in choosing a lot of those. Maria has stayed a close friend through these years. I think she really captured Mrs. Ford’s desires and wants and dislikes.

Smith: Let me ask you something, it may be sensitive. Were you aware of her - however one describes it - difficulties, problems?

Walters: You mean with the alcohol and the pills?

Smith: Yeah, more I guess the pills.

Walters: Actually, this fits right in with the butlers. Obviously the butlers knew about it, because they were the ones providing the drinks, and whether they knew about – well, I think everybody pretty well knew about the difficulty she had with her back and the pain pills and everything; the combination of the two.
You never heard anything from any of those people. It was Mrs. Ford, after the family intervention, coming forward that everything broke on the scene. And you still didn’t hear any conversation from the residence staff – those people that knew the difficulties, because it’s so personal. And was I aware of it? Yes. Was I aware of the extent of it? No. But the butlers had to be and they didn’t tell me. I don’t think they told Rex Scouten, who was the chief usher at the time. That was what family did.

Smith: It also must be awkward - you get into a campaign, the result of which determines whether they will continue to inhabit the house. Partisanship aside, it must be at least something of an emotional rollercoaster. Rex told us a wonderful story about election night in ’76, where he was upstairs and it was two o’clock and it wasn’t over, but it wasn’t looking good. And the President decided, look, we’re not going to know for sure, I’m going to turn in. And he goes across the hall and Rex followed him and wanted to say something consoling without conceding. Anyway, to make a long story short, he says, “You know, Mr. President, you’ve spent your life in service to this country, in uniform in the war and all those years on Capitol Hill and during this incredibly difficult period these last couple of years. No one deserves to win more than you do. But you know, Mr. President, maybe it’s just time for you to take a well-earned vacation.” And Ford looked at him and said, “I don’t think so.”

Walters: I was working that night, and Rex came downstairs after that and he said, “It looks like it’s lost.” And of course, that was the first time that I had been there and I had this wave of emotion wash over me. The first president that I’d served was not going to be there much longer. And my first feeling, and I think it was universal for the staff, was, this good man should have had a term of his own, an elected term of his own. Because we all, universally, just liked the President and the First Lady and it would have been fitting for him to have an elected term and not an appointed term.

Smith: There have been a number of people who’ve suggested that it took him a little while to bounce back. That he wasn’t quite his normal self. Did you sense that in the immediate aftermath of the election?
Walters: It was a shock. He expected to win. I think the First Lady did, too. And there was a ‘is this real?’ kind of feeling that kind of permeated the two of them. I had an opportunity, obviously, to be with them one on one on different…but I never spoke about the political things because I hadn’t been there long enough to voice any kind of opinion or any comments at that point. But you could sense that. There was a sense of disappointment, and I could be wrong, but I think Mrs. Ford recovered quicker than the President did. She was ready to move on to the next phase of her life. Was Colorado where they were going? Was California where they were going? That came back very quickly with her. It took him a little longer. And the staff was also just very down. I think in the years that I was there, that was probably the time that I saw hurt in the eyes of the staff that the Fords weren’t going to be there. Certainly some of the other presidents that I served eight years, so we knew after the second election they were going to be leaving on a particular day. But there was real hurt that he didn’t have an opportunity to get elected.

Smith: Which testifies to the affection in which they were held.

Walters: Oh, absolutely. I think so, yeah. But that relationship is a very close one and some of the staff takes it more to heart than others. Once again, being the new guy on the block, my immediate thought was, “Oh my God, there’s going to be a new president in two and a half months and am I going to have a job? What is a transition all about?” We had, obviously with Rex’s guidance, started following those snippets that we could to get an idea of what the Carters were like from the summer when he was nominated, so that you have something in the back of your mind about the family members. We’d clip out articles from newspapers and magazines that said, “This is Jean Stapleton, the President’s sister, and this is Billy Carter and he lives here.” Those kinds of things we’d start collecting, just in case that person was going to be elected president. And that of course, stepped up once the election was over, in trying to collect information and you start making those transitions. It’s not an easy time – transition.

Smith: There’s a story in one of the memoirs, I guess, where I think he [President Ford] was actually a little worried about her. That he had made arrangements,
I think Bob Hope was involved and other folks. Anyway they had gone out to
dinner or some event, and came back into the residence and, unknown to her,
he had brought a number of their friends together and it turned into a
celebration.

Walters: I just don’t have any recollection of that. But it would make sense that he
would do that because usually a lot of people forget about – an election
happens in early November, and December is the busiest month at the White
House because it’s the holiday season. And it starts immediately after
Thanksgiving.

Smith: And she loved Christmas.

Walters: They had all the people in and then all the activity that was associated with it
and the opportunity to share. Decorations – how the house was going to be
decorated for Christmas. I think she would have liked to have had the
opportunity to have another couple Christmases because the first year was
kind of thrown on her. The second year there was some thought they would
get into it, but then they weren’t there for the continuation of that. So the
month of December is taken up - actually from Thanksgiving right to New
Year’s Eve - is taken up with the holiday affairs. And then the family usually
goes away between Christmas and New Year’s and then you come back and
it’s January the third; and you’ve got seventeen days. So normally in that
period the families usually have those major supporters, their friends, and they
have them in for a kind of last activity at the White House. And President
Ford had a number of those, as did Mrs. Ford with friends and family and
supporters through the years. So I don’t have a specific recollection, but that
doesn’t surprise me.

Smith: I assume like all families – well not all, some more than others, I guess – that
they enjoyed Camp David.

Walters: Oh, I think everybody enjoyed Camp David.

Smith: Is it just because it’s a chance to get out of the bubble?
Walters: First and foremost, it’s not formal. Camp David can never be associated with formal. There are individual little cabins, they are rustic, back from the ‘30s and the work projects administration, when it was literally a work camp. And of course they’ve been updated through the years and everything. They are very nice, but the rooms are relatively small.

Smith: Homey.

Walters: Oh, absolutely. And they can get out and the people - they interact. The military are different than the White House staff, the residence staff are the little more formal. They are military who can become more comfortable more quickly in a less formal atmosphere. And the opportunity to be out and not have the Secret Service closed in around you and the facilities that are there. They have everything they could possibly want, and if it’s not there, they can have it brought in because it’s a big enough compound that they don’t have to worry about that. I know at the start of the Carter administration, there was some thought to give up Camp David as they did with the ship and various things.

Smith: Ironic in light of such later events.

Walters: And that is exactly where I was going. Rex Scouten, I know I did, I’m sure the other ushers did who interacted, said, “Mr. President, before you make that decision, go there. Experience it first.” And, of course, that’s his claim to glory. If there’s anything that’s outstanding it’s the Camp David Accords. And everything that went on. And to think back now, that they came within a very short period of time of closing Camp David as a presidential retreat and turning it back over as a military post. And eventually it obviously would have been abandoned, probably turned over to the Park Service as a Park Facility, maybe a historic site. But the fact is, that it is a glorious setting, and every president since President Carter certainly has used Camp David to some great advantage. But the Fords, I know, enjoyed it immensely. They were used to being outside.

Smith: Do you think he got a bum rap about being clumsy?
Walters: Oh! Goodness gracious! I’ve told everybody that I’ve ever had an opportunity to answer that question. He is probably the most athletic president that’s ever been at the White House. And the fact that he bumped his head or slipped and fell down the steps, I mean, who hasn’t done that? In fact, the problem was that he did it in front of the press. And the fact that he went out and swam, the swimming pool put in by the swimming pool institute and a bunch of friends that got together and put the outdoor swimming pool in and the fact that he went there daily and swam. And every president since then has enjoyed that pool immensely.

Smith: I was going to ask you.

Walters: Immensely.

Smith: It gets lots of use?

Walters: Absolutely. And I just always laugh when people say that. President Ford was always bumbling and stumbling – you’ve got to be kidding me.

Smith: There is a story which is so telling. In Vienna, first of all, it was raining and he had an umbrella and he had Mrs. Ford’s arm. And he slipped and fell and they got the picture. Of course, all the people around him were railing against the photographers. Ford says, “Well, of course they took the picture. If they hadn’t they would have lost their jobs.”

Walters: But the fact that he was getting out of the helicopter and bumped his head. He was a tall man. He forgot to duck, give him a break.

Smith: A couple of things and we’ll let you go. Obviously you saw him on a number of occasions, but I’m thinking of two in particular. One of which was the 200th Anniversary of the first occupant of the White House, you had all the former presidents and first ladies there that night and I had the privilege of writing his remarks for that event. What do you remember about that?

Walters: You’re talking about the dinner?

Smith: Yeah, the dinner for the 200th Anniversary.
Walters: Well, the first thing I think about – and this is really off the subject – but that was the first night we were going to have the Clinton china. Mrs. Clinton, late in the administration had decided to get a full set of china. And that night she was hoping – and that was in December, December 3rd or something, sometime early in December –

Smith: And right at the peak of the whole dispute over the 2000 election…

Walters: And they hadn’t decided yet who the new president was going to be. And so all we got was enough base plates and service plates for the head table where the presidents and the first ladies were seated. I was invited to that dinner as a guest. First time I’d ever been invited as a guest because I was always working. Of course my mind was going, “What’s going on, how is this going?” because I wasn’t in charge. I wasn’t used to not being in charge at these major dinners. It was going fine and President Ford got up with those wonderful remarks and talked about the staff and the relationship and tears came to my eyes.

I was sitting next to Hugh Sidey’s wife, and she looked at me and she said, “That hit home.” I said, “It did.” It really did because it spoke to the relationship that over a period of time, a relatively short period of time, that President Ford and Mrs. Ford developed with the staff. And so that’s my memories of that occasion.

Smith: And then I assume you are probably working when the Bushes very generously – had his 90th birthday party at the White House. In 2006 they had a birthday party for him.

Walters: Yes, absolutely. In fact, I have the photograph in the other room of all of them there assembled. In fact, can I take a second? [leaves to retrieve photo]

Smith: Now, what event was this?

Walters: This was his birthday party – I’m pretty sure it was. No, that wasn’t, I take that back. That’s not the one. Wasn’t that the opening of the Library? That’s what that was. The Nixon Library, I take that back. And they all gathered in front of the Oval Office desk and the picture taking, when I became aware of
it, I contacted each one of the first ladies and said, “There are a number of people who served all these presidents. Would you consider if I got the names of those individuals, and said there would be a limited number, having yourself and the president sign these and return them to the staff?” And they did and there are only twenty-two of those in existence. I was thinking about the other day – this was in the State Dining Room, when they were gathered for his birthday. They gathered in the State Dining Room and I have that photograph. Those gatherings mean so much to those of us that had an opportunity to span the different administrations.

Smith: There obviously were still people on the staff from the Ford years.

Walters: Yes, there were.

Smith: Did they have an opportunity to interact?

Walters: Interact with them? In fact, I gathered those people together. Whenever we had – while I was the chief usher – whenever we had a former president come back, I had those staff members who served that president come and stand in the hallway outside of the diplomatic reception room, so that when they arrived, they’d walk down the hallway and see these faces that they were familiar with. They appreciated it. I had a lot of them respond immediately and later in calls or letters to indicate how much that meant to them – to have those kinds of remembrances that went through. And it was a dwindling number through the years, obviously. But to have the opportunity because there is that special relationship between the residence staff and the families, to have them see people who they were familiar with and possibly, if they were going to go upstairs and have a drink with the president or beverage, to have their favorite drink without them asking for it. Little things like that made the years at the White House come back to mind.

Smith: And then the most poignant gathering of all – again, I don’t know whether it had been done before for other presidents – but on the morning of the Washington funeral. The President had decreed he didn’t want a caisson through the streets of Washington, and so when they went from the Capitol up
to the cathedral, they made a point of going by the White House. And the staff was gathered outside, which was very poignant.

Walters: Yeah, at that point I was up at the cathedral, standing in line to get in with everybody else. Julie Nixon Eisenhower was in line behind me, about thirty or forty people, and I turned around and saw her and she saw me, so we went and said hello. I left my wife standing there and I went to the front of the line and I grabbed one of the people by the cuff of the neck and I said, “Julie Nixon Eisenhower is standing back here in this line. Somebody come get her.” So they went by and got her and took her. But there was Julie, standing in line with everybody else. And that’s the kind of relationship that I think a lot of the families, and a lot of American people, don’t see. They see this imperial presidency and these families that are kind of put up on a pedestal, but they don’t see themselves that way. I didn’t work for any president that saw them or their families that saw themselves that way. They were put in a position for a period of time, and after that they were Americans.

Smith: A lot of people don’t realize about the ongoing relationships that exist between the families. I remember when the President had that minor stroke in Philadelphia. Within twenty minutes I got two calls, one was from Julie and one was from Tricia. And Mrs. Johnson remained very close to the Fords for as long as they were around.

Walters: In the years that I was at the White House and the families I had an opportunity to serve, Mrs. Johnson was held in such reverence by the other first ladies. It was truly amazing the way they talked about Mrs. Johnson. And when she was invited, which each one of the first ladies did, to come to the White House, everything needed to be perfect when Mrs. Johnson came. It was really wonderful to see.

Smith: And that extraordinary scene, the day Mrs. Ford went to the hospital. The day before they entertained the Johnsons at the groundbreaking for the LBJ Grove. And they had the Johnsons to tea and showed them around the family quarters. There were photos and you could see Mrs. Ford’s bag is packed, sitting at the bottom of the bed, all ready to go to the hospital. And nothing was ever said.
Walters: But that goes to show that the White House is the home, as opposed to the official entity that most people – most people say, “Today the White House said…” And I tell people, the White House doesn’t have a mouth, first of all, and usually what they are talking about, they are not talking about the residence, they are talking about the West Wing, the political aspect of the White House. I said, “You have to remember that the West Wing is still an appendage to the original building.”

Smith: How do you think Gerald Ford should be remembered? I guess I should say, how will you remember him and how do you think he should be remembered?

Walters: Well, I remember him, as I said earlier, just as a wonderful person to be around in any circumstance. Just a wonderful, warm individual. I think history placed him in a position that he excelled. He was thrown into a circumstance that no other president had ever been thrown into. And certainly also the vice presidency under the circumstances he became vice president. From a congressman to a vice president and then the presidency, through all those iterations he kept himself whole. He kept his family whole. And he never lost his dignity. It’s the one thing that President Ford means to me, he always held his head up, and he had right to, because of the way he acted when thrown into that historical perspective. And the way he was – I hate to use the word treated – but I can’t think of another one right now that’s proper. He is certainly seen as a transition figure of exceptional ability by historians, but at the time he wasn’t. He was ridiculed by some and as you said, some of the things that were in the bumbling and stumbling – you just couldn’t have been further from the truth. I was glad to see him get the tribute and the heartfelt depth of the tribute that he got when he passed away.

Smith: I was wearing two hats that week. I was with ABC the first half of the week and then with the family the second half and I can tell you, media people were astonished at the extent of the response and it seemed to build as the week went on. And the number of young people in the lines and people who weren’t alive during the Ford presidency. And I think part of it was they were being introduced to him for the first time. A lot of young people were seeing these clips and contrasting it with the kind of ugliness of our politics today,
and it looked pretty good. The fact that poor LBJ who died the day before the Vietnam peace agreement was announced, Ford lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his thinking on the pardon.

Walters: I think you’re right, yes. He never lost that fantastic smile. He always had that wonderful smile that he carried with him regardless of the circumstances. It’s funny, when he was coming out of the theater when he was shot at and the Secret Service were pushing him into car, the shot from across the street, it’s like he’s got this look on his face, What is going on? The concept hadn’t reached there that all this activity was because of him.

Smith: You could debate whether he was naïve or just kind of the Eagle Scout, but he literally went to his grave thinking he didn’t have enemies.

Walters: I don’t doubt that in the least.

Smith: Time was good to Gerald Ford.

Walters: It was. And what I liked about it, as you said, that it occurred during his lifespan. It didn’t wait until he was passed on.

Smith: The Profiles in Courage Award – he said afterwards, “For twenty years, everywhere I go people ask the same question. They don’t ask anymore.” It was if the imprimatur of the Kennedys dissolved this. And again, people never saw it, but there was that relationship between the Kennedys and Ford, of course, because they’d been in Congress together. And then he was on the Warren Commission. There was a relationship that people didn’t know about. And in the later years it was very touching.

Walters: That’s a small fraternity. There is none smaller. And the weight – I don’t think people really are cognizant of the weight of the world that is placed on our president’s heads since the Second World War. I mean, we’re the preeminent country in the world and they carry that on their shoulders all the time. I think earlier you were talking about George Bush and the fact that he was kind of somewhat relieved – I think the weight – and I saw him change – the weight of having the safety of the American people on his shoulders was so great that it blocked out all else.
Smith: Interesting.

Walters: And I watched him change pre and post 9/11. I had opportunities to talk with he and his father, certainly a wartime president also, and the weight of our American troops on their shoulders was just incomprehensible. I saw it, talked to them about it.

Smith: I had an extraordinary experience – it was Charlie Gibson’s idea – but the President picked up on it. On January 19th, the last event on his schedule. It was never released to the media, it was for the oral histories of both libraries. I spent ninety minutes in the White House foyer interviewing the two Presidents Bush; off the record and therefore a little more candid than it might have been otherwise. It was fascinating. But I know exactly what you are saying.

Walters: It’s interesting that you talk about that in the Grand Foyer. On Inaugural Day, for 43, I was standing in the Grand Foyer, the family had come in after the parade and had gone into the State Dining Room and the President was standing pretty much by himself in the foyer. I walked out to him and I said, “Sir, is there something I can help you with?” And he said, “I’m waiting for the President.” And I looked at him and I said, “Sir, you are the President.” And he said, “No, I mean 41.” Now, up to that point I hadn’t heard that, and I don’t know whether that’s the derivation, or whether it started with the family earlier than that or not. But that’s when, obviously after that, I heard 41 or 43 all the time to distinguish between the two men.

Smith: A perfect note on which to end.
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Smith: Thank you for doing this. Before you were president, there was a long-running relationship here. I heard President Ford talk with real admiration about your grandfather. And then, of course, when your dad went into Congress in ’66 – which, by the way, was a brilliant campaign. The best political slogan I’ve ever heard was ‘Labels are for cans’. A lot of people might dust that off today. Anyway, clearly Ford saw him as a comer. Your folks were in China and your dad was brought back to the CIA. And there was a perception - not that the president was responsible - but because of the political climate at the time, that he was being deep-sixed in terms of his own political future.

The reason I ask is because Nelson Rockefeller went to his grave convinced that all that was Don Rumsfeld’s doing. Did it make it awkward when you decided to bring Rumsfeld into the cabinet?

Bush: Very interesting question. It made it awkward for some of the people who liked to gossip about that. Actually, it didn’t make it awkward for them; it gave them gist for the gossip. But, no, I made my decision on what I thought was best for my administration, not based upon some kind of history between Dad and Rumsfeld. I’ve never really known whether that was true - that being that Don Rumsfeld engineered the situation where George Bush, in order to get confirmed as the CIA, had to renounce his basic right as a citizen, which is that he would not seek the vice presidency. I don’t know if that’s true or not. It didn’t really enter into my mind.

I ended up with relationships with people that had poor relationships with my dad, like [John] Connally, for example. I got to know Connally in a different light. They may have bent over backwards to be nice to the son after having had animosity with the father. I don’t know. But I picked Don Rumsfeld because I thought he’d help transform the military. That was the primary focus of what I wanted my defense secretary to do. I thought we needed a
military that was different from the Cold War structure and Rumsfeld had written about that and would be good at it. But, no, it didn’t prove awkward. It may have for Dad, but he wouldn’t have told me and he never reflected any awkwardness. And, generally, my mother can’t contain herself and would’ve expressed herself openly had there been a problem.

Smith: Let me go back. You, of course, ran for Congress in ’78.

Bush: I did.

Smith: But before that, didn’t you work in the Ford campaign in ’76?

Bush: I did. What had happened was I had gotten out of Harvard Business School in ’75 and went to Midland, Texas, where I was raised, to stake my claim. You know, all business was revved up after the oil embargo and I scratched an entrepreneurial itch. I got out there and Jimmy Allison, who is the publisher of the Midland Reporter Telegram and the campaign manager of my dad’s ’66 campaign, the campaign manager of Ed Gurney’s ’68 campaign and the campaign manager of Winton Blunt’s ’72 campaign for Senator of Alabama, had taken over the newspaper from his dad. I think it was John Tower who asked him to help him in this state, so he asked, “Would you mind running West Texas for us?”

Smith: Now, was this the fall campaign or the primary?

Bush: No, it was the primary.

Smith: Oh, that was tough.

Bush: Yeah. See, I was a volunteer. I was in the oil business. And it was clear to them from the beginning that Ford had no chance in West Texas. I mean, Ronald Reagan was, you know, riding a wave out there. I can remember helping set up an event in Lubbock, Texas for Gerald Ford and he came out there and there were a handful of people that came to see him. We got zero delegates. As a matter of fact, Gerald Ford got zero delegates statewide in the state of Texas.

Smith: Right. And there’s the famous incident where, was it the tamale…?
Bush: He ate the husk on the tamale down there in San Antonio. That didn’t help either but - tamale or no tamale - Ronald Reagan had created a political tsunami and just crushed President Ford in Texas.

Smith: Was that part of a Republican Party that, even then, was in the throes of change?

Bush: Yeah, absolutely. So, I had run for Congress in ’78 and I got beat by Ken Hance, who’s a conservative Democrat. All those conservative Democrats who had forever voted for the Democratic Party switched to Reagan in ’80 and forever since, that district has been solid Republican. So, basically, what Ronald Reagan did was that he had the charisma and the ability to take people that were inclined to be Republicans and convert them to the Republican Party.

Smith: He infamously staged a comeback in the primaries in North Carolina with the issue of the Panama Canal treaties. Was that something that really resonated down here?

Bush: Absolutely. President Ford made a tough decision and it irritated a lot of people. Occasionally a hot button issue will arise that triggers a protectionist or nativist impulse and this was clearly one. We’re witnessing the same thing now with the immigration debate and it was first manifested during my presidency on Dubai ports, which was a case of Port Management Company from a foreign country that was good at what they did, and yet the renewal of a contract triggered this populist uprising and it became a sovereignty issue.

Smith: I assume in today’s media climate, it’s a lot easier to push that hot button and get it out there than it was back then.

Bush: It is much easier because of the blogs and the 24-hour news cycles. On the other hand, the Panama Canal Treaty was really hot and I remember John Tower supported President Ford on the vote and was vilified. Plus, his support of Gerald Ford over Ronald Reagan really made it difficult for him.

Smith: I’ll tell you a Connally story from that year. At the time of Connally’s indictment, the milk fund or whatever that he was indicted for, he went up to
the White House to see the President about something. And aides told Ford, “You can’t do this. You can’t talk to him because he’s being indicted.” And Ford, being Ford said, “Look, in our country, you’re innocent until proven guilty. Of course I’ll see him.” So, he saw him. Fine.

So, later on, in the Texas primary, the Ford people approach Connally who was staying neutral. Later still, he sees himself as a running mate for Ford and comes to the White House. Dave Kennerly tells this story. Kennerly said to him, “God, if I was President to the United States, I wouldn’t see that bastard after what he did.” And Ford said, “Well, it’s a good thing you’re not president.” So, it all leads to Kansas City and the vice presidency is up in the air. Connally wants to come to see the President for another visit and Ford agrees to see him. Kennerly says, “God, I hope you’re not considering that s-o-b” and Ford looks at him and says, “Do you think I’ve forgotten what he didn’t do in Texas?” Behind the genial exterior was a tough guy.

Bush: Absolutely. Look, I didn’t know President Ford very well. I was of a different generation, but when I was with him, one, I was impressed by his stature. The big guy. Secondly, I was impressed by his gentle nature. There was no kind of bully to Gerald Ford, but you could tell beneath the veneer of kind of a friendly fellow that there was an inner strength and that impressed me.

Smith: Did he campaign for you in ’78?

Bush: Nobody did in ’78. It’s interesting. The ’78 primary was a pretty tough primary, because I was accused of being shipped by the Rockefellers to buy up all the farmland. This was during the American Agricultural Movement. There was big time unrest in the agricultural sector and a lot of the district is farming. Ronald Reagan actually endorsed my opponent in the ’78 primary and a lot of people speculated it might’ve been that some of his political advisors were saying that this is a chance to wound Bush, Sr. At any rate, Reagan called me the day after the primary and congratulated me and asked if I wanted his help. I had made the determination that I was going to seek nobody’s outside help, my dad’s, Reagan’s, or Ford’s because I wanted to
show people I could stand on my own two feet. So, no, he never campaigned because he wasn’t asked.

Smith: Was that campaign a valuable experience?

Bush: Oh, it was great. Really good for a lot of reasons. One, it taught me that you can run and lose and life goes on. Secondly, it enabled me to understand what it means to get defined, how you have to define yourself as opposed to get defined by an opponent. I got “out-country'd” in a country district and I vowed that that would never happen again. And, thirdly, it really helped cement my marriage, because Laura and I had just gotten married. We got married in November of ’77, so we spent our real first year of marriage in politics and it gave her a glimpse of politics and it gave me a glimpse of a fabulous woman on the campaign trail.

Smith: She took to it naturally?

Bush: Yes, she’s good. One reason why is she has zero political ambitions for me or herself, for that matter, so she was a very natural campaigner. People took to her more quickly than they took to me out in West Texas. I still had a little Ivy League veneer on. She was born and raised in Midland and the fact that she was reluctant to be on the campaign trail appealed to a lot of people, particularly women who could relate.

Smith: Sure. In ’80, you go to Detroit.

Bush: Yeah.

Smith: And there’s this crazy, still murky, never fully explained effort that some people literally think to this day was kind of a feint, almost a head trip by the Reagan people to send out the message that, “We’re moderate. We’re willing to reach out to the moderates.” A number of people have told us it was really a Kissinger and Greenspan effort to get back in the game, that they were using Ford. It never would’ve happened, partly because Mrs. Ford, I don’t think, ever would’ve gone along with it. But stories have been written that suggest your dad was basically on the verge of leaving town, that he thought that this was a done deal.
Bush: Well, I wasn’t there. Interestingly enough, I got notified about President Reagan’s selection of my dad in a restaurant in New York. So, we hustled over the next morning to Detroit from New York. So, I wasn’t there. I think the report that he pretty well considered himself out of the mix was true. You know, I can’t imagine a worse set up than a co-presidency. And there is no doubt in my mind that, when it all came down to it, that President Reagan would not have allowed that to happen. It was a figment of somebody’s bad imagination.

Smith: The phrase was Walter Cronkite’s.

Bush: Really?

Smith: Yeah.

Bush: But, splitting duties… I mean, the president assigns duties. The president doesn’t split duties. You can imagine a White House in which there had been a predetermined assignation of duties. Then, immediately, you’d have two camps in the White House. There needs to be one camp and that’s a camp that is loyal to the country and willing to work for a president, including a vice presidential staff that is obviously loyal to the vice president, but that also understands who makes the decisions and that’s the president. Period.

Smith: In 2000, the day of your acceptance speech, there were people who were in that room who have marveled: here you are, a few hours away from the biggest speech of your life and, first of all, that you’re thoughtful enough to go over to the hospital to see Ford. They’ve talked about how you went in there very relaxed, very jovial, with no sign of pressure in terms of what was going on. What do you remember of that visit? How did you learn about his illness?

Bush: I would guess that Karl Rove said, “The President is ill and I think you ought to go over there.” Secondly, by the time you’re getting ready to give a speech, at least the way I do things, I had gone over that speech innumerable times and the truth of the matter is you want your mind off of the speech or off of the event. It’s like debate day. You don’t want to be sitting around kind of thinking about what the question is going to be and grinding through
the potential answers in your mind. You want to get your mind off the
subject. You’ve worked, you’ve prepared, you’re ready to go, and so going to
the hospital to see President Ford was therapeutic in some ways. It kind of
got your mind off yourself. I can’t remember all the details of the event, but
somehow I remember the big guy was in his pajamas. Laura went with me, if
I recall correctly, so I’m glad we went. It was a small gesture.

Smith: Well, it really meant a lot to him. It really was a tonic.

Bush: It was a tonic for me, too. When you think of somebody else, it tends to cause
a person not to be so self-absorbed that you fret and agonize.

Smith: Well, and he’d been through that. His acceptance speech was probably the
most important speech he ever gave.

Bush: The interesting thing about an acceptance speech at a convention is that it’s
your second most visible moment. The first is when you pick your vice
presidential running mate because it speaks volumes about the process. It’s
really your first presidential decision and it begins to describe to the American
people who you are and what kind of president you’d be. The second is your
convention speech because it’s the first time most people actually see you
speaking to them as to what your priorities would be and what your hopes are
for the country.

Smith: Let me ask you, because that segues very neatly into the selection of Dick
Cheney. One of the things that’s fascinating about the whole trajectory of
history – and you’d know a whole lot better than I would – are all these
people who say, “What’s happened to Dick Cheney?” I’ve often thought one
of the things that happened to Dick Cheney was his experience. The irony is
that Ford spent twenty-five years on Capitol Hill, and the moment he became
president, he found himself in the position of defending executive
prerogatives against the Watergate Babies, that whole generation of people
who wanted to chip away at the presidency. They’d already passed the War
Powers Act. And Cheney went through that at a young and very
impressionable age. Then obviously he had the experience in Congress
himself. But, I wonder if he didn’t bring with him to your presidency this
very keen sensitivity about the vulnerability of the presidency, the fact that presidential powers are under constant assault.

Bush: Sure, they are. And the great thing about our country is that you’re always arguing on the margin. Checks and balances exist, and the question is to what extent does the legislative body or the courts get to check the presidency and balance the presidency? And the president, of course, has to deal with the circumstances of the times. In my case, I needed to exert presidential authority within the Constitution; that is, my authority is under Article II as the Commander-in-Chief. In my case, I also got bolstered by congressional resolution as well.

You know, I’ve heard all that stuff about Dick Cheney and “What happened to Dick Cheney?” “Dick Cheney has changed.” Dick Cheney did not change from the moment I asked him to be vice president to the day we left office. Dick Cheney was an experienced, solid advisor who did not panic when times got tough and who did not express displeasure behind the president’s back. The presidential nominee must do two things when you pick a vice president. One, assure the American people that if the worst happens your nominee can be president. Dick Cheney passed that test. He had the experience necessary to be president. And, secondly, the president picks a vice president to shore up his own weaknesses. I was a governor from Texas. I had visited Washington. I never had had Washington experience. Dick Cheney had been secretary of defense, chief of staff, and a member of the United States Congress. He had excelled in all three positions and there’s no doubt in my mind he was a great pick.

The problem is, during the presidency, I made some very controversial decisions. I authorized within the law the ability for our intelligence services to use enhanced interrogations techniques to get information from cold-blooded killers to protect our country. Dick Cheney supported that decision and rather than blame the president, a lot of the chattering class would rather blame the vice president. I thought that criticism of Dick Cheney was very unfair.
Smith: Is it helpful to have a vice president who clearly does not have presidential aspirations of his own?

Bush: It’s an interesting question. I think so; at least in my case it was, because I had a controversial presidency. I made a lot of very difficult decisions and, had my vice president been positioning himself or herself for a run for the presidency, some of the decisions would’ve been undermined by the leakage that would’ve come out of the vice president’s office. I think of the surge, for example. One of the problems with the president in making a tough decision like sending more troops in when everybody wanted you to pull out is you need as much unanimity in the government as possible in order to make the idea saleable. In this case, had there been any dissent, the Congress would’ve exploited it and made it much harder for me to get the appropriations bills through. This would’ve been in ’06. Right about in ’06, somebody as a vice president would have been beginning to position and that would’ve been a hard position for somebody running for president to have assumed at the time. It made it a lot easier in many ways to have a vice president who wasn’t seeking the presidency.

Smith: Do you think he had this particular sensitivity to the inherent hostility of Congress toward the Executive? I mean, was he any more or less sensitive to that than you think?

Bush: I don’t think so. I think Dick, one, was very respectful of Congress. He loved the institution of the House and he would often talk about his experiences as a congressman. No, I think, like myself, he reacted to the horror of 9/11. We were charged with the task of protecting the homeland in a very uncertain environment. We were getting daily intelligence reports that talked about all kinds of attacks. It is hard for people to remember what that period after 9/11 was like, but it was a period of a lot of anguish and a lot of doubt and uncertainty. And then it was followed by a period of finger pointing. You did not connect the dots. You must connect the dots. We started connecting the dots and then all of a sudden the dialogue became “Why are you connecting the dots?”
I never felt like Dick’s advice was excessive and I always felt it was important. But every time I made a decision - and he’d disagree with a lot of the decisions I made, well, not a lot, but a fair number – he would say, “Yes, sir, Mr. President.” His classic line was “That’s why you get paid the big bucks.” I mean, for example, when I agreed with Secretary Rumsfeld that I needed new eyes on the ground in Iraq and decided that Bob Gates would become the secretary of defense, I informed Vice President Cheney and he disagreed with the decision [to accept Rumsfeld’s resignation] and I fully understood. But, he also understood it was my call to make and he knew I thought long and hard about it.

Smith: It’s a speculative question, but was that affected, do you think, by his long-standing relationship with Don Rumsfeld?

Bush: No question. No question. He and Don Rumsfeld are close friends and he also thought he was doing a fine job, but, you know, it’s the president’s decision to make and Dick knew that. He could express himself very plainly and I appreciated that. And, also, one of the things that a president needs is there to be some creative tension. In other words, you don’t want everybody sitting around the table and saying, “Oh, okay, let’s go tell the boys”, “Looking beautiful today.” What you want is somebody saying “This is what I think” and somebody else saying, “This is what I think” and have them hash it out and Dick Cheney was good at that, but he did it in a way that wasn’t personal or full of animus. Of course, I was never in a lot of those meetings. I mean, occasionally, there would be flare ups in my presence. I was told, of course, by my national security advisor, for example, when there is a tension in a National Security meeting - what went on. And, you know, people would take strong positions and that’s what a president wants. And Dick was good at that.

Smith: It’s interesting. That was very much how Ford liked it and Ford was very different from Nixon in that regard. You can’t imagine Nixon inviting people in and having it out, whether it was the budget or whatever. I mean, that was very much the approach that he took. At the time of 9/11, I know that the former presidents were at the Cathedral. Did people reach out through them?
Bush: I think that, if I recall correctly, prior to going into Iraq, Condi and Hadley, if I'm not mistaken, touched base with the former presidents. I’m not sure. I know they touched base with Bill Clinton.

Smith: We’ll follow up on that. Hadley, I think, was a very junior official in the Ford White House.

Bush: Right. He was. I think so. I think they did. You know, it’s interesting. I was often asked “Did you consult with former presidents?” and the answer is “No”. I generally called a former president when I had a request. I called my dad and Bill Clinton to ask them to help on the tsunami, but most former presidents know that the current president has got much better information than they ever would and, therefore, their advice would be superficial at best.

Smith: One thing I think, didn’t King Hussein die on your watch?

Bush: No.

Smith: No. Who was it? Was it the King of Morocco?

Bush: No, no. Pope John Paul died. That was the biggest state funeral we went to.

Smith: Anyway, I know that President Ford who, at that point, was really getting on in years, I know he went at the request of the president to walk in King Hussein’s procession.

Bush: That would’ve been Clinton.

Smith: Okay.

Bush: I did call my dad, of course, but it was really to comfort him. The roles got completely reversed during my presidency. When he was president, I agonized about what was said about him or how he was characterized. When I was president, he agonized about what was said about me and how I was characterized. He would comfort me when he was a president. I comforted him when I was the president. So I spent as much time calling him and saying, “Don’t worry about it. I’m doing fine.”

Smith: And did your mother just get mad?
Bush: Yes - actually, she tuned it out. She handled it the right way, which is you don’t pay attention to it at all. She did what Dad should’ve done.

Smith: You and Mrs. Bush did something very gracious and I’m not sure it had been done before. You had a 90th birthday party for President Ford.

Bush: Yes, we did.

Smith: How did that come about?

Bush: Well, we just thought about it. I can’t remember, I wonder if Dick, I don’t remember the genesis. It might’ve been that Dick said, “You know, this is Gerald Ford’s 90th birthday,” and Laura grabbed on to it and said, “Let’s have a party for him.” It could’ve been. I just can’t remember who suggested it. It might’ve been that Laura read about it and said, “Let’s do it.” But, anyway, it was a really wonderful occasion. I had not known the Ford family very well and we really had a wonderful time with the President and Mrs. Ford and the children. It was a neat deal. I had him into the Oval Office and we had the grand dinner there and I’m glad we did it. It was really special.

Smith: He cherished the memory. There’s a wonderful story – a classic Betty Ford. After her portrait was hung in the White House, maybe a year or so later, she had some cosmetic surgery done and people asked her why and she said because she wanted to look like her picture.

Bush: She’s a classy woman.

Smith: She had a tough road to hoe.

Bush: In the spotlight. That’s the problem with public life is it’s public and if you’ve got any frailties or any issues you’ve got to deal with, it’ll be highlighted. Mrs. Ford did the country a great service by dealing with her addictions and has left a legacy of people being willing to confront life’s realities.

Smith: And, even before that, the breast cancer. Thirty years ago, no one talked about it and it was a deadly silence.
Bush: That’s right. She was great and did a great service. The first spouse can either seize the moment and really make a difference in people’s lives or kind of go “Why me?” Mrs. Ford did that and Laura did that, too.

Smith: I’ll never forget, because I’ve seen the letters when the Fords moved into the White House. Of course, they never expected to live there. They never wanted to live there, although, once they got there, they decided they’d like to stay. But, she mentions - typically candid Mrs. Ford - mentions somewhere that they shared the same bed. And concerned Americans wrote to protest that fact. Do you ever get over the extent to which your family, your “private life” is public property?

Bush: I probably was the person best prepared to understand the realities of an incoming president. The huge sacrifice is that you’ve lost your anonymity forever. And I knew that. So, having said that, the honor of representing the country, the thrill of being the president, being in a position to be able to make history, far exceeds the inconveniences of the loss of anonymity.

Smith: Susan was a teenager who had to adapt to Secret Service agents. Was that a challenge for your girls?

Bush: Well, you know, they were getting ready to go to college and it was a huge challenge for them and it was a great relief for me. The Secret Service are really good and they gave our girls space. But, no question, somebody who contemplates running for president and happens to be a father or mother, has got to weigh what that means on their children. In our case, our little girls were apoplectic about me running and (they) emerged after the process as young, professional, contributing women. We’re very proud of them.

Smith: A couple of things and we’ll let you go. I think the last picture of President Ford that was published coincided with your visit out there, which was around Easter, 2006. The family was very grateful - it was the best medicine. But it’s interesting that that’s the last picture, because they were also very sensitive. I mean, he was a proud man. You know, would never appear anywhere in a wheelchair. And that was going to be the last picture that people saw. Was that visit arranged spur of the moment?
Bush: I can’t remember how it was arranged, but the truth of the matter is it made sense for me to go by there. I was in the region. I think that’s the trip where I did a political event and went out to one of the Marine Corp bases, Twenty nine Palms. Went to church out there with the troops. Rode my mountain bike, as I recall. Maybe did something for Mary Bono. But it was important that I go call on the former President. I was in his neighborhood and it was easy to do and I’m glad I did it.

Smith: Were you aware that his health was at that point failing?

Bush: Yeah, of course I was. But I didn’t see a failing man. When I was with him, he was in command. I mean, obviously he was older, but he wasn’t bed ridden, he wasn’t in a wheelchair, and he wanted to walk out on his front steps and have his picture. I thought that was great.

Smith: Do you remember what you talked about - and what you didn’t talk about?

Bush: I was surprised when I read that President Ford disagreed with my decision to liberate Iraq. And one reason I was surprised was because he never brought it up. On the other hand, when I really thought about it, I wasn’t that surprised because a lot of people didn’t agree with my decision and I can understand that. It was a very difficult decision to make and it’s hard for people to make the connection between protecting the country and dealing with a sworn enemy of the United States who everybody thought had weapons of mass destruction.

Smith: My recollection, and it’s vague, was much narrower. It wasn’t that he opposed the policy. And he certainly rallied around 9/11 and ‘Whatever the President needs to do, he knows a lot more than I know’ and all of that. I think he felt uncomfortable with the argument about weapons of mass destruction, to the extent that that was the stated rationale.

Bush: Yeah, well, he felt uncomfortable about it, particularly after we didn’t find any. I felt uncomfortable about it, too, but when you’re the president and everybody’s saying he’s got weapons of mass destruction and you give him a chance to show the world that he didn’t have weapons of mass destruction - and, once again, he defied the United Nations and the demands of the free
world - the president has got to make a decision. I felt like I had made a credible case to Saddam Hussein that we’re going to take him out militarily unless he honored his obligations, and couldn’t imagine him thinking I was bluffing.

And, therefore, when he chose to kick the inspectors out and not show the weapons, I concluded, as did a lot of other people, that he was hiding something. Obviously, it was a huge disappointment that we did not find the weapons that everybody thought he had, but at the time you make the decision, we didn’t know that. There’s a lot of people who said, “Well, I wish he hadn’t made the case on weapons of mass destruction,” but that’s because now they’re able to look backwards.

Smith: Sure. And I think you said as far as you know, he never voiced criticism to the vice president or Rumsfeld.

Bush: I never heard that. As I recall, both Dick Cheney and I were surprised, but it’s understandable. There were a lot of people voicing their doubts about the policy and particularly after we didn’t find the weapons of mass destruction. The fundamental question is whether or not the democracy in Iraq will hold and when it does, and I think it will, what effect that will have in a part of the region that produced nineteen kids that came and killed over 3,000 citizens on our soil.

Smith: What do you remember from the funeral? Of course you spoke at the Cathedral.

Bush: I remember a family that was grateful to have had a father or husband like Gerald Ford. It seemed like to me that the funeral honored his decency. The family was, of course sad, but appreciative that they had been associated with that guy they loved. That’s what I remember. I don’t remember unspeakable sadness. I remember a celebration of life.

Smith: They were astonished at the number of people who turned out. You know, the Reagan funeral was the perfect send off for Ronald Reagan and we tried to make the Ford funeral as personal and evocative and more Truman-esque than Reagan-esque in some ways.
Bush: Right. That’s interesting. I guess I’d better start thinking about my own one of these days.

Smith: I was going to say. Has anybody asked you the question yet?

Bush: The colonel of whatever he is, the colonel of death or the colonel of doom, hasn’t been over yet. You know, it’s interesting.

Smith: That Rose Garden, you know, at the library is awfully impressive.

Bush: Could be there. Right now, I’m planning on being planted at the Texas State Cemetery in Austin.

Smith: Really?

Bush: Yeah.

Smith: That’s interesting. For whatever its worth, Richard Nixon was going to be buried in a cemetery in Whittier with his parents and I remember we had this discussion. Have you been to the Hoover site in West Branch?

Bush: No.

Smith: It’s got the Library, it’s got the birth place, and then 450 yards away on this gentle hill are the gravesites. Hoover gave one instruction. Nothing could ever be planted or built that would interfere with the view back to his little two-room cottage because he wanted people to realize that, in America, the condition of your birth was no limit to where you could go.

Bush: That’s very interesting.

Smith: The whole story is there. So, they decided at the Nixon to do the same.

Bush: Interesting. Well, mother and dad are to be buried there at College Station at his library. We may end up buried here [in Dallas]. See, I need to see the thing first.

Smith: Yeah, it’s an attraction.
Bush: A little candle lit in the corner, you know. I have no idea. I’m probably not interested, not 'probably,' I’m not interested in the big caisson, the big parade, and all that stuff.

Smith: Yeah. How do you think Gerald Ford should be remembered?

Bush: Well, as a decent public servant. In other words, he brought civility to the process. He could be tough if he needed to, but he never did it in a mean-spirited kind of petty way. That he was a true public servant in the sense that he served for the right reasons. Look, one of the great presidential decisions in my judgment was the pardoning of Richard Nixon. And the reason I say ‘great,’ maybe there’s another adjective, but it was a big decision because he set aside his own personal popularity. Presidents are often confronted with advisors who say “If you do this, you will be unpopular.” A president must weigh decisions and ask the question “Is it the right thing to do?” “Is it good for America, not good for me personally?” President Ford made a decision to pardon Richard Nixon which many argued cost him the presidency, kind of the ultimate presidential sacrifice. And that is a great example for future presidents.

Smith: I was going to ask you: Do you look over your shoulder? I mean, are you aware, not only of the history of that house, but of the decisions that have been made there, and draw parallels or even inspirations?

Bush: Absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, I love history. I was a history major. More importantly, I read a lot of history while I was president and, no question, at least I gained a lot of inspiration and I learned a lot about the presidency. I mean, I think of Harry Truman’s decision to fight the communists in Korea. His decision to reorganize the Defense Department. His decision to set up a National Security Council. His decision on the Truman Doctrine. All those policies put him in bad stead with the public. On the other hand, he made my job easier. I think about Lincoln and his generals. I think about Ford and his pardon. No doubt that, if a president spends time analyzing other presidencies and presidential decisions you can learn a lot. I found it to be fascinating to be making history and reading history at the same time.
Smith: Perfect. That’s great.

Bush: Good!
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Smith: It seems to me you’re in a virtually unique position in a lot of ways. One of the themes that we’ve been exploring in all of this is the challenge that Ford confronted being thrust into the presidency with no transition - couldn’t even acknowledge the possibility. And, among other things, having to mesh, for lack of a better word, an existing White House staff with this “to be determined” group of outsiders. Let me give you a metaphor. We’ve been told by a number of folks who were there that on the morning of August 9th, after the swearing in, there was a receiving line and a reception. And pretty universally, you could see the Nixon people just kind of peel off.

Warren: I was one of those.

Smith: Which would be perfectly understandable.

Warren: I was standing there with Al and I said I didn’t want to go in. First, I loved Gerald Ford, but I didn’t want to go in. I was feeling so down and so beaten. I said to Al, “You know, I’ve had my picture taken with the President Ford.” And he said, “So have I.” So, I left. I don’t know whether he did, but I did. My wife was there and I was going to see her back to the car and I did. And I go back to my office and I’m told that Gerald Ford wants me to stay on. I mean, it was so unexpected.

Smith: Really?

Warren: Yeah. So unexpected and such a nice thing. There was a David Broder column that I recommend to you – it was within a week or ten days of the resignation - where he said, “There are a few people in the Nixon administration that Gerald Ford could use and would be good and should not be tarred with any other brush.” And I was among those as was Bill Timmons, Ken Cole, there were six or seven and you know he talked to Ford. I think he talked to Ford, because Ford had asked those folks to stay. What David was doing was telling certain people in Mr. Ford’s camp who were
angry at the Nixon folks ‘lay off these guys.’ And they did. It was wonderful.

Smith: Let’s back up. Tell us how you got to where you were in August of 1974.

Warren: Well, I was city editor of the *San Diego Union Tribune*. I was directing the political coverage, so I’d seen them at the convention in ’60 and then I saw them when they came through in ’62 running for governor – Haldeman, Ziegler, and a few others. So, the problem was Herb Klein. What to do with Herb. Herb did not want to be press secretary again. He was the vice president’s press secretary. He’d risen above that. So, he devised this director of communications office, which they accepted and they quickly then named Ron press secretary. But they looked at the staff. They said, “There’s no one on this staff that has any experience in the news business. Someone told them that, they didn’t recognize it themselves. So, Bob started casting out a rather large net and he called a mutual friend in Los Angeles, Cliff’ Miller. Do you know Cliff?

Smith: I know the name.

Warren: He was very useful to Haldeman in many ways. He called him and he was very calm. He was very knowledgeable and had been of great use to Bob over the years. So, Bob called Cliff and said, “We need somebody fast.” This was in December. “We need somebody with news experience who will fit in” with everything that connotes. Cliff understood and he said, “How about Jerry Warren?” Cliff and I were pretty close. So, he thought about it and Ziegler called me and asked me if I can come to the Pierre. This was the week before Christmas. Ron wanted me there the next day. So, I said, “Sure, I’ll come and talk.” I talked to my boss and they said, “Go ahead.” I went out there and Ron told me - and now that Herb’s gone, I can talk about this. I wouldn’t have done it if Herb were still alive. Ron and I were having lunch at the Pierre (we had to wait two hours and I was starving), and he said, “This is what the job is” and he described it. “If you take it, will you be loyal to me or to Herb Klein?” I said, “Well, if you hire me, I’m loyal to you.”
Smith: This was Ziegler?

Warren: Yeah. “I report to you. You hire me, Herb doesn’t.” Herb had said, “I’m not going to take anybody from the Union Tribune because the bosses were worried that he would take three or four or five people. There were some that, I think, he wanted to take. So, Ziegler said, “Fine.” And we talked about a lot of things, background, how I’d come up to (by that time it was) Assistant Managing Editor at the Union. And he says, “Okay, you’re hired. I’m going to go announce it this afternoon.” I said, “No, you can’t do that. I have to talk to my wife. I have to talk to my bosses.” He says, “Well, get on the phone because I’m going to announce it this afternoon.” So, I did.

Smith: Did that give you pause at all about ‘Boy, what have I got myself into?’

Warren: It did, but it also said – and it sounds very self-centered – it also said ‘This guy needs help and there needs to be some moderation of some (columnists) in that office.’ And I tried to do that. So, I called all of the pertinent people. My wife and I had a house in La Jolla; we’d just bought a house, an old famous house in San Diego from an estate sale, so we have these two houses. So I said, “Phenie, you’re going to have to sell two houses and pack up and be out here whenever you can be.” So, I went back, said my goodbyes to the paper, packed up, and reported on the 22nd of January. They asked me to come to the inaugural event and I said, “No, I wasn’t on the campaign. That wouldn’t be right.” So, I stayed away from that and went in the next day. And that’s how it happened.

Smith: Was Klein frustrated in his position?

Warren: He never showed that. I think he was. As it developed and as it went on, he generated his activity himself and he was not a part of the 7:00 meeting folks. I think he undoubtedly resented that.

Smith: You wonder about the old Nixon hands. Rex Scouten said something fascinating. Rex, who was the soul of discretion, appropriately given the positions that he’s held, but when he was a Secret Service agent in the 50s, he traveled extensively with the vice president and became a virtual member of
the family. The family actually had a room for him in California. I mean, they became that close. But he said something fascinating and he implied more than he expressed. He said the Nixon he knew in the 50s was very different than the Nixon he knew in the White House. He said more than once - a wonderful non sequitur - on an airplane, Nixon would start pounding his fists against the armrests and say, “I’m not tough enough. I’ve got to make myself tougher.”

Warren: That is the secret. If you read his books, that comes through. This guy wasn’t tough enough. That guy was tough enough. And it is amazing, because I have tried to research his feelings about me and I think I have it crystallized and I’m not sure I want to talk about it on the camera, but that’s an essential part of it. Rex, bless his heart, before the Fords moved in and after the Nixons left, I asked Rex if I could have a tour of the family quarters. He said, “Sure.” So, we spent two or three hours and he’s telling stories. It was just wonderful. I really liked him a lot.

Smith: And he clearly felt very close to them.

Warren: He was very loyal. He was.

Smith: I’m jumping around here, but there’s so much to cover. I’ve always felt that Mrs. Nixon didn’t get the recognition she deserved. Was she shy? It’s interesting, because when I asked Susan Porter-Rose that yesterday - not to answer my own question - but the word we finally settled on instead of shy was ‘self-effacing.’ Which is different.

Warren: That’s a good word.

Smith: But, what I didn’t really get answered was – and, of course, Susan wasn’t around then, but it has been written that the early years in politics was one thing, but that ’52 was a searing experience. And she came out of that with a much different attitude about the ugliness of politics that never left her.

Warren: Well, I don’t know whether the library has the transcript of Richard Nixon’s private farewell to the staff after the public funeral for Pat.
Smith: I was there.

Warren: You were there.

Smith: Yeah.

Warren: Well, he almost told us that she didn’t want him to run in ’60 or in ’68. And she stayed with him and she was loyal and he almost said – I felt this – that he never showed that he had relied on her so much. He never acknowledged publicly her importance to him and, therefore, to the White House.

Smith: Of course, a number of people commented on the fact that, on the morning of August 9th in the farewell, he talked about his mother and his father, but he never talked about Pat.

Warren: No, he didn’t.

Smith: And I think his explanation was that he couldn’t have gotten through that. Who knows?

Warren: Who knows? Because of my personal experience, I feel that he understood, after the hospital experience with the phlebitis, he understood that there were people that he hadn’t really talked to, didn’t know anything about. I went to see him and it was right after the Face the Nation experience. My friend, George Herman, chose Gene Rishan of UPI, Bob Pierpoint, and one other, whose name might come to me later. I get all made up and I’m sitting there and the lights are on and the cameras on and Pierpoint has the first question. He said, “Jerry, did Richard Nixon break the law?” I said to myself, “Wow. What am I going to do? If I say ‘no’, this interview is going to just dissolve into screams and if I say ‘yes’, then I further isolate myself from the Nixon folks.’ But I said, “Yes, but he has suffered for it. He’s been penalized for it and I think the books are complete and even on this,” words to that effect.

And so, when I went to see President Nixon the first time at Casa Pacifica, Jack Brennan met me and I said, “Jack, does he know about the Face the Nation interview?” He says, “Yeah, I told him.” And I said, “Well, what did he say?” And Jack said, “Well, he thought about it and thought about it and
then he said, ‘What the hell else could he say?’ which just broke the dam of remorse and all that.

Smith: I’ve often said the most remarkable thing about the Nixon presidency, given his self description as an introvert in an extrovert’s profession, was not how it ended, but that it happened at all.

Warren: If you think about it, on those lines, he overcame so much that would’ve destroyed a lesser man and became president of the United States. And he went into the presidency prepared. David Ignatius said something about our current president right after his election in a column. He said, “He has spent his whole life becoming. Now he has to be.” Well, I think both Nixon and Ford went in fully formed. They didn’t have to grow in the job. In Nixon’s case, he knew what he wanted to do, not just in foreign policy, but in domestic policy. He had some very bright people writing books like *Nixon on the Issues*. So, strategically, he was ready. Mr. Ford was not, but he knew what his job was as president and that was to knit the country back together again.

Smith: Do you have a theory as to what Nixon’s demons were?

Warren: I do. It’s really far-fetched and not accepted by my friends from the Nixon camp. I wrote a piece on it after the Nixon death. Remember, he got back from the service and he was changed as all people are after a war experience and he wanted to run for Congress, but he wanted to prepare himself and he got a scholarship offered to Harvard. His mother said, “Richard, you can’t do that. I have to take your brother to Arizona because he has TB.” Arizona was the only cure in those days. Go to the desert. “If you leave, that leaves your father alone, practically.” See, Ed was so young at that time. So, Richard thought about it and accepted that logic and bowed to his mother’s wishes and went to Whittier and that changed everything. I believe in my heart that some of his anger and paranoia against the establishment – foreign policy establishment, the Eastern theocracy – I believe that would’ve all changed had he studied at Harvard.
Smith: Because he was a closet intellectual, wasn’t he?

Warren: Oh, he was brilliant!

Smith: I mean, much more than Kennedy.

Warren: He was brilliant.

Smith: Yeah.

Warren: No question about it. No question about it. And I think, when you have the opportunity to go and then you’re stymied, you begin to say, ‘Well, they’re not so good. West coast is fine. I’m doing well here. And then I’m going to Duke Law School. That’s fine. That’s recognized.’ And so, he built up this belief in him that he doesn’t have to come out of the Ivy League. So, I think that’s what he took in to the White House and I think that’s what festered during the war, especially when the college presidents caved in so many cases. They came down to see the President, but they saw Kissinger instead, the Ivy League presence (Kissinger taught at Harvard). And Kissinger, I shouldn’t speak for him, but I heard him say they are cowards and words to that effect. So that fed into it. And then I don’t think the President’s paranoia would’ve grown to the extent it did if that hadn’t happened, because I think, if he accepted the academic situation for what it is - a group of brilliant people who think differently than I do on some issues, but can be helpful and are important to the country – he could’ve toned down Henry’s anxiety the after Pentagon Papers. Pentagon’s papers did not smear him or Kissinger. It turned out to be very valuable, as a matter of fact, to academia, certainly. But they were so worried that more leaks would happen. And that is what gave us the plumbers.

Smith: You know, he was so greatly detached in his analysis of externals. And he obviously wrote with considerable self-knowledge things like *Six Crises* and the like. Do you think he understood the paranoia? Did he acknowledge it or ever try to trace its roots?
Warren: No. No, I think he went to his grave believing we did what we had to do, which is understandable. I started to say earlier that, after his experience in the hospital and after the resignation, he began reaching out and trying to repair the relationship with staff members. I went in to see him on that first visit and we chatted for an hour. His foot was up on the desk and he wanted to know about my family and my kids. Then he said, “You know, we never had a chance to talk in the White House.” I know he was doing that with Pat, too, because their relationship was really cemented even more when they were at Casa Pacifica. She loved it there. So, I think he recognized that separation from the personal side of, not only his staff, but his wife.

Smith: Do you remember how you found out about the Watergate break-in?

Warren: We were in Key Biscayne and there was just a little piece in the Post, which we got flown to us wherever we were, along with the Times and the Sun and other papers of note. There was a little piece in the Post about the break-in. It was Larry O’Brien’s office, so the natural question to us was, does the White House know about this? Is there any Republican effort here? And that’s when Ziegler said that it was a two-bit break-in or burglary or something. And we didn’t worry about it until we got back, until it started to snowball. Once the snowball started to roll down that mountain, it got bigger and bigger and bigger.

Smith: One of the surreal things about it, looking back, is how long it went on. I mean, can you imagine in today’s media climate anything like that lasting two years?

Warren: No. No. The bloggers and all of the talk radio and talk shows, right and left, would’ve gathered together and would’ve forced actions a lot quicker, I think. They would’ve fired up Congress and they wouldn’t have been so reasonable, actually.

Smith: We asked Pat Buchanan that question and he said, “Oh, I didn’t read about it. I got a telephone call and as soon as I heard, I knew we were involved.” I said, “Really?” Obviously he didn’t say who, but he said, “We were getting
mimeographed copies of materials out of Muskies’ headquarters on a routine basis.”

Warren: And, you know, a few people knew about the plumbers and their gathering in what’s now called the Old EOB. One or two people knew that there was some crazy people down there, not the [staff] leadership. The leadership was wonderful.

Smith: Was Colson fingered?

Warren: No.

Smith: No.

Warren: I don’t think he was.

Smith: Interesting. Were you surprised to learn about the tapes?

Warren: Yes. Yes, I was and I was not too disturbed when I heard about the tapes. I thought ‘Why not tape these things for history? It’s a very good idea.’ But, I learned that the impact on the personal side of Richard Nixon was going to be very damaging in one way or another. I didn’t know how it was going to end.

Smith: I remember President Ford being genuinely shocked, not Casablanca shocked, genuinely shocked at two things. One, that Nixon lied to him, and, two, and I think in this regard you cannot exaggerate the broader cultural impact, was the language on the tapes. How do you quantify the political impact, not of legal/illega actions, but of public shock at that language in the Oval Office?

Warren: Well, you can’t, actually. It’s clear that the language bothered him. I remember something Henry said at the funeral, that Gerald Ford had small town values and that’s so true. I mean, they’re the same values that he had in Michigan, they just were there. He was who he was.

Smith: Let me ask you. This goes right to what you were doing. I’ve always thought the first press conference of the Ford presidency – I think it’s the 27th or 28th of August and Ford, who’s been in town for twenty-five years, knows the press corps, but he goes in there having convinced himself that they’re going
to want to talk about Cypress and the Middle East and inflation. And, of course, that’s not what they wanted to talk about. And I’ve always believed – I mean, I think the pardon would’ve come anyway – but if you’re looking for a tipping point, Ford came out of that press conference unhappy with himself and the situation. And I think maybe it brought home to him in a way that nothing else had ‘it’s going to be like this.’

Warren: I’ve not heard that formulation, but I certainly agree with it. I think he was shocked at the animosity underlying the questions, some bitterness.

Smith: I assume he was prepared. I mean, was there preparation for that press conference?

Warren: At that point, I was not active in preparing him for anything. I was first there just to be help terHorst and talk to Jerry before the briefings and help him come up with positions after we had been told what the president thought. So, I did that for awhile and then I went on vacation and Jerry resigned and the pardon came just as I got back from vacation. Then, I was moved into Klein’s office and I was the Director of Communications without portfolio, which was fine. Then I began to do the press conference preparation, but not at first.

Smith: Maybe you could help us. Of course, terHorst is gone, but a number of people have suggested that there was more to his decision than just moral outrage. That that was genuine, certainly not faked, but that he had also, in the course of a month, concluded that this job was not for him, that it was overwhelming. And this afforded an opportunity to walk away.

Warren: Yeah. Well, see, he was a newspaper columnist and they have different schedules than the reporters who have to be at the White House all day. So, he didn’t have that pace, that rhythm. I know the job was tiring. I saw him fall asleep in the barber chair, which is understandable. He wasn’t prepared for that. But there’s one other thing. He was lied to, not by the president, but by someone close to the president. And those things entered into it as well. I think he wanted out and this was the portal. But, as you say, that pardon was the occasion.
Smith: It’s interesting, because Ford’s explanation after the fact, which is revealing, is that he couldn’t tell terHorst in advance, at least he didn’t feel he could. And he couldn’t lie to terHorst. So, they were both in some ways impossible positions.

Warren: I wish some of the top staff had understood that position and had been able to say to Jerry, “Look, this is a very delicate situation. Off the record, you must know that whatever is said from the White House can be damaging, so you’re walking on eggs and I suggest you just say, ‘I really don’t know anything about that’ and let it go at that.” But Jerry didn’t want to do that.

Smith: Mel Laird is a man of a thousand schemes and as many leaks. Bob Dole had a great line. He said, “Mel Laird’s a guy who puts poison up the river a mile upstream and then runs into town to rescue everybody.”

Warren: That’s wonderful.

Smith: We had a great session with Mel. He loved Ford, but he’s angry with him. Mel Laird believed that he could bring a bipartisan delegation from the Hill down to the Oval Office at the right time and they would, in effect, petition the president to do this. Now, here’s my problem. Again, putting yourself in the supercharged atmosphere at that moment—

Warren: Is this after the resignation?

Smith: This is after the resignation, but before the pardon. Wouldn’t any trial balloon have been shot down before it cleared the trees?

Warren: He couldn’t do that and Ford knew that, I’m sure. There’s no way he could do that. It had to come as a complete surprise. You couldn’t prepare the American people for that. They had to be shocked, then they had to think about it and Ford had to give them some things to think about. And he did.

Smith: And take the heat in the process.

Warren: And take the heat. That’s right.
Smith: Haig told us something interesting. We saw Al Haig not long before he died.
To be honest with you, there are people who are emphatic and blustery and there are people who are on the verge of senility and it’s sometimes hard to tell the difference.

Warren: That’s right.

Smith: But Haig was emphatic. First of all, it’s very clear that Al Haig and Bob Hartmann were put on this planet to annoy each other to death.

Warren: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Smith: That was part of it. But he insisted that he never listened to the tapes. And it’s interesting. Everything keeps coming back to Fred Buzhardt. Buzhardt had been Laird’s counsel at the Pentagon. A month after Laird comes back reluctantly to the Nixon White House, Buzhardt tells him, “Be careful what you say because I’ve been listening to the tapes and the president’s in this up to his neck” which then put Laird in a very difficult position.

Warren: Fascinating.

Smith: Then, we talked to Haig and he said, “No, I didn’t listen to the tapes. Fred Buzhardt gave me some very good advice, which was, ‘Never be alone with a tape.’” And I assume this is post-eighteen and a half minute gap and that sort of thing, I always assumed that Haig had listened to the smoking gun tape.

Warren: I believe him when he says he didn’t because I saw his reaction.

Smith: We’ll never know, I don’t think, exactly what Haig and Ford and Hartmann and all these people were thinking. I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s what wasn’t said that’s the real story. That politicians have a non-verbal language.

Warren: Oh, yes.

Smith: Although Ford was slow on the uptake, I think, when he first met with Haig. At least that’s the impression left by the Hartmann intervention, and then Bryce Harlow and those folks—
Warren: I can’t add to that, but I can certainly argue with it from a sense standpoint. I think you’re on to something with that theory. I remember after Ron said to the staff that the President was going to go on the air that night and resign, after a day of back and forth and back and forth, I went by Steve Bull’s office. And there was the Vice President sitting in there. I don’t know why I did it, but I went in there and said, “How are you, Mr. Vice President?” He said, “I’m fine.” He said, “You’re looking fit.” And I said, “So are you, Mr. Vice President.” And that was it. I knew what he was going to be told and he did, too. He had to have felt it.

Smith: Can you imagine putting yourself in Ford’s shoes during that almost year when – talk about being on a tightrope – I mean, clearly your job is to defend the president, but at some point, as this evolves, defending the president reaches the point where it may undercut your own integrity and certainly complicate your life, if in fact you succeed to the presidency. But you can never acknowledge the possibility. I’m trying to get a sense of what the attitude was in the Nixon White House, and particularly among the hardcore defenders towards the job the vice president was doing. He was out of town an awful lot. There’s always going to be resentment of the vice president, whoever it is, not being sufficiently loyal.

Warren: The staff.

Smith: At the staff level.

Warren: Lay it on the staff.

Smith: Well, was there a consensus at all?

Warren: I never heard it discussed in the press office by Ron or anyone else. And, you know, I wasn’t in those meetings with Ron and Haldeman before Haldeman resigned, so I don’t know what went on in there. I do know that there was a resentment with the staff. I mean, Hartmann did not just have Al Haig. There were a number of people who shook their heads, and there were others that came with Ford who were not equipped. You know, you said something much earlier in this interview about the old Nixon hands. Well, there were
old Ford hands, too. And, on both sides, they didn’t fit in that White House in those circumstances. They weren’t equipped and something had to be done and ultimately was.

Smith: I assume in Hartmann’s case, there’s a very thin line between protective and possessive. Bob probably incorporated both.

Warren: Well, that’s right. And I think on the Nixon side, I think Rose Mary had the same feeling, that balance. But Hartmann seemed to put it in a personal way, too.

Smith: It wasn’t just Haig.

Warren: No, it was Buchanan, it was Ziegler, and it was all of those people who were noticed and visible. All of the suspects were Deep Throat. But, you know, Mr. Ford probably felt the same way I did. I don’t know what’s going on. I have a terrible feeling about it. I have a sense of doom. But my job is to represent the President. And, so, at that time, considering the integrity aspect, I made the decision. Well, it was when Ron could no longer brief, they put me in the job without the title. I made a decision, I’m going to approach this as a personal problem for Richard Nixon and not as a problem for the office of the White House or the Constitution or anything else. This is his personal problem and he is the only one who can speak for himself.

Smith: We did a long and fascinating interview with Jerry Jones. And a couple things popped out. I’d be interested in your comment. One was when the Court came down with it’s unanimous decision on the tapes. The initial reaction in San Clemente – and I assume he meant Ziegler, and whether Ziegler was anticipating his boss or, in effect, speaking for his boss is not clear – but the initial question was: can we defy the Court?

Warren: Yeah. Those bastards. Yeah, that’s what was said. And Sinclair was there. When it got into the Supreme Court, James St. Clair came into the White House counsel’s office and was, I thought, kind of a moderating person. And when it got into the Supreme Court, we were out in San Clemente—
I’ve got to tell a story that’s off the subject, sadly. He’s [St. Clair] briefing and then I brief after him and, in the back - I’m in the Surf & Sand Hotel - the cigarette in the cigarette holder and a beer and a cap on is Hunter Thompson. He had a photographer with him. The photographer was – I’ll think of her name. She was the most famous photographer in America for awhile. He put his hand up and he said, “Forget about the God damn tapes. I want to know about the clot.” And he was onto something. He was onto the sense that Richard Nixon was near death, because the clot could go up to the heart and he could die. I said, “Well, we’ve said everything we want to say on that.” And he persisted. Of course, when the President went into the hospital in Long Beach, I got a call from the Philippines and it was Hunter Thompson and he said, “I told you so!” And then he called me when he got fired from Rolling Stone and he called me for money and I didn’t help him, but that’s beside the point.

Smith: Was there a bunker mentality at that point?

Warren: Bunker mentality with the Congress, less so with the Supreme Court. I think then the mood began to change a little bit. One way or another, this is it.

Smith: Was there a sense that the tapes were the whole game at that point?

Warren: In some minds, yes, and certainly mine. I had never heard any of the tapes. I’d seen some of those transcripts, of course, the redacted transcripts. One of my jobs was to read proof on all the transcripts. When the President made a speech, the transcript would come to us and it was old mimeographed stuff in those days. And I would read proof and then the court reporters would change it if it needed changing. So, many times, I had to listen to the conversation to see who was speaking because they often put the wrong name on it. So, I found that I was sort of an expert on Dean’s voice, Haldeman’s voice, and Ehrlichman’s voice. So, Ron sent me to the EOB in a locked room and someone gave me the June 23rd tape and I listened to it while I read proof of the transcript and I almost died. It was like a sledgehammer blow in the stomach. And I think to a certain extent, that’s the reaction that Al had as well. Now, we’ll never know whether he’d seen it before or not. He certainly
was in a position to. But I tend to think he hadn’t. There was a point when each of us in those positions had to say, “Do I want to stay here or not?” before the smoking gun when there was still some question. And each of us, I think, came to the conclusion that, “No, I signed on to be loyal to the Constitution and this man represents that, so as long as he’s there, I’ve got to do my job.” I think Buchanan had the same sense and some of the others who were speechwriters and writing speeches defending the President. So, it was very depressing time toward the end. Very depressing.

Smith: The night of the resignation speech, he famously wanted no one around. Did you see him at all that day or the next morning in the East Room?

Warren: I did not see him that day. (I was in the East Room for his farewell speech.)

Smith: We talked to people who were in the meetings (both representatives of the House and Senate). Well, Bill Timmons, who set up that meeting with the loyalists. And it was obviously a very emotional one for everyone involved.

Warren: There is a picture in the archives of those folks coming out of the West Wing and it’s taken from up above and you see the sea of reporters and photographers, hundreds of them, and I’m in there. Ron says, “You take them out and you introduce them.” So, I did. I was walking next to John Rhodes, Barry, Timmons, and - who was that attorney? My memory fails ______. And I introduced them and it was just so awkward because the one thing that Ziegler had said was, “You cannot mention the word ‘resignation.’ You cannot do that.” And they said they didn’t do it. So it wasn’t mentioned, but everyone around got that sense. And there were just hundreds of reporters and technicians and photographers there. There were hundreds of people outside the fence that’d been there for a day or so, ever since the Supreme Court decision. And that night was the same thing (The night of the resignation speech).

It was an eerie feeling. I was in my office and somebody that I didn’t know came into my office to watch on my three little Sony television sets. She was in there and she was a rather attractive woman. I didn’t know who she was.
And somebody stopped outside and took a picture through the window and it was an AP guy. I saw him later on and I said, “I’d really prefer that picture not run because I don’t know who that woman is. I don’t know how I’d explain it to my wife, for one thing.” And they understood, so they didn’t put it out on the wire. But, after having the blow of listening to this thing and putting out the transcript and watching the reaction and, in the meetings at the press office where the girls were so emotional and some were crying, I started to cry in my little office. Saul Pett came in and he was going to do the overall feature for AP. He’s (was) a brilliant writer, and he talked to me a while in a consoling way. He mentioned that in his long, long piece that he wrote, which was pretty good. But it was happening to us individually at the same time.

Smith: And the next morning in the East Room must’ve been excruciating.

Warren: Oh, it was. I controlled myself in there, but I was so empathetic with him. I knew how difficult it was. He put glasses on in public [for the first time]. He was near tears.

Smith: And he must have been just physically exhausted as well.

Warren: Oh, of course. I know he had been up quite late the night before the speech. That’s the night he met with Kissinger, I think, late at night. Yeah, I don’t think he slept much.

Smith: I don’t want to get bogged down in all this, but there’s certainly been a debate over the final days and the portrait of him that has passed into history is that someone out of control, drinking to excess and all of that.

Warren: I don’t buy the last part. Richard Nixon could not drink to excess. He couldn’t hold it.

Smith: One drink was excess.

Warren: One and a half of those martinis were enough. Then he became jovial. And now, of course, in this experience, I don’t think he was drinking at all because he had some serious thinking to do. He very well may have talked to
portraits. I’ve talked to some portraits in the White House, you know. What would you do? Have you ever seen anything like this? And I don’t think I was crazy. I was depressed, but I don’t think I was crazy.

I don’t remember when it was, but we went to Pocantico Hills and I was there to help set up the thing and we chose the gym. There was a building that was entirely devoted to recreation for children.

Smith: The Playhouse.

Warren: The Playhouse, exactly.

Smith: $500,000 structure.

Warren: The squash courts, tennis courts, basketball courts. So, we chose one of those as the thing and I saw where they lived and what gave them the entitlement feeling that a couple of them had. Laurence didn’t have that, I don’t think. Laurence was different and really good. But that was an amazing house. My visual memory of Nelson Rockefeller is wherever he was, he was smiling and he brought warmth into the room and he would look at you and recognize you and say, “Hiya, fella!” And then he’d go someplace else and say, “Hiya, fella!” Whether man or woman, it’d be, “Hiya, fella!” He was the only politician I’ve ever known that didn’t try to remember names. Unbelievable.

Smith: When he was chosen as vice president, it’s easy in retrospect to say this just never was going to work - this is a very odd choice given the dynamics even then of the Party. The only thing that makes sense is what Ford said. That Ford was secure enough in himself to pick someone who had more of everything, and that Rockefeller filled in the gaps. He had a reputation for surrounding himself with talented people. He had a global network. And in some corners at least, his selection would be very reassuring.

Warren: Well, I thought it would be. I thought it was a good choice, because I thought it would reassure the moderate Left of the Party and maybe bring them together. Ford could maybe do that because he was a pacifier for his people and when he spoke to publishers, I could just see them warming to him. He
wanted to bring people together. He knew the country was divided and he couldn’t do anything about the political divide except to be polite as he always was and to meet with them. But he thought he could bring the Party together.

Smith: It’s interesting. For someone who I always said was the least self-dramatizing of men - to the point where I really think it hurt him politically - those first few days he understood that symbolism was substance. To bring in the Congressional Black Caucus and George Meany and ERA supporters; I mean, people who had not been in the White House.

Warren: No, I thought that was brilliant because he really had the sense of healing the wounds and sewing up the seam.

Smith: Can a president be too nice?

Warren: Yeah. He could allow his staff to do some pretty stupid things. That’s where he’s too nice. He was a lot like Eisenhower except in one way. When they took crazy ideas to Eisenhower and told him, “You have to do this” – Andy Goodpastor told this at the Chief of Staff thing I helped put together in San Diego, he said, “People would rush in and say, ‘You’ve got to sign this right now!’ And Eisenhower would say, ‘Boys,’ because they were all men, ‘let’s don’t be in a hurry to make our mistakes.’” And that’s what Gerald Ford needed when someone brought up the WIN button.

Smith: Which I think came out of the speechwriting operation.

Warren: I did, too. Oh, yeah, absolutely. And, you know, Seidman, for all his brilliance might have thought it was a good idea, but I’ll never know whose idea it was. And then, the other thing that I think he was a victim in was that whole segment around the Polish democracy issue. We knew what he was saying. You know what he was saying. He was saying the Poles in their hearts are not under the thumb of the Soviet Union, they are free in their hearts.

Smith: And, of course, he’d been there. And Romania.
Warren: And you go there and you see the crowds and they love America and he’s America to them and they sing to him. And he hears stories about the churches. The Communist Party could not close the churches in the old town of Warsaw. Couldn’t do it. So, that’s what he was thinking.

Smith: But the stubbornness with which he refused to back off.

Warren: And the slowness of his staff, Henry in particular, to tell him the damage that can be done. It reminded me of a Nixon thing. Nixon spoke to a law enforcement group in Denver at the time that Manson and his team were in jail and going through the courts and they were not found guilty yet. But Nixon said, “Manson’s guilty.” And, of course, that’s the banner headline. But he was standing next to John Mitchell and Ziegler and they could have caught him as he left and said, “You’ve got to change that because that’s up to the courts.” And then Nixon could’ve come back and done it, but, no, they were afraid to do that for some reason. So, we had to fight that battle as Nessen had to fight the Polish battle for some time.

Smith: Is it fair to say, at least broadly speaking, that one way of looking at the Ford trajectory is as someone who is thrust into this office, very much a man of the Hill, who has to not necessarily unlearn that skill set, but has to learn a whole new skill set. Has to learn, first of all, what it means to be an executive and, secondly, what it means to be the president. He said the great frustration in ’76 was that he felt he’d just mastered the job when he lost it. Again, I’m not looking for compliments here, but would you buy the argument that, over those two plus years he learned to be president?

Warren: I do. I think he felt that his work across the aisle as Minority Leader and his friendship with the people on the Hill would carry through and he found quickly that it didn’t. There’s a story that I heard him tell – you may have heard it, too – about a prominent senator who I will not name coming to see Gerald Ford at Ford’s request. I don’t remember what the issue was, but it was a foreign policy issue, defense issue. And Ford really worked on it. He said, “This is really good for the country and you’re key here. You really have to go for this” And the guy said, “Okay, Mr. President. I’ll do that.”
And he gets in his car and he goes up to the Hill, he gets out in front of his office building and the photographers are there. And he told the reporters, well, the __________, “I can’t support that bill.” And Mr. Ford called him and he [the Senator] said, “You know, I just didn’t have the strength to do that.”

It was very disappointing to him [Mr. Ford], because he had learned on the Hill that your word is your bond and he had grown up with that. That’s one of the small town values that he grew up with. If you say you’re going to do it, you do it, no matter how it cost you. And he did. And he lived that. So, that was a great disappointment to him. As president, he did not have the influence over leaders in the House and Senate that he did when he was in Congress. And I think that was a great shock to him.

Smith: Of course, you have the Watergate Babies in ’74. I think the issue was decontrol of natural gas prices, and he had been duking it out over energy policy. At length, he got a handshake deal with Mansfield and Albert and they came back a week later and said, “I’m sorry. We can’t sell this to our membership.”

Warren: I’m sure that’s true.

Smith: Which, again, tells you, on top of everything else that he inherited, now he’s in this period when multiple rugs are being pulled out from under him.

Warren: Yeah, exactly. He learned that he had to speak to a different audience to move the country. He couldn’t speak to the leadership in that way anymore. And I think the WIN button was a part of the prior Hill-type mentality. That’s something the Republicans would do. They would show for the cameras a WIN button and he didn’t sense at that time that that wouldn’t work in the White House and it wouldn’t work with the American people. So, he had to learn how to use the power that goes with that office in a way to affect the American people.

Smith: It has been said by more than one whatever one thinks of Rumsfeld, that Rumsfeld in many ways was a very skillful tutor.
Warren: I think he did a brilliant job as chief of staff. Brilliant. He handled some of the personalities and he wasn’t a tough guy. He was firm with these folks, but he did it and he got the job done and he took over. He closed the door to the Oval Office.

Smith: The spokes of the wheel came off.

Warren: The spokes of the wheel came off. That’s right. And the man I replaced as director of communications was one of the last to go and it was rather difficult, but Rumsfeld did it. I think he was a brilliant chief of staff for Gerald Ford. He told a story at this chiefs of staff event that we put together at the University of California in San Diego. He was in the room with Gerald Ford when the – what was the name of the ship?

Smith: Mayaguez.

Warren: The Mayaguez event. And he said the President of the United States was talking directly to the skipper of the Mayaguez. Now, that had never been done before and I’m sure it hasn’t been done since, but that was a brave thing to do. And I know Rumsfeld had a hand in that to set up that communications link and it was good.

Smith: In the immediate aftermath of the pardon, it has been suggested that there were people on the Hill who were publicly outraged and condemning the president’s action, but who sent back channel messages to the effect that, you know, “You got us off the hook” or “Thanks for doing it.”

Warren: I would believe that. I don’t know that to be true, but I would believe that.

Smith: And then he goes out to California, right before the election, and everyone says, “Whatever you do, don’t visit Nixon.” And he visits Nixon.

Warren: Of course, he did. He was moved by something inside that had very little to do with the political machinations. That’s where the small town values come in.
Smith: The other side of that coin...we talked to Benton Becker. Ford was vice president when Earl Warren died. And Benton, who was politically to the left of Ford, had said, “You know, Mr. Vice President, it might be a nice gesture for you to go up to the Court and pay your respects.” And Ford thought for a minute and said, “Well, I don’t think the White House would be very happy.” And that’s where it was left. Becker learns later on, independently, that Ford had in fact gone up to the Court, placed a wreath in front of the casket. And sure enough, Nixon said some snide thing to him afterward.

Warren: I’m sure he was ticked off.

Smith: But Earl Warren, of course, had been chairman of the Warren Commission. So there was a personal connection there.

Warren: There was a connection. You know, speaking of the ’76 campaign and all, I think he was on to something with the economy. Ford was onto something with energy, and this was stuff that originated in the Nixon domestic council.

Smith: Deregulation.

Warren: Yes. And, so, a rather striking idea he was leaning toward was a gasoline tax, I think. Of course, that went by the wayside when Ronald Reagan rode out of the Right and challenged him.

Smith: Were they slow to take seriously a) the prospect of Reagan actually running and b) just how formidable an opponent Reagan might be.

Warren: I don’t know. I was away by that time. But I sensed they were. Somebody asked Jimmy Carter recently, “You’re very friendly with Gerald Ford. How did that come about?” And Carter said, “Well, we were both beaten by Ronald Reagan.”

Smith: I’ve often thought that that was a factor.

Warren: Oh, it was. No question.

Smith: And that they both resented the fact.
Warren: They resented the fact that he would not campaign, wouldn’t do anything. And then sort of was in the opposition. Had he campaigned for Gerald Ford, he’d be president. We would not have had Carter. We’d have had some solutions to the energy situation that we would still be feeling, I think. It’s just too bad.

Smith: Did you ever see Ford’s temper?

Warren: No.

Smith: The fall of Saigon, what was the mood like in and around the White House? Because, apparently, Kissinger was still trying to go down with all flags flying and get Congress to appropriate funds and all that.

Warren: The general feeling throughout my level in the White House – and, by that time, I was going to the seven o’clock meetings – was it was a Congress’s fault. That had Congress given the money that was necessary, that would not have happened. We were winning although people thought we were not. And Congress pulled the rug out. So, there was great bitterness at that point. They felt the dignity of the country had been tarnished because of Congress messing around in foreign policy too deeply. I mean, they had a role, they have to recognize that role.

Smith: At one point, he’s out in California, the timing could not have been worse. He was playing golf. Obviously the collapse was several weeks in the making. But it was becoming clear that Vietnam was collapsing. There’s that bizarre chase across the tarmac with Helen Thomas and others in full pursuit with microphones stuck in the president’s face. And he just didn’t want to address what was going on.

Warren: No, and he didn’t want to talk to the press anyway. His orders always were to keep the press away. Remember the famous incident in New Orleans when he pushed Ziegler?

Smith: Now, that’s Nixon we’re talking about.

Warren: Oh, the Ford chase.
Smith: Yes, during April of ’75 when Vietnam was collapsing and there was this seriocomic run across the tarmac, with pictures of Helen Thomas and others in full pursuit. I mean, it was unpresidential.

Warren: It was, but he didn’t know what else to do, I would guess. I wasn’t on that flight. But I would guess that he, you know ‘What do I do now? I’m not in a weak position, but I’m going to talk to some people before I can talk to the press.’

Smith: Is that a metaphor in some ways for the first few months of his presidency?

Warren: No, because he was so strong on certain things. He knew what he had to do to bring the country together, take care of the Nixon situation, and take the heat for that. But, in other things, he - in what we’re talking about earlier - the movement of the country toward his position, he was still learning that. And I personally think at that time, he also blamed the Congress and he’d been part of it.

Smith: Two quick things around that. This is so typical of Ford – if you’d just taken office under the circumstances he had and if you decided you wanted to undertake an amnesty program for Vietnam draft dodgers, you wouldn’t get in a plane and fly to the VFW convention to announce it. You know, you’d put out a press release on Friday afternoon when you were up in Camp David. But he did that. And I’ve always believed that that and the pardon should be seen as pieces of the same puzzle.

Warren: I do, too. I think he felt on the amnesty thing that he had to go to people who would be opposed and that he had to tell them why it was good for the country. And he had to go with his hat on, or whatever it was, and be one of them and tell them why. I always thought that was very strong. Very strong.

Smith: Jack Marsh told us a great story, which again illustrates the difference between the press then and now. The day before they went to Chicago, he walks into the Oval Office and said, “Mr. President, we’ve got some bad news.” He’d gotten a lot of bad news, so, “What now?” It turned out Steve had not registered for the draft on his eighteenth birthday. And he said Ford
looked like he was gobsmacked. He just put his head in his hands. Well, before the day was over, they got General Hershey or whoever, they got it taken care of and the press never found out. But, can you imagine in today’s media climate – talk about overshadowing the real story.

Warren: I have thought often about how the situation would’ve been so much worse with today’s media climate and environment.

Smith: And then, after the fall of Saigon, when he got angry, remember when Congress wanted to pull the plug on money for resettling the refugees? Maybe that’s when he begins to learn about the power and the advocacy of the job. Because he put together this crazy quilt coalition and went to the country and basically shamed the Congress into restoring funds and bringing out about 100,000 in the first wave. I thought it was very moving when he died, the pieces in the press about the people who’d been part of that exodus, and who looked at him as their rescuer.

Warren: That’s interesting. You know, that really makes sense. His inclination was not to avoid the press. His inclination was to talk to them, show them he understood. As you know, he made very good friends in the press corps. Very good friends.

Smith: And unusual people. I was surprised that John Osborne was kind of an admirer. That’s surprising on the surface.

Warren: It is. Dick Growald was one of his favorites. Dick was a UPI reporter famed for his gustatorial achievements. And he got into a couple of jobs that he didn’t like, press handler for a big corporation. And then he went up to Sacramento. He was hired by my organization to run the paper we were trying to start in Sacramento. Well, he hated that. So, he called me and he called Pete Kaye and he said, “Get me out of this. I can’t do this.” So, we brought him down and gave him a job of putting some understanding in our coverage of the North County, which was our target circulation area. And it was clear that he wasn’t the old Dick Growald. He was failing, but he had it, he had it.
But he did crazy things. But Gerald Ford checked with him from time to time and before he died, he was leaving, he was going to live in New England with his brother so his brother could take care of him. And we had a little party for him, a going away party, and Gerald Ford came over from Palm Springs. And he really showed his warmth and his understanding of the press and the guys that come to the dinner every year know that, they feel that.

Smith: When did you leave?

Warren: I left in August of ’75.

Smith: Before the assassination attempts.

Warren: I didn’t want to go through another campaign and I had this job offer that I couldn’t turn down. And I went with his blessing and good feelings. Had a nice chat and the obligatory walk along the colonnade between the West Wing and the house. How many pictures were taken with presidents walking on that?

Smith: By that time, did he seem comfortable there?

Warren: Yes, he did. And he was jovial. There’s one anecdote that I love. He had a meeting of the top economic people, political people, and legislative people. The issue was going off the gold standard. A big issue. So, there was one man who should’ve been speaking up who was quiet. And so the President finally said, “Mr. Ash, what do you think about this?” And Mr. Ash [Roy Ash, director of the Office of Management and Budget] said, “Mr. President, I have to recuse myself from this conversation. I own the biggest gold mine in North America.” And Gerald Ford laughed. He thought that was wonderful.

Smith: He had a sense of humor.

Warren: Yeah, he did.

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

Warren: More than I thought I was going to.
Smith: For example, at the time of the breast cancer surgery, that must’ve posed a unique kind of challenge.

Warren: Well, it did. When Nessen said, “She’s going to come over to the press corps and talk about this.” I said, “Well, we’d better think about that.” Nessen said, “It’s too late. She’s coming.” And, boy, did she make a name for herself in that press conference that she possibly hadn’t had before. She’d gone through the conquering of alcohol and openness about that and pills and now she’s talking about something that most women don’t want anybody to know about. And it was very moving and it really moved the press corps. I thought that was one of the bravest things I’d ever seen a First Lady do. She had grit and determination.

Smith: Were you aware of what euphemistically was referred to as her ‘problem’ while you were in the White House? Was that something that people talked about?

Warren: Early on, I was. It was a problem that certain people were concerned about would become known and how would we handle it. And she handled it. Bless her heart.

Smith: But, of course, that was after they left. I mean, did it cause problems?

Warren: No.

Smith: No.

Warren: No, because she was very careful, very careful. Talk about First Ladies being careful - I rode the helicopter once with President and Mrs. Nixon to the airport from some event in the country. I got up early and Pat was in there with curtains drawn, smoking. And there were some in the press who suspected this, but no one wrote about her smoking and I think there were some that might’ve suspected the alcohol problem, but they so admired Mrs. Ford. And rightly so.

Smith: And the kids? Were they around much? Susan was, of course.
Warren: Susan was around a lot and I talked to her some. I got to know Jack who ended up in San Diego. A story about Susan that I love: Clem Conger, who was the procurer of historic artifacts for the White House—

Smith: And something of a landmark in his own right.

Warren: Yeah. Mr. _____. She [Susan] wanted a brass bed, a four poster brass bed and he couldn’t find one. He finally tracked one down in some woman’s house in Iowa and he went out there and he talked her into donating that to the White House. So, Susan got her bed. That story came from Rex Scouten and from Clem Conger.

Smith: You obviously had contact with him after he was out of office.

Warren: I did.

Smith: In ’80, that crazy momentary flirtation with the vice presidency—

Warren: Oh, that was so disappointing. It really was. It was so uncharacteristic and he hurt his reputation. It wasn’t in a lasting way, but momentarily.

Smith: It’s funny, people forget it was Cronkite who used the phrase ‘co-presidency’ and Ford, being Ford, just kind of politely—

Warren: He wouldn’t refute Walter.

Smith: Bill Timmons, being the guy who was in the middle of this, was literally typing up the agreement. And he said, “I will go to my grave knowing there was no co-presidency.” I’ve often wondered if there was an element in Ford - maybe it’s a little bit the Eagle Scout, the seeing the good in everyone - but almost an element of passivity.

Warren: No, I don’t think it was passive. I think it stems from something that the minister said at Gerald Ford’s funeral, that Gerald Ford lived his life by the two great commandments and by the great commission to love thy neighbor. The commandments are love God and love your neighbor as yourself. And the commission is to go out and love your neighbor. And I think Ford lived by
that. I think the minister was absolutely right and he tended to give the other person the benefit of the doubt, and not to embarrass or refute them.

Smith: That’s interesting. I only heard him speak disparagingly about two people and the worst he could come up with was “He’s a bad man.”

Warren: That’s very bad.

Smith: Yeah. One was John Dean and the other was Gordon Liddy.

Warren: Well, that fits.

Smith: Were you surprised by the amount of reaction when he died?

Warren: Yes, I was.

Smith: Because he’d been out of the public eye for quite awhile.

Warren: I was so pleased, but I was surprised. I loved being at that funeral. I was honored to be there and I loved what Brokaw said. I loved what Henry said. It was good. And, you know, I was sitting next to some people who remembered and every one of them said, “He deserves this. We may not have thought of it earlier, but he deserves this.” And he does.

Smith: Time was good to Gerald Ford. He lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his viewpoint on the pardon.

Warren: Yeah, that’s right.

Smith: And then, of course, the crowning event was the Profiles in Courage award from the Kennedys. He said, “For twenty years, everywhere I go, people ask the same question.” He said, “Since that event, they don’t ask the question anymore.”

Warren: No, that’s right. That was the seal of approval. Well, he did grow in retirement. I’m not going to say he mellowed because he was always mellow, I think. But he grew in tolerance of other people and he grew in appreciation for what other people did. The trip over to [say farewell to] Growald was an
example of that. He didn’t have to do that, but he wanted to pay respects. He knew Growald was dying.

Smith: I’d love to explore that a bit. In the eulogy that I did in Grand Rapids, I pointed out the fact that most of us tend to get a little more conservative with age. In his case, I don’t think it was simply that he stayed where he was while the Party went off to the Right. I’ve always wondered how much Mrs. Ford was a factor in that. You wonder how much having kids and then grandchildren sort of keeping you in touch was a factor. But it’s not just abortion. To this day, he’s the only president who signed a petition for gay rights.

Warren: You know, I think you’re on to something with Betty’s influence, because when Betty built that wonderful recovery center in Palm Desert, that brought them into the recovery world and this fits in the recovery world. Forget politics. Do the right thing. Take the indicated step. And I think that rubbed off on Gerald Ford. I know it did on me.

Smith: You saw all these people in his circle, people of accomplishment, who had this problem. It was seen as a problem rather than a moral failing.

Warren: It was a disease. Clearly. And Betty knew that and Gerald Ford knew that, but there are some principles of recovery which really fit Gerald Ford’s template. I know I moved politically after I got back to San Diego. I moved more than my publisher wanted me to move. Certainly more than my Nixon friends wanted me to move. And they think I’m a flaming liberal now. I’m not, but you’re right. The Party left me, but I also was moving at the same time. And I think Gerald Ford was, too.

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

Warren: Oh, when was it? No, I don’t. I don’t. The last time I talked to him was the event for Dick Growald in San Diego. I had seen him at various events, mainly funerals, you know, while he was still alive. And we just sort of said ‘hello’.
Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Warren: I think he should be remembered, not as a self-effacing man, but as a selfless man. As a man who put integrity before self. And I think integrity was a very strong issue for Gerald Ford. He saw the breakdown in his predecessor’s problem and he wanted to show the country that there is another way to govern and that he could do it. And he did it. He had a few blips, but he did it primarily. He will be remembered as a healer and as a man who didn’t have a chance to show us everything he had. He didn’t do something like Nixon or Clinton, certainly, but he was denied the chance to really show us who he was. And I think people will remember that.

Smith: He said it took him awhile to bounce back from his loss in 76. People who were there told us that for days, maybe weeks, he went around saying, “I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer.”

Warren: Yeah, well, most of us couldn’t believe that. But, you know, he could’ve done things that were safe and appealed to the majority of his Party and perhaps survived. He could’ve handled the Polish thing differently and that would’ve helped. But he still would’ve done the pardon.

Smith: And that brings me to the final thing. The debate has gone on, obviously, for thirty-five years about the political consequences of pardoning Richard Nixon. Imagine the country during those two and a half years if he hadn’t pardoned Richard Nixon. [Not!]

Warren: I have imagined that and he certainly did. The country’s business would not have been conducted. Certainly wasn’t conducted before the pardon. As you pointed out, he went to Congress with all these substantive issues to talk about, to the press, and they didn’t want to talk about it. It’s similar to my experience that last six months of the Nixon administration. I would go to all the meetings. I would be prepared on everything that was happening and all the major issues. And I would hand out a sheet of paper that told about a major issue and they [the reporters] didn’t care. They didn’t care. That’s the way it would’ve been, and he couldn’t have done anything except try to
answer for his predecessor. Look at how the G.W. Bush situation has affected American politics today. Some Democrats are still running against George Bush. And they would be running against Richard Nixon and they would lump Gerald Ford in with Richard Nixon and they would’ve missed the opportunity to see a great man [GRF] with great values in the presidency.

Smith: Perfect.
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Smith: Let me just throw one out from left field. Tell us something surprising about Gerald Ford, something that people who think they know him might be surprised to learn. Character traits, or anything.

VanderTill: A couple of things come to mind immediately - his forgiving nature. It’s not easy to make stupid mistakes, I’ve done a few and I know that on one or two occasions, I really did stupid things. I got caught up in the heat of the moment and he forgave me for that. He didn’t come right and say, “Gordon, I’ll forgive you for that.” But we just passed it right by.

Smith: How did you know you were forgiven?

VanderTill: Everything just went on as it had been. He didn’t make me do penance or anything like that. But I realized what I had done was really stupid. You know when you really screw up, and I did. I thought this is a real man who forgives me like that. I always had a great deal of respect for Mr. Ford – or Jerry. But when he forgave me for my transgression, I knew what a man he really was. Some people would beat the tar out of you if you screwed up like I had done.

Smith: Particularly powerful people in a position of authority.

VanderTill: Right. And he was an ordinary human being. And I loved him for that.

Smith: When did you first meet?

VanderTill: That’s a question that I don’t think I have any idea – except that I know we came to talk at one time at a meeting in Grand Rapids for the Republican conference. It was going to be a meeting, I think, in one of the areas that was open for Republican people who met for whatever was going on at the state conference. I knew that I had talked to Frank Meyer and he said, “Now, Gordon, Mr. Ford wants to talk with you, about maybe he wants you to come to work for him.” I said, “That’s really interesting.” Since I just had my
degree from the U of M, a master’s degree, I said, “Yes, I’d be glad to talk to him. How are we going to arrange this?” So I went to talk with him. I’d known who Jerry Ford was for a long time. I had no idea how much money – where, how, whatever – a whole bunch of things. And so we had a chance to sit down and talk. So that was my first real opportunity to sit down and kick some ideas around with him.

Smith: And what was your background that led you to that encounter?

VanderTill: My encounter that led to that, I think, was when I was a student at Calvin College. That year, every year, there would be an award available to a senior level student for what Jerry Ford called the Ford Workshop in Politics, a little twist on the words. It was kind of fun. I was looking for work because I was married and didn’t know what I was going to do next, etc. So I talked to my instructor in political science, Joe Westra, and I said, “What’s this thing about a Ford Workshop in Politics? What’s this thing about?” He said, “Boy, that’s a lucky thing if you could get that.” I said, “Well, what’s that?” He said, “Well, it’s really very simple. You have to be approved by the president of the college and I have to recommend you to the president of the college. Then if they approve it, it goes to Mr. Ford and then he makes a decision yes or no. Yes, you’d be okay and then you’d come to Washington, D.C. and then you’d work there and you get paid for two months. I’d been working in the grocery store for years. How wonderful, what a gift! It was like a gift from God.

Smith: Was that your first trip to DC?

VanderTill: That was not my first trip to DC, but it was my first working job. And I had been to DC as a kid. My parents were patriotic people; we had gone to Washington, DC on a trip out to the East Coast and we had stopped out there. I don’t remember all the details of that, it’s been several decades. And so I talked to my wife and I said that I might have a chance to get paid in this. We decided I would talk to Mr. Ford during the state political conference, and then we’ll talk about whatever. And so we talked. Mr. Ford said, “Well, you know, you’re going to have to get to Washington on your own, and after that you’ll have to find a place to lodge for a while.
If the president of the school recommends you, then you will be the summer student.” President Spoelhof, who just passed away about ten days ago, was the president of the college and recommended me. A great man, by the way. So that got done and fortunately for me, the previous summer school I had met a fellow by the name of Bos, B-O-S was his last name. Ronald Bos and his wife Myrna, and they were from the suburban Maryland area, he was a teacher and we had sort of been friendly, like for lunch, or we’d have coffee together. And Ron had said to me one time, “You know, sometime you ought to come see us in Washington.” He knew I was interested in political science and one thing and another. So I called him up and said, “Guess what, Ron? I’m going to Washington.” And I got to stay with the family for a couple of weeks.

Smith: When was this?

VanderTill: Oh, this would have been about 1966, approximately.

Smith: Was he House Minority Leader by that point?

VanderTill: I believe Ford was, yes.

Smith: What did you see of him that summer?

VanderTill: Well, I saw him when I walked in and said, “Hi, I’m Gordon VanderTill.” We shook hands. He said, “Now, Frank is going to give you some idea on things he wants to have done.” Frank Meyer.

Smith: Was he the AA?

VanderTill: AA? Yes, Frank was the AA, and so we talked and sat down. He showed me where I would have a desk, H230. I’ll never forget those offices. Beautiful spot, looks out over the mall.

Smith: Now, is this in the Capitol building, itself?


Smith: Because it was the Minority Leader’s office you were in? You weren’t in a constituent office, his Michigan office.
VanderTill: No, I was right across the hall from the House Foreign Affairs office, and there were a few other students out there from – I don’t think they were from Calvin – but there were other students who had come and applied to be summer students. There was a gang of boys and girls, so to speak, and we were busy writing letters to individuals who had written to the Congressman.

Smith: Now, I take it answering the mail was a religious duty. It was a top priority.

VanderTill: Frank Meyer had quite a presence, yes. He was an incredible man.

Smith: Tell us about him.

VanderTill: He was about your size, as I mentioned when you came in. He was originally from the Grand Haven area, had taught at, I think, the Christian school system there. One of the things I found out from Frank as I had gotten to know him a little bit; he told me a little story about what happened when he had finally been offered a chance, an opportunity, to become Ford’s AA in Washington. Frank said, “Yes, it was really something to hear about. Some of the little old ladies from the church were there after the services in the morning, and they were talking about you, Frank.” “Oh,” said Frank, “is that so?” He was very humble, by the way. He said, “Oh, I hope they said something good.” Well, we chucked. And then one of the little Dutch ladies said, “You know, I heard that Frank Meyer now is going to go work for Congressman Ford in Washington, DC. Can’t you imagine such an outlandish, astounding event?” “Oh, yes,” said the woman, “I’ve known Frank a long time. He was such a fine Christian man.” And Frank just burst out laughing about these comments about him, not that he didn’t take Christianity seriously, because he did. But he thought, what a connection, he used to be such a fine, Christian man and now he’s in government. And, in fact, that was sort of the way the Dutch people used to be.

Smith: That’s interesting. We’ll do a detour because part of this is trying to get a sense of the political culture that produced Gerald Ford. Clearly it’s a culture that is largely gone, or certainly transformed. We’re trying to get a sense of just how pervasive the Dutch influence was in this area; how it manifested itself politically and otherwise.
VanderTill: Well, I really can’t speak for all of them, but the people were always interested in politics and government, it seemed like. But it’s nothing that you should ever make into any kind of career, whatsoever. And you probably shouldn’t go to Washington, DC, to the wicked city. To live there? Probably not even a Christian Reformed Church there.

Smith: We’ve been told about backsliders who on a Saturday night, would go out and buy the Sunday paper. They wouldn’t read it until Monday.

VanderTill: Oh, they’d buy it on Saturday. Bob Vander Laan and I would go out to Seymour Square Saturday evening. Yes. Actually, a little before that, but late in the day, so they wouldn’t have to buy the Sunday paper. Of course, Bob was a state senator then and he was sort of a godfather to me as far as getting me involved in government and politics and one thing and another.

Smith: Presumably their conservatism was financial.

VanderTill: Oh yes.

Smith: And that dovetailed neatly – Ford was always a fiscal conservative.

VanderTill: True.

Smith: He did fit in very neatly with that prevailing culture?

VanderTill: I would say so, that he would; it was a good fit.

Smith: Because I wonder, over time, and as his horizons broadened, and as he became more and more of a national figure, you have sense of him – well, look, he came home from the war and took on this entrenched moss-back, who was the quintessence of isolationism.

VanderTill: He was a Christian Reform moss-back, Sherman St. Reformed Church.

Smith: And, indeed, it has been convincingly argued that the reason he didn’t marry Mrs. Ford before the primary was because of the political ramifications of marrying a divorcee.
VanderTill: She was probably a dancer and a cover girl and all those other things. By the same token, I think you have to look at Jerry’s parents; Jerry Ford, Sr. and, of course, Jerry’s real mom. And I think that was a moderating influence.

Smith: How so? That’s interesting.

VanderTill: Well, you know, Senior and Jerry’s mom were very tight. And they loved each other very much. If the divorce was a bad thing, then there are all kinds of things that are bad. And the fact that they lived the way that they did, as well as they did, and the way that they worked together and worked out their marriage and the other children, and the respect that was shown to Jerry and the other brothers, and the way Dad treated them all the same, was a moderating influence against the big prohibition against divorce.

Smith: When you stop to think, after all, his mother had gotten a divorce.

VanderTill: Well, because she was treated very poorly.

Smith: Did he ever talk about that?

VanderTill: No. I have read about it, but only very limited, and it’s a very personal thing. I have also been through divorce a couple of times. It’s a difficultly in the Dutch Reformed area. Probably not so much today as we do presently.

Smith: One senses that he may have very well gotten his interest in politics from his dad. Wasn’t his father politically active?

VanderTill: Yes. I think he was the chairman of the local party.

Smith: And wasn’t he anti-Frank McKay? Wasn’t that part of the dynamic?

VanderTill: Frank who?

Smith: Tell us about Frank McKay. He has a building named after him in Grand Rapids.

VanderTill: Yes. I read a book one time, quite by accident, at the U of M and it was about Frank D. McKay. He was referred to as “The Boss” and he was probably a little bit like in the case of Harry Truman. Very similar boss control situation there. And Frank McKay was thought of as “The Boss.” He was in charge of
the politics and the real irony of the whole thing was that when Ford, Jr., or Junie as they used to call him – I never called him Junie – the decision that he was going to run for Congress against the Hollander…

Smith: Bartel Jonkman.

VanderTill: Bartel J-O-N-K-M-A-N. Well, when Ford decided to run against Bartel, I suspect that it may have been a little bit against Gerald R Ford, Sr.’s wishes, what his son was doing. As a matter of respect to Gerald Ford, Sr., Jerry Ford used to on all his official statements, letters and responses, signed as Gerald R. Ford, Jr., out of respect to his parents, and to his dad especially. After his father passed away he dropped using the Jr.

Smith: Were they close?

VanderTill: Senior and junior? Yes, I would say so, although I did not look at that in great depth on that, but, to me, yes. And the other - Jerry’s real father who came to visit at a diner in the South High area where Jerry was working as a bus boy-diner. We’ve all heard some instances. Jerry, Jr. never had much respect for or time for the other man – Jerry’s father – natural born father, I guess would be the right way to say it. There was a major dismissal of that whole thing. It seems as though the man came to see his son, to make sure his son was doing okay. And then that was it. That was about the way it went. And Gerald, Senior and Gerald, Junior seemed to have a very close relationship.

Smith: What do you think he got from his mother? I’ll preface that by the famous story where she literally died in a church pew on a Sunday morning. And when they went back to her place, they found her calendar, her datebook, filled for the next month, or something like that.

VanderTill: I’m not aware of that, no. But I’m not sure I totally understand your question.

Smith: Well, there are people who see his drive and ambition, and they saw that in his mother.

VanderTill: Yes. That one thing is apparent if you go back to any of the Ford papers, and all the papers that were kept, and if you look back to the days when Ford had sufficient staff to run the operation when he was Minority Leader, he had
George Willis, I think, was the man who took care of all the papers and kept the scrapbooks. It was very important to Gerald R. Came right off his mother’s page. And that was done, as far as I know, forever on the Ford staff. It was a trait that Jerry always kept. It was not a matter of ego; it was a matter of record.

Smith: That’s interesting.

VanderTill: I was surprised initially when I worked as a summer intern, to encounter this. I said, “How come he’s doing that?” Well, it makes sense. If somebody is going to quote you better have it written down.

Smith: We all know he wanted to be Speaker of the House.

VanderTill: Yes.

Smith: How burning a desire was that? And how frustrating was it to fall short? Is it why he went on the road all those nights and made all those speeches and ate all those rubber chicken dinners? Was it all because he wanted to be Speaker?

VanderTill: I was on a Ford campaign trip with him one time, and we went out west.

Smith: Was he still in the House?

VanderTill: He was in the House. Trying to build members, looking for a way to continue to build the majority. He was not looking to become Speaker, persae, but to make sure that the Republican perspective was going to have some clearance. I think that was always in his mind about being Speaker. God bless us, we could have had Nancy Pelosi instead. Oh, my.

Smith: What was the trip like? What was he like on the road? Was he different at all on the road from back in the office?

VanderTill: No. He was an ordinary guy. Wonderful man. We were on a private airplane from Grand Rapids. We left on a Sunday morning; we were on our way to Montana, as I recall. I don’t remember the numbers, they had one term and they were looking to get back in again. The plane had no plumbing facilities inside and I had way too much coffee that morning to get on the plane. When we got off the plane I thought I was going to bust right open. That was an
incredible trip. We were also in New Mexico on that trip and a couple of other states out there in the west.

Smith: You learn a lot about people when you travel with them.

VanderTill: Especially if you don’t have a commode.

Smith: What did you learn about Jerry Ford?

VanderTill: I have been able to expand the level of knowledge which I have used several times over in dealing with the people who thought Jerry Ford was clumsy and fell down the steps of the Air Force One. And I said, “Listen, now I have traveled with this man and I can tell you he’s going to be carrying a briefcase. In his briefcase you’ll find a pipe or two, there will be some tobacco in there, and a package of Clorets gum. Clorets gum. Well, you know, Mr. Ford liked to have a little drink. He would have maybe a little bit of – I don’t remember what his favorite was anymore. But he’d have a little snifter. And he’d have some smoke on the pipe. And I said, if you watch that film on what happened when Ford fell down those steps coming out of Air Force One, he didn’t have any problem that he was clumsy. He said, “What do you mean?” I said, “Well, the reason was that he stumbled was that he’d had a little snifter. He wanted to have a little whiskey and he didn’t want it on his breath because he didn’t want to offend people with it on his breath. And he knew that if he smoked his pipe that would make his breath smell also. And he got down to the bottom step and that was it, the one he missed.” And I had a chance to try that with several people. He was not clumsy. He was very solid. Fact is, we played football. The campaign of 1970, I think – still had a pretty good arm, in fact.

Smith: And that was the presidential campaign.

VanderTill: No, this was at South Field and we did some video cassette work with young people talking about Vietnam.

Smith: ’72 maybe?

VanderTill: May have been ’70, yes. Ford was still very good, very adroit. Very athletic and in good shape.
Smith: Was he good with young people?

VanderTill: Yes, very much. We had one guy we didn’t like a whole bunch. He name was Maki. I don’t know if you are acquainted with that. Are you acquainted with that story?

Smith: No.

VanderTill: Oh, my gosh. This was when we were at 425 Cherry, which was where the Ford office was. And we had a few rabble-rousers in town, young people who were anti-Vietnam, anti-war, anti-anti-anti, etc.

Smith: And presumably anti-Ford?

VanderTill: Yes. We were working in the Grand Rapids office and Ford was there and Trix Tikenberg was there. Do you remember Trix? No you don’t remember Trix. She was one of our secretaries. She should be mentioned. One week before Jerry was there, we got a call from the police department. Said you're going to have a little bit of a dustup over there at 425 Cherry. They want to come and talk to you about what’s going to happen. Rabble-rousers are going to cause you trouble. So we talked about it, how we are going to do this, they're going to send this big man in the room, in the waiting area. And this big plainclothes cop. We had somebody there, just to make sure everything was going okay.

We made arrangements for when the police were going to be there. Fact is, I don’t remember the name of the detail officer, but I remember that he was a Hollander, a big Hollander guy, and we had a bunch of these rabble-rousers come in and talk at us and just splitting up nonsense. I don’t recall that Ford was actually in there at the time, but there were other ordinary citizens like the rest of us who were there. They wanted to listen. They heard these kids talking about Vietnam and when at five o’clock the big bull decided that it was time to close the door. “How late do you stay open there, Mr. VanderTill?” “Well, usually about five o’clock we close.” “Okay, we’ll close the door.”
They pushed the rest of these kids out the door at 425 Cherry. I didn’t think much of it and we locked the door and left. The next day when I came in, huge stones had been thrown through this plate glass window. What in the world is going on here? So we called the landlord and called the police department, and we had some conversations with the landlord. He came in and he said, “You’re probably going to have to find another place to get you an office here.” And I said, “Excuse me, are you going to kick us out of the Congressman’s office here? You going to give this chief Republican from the U.S. Congress – you’re going to ask him to leave your offices here?” So I tried to do a shame job on him, and it worked. He decided to let us stay there.

Smith: What did Ford think of all this?

VanderTill: Ford wasn’t in on it.

Smith: But you must have kept him informed or he must have known that there had been violence committed against his office.

VanderTill: I can’t remember how that happened. I may have talked to Frank, I don’t know.

Smith: It’s clear that there was a period of turmoil. Do you know if he was having arguments within his own family about Vietnam?

VanderTill: Probably, I don’t know. I don’t know how that came out with the staff, how it worked out or whatever.

Smith: Now, you mentioned Frank again. Was he in DC?

VanderTill: I don’t recall that he was, but I don’t know.

Smith: What was your role at this point in the office? What was your function?

VanderTill: Well, we were there to listen to these people come in and rant and rave at us.

Smith: So you were a member of the staff.

VanderTill: I was the staff director.
Smith: How had you gone from that internship, that summer job, to become a fulltime staffer?

VanderTill: We didn’t make that jump, did we? No. We could do that. After that summer internship I got back to Calvin and I had spent some time with people at the state government level set up by Bob Vander Laan. He was a friend of mine for a long time, and a state senator. I said, “What are we going to do next?” He said, “Well, Gordon, are you going to law school or what are you going to do?” And I wasn’t sure about this or that or whatever, and decided that I would talk to some people. And so I had more people who had greater fidelity to what really happens to their lives. Are they working for government service, are they working for politicians, are they doing this and that or whatever?

I talked with Jack, whose last name is long gone, who was George Romney’s legal counsel. I spent some time talking with him, he said, “What is it you want to do, VanderTill? You want to go to law school, or what are you going to do?” And I said, “Well…” Yakked with him a little bit back and forth, and then I said, “Well, I’m really interested in government and politics and I think that what I should do is go into law school and that would be a good way for me to go this way.” He said, “Well, do you want to be a lawyer?” And I said, “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe.” And he said, “Well, if you want to be a lawyer, that’s why you should go to law school. And if you don’t want to go to law school, then you shouldn’t go to law school.”

So we sort of filtered that one out. This other fellow - who was the head of the Department of Commerce in Michigan at the time, his name was Dion – and I had time to sit with him and talk. It turned out that he had been a student at the U of M also and there was an alternative that I could possibly use by getting a master’s degree in public administration. A MPA degree. They thought it would be a good idea, and I decided to do that. So that’s how I got into doing that kind of work. At that point – this is a long story – it’s a lifetime.

Well, at any rate, I was very much involved in looking for employment; I was married. I decided that one place that I was really interested in was the Central
Intelligence Agency. CIA. We had a letter from the CIA that indicated that they had known of my history in the Army Security Agency and they were interested in people like me. And so I was rather intrigued by that notion. How things might have turned differently, you know? I ended up going to Washington, DC. I also was interested in the National Security Agency, NSA in Fort Meade. I had spoken with them in Washington. On my own I went down and interviewed with them. I decided I didn’t like the cut of their jib, so to speak, and what they were hiring mostly were Georgia Tech graduates involved in their master’s degree programs in math and things of that nature. I decided I didn’t want that NSA thing.

I then ended up spending time with CIA people. In fact, of all things in the world, the CIA had a office in Ann Arbor, Michigan in an office building. This is when everybody hated the CIA, it was crazy. I had talked with them and I’d gotten okay, buy me a ticket or whatever. So I went to CIA to interview with them there, also. I found the interior look of me and how they were looking at themselves and how I was watching how they were doing whatever they were doing and I found it very intriguing. Their approach to more secretive was CIA than it was with NSA (?). They said you go get yourself a ticket and fly on down to Washington. Such and such a hotel and they’ll pick you up in the morning on this bus at such and such a place. It was all very vague. They said, “Keep good records and we’ll pay you back for whatever it costs.” So I said, “Okay, I’ll just write it down.”

I went through several days of interrogation by CIA. Now if anybody were to listen to this, they’d probably say, no, that’s not the way he did it. That’s just not how it happened, that sounds like a big story he made up. I didn’t. So they said to do this and do this, and then you’ve got to go over to this office over here and you’ve got to make up a story for whoever you are going to tell about who you are working for if we offer you a job. I said, “What are you talking about?” They said, “Well, you’re not going to tell anybody you’ve just gone to work for the CIA.”

Smith: Need a cover.
VanderTill: So, I was going to be a DAC in the Department of the Army (?), and we made up all kinds of stories, then this woman gave me a list of money that I had spent on this trip to DC. And how much did I spend, and where did I go and what did I do, etc., etc., Then I went in this wire cage about the size of this dining area, and unlocked the door and in I went. There was this woman sitting there with buckets of money. (How your government works.) And she said, “Well, I see that came out to $145. Here you are, Mr. VanderTill, thank you very much. Have a good trip home. Bye.” It’s like, Joni doesn’t probably believe any of this, but it’s all true. It was an incredible experience, just incredible. I didn’t take the job as it turned out. I ended up going to the U of M and applying to the public administration program.

Smith: Today it would probably be at the Ford school.

VanderTill: Well, now, yes. We’ll get to that irony in a minute. This was – I’ve gotten it written down someplace, I can’t remember, but it’s the advanced degree and whatever for everybody who wanted to get a degree in public administration. That’s the course that I followed – for those who wanted to be city managers. I used to call it How to be a City Manger in Six Easy Lessons. A little bit of daring about that.

Smith: So from municipal government to Gerald Ford and U of M, how did that transpire?

VanderTill: Well, I was at the U of M; I was one of a small number of people who were competing for a fellowship. And I won one of those. I guess a fellow turned out to be a good friend of mine. Then I was working there as a fellow to the Michigan Municipal League. John Honeywell was the man who was in charge, my boss at that time. I was doing the wage and salary summary. Went out to all the members of the Municipal League so that they knew how much money and what the benefits can have for their people, etc. So I did that. Where did I go from there? This is a painful process, you know?

Smith: Did Ford run into you or ask you, in effect, to come back? Because obviously he remembered you from your days – the summer job.

VanderTill: Yes. I’m not sure on that. I’m trying to think how that finally came out to be.
Smith: And what was the job that you took with him when you first went to work fulltime? Were you in Grand Rapids or were you in Washington?

VanderTill: I was in Grand Rapids.

Smith: In the constituent office?

VanderTill: Well, I was not, no, when I took the job. I had finished my master’s degree and I don’t remember exactly how – oh I know. After my master’s degree I was working Constituent Services for Bob Vander Laan, in the state’s senate. And I got involved with Emil Lockwood also, who was the senate Republican leader. I had one day off from work because I was ill, and when I came in the next day, I talked to Bob Vander Laan. He said, “Now, Vander Laan, Gordon, tomorrow when Emil Lockwood is going to be here, he’s going to want to talk to you for a while about something.” I thought that was interesting. “Well, I think he has a job he wants you to do.” I thought, “Really.” He said, “Don’t say no just because of me.” Whatever. Vanderlin and I were good friends and go back for many campaigns and whatever.

So I ended up talking to Emil Lockwood and he said, “The Nixon people have just asked me to be the head of the Nixon Committee for Michigan.” I think that was 1968. “So, we’re going to want you to run the office, and we’re going to work on this and do this and this.” I had never run a statewide campaign of anything. So that’s how that started. We got involved in a whole host of issues and it was a very difficult campaign. We were there before – in fact, as I can relate back to the recent Republican campaign we just had here. We had no money. We couldn’t raise any money. We didn’t have any material to pass out to people. It was just a mess. In fact, I have a report that I wrote based on how they screwed up the campaign. Not because I was so wise, but because they didn’t do it the right way. The President campaigned. Had no chance for this last one. Part of the problem is you can’t run a good campaign with no money. After the campaign was over, after Nixon was chosen as the candidate, as the Republican candidate for the year, I was looking at the Plum Book. You know what the Plum Book is?

Smith: No.
VanderTill: I wanted to maybe get a job working for the federal government for the Republican candidate, the Nixon people and company. Well, I didn’t know what rascals they were, but we found that out. One of the people that I had met along life’s way was another Ford. His name was Tom. I had worked with Tom in his last campaign for re-election to the state House.

Smith: Was he close to his brother?

VanderTill: I thought so, yes. I would say so.

Smith: Were they similar in their political outlooks?

VanderTill: Pretty much, yes. They were pretty much on the same view, so to speak. Tom was a decent guy. Had a good time. Oh, the way we campaigned those days – what a change now. We had a sound car. Tom’s campaign was, in the primary, against a mayor of Kenwood. What’s his name, Joan? Tom? No? Pete. Pete Lambert. Good man. Tom beat him. So anyway, I’m working in Lansing and at that time I spent some time talking to Tom. I said, “You know, I worked on this Nixon campaign. I put all this time in. I’ve got this Plum Book and I’d like to have a job someplace.” Tom says, “Oh, yes. That seems reasonable. A good idea.” I said, “Maybe some night when you talk to Jerry on the phone you could talk to him about it.” Tom got back to me and he said, “I talked to Jerry and he said, ‘Good one. Good idea.’” That was like “Oh wow.” I didn’t know I had the cojones to do that, but anyway, I did. After that I didn’t get any offers that were worth a nickel. And what did I do at that time for working? I think I may have worked for Vander Laan, but I’m not sure at that point what I was doing. What else did I do, Joan? Anything? We miss anything?

Smith: But I’m still trying to get you to Ford.

VanderTill: Oh to Ford. Well, I think Ford probably said something to the rascals who were running the campaign, but it was certainly nothing much. So, how did I end up with Ford’s staff? I went back to work on Vander Laan’s staff and I got a call from Frank Meyer again. I picked up the phone and it was Frank Meyer, and he said, “Hey, Gordon, how are you doing? What’s happening? What are you doing now? Are you doing anything?” Then Frank said,
“Gordon, Mr. Ford and I have been thinking that maybe we should have somebody fulltime in Grand Rapids. Sort of working that office for him.” And that’s how that came about.

Smith: Okay. Now, did you stay in Grand Rapids, or did you go to DC to work?

VanderTill: No, I was living in Lansing, when when I went to DC, sort of a covering talking to, and discussing what’s going to happen here. So Frank says, “We want you to go over and see the Veterans Administration. Then you can go over here and over there and talk to those people.” Frank was setting up other appointments for me to meet people and talk about what goes on, etc., etc.

Smith: Was that in anticipation of your going to work in DC?

VanderTill: No, in Grand Rapids.

Smith: I want to understand, you ran the office in Grand Rapids. Did you ever work in DC? In the DC office?

VanderTill: Other than that summer internship. That was it.

Smith: Let me ask you, because here’s a man who is politically secure, doesn’t have to worry about getting re-elected; but apparently much more than, say, his counterpart today, made a point of still coming home.

VanderTill: Right. He did, indeed.

Smith: Tell us about that. Why did he do it and what did he do when he was here?

VanderTill: Well, some people thought that Ford was getting big britches and there was just enough nattering away about that and he didn’t want that to happen. He didn’t want people to think that. So he wanted to have somebody local here. Jerry and I talked about it. He said, “We’ve got to make sure that we have somebody here who can keep us attuned to what’s going on, what do they hear about, what’s going on in politics? Do you need somebody to do this?” and whatever. So I think it was not so much that he was fearful, but he wanted to make sure that he was covering the scene, so to speak.

Smith: Did he ever have a primary challenge?
VanderTill: I don’t remember that he did.

Smith: And was he ever seriously challenged in November?

VanderTill: Yes, well that was Jean McKee.

Smith: And who was she? Why did she pose a serious challenge?

VanderTill: Well, because she had a lot of money from the unions. That was one. Plus she had at least one or two people who could do things about politics. Jim Riekse. He was pretty good.

Smith: And he took that challenge seriously?

VanderTill: Ford did, yes. In fact, at that point I would not let him not take it seriously. Not because I was so wise, but because what I decided to do was to convince him and others that we needed to have a better campaigning operation. One of them was Jack Stiles. Yes, you heard that name. Yes.

Smith: Tell us, because he seems to be at the local level in some ways as important, and polarizing a figure as Bob Hartmann was in the Washington office.

VanderTill: Very much, yes.

Smith: Parallel?

VanderTill: Yes, like that.

Smith: But what does it tell you about Ford, that he was comfortable with these people who were controversial?

VanderTill: The word is smart. You know who your enemy is or where and what he or she is doing and is up to it. Now, having said that, Hartmann was not an enemy of Ford, nor was Jack Stiles. They were buddies from the Navy, for crying out loud. And it was a wonderful combination, those two. They were something else. If you had a buddy and you wanted to go and raise hell at night, let’s go out and get drunk or whatever – well, they didn’t do that, but that kind of thing.
Smith: It has been said that one of the things that Stiles and Hartmann also shared was a thirst.

VanderTill: Thirst for power or what?

Smith: Well, I’ll let you fill in the blank. A more basic thirst.

VanderTill: Yes, I know what you mean.

Smith: I’ll jump ahead here. Nelson Rockefeller as vice president became somewhat paranoid about a number of things, including Don Rumsfeld. He didn’t age well, put it that way. He had convinced himself that there were people around President Ford who did not want to see him re-elected. That there were, in fact, people around President Ford who, for lack of a better word, I’ll say, delayed a re-election campaign beyond a logical starting point. And he had even convinced himself that Jack Stiles’ death may not have been an accident. That’s how far he had gone.

VanderTill: Jack Stiles died by himself. Now that road that he drove off there where his house was, he could have driven that with a snout full of booze forever and never missed a turn. I think somebody drove Jack Stiles off the road. He hadn’t been out drinking and missed the curve. That’s not the way it happened.

Smith: I want to understand this. I realize you are theorizing here. Was Nelson Rockefeller totally paranoid to believe that Stiles’ death may not have been an accident? When you say someone else drove him, was that an accident?

VanderTill: Who is the guy that was killed in Washington on the – Secret Service guy – along the Potomac? Come on, Joan, you know. Everybody theorized that something happened to him.

Smith: In the Clinton administration?

VanderTill: Yes.

Smith: Oh yes, you’re talking about the guy from Little Rock, the counsel who committed suicide up wherever it was. [Vince Foster]
VanderTill: Yes. I’ve been through those places. I don’t think that the governor of New York would have done that to get rid of Jack Stiles. Or if he had thought that it was necessary to do, he would have been more careful.

Smith: No, he thought that someone else had been responsible for Stiles’ death. And he connected this with the fact that the Ford campaign was so late in getting off the ground and that somehow there was a connection between Stiles’ untimely death and the delay of the campaign. That’s where he was coming from. How important was Jack Stiles to Gerald Ford’s political operation?

VanderTill: Ford had a lot of confidence in Stiles’ ability to think through ways of doing things.

Smith: Did Stiles have a title?

VanderTill: Stiles?

Smith: Yes.

VanderTill: Sort of. Chief Schmuck or whatever. I don’t know.

Smith: Crony?

VanderTill: Crony – that would be one. Jack never had a moment where if he thought it was important for him to go talk to Ford, he’d go in there and say, “Hey, I’ve got to talk to you.”

Smith: Okay. And that sounds like Bob Hartmann as well. In Grand Rapids, were you aware of how polarizing a figure Hartmann was down in Washington?


Smith: Because he was in your neighborhood, in effect.

VanderTill: Yes. I kind of enjoyed Jack. He and I teamed up on a couple of things.

Smith: Watergate comes along.

VanderTill: Oh, God.

Smith: And at some point Ford must have discussed it with the staff.
VanderTill: I would think he must have, yes.

Smith: Do you recall? You are part of the staff.

VanderTill: Oh, no. I never talked about Watergate.

Smith: Never talked to him about Watergate?

VanderTill: No.

Smith: Never discussed Nixon’s potential involvement or its implications for the party, or for Gerald Ford?

VanderTill: No. I don’t recall that – ever.

Smith: Well, when Spiro Agnew resigned, were you surprised by what happened next?

VanderTill: Yes. I could tell you one thing especially about it. The real impact on Ford and on me was that I was moving from Grand Rapids to Washington. Mr. Ford and I talked about what I would be doing for work in Washington. Ford said, “Well, I hate to tell you this, but you’re going to have to pay your own relocation money.” I said, “Jeez, boss. I know what the housing market is in Washington. What are you expecting?” He said, “Well, I know it’s not a friendly thing to happen, but the vice president’s budget is shot. There ain’t no money. Can’t do it.”

Smith: When I said he was a fiscal conservative, that’s a euphemism for tight.

VanderTill: Yes. No, I didn’t see it that way. He was always generous to us or other people. So he was not that way.

Smith: Were your salaries, for example, comparable to your peers?

VanderTill: Yes, I think so. Pretty good. A lot better than being a Kroger store clerk.

Smith: So you went to work for him as vice president? In DC?

VanderTill: No. I wanted to, but I ended up working for the Federal Energy Administration. Which was a new idea from Nixon.
Smith: Did you ever work for Ford again? During his presidency?

VanderTill: I don’t think I did. No.

Smith: So you would have left him basically while he was vice president – before he became president?

VanderTill: If I’d had the opportunity, probably yes.

Smith: You said you went to work for the Federal Energy…

VanderTill: Administration.

Smith: And that was while he was vice president?

VanderTill: Yes. He had some people around who helped me get a job.

Smith: A lot of folks believed, when he became vice president, that it was only a question of time before Nixon was forced out of office. Did you sense anything about him at that point? That he anticipated that? He was in a very awkward position as vice president. In effect, called upon to defend the president, but at the same time not to go so far in defending the president as to sacrifice his own integrity or usefulness if he ever became president. Did he ever talk about the situation?

VanderTill: I did not have the opportunity to discuss that with him. No. I’m sure that there would have been many who would have been interested in discussing that, but I didn’t feel that I should do that.

Smith: What were his strengths as a boss?

VanderTill: I think I mentioned earlier that he was willing to allow a screw up…

Smith: Once, as long you learn from the…

VanderTill: I learned.

Smith: What were his weaknesses? Because there is this school of thought that says good old Jerry never thought anyone ever had an ulterior motive and therefore, could be naïve about people.
VanderTill: I never really thought of him as being naïve. I don’t know of anybody who tried to pull anything out from under him.

Smith: Does the name Robert N. Winterberger ring a bell?


Smith: Tell us about Robert N. Winterberger.

VanderTill: Did I show you the book downstairs?

Smith: I saw the book, but we’ve heard about – there’s someone who tried to take advantage. Who was Robert N. Winterberger?

VanderTill: He was a lobbyist of some sort. I bought that book a long time ago and I pulled it out for this meeting.

Smith: And did he exaggerate his relationship?

VanderTill: Oh, by all means. Sure. I was not one to do that with Ford, where I would make myself to be of far greater importance to Gerald Ford than whatever else I could be. In fact, I think I had other people that I encountered along the way of life in Washington who thought I might have had more importance than what I ever would have thought. I think I’m sort of a humble person. I don’t think that I am self-seeking. My journey has been good. I believe that I’ve conducted myself properly.

Smith: Did you see his temper?

VanderTill: Not very often. I have heard of it.

Smith: What have you heard?

VanderTill: Don’t piss off the old man. But that’s all. I don’t really. I have not seen him really, where he would be storming angry.

Smith: Ever hear him curse?

VanderTill: No – well, once in a while maybe. Not much.

Smith: What about his sense of humor?
VanderTill: Yes, I think he’s got one.

Smith: How would you describe it? He wasn’t a storyteller.

VanderTill: Well, occasionally. But the world is much less, it is, with him being gone. He was a wonderful man. I would say that no matter what. I just never had any bad feelings about Gerald R. One time I made this wise remark about another media person. But that passed by.

Smith: You made a remark, and did he respond to what you said?

VanderTill: No.

Smith: You said you made a remark about a media person. Did he respond?

VanderTill: Like, “Well, you know you really shouldn’t do that.” It was that kind of a back hand, like you really shouldn’t do those kinds of things, or whatever.

Smith: He sounds almost fatherly. Would that be an appropriate word to apply?

VanderTill: I’m not sure what you just said. What word?

Smith: Fatherly.

VanderTill: Fatherly, yes. Perhaps. I think he may have thought of me somewhat that way.

Smith: Did you know Mrs. Ford at all?

VanderTill: No.

Smith: She wasn’t in the office?

VanderTill: No, no regard for her. We took her around one weekend in the car for some reason. Had to go here or wherever. I know he loved her a bunch. I never shared his affection.

Smith: Why was that?

VanderTill: It’s one of those constants in elected officials and their spouses. It’s the difference between them and a staff person, for example, and the spouse. I think that’s part of it. It’s sort of addressed in textbooks, along the lines of
why elected officials and spouses don’t usually get along all that well together.

Smith: I can understand not wanting to offend the spouse, being concerned about that. But was there a reason for you to feel that way?

VanderTill: No. I didn’t have an uneasy enough feeling, but I just didn’t like her. I felt like she felt she was a little bit too good.

Smith: Okay. Did you sense any unhappiness on her part? We now know, obviously, that it was kind of a rocky road in some ways. And, of course, he was away a lot. She really was left with the kids. All of that.

VanderTill: Well, that’s like asking me how Joni and I get along, what do you think?

Smith: Yes.

VanderTill: I just never really much cared for Betty.

Smith: But you also said you didn’t have a lot of contact with her.

VanderTill: No, I did not. But I felt that she was kind of uppity.

Smith: Do you think any of that is traceable to her background with the arts, the dancing, and the cultural background that she came out of?

VanderTill: Yes. As opposed to taking Steve to ride a motorcycle. There’s a real difference there. I still recall that with Steve.

Smith: Did you have much contact with him in later years?

VanderTill: No, did not. Didn’t have any reason to.

Smith: Did your paths cross at all?

VanderTill: No, not once I was gone.

Smith: Okay.

VanderTill: I don’t know if I’ve ever seen him since. He wouldn’t know me if he fell over me. I didn’t really have much to do with the kids. Susan, I guess, she was kind of cut out of her mother’s box, I think.
Smith: Is it exaggerated the amount of time that he was, in fact, out on the road? Once he became a Republican leader, we sense that he was constantly traveling.

VanderTill: He was, yes.

Smith: That’s accurate?

VanderTill: Yes. I would say so. Pretty much.

Smith: And yet he still found time to get back here?

VanderTill: Yes.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

VanderTill: I never much cared for Bob Hartmann.

Smith: What was it about Hartmann that made him so controversial? Because you are by no means the first person to indicate that. Was he possessive of Ford?

VanderTill: Well, Ford took Hartmann to come with him. And I think Ford probably listened too much to Hartmann. I don’t know. I just didn’t like the cut of his jib, you know? He was just too much. One of the things was Ford was coming back to Cedar Springs, I think as vice president.

Smith: Yes, he’d just been nominated. And the day after his nomination he came back to the Red Flannel Days.

VanderTill: Well, that night I had my phone – just a single line phone – it had all kinds of messages. Every person in the media wanted to talk to Jerry Ford. Wanted to see him – when was he going to be here? When is he going to do this? Blah blah blah. I had a friend at Cedar Springs, at a little college up there, and I said, “You’ve been trying to get us to come with Mr. Ford to take a look at your college. And I’m wondering about whether that chapel that you had there, whether that would make a good place for a press conference?” No hesitation. Yes, of course. I had friends like that, that’s part of what my job was. And so I said, “Can you set it up with microphones…” and we had set up a sequence for credentialing media. We started working that morning; when I
got up it was early and I had other staff and we were busy putting that together.

And then I got a call from Hartmann. “We’re going to have a press conference at the airport.” I said, “Can’t do that. Sorry, we’re set up at the college. It’s all set. We’re going to do it. Scotty got it all set up, got people coming in, going to credential the media, da da da.” He was like, “What do you mean? You didn’t ask me if it was okay.” “Sorry, I’m running this operation out here.” But it pissed me off big time. We pulled it off really well. And I never really got over our run over on that one. I never gave up a damn _________.

Smith: Big crowd at Cedar Springs?

VanderTill: Oh yes! There were pictures. I was walking down the main street with Gerald Ford and there were other people there. That might have been it, too. Maybe Hartmann wasn’t there, or whatever. Someplace we have pictures around, I don’t know where.

Smith: There are people who look at Hartmann and think that there is an element of jealousy that was built in. That he could protect Jerry Ford from himself. And that no one else had the same abilities.

VanderTill: I had done all kinds of crap like that for a long time – before Bob Hartmann even knew how to spell Bob. Is he still alive, by the way?

Smith: No, he died about a year ago.

VanderTill: Did he? Whatever. One of the really wonderful, fun things we had happen, had to do with Spiro T. – and Gerald R. Ford. What had happened for several months, apparently from what I could figure out, every time Ford would see Spiro, he would say, “When you coming back down to my town now? We’re going to have you here, you can come speak.” And it’s like, “Yes, I’m going to do that, Gerald.” And finally, one day, everything clicked together. Yes, we’re going to have Spiro T. back. Well, this is the middle of bad stuff going on with Spiro.

I got a call, probably from Frank, I don’t remember, but “Now, we’re going to have the Vice President here, he’s coming to talk at Calvin College.” “What?
You’re going to what?” Oh, those kids didn’t want to hear him. And somehow – not me, I didn’t arrange it, I knew better. But somebody else arranged it that that’s where it was going to be. And I got the word that “you’re going to deal with, volunteer with the advance people, Gordon.”

“Where we going?”

“Calvin College.” Yes right. Being a good soldier I did my salute and said okay and I met with them at the Pantlind Hotel, and we start getting all kinds of crap. They keep throwing out, “How come we’re going to meet at Calvin College for the President and Vice President and Mr. Ford?” and blah, blah, blah, and I said, “Well, that’s because Mr. Ford says that’s where he wants it to be.” Their advance people are grumbling. That’s the way it is. That’s what Gerald R. Ford says, that’s where it’s going to be. “Oh, we can’t do that.” That was like pouring gasoline on the fire. I agreed with them.

Smith: Did Agnew show up in the end?

VanderTill: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: At Calvin?

VanderTill: Bet your butt. So, anyway, we’re down there, see, and they went in this hotel room and they said, “Let me use that phone. We’ll get hold of Mr. Ford and you can hear him say it himself.” Called from outside to Crown View Drive. I hated myself for that. I said, “Hi, this is Congressman Ford’s office calling and the people are here from the Vice President’s staff and they want to talk to Mr. Ford about this….” Well, I mean, this advance guy must have crapped his drawers. He said, “…..where are we going?” And they settled it. Ford said, “It’s going to be at Calvin College and that’s that.” And those other people were so angry, as angry could be because I got them snookered. So, I said, “Well, I work for Gerald R. Ford. I don’t work for these clowns.” I never forgot this as long as I’ve lived.

Smith: That’s a perfect note on which to end.
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Smith: First of all, thank you very much for doing this. It’s hard to know where to begin. Tell me about your dad and his place in this story.

Ford: Well, my dad, Jim Ford, is the youngest of the four brothers and obviously, I’m the youngest of his four children. Dad was always Uncle Jerry’s little brother and you could tell that.

Smith: How much age difference was there?

Ford: Fifteen years. And there’s actually fifteen years, ironically, between my oldest sibling and me. In that thirty year gap there is part of the reason why a lot of people think that Uncle Jerry is actually Grandpa Jerry to me. And so it’s led to some interesting situations over the years. But Dad being the little brother, I just remember – well, frankly all three of the brothers treating Dad differently because he was the little brother. But Dad was an optometrist here in Grand Rapids, and I’m now an optometrist here in Grand Rapids – took over his practice. So it’s been a lot of fun being centered here in Grand Rapids, and being part of that legacy, my dad’s legacy, but also Uncle Jerry’s legacy, frankly.

Smith: Now, just for the record: there’s your dad, and then the President and then the two other brothers?

Ford: Tom and Dick.

Smith: Was it Tom who went into politics?

Ford: Yes.

Smith: Served in the legislature?
Ford: Yes. He was a state legislator and after that was a lobbyist for several years. But Dad never had any interest in politics, never went anywhere near it. In fact, he stayed as far away as he could.

Smith: It struck me at first as odd, and then I came to understand it when we talked to Dick. He said this may seem strange, but we never talked politics. He figured everyone else wants to talk to him about that, so he didn’t. And so there were things that you would assume went on between those brothers that never did. Was that the same way with the rest of the family?

Ford: I would say yes. I don’t remember my dad ever having any conversations, at least with me in the room, about politics with Uncle Jerry. Now, there were many conversations in our household about politics between my dad and I and the family and so forth, but I don’t ever remember a conversation. The one exception to that rule would be when we visited Palm Springs when I was still very young. He was probably a year or maybe two out of office at the time.

Smith: And your age is?

Ford: I am now forty-five. At that time I was probably – I must have been thirteen, fourteen years old. I remember having a conversation. We were having dinner at the house in Palm Springs and I remember Uncle Jerry making a comment that struck me as unusual at the time - essentially saying that we’re going to have a problem in this country some day, if it ever becomes the Republicans against the Democrats. Which struck me as unusual at the time; thinking, well, that’s what it is now. Why would he make such a statement?

Now, realizing really what he was saying was: if that’s all it’s about – the Republicans against the Democrats – and now seeing where we are in the country and seeing how things are playing out, that comment rings truer and truer every year. And it’s interesting that you asked that question. The one time I can think about any political discussion was that very issue, and that stuck with me. I couldn’t tell you anything else that we talked about that night at that dinner. But that comment just stuck with me – I think in my fourteen year old mind, thinking, boy, I think the old guy’s lost it because that’s the way it is now.
Smith: You wouldn’t have known your grandparents?


Smith: Where on Fulton Street is it?

Ford: Fulton and College. It’s a great old colonial structure that is still there to this day. But that is where her apartment was before she passed away. I remember going to that apartment. Now, I was probably four or five years old when she passed away, so it is one of those very scant memories. That’s the only memory I have of Grandma or Grandpa Ford.

Smith: Did your dad talk about his folks?

Ford: Oh, yeah, quite a bit.

Smith: What was passed on to you about them?

Ford: They were hard workers. I remember there was a lot of discussion about the fact that they worked hard. I remember conversations much later about what Grandma Ford endured in leaving her first husband and coming to Grand Rapids and all that. But that was something that was shared with me way later in life.

Smith: Just because it was such a sensitive subject?

Ford: Oh, I think so. But yet it was a story that I think my dad felt had to be passed on from the perspective that it was a daring move at the time, and showed a lot of guts and a lot of chutzpa to be able to do that at that time in life. Again, just the way things were then, you just didn’t do that, and that took a lot of courage on her part. I think he wanted to share that with me as part of the family legacy. But also, just some of the things that Grandpa Ford endured through the Depression, some of the things that he went through to be able to make it work for the family and so forth.
Smith: My understanding has always been that at some point in the Depression they lost their house, or they moved from one house to a much more modest residence.

Ford: Yeah, that’s what I remember. The story that was passed down to me was they left a bigger house where everybody had their own room and so forth, and moved to a smaller house where everybody was kind jammed in and so forth. I don’t remember a story about losing the house, but having to downsize.

Smith: Do you know in what neighborhoods those were?

Ford: I wish I could tell you. To put all those pieces of the puzzle together and that would be a little more challenging for me.

Smith: Your dad was old enough to remember the Depression?

Ford: I would say probably not. I think probably those scant memories, and I’m sure stories were told to him. But I would say probably not. I don’t remember him conveying any other than second hand, third hand stories.

Smith: Are there qualities that you think of when you think of, the four brothers, that define the Fords?

Ford: I would say all of them were incredible gentlemen in every way, shape and form. Honest, just great gentlemen. Didn’t speak ill of anyone. I don’t remember my dad ever saying a bad word about anybody – even people that had done things wrong to him or that had really wronged somebody, he would still always try to find “the good” in them. And I think that’s the same with Uncle Dick, same with Uncle Tom, and certainly the same with Uncle Jerry. I just don’t remember them ever having an ill word about anybody. In fact, there was, obviously, some ill-will between Uncle Jerry and Ronald Reagan following the election. I remember my dad saying to me, specifically, “That’s something we don’t want to talk about. That’s a problem between Uncle Jerry and Ronald Reagan and we’re just not going to talk about that. That’s just not a story that we are going to share. We’re not going to run around and tell everybody that Uncle Jerry and Ronald Reagan don’t see eye to eye. We’re
just not going to talk about that.” And at the time I was thinking, well, we don’t want to talk about it because it would be politically damaging or whatever. Now I realize we don’t talk about it because we don’t talk ill things about anybody. That was just their way of handling everything.

Smith: That raises an interesting point. Did you have in any way, at any point, a sense of being restricted? Along with the honor, recognition, in some quarters, notoriety – was there a downside at all to being a Ford, to being the President’s nephew?

Ford: Well, in answer to your question, yes, there were things that I felt restricted about. There were things that I knew that I couldn’t talk about. There were things that were told to me that would be told to me under the premise that we don’t need to share this with everybody, but here’s what’s going on or here’s what’s happening and so forth.

Smith: Would that include Mrs. Ford’s condition before or at the time of the intervention?

Ford: At the time, yes. Not before. In fact, I didn’t know anything about it, quite honestly before - or whether or not my brothers and sisters did, or anything. I couldn’t tell you. But I can tell you, at the time of everything going on and so forth, and it was hey, here’s what’s going on, but we don’t need to talk about that. But it wasn’t anything where I felt restricted. I didn’t feel that way; I just knew there was some stuff we just weren’t going to talk about and that’s all there was to it; and that we weren’t going to make anything public and that’s it.

Now, my mother was fond of using this notoriety, if you will, as a little bit of a crutch against me growing up. The idea that, “Alright, buddy, if you get caught doing something wrong it’s going to be all over the front page of the press. The press is going to love the idea that Jerry Ford’s nephew was caught drunk driving, or that Jerry Ford’s nephew was caught doing this or that. So watch yourself because…” And I will tell you that when I found myself in situations where I shouldn’t be, where every high school kid ends up at a party someplace where people are drinking and so forth, I got out of there.
And I didn’t get out of there for many other reasons than I knew that, okay, my mother would be really upset if…

Smith: Does that give you a particular sympathy with your cousins?

Ford: I think so. But I am also very fond of telling people when they ask me questions in the office, I’m seeing patients every day and invariably questions come up about Uncle Jerry and what was it like, and so forth. I love telling people that we were close enough to it to get all the benefits of it, without being so close to get any of the downside. We didn’t have to worry about Secret Service. We didn’t have to worry about people recognizing us on the street. We didn’t have to worry about any of that. Nobody, still to this day, really gives a rip who we are. The only time I ever had any attention, in Grand Rapids, anyway, was when Uncle Jerry passed away. Then some people recognized who I was and so forth, and did some TV interviews and whatnot. But other than that, I’ve been able to live in Grand Rapids and be away from all the nonsense that comes with that.

Smith: In his later years, post-White House, did you ever have a chance to see what he put up with, like the autograph seekers?

Ford: To a more limited extent, because the times we were with him were either in Palm Springs or in Vail or here in Grand Rapids. And I think those three places people kept their distance and understood. But I think, even then, I remember just walking through downtown Vail to go to dinner one night, and it was just all of us as a family, just walking through the streets of Vail, and yet having people stop and paying attention and so forth. And as a fifteen or sixteen year old kid, I thought that was pretty cool. As I got older, I started to realize that this would be bad news to have to deal with this every day.

Smith: Did they seem comfortable with it, acclimated to it? Did they ignore it?

Ford: I would say acclimated is probably a good word for it. I don’t know that they would ignore it. I think they were keenly aware that there were always people around and people stopping. And even in that stroll through the streets of Vail, people would reach out their hand and say hello. What I really appreciated about both Uncle Jerry and Aunt Betty was the fact that they
didn’t ignore anything. Now, they may be engaged in conversation, as you and I are now, and they may not see somebody’s hand reach out, or whatever, but they wouldn’t ignore it. They would pay attention; they would nod; there was some recognition of everyone that was around. Which is what I think made him so endearing to everyone in the country, much less here in Grand Rapids – he went that extra mile to really make people feel like they were special. And I still hear that to this day – people will come in the office and they say, “Boy, when your uncle was a congressman, I wrote him a letter about this issue or that issue and boy was it nice for him to write me a letter back, or call me on the phone, or whatever.” It was just phenomenal.

We had a wonderful meeting - Uncle Jerry and I had a meeting – it was to my memory the only time Uncle Jerry and I ever sat down together alone, out in Palm Springs, the March before he passed away. I was in Palm Springs and I just stopped by the residence, and we sat down and we had a nice 45 minute conversation, and one of the questions that I asked him was: if I were ever to go into politics, not that I have any interest in that whatsoever, but recognizing that he was getting into his later years and so forth – I wanted to ask a question that I just wanted to hear the answer from him to me. And so I asked him what was the secret to your success in politics? And his comment to me was: “I made everyone else’s problems my problems,” which I thought - what a wonderful statement of a consummate servant. Not a politician, but a consummate servant, would be someone that made somebody else’s problems their problems. What a wonderfully profound statement from a man who has lived that his whole life.

Smith: It’s very interesting you say that. It’s also very shrewd. One of the things that keeps coming up in these conversations is this notion of him as a nice guy who healed the country. It sometimes carries connotations of there wasn’t much more there. To say he was without guile can be a euphemism for he wasn’t particularly sophisticated, or whatever. But you don’t get where he got without having political skills or calculating advantage. And out of it emerges the sense that there were times in his career when he put that image to use. People thinking, oh, good old Jerry Ford – maybe underestimating him – and that’s actually to your advantage, to be underestimated as Ronald Reagan
showed over and over again. And it’s fascinating that at the end of his life, he
would describe what he did as making other people’s problems his own.

Ford: Yeah. Well, as I think back on the interactions that I had with him over all
those years, I genuinely believe that he really took those things to heart. It
made a difference for him in how he lived and how he walked his life.

Smith: Did you have a sense that that might be your last visit with him?

Ford: I absolutely did. Yeah. We met in his private office and I remember walking
out of the office and I just sensed that this is probably the last time I’ll see
him. And I had had interactions with him before, but there was just something
about that time – I could see that physically he was failing.

Smith: Was he using a cane at that point?

Ford: A walker. In fact, it was a little bit interesting how the whole thing came
together, because it was actually shortly after Reagan had passed away that I
thought that I have to make a special point of going out and seeing Uncle
Jerry, because he was not traveling, really, anymore at that point. And I
thought if I’m going to see him, I’m going to have to go there. He’s not going
to come here because we’d always seen him when he was here in Grand
Rapids. He’d make a point of at least saying hello or meeting here or
wherever and some interaction. But knowing that he wasn’t doing that
anymore – we weren’t going out to Vail for the golf tournament anymore and
so forth – I knew I was going to have to make a special point of doing that. So
I called Penny Circle and said, “Next time I’m in California…” She said,
“Fine and great, drop by.” Well, it was two years, or whatever, later that I
finally found myself in California able to sit down and have that conversation.
But interestingly, Penny was less receptive of the idea as that two years went
by, and I called and said, “Hey, I’m coming out.” And she said, “Greg, there’s
some things you need to understand, your Uncle Jerry…”

Smith: She was very protective.

Ford: Oh, absolutely! To the point where, when I got there, she said, “Well, we’re
not sure how this is going to work today, but we’ll do our best.” And I
thought, boy – then I started to think, well, okay this might be even more than I was prepared for. I was ready for a ninety-two year old man, aging and whatnot, even though he was the ageless wonder. But she made a point of taking me through his private office before he was even in there and showing me all the things; do you remember this, and do you remember that, and do you remember seeing these things, and so forth, which was great. Then she sort of escorted me out of the office and they brought him in. Then I came in and he was already sitting at his desk. I just thought that was kind of interesting that they didn’t really even want to have me see him walk into the room. But his walker was there next to his desk and so forth, so I knew how he had gotten there. But it was the first time in all the years that I knew him that he looked frail and he looked like he was aging.

Smith: Had he lost weight?

Ford: He had. He was very thin and his color wasn’t terribly good. You get a sense, and I definitely had the sense that that would probably be the last time that I saw him. But, what a great conversation we had. Like I say, I think it was the only time that I remember being in the room with him all by ourselves and just talking about whatever. The thing I remember most – and I was commenting earlier about Grand Rapids, how much I loved Grand Rapids, I couldn’t get him off the subject of Grand Rapids. No matter what train we went on, he wanted to come back to Grand Rapids. He wanted to talk about Grand Rapids and how are things in Grand Rapids? He was talking about old friends and wanting to know about the DeVos family and any number of different things that always brought us back to Grand Rapids. So finally I thought, I’m just going to indulge and we’ll just go down the path of Grand Rapids.

So I started asking questions about his memories of Grand Rapids and so forth. He shared some wonderful stories about Aunt Betty and Uncle Jerry meeting for the first time, and the first dates, and some of these things and where they were, and all this. He is describing these locations to me and I’m thinking boy, that’s kind of a cruddy part of town now. But that was real special for me to be able to hear that. And then I went down the path of “tell
me more about my dad when he was a little kid.” He was a fifteen years old when Dad was born and I thought, well, he’s going to add some insights onto my dad that would be interesting and fun to listen to, and so we got into some of that conversation.

That forty-five minutes went by real quickly. But I could tell he was fatiguing, I could tell that he was ready. I also could tell, for the first time, he was making some mental errors that I had to help him through. At one point, in fact, when I asked the question about politics, he said, “Well, someday maybe you’ll follow in your dad’s footsteps.” And I said, “Dad didn’t want anything to do with politics,” and he said, “Oh, that’s right. That was Uncle Tom.” So, it’s a little slip and I’m a nephew, and I’m seen three times a year and that was the extent of it, so I didn’t expect him to put all the pieces of the puzzle together. But at the same time, he would have never made that mistake five years earlier. So it was apparent to me. And as our conversation went on, there were more of those types of things, so I could tell he was getting fatigued, he was getting tired and it was time to call it quits.

Smith: I often thought - he loved travel; he loved rubber chicken; he loved the whole routine. And I think when the doctors basically said, “You can’t,” that was a kind of death. Because it just restricted him.

Ford: Well, even when he was here for my dad’s funeral in January of 2001, he told me that he wasn’t allowed to travel without one of the family, according to Aunt Betty. Because Cousin Jack was here for Dad’s funeral, as well. And I made a comment that it was nice that Jack could come along and he said, “Well, Jack had to come, otherwise I couldn’t come, because Aunt Betty has made it very clear that I can’t travel without somebody in the family.”

Smith: Even with Secret Service?

Ford: Oh, no. He could not travel without somebody in the family with him. So I sensed even at that point that, okay, we’re ratcheting down away from being able to travel like he wanted to. And then it was shortly after that there was simply no travel.
Smith: But they did the ninetieth birthday event here. It was the last time he came back to Grand Rapids. You mentioned before that he came at the time of your dad’s death, getting together down here. Describe that. Had your dad been ill for a long period?

Ford: Yeah, he had Parkinson’s disease, or a form of Parkinson’s disease called Lewy Body Syndrome and it forced him into retirement earlier than he wanted to retire, or I wanted him to retire. The greatest five years of my life was being able to practice with my dad. But the plan was it was going to be ten years or more that we were going to practice together. Well, we had to call it quits early and so he had been ill and he had been going downhill and so forth.

I will tell you, too, that during those times where he was in a nursing home in his later years, he would get very excited when Uncle Jerry would be on the phone or Uncle Jerry would be in town and he knew Uncle Jerry was going to come to visit and so forth. There was a different air that Dad had when he knew that his older brother was going to come for a visit. And that was really touching for us. So at the time of his death, and we certainly told the family that we’d like to have everybody get together if we could, Uncle Jerry was very kind to offer this office as an opportunity for my siblings and our families to be able to meet here. I expressed to him that really what I wanted to do was have a time where we could just talk about Dad’s life and what Uncle Jerry remembered about Dad and so forth - just a nice opportunity to be able to do that. And as we came down and met for a better part of an hour, I think, here and had some great conversation. It wasn’t all about Dad. There were some other things we talked about and wanted to know how Aunt Betty was doing and so forth. But it was neat for our kids to be able to interact with Uncle Jerry. That was kind of a cool thing as part of that, even though it was obviously a sad time for us in losing Dad.

Smith: How old were your kids at that point?

Ford: Well, my youngest was only one at the time, so it would have been a one year old, an eight year old and a ten year old. They were pretty small. My next closest sibling is ten years older than I am, so his kids were all fairly older and
my older sisters had older kids. But it was great to have that interaction with Uncle Jerry for them and to my knowledge, it was the last time we were together with him other than the ninetieth birthday party, where it was kind of an “Hi, Uncle Jerry, how you doing? – See ya later.” But it was really just a cool time for us to just be with Uncle Jerry in this environment without anybody else here. They had arranged through the museum to have a photographer here and we took some great pictures that my kids cherish as their one picture with Uncle Jerry. So they get a kick out of that and showing their friends and so forth.

The frightening thing for me is how many of my kid’s friends – who is Jerry Ford? Which from Grand Rapids, Michigan is a little disturbing to know that. It’s true. In fact, I had a conversation with a lady not that long ago – I’ve got a picture in one of my exam rooms in my office of my brother and I on the White House lawn. She’s been a patient of mine for ten years. And she said, “I’ve always wanted to ask how did you get this picture on the White House lawn?” And I said, “Well, my uncle was the President.” And she said, “The president of what?” I said, “The President of the United States.” And she said, “Oh, no kidding. Now, who would that have been?” I thought, for crying out loud. So it’s that kind of stuff that I’m amazed at, but, you know that’s the way history is.

Smith: Short memory. Were you at the White House during his presidency?

Ford: Yeah.

Smith: What do you remember about that?

Ford: It feels like it was yesterday, it really does. I was at an impressionable time - I think I was nine, ten and eleven during that time. And if I’m remembering right, I think we had three trips to the White House, but on only one of the three trips did we actually stay at the White House. It was a long weekend trip, as I remember, and we went on a Thursday and we stayed through Sunday night. My brother and I made it a quest that we wanted to see every one of the rooms of the White House – 133 rooms, or whatever it is. I think we saw all but two, and the two that we didn’t see, there were Marines
standing outside the door saying, “No, you’re not going in here.” And me as a nine year old and my brother as a nineteen year old, we weren’t going to argue, obviously. But just unbelievable impressions in my mind of what was there and the history; some of the things that we saw obviously, all the areas where the public tours are.

We had the opportunity actually when Uncle Jerry was sworn in as vice president, we were there at the White House and President Nixon had given us the honor of a tour of the White House at that time. But we only went into the public areas, the same public areas that everyone else went into. And I remember, as a very young kid, thinking boy this was really neat – just simply from the standpoint that we could be in places outside the ropes from where the public tours were, I thought that was pretty cool as a seven or eight year old. But then going back and actually living there for three days and being able to have the run of the house – you could go wherever you wanted to go, do whatever you wanted to do – was just super spectacular.

To be in the Oval Office and just see what went on from day to day, the Rose Garden. I can remember very distinctly my brother and I on our little tour on our own, we ran into a storage area on the third floor, as I remember, and we went in. We were just kind of looking around. What do you put in storage at the White House? And it was a lot of Uncle Jerry and Aunt Betty’s stuff like you’d find in anybody’s attic. And one of the things we found was a set of golf clubs that had Uncle Jerry’s name on the back of the irons. So we scurried down to the Oval Office to ask him questions about this set of golf clubs. He said, “Well those are clubs that Jackie Gleason had given me. In fact, why don’t we hit some golf balls? Go get your mom and dad and let’s go out on the South Lawn and we’ll hit some golf balls.” So we went down and I remember the Secret Service scurrying around, the Marines scurrying around while we went out with this golf bag, and we’re hitting golf balls on the White House lawn and there are a few people down at the fence watching and so forth. And I thought that was just the coolest thing, that here we are with the President of the United States hitting golf balls as you would if you were at any uncle’s house.
But I think that was what was so endearing about Uncle Jerry to me – the fact that here was the 38th President of the United States being Uncle Jerry to us. Not being the 38th President, just being like he would do if he was a barber down the road, and his nephews came to visit, he’d be doing the same thing. But it was all sorts of little things like that – sitting in the family quarters, I had my feet up on a little cocktail table in front of me and my mother about had a heart attack because she had looked at the inscription on the table and it was something to do with Abraham Lincoln. She about had a heart attack. This little snot-nosed eleven year old kid had his feet up on this table.

Another one of my favorite stories that I still tell to this day was Uncle Jerry and Uncle Dick and Dad were going to go play golf one morning. And we all met for breakfast in the family quarters and my dad had on, as would be the case back in the ‘70s, these loud, obnoxious golf pants. Very loud, very obnoxious. And so after breakfast we were just sitting around chatting before they headed off to play golf. Aunt Betty was sitting there and we were just having a nice conversation, and the conversation went away from her and she just stood up and went into the other room and she came back in and sat down. She had a pair of sunglasses on. Nobody really said anything until finally my mother said, “Betty, what are you doing with sunglasses on?” And she said, “I cannot stand to be in the same room with your husband’s pants for another minute without my sunglasses on.”

But that was the kind of sense of humor that I remember both of Aunt Betty and Uncle Jerry would have - that kind of quiet sense of humor. She would have sat there for an hour before somebody noticed, just to save the punch line. Again, a ten, eleven year old kid, but I remember it like it was yesterday. We had the opportunity during that trip to go to the Lincoln Memorial, to go to the Washington Monument and do some of these things and we were escorted around. Again, as a ten, eleven year old kid, that was great – jump in the back of a limo and have them ferry us in and stopping the line so we could go in these places. It was great to have that little taste of celebrity, if you will. That was great fun.

Smith: Did he have the pool by then? He had a pool built outside the Oval Office.
Ford: Yes, he did. I’m trying to remember – I don’t think we ever had the opportunity to do anything in the pool. I remember seeing the pool, being around the pool, but I don’t remember – and I think it was because that particular trip it was early springtime. It was probably this time of the year, in fact. I can remember the trees being very green and lush and so forth and the cherry blossoms, so it was probably early spring. I don’t think we had the opportunity to use the pool.

Smith: I’m wondering if your dad or his brothers, or anyone else in the family, for that matter, talked about the pardon or the consequences. Locally, whether there was – we were talking to Warner Veit this morning and the paper was critical. I assume like anywhere else there was criticism. But I’m wondering whether it was something you ever experienced directly or talked about.

Ford: Well, yeah, there was discussion. Again, not directly with Uncle Jerry, but I remember a lot of discussions in our household about it, especially at the time. And I remember it for the first time I’d heard the words ‘political suicide’ in my house. And obviously it made me take notice of the fact, not really understanding exactly what was going on other than the fact that he had pardoned President Nixon, and that that would potentially be political suicide, and I wanted to understand more about what does that mean. But yet it was not made clear that that was it. It was just that it potentially could be political suicide.

Now, moving forward, after he lost the election and so forth, of course that was a big topic of conversation; what would have happened had he not pardoned Nixon and where would he be and so forth. Always the conversation would turn back to – well, it wouldn’t have mattered if he won the election then, because the overall mood in the country would have been so bad and there would have been so much other trouble to worry about – losing our face, if you will, around the world, with the fact that our former president would have been on trial and all the rest that goes along with it. So it was always quickly brought back to the idea that, political suicide or not, it was the right thing to do for the country. Which was a theme that was repeated for many years.
Yet, I can remember sitting here, on this land, when we dedicated the museum in 1981 or whenever it was and I remember protestors chanting the fact that if you pardon a crook, you get a museum. And I took tremendous offense to that and I thought, this man did not pardon a crook. Now you could say that, but you’re forgetting what he did for the country, and that was terribly offensive for me. But it was probably the first and only time to my memory that I remember just feeling my blood kind of boil a little bit – now wait a minute.

Smith: It’s interesting. He said everywhere he went for twenty years after leaving office people always asked the same questions. But once the Kennedys gave him the Profiles in Courage award, the questions stopped. Almost as if having the imprimatur of the Kennedys… and in many ways he was lucky. Poor Lyndon Johnson died the day before the Vietnam peace agreement was announced. And your uncle lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his thinking on the pardon.

Ford: And that was huge for me and I think my siblings, was the fact that he did live long enough to see that; and quite honestly, that my dad lived long enough to see that. Because we all knew that it was the right things to do. We were very confident in that decision, there was never – none of us ever felt like that was a silly thing to do. We all had great confidence that it was the right thing to do. But we were waiting for the rest of the country to say the same thing. To say, “Wow, that was really the right thing to do.” And I agree with you. The Profiles in Courage – I remember physically watching that and thinking to myself, I think this will do it. I think this will be the thing that will finally lay it out to rest. And how happy I was that Uncle Jerry was alive to see that and that my dad was around and what a great thing that we could put that to bed and know that he’s getting the just rewards for a hard fought decision.

Smith: In the ’76 campaign, of course, he ended it here. He came back and they had the unveiling of the mural out at the airport. Do you have memories of that?

Ford: Oh, absolutely. In fact, I’ve got a picture in my office now, a picture of the four brothers on that day with Air Force One in the background and Uncle Jerry with his Michigan tie. There were actually little state of Michigans all over the tie. But I remember everything about the campaign, about the
convention. It’s very vivid to me and remember even Dad campaigning a little bit, which I thought was just hysterical because, again, he was so adverse to anything like that. For him to be jumping on a plane and going someplace to campaign and so forth.

I remember at one point in the campaign, I think it was Walter Mondale had made a comment – he was introducing Jimmy Carter and he made the comment – he mistakenly said, “I want to introduce the next President of the United States, Jimmy Ford.” Well, my dad’s name being Jim, he’s watching the evening news and he sees this slip up on the news and he says, “For fun, I’m going to write Walter Mondale a letter.” So he did, he wrote a letter to Mondale which said, “Thank you, but I’m not interested. I think my brother will do a better job.” And he got a return letter – I wish I had that letter. I remember seeing it and I have no idea where it went, but it was just a great letter.

Smith: Mondale is a delightful man. I had an occasion two years ago to interview him at some length, and just a delightful guy. And in many ways a throw back, much like your uncle. Election night - was it a traumatic experience?

Ford: It was a traumatic thing for me the next morning. The night of, I went to bed early enough, as a kid I went to bed early enough that it looked like there was still a chance. There was a lot of excitement around our house the last three weeks of the election, knowing full well that Uncle Jerry was making a big push and he was gaining a lot of ground really fast, and everybody in the press was talking about the fact that he was gaining ground fast and boy this thing could really flip around and watch out. So we were very excited about the potential. And even when I went to bed that night, I don’t remember what time it was, but I remember thinking there was still a pretty good chance that we could pull this thing off.

But I remember getting up the next morning and my mother was still in her bed, but watching television. I walked in and she was watching the Today Show, or whatever it was, and I said, “Well, how’d it go?” And she said, “We didn’t do it.” That was a little devastating for me, I think from a couple perspectives. One is, I just thought that he was going to win and that’s all
there was to it, and voilà! But number two was, does this mean I can’t go back to the White House? Because I want to go back and play golf on the lawn. So there was that disappointment as an eleven year old, as well. But I remember the family being disappointed, disheartened, but at the same time, hey, this is the way the cookie crumbles sometimes and we have to move on.

Smith: Was there criticism – I guess this would be more directed at your dad and his brothers level – of the Ford’s decision to go to California rather than come back to Grand Rapids?

Ford: I don’t know that there was criticism, necessarily. I had always been of the opinion, and through both Mom and Dad saying that that was the better place for Aunt Betty.

Smith: You weren’t surprised?

Ford: Oh no. For me, again at that point in life, I had never known Uncle Jerry to really live in Grand Rapids, so, for him not to live in Grand Rapids now was not a shocking surprise to me. So I certainly didn’t expect him necessarily to come back to Grand Rapids. But I will also tell you, and brought out, in fact, by your comments, at the funeral – the fact that Grand Rapids was his home, even though he was in California, and the last conversation I had with him – it was very obvious that Grand Rapids was home. And that just was so neat for me to have that from him – with me living in Grand Rapids and being here in Grand Rapids and my roots are here in Grand Rapids and I don’t have any intention of leaving Grand Rapids. That was really fun for me to see. And I didn’t sit down and say, “Talk to me about Grand Rapids.” He wasn’t going to leave out anything about Grand Rapids. Once he knew that I was living in Grand Rapids, he was going down that path and that path only. So that’s very heartening for me to have had that opportunity.

Smith: It’s interesting, too, because one gets a sense he very much wanted this facility to be here. Fred Meijer had land on the outskirts of town. But once the decision was made it was to be in Grand Rapids, he wanted it to be downtown, and in many ways, it turned out to be the catalyst for everything that has followed.
Ford: I don’t think there’s any question. Well, I remember my dad coming back from a meeting about the location for the museum and being somewhat disheartened by the fact that they had chosen this location, because at the time it was a bit of a dump down in there. It was like, why there? They know more than I know. But as I’m sitting here today, as I think back at what it was like back then at that dedication in 1981, there wasn’t anything downtown. Why’d you come downtown? You wouldn’t come downtown. The farthest you’d come downtown was to the public museum which was on the outskirts of downtown. That’s as far downtown as you’d come, unless you worked downtown. It’s a whole different city.

Yes, Uncle Jerry was a big part of that equation, but it’s the people in Grand Rapids – just the philanthropy that happens here in Grand Rapids is unbelievable. And what a great example for my generation and for the generation after me to be able to see what’s going on and now seeing the DeVos children that are starting to pick up the reins, the same as their parents did. And the Van Andels and multiple families that have picked up that role. Grand Rapids is great and that’s why I love Grand Rapids and I love coming back to Grand Rapids. No matter where I go, it’s always great peace to come back to Grand Rapids.

Smith: Tell us about Aunt Betty.

Ford: Well, the sense of humor, obviously number one. But just a great, gentle, wonderful soul, so giving. I remember having conversations with her on the phone where I would, for whatever reason, be calling the house or calling the office or whatever to talk about this, that, or the other thing, and every once in a while she’d answer the phone, which I thought was always funny. I’d always expect staff or somebody to answer the phone; she’d answer the phone. And she would take extra time to ask me about what’s happening in your life? Where are you in school? What’s happening with you now? And that was really cool as a kid, but even as I aged and I started having children and so forth, she was always very interested in what I was doing.

I don’t know her that well – she’s kind of my distant aunt by location, if nothing else. I saw her as I saw Uncle Jerry; not very often, and had fewer
conversations with her over the years than I did with Uncle Jerry. That sense of humor – my mom had a great sense of humor, my Aunt Janet, Uncle Tom’s wife had a great sense of humor, Aunt Ellen’s got a great sense of humor, so the four wives of these four boys were trouble together.

I remember, in fact, my parents had gone to Camp David for Thanksgiving one year, and I can remember my mom talking to me on the phone from Camp David, saying, “We should have brought an extra suitcase because there’s a lot of stuff here I’d like to bring home with us,” and Aunt Ellen and I are doing this and Aunt Betty is behind us, she’s wants us to take stuff. And so I just got the biggest kick out of the fact that these four were up there causing trouble at Camp David. But her sense of humor and her gentleness are the two things that I really am most fond of. But also incredible strength.

Smith: She looks so frail and there she is – she’s ninety-one.

Ford: When she’s going to do something, she just flat does it. It’s a great legacy for me, personally, but for the entire family to be able to look at somebody that, again, looks frail. Doesn’t look like somebody who is going to hike up her boots and go a hundred miles an hour. She did for all those years, and by all accounts, all things considered, is still fighting the good fight. And so that’s a lot of fun.

Smith: A couple of things. Was there a pattern or routine after the President left office, of the frequency of his visits back to Grand Rapids? When he was here, what would he do involving the family?

Ford: It was real varied, to be honest with you. There would be a year where he would be back here five and six times in a year. And there would be another year where he’s back one time. But for the most part, I think he did a pretty good job of wanting to make sure that he at least made contact with the brothers while he was here. Maybe not the extended family, but I remember specifically my dad having to cut out of the office early because he was going to have Uncle Jerry over for dinner and they were going to have dinner together or whatever was going to happen. So I think he did a pretty good job with that, but at the same time, it was a little disappointing, I think, for a lot of
us in the fact that when anybody knew that Uncle Jerry was coming to town, their whole agenda got packed full so that those times for us - which is part of the reason why that meeting that we had in 2001 here in the office was so neat for us - because it really was that opportunity that we had not had too many times before, where we could just relax and be at ease with him. Often times, it was like I said before, we’d be, “Hi, Uncle Jerry. Hi, how are you. How are things? Good. Okay, see you later,” and he’s being rushed off to the next thing and the next thing. There were several trips and there were several opportunities to get together; maybe not for a long time, but even if there was a little bit of interaction, it was nice. Where we saw and interacted with Uncle Jerry the most was in Vail, part of the Jerry Ford Golf Invitational that he had in Vail every year.

Smith: By all accounts, they were beloved in Vail. They were more than celebrities, they were really seen as contributing members of the community - almost mascots.

Ford: Oh, I would concur wholeheartedly. In anything that I ever saw up there, I would absolutely tell you that that’s exactly what I saw.

Smith: Tell me about their house in Vail, because I’ve never been.

Ford: It was a fantastic place; set into the side of the mountain. But not overstated in any way, shape or form. As you would expect from them, it was not overstated, but very comfortable, very warm. A couple parts of the house that I remember the most: one was a smaller room with a smaller ceiling line that was specifically for the grandchildren. It was just basically a mini room that if you went in as an adult, you’d have to hunch down a little bit to get into this room. But all the dimensions were small. It had smaller furniture in it, and I think it was a room, if I remember right, maybe over the garage or something like that. But it was a room that was for the grandchildren.

But the rest of the house, they had a wonderful family room/living room area that looked out over the mountains and I can remember sitting in that room with celebrities and just having conversations the way you and I are having a conversation now. Sitting there with Dinah Shore and any number of different
celebrities, Flip Wilson, Sammy Davis, Jr., Bob Hope. When I think of those times now, it’s quite surreal, but yet just having a very pleasant, just normal conversation – “How’s life?” – not getting into politics and not getting into celebrity, just very relaxed.

But the whole house was set up that way. They had a wonderful deck out in front of the house and Leonard Firestone lived next door. And I remember one of those surreal moments for me was when we went over for breakfast one morning during the golf tournament, and we’d finished breakfast and we were all heading out and Uncle Jerry was going to go get ready to play and as we’re out in the street, getting into our cars, here stands Uncle Jerry on his front deck and he’s motioning to Leonard Firestone, “Morning, Leonard,” – “Morning, Jerry.” Just the way you would with your neighbor.

Smith: Leonard Firestone is a very important part of this story, isn’t he?

Ford: Absolutely.

Smith: He and Mrs. Ford really created the Betty Ford Center together.

Ford: And, again, very few interactions with him, but the interactions that I had with him – an incredible human being. Somebody – like we talked about Aunt Betty – this is what I think I’m going to do and I’m just going to do it, and there is nothing that is going to get in my way. Whatever I’ve got to do to get this done…Just a phenomenal human being. But that whole surreal approach of – here’s two next door neighbors that – oh, one happens to be an unbelievable businessman and the other one happens to be the 38th President of the United States – wow, isn’t that something? But yet they were just buddies, just hanging out the way anyone would with their buddies.

Smith: You mentioned sports a couple of times – did the family resent the caricature that some had created in the media about the klutz?

Ford: You know, I hate to use the word resent, I think resent is too strong a word.

Smith: Take issue with?
Ford: Yeah, I would say take issue with, but also, I think all of us found it relatively humorous that this man, who really was an impeccable athlete, and was actually not a klutz at all – in fact, if there was a klutz of the four brothers, it was my father. My father was ten times the klutz that Jerry Ford was, but yet, the media grabbed onto that and they just would not let it go. And I think we took exception to it, but at the same time, I think we took it with a sense of humor, and the fact that we knew better.

Smith: I wonder whether he, deep down, resented it.

Ford: Oh, I suspect, as any athlete would. When you are an athlete and somebody’s kind of poking fun at your athleticism, I’m sure that would bother you a little bit. Not being much of an athlete myself, I don’t know that feeling.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction at the time of his death?

Ford: Yes and no. I’ll tell you what shocked me was, we got together with the family over here at the hotel. And we were down in the lobby getting ready to come over here to the museum, and I looked out the window in the lobby and I saw all these people lined up in a line. And I looked at my wife and I said, “What’s going on downtown? Why are all these people lined up?” And she said, “Well, you bonehead.” I said, “But the museum is over there.” It wasn’t until we got in the cars – they ferried us over here – we got in the cars and we drove out and the line went all the way around the hotel and all the way in front of the convention center and all the way down the road and all the way over here – that I went, “Wow, this is a big deal.” Was I expecting a great reaction? Certainly. I mean, living in Grand Rapids my whole life and being part of the action here, I knew full well that there was going to be a big outpouring at that time. But it did surprise me just how much the people came out – and to stand in line for four and five hours to walk past the casket? Still to this day… I get emotional just thinking about it. It was just amazing to see that. So, yeah.

Smith: Was that the emotional highlight of those few days?

Ford: Yes – other than the plane. And I think that was the culmination of everything for us. That week there had obviously been a lot of emotion and
anytime…when Uncle Jerry passed away, of course, we’re all thinking about my dad and it hadn’t been that long since we lost my dad at the time. So there is a lot of emotion, but at the same time, we’re going a hundred miles an hour, we’re going from this thing to that thing and so forth and so on. And now it’s the end, and those planes fly over and I was just…just weeping.

Smith: And the sun was setting. You couldn’t have designed…

Ford: It was unbelievably surreal. The weather in Grand Rapids at that time – are you kidding me? In January to have that weather in Grand Rapids, Michigan? It was phenomenal.

Smith: Perfect note on which to end.
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Smith: Tell us about how your paths crossed with Gerald Ford’s.

Willard: Early in 1975, I sent in an application to be a summer intern at the White House. And low and behold, I got a telephone call late one night and then received a big packet of materials saying I had a position. So in April or May, 1975, I came to Washington to work that summer as an intern at the White House.

Smith: And what prompted that? I mean, did you know people? Did you have sponsors? How did you go from where you were to being part of the program?

Willard: No. I didn’t have sponsors. I was a political science and history major and always had an interest in government. I’m not certain how I came to learn about the possibility of a summer internship at the White House, but that was the only Washington internship I sought. And, fortunately, I got it.

Smith: And you were where?

Willard: Started in the press office.

Smith: I’m sorry, home was…?

Willard: Oh, home was Pittsfield, Illinois, a small town in west-central Illinois, about seventy miles west of Springfield. It was at the end of my junior year in college. I’d been studying at Oxford University and the London School of Economics that preceding year and was getting ready to finish up my undergraduate degree at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. I was notified that spring of 1975 that I’d be an intern at the White House.

Smith: Tell me about your experience as an intern.

Willard: As you’ll recall - you and I were fellow interns, Richard - it was a wonderful summer, especially in my case for a small-town boy from the Midwest. It was a very heady experience.
Smith: Was that your first time in D.C.?

Willard: Second time. The first time had been shortly before I arrived. I’d met Warren Rustand, who at the time was the President’s Appointments Secretary. So, Warren had me come over to the White House, which was during my first visit to Washington. Then I came back shortly after that and started the summer with our intern group.

The work was terrific. There may have been some among us that didn’t do quite as much work – perhaps. But I started in the News Summary Office with John Hoornstra. It’s hard to believe in this day of Google Alerts and Politico columns that back then we needed to gather and summarize the prior day’s news. We prepared a news summary every morning.

I then moved over to Bill Baroody’s Office of Public Liaison. The office’s White House Conferences conducted around the country were terrific.

Smith: And that was an innovation of that office. It was an innovation before Ford’s presidency.

Willard: Brand new, and there were several different components within the public liaison office. And one of the components was what was called the White House Conferences Office. Every six to eight weeks, there would be a day-long conference with Cabinet and agency heads, culminating in the afternoon with an appearance by President Ford. He would give remarks for ten to twelve minutes, and then he would take Q & A from the floor for the better part of an hour. It was a wonderful institution. I don’t know if it’s been replicated since.

Smith: And who would be attending?

Willard: Community leaders, business leaders from the local host city or region. Bill Baroody, Jeff Eaves, and John Shlaes oversaw the White House Conference operation. The attendees were a very wide cross-section of community or regional leaders, including labor and business leaders. The conferences didn’t have a political tone. They had much more of a policy tone.
Smith: The criticism has been made over the years that the administration from the top down was slow to accept the possibility of a Reagan challenge, and perhaps simultaneously, to take seriously how formidable a candidate Ronald Reagan might be. What’s your take on that?

Jim Baker told us a wonderful story, maybe unintentionally revealing. At the height of the campaign leading up to the Texas primary, Reagan is obviously in this for the long haul. It was right at the time when Kissinger decided he was going to Africa. Baker, who agreed with the policy, questioned the politics of the timing and, still worse, the fact that not only was Kissinger going on a trip that could theoretically be postponed until after the Texas primary, but that he was going to further promote this trip in advance through a White House press conference and so on.

Baker was griping about this and was finally told, “Look, if you feel that strongly about it, make an appointment to see the President.” And he did. He went in the Oval Office and Ford was there with his pipe undisturbed, seemingly, by this latest tempest in the teapot. Baker is trying to convey the likely cost of this in political terms. And Ford responds, “Well, Jim, I really appreciate your viewpoint. Glad you came by, but I’m sure the enlightened Republicans of Texas will understand what we’re trying to do.” And Baker said, “Mr. President, you don’t understand, on this issue, there aren’t any enlightened Republicans in Texas.”

And that’s a long way of introducing this subject, I’m trying to get a sense of how much of this was inexperience - the fact he’d never been through tough campaigns before. And how much of it was just a disinclination to have his presidency consumed by politics so soon, and right after a presidency that had been destroyed by politics?

Willard: I’ll try to break that down into pieces. Let me say first, I wasn’t a senior Oval Office or campaign advisor, as were Cheney and Baker and those folks.

Smith: Sure.
Willard: On the first part of your question about the Reagan challenge, my recollection is that in the summer of ’75 and into the fall, I don’t remember it being significantly, if at all, on the radar screen. I’m sure it was out there, but I don’t remember it being anywhere as a front and center topic. And then, obviously, the crescendo began in late ’75 and into ’76.

In terms of why he reacted as he did, I guess I would - given my personal perspective and now looking back, because I came to know him much more after we left Washington – it was almost visceral with him that he was not going to allow those political considerations to control his presidential decisions - much as there was a part of his being, that competitive part of his being that would want to. The visceral part to him was manifest; “Nope, I’m not going to take the politically expedient route. I’m going to rely on Henry and Brent’s policy judgments. The other advisers’ political judgments and advice are spot on; But I’m going to implement the other policy.” And, with the display of that familiar crooked left index finger of his, that was the end of the discussion. But, again, that perspective is one that’s not contemporaneous with those discussions at the time, but knowing him more closely afterwards and looking back now.

Smith: You know, there’re all sorts of ways at looking at his presidency. One, it seems to me, is to follow the trajectory of someone who, while not unlearning the unique set of skills that made him so successful on the Hill, had to learn a whole different set of skills as an executive and, above all, as a communicator and public advocate. And he was always very frank about it. In fact, he said, “If I had to do it over again, I would’ve spent more time on being educated on communications.” He grew into the office; allegedly, one of the things he said at the time of his loss [to Jimmy Carter] was that it really hurt because he thought he’d just mastered the place when he lost it. I’m wondering if part of that mastery was his relationship with Kissinger. The one thing he said the night Nixon resigned - when he [Ford] came out of the house in Alexandria - was to reassure the country that Henry’s not going anywhere. And yet, a year later, he had decided - nothing against Kissinger - but no one person should have both hats. Clearly, he had developed a degree of confidence himself
where he was perfectly comfortable around Kissinger with his somewhat mercurial, occasionally volcanic temperament. He had no difficulty working with someone as temperamental as Kissinger. And there were others, but intellectually, he had long since found his footing.

Willard: Part of it was he was a wonderful listener. Listening carefully came naturally to him.

Smith: Do you know where it came from?

Willard: You can draw a straight line from a little boy growing up in Grand Rapids, through his years in the House and then his presidency. I’m not certain where it originated, but listening was easy for him. Combine that with the core decency he showed to everyone with whom he dealt, whether it was a senior Cabinet secretary, such as Secretary Kissinger, or someone on the domestic residence staff, he would listen. He would always listen and engage and connect.

Smith: Which also, by the way, was a great skill for a congressman.

Willard: Phenomenally important.

Smith: Whether on the campaign trail, in a committee room, or climbing the ladder towards the Speakership.

Willard: To be sure. But from the standpoint of the presidency, he came to the office with an advantage – perhaps more so than some of his predecessors – of being able to listen to disparate advice. He quickly moved into the role and became quite comfortable in the presidential power - the component Article II power of “the decider.” That he had these disparate advisors, and whether it was his original - the ill-fated bicycle wheel management structure - or otherwise, he came to be very comfortable with the role of decider.

Even he would’ve admitted that it was that third leg – the communicator skills needed in the Oval Office – which was much different than the skills needed to communicate to the constituents of the 5th District in Western Michigan. He evolved into that role. Whether he evolved too late or not enough, we’ll leave that to others to decide.
Smith: Did the Reagan challenge ultimately make him a better candidate?

Willard: Absolutely; both in his communications and speech-making, and in the process of presidential campaigning. He learned, early in the general presidential campaign, the difference between that level of campaigning and his primary fight with Reagan. Whether it was folks like Red Cavaney and Terry O’Donnell advising him, educating him, on what is involved in a presidential campaign, eventually, as the saying goes, he got it. Of course, there were exceptions. One in particular we still chuckle about. He decided on the last day of the 1976 Republican Convention that he and Senator Dole just had to go to Russell, Kansas and have a big campaign kick off - the next day! Dick Cheney and Red called Richard Wennekamp, Andy Stern, and me into the White House staff office at the hotel and sheepishly told us that, per a direct order of the President, we had to do the impossible for three advance guys – get ourselves out to Russell, organize a huge rally, make sure there were thousands of excited attendees on hand - and do it all in 24 hours. We somehow managed to pull it off – just amazing. On their arrival the next day, the President and Dole were ecstatic, and Dick and Red were beaming with “you have got to be kidding me” looks. We all still laugh about it. It was one of the biggest and best events of the entire campaign. He came to understand the extraordinary demands of the campaign on himself and his staff, particularly on Red and our advance office group.

Smith: Is that balance offset by the cost of the Reagan challenge? I mean, on balance, if Reagan had not run, would Ford have come as close?

Willard: Would he have carried Texas in the general election? Would he have carried New York? Perhaps. My personal feeling has always been because the margin with Carter was so narrow; I’ve always attributed it to the pardon. Take a snapshot of the body politic in November of 1976 and then pull out the pardon from that equation. Admittedly, what the country would have been like had it just been through a Nixon prosecution is a difficult assumption. But if you assume out the pardon from a 1976 scenario, it would have had a much larger impact on the outcome than the Reagan challenge.

Smith: So, after the intern summer, did you stay on? Did you come back?
Willard: Came back after I finished college. During the summer, I’d made friends with folks in the Advance Office through the Office of Public Liaison. They began to ask me to go out and do advance work for the President that fall. I finished my degree and joined the White House staff full-time in the Advance Office. I continued in the Advance Office in 1976 through January 20, 1977 as a White House Staff Assistant. Then on Inauguration Day, Bob Barrett and I, and Joy Chiles and Annie Grier left with the Fords and moved to California. I spent 1977 in Rancho Mirage and Vail with them. After that I got a law degree and then began a career as an attorney.

Smith: And was there any doubt after the election that that’s where they were going to wind up? Had they given thought to that?

Willard: No. I think it was made very quickly. I remember having a conversation with him, right after I’d been asked to move to California, in Dorothy Downton’s office. She had an office just off the Oval Office, across from the pantry. One of my responsibilities during the transition was transporting all the Fords’ personal property from the White House Residence out to Palm Springs. So I was in working with Dorothy one day, and President Ford came in. Now that you ask the question, I remember thinking at the time, “Gosh, I wonder if they had thought, maybe back when he was in Congress and had decided not to run again, were they going to retire to Western Michigan or Palm Springs?” I have a clear sense that very early after the election Palm Springs was it.

Smith: What was his mood? We’ve heard from a number of people that it took him awhile to bounce back.

Willard: Yes. I’ll give you a snapshot from Election Night that’s a great illustration. During the campaign, I spent several weeks with Steve Ford. He decided to tour the western states in a Winnebago and asked his dad to assign me to help.

We’d campaign in his Winnebago for several days, and then we’d split off and campaign elsewhere, including with his dad. The campaign developed increasing enthusiasm - almost confidence - as the gap with Governor Carter shrank. Election Night captured all the mood swings of the entire campaign.
Steve and I arrived at Washington National Airport the afternoon of Election Day after our last flight of the campaign. We proceeded with his Secret Service detail to the White House, where we were met at the Diplomatic Entrance by Susan Ford. The three of us visited for awhile, and then around 5:00, Susan and Steve went upstairs to the Residence. I called a friend for a ride and planned to watch the election returns that night with some of my fellow White House staff members.

A little after 5:00, as I was waiting to leave, the President walked into the main hallway and went into Dr. Lukash’s office. When he came out of the doctor’s office, he walked over to where I was standing. His voice was a mess; he could only manage a hoarse whisper. He joked that his timing to end the campaign was right on the mark since his voice “didn’t have another speech, much less a full campaign day in it.” I told him Steve was already upstairs, and we were glad to be home. He said, “That was a huge job you had with that campaign of his. I want you to know how much I appreciate what you did.” I told him I thoroughly enjoyed it, and joked that Steve still hadn’t succeeded in making a cowboy out of me. The President chuckled and whispered, “You get home and get some rest. We’ve got a busy month ahead.” I said, “Thank you, Mr. President. Let’s bring home a winner tonight!” He gave me a slap on the back and headed off.

At about 8:45 p.m., I was with some fellow White House staff members and received a phone call from a White House operator. She immediately put the call through to the Residence, and Steve came on the line. He said that he and the First Family were watching the election returns with some friends and wanted to know if I would come over and join them.

I arrived at the Usher’s Office at 9:15, and Rex Scouten took me up to the second floor of the Residence. Present were the President and First Family, Joe Garigiola and his family, Senator and Mrs. Dole, Leon Parma, Bob Barrett, Dick Cheney, David Kennerly, and Kevin Kennedy, along with some other friends of President and Mrs. Ford. Many of those friends left shortly after I
arrived. During the evening, additional White House staff members and other guests would come upstairs. Dick Cheney and David Kennerly were in and out several times. Periodically, Ron Nessen would update voting results. A Newsweek photographer came up at one point to take photographs of the family. The family and guests milled about among three rooms on the second floor - - the family room off the President and First Lady’s bedroom, the President’s exercise room, and the main center hall. Each room had a large television set tuned to one of the networks.

Governor Carter had taken a large early lead in the South and was well ahead in the electoral vote. Nevertheless, the President and First Family were in good spirits. While waiting for the next round of returns, we all recounted funny stories from our many campaign travels. In general, at this point in the evening, the mood was anxious, but hopeful. We moved from room to room trying to keep up with the latest results from each of the three networks. The President, Steve, Kevin, Leon Parma and I spent a lot of time watching the returns in the main hall.

We used my copy of a Time magazine electoral map all night for comparisons between Time’s state by state predictions and the networks’ projections. The President constantly asked us for comparisons between the magazine’s predictions and the networks’ calls. Then, several returns from western states began to come in solidly for the President, and spirits in the room rose. By 11:00 p.m., real optimism seemed to be developing.

At one point, a loud cheer went up from down the hall in the exercise room, and the President joked, “We’re watching the wrong channel!” Joe Garigiola was the evening’s cheerleader, shouting “Go Big Blue” as the President’s states was marked in blue on the networks’ electoral maps. Garigiola clapped his hands and said, “Don’t worry, Prez, they got four in the top of the first, but we’re going to pull it out!!” Periodically, the President would step into an adjacent room to speak on the phone with Dick Cheney. Pearl Bailey arrived and added further bounce to the evening. She and Mrs. Ford watched the returns with the group in the exercise room for quite awhile.
As midnight passed, the optimism continued to grow, although Senator Dole observed quietly, “We just aren’t going to be able to pull it off.” Given what seemed to be the positive trends, I was puzzled at his comment. Everyone kept an eye on New York’s returns, which at that point had the President in a slight lead. Soon, though, Carter drew even in New York, and the mood became much more tense. A little after 1:00 a.m., New York was declared for Carter.

Although the President continued to be positive (“We’re still in this thing!”), concern was apparent on his face. The returns from Pennsylvania and Texas looked unfavorable, and we figured he needed to carry at least one of those states to have a shot at winning the Electoral College vote.

Around 1:40 a.m., the President said he wanted to call John Connally to get a report on Texas. When he returned to his chair after the call, he whispered to Steve and me that the report from Connally was not optimistic. Senator Jacob Javits came upstairs and met with the President privately for a few minutes across the hallway.

At 2:05 a.m., Carter was declared the winner in Texas. Garagiola sighed, “I just can’t believe this. I can’t believe it.” The President looked at the screen with Texas now in red and said, “That one hurts; that one really hurts.” North Dakota then came in for the President, and spirits brightened a little. A few minutes later, the President turned to us, punched his left fist into his right hand, and said, “It’s still a helluva ballgame!” He remarked how disappointed he was at the loss in Missouri and the additional defeat there of incumbent Republican Governor Kit Bond.

By 2:40 a.m., the race appeared to be moving to razor thin. The talk turned to a specific Electoral College scenario -- if the President could carry both Hawaii and Ohio, he still could win. Carter had a 4,000 vote lead in Hawaii at the time, but many votes were still out. The President passed the Time magazine electoral map back to me and shook his head, “Louisiana, Missouri and Delaware ... Ugh!”
Shortly after 3:00 a.m., Dick Cheney and Bob Teeter came upstairs and went into the dining room with the President. A few minutes later, the President walked over and asked Steve and me to gather the group into the west living room. The President stood at the west end of the room; Steve was on his left, and I was on his right. As the rest of the group gathered, everyone seemed prepared for bad news. The President must have sensed the same thing because he quickly smiled and said, “No, this isn’t a concession speech. I think Bob Teeter has some interesting information for us.” Teeter explained that the returns in Hawaii were not complete in that votes cast before noon were counted first, after which the afternoon ballots were counted. He also indicated that the President’s chances in Wisconsin still looked good, even though the networks had already projected it for Carter. The President then said it would be morning before any definitive results would be in, so he was “going to bed for awhile.” He said goodnight to everyone. Before going to bed, he talked briefly on the phone with Dick Cheney. At the same time, the few remaining guests started leaving. By 3:25 a.m., most of them had left.

Those of us who remained - Mrs. Ford, Mike, his wife Gayle, Steve, Susan, Pearl Bailey, Kevin Kennedy, and I – went into the large main hall and continued to watch the returns on NBC.

At around 3:30-3:40 a.m., John Chancellor announced that Jimmy Carter would be the 39th President of the United States.

Silence. No one said a word. There were no tears, no signs of disappointment - just several minutes of complete silence amidst the television chatter of the NBC correspondents. Finally, Mrs. Ford looked over and said, “Do we dare wake him?” Mike Ford and I both replied in unison, “No; let him sleep.” Soon Jimmy Carter appeared on television, and Mrs. Ford smiled at the television screen and chuckled, “Governor, you have no idea what you’re in for in here.”

The mood was mixed. The group was obviously very disappointed. But as everyone began to talk about the past two-plus years and about the campaign,
there was an undercurrent in their comments of pride mixed with a sense of relief.

It’s one of those moments -- what do you say at a moment like this? -- here’s the First Lady, whose husband has just lost the election - good gracious! So, there was not much said for several minutes, and then Mrs. Ford chuckled and said, “You know, I had the funniest thing happen to me during a campaign trip I made in October.” And Susan laughed and said, “Well, Mom, I had a similar thing happen to me!” Soon, it was this cacophony of everyone telling stories of funny things along the campaign trail.

We all sat around for nearly an hour reminiscing and, yes, laughing loudly at hilarious campaign stories. At some point, Mrs. Ford changed into her nightgown and robe and rejoined us. She had all of us in hysterics as she told more of her own funny campaign stories.

Finally at 4:30 a.m., we decided to call it a night. Steve and I walked Pearl Bailey down to her car on the South Lawn and returned to the Second Floor where we managed to roust Susan, who’d fallen asleep on the floor. Kevin had gone on up to the third floor. Mrs. Ford was standing in the archway between the west living room and the main hall, and Mike, Gayle, Steve, and Susan walked over to say goodnight to her. I moved to the side of the room near the elevator. As the children returned towards the elevator, Mrs. Ford looked over, and I nodded, “Good night, Mrs. Ford.”

I must have appeared as disappointed as I felt. Mrs. Ford walked over to where I was standing. I shook my head, “I’m so sorry; I just don’t know what to say. I really thought he was going to pull it out.” She took hold of my hands - quite firmly - and replied, “Now listen! We’re going to leave here in January with no regrets and many wonderful memories. And remember, when we leave, we’ll have our heads up with lots of pride.” She gave me a hug and said, “Thank you for all your hard work.” I managed only a feeble whisper, amidst several tears, “It was an honor, Mrs. Ford.” She turned and walked to the bedroom. I went up
to the third floor with the family where a bed had been prepared for me in the Solarium.

I understand the next morning Bob Barrett told President Ford the results. And when I saw the President upstairs in the Residence that morning, he’d obviously been told, and he was really, really disappointed. Not morose, but, yes, it hurt. It hurt.

Smith: One senses, given his competitive nature, that some of his disenchantment was directed at himself. A couple of people told us that, for awhile after that, he would mutter, “I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer.”

Willard: I never heard that, but he may have internalized it more. I was always struck by how gracious he was to the staff and the campaign folks over at the President Ford Committee. You never had a scintilla of, “Well, if the campaign would’ve been run a little better” or “If we’d have done this a little better.” I don’t know, but it may have been because he was internalizing it as much as anything.

Smith: Tell me about Mrs. Ford back then.

Willard: In the White House period, particularly during the campaign, she was a rock. Just very, very firm in terms of her campaign activities. Occasionally, I’d go out on trips with her. Pete Sorum was the person in our White House Advance Office who was assigned to Mrs. Ford. But occasionally, one or two of us would go out with her on a trip. She always was gracious – inestimably gracious. But strong. Very strong. Whether it was dealing with the staff, dealing with her schedule, or dealing with events, she knew what she wanted to do, and we did it.

Smith: Did you see any evidence of a “problem,” however defined?

Willard: During the White House?

Smith: Yeah.
Willard: No. No. Never. But that changed once we were in California. Soon after we arrived out there, I realized something was wrong – there’s a “problem”. But in the White House, from the Spring of ’75 to January of ’77, I can’t recall a single instance where I said, “That’s odd”; never sensed that at all.

Smith: And, talk about opposites attracting… He was the most self-disciplined of people.

Willard: You think!

Smith: And punctuality is not a quality I automatically associate - for all of her wonderful qualities - that was left out of the mix. And I’m wondering whether it’s not a form of perfectionism. You know, she wanted to look her absolute best wherever she was going to be, but there’s also a surprising amount of stage fright. She’s not comfortable giving speeches. She gets butterflies before going on, which may very well be the mark of a true pro. Or maybe she’s just late. Maybe it’s something as simple as that.

Willard: Or a combination. She was a perfectionist in so, so many things. A lot of that goes back to her dance and the precision of dance. And she carried that over into her public persona in particular. So, when she would do an event, she wanted it to be spot on – perfect. I remember when she filled in for the President on a trip to Iowa, to Des Moines, back in 1976, at the last minute. I think it was during the crisis in Lebanon, and he just couldn’t come. So Mrs. Ford came in his place. I remember it was so important to her when she arrived that everything be perfect and that she not fail to do what needed to be done and should be done. So, if you carry that back to your example about speaking, that’s not her forte – public address, public speaking – my sense was not so much that she didn’t like it (because she did it well), but it didn’t come naturally to her. You combine that with her real drive to perfection, and it was tough. It was tough for her.

Smith: Of course, there is also this school of thought that here’s a woman, who, after all, had been a performer in her early days, had been on stage, was not unfamiliar with audiences, and who found, once she got over the initial shock,
that she rather enjoyed life in the White House; enjoyed the platform that it afforded her. In many ways, people thought she blossomed as First Lady. Not least of all, probably because she also saw more of her husband, who was physically there. Did he feel guilty at all about those years when, like a lot of men of his generation, he was climbing the ladder and a lot of the burdens, particularly of child-rearing, fell to her?

Willard: Yes. Did he feel guilty? Yes. After we left the White House, I’d travel with him always, and we’d usually sit up late at night talking. He never would say, “Gosh, I sure feel guilty being gone all those years.” But he would talk about those years, especially after he became Minority Leader, and the travel demands. And he would talk about how long he was gone. But it was in the context of the family, not in the context of, “Well, I was a loyal trooper for the Party.” It was in the context of, “Yeah, two hundred plus days a year back in those days I was away from Betty and the kids.” I don’t think one can come to any conclusion other than he regretted it and that, he felt – pick your descriptive phrase – guilt…felt badly…whatever.

Smith: Did he try to make up for it?

Willard: In later years, perhaps. I don’t know that you ever can make up for it. But I think in later years, he spent a lot more time certainly with the children, and then with the grandkids. The joy that those grandkids brought to him and Mrs. Ford - - and to Mrs. Ford still today. So, I don’t know that it was somehow attempting to make up for it, but he clearly wanted to make sure and experience and share in the joy of those relationships in his later years.

Smith: One senses that the transition was easier for her. I mean, she had houses to think about, a lot of domestic concerns. They were going to a place that presumably would be good for her health. You know, it’s a whole new life. She probably thought she was getting her husband back. She hadn’t run for office, you know.
Willard: That was one element. I also think that, during the Election Day to Inauguration Day period, there was a fair amount of - not necessarily trepidation on her part - but, “Wow, what are we getting into?” Yes, she’d see her husband a lot more, but they didn’t have a large cadre of close friends in Rancho Mirage. They had acquaintances, but not close friends. Certainly not, for example, the Lilian Fisher type of relationship or even some of the other close friends of Mrs. Ford’s. We’d talk with Mrs. Ford during that period in the White House and ask - “Should these things go to the Laguna Nigel warehouse?” “Or to Deware house,” the home they were going to rent in Thunderbird Heights. “Or should this go to a government storage facility”, until they built their new house? And I recall a fair amount of comments from her along the lines, “My, my, this is going to be quite a change.” But I don’t think she feared it or ever thought “Maybe we’re doing the wrong thing; maybe we should just go back to Grand Rapids.” Never heard any of that.

Smith: They were starting over, in some ways.

Willard: Oh, absolutely. This was the end of twenty-eight years when Alexandria and the White House were home. And then suddenly they were going, not back to Western Michigan, but to a rented home in Thunderbird Heights in Rancho Mirage, California.

Smith: Was she surprised to find that he was away as much as he was after they got out there?

Willard: Oh my, yes! I remember those early weeks. Bob Barrett and I, and the two secretaries, Joy Chiles and Annie Grier - now Annie Willard. And Lee Simmons came out with us. We were subsequently joined by Dorothy Downton and Carolyn Poremka.

Smith: And where was your office initially?

Willard: The office of the former President of the United States was a “magnificent” kitchenette bungalow on the Thunderbird Country Club grounds with two
bedrooms and sort of living room-kitchenette - that was it! So Bob Barrett and I had one room and Annie and Joy had the other. And we dispensed the former president’s business in this little kitchenette on the Thunderbird Country Club grounds – pretty funny, looking back at it now. And he and Mrs. Ford rented a home from Emily Deware up on the hill just on the other side of Highway 111. After a few weeks, we rented a home on Sand Dune Road, the Priest house, which is about three doors up from where the current office is on Sand Dune Road, and the Priest House then became his and our office.

Smith: Was that Ivy Baker Priest?

Willard: It was Pat Priest and her sister – I forget her sister’s name. But Pat was the blonde straight actress on the _Munsters_. So we converted her house into an office, and the President had an office there.

I remember those early weeks, commenting to Bob and Annie and Joy, how lonely it was for the Fords. Just so lonely. There were telephones and all, but it was so lonely from a personal standpoint for them. They just didn’t have a lot of close friends there in the desert. They had people who would come down, particularly Leon Parma – a long-time very close friend. But Leon lived in La Jolla, near San Diego. In those early days, I remember thinking how lonely this was for them.

When we first left the White House, we didn’t leave on Inauguration Day directly for Rancho Mirage. Instead, we flew on Air Force One to Monterrey, California, and he played in the Bing Crosby Pro-Am Golf Tournament. He was there for three or four days, and then came down to Rancho Mirage. By then their things from the White House had arrived. So at least there was some sense of home, albeit in a strange house.

The first few weeks he didn’t travel that much. We maybe did a few trips, but not a lot. We took a trip in February to New York and saw _A Chorus Line_. It was probably within a month of the Inauguration. And I remember walking into the Shubert Theater with them. The start of the show had been delayed for them, and it was just pandemonium when our group walked in. Standing ovation for
them – loud cheers! And I remember the look on the Fords’ faces at that moment, and then later that night when we got back to the UN Plaza Hotel. What an impact that reception had on them.

Erik: Did the theater announce them?

Willard: Yes. Before we arrived, the theater said they were delaying the start of the show because of special guests. It was pretty apparent in the theater – front and center there were four seats and three seats behind them that were unfilled. We arrived and were seated - President and Mrs. Ford and Annie Grier and I, and then three Secret Service agents behind us. We went backstage afterwards, and Mrs. Ford was just ebullient.

Shortly after that trip, he began to travel.

Smith: They enjoyed the show?

Willard: Oh, they enjoyed the show! Just thoroughly enjoyed the show.

Smith: Among those who knew them well, it is an article of faith that she had a somewhat more ribald sense of humor than he did. And things would often have to be explained to him…

Willard: There’s a song in *A Chorus Line* – I remember it now as vividly as when we were sitting there that evening, when you hear the character sing, “Tits and Ass.” I remember looking immediately to my left. Mrs. Ford was sitting next to me, and then the President and then Annie on his other side. And Mrs. Ford laughed heartily at the lyrics. And then the President, after a pause, laughed very hard. It was quite a moment. Both thoroughly enjoyed themselves, including when we went backstage afterwards.

Shortly after that he started traveling again -- a lot.

Smith: He needed that, didn’t he?

Willard: He did. I can’t explain it. But shortly after that trip to New York he cranked up the travel. We went to New Haven, Connecticut and spent – gosh, we were
probably out there three or four days. He stayed in a Yale residence college. I forget the name of the college, but we stayed right there in the residence hall. And he took meals with the undergrads, and he gave lectures. And, of course, we went to his alma mater – the law school. He gave a couple of lectures. And he absolutely thrived on that. And then he went and played in a golf tournament. And then he gave a speech on the War Powers Act at the University of Kentucky. There was a whole panoply of events, and he clearly thrived on it.

Smith: He took heat for “commercializing” the ex-presidency. And I’m wondering – without dismissing it altogether – there is some element of context because you never got any awareness of all the charity work he was doing, or the campus visits that he was making, or even the suggestion that he could be doing constructive work on boards. Somehow the fact that you would go on a board was deemed inappropriate. He turned down a whole lot more offers than he accepted.

Willard: Right.

Smith: Was he sensitive about that?

Willard: I don’t think so at the time; the criticism began to come later. That first year, I don’t think he received that much criticism.

Part of the difficulty was that there wasn’t exactly a template on how to be a former president. If you go back a few presidents at the time – Nixon, Johnson, Eisenhower – they lived relatively private, quiet lives. President Ford was sixty-three years old, very active, swam several miles a day. So here was this very active, engaged former president. What should he do? What should he not do? How should he comport himself? That first year he signed the agreement with NBC to do some specials. He signed the contract to do his autobiography. But that first year there were not as many of the corporate speaking engagements as there were in the late ‘70s, early ‘80s. In those subsequent years, he got a fair amount of criticism. But, ironically, as you point out, as he moved into that period, the amount of charity work he was doing just exploded.
Smith: A lot of people also don’t stop to realize – one of the things that maybe bonded him and Jimmy Carter – was that each of them were shocked to realize, after losing an election, that they were expected to raise millions of dollars to build a library.

Willard: Right. And, in his case, the library/museum arrangement was bifurcated. When we left the White House, he had already donated his papers to the University of Michigan. He’d signed the deed in late December of ’76, officially deeding his papers to the library in Ann Arbor.

Right before Mrs. Ford’s hospitalization – in April of ’77 – we went to Grand Rapids – I think for Easter. And while there we met with Dick, Jim, and Tom Ford and some community leaders looking at sites for a possible presidential museum. And I remember going down to the riverfront, pretty close to where the museum is today. It was really desolate. There were old warehouses, nothing like the spectacular riverfront today. And the question quickly came up – would the Michigan legislature help with some of the costs? I remember the President fund-raising with Benno Schmidt who was engaged by the President to help him raise the millions of additional dollars that it was going to take. But there was a very clear sense at the time that the President was going to have to raise a lot of money because he was going to have two facilities – a library and a museum, each in a separate city.

Smith: And that was long before anyone really thought about the need for an endowment.

Willard: Never thought about it. And again – this was a few months after we had left Washington. And it was just a sense on his part of – well, we need to raise a lot of money to build these buildings - period. I don’t think the ‘e’ word, endowment – was discussed. I don’t remember it ever being discussed. But that Easter visit to Grand Rapids was the first time I recall their having the sense that there was going to be a bifurcation of the library and museum and the cost of that. At the time, I think it was simply, “Okay, fine: library Ann Arbor; museum
Grand Rapids.” No one ever took a step back and said, “Well, gosh, none of the other libraries does it this way.” And, of course, none has done it since or probably ever will.

Smith: And even more, no one ever took a step back and says, “This is great now. Twenty years from now will this work?”

Willard: There was discussion in the early to mid-2000s. I remember having lunch with him in 2004 or 2005, there at his home in Rancho Mirage. And towards the end of lunch, he said, “I need to ask your advice on something.” And he had Penny bring over a correspondence file. There was correspondence from folks in Michigan about the prospect of moving the library from Ann Arbor to Grand Rapids and the costs attendant to that and to join the two. And that never went anywhere.

Smith: Did he have an opinion?

Willard: During that conversation, I gave him my initial reaction – which was – that’s a lot of money because you’d have to build a whole new facility. At the time I also said, “And I don’t think…unless the university is a part of the facility in Grand Rapids…I can’t fathom that the university would ever agree to participate in that.” He was, at that point, (hearkening back to the earlier part of this oral history conversation), he was in the listening mode. In subsequent conversations with him, he made it pretty clear to me that he did not support merging the two. We didn’t go into all his reasons. He may have sent a letter at some point towards the end of his life saying – “I don’t think this is a good idea – at least for now.”

Smith: Were you surprised by the intervention?

Willard: Yes. Shocked. Just shocked. That April ’77 trip to which I referred, I knew then – we all knew at that point – something was wrong – very wrong. It’s so remarkable to look back with benefit of hindsight and say, “For goodness sakes, why couldn’t we realize that?” And my wife, Annie, spent hours and hours with
Mrs. Ford in California and traveled with her. And Annie was as surprised as I was at the diagnosis.

Smith: Really?

Willard: Yes.

Smith: I guess I should be more explicit. The intervention is a response to a situation. The situation, presumably, must have been obvious enough, chronic enough, acute enough, to warrant the intervention.

Willard: Right, but what I mean is sitting here, in 2011, and looking back to 1977 and then the intervention was in ’78, looking back at ’77, how ignorant we, as a society, were about alcoholism and chemical dependency.

We flew back to Rancho Mirage from that April of ’77 trip to Grand Rapids I mentioned. We were on a military aircraft and stopped in Oklahoma City to refuel. I’d gone up front during the flight and noticed Mrs. Ford’s hands while she was sitting with the President. She was clasping her hands very hard like this [indicating one hand firmly clenched over the other hand]. We arrived in California, and I remember being shocked when she unclasped her hands. She had a huge bruised welt right here [where her hands were clasped].

That evening President Ford called me and said with a very concerned tone, “Can you come down to the house?” I lived up in Palm Springs, so I rushed down to Rancho Mirage. Mrs. Ford was there, obviously in a lot of pain. And she said, “I can’t live like this anymore; the pain - I can’t.” We talked about it. She said, “I know the risks. I want to reconsider the possibility of surgery.”

So I contacted Dr. Lukash, who had been the White House physician, and he made arrangements. And within the next day or so, she went over to Eisenhower Medical Center and had a myelogram. I don’t know if they still do it today, with the new MRIs and CTs. But they injected dye into her spine and took x-rays or CTs. Late that afternoon after the myelogram, it was pretty apparent that something wasn’t right. She was not well. And the doctor said,
“Well, we’re going to admit her. She is having a reaction to the myelogram. And that happens in about 5% of the cases.”

At that moment, I wasn’t particularly worried. But by the evening her condition became very critical. I stayed that entire week in the hospital suite with her – never left; slept each night in the anteroom in her suite.

The President came over the first evening, and we talked to the doctors. They were reassuring, but there were some things not quite right. Well, it got worse. And the second day and the third day and the fourth day. And she was very, very ill. We went downstairs to radiology one evening, and they did scans of her brain, fearing that maybe her breast cancer had metastasized. Again, as we think back, her breast cancer was in the Fall of 1974; so this was less than three years since her cancer diagnosis. There was a fear that maybe what she was experiencing was related to the cancer. Fortunately, it wasn’t. She remained hospitalized for a couple of days and then went home. And she was in a really difficult strait for two or three weeks after that. And no one at the time – none of the physicians – no one made a diagnosis other than a very serious adverse reaction to the myelogram. The consensus of the medical folks was that she simply had had this bad reaction to the myelogram.

Looking back today, with the benefit of thirty-plus years of hindsight, she was going through withdrawal. Nobody realized it. No one ever connected the dots. None of the physicians did, none of the family did, and none of us who were around them did. Not one single person said, “Maybe there’s something more going on here.”

Smith: Including her?

Willard: Including her. So then fast forward the following year when Susan and the President and the family intervened and she went to Long Beach. I remember when it came out, the headline “Betty Ford admitted for alcoholism.” I remember calling Susan and Steve in shock. I said, “Alcoholism? How can that be? I’ve traveled with your mother. I shared hotel suites with her; we’d stay up telling funny stories and gossiping. I never saw her slamming down drinks.”
But, again, the understanding of that disease in 1977, 1978 and today - ironically, I think it’s fair to say, Betty Ford is the reason the knowledge base today is what it is, as distinguished from what it was in 1977-78.

Smith: Is it also possible that she was, I suppose like lots of people, perhaps especially from that era - kind of a quiet, almost a lonely drinker. You stop and think, she left Washington for this new life; the kids were really grown up by then so they were out; and he turned out to be on the road as much as before. She didn’t have a cadre of friends. And just the combination of loneliness, and maybe disappointment – it was a particularly vulnerable environment.

Willard: But those who were around her during the day, including Joy and Annie and Bob, I don’t recall there was ever a sense of “gosh, Mrs. Ford’s really…” And the countless times I would be around her at all hours, literally, I cannot remember any time during the day that Mrs. Ford had a drink during the day - never. She had her pain medicine. But my understanding of alcoholism in those days and my sort of mental image – at the time – of alcoholism was this bottle in the brown paper bag.

Well, now we know differently.

Smith: Do you think the kids, and particularly Susan, were maybe more attuned to what was going on than he was? Let me put it another way. Do you think there was some denial at work that wasn’t the case with the kids?

Willard: Maybe. And the reason I hedge is that after her hospitalization in April, 1977, there was a sense among all of us, even the President, that she was struggling. It would manifest itself to us in different ways. We were very aware of it, but didn’t know what “it” was. There was the Bolshoi television appearance.

Smith: Which is painful to watch.

Willard: It’s just remarkable, looking back, that no one ever connected the dots. I think much of it (and that’s why I hedge my answer a little bit) was not so much denial on his part, but that he and the rest of us had a growing sense that
something was wrong – really wrong. He was also distracted with his huge travel commitments. He’d say, “Well, Greg, we’ve got to focus on this upcoming eight day trip, and Betty doesn’t want to go (or can’t join up with us.”) But the undercurrent – the reason she didn’t want to go, or couldn’t – he and I both knew it was more than her back pain.

Smith: Yes. Was travel an issue? Was she welcomed to travel?

Willard: Yes. She was always welcomed; she just wouldn’t go with us. There was a trip in May that had been scheduled for quite awhile. Lady Bird Johnson had invited them to the ranch for three days. And Mrs. Ford couldn’t go, just wasn’t up to it. So the President and I went. Lee Simmons also went.

Smith: There’s a real friendship there, wasn’t there? Between Lady Bird and the Fords?

Willard: It was wonderful. Mrs. Ford wasn’t along, but it was a remarkable trip. Both President Ford and Mrs. Johnson, particularly Mrs. Johnson, had a wonderful time. I was just a staff person, but she included me in everything. I remember one morning she brought in a number of the ranch hands, and we sat around the living room and had coffee. And then after they left, Lady Bird would talk with President Ford about every topic imaginable. I remember early one afternoon she came upstairs and knocked on his door. We had just finished lunch. He and I had adjacent rooms there at the house. She knocked, “Mr. President? I’m going to go out for a walk and wanted to know if you and Mr. Willard would like to join me.” He said, “I’d love that.” And so the three of us soon headed outside.

We walked down the gravel road in front of the house, trailed by the Secret Service agents - hers and his. Mrs. Johnson and President Ford chatted about all manner of things. She loved explaining to us all about the wildflowers and history of the countryside. And then all of a sudden, we turned towards the river and walked to President Johnson’s grave. Mrs. Johnson and President Ford stood there and reminisced for quite awhile about President Johnson. That trip to the ranch was a wonderful visit for him. There clearly was a special
relationship between the Fords and Johnsons. And it continued with their kids. Susan stays in close touch with Lynda and Luci. It’s a wonderful friendship.

Smith: I remember at the time of the Philadelphia convention in 2000, where he had that mild stroke. I’ll never forget, within twenty minutes of the news breaking I got two calls. The first was from Julie and the second was from Tricia. And one sensed that that relationship existed. Can you talk about Nixon? One senses the pardon had to have altered that relationship in a permanent way.

Willard: It did. When we first got out to Rancho Mirage in 1977, ironically, we were only about ninety-five miles from San Clemente. They corresponded briefly; they weren’t regular correspondents. But I do know they corresponded. I don’t think they spoke by phone.

Interestingly, in March, the Fords went to Vail for a three or four day weekend, and I stayed back in California. Annie Grier [now Willard], one of the secretaries in the Rancho Mirage office, had worked for President Nixon on his White House staff. So she decided to go up that weekend to visit her friends Diane Sawyer and Frank Gannon, with whom she’d worked in the Nixon White House. When Annie got up there, she called and said, “Why don’t you come on up and visit?” So I did. And that was the first time I’d met Nixon. It was during his David Frost interviews.

I met with Nixon twice on that visit. The first was a casual conversation the first day, and then the next visit was a longer discussion with him. On Saturday, Jack Brennan, Nixon’s chief of staff called and said, “Greg, why don’t you and Annie come over and have coffee with the President.” We drove over to the office and visited President Nixon for quite awhile. President Nixon, of course, asked me what I currently was doing. I told him of my position as President Ford’s personal aide. It was interesting; at no point during the conversation did he say, “How are President and Mrs. Ford?” or “How are Jerry and Betty?” or, even as I’m leaving, “Please give my best to Jerry and Betty.” Nothing. And when I subsequently told President Ford that I’d been to San Clemente and
visited with President Nixon, I didn’t get from President Ford, “Tell me how the President is doing”; or “how’s he doing.” Nothing.

President Ford and I subsequently watched the first Frost-Nixon interview on television at Trammel Crow’s house. After the broadcast, we immediately went upstairs; he was very upset by what he’d watched – very troubled.

But I certainly didn’t have any sense at all that there was animus between Ford and Nixon - none. But, at least on President Ford’s part in 1977, I think there was this sense of, “What would be appropriate?” At his core, he didn’t want to do or say anything to make Nixon feel uncomfortable. And so it was a challenging relationship. I don’t know how it evolved in the ‘80s, and until Nixon died. But in those early days it was awkward for President Ford.

The same with Spiro Agnew. Agnew lived right across from where our office was on Sand Dune Road. Agnew’s home was in an area called The Springs. It was a development in Palm Springs. I know a couple of times the President and I would be playing golf, and look over and there would be Agnew in the next fairway. Neither Agnew nor President Ford turned their carts to go speak to one another. They had to know of one another’s presence, fifty feet away – you can’t not know, particularly seeing President Ford with six or eight Secret Service agents around him. I don’t recall, in that early period, them ever coming into contact in social settings out there either.

Smith: I only heard him speak disparagingly of two people and the worst he could come up with was, “He’s a bad man.” One was John Dean, and one was Gordon Liddy. One senses that from a very early age, he almost trained himself – perhaps his mother had something to do with this – perhaps the Eagle Scout – but consciously made an effort to imagine the best of people.

Willard: Always. Almost to a fault, sometimes. He’d see the best in people, which led to an exchange such as – “Well, Mr. President, there’s this aspect going on here. There’s a story here, sir, that’s not very pretty.” He’d reply along the lines, “Well, I know, but he’s such a good guy, and he’s done so many good things.” The reply - “I understand, Mr. President, but…” – was tough for him to accept.
Smith: I saw it with Mrs. Reagan in a different sense that I think clearly redefined her role. He [Ronald Reagan] didn’t have a Haldeman. And she had pretty good antenna and pretty good judgment. And I’m wondering if there was any of that dynamic with the Fords.

Willard: A little bit. When you would sit down with Mrs. Ford – and you may remember this from your experiences – she’d bluntly say, “Well, tell me what’s going on.” She wanted it all – the good, the bad and the ugly, including some gossip. And not in a mean way, like “I’m going to go rat this person out.” But she enjoyed knowing what’s going on. He, not so much, though. He’d kind of go down that path, “Well, Mr. President, I want to let you know about this. It doesn’t directly affect you, but…” Well, more likely than not, you’d be cut off. “Okay, we don’t need to talk about that.” But Mrs. Ford was – in my experience in those early years – was much more proactive in terms of making sure he was told. She’d say, “Jerry, now you need to think about this!”

Smith: Protecting him from himself.

Willard: I don’t remember in those early years her filling that role.

Smith: Did he see himself as a prospective candidate for 1980? I know later on there was an effort to lure him into the race, but I’m wondering - in part the context in which some of these decisions commercial, were made - whether he really saw his political career as over.

Willard: Break it down. That first year, I can say almost unequivocally, no. He did not see himself as a candidate. I remember we were going to be in Houston that spring of ’77. We were putting together the schedule, and he mentioned to me, “We need to leave several hours in the morning wide open,” which was unusual. I said, “Sure, Mr. President,” and blocked it out. I told the Secret Service that we were going to be unscheduled that whole time. And what subsequently happened that morning was, President Ford and I had a meeting in the hotel with George H. W. Bush and Jim Baker. The discussion was about George H. W. Bush running in 1980. And then about an hour later John
Connally comes in. I didn’t sit in on that meeting. But President Ford and I talked about it later, and he gave a download of the discussion.

I don’t recall any suggestions on President Ford’s part that, “Well, I’m going to have these conversations, but in the back of my mind, I might run myself.” I really think, at least in that first year, that he was done with politics, consistent with the conversations he had with Mrs. Ford in 1972 - 1973 when he realized that he wasn’t going to be Speaker.

Whether that changed leading up to the 1980 Detroit GOP convention with the Reagan-Ford ticket chatter - perhaps. Bob Barrett would’ve had those conversations at the time and will have the best insights. But I never thought he’d ever run again – never.

In that first year after the White House, there were zero discussions, including leading up to and following his meetings with Bush and Connally, of him ever running again. He, of course, didn’t make any commitments to either. But had he been contemplating re-entering, he would likely have said, “Well, this is what I discussed with George and Jim and with Connally, but we need to keep in mind what I may do.” Never a whiff of that. He was done.

Smith: Did he hold a grudge against Reagan? And I don’t mean in a burning sense, because he’s not the sort of person who lived in the past. But you wondered. One sensed that if you scratched the surface deep enough, you would find lingering resentments, not so much of the original challenge, but the lack of campaigning in the fall.

Willard: Right. I would use a different word than grudge. And I’d bifurcate it from a personal standpoint. There was no animus from a personal standpoint. From a political standpoint, from the party perspective, I heard him discuss, on more than one occasion, his sense that although then-Governor Reagan campaigned in 1976, the number of times he uttered the phrase, “Jerry Ford” or “President Ford” was pretty limited. And I think, not a grudge, he didn’t begrudge that, but….

Smith: But he’s keeping score.
Willard: He remembered. And he was disappointed. But fast forward to 1980, and the two of them having some brief discussion about a Reagan-Ford ticket. But, as I said earlier, I never thought he’d do it, especially considering Mrs. Ford.

Smith: Were you surprised when the friendship with Carter developed? One senses that all the other members of the former presidents club, who found it hard to imagine being friends with Jimmy Carter, found it particularly puzzling.

Willard: Yes and no.

Yes, in that I remember how disappointed he was that he lost. I could see his disappointment in our last days in the White House. I could see it on his face. I could hear it in his voice, and Governor Carter was responsible for that. It never ever popped into my mind that they somehow would someday have a close relationship.

No, in that when you think about Gerald Ford and the core components of his being and his goodness – you always have to talk about his goodness – it doesn’t surprise me at all that they made a link. That the similarities that the two have, whether it’s Dorothy Ford or Lillian Carter, three sons and then a daughter, both in the Navy, both not from large means. A lot of commonality that one would not at first blush ascribe to political adversaries.

Smith: And a pair of strong wives.

Willard: A pair of strong wives, in their own ways.

Smith: That friendship, by the way, extended to the wives.

Willard: Oh, to be sure. I remember in some of the more private moments during President Ford’s state funeral, particularly in Grand Rapids and on the Air Force One flight from Washington to Michigan, the emotional impact on Mrs. Carter was significant and very apparent.

Smith: I will never forget. It’s odd, when you are standing there, trying to get through [a eulogy], and the Fords are right in front of you, and you’re trying to do your best, and you’re in a kind of a fog – the thing I will always remember is at one
point looking over and seeing Rosalynn Carter weeping. And I thought, who would have imagined thirty years ago that this is how the story ends? It’s just so improbable.

Willard: And a similar moment occurred during planning for the funeral. I was visiting President and Mrs. Ford at their Beaver Creek home. I’d go out to Beaver Creek and Rancho Mirage and do a series of detailed planning meetings, new table-top scenarios, and on site walk-throughs with MDW and Secret Service. Sometimes, we’d also work on her plan. Then, we’d sit down and go over new recommendations on the State Funeral plans. On this particular visit, he and I were talking about the final ceremony at Andrews Air Force Base and the last flight to Grand Rapids on Air Force One. All of a sudden he became very somber. And he began to tear up. He looked over and said, “Greg, it would mean a great deal to me if you would make certain that Jimmy and Rosalynn are on that last flight with Betty and the children.”

And in my mind, that moment and his visible emotion sum up their extraordinary friendship. We were discussing taking his remains home to Grand Rapids for the last time, and he had one request: he wanted me to be sure that Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter were on that flight.

Smith: And the scene I’ll never forget, once we were on the flight, President Carter walking up and down the aisle with the youngest Ford great-grandchild.

Willard: With Joy Berlanga.

Smith: It was just an astonishing image.

Willard: And Joy, she couldn’t have been six months old at the time, with him up and down the left side of Air Force One.

Smith: By all accounts, the Carters were astonished at the crowds, at the outpouring that they saw when they got to Grand Rapids.
Willard: We all were. People have asked a similar question about that relationship, was it genuine and all – and there are so many similar examples one can point to. And I’m sure Penny Circle over the years had dozens of similar examples of just how deep and broad that friendship was – among the four of them – not just President Carter and President Ford, but among all four of them. And, it culminated with President Carter breaking down at the end of his eulogy. That’s as heartfelt as it gets.

Smith: Were the Fords comfortable talking about their funeral planning? Or did they become more comfortable over time? How was it initially introduced?

Willard: May, 1977 was the first meeting President Ford and I had regarding his State Funeral Plan. A civilian from the Military District of Washington came out to Rancho Mirage. We met in the conference room with the President. I remember thinking at the time, “This may be the oddest meeting I’ve ever participated in. The President is 63, walks eighteen holes of golf and swims each day – why are we talking about his funeral?” We went ahead and developed some very basic ideas and a funeral plan template. That template evolved by about 1986 (Penny and Bob Barrett may know better) into a simple seven page outline that was then put on the shelf. I understand in the 1990s you were able to move it forward; your memo about a funeral plan was terrific.

I became re-involved in 2003 when Steve Ford asked me to breakfast in Washington. It was after the President’s 2000 stroke, and he was still doing pretty well. At that point, the whole funeral plan was still a 12-page outline comprised mostly of lists of which military units would be assigned to what ceremony; pretty sparse. Steve said, “We really need to get serious about this while Dad is still in ok health.” And so - from 2003 to the President’s death on December 26, 2006 - I became very involved in planning the funeral and then oversaw its conduct. It turned out to be an enormous undertaking - pretty much full-time for those three years; hundreds of meetings around the country, 33,000 e-mails, thousands of documents, 23 separate invitation lists, security checklists, contracts, conference calls and meetings with Mike Wagner and MDW, Secret Service, White House staff, Blair House, law enforcement, National Guard,
U.S. House and Senate, clergy, hundreds of annotated diagrams and seating charts, all the printed materials and tributes, meetings and teleconferences with the Fords and the family, and, of course, planning and overseeing the very private arrangements for his Remains upon Demise. The final plan was 587 pages. Our entire funeral file has more than 2 terabytes of data.

In the early stages of the planning, President Ford would occasionally push back. I don’t know whether emotionally he didn’t want to talk about it, or, more likely, it was his way of saying, “I want to make sure there’s not too much pomp.”

Early on I said to him at a group planning meeting in Rancho Mirage, “Mr. President, two things are going to happen when you die. The sun is going to rise in the east the next morning, and the American people are going to pay tribute to your service to the Nation. Now you may not like the second of those, but it’s going to happen. You can contribute, you can give your thoughts, you can participate in the planning, or, instead, you can choose not to do so. But it is going to happen, whether you want it to or not - period.” He paused and smiled, “Well, I guess when you put it that way…” Over the course of our three years preparing his funeral plan, it wasn’t so much a reluctance, as an uncomfortableness sometimes, with what otherwise would be the pomp of a state funeral. A significant consideration was also the effect he knew his death would have on Mrs. Ford, the children and the grandchildren.

Smith: Was there an inherent – for lack of a better word – tension between marrying those two strains? One of the things that I think came to define that week in a way that had more of an emotional impact than the sheer pomp would have, was the extent to which it felt like a family funeral.

Willard: Well, I’m glad to hear you say that because that’s exactly what our hope was with the entire funeral plan.

Smith: Really?
Absolutely. I insisted that the family be the focus. One of the earliest meetings I had was with the military and Secret Service in Washington - huge meeting. I explained the two stages we were going to utilize to develop the funeral plan: in the first stage we would develop a plan for Mrs. Ford and the family; then, the second stage would incorporate all the military traditions and protocol. I pointedly said that the plan’s three priorities would be: family, family, and family -- in that order! I described it this way: what we’re going to do is first prepare a funeral plan for what Mrs. Ford and the children and the grandchildren will need to say goodbye. Once we’ve defined that, once we’ve developed that – and not before – we will then overlay all of the traditions, the rituals, the protocol. But it will always be, at the core, about Mrs. Ford and the children saying goodbye to her husband and their dad.

You’re right; there could have been a tension. But I can count on one hand the times when there actually was. And every single time an issue like that would come up, Mike Wagner and I resolved it; no problems - none. I’ll give you an example – planning the repose at St. Margaret’s Church. The Remains were to be brought there the first time – when “the casket goes public” is the phrase they use. Mike and I spent hours and hours planning every detail of that first repose. Upon arrival at St. Margaret’s, there first would be private time, a private prayer service with just Mrs. Ford and the family. Military tradition said that four military personnel must stand vigil at the corners of the casket. But that meant Mrs. Ford and the children would be looking at the casket through or around uniforms. I said, “That’s not going to work. Family, family, family.” By this point in the funeral planning, Mike, whose title is Chief of State Funeral Planning at the Military District of Washington, had become the lead MDW coordinator for us. In this instance, Mike studied the military protocols and concluded: if the Officer In Charge stood alone at the head of President Ford’s casket during the family time, that would be sufficient to sustain the military “vigil.” The other military personnel could leave. So we did it that way. The family’s needs were met, and protocol and military traditions were also observed. With Mike, we were always able to resolve the most difficult and sensitive matters in the funeral plans. He’s extraordinary.
Sure, there’s a possibility of tension between family emotions and needs, and protocol and tradition for a state funeral. But Mike and I, with MDW General Guy Swan’s steadfast support, always found solutions – always. A real tribute to Mike and General Swan – two remarkable men, just remarkable.

Smith: And I recall vividly, his expressed desire not to have a caisson.

Willard: Yes. And ironic because what came out of that desire was an alternative - and very touching - part of the funeral. He didn’t want a horse-drawn caisson, so his casket was to be borne by a hearse from Andrews Air Force Base to the Capitol. So, we developed a new idea for him to consider: have the hearse come over Memorial Bridge, around the Lincoln Memorial, up Seventeenth Street, and then pause at the World War II Memorial in a moment of mutual tribute to President Ford and his World War II comrades.

I remember sitting in the den with him late one morning at the house in Rancho Mirage. He was in the blue chair there in the den. We were going over my latest updates and recommendations on the plan, and I began to describe the Word War II pause recommendation to him. In his last visit to Washington in 2004 after a Foundation dinner when Dick Cheney and Don Rumsfeld had received the Foundation’s medal in Statuary Hall, the Secret Service had driven him in his limo into the World War II Memorial, and he spent some time there. He was very moved by it. He was so proud of his Navy service. So when I talked to him about the recommendation for a ceremonial pause at the Memorial – not just as an alternative to the horse-drawn caisson, but as part of telling the story of Gerald Ford to the American people - he became very emotional. “I can’t tell you how much that would mean to me.”

The phrase I used to describe our planning was “Thematic Mosaic” – a series of tributes (a mosaic) that would comprise his overall state funeral. I explained it: “We’ll have eight days of tributes. There will be this piece of his life represented here, and this piece there, and that piece there. And at the end of the eight days, I want the Ford grandchildren to be able to step back and look at that
eight day mosaic and say, ‘That was my grandpa.’” Whether it was the World War II Memorial pause, having the casket borne up the House of Representative steps and later out the Senate steps, lying in repose outside both chambers, or the individuals he selected as eulogists and pallbearers – all of those were part of telling the story of Gerald Ford in the context of a state funeral mosaic.

Smith: Any surprises that week?

Willard: A couple in particular. One was during the first Arrival Ceremony at the Capitol. We had twenty honorary pallbearers in DC, many of whom were older and several of whom had heart conditions. We didn’t dare risk having them climb up the forty-eight steep steps behind the casket. So, during the planning, we said that the Honorary Pallbearers would be at the foot of the stairs. The casket would be borne up the steps, and the pallbearers would then be brought under and taken up the elevator. The plan was that as the casket passed by Mrs. Ford and her official military escort, General Guy Swan, at the top of the steps, the two of them would move in behind the casket, and then the children and grandchildren would follow them in. And then I was to move in behind the family, and we’d proceed inside the Capitol.

So that night it all unfolded just as planned, or so I thought! The casket passed by, the family followed, and, just as I started to lean forward to follow, I looked left, and there was Alan Greenspan! For a moment I thought, “Oh, dear God, Alan is lost; he’s supposed to be going in the elevator under the stairs with the Honorary Pallbearers!” I leaned a little further forward, and there were Brent Scowcroft, Henry Kissinger, Dick Cheney - all of the Honorary Pallbearers walking together up the steps! Vice President Cheney came up beside me and said with a twinkle in his eye, “Didn’t expect to see us, did you, Greg?” I smiled, “No, Mr. Vice President; I sure didn’t.” He replied softly, “We wanted to walk him in.”

That was a surprise, and a wonderful surprise. The other, well, several others – the first, we talked about the crowds, especially in Alexandria.
Smith: On that day that we went up to the Cathedral, I was wearing my ABC hat, so I did not get to be in the motorcade, but I was told by a number of people, including colleagues at ABC, that although you had dispensed with the formal procession, a surprising number of people had turned out just to say goodbye.

Willard: Remarkable crowds. Another memorable moment occurred later that same afternoon. It actually began Saturday while we were enroute from California to Washington on Air Force One. As we lifted off from the Palm Springs Airport, I suddenly realized that thirty years ago almost to the day I’d come to California with him on Air Force One, and now I was accompanying him on Air Force One back to Washington -- for the last time. That realization hit me like a bolt. I lost it; very difficult moment. I quickly got back to work finalizing plans for the ceremonies that evening in DC. A short while later, I casually said to Major Mark Thompson, President Bush’s military aide, “Would you check our flight path from Andrews to Grand Rapids next week? And if we’re going to be anywhere near Ann Arbor, if you could just let me know, I’ll point it out to Mrs. Ford.” That’s all I said. The following Tuesday afternoon, after the service at National Cathedral, we boarded Air Force One at Andrews and took off for Michigan. We weren’t even to altitude when Major Thompson came back and said, “Mr. Willard, in about an hour we’re going to go into a steep dive.” I replied, “Major, there are lots of things I’d like to be told on Air Force One – that’s not one of them!” He smiled and then told me what Colonel Mark Tillman, the presidential pilot, had arranged. So, over southeast Detroit we started going down, as you will remember. We told Mrs. Ford and the family and the other passengers what was about to happen. We leveled out over Willow Run, Michigan at 800 feet altitude. The aircraft went full flaps down, doing barely 190 knots. Air Force One then flew directly over the University of Michigan football stadium and then gracefully toggled its wings from side to side to say goodbye. It was a moment I’ll never forget.

There were many wonderful moments that perhaps you could call a surprise: the reactions of the crowds when the children and the grandchildren went over – either to the lying in state in the Rotunda, or to the public repose in California
and Michigan – and the effects that had on the thousands of people with whom the family interacted - what a wonderful part of the eight days that was.

Another wonderful moment involved Mrs. Ford. Most people don’t know that she was very sick that week. Very sick; horrible bronchial infection. And it became a real question whether she was going to be able to make it to all the services and ceremonies. Tradition is that Air Force One is provided to move the remains to the final resting place. Then, a different, smaller military aircraft returns the widow home. So, we were scheduled to return from Grand Rapids to Rancho Mirage in a C-32 aircraft. On Monday afternoon, January 1, we were at Blair House, and Mrs. Ford was receiving the ambassadors from the countries he visited as President. Randy Bumgardner, Manager of Blair House, came in and said I had a call on a Blair House phone from Joe Hagin, President Bush’s Deputy Chief of Staff. Randy is an extraordinary person who made certain everything at Blair House was perfect for Mrs. Ford – and it was. Joe said,

“Greg, I’m on a speakerphone on Air Force One with President Bush and General Tubb in the President’s office.” General Tubb was the President’s physician who’d been attending Mrs. Ford in Washington. And Joe said, “The President and General Tubb think Mrs. Ford would be much more comfortable going back to California on Air Force One. If it’s okay with her, we’re going to have this aircraft take her home to California.” Now, President Bush didn’t have to do that. It wasn’t a surprise as much as another of his many wonderful and compassionate kindnesses that week.

A very funny moment occurred later that afternoon at Blair House. All of the former Presidents, First Ladies, and First Family members came to Blair House to pay their respects to Mrs. Ford. Randy Bumgardner had set up a lovely table with a condolence book for all of them to sign. Many of them took their time and wrote notes. At one point, Hillary Clinton was seated writing her note in the book. President Carter was standing behind her patiently waiting to sign the book. Happy Rockefeller suddenly walked by and saw him waiting his turn. She turned to him and said crisply, “Well, you better get ready – you’re next.” President Carter froze! From the shocked expression on his face it was apparent
he thought Mrs. Rockefeller was somehow prophesying that his State Funeral was next – and not that he was merely next in the condolence book line. David Kennerly and I were nearby and doubled over laughing.

There was another humorous moment at Blair House. President Bush ’43 and Laura came over to pay their respects. I took them up to the second floor library – just the two of them – to meet with Mrs. Ford. Sometime later, his father, President Bush ’41 and Barbara and the Ford children came in. There’s a great photograph of the two Presidents on the left sofa and Barbara Bush sitting in a wing chair with Laura Bush sitting perched on the arm of the chair. I remember chuckling to one of the Ford children, “There are six billion people on the planet, and we’re looking in that chair at the only one who can make the First Lady of the United States sit on the arm of a chair!” Barbara Bush with her daughter-in-law – the First Lady - sitting contentedly on the arm.

Smith: That walk down the Cathedral aisle must have been…

Willard: It was tough. Mike Wagner and I had developed five scenarios for Mrs. Ford to get her to her seat. She made the final decision. The scenarios ranged from: I would assist her in a wheelchair all the way down a side aisle to the front of the Cathedral and then President Bush would meet us and escort her around the front pew to her seat; or I’d take her in a wheelchair to the cross-aisle, and then he’d seat her; or she’d walk the entire way with President Bush. And so the moment came. Everyone else was seated. It was time for her to be seated. President Bush and I were with her in the Cathedral Narthex. The three of us paused, and I said, “Mrs. Ford, whatever you would like to do in terms of getting to your seat, you and I went over the options last night.” She got that resolute Betty Ford look and said firmly, “Greg, I can do this!” and turned, “Mr. President, if you please.” She took his arm, the ushers opened the main Cathedral doors, and the two of them made that long walk. I was shadowing down the right aisle. She went the whole way - no problem. Amazing.
Smith: Bess Abel, Mrs. Johnson’s great aide and friend, told me later, “You know, it sounds like she still has dancer’s legs.” It took another woman to notice.

Willard: Indeed. And, given how ill she was that day, it took enormous courage.

Smith: Well, there was a whole generation who were discovering him for the first time through these old clips and they were comparing and contrasting that with the ugliness of current politics. And he looked awfully good.

Willard: Very good. The funeral, and its thematic mosaic, let Americans young and old consider him in a broader historical context. Mrs. Ford and the family were able to say their final goodbyes, and exactly as we’d planned - state funeral protocol and traditions were carried out completely. Peggy Noonan later wrote,

“[President] Ford’s was the most human of presidential funerals.
Maybe because the Fords wanted so little done, so insisted on modesty,
all that was done was genuine, and sincere, and -- perfect.”

And so it was; a finer description of his funeral there will never be.
Smith: Do you remember your last visit with him?

Willard: I do; 2006. I was in Rancho Mirage for several days working on the funeral plan and a number of personal legal matters I was handling for President and Mrs. Ford.

The last morning I walked over to the house around ten. The President’s health was declining, but he wasn’t yet bedridden. Mrs. Ford was at the dining room table. I told her goodbye, and asked if the President was around. She said he’d gone back to take a nap, so I asked her to tell him goodbye for me. All of a sudden we heard the click of his cane. He came around the corner with a bathrobe on and smiled, “Where are you going!?!?” I reminded him, “Well, Mr. President, my flight leaves at 12:30.” He said, “Oh, just put some swimming trunks on and come into the pool. The damn doctors told me I can’t swim, but that doesn’t mean I can’t walk!” We both laughed. It turns out he’d started getting in the pool and walking around just to get some exercise. He thanked me for all the work on the funeral plan, tousled the side of my head, and said, “Well, hurry back!” I gave him a hug and said goodbye.

That was the last time I saw him.

The last time we spoke was early November, 2006. By then, his health had declined significantly; very frail. I had an evening conference call with Mrs. Ford and the family about my meetings at the Pentagon earlier that day with the Navy and Secretary Rumsfeld’s staff to plan the January, 2007 Naming Ceremony for the CVN–78 aircraft carrier as the USS Gerald R. Ford. President Ford had previously been told about the decision on the carrier’s name. During the conference call, he suddenly came on the line. He was so excited to hear about the Naming Ceremony plans and Susan’s duties as Ship’s Sponsor. At the end of the call, he thanked me, asked to give his best to Annie, and then said, “Come visit, Greg.” I replied, “Good night, Mr. President. I’ll see you soon.”

That was the last time I spoke to him. He died the next month.
Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Willard: I hope he’s remembered for the person he was. People talk a lot about his character and all those component elements of his being. I think he’s best remembered by that core goodness – “good-ness” – because it permeated everything he did. Whether it was in relationships with friends and colleagues, his presidency, vice presidency, his service in Congress, Navy, Yale Law School, University of Michigan, and then all the way back to growing up in Grand Rapids, there was always a core goodness. And the phrase, “He was a good man,” almost sounds trite. But it’s not trite as to him; it’s very real. When one remembers Gerald Ford in that context - that he was a good man - and then examines what that meant over the course of his 93 years, that’s a wonderful, wonderful legacy.

If that “good-ness” of Gerald Ford can be remembered, and if its manifestations in his public life can be honored and hopefully emulated, we will have known – and been honored – by a life well-lived.

Smith: Perfect.
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Smith: Thank you for doing this. We really do appreciate it. Tell me how your path crossed with the Fords.

Gen. Swan: At the time of the President’s death, I was serving as the U.S. Army Military District of Washington commander here in D.C. And part of the responsibilities in that position are to help coordinate the military aspects of a state funeral. And this has been one of the traditional roles for that command.

In addition to doing all of the planning, there is a personal role that goes with that position, and that is to serve as the personal escort for the widow of the past president. My predecessor had done that for the Reagan family and then I had that privilege with the Ford family. So planning had been ongoing for the state funeral for many years, as it is for all the surviving presidents. But my personal relationship with the family actually began on the 26th of December, the day that the President passed away, when I received the call that he had died. And the indications were fairly quick. I mean, the family had been together, as I understand, for Christmas Day. The notification and the failing health, was pretty quick, so we had to respond pretty quickly.

Smith: Let me back up, maybe rephrase the question. What career path culminates in this position?

Gen. Swan: I was a traditional armor tank officer and had grown up in various troop units in the United States and Germany and Korea. Spent time in the Gulf War, and had, prior to that position, here at the Military District of Washington, I’d served three years as the Chief of Congressional Affairs, of all things, for the Army. So I’d had a lot of recent experience here in the Washington area, with Capitol Hill, with the senior leaders in the Army and the Department of Defense. So it seemed like a good fit when the Chief of Staff of the Army appointed me to that position. And I felt well prepared to do that job, which is
a wide ranging job, from Homeland Security issues in the Washington area to some of the ceremonial activities.

Smith: I wonder whether 9/11 had an impact at all on this job?

Gen. Swan: It has. In fact, the position now is dual command - as an Army command in the Washington area, but also serves the broader U. S. Northern Command now, which has overall Homeland defense responsibilities that headquarters out in Colorado. So the Washington command is a subordinate, and in that capacity is a lot of coordination with local, state, and federal authorities in the Washington area for security, disaster response, and so forth. In fact, the officer that’s in that position today is heavily involved in today’s State of the Union Address and the security apparatus for that.

Smith: So now, the President passed away on the evening of the 26th. Were you in D.C. at that point?

Gen. Swan: I was in D.C. at that time, just happened to be here and received word. And because the planning for the President’s state funeral is so well-rehearsed, there’s almost a battle drill that immediately goes into effect. In my case, my aide decamps and I gathered our uniforms and our personal effects and literally, within hours, we were at Andrews Air Force Base, getting on an aircraft to fly to Palm Springs. That was literally within eight to twelve hours after he passed away.

Smith: And I assume the proximity to New Year’s affected the plan to some degree.

Gen. Swan: To some degree.

Smith: An extra day at the Capitol?

Gen. Swan: That’s right. And we realized that we would have to make timing adjustments. Of course around the holidays, a lot of the senior officials and former administration officials were literally spread out all over the country. I think President Carter was actually out of the country at the time. So we knew that
that was going to be a challenge, gathering all the individuals that wanted to be part of that event. So not just New Year’s, but the Christmas holiday and the other holidays kind of generated some rapid adjustments to the plan.

Smith: You met the family for the first time when?

Gen. Swan: Interestingly, we flew into Palm Springs airport, went over to the Ford residence there in Palm Springs, and literally, the first event or the first activity was a very small, one-on-one session – myself and Mrs. Ford – in their living room. It was almost an introductory kind of session. She obviously knew who I was from Greg Willard’s many discussions with her and the President; but we’d never met. I actually tried to avoid – it’s interesting, Richard – I tried to avoid being too involved in the planning because there was always the perception that if General Swan or my predecessor was near the family, there was some indication that something was wrong with the President - that I may be some indicator. We were very conscious of that. So I met her, literally, one-on-one. One of her sons, Steve was there, and the three of us just talked. It was an informal session with me conveying to her, obviously, my condolences, and what might be occurring over the next seven to ten days - to just kind of frame for her what would be occurring. She’d been very involved in the extensive funeral planning with Greg Willard and the President for several years. But on that first visit I thought it was useful to describe - here’s the sequence of things that will occur here, Washington, and then Grand Rapids. It was very cordial.

Smith: Pretty daunting. When Harry Truman signed off on his plans, he famously said, “It looks like it’s going to be quite a show, too bad I won’t be around to see it.” And in the event, because of Mrs. Truman’s advanced age, they dropped the Washington portion. And in many ways, I think it turned out to be more affecting because it was limited to Independence. Mrs. Truman, at that point, was younger than Mrs. Ford was. She was being asked to take on quite a physical challenge.
Gen. Swan: She was. And I think – there was never any hesitation on her part or the sons or Susan – to deviate, or significant deviations, from the original plan. They knew full well what their husband and their father meant to the country. And I felt that sense of obligation on their part. It was quite an interesting – just aura – around the whole family. That there was this typical Midwestern family dealing with the loss of a loved one, yet fully aware that they had some public role that they had to play. And felt that it was quite well balanced. They were very well balanced in doing all of that. So I felt gratified that they were confident that the plan that had been put together was one that they were comfortable with.

Smith: I was wearing two hats that week – I was with ABC the first part of the week and then with the family the second part. And my sense was, journalists in particular were surprised at how much reaction there was, and how it seemed to build as the week went by.

Gen. Swan: I noticed that, too.

Smith: Were you surprised?

Gen. Swan: Clearly, it’s a shock to the nation that a former president has passed away. But I think we were still operating somewhat in the shadow of President Reagan’s state funeral. And that had been such a monumental event, that it took longer for, as you said, for the nation to grasp that another president had passed away. The family wasn’t overly concerned by any of that, nor was I. We had a job to do. But I don’t think it really hit most Americans or even ourselves, or even the family, until he was brought back to Washington. And then it started to gain some momentum, as you said.

Smith: For example, I’ve been told that they were really surprised and very moved by the crowds on a Saturday night on the streets in Alexandria.

Gen. Swan: They were. As all the presidents do, they had some very specific things they wanted to accomplish, and a story to tell about their father, their husband, our president. And one of those things was to go back to their home where they
had lived in Alexandria when he was serving in Congress. So the circuitous route that we took from Andrews Air Force Base to downtown Washington took us through Alexandria and the outpouring – I think all of the family members were amazed. Here we are during the holiday period, how many people actually came out on the streets of Alexandria and elsewhere in Washington, I think it was very gratifying for them that their husband had not been forgotten and had been appreciated - more than maybe most Americans realized.

Smith: And the irony for someone who was adamant in not wanting a formal caisson, but I’m told that the morning of the cathedral service, when they drove from the Capitol past the White House and up to the cathedral, that there were still large numbers of people out on the streets.

Gen. Swan: There were. And back to the evening when we drove in. We drove in the evening, so we actually drove through Alexandria at night – part of that route, you know, took us past the World War II Memorial. And he was very adamant that, like most World War II veterans, that was a great accomplishment, to get that monument built. And that was a tip of the hat to fellow World War II veterans that took us past there. And that was moving because there were a lot of senior citizens, so to speak, that were there right between the Washington Monument and the World War II Memorial. A lot of World War II veterans. It was interesting, and I’ll mention it later, the demographics of the audiences that participated in this was quite interesting as we went through Alexandria, their hometown for many years, World War II veterans, Grand Rapids Boy Scouts. I mean, more Boy Scouts than I’ve ever seen. It was just really interesting looking at the demographics of the crowds. Just fascinating.

I think you mentioned going up to the cathedral there were still a lot of people out. The city had prepared very well, too. And we worked a lot with the city officials and the police in the city. They had done a fabulous job in preparing
the city for that event. And just like everyone else, they have to react on relatively short notice to make all that happen.

Smith: How was she holding up? Because we knew later on, she wasn’t altogether healthy that week.

Gen. Swan: When I got there to Palm Springs I noticed that she was a little congested, and I was told later that she had had some form of bronchitis and had not been feeling well. And frankly, I thought that might cause us some challenges. So things like wheelchairs and being prepared for whatever she could deal with became part of our planning. But a very, very strong woman and extremely impressive in her resilience – let me say resilience - during the week. Because there were ups and downs, and when she was in the public eye, she was very much aware of that and as others, I’m sure, have told you, she was very intent on doing her husband proud. But those periods when she was just with the family or not on stage, so to speak, she took a break and paced herself. I was proud to see her pace herself, because she knew that this was going to be a lengthy process and she was going to have to find strength during certain periods and then try to rebuild the strength as she went on. I was quite proud of how she handled herself through that. And it certainly lightened the load on the rest of us who were very concerned about her. So just a fascinating woman and a very strong woman.

Smith: Was there anything about her that surprised you? This was your first exposure to her.

Gen. Swan: She was extremely gracious. She could have been somewhat hostile to someone like me, or even distant, because when a person in my capacity arrived on the scene, it meant that her husband had passed and so I was a little concerned that that might stand between us. Because I think part of my responsibility was to build an appropriate relationship with her immediately that would take us both through this process and make it as easy on her as it could be. Not that her focus should be on me, but I wanted to be there in a capacity that made sense for her. And I was surprised at how well received I was by Mrs. Ford. That did surprise me.
Smith: The family that week, when they were off stage, was there a lot of reminiscing going on?

Gen. Swan: There was when we got to Palm Springs. As you know, Greg Willard was President and Mrs. Ford’s personal representative for the entire state funeral. Greg had worked very closely with our team for several years as the principal family agent for planning and then overseeing the conduct every detail of it. My first morning in Palm Springs, after that one-on-one session I had with Mrs. Ford, Greg gathered the family – gathered the whole family together - and took all of us through the sequence of events - this is what’s going to occur over the next several days. Some had been privy to the plan and some of the distant relatives had not. It was fascinating because there were babies in there, there were older people, there were men and women. There were about thirty in the small conference room at the residence with him. And there was an intense focus on what they were being told by Greg. They wanted to know what would occur, what would their role be? And as soon as they all understood that, there was a lot of laughing and a lot of reminiscing and it was a family reunion atmosphere. I was glad to see that because it could have been just a dark day. But they would not allow that to happen. They really wanted to focus on the bright things they remembered about the President.

Smith: One of the remarkable sights I’ve ever seen and I’ll never forget it - on Air Force One, flying back to Grand Rapids, President Carter hoisting on his shoulder the Fords’ newest grandchild, or great grandchild, I guess, walking up and down the aisle of Air Force One. And again, who would have thought thirty years ago that that’s how the story ends?

Gen. Swan: That’s right. And there were many moments like that where the family really, I think, took advantage of being together. I think what I was experiencing was a great deal of gratification, gratitude to their parents that they had been part of such a wonderful family. A number of them had been together for the Christmas holidays, so they had been together. But this was a celebration, not only of the President’s life, but of this wonderful family. And they made the most of it under the circumstances.
Smith: And I think that a theme from the beginning that in some ways set this apart from other grander, if you will, presidential funerals - the emphasis upon family. I don’t want to pry, but I had heard – I knew that the Johnson girls after this said we’ve got to get serious about Mother’s plans and so on. And I was told that the Carters took a fresh look at their own plans in light of what they’d been through. And I understand that they were particularly impressed with the lines in Grand Rapids, two miles long at one point. On a January night, that’s impressive.

Gen. Swan: And you saw it, Richard, when the President was lying in state in the Capitol, the lines grew overnight. He was there for two days. And the thing that struck me there, as well as in Grand Rapids, was that the children of the President, all four children, took turns – I mean, it still brings tears to my eyes that they were out thanking people for coming to see their father. I couldn’t believe it. You know, Americans will come see their president, but they took this far more personally, like – why would you come and see my father – we’re so grateful that you would come and see our father. And they took turns throughout the entire time in the Capitol to walk the lines, talk with family members, and it was really something to behold. Other presidential families – I can’t speak for them – it might have been odd. But that was the nature of the Ford family. They were very grateful for the outpouring. And the same thing occurred in Grand Rapids, as I mentioned. Boy Scouts and his great association with the Boy Scouts of America and his own service as a Boy Scout, it was incredible. Scouts came from all over the Midwest and, as you said, miles and miles of streets lined from the airport to the library. And then the lines – it was somewhat disappointing, somewhat sad that the line had to be closed at certain times because there were people still wanting to pay their respects. But that was what he meant to that part of the country.

Smith: And the weather was glorious.

Gen. Swan: It was.

Smith: I mean, for January.
Gen. Swan: It was cold, but it was beautiful weather, it really was.

Smith: I assume, maybe one of the unintended consequences of the holiday, that extra day maybe, in DC, gave her a little more chance to rest…she was at Blair House.

Gen. Swan: She was.

Smith: And I know there were a lot of visits, some ceremonial and some more personal.

Gen. Swan: She took a lot of visitors, and, again, that was to her credit.

Smith: Former presidents came by.

Gen. Swan: That’s right.

Smith: And I think the Nixon girls and the Johnson girls.

Gen. Swan: They did. A number of his Cabinet and others had come by. And so she never turned anyone away. She was very, very intent on allowing those leaders to come and pay their respects. So she exhibited a lot of strength throughout all of this, and again, it was a remarkable thing to be part of. There were times when I was a bit concerned about her, but she surprised me with her strength.

Smith: She looked so frail, but there is coiled steel there.

Gen. Swan: There is. And an example was in the National Cathedral. We were scrambling ahead of time to make sure we had a wheelchair ready for her to make the long walk.

Smith: That is a long walk.

Gen. Swan: It’s a long walk, and she walked with President Bush. Even President Bush asked her, “Would you like to use the wheelchair?” She absolutely refused, and made that walk. And then again the walk in Grand Rapids as well. But she was intent on walking the distance there.
Smith: We were told that the following week when she got home, someone commented upon this and she said, “I just did what my husband would have wanted me to.”

Gen. Swan: Well, let me tell you this, if I can get through this part. The day of the interment, at the library, we came from the hotel and arrived at the library and a wheelchair was positioned for her. And even her children - “Mother, is everything okay?” and “We have the wheelchair here.” And it was the darnedest thing, and it is the one thing I will remember about the entire event. She told me that she had walked along that river, along the Grand River there many times in that exact spot with President Ford throughout their lives. And she wanted to make one more walk with him to the final resting place. I mean, when I relate this to people I can’t believe I get emotional about this, but we were all so concerned about her health, and she was more concerned about their relationship and doing the right thing. And the last thing she said, and if she sees this I hope she’ll pardon me for saying this, but she said,

“This is the last time I’ll make this walk.”

She knew this was a quintessential moment in her life and she absolutely had to do this. It was a lengthy walk, as you recall, it was probably well over a football field length, and it was cold and she did have to hold and we did steady her. But she said, “I have to make this walk because I won’t be making it again.” That was so very touching. These things, you know, I really, at that point, felt like almost like part of their family. Not just me, but other Americans, too, who watched this were very moved by that final interment ceremony.

Smith: It’s interesting you say that because I’ll never forget, reading Peggy Noonan, who said she didn’t understand it herself, she wasn’t particularly a Ford Republican, but she found herself sobbing as she watched. And she was talking to a friend who had the same reaction. I think it was that family. It was a family.

Gen. Swan: It was. It was an amazing experience, and their sons and their daughter were, throughout the week, were coaching their children, the President’s
grandchildren and great grandchildren, about what this all meant. They were very – not just that their grandfather or great grandfather as a former president – but their grandfather and what this was all about. Almost as if you need to remember what is happening here as you go on with your lives. So a great sense of family as the week went on. Much different than other state funerals. But that moment, that struck me when she said, “My husband and I have made this walk many times, and I won’t be making this walk again.” I almost lost it right there. We had a job to do and that was what our focus was, was to make sure that the entire ceremony, from start to finish, was respectful of a great leader and something that our nation could be proud of. And that was our objective. And I’m very pleased that it came off the way it did.

Smith: Did you see interaction between her and the Carters?

Gen. Swan: It was an interesting dynamic, as you mentioned. Arch rivals, political rivals, but in 2006 and into 2007, what I gathered from that – and there were many remarks about this in the press – that in this year in where there is much discussion about civility in Washington, there was a moment there during the state funeral for the President that we had come back to the civility that they recalled. Even when they are arch rivals, even when the President was in Congress, there was a time when party leaders would socialize. I heard that numerous times from a lot of former Cabinet officials and former Congressional leaders who were there - that they missed that. That camaraderie, that collegiality. And I think having President Carter there reminded them of those days.

Smith: I wonder if that, in some way, didn’t contribute to this building emotion as the week went by. We were in some ways mourning an era and a culture that we were burying, as well as a man.

Gen. Swan: I think so. Part of the Greatest Generation, with President Ford, there was some of that, the political environment that I mentioned that they were part of. There was kind of a reminiscence there of days gone by, and maybe we could recapture some of the collegiality and bipartisanship. And I think President
Carter was somewhat aware of that, and others were, too. That this is a bit of a lesson to all of us about how things could be, ought to be, might me in our political dynamic.

Smith: Plus, the country had come around on the pardon.


Smith: The Profiles in Courage Award was the imprimatur. He said for twenty years, everywhere I go, people ask the same questions. And after the award, they don’t ask the questions anymore.

Gen. Swan: They don’t. And it was interesting. I think, sadly, it took his passing for people to re-look at the Ford presidency and what it meant. As brief as it was, the tumultuous time after Watergate, coming out of Vietnam. I actually graduated from West Point in 1976. He was my president when I was graduating, and that time was appropriate for a man like Jerry Ford. We needed him at that time. We didn’t realize it at the time. And now, as we look, back, he was the right man in the right place at the right time.

Smith: Last question. Do you think, without getting into any specifics, that Ford’s funeral, how it unfolded and the impact that it had, may influence future planning?

Gen. Swan: I think from a technical standpoint, yes. But each state funeral is very much a family affair with a real intent to tell a story about that individual. And as you saw, there were idiosyncrasies to President Ford’s funeral that were very personally meaningful to the Ford family. A lot of emphasis on the Congress during the funeral, that you might not see in another presidential state funeral. That was an example. The piece in Alexandria, and at the World War II Memorial. There was a well-designed theme behind the planning – “thematic mosaic” is how Greg Willard described it. How do we at MDW, along with the family, tell the story the family would like to have told about their loved one, and a former president. But from a technical standpoint, we learned a lot. Just like any military operation, we did various after action reviews and have
most definitely applied that to the other state funeral plans that are underway as well.

Smith: In your current position, if a former president were to pass away tomorrow, would you be repeating your role?

Gen. Swan: No, there is an officer in that position now who will play that role. And my contribution to him might just be some words of advice, if he asks. I did ask my predecessor about his experiences with the Reagan family, which were very helpful. And if the current commander asks for that help, I’d certainly do that.

Smith: I can’t thank you enough. It’s been great.

Gen. Swan: Thank you, Richard. This was a great privilege, one of the high points of my career, and I have to absolutely thank the Ford family for their hospitality in all of this. They could have really treated me far differently. But that’s not the nature of that family. They are a very welcoming family, and even under the circumstances, they almost welcomed me as part of their family and I do try to carry on a relationship with them as they see fit. But we keep in touch, and I know that there will be a time when they may ask me to come back, when Mrs. Ford’s time comes. I don’t look forward to that. It’s almost like she’s my own mother now, in some ways, if I could be so presumptuous about that. But she is just a wonderful lady.

Smith: Well, you’ve certainly bonded. You’ve been through a uniquely personal, very intense…

Gen. Swan: Let me close with one thing.

We came back to – we were at Grand Rapids after the interment and everything had been completed, and we went back to the airport at Grand Rapids. And Mrs. Ford was flying with the family on Air Force One back to Palm Springs. I was departing at that point from Grand Rapids; everything was complete. My aide de camp and I were ready to jump in the vehicle and go catch out flight out of Grand Rapids. Suddenly, some Secret Service guys ran up to us and said, “You can’t go yet! She wants to see you.” So we went
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up into Air Force One, into the President’s compartment. And Mrs. Ford spent an amazing several minutes, quietly thanking me for what we’d done for her and her family; totally unnecessary on her part. It was a remarkable moment and an act of kindness I’ll never forget.

We parted as friends. It was such a gracious and moving gesture that she would even think to do that. I’m forever grateful to her for her graciousness and her hospitality under such an extraordinarily trying time in her life. It was an amazing experience.

Smith:   Thank you.
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Smith: Do you remember when your path first crossed with Gerald Ford?

Bruno: I first encountered President Ford when he was a congressman from Michigan. He was rising in the ranks of the Republican Party and he was always accessible to everybody, but especially to reporters. It wasn’t a vanity thing; he wasn’t seeking them out; but if a reporter wanted to talk to him he sat down and he talked with them. He was always very open, and he was a defender of the Republican Party line at the time, whatever it might have been. But we were accustomed to dealing with people like that.

Smith: Did that degree of openness sort of set him aside? Was he unusually accessible?

Bruno: You got a sense that he actually enjoyed the press; that he enjoyed the back and forth that went on, and he understood exactly what we were supposed to do. I think a lot of that came from his friendship with Pete Lisagor. Pete Lisagor was a brilliant journalist for the Chicago Daily News, and he became very close to Ford. Ford later told me that he often listened to Lisagor for advice and so on. His favorite expression was - and he borrowed this from Pete, “The role of the media is to walk down the middle of the street and break windows on both sides.” There were many times I heard Jerry Ford say that to an audience. He just didn’t fight with us.

Smith: It’s interesting, when we were planning the funeral, he insisted on having a journalist as a eulogist. Originally it was going to be Huge Sidey, and then he passed away so Tom Brokaw performed that function. But it was clearly to send a message.

Bruno: That was very important, yeah. When he became president he still had that same attitude toward the media. One of my favorite stories and experiences was I was with Newsweek and we were trying to get a one on one interview
with President Ford. It came through that we could have it, but we would have
make it a three on one, there was Tommy DeFrank, who was covering the
White House, and Pete Goldman who was writing it, and me, as the chief
political correspondent. So we went to the White House on our appointed day
and we were ushered into the Oval Office, not to some outside place, and
there was a round table there in front. We all sat down with the President and
the President pulled out his pipe, and his tobacco pouch and loaded up. I was
a pipe smoker then and he asked me would I like some? I said, “Yes, I would.
Thank you.” And I took his tobacco and we lit up and – I mean, he was the
last president you could do that with. But he was perfectly at ease.

Smith: He seemed comfortable in the surroundings?

Bruno: Yeah, he was very comfortable with us. Then we got toward the end and I
asked the real nasty questions and he kind of winced, and he said, “I knew
you were going to ask that.”

Smith: Do you remember what they might have been about?

Bruno: I forget now. But he expected it and he understood completely.

Smith: Clearly that attitude differed from his predecessor.

Bruno: Yeah, absolutely. The worst thing that could happen to a journalist back then
was to be on Richard Nixon’s good list; and guys were fighting to get onto the
bad list.

Smith: Do you have a theory to explain Richard Nixon?

Bruno: Yes, [but] I don’t know if it explains. I got somewhat close to him in the ‘60s
because I was covering his comeback. There weren’t very many of us
covering it. Many times it was just Mr. Nixon, myself and Pat Buchanan as
his aide in traveling around the country – long trips. I would sit with him on
the plane and the only ground rules were, when we talked about other
Republicans, he could not be quoted.

He had an amazing knowledge of politics in every region in the country. He
was landing one time in Minot, North Dakota. Nixon had been given a card
by Rosemary, his secretary, as to who was going to be there greeting him at
the airport. And as he went down he was ticking off what each one’s interest
was that he knew, and he knew all the power plays that were going on in that
state. He just had a terrific sense of it.

Now, he misjudged the media. He had no understanding, really. It was
appalling to see how little he and the people around him understood about the
way things worked. The only one who understood was Herb Klein. For the
most part they didn’t, and Nixon said to me one time - I was going to leave
him because my job then was going to be news editor and somebody else was
coming on to cover him, several were coming on. And I told him the same
ground rules and we’ll always come to you with a story that we’re going run
if it’s negative and give you a chance to respond. And he said, “Don’t
reporters write what their editors tell them to write?” And I said, “Not at a
certain level, Mr. Nixon.” And I explained to him that if the editors tried to
tell us what he had to write, the guys would quit, and had quit when
somebody tried that. He couldn’t accept that because he thought that it was all
done the way some of his friends did it in California, in San Diego.

Smith: The old LA Times?

Bruno: Yeah, the old LA Times, that they dictated what a reporter was going to report.
But he had no grasp of that. He never was truly at ease with the media.

Smith: But was he at ease with people, generally?

Bruno: I was just going to say that he wasn’t at ease very much with anyone. He
always felt there was a plot around him. And sometimes he was right.

Smith: Did you see the obsession with the Kennedys?

Bruno: Yes, very much so, and with Lyndon Johnson, too.

Smith: Really? How so?

Bruno: I think he was scared of Lyndon Johnson, as many people were. And I think
he felt that Lyndon Johnson was unpredictable. Whereas, Kennedy was pretty
predictable.
Smith: The Nixon people believed that their campaign plane in ’68 was bugged by the Johnson White House.

Bruno: I don’t know that – I hadn’t heard that.

Smith: To go back, you talked about Ford when he was rising in the House. We’ve all heard the Johnson jokes and the slurs on his intelligence and all of that – what were the qualities that allowed Ford to rise in the House?

Bruno: Ford, from the beginning, became a man of the House. He was proud to be there and his ambitions ended there. Here was a guy who had gone through the University of Michigan and Yale Law School, I mean, great institutions, great education, and he was very smart. We can talk about that later, but there was a great disservice done to him by his own staff, at any rate. And he was a good guy; he just was a nice guy and he made friends. He understood what other members had at stake. They would come to him with things as he rose step by step, and was sympathetic to what they faced because he, as a congressman, faced the same things, the same type of things. The people who get you elected expect to have access and things like that. It’s not a sin, there’s nothing wrong with it as long as it’s open. And the other thing with Jerry Ford, he was a very open person, and he was comfortable about himself. I’ve heard that said many times, and I think it’s true. He was.

Smith: In a way, by contrast, you wouldn’t say that of Richard Nixon?

Bruno: No. I wouldn’t say it about many people who would posture. But Jerry Ford never did any posturing. You asked a question, he gave the answer as best he could, and many times it was party line, but that’s what you expected anyhow. He was not a rebel.

Smith: And yet, it’s interesting because he went into politics as an insurgent, in effect, taking on this moss-backed isolationist. And then he was persuaded, at least to be rebel enough to take on Charlie Halleck.

Bruno: Yes.

Smith: Did you know Halleck?
Bruno: Yes, but not well.

Smith: Was that a generational thing more than anything else? Because post-Goldwater, clearly, there was a sense that we’ve got to do something. But races like that, what are they hinging on?

Bruno: The post-Goldwater era, that was really an upheaval in the Republican Party and the state chairs played a vital role in that. When their support dissolved with Nixon early into Watergate, and by the time it got to impeachment, you couldn’t find a state chairman anywhere, hardly whose…

Smith: That’s interesting because I don’t think I’ve ever heard the role of the party organization in the field referred to as a factor in Nixon’s survival.

Bruno: Yeah, there was a meeting – one day we discovered that all of the state chairmen from the Midwest were nowhere to be found. We found them at the O’Hare Inn, in Chicago. They had a room that they had rented for a secret meeting. This is where they decided that Ray Bliss was going to be the head of the state chairs now. Ray Bliss was heartbroken over what had happened and what Nixon had done because he had been a loyalist. But now he was going to do what was best for the party, and that’s exactly what they did. And what was – Dean Birch was out…

Smith: That’s right.

Bruno: And Ray Bliss was right in without any movement; once around the table. And it was all the Midwestern state chairs. Well, that was the heart and soul of the Republican Party at that time.

Smith: You’ve just put your finger on something. People talk about how different Congress is forty years later; think how different the Republican Party is forty years later. I mean, Gerald Ford was at the epicenter of the Republican Party in the mid 1960s – it really was a Midwestern party.

Bruno: And Jerry Ford was very much a Midwesterner. We don’t have a distinctive accent like Southerners do, or even a culture that way. Yet the Midwest has a character of its own and it’s to work hard, keep quiet…
Smith: He used to say, growing up, his parents, there were three rules: work hard, tell the truth, and come to dinner on time. Not a sophisticated philosophy, but it got him through life. I also wonder though, if then at least, Midwesterners didn’t take a little bit of a hit. I’ve often thought that as someone who came from the Northeast, but who spent a lot of time in the Midwest, that there’s a kind of cultural bias, almost a snobbery; a notion that because Midwesterners talk slow, they think slow. I wonder whether some of those quips about his intelligence were grounded in that style, that kind of stolid speaking style.

Bruno: Well, that whole thing – we can talk about that. First of all, Jerry Ford was probably the most graceful athlete who ever occupied the Oval Office. I mean, here’s a guy who was a varsity football player for the University of Michigan and a skier and an athletic man. The myth began that he was a clumsy ox, and it was done as a gag, on Saturday Night Live and Chevy Chase – and instead of ignoring it, which they should have, the White House people, some of them, had fun with it.

Smith: Ron Nessen went on the show.

Bruno: Ron Nessen went on the show and that was a bad thing. That never should have happened. President Ford tripped coming down a ramp from a plane, and so what? Lots of people trip coming down a ramp, it’s understandable. But it’s the President of United States, so it has to be reported. But then they go on and on with it. And then there was the golf ball. What was it? It hit Spiro Agnew or something like that? I don’t know.

Smith: It’s the follow up that’s so revealing, because, of course, the people around him, they all sort of got upset and targeted the photographers. And Ford’s response was, “Of course, they took the picture. They would have lost their job if they didn’t.” - which gets back to your earlier point about him understanding the job of the press.

Bruno: Yeah, he really did. And then after he was president, we started skiing together out at Vail and Beaver Creek. They had these races, the Ford Cup, and each team was made up of a newsperson or some celebrity, and then an Olympic skier for the coach and a former great of skiing. The first year my
team won the championship, but I had to race President Ford in the very first heat of the very first race. We each had a handicap, but his was higher than mine so he got out of the gate two seconds ahead of me. I was ready to go and two seconds went by and my gate didn’t open. So it was a few more seconds and finally my gate opened and Ford was way down the course and he beat me in that heat, and I was furious. Because everybody was kind of pretending to be laid back, that this isn’t all that important, it’s just good fun. But once he got into there, into the gates, everybody’s juices started flowing, including the Olympic skiers.

And there were cameras, TV is covering it, printed press is covering, everybody is there, and I have to race against the President. So, somebody comes up and shoves a mic in my face and says, “Well, did you let him win in order to get an interview?” I said, “What? Are you crazy?” I said, “I didn’t want to get beat.” Everybody is laughing. So we won the championship and at the dinner someone got up and said, “I noticed one thing. People with foreign accents ski faster.” Then he said, “And when you race the President of the United States, the President always wins.” But he had great fun with that.

Smith: He was good company?

Bruno: Oh, yeah, and he was a pretty good skier, but he had gotten older and his knees were troubling him. But he was a respectable skier and graceful. So I felt they did a great disservice because the perception set in all around the country that Jerry Ford was a clumsy oaf. And it wasn’t true and I think that cost him something.

Smith: Let me go back. Do you remember where you were when you first heard about “Watergate?”

Bruno: Yeah. It was during the primaries and I was in California covering McGovern. McGovern was making a huge sweep up and down California. It’s in Los Angeles, they had stopped there overnight and I was filing a story. That was when I first heard about a break in at the Watergate Hotel; and I paid absolutely no attention to it.
Smith: One of the people we talked to was Jerry Jones, who at that point was reorganizing the personnel office for Haldeman. And, among other things, he told us that early in ’73, this is well before the Wall Street Journal story broke about Agnew; several months – Haldeman was still there. He got a call one day from Haldeman who wanted to know how many jobs reported directly to the Vice President. He [Jones] figured about fifty. He [Haldeman] said, “Fine. I want undated letters of resignation from everyone.” Which raises two possibilities: one, that they had some inkling from sources in Maryland that there was an investigation underway; or two, that Agnew had done something and Nixon blew off the handle and said…Is either one possible or plausible?

Bruno: Agnew first surfaced before the first term nomination.

Smith: He’d been a Rockefeller supporter.

Bruno: Yes, and he was on his way to meet Rockefeller in New York, and Rockefeller had brushed him off or something.

Smith: Well, remember – Rockefeller was going to announce – it was the end of March – and he didn’t tell Agnew that day he was not running.

Bruno: That’s it – yeah.

Smith: And Agnew, who had invited the local press corps in, was humiliated because his friend and candidate hadn’t bothered to tell him.

Bruno: That’s right, that’s what happened. And then he was coming up to New York and he called John Mitchell and told John Mitchell he was ready to endorse Nixon. At that time Agnew was held out as sort of the great White Hope because he had handled rioting in a reserved and sensible way. He had become kind of a darling of the Nixon campaign. I was meeting Mitchell for lunch and he was late for lunch, and he said, “Well, you won’t guess who called me.” I said, “Who?” and he said, “Spiro Agnew, he wants to announce for Nixon.” Because he was so aggravated with Nelson Rockefeller leaving him holding the bag, which was not unusual.

Smith: Really?
Bruno: Yeah, he had done things like that with several people around the country. Anyhow, that’s how that came about.

Smith: By the way, at that point where they – people forget they only won that nomination by twenty-five votes on the first ballot.

Bruno: But they had it wired.

Smith: My question is: if Reagan – because I was fourteen years old, I was on the floor of that convention during the Rockefeller demonstration – and I remember being pissed because Reagan wasn’t holding his end of the bargain up. Now – people have said Strom Thurman saved their bacon in the South, New Jersey, critically, they broke open and got a significant number of votes, did that twenty-five vote margin understate their strength?

Bruno: Yes, because they had more votes than that, and when they knew they had the magic number plus, they let others go to do what they had to do. They understood that some had local considerations and so on. I think one of the examples was Mississippi, where ….

Smith: Clarke Reed.

Bruno: Yes, I remember it very well.

Smith: Clarke Reed is a legendary figure.

Bruno: Clarke Reed disappeared from sight when all hell was breaking loose. And somebody at Newsweek was climbing up my back that, “We’ve got to find him. We’ve got to find him.” And other people from the Mississippi delegation were missing, Pickering and Haley Barber, who I spoke with several times a day.

Smith: Really?

Bruno: And the Newsweek delegate count, which I was running, was the only one that showed that Reagan was beat. That he couldn’t get the delegates.

Smith: This was ’76?

Bruno: Yeah.
Smith: Because the story that we’ve been told is that Reed, who is a kind of slippery character to begin with, used – that may be a pejorative – but when Reagan announced Schweiker as his vice presidential choice, Reed was off the reservation.

Bruno: He didn’t like that. But Reed was off because he felt that Reagan would be a loser. I think that was the most driving thing with Clarke. And Clarke was a guy who was always trying to bring the factions together in Mississippi, which wasn’t easy. Clarke was a good guy; I liked him very much. He didn’t tell me everything, but he never told me a lie. Clarke was concerned that the way the roll call would go, that Mississippi would be the state that would bring Reagan down, and that Mississippi would break unit rule. They had had unit rule. Thirty delegates and whoever had the most got all of them. Well, they were going to break it down so that each delegate was only half a vote so they could bring in more people for the reserves. And that the delegation would split and Reagan would get something, but not enough. His big question was what did our delegate count show? And in that thing, you were picking off delegates one at a time, that’s how minute it got. There was a guy in South Carolina in the real estate business that had never been treated like that in his life. He gets a call, “Come up to the White House and see President Ford.” And they bring him up and he goes in and has a Coke with President Ford.

Smith: We’ve been told, for example, the dinner for Queen Elizabeth was stuffed full of uncommitted Republican delegates and their families.

Bruno: Probably was.

Smith: That they used the Bicentennial events.

Bruno: It probably was; I didn’t know that. Anyhow, he knew what Mississippi was going to do. Then just before the convention, Clarke disappeared because he didn’t want to have to answer questions. He was at a motel outside of Jackson, I think, somewhere down in Mississippi. And then they came to Kansas City and there was one morning everybody was going berserk trying
to find the leaders of the Mississippi delegation, Clarke Reed, Billy Pickering, and so on. They were in my room.

Smith: Were you hiding them, sheltering them?

Bruno: Yes, and how I was. I told __________, and I had a little junior suite with a bar and everything. “Pour yourself and just stay here and work. Use the phone, do anything you want.” There was a colleague at Newsweek who hated me and was trying to say that we were being scooped and so on, and I had filed the story on what Mississippi was going to do, what they were going to try to do. And he said, “Nobody else has anything like that.” And I said, “Well, that’s the way it is, you know.”

When we got to the roll call, our delegate count was off maybe by one or two when we got to Texas. And I came up and Kay Graham was sitting in the box with the Newsweek brass and she and I had promised we were going to have a shoving story when we got to Kansas City in which we would stick it up the ass of everybody else. And she thought that was great, because they were very worried – the Washington Post delegate count was different from ours.

Smith: Really?

Bruno: Yeah. We were the only one that showed the weakness. And that’s because we knew these people. They talked to us.

Smith: And they were leveling with you.

Bruno: Oh yeah.

Smith: Let me ask you, Stu Spencer said something very interesting. He thought Sears made a huge strategic blunder when they decided to put all their chips on that procedural issue regarding forcing Ford to name his vice president, as opposed to an emotional issue like foreign policy. And so then of course, the debate took place within the Ford camp: do we let, in effect, the Reagan, too, have the platform, or do we fight it? Tom Korologos is the original source for this, but other people have confirmed it. Kissinger was going to resign; he was going make it a personal test and so forth and so on. And Tom said, “Well, Henry, if you’re going to do it, do it now because we need the votes.” And the
decision was made - I think Spencer was part of this - let them have the plank and the platform, because what you don’t want to do at this point you don’t want to introduce the uncertainty of this highly emotional debate over détente, etc., etc. And that Sears had, in effect, shot his wad with the procedural vote the night before. Does that make sense to you?

Bruno: Yeah, John, who I knew well, was a good guy…

Smith: Is he still around, by the way?

Bruno: I don’t know. I’m not still around.

Smith: Because he has been quoted in recent years as saying, and you can tell me much better than whether this is bull, that his candidate, rather than Schweiker, he would have gotten Nelson Rockefeller. That’s what he says.

Bruno: No he wouldn’t. No, I don’t think that would have happened. The Reagan people couldn’t stomach that. But John really spoofed me one day. We had this __________ breakfast in the morning, eight o’clock in the morning, which is barbaric. At any rate, it went on through the day and everybody is chasing delegates and I get home late and pour myself a couple of scotches and sit out in back, trying to simmer down, and I get a phone call from John saying that we’ve been friends a long time and he’d hate to see Newsweek go off the deep end with our delegate count because he had all these hidden delegates that nobody knew about. And I had just enough scotch to take him seriously and I did. I said, “Well, John, I appreciate the call. Let me think this thing through.” I went out there and I walked around the garden and shook my head and all of a sudden I realized that he didn’t have anything, he was spoofing me. And I later found out the next day that he had called a number of guys and told them the same story. And so that’s when I knew that we were onto the right thing, that our delegate count was going in the right direction. They didn’t have the strength.

Smith: Was the Ford White House too slow to awake, first of all, to the likelihood of a Reagan challenge, and secondly, to the strength that Reagan would bring to that?
Bruno: They vastly underrated Reagan and what he could do and what his appeal was. And they had him down. He was beaten until North Carolina, until the North Carolina primary when he came back, and they allowed that to happen because they should have won it and they didn’t. Or they should have made a stronger showing; I forget now exactly what it was. But that was where Reagan was down and he got up.

Smith: It was the Panama Canal.

Bruno: He was down for the count going into North Carolina and they let him get up and that was the biggest mistake they made.

Smith: There is an argument; I guess you can go both ways, that the Reagan challenge paradoxically, made Ford a better candidate.

Bruno: I don’t know about that. I asked him one time - when we were skiing, we never would talk about politics because it would be like taking advantage of a friendship – but occasionally it crept up. And he said to me one time that if he hadn’t had to fight Reagan in the primaries all the way to the convention, he could have had a stronger campaign. He felt that that whole primary fight weakened his campaign. Did it make him a better campaigner? I’m not sure about that, I don’t know. But he believed that his campaign was weakened because he had to fight Reagan all the way.

Smith: Do you think he held a grudge?

Bruno: Jerry Ford wasn’t the kind of person that held a grudge in politics, but I think, yes, I think there was some bitterness there. And Reagan didn’t do all he could have done or should have done in the general election campaign. And I think that President Ford, his attitude, I think, was well that’s not the way I play the game.

Smith: Let me go back. Were you surprised by Ford’s selection to be vice president?

Bruno: Yeah, I was, because he was such a middle of the road guy. And maybe that’s the reason why it was a good selection because he was that. I remember when Nixon first got elected for the first term and they were hanging out at their headquarters with a hotel in New York.
Smith: The Pierre.

Bruno: Yeah, and I went over there to see John Mitchell and Mitchell said a curious thing to me, he said, “Well, when we get to Washington, there’s a lot of people who are going to have to learn what it means to have a Republican president in the White House.” And I said, “Who do you mean?” He said, “Jerry Ford, Everett Dirksen.” In other words, the leaders of the Republican Party. I thought, “Holy Mackerel.”

Smith: That’s fascinating because that raises a whole – Ford was very loathe to criticizing other people, but you could tell that his feelings, particularly towards Haldeman and Erlichman, were less than warm.

Bruno: Yeah, I never heard him criticize anyone, but I know that that was true.

Smith: And apparently, the irony is the one time apparently Erlichman deigned to go up to Capitol Hill he actually fell asleep in the meeting, which is eloquent in its own way. There was a story, and I think it’s true, that shortly after Ford was confirmed as vice president, Nixon had Rockefeller in the Oval Office and he said something to the effect of, “Can you imagine Jerry Ford sitting in that chair?” Now, he might have been flattering Nelson, he might have been who knows what else. But that suggests a personal attitude toward his vice president. Did you ever sense that? That the Nixon people regarded Ford…

Bruno: That is true, that some of the Nixon people that I encountered underestimated Jerry Ford, and they underestimated some of the people around Jerry Ford, too.

Smith: He was put in an almost impossible position as vice president, and to maintain his own integrity he got out of town.

Bruno: I was going to say, yeah, that one of the tip offs that the end was coming – up until that point, it was a month or so – Jerry Ford was a supporter of Nixon and would not say or do anything that in any way would hurt the President. Then he realized that Watergate was true, and that Nixon had played a lead role in the cover up. And he knew then what was going to happen and that’s
when he got out of town. He didn’t want to be around when the shots were fired, which was smart.

Smith: Did he, if not then, then later, talk with you about his….

Bruno: No, we never talked about it.

Smith: Did he ever talk about his relationship with Nixon?

Bruno: No.

Smith: Can you remember a time – it had to have been unthinkable, at some point, that a President of the United States would be driven from office?

Bruno: It was. It was one of those stories that come along every so often in which you are working on and you say, “Am I really covering this? Is this really happening?” When Kennedy was assassinated you had that feeling, “Has this really happened?” And the same thing was true with Nixon facing impeachment. Is this really true? Is the President of the United States going to be forced out of office? And you had to cross a certain threshold in order to believe it.

You asked me when I first heard of Watergate, and [I said] it didn’t mean anything to me; but then we went through the election and after the election I was asked to form, join a task force to work on Watergate. So I had to get filled in pretty fast on what it was. I asked the reporters who had been covering it and who were going to continue covering it, “Tell me about this. What’s here?” They would tell me things and I would say, “Oh, no, they can’t be that dumb. They couldn’t have done things like that” - the Nixon people. They said, “No, that’s what we’ve got.”

Then one day, with the story breaking, I phoned around the country to various Republican leaders, and to even some at the White House. Then I talked to somebody at the White House who was in a real power position, and their interpretation of what had happened was pure fantasy. I realized for the first time that they didn’t understand what was happening and that they were going to go down the drain because of it. And once you cross that threshold, where you could believe what you were hearing, you knew that he was finished.
Smith: Do you think John Mitchell took secrets with him to the grave?

Bruno: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

Smith: Do you have a theory about what Mitchell’s role in all of this was?

Bruno: Well, he became the fall guy, and talked to me all the time because he was afraid that Haldeman and Erlichman were setting him up to be the bad guy. He didn’t like the idea of going to prison and he didn’t trust what he called “those characters in the Casablanca.” When Mitchell referred to somebody as a character, that meant that they were really a bad person.

Smith: Was that in reference to Haldeman and Erlichman?

Bruno: Yes - the characters in the Casablanca. We would talk several times a week and he was pretty forthright with me, and he was trying to protect himself.

Smith: Was his relationship with the President deteriorating?

Bruno: I don’t think so. I think even when he was out, he and the President and Bebe were a trio, and that there was a lot of money involved. We never could prove this, but they had bank accounts, where was it – in Aruba? I’m trying to remember – in Tricia Nixon’s name.

Smith: Really?

Bruno: Yeah. But we never could do anything with it. We tiptoed around the edge of it, but we never had enough to really go solid. But I think there was a lot of money involved with those three. Haldeman and Erlichman were almost peasants compared to them. Yeah, I think Mitchell kept – and Mitchell was pretty forthright with me about a lot of things, but the one thing that he kept insisting on was that Nixon was not part of the cover up. And, of course, that was a lie. And he knew it.

Smith: The break in itself – do you have a theory as to who ordered the break in?

Bruno: Yeah. I think it was Colson and Liddy.

Smith: But now, whose permission would they have had to get?
Bruno: Colson didn’t get anybody’s permission for anything.

Smith: Was he a rogue?

Bruno: He was a loose cannon and unwise in the ways of Washington. He knew full speed ahead.

Smith: Well there is this school of thought that one of Haldeman’s most important functions was to take the President’s more off-the-wall pronouncements and let them simmer, that hopefully they go away or whatever. And that Colson or Liddy or someone, someday heard one of these and saluted and went off and did it. Do you think Nixon had any knowledge of the break in?

Bruno: Yes, I do. I think so.

Smith: And was it because of the Democratic National Committee chairman…anyway, but the Democratic National Committee chairman, was he the target of the break in?

Bruno: I think he was a target, but they had a kick going like military intelligence. They just wanted to know everything that was going on with anybody who was an opponent to them, or that they perceived as an opponent. And they would just gather information as much as they could and kept a nice little file on everybody. They had a Cold War mentality - let’s put it that way - that they applied to politics.

Smith: Well put. Did you and Mitchell ever discuss that? Did you ever discuss with Mitchell who was responsible for the break in?

Bruno: I tried to, but he always slipped away from me and kept talking about those characters, and I think he meant Colson.

Smith: Okay.

Bruno: But at the point that he came to me, there was no love lost between him and Haldeman and Erlichman.

Smith: Watergate is so slippery. Just sitting here listening to you talk about it, it seems even larger and more sinister in retrospect than it did at the time.
Bruno: Yes, it was. John Mitchell was one tough guy; he didn’t have an ounce of
back-away in him. He tried to protect himself, of course, but then when he
realized he had to go, he was going to go his way with some sense of dignity.
And where he was going to go to prison; he had nothing but contempt for
people who were crying about it.

Smith: People like Magruder?

Bruno: Yeah.

Smith: The only two people I ever heard Gerald Ford disparage – and the worst he
could say was, “He’s a bad man,” – one was Gordon Liddy and the other was
John Dean.

Bruno: That would be right because John Dean did something that to Jerry Ford was
unacceptable, which was to betray your boss. That would be my guess.

Smith: To save his own skin?

Bruno: Yeah, betraying somebody else. That’s something that I would guess that
Ford could not tolerate.

Smith: For people who weren’t around then, what was the mood like in those last
days? You had the smoking gun tape…

Bruno: It was like the fall of the Alamo, I guess.

Smith: By the way, Jerry Jones told us when the Supreme Court ruled that Nixon had
to turn over the tapes - you may very know this - the initial response from San
Clemente was, can we defy the court? Ron Zeigler was the President’s
messenger and that was the initial question back to Washington. And I assume
Haig, among others, made it clear that that was not an option. But that’s really
the beginning of the end, isn’t it - the unanimous Court decision?

Bruno: Oh, yes, sure it is. And also I would say the Saturday Night Massacre because
of the impact it had on public opinion. That’s where Nixon began to lose his
core. Shortly after that I was in California giving a speech for Newsweek to
airline and oil executives. These were really the business people who had
always been staunch Nixon supporters. But I had to give a speech that was
telling them things I presume they did not want to hear. And I did. Then we got to the question period, and we went around the room. All of these presidents and CEOs were all standing up to denounce Nixon and I think to myself, “Holy Mackerel, the big business community in California is running away now.”

So as soon as the meeting was over, I ran into the men’s room, pulled out my notebook and started to write down everything I had heard. And then I called New York and got hold of the business editor, Clem ____________, and I said, “Clem, there’s a story out here about business deserting Nixon and let’s get on to it.” And so we did, and the next week we wrote the story and it was right on the money and it was happening everywhere in the country; the business support was falling away. That was a pretty crucial thing.

Smith: That last week, can you describe what that was like? I assume it was unlike anything you’d ever experienced.

Bruno: Again, we resorted to the delegate count mode and we started counting Congress – how they would vote. Mitchell had told me that the White House had done the same thing. This was probably three weeks before. He said, “Those characters have finally learned how to count. All they’ve got to do is iron out the Jerry Ford deal and Nixon will resign.”

Smith: Really?

Bruno: And reported this with not saying who was telling me this, but I’ve never revealed that I was talking to Mitchell. That was one of the ground rules. And nobody wanted to believe me. But I said, “This is the end, he’s going to be out.”

Smith: Of course that opens the whole door to the controversy over the pardon, and I’ve often wondered whether we’ve not made a mistake all these years, understandably, in trying to track down who said what to whom at what time. And that the real story of the pardon is in what was not said. In the way that people communicate without communicating.

Bruno: I know exactly what you mean.
Smith: That Haig, from his perspective, could very well have reached the reluctant conclusion that in the interests of the country, Nixon had to go. And that his job was to make it happen with as much dignity as possible, and everything flows out of that. People don’t have to have sinister motives or – I don’t know – what’s your take? But the fact that Mitchell would say to you at that point, “The Jerry Ford deal,” that can only mean that someone, at least…who would Mitchell be talking to?


Smith: Yeah.

Bruno: I had forgotten the story. He looked at my files, my Watergate files, and sure enough, there was the thing I had filed, the story I had sent on Mitchell’s view on what was going to happen next. I guess this was about three weeks before Nixon resigned and Ford was off somewhere hiding out, which was a smart thing to do. I couldn’t convince – no, I’ll put it this way – from about February onward of that year, it was like seeing a play or a movie which you had read the book on what was happening and everything was falling into place and that’s when I began to realize that Nixon really was through – that he could not come back from this. And that everything was turning against him. It was hard to think that way because this hadn’t happened in our lifetimes.

Smith: Plus, it’s an eventful period in the country’s history, quite apart from the scandal.

Bruno: Oh sure. With everything that’s going internationally and again, you had to cross certain thresholds in order to cope with Watergate - the first one being that they could be as dumb as they were. And that’s when I remembered the words of Menken, who was a brilliant writer; a terrible human being, but he wrote once, “Never underestimate the stupidity of men in high public office.”

Smith: It’s interesting, we talked to Haig, and the same weekend we talked to Mel Laird, and it is interesting how many roads led back to Fred Buzhardt. Fred Buzhardt had been Laird’s counsel at the Pentagon. A month after Laird came
back to the Nixon White House to try to salvage things, he got a call from Buzhardt who basically warned him, because he, Buzhardt, had been listening to the tapes. And in effect, signaled to Laird to be careful what you say because Nixon is into it up to his neck. Haig told us, to my surprise – I always assumed that Haig had listened to the smoking gun tape – he claimed he never did. He said, “Fred Buzhardt gave me some very good advice, which was ‘Don’t ever be alone in a room with a tape’,” which presumably is a reference back to the eighteen and a half minutes. Do you have a theory about the eighteen and a half minutes?

Bruno: Yeah. When we learned about the tapes, I came home late one night and one of my sons was up studying – he’d had a tough football practice. Anyhow, I told him, “You won’t believe what’s going on here,” and I started to tell him. And he just said, ‘Well, they’ll burn the tapes.” I thought to myself, “You know, he’s probably right,” they will destroy the tapes. No matter how incriminating that act may be, they could not allow anybody to hear what was on it, and I didn’t know what was on the tapes. But whatever it was, they couldn’t allow it to become public. And they did exactly that. I said, “They deliberately destroyed the part that was the most incriminating.”

Smith: They, being Rosemary Woods, the President?

Bruno: Rosemary Woods would do anything that the President told her to do. And I’m sure that somebody around him at the top level told her what to do. She never took orders from anybody else. Rosemary was a power in her own right and she was close to Pat Nixon. She had Pat Nixon’s support in everything. Pat Nixon was a truly remarkable woman, and a very fine person.

Smith: Tell us about that because I’ve always thought she’s never gotten her due.

Bruno: That’s right.

Smith: That she was very private and the whole notion of ‘Plastic Pat’ is so far from the reality.

Bruno: She was badly hurt going back to the Eisenhower years when she felt that Nixon was not appreciated and was treated badly, and she with him.
wasn’t much of a social climber or anything like that. She just wanted to do what was right. She learned what was right and she did things that were correct, and she was very considerate of other people. We were flying to some little town – Iron Mountain, or something like that. Anyhow, the photographer took a lot of pictures and sent them to me. I sent them to her and the next thing I get is a copy of a note she wrote to the photographer thanking him for sending the pictures. She was that kind of a person.

And then on Christmas time, Meg and I were invited to Nixon’s New York apartment and we were the only outsiders, the rest were all relatives and campaign people. It was my first meeting with Haldeman. I could see him looking, “What’s this person doing here, this insect?” And I could actually sense hatred on his part toward me – and I didn’t even know him. But he knew I was the Newsweek political person. When we left and Mrs. Nixon was so gracious, as always, and when we left I said to Meg, “Well, how’d you feel?” And she said, “Out of place.” That was true.

The next day Mitchell asked me would I be interested in being Nixon’s press secretary? And I said, “Oh, no, not for me. I’ve got boys to raise,” and so on. But the truth was, I never could get – as much as I had learned to respect Nixon – I could not see myself lasting five weeks in that spot. They actually wanted Mike Wallace and Mike Wallace had turned them down twice. And they were going to ask him a third time, and then if he did, I might be considered for it. I said, “Well, just don’t let it get off the ground, I don’t want any part of this.”

Smith: When Jerry terHorst quit and cited the pardon, there are those who believe without disputing that story, that it wasn’t the whole story – that terHorst, perhaps not surprisingly, found the job to be overwhelming.

Bruno: Oh, I don’t think so, not Jerry. Not only that – I’ve never told anybody about this – when terHorst quit, Anne Armstrong and George Bush wanted me to be Ford’s press secretary. And, again, they said they’d offered it to Nessen and he had turned them down once, and they were going to offer it a second time, and if he didn’t take it then, would I be interested in doing it? Well, by now it was several years later, plus it was Jerry Ford instead of Richard Nixon, and I
said, “Yeah, I’d like to do it.” And so they said, “Well, what unique qualifications do you bring to this?” And I said, “Well, I can ski with him.” But anyhow, obviously they took Nessen.

Smith: Was that a mistake, in retrospect?

Bruno: It’s hard for me to say, because I wanted the job, too, at that point.

Smith: Okay, fair enough. But a television guy who was in the eyes of many, perhaps a bit of a show-off.

Bruno: I think it was a mistake because he was more interested in the limelight for himself than with Ford. And when he went along on Saturday Night Live with Chevy Chase and everything. I thought that that was totally, totally, improper and somebody at the White House should have grabbed him by the throat and said, “No, you can’t do that.”

Smith: Were you surprised by the pardon?

Bruno: No, not at all. I didn’t have any information, except what Mitchell had told me a few weeks before, that they had to carve some kind of a deal with Ford to protect Nixon.

Smith: By the way, just to get that on the record, the fact that Mitchell held that view, and indeed, quite possibly that the President held that view, does not lead to the assumption that Ford, at that point, held that view or that there had been any discussions with Ford.

Bruno: Yeah, I think that’s possible; I think that’s very possible, because by now all of the aides were taking over and they were talking to each other from one camp to the other. But it seemed to me as a reporter that there had to be a pardon; they could not bring the President of the United States up in a normal trial – that the country had gotten to the point now where they just wanted this thing to be over with. And Ford’s mistake, in my opinion, was that they put out the wrong signals, that there would be no pardon.

Smith: Now, that brings us to a real flashpoint. Ford has his first press conference, it’s the 28th of August. And there is this quality about Ford that – and I’d
obviously like to hear your reaction – for someone who had been in Washington for twenty-five years, he could be naïve. He believed that the Washington press corps at the end of August, 1974 would want to talk about Greece and Cyprus and inflation and all those things that he was trying to get his arms around. He was told in advance that they were all going to want to talk about Nixon. That press conference, which he by his own admission did not handle well, and which he left feeling angry, mostly at himself, I always believed was the tipping point that led to the final pardon.

Bruno: I do remember it now. But I think when Jerry Ford realized that Watergate was going to bring down Nixon and that the pardon was going to be the number one thing on his plate, I think that far back they realized that they would have to pardon him.

Smith: Really?

Bruno: And that they gave off misleading signals and in the case of Jerry terHorst, Jerry was sent out there and he had to lie to the press. He didn’t know it was a lie and Jerry got angry and did what any self-respecting newsman would do, and said enough, I’m not going to do this sort of thing. I told them when they asked me, “Could you go along with a policy you didn’t believe in?” I said, “Oh, sure. That doesn’t bother me, but don’t ever send me out there to lie. Because I would do the same thing that Jerry did. Excuse me, I’ve got to go because…”

Smith: You were not surprised when the pardon came.

Bruno: I wasn’t surprised because, well I was surprised in the sense that he had mislead everybody. I found that hard to believe at the time. And of course within a few weeks he did what was inevitable. When you look back at it, how could there not be a pardon?

Smith: Mel Laird, who of course has a scheme for everything.

Bruno: Mel’s a terrific guy.

Smith: Oh yeah, and a great friend of Ford’s. He was angry because he had a plan. He thought he was going to bring a bipartisan delegation of Congress to the
White House to ask Ford to pardon Nixon. The problem with that is, every time you war game the decision, and the notion thirty-five years later that somehow you could have prepared the country for this, given the mood at the time - wouldn’t the first trial balloon be shot down before it ever cleared the trees?

Bruno: I think so. And what made the pardon so right was that it happened fast. It could have even happened faster maybe. But the country, I think, was tired of Watergate and the whole thing. Nixon was out, now let’s go on. But if you were going to have a trial or whatever you want to call it, it would have dragged on and on and on.

Smith: I don’t know what you were hearing, but we’ve been told that Ford was being told through the backdoor from the courts, I guess from Judge Sirica, that it could be two years before Nixon would be in a Washington courtroom, assuming it was decided that he could get a fair trial.

Bruno: It makes sense.

Smith: Yeah. And that that was a factor – Ford’s trying to master this job that he had never wanted – and the thought of spending the next two years talking about Richard Nixon…

Bruno: Very smart. They had to get Nixon out of the picture, off stage.

Smith: The fall of Saigon – how bleak was that?

Bruno: It was terrible. I think many people by that time had been prepared for nothing but bad news out of Vietnam. And for many people the fall of Saigon, I think, was kind of a relief. Now we’re getting out, finally, and really getting out – maybe not gracefully, but getting out. And I think by that time all people cared about was getting out.

Smith: Laird is convinced, or he’s convinced himself, much as he loves Ford, he blames Ford for not getting Congress to pony up additional money when South Vietnam was on the verge of collapsing. Is there anything an American president could have said at that point that would have persuaded Congress to fork over more money to prop up the South Vietnamese?
Bruno: I can’t think of anything, other than we never lost a war.

Smith: Yeah.

Bruno: And unfortunately we did. No, I think by that time, if I recall correctly, public opinion had turned against the whole thing. And now you were having college boys and suburban boys being drafted. Up to a certain point, Vietnam had been a poor man’s war, and the only people going there were the gas pumpers and so on; people with less education and means.

Smith: Talk about change of public opinion - what really angered Ford was, once Saigon fell Congress wanted to cut off any funds, for example, for resettling refugees. Basically, they wanted to pull the plug and walk away. And he put together this kind of crazy quilt coalition with George Meany and the American Jewish Congress and others. That was leadership.

Bruno: Yeah. And it was in some respects, it was the Navy way.

Smith: How so?

Bruno: You get a board of officers of high rank to sit down and work out the solution to a problem. The Army did the same thing. But the Navy had it almost institutionalized, that the way they would handle these things is a board of captains and admirals…

Smith: It’s interesting you say that, because I wonder how Ford’s naval service might have affected…

Bruno: I think it affected him quite bit. The same as World War II and Korea affected all of us, that it was turning points in our careers and in our thinking. When I came out of the Army I had changed my mind about almost everything, it seems. My experience had been enlightening, and I’m sure the same thing was true of millions of other guys.

Smith: When Rockefeller was selected to be vice president, we know that George Bush was another candidate and have reason to believe that Don Rumsfeld’s name was also in the mix. Does that ring a bell with you?

Bruno: Yes.
Smith: Is it safe to say that the Rumsfeld-Rockefeller rivalry was baked into the cake? Was it unavoidable?

Bruno: Yes, it was unavoidable, but I don’t think it meant that much. I think Rockefeller could crush Rumsfeld, and Rumsfeld at that time, was a very attractive guy. And it’s funny; both of our careers took place at the same time. We came back from the service in Chicago and I was starting out as a police reporter, and he was starting out as the business guy and he made his first run for Congress and I guess he got beat. And then the second time around he won it. But he was a terrific guy, and I liked him very much. He was also very much at ease with us and seemed to understand. I don’t know if that carried over.

Smith: It’s interesting, he said to us, and other people have confirmed, his advice to Ford was: clean house early. Which raises a large question, can you be too nice to be president?

Bruno: Yeah, you can be too nice to be president if you don’t take action where action is needed. I think that was one of George Bush, the first’s problem. George Bush is basically a nice guy, a good human being. I always said he did in real life what Ronald Reagan did in movies. It probably wasn’t fair. He’s a really good guy. Yeah, you can be too nice. You get burned a few times and then you learn you can’t be too nice.

Smith: Of all the challenges confronting Ford, one was to try to take this White House, which, let’s face it, was 98% Nixon people, and make it work for him. And obviously a lot of Nixon people were integrated into the new administration, but there also had to have been some real stresses.

Bruno: I don’t know because I wasn’t covering it from the inside. Cannon, Jim Cannon would be a good source for that.

Smith: Was Rockefeller unhappy from the beginning?

Bruno: Oh, I think so, very much so. He wanted to be president and his party would never let him be president. And I think he was actually very bitter about that. He concealed it – kind of thinly at times, like when he gave ______ the finger.
Yeah, I think Rockefeller wanted it, it was clear that he couldn’t get it and didn’t understand why he couldn’t get it. That was the most difficult thing. Because wherever you went with Rockefeller around the country, when he left New York and the East, the enthusiasm wasn’t there. The only thing that got him through was he gave a lot of money away. He never had that Republican Party support.

Smith: Were you at the Cow Palace in 1964?
Bruno: Yes, I was.

Smith: Remember the night they tried to boo him off the stage?
Bruno: I remember it very well. Yeah.

Smith: A lot of people think it’s his finest hour.
Bruno: I was with Bill Miller, my favorite candidate of all time. He was the congressman from upstate New York. And I discovered to my horror about six o’clock that night that I hadn’t assigned anybody to cover Bill Miller, who was going to be the vice presidential choice. So I said, well, I can’t get hold of anybody, so I’d better go up there and cover him myself. I go up to the penthouse or whatever it was on top of the Hilton, and there’s a couple of guys at the bar having a drink and so I said I was from \textit{Newsweek} and they said, “Have a drink.” So I had a drink with them and just then on TV is Goldwater, the nominee saying that Miller was his choice for VP, and then out of the adjoining bedroom comes Miller and doesn’t see me. And Miller is standing there watching this and he says, “Now, we’re going to get the shit kicked out of us, but it’s going to help my (bleeping) law practice.”

Smith: Well, he was probably right on both counts.
Bruno: I said, “Relax, I’m not going to sandbag the guy.” And then we became friendly from then on.

Smith: When Rockefeller was dumped, he must have been very…
Bruno: Oh, his pride, I think. I think he really was angry.
Smith: Did you see him around that time at all?

Bruno: No, I didn’t cover him. I think Jim was covering him.

Smith: No, he was still in the White House because Jim was at the White House.

Bruno: That’s right. I don’t remember then who was covering.

Smith: At the Kansas City convention, the selection of Dole, did that come as a surprise?

Bruno: Yes. I thought Howard Baker had a better chance and I didn’t think that Dole had the delegates, but Dole did.

Smith: The theory is, at that point the polls were so bad that the base was in trouble. And if you’re not carrying Nebraska, the Dole selection was, in part, about shoring up the base. Does that make sense?

Bruno: Yeah, I think so. And Howard Baker couldn’t take it because he was concerned about his wife, and that was a huge, huge, concern. I was told that he said, “Don’t let it get off the ground. I don’t want it. I can’t take it.”

Smith: Yeah.

Bruno: And so that’s when they turned to Dole.

Smith: Over the years it’s been said that Anne Armstrong’s name was at least on a list. Does that ring a bell at all?

Bruno: Yes. She was on a list but we never felt that it was serious. We felt that it was just a listing, and nothing more than that.

Smith: By the way, did you ever have much contact with Mrs. Ford?

Bruno: No, unfortunately. I wish I had. We knew each other and said hello, but I never really…I had with Steve and with Jack.

Smith: Now Jack was a bit of a hell raiser.

Bruno: He was then. And Steve did pretty good, too.

Smith: But that stuff never got in the press.
Bruno: No, they didn’t care. We were racing one year and it was the usual BS again, “You don’t have to take this seriously,” but everybody did. Jack Ford was one heat in front of me and he took off and blew right out of his bindings. Oh, what a terrible fall. His ski came up, down he goes, down this ramp that accelerates you and it was a miracle, we all thought, that he wasn’t killed. A year or two later, I’m skiing in the race, and I’m on the team with Steve and we’re standing up there at the starting place and kibitzing back and forth, and I said, “Boy, that was terrible that time when Jack blew out of his bindings,” and Steve smiled and said, “Yeah, wasn’t that awful.” And all of a sudden I realized that Steve had rigged the bindings so that they would blow off. It was always fun being around the Ford boys.

Smith: When Mrs. Ford had her cancer surgery, again, it’s hard for people today who take it for granted, but in those days people didn’t talk about breast cancer.

Bruno: That’s right. Betty Ford was a real dynamo. I didn’t know her, but from what I understand, she was a tough person who had – I think Congress had prepared the Fords for what lay ahead, as much as it can be prepared for, the presidency. But they were people of Washington; they were not making war on Washington. And now we’ve had a string of candidates and presidents who were elected on the premise that they are going to pull down Washington. Well, that’s crazy.

Smith: The night of the debate – because Ford clearly was catching up.

Bruno: Yes.

Smith: He won the campaign. I mean, if you stop and think where he was in the beginning and where it was at the end, but of course, the Polish gaffe came along. Did you know immediately that it was…

Bruno: I was so wrong on that. That was one of the biggest mistakes I’ve ever made as a journalist. And the reason for it was, in San Francisco, our old fiddle player from our bluegrass band had lined up a bunch of local musicians to go to this bar after the debate and Hank Truitt, who was on the panel, would play the banjo and I would play the guitar, and we’d have a great night of playing at playing bluegrass music together. And I was really anxious to get there. So
anyhow, before I could go, I’ve got to do a taping with NBC and they asked me about Ford’s gaffe on Poland. I said, “Oh, I don’t think that that’s much of a problem. Everybody knew what he meant to say,” because I knew what he meant to say. And of course, that was about the most stupid reply I could have given.

The next morning the phone rings and it’s my father in Florida saying, “How can you be so dumb?” And then my sister calls me. I’m trying to make a plane out of San Francisco, and my sister calls me and she says that my hatred for Jimmy Carter is showing. So I fly back to Washington and I come into the bureau and it’s silent. Nobody says good job or anything like that. So then I get a call from Robert Strauss and Bob says, “Bruno, you’re really one goofy son of a bitch.” I said, “Hey, Strauss, I don’t need you to tell me that. My father and my sister have already done it.”

I get home, and the boys come in from football practice and we’re having dinner and one of them says, “So and so said his father thinks you’re an asshole.” And I said, “Well, boys, lots of guys have got fathers who go to a party and dance around with a lampshade over their head, and do something stupid. But I do it in front of millions of people.” And my big son says, “Yeah, Dad, you’re the biggest asshole we’ve ever known.” So anyhow, that’s my side of Eastern Europe.

Smith: That’s interesting because Ford was stubborn. Ford let a week go by when he could have reversed the damage. Did you ever see that side of him – the stubbornness? Or did you ever see his temper?

Bruno: No, I never saw his temper. I saw him set his jaw to prevent losing his temper, but I never saw him lose it. No. Yeah, I mean, he held out on that.

Smith: And the momentum just absolutely came to a halt.

Bruno: It was really a serious blow. Even though, if you read the whole thing, later on, he cleared things up pretty good. But by that time, the damage is done.

Smith: And it’s really almost the birth of the sound bite culture.
And Max Frankel gave him three different chances to change it right then and there, and he didn’t take it.

I’ll tell you a funny one, though. It was about a week later that we had the vice presidential debate with Mondale and Dole, and it was the first time that there had ever been one and I was on the panel. We had worked out ahead of time what our questions were going to be together and planned who would go first, second, third, so there would be continuity to the debate, rather than just scattered all over the place. We all agreed that we would not ask follow up questions unless it was absolutely necessary, and we would signal behind the table like that. There was Marilyn Burger, Wally Mears, myself and a fourth person, I forget now.

Anyhow, that’s when Bob Dole came out with Democrat Wars, which was really bad, and Dole, you could tell that Dole did not want to be there. He didn’t like the idea of the debate, or anything about it. But he was being the good soldier, he had to be there. So afterwards Dole and I were alone in his dressing room and there’s a call from Ford, and it’s on an amplified phone and Ford has probably had a few martinis; his words are slurry, “Great job, Bob. You really did a great job.” So, right we knew the martinis had set in.

By the way, is it safe to say in those days, everyone drank a lot more?

Yeah, and how. Jack Germond said, “When we pulled into a hotel, the first thing we looked for was the bar. Nowadays, they look for the health club.”

Anyhow, Ford said, “Good job, good job, Bob.” And Dole says, “Thank you, Mr. President.” And the conversation ends and Dole turns to me and says, “I wonder what he was watching.” Dole was just a great guy, a delight. They kicked me off the press bus because we had too much fun. In those days we didn’t report what went on.

By Election Day the polls had shown basically it was pretty much a dead heat. Did you think that Ford had closed the gap?

Yeah, I did. And also, I’d learned by then that what the polls show in mid to late October, early November, is that you have a closing in every presidential race, and it’s reality setting in. Now people are really dead serious about how
they are going to vote, so the polls that are taken in the last week or so are the ones that really count because it’s the next thing to the election itself. Yeah, I didn’t know who was going to win at that point, but I just had a feeling that Ford had made up a lot of ground, but not enough.

Smith: There is a school of thought that says the pardon was in the end a bridge too far, I’ve always thought, you may not remember, but in the weekend before the election there were some economic numbers that were released that suggested - Greenspan called it a pause in the economic recovery - but they were not good numbers. And I’ve often wondered whether Ford had caught up, but then people at the very end were asking themselves, “Okay, do I want four more years of this, or am I willing to take a chance on something different?”

Bruno: Well, I never thought that the economic numbers really registered with most people; that what registers with people is their own security. Do I have a job? Do I keep my job? Do I have my medical insurance? And so on. Those are the things that people care about when they judge the economy. What the GNP is or anything like that, it goes over our heads, for the most part. So I don’t think that that set of economic numbers really was all that decisive. I think that the Jerry Ford as a goofball, as a clumsy oaf, had really done a lot of damage.

Smith: I know exactly what you mean. He said, and it’s really poignant, that what hurt so much was he felt that he had just mastered the job when he lost it. And you wonder what a full Ford term with the legitimacy of an election would have been.

Bruno: I think it would have been pretty good. I think it could have been pretty good. I think the country could have very easily, once they got to really know him, fallen in love with Jerry Ford.

Smith: I’ve often thought there’s a Trumanesque – kind of a plainspoken, unflashy, Midwest authenticity about the guy.

Bruno: I think that’s true. Truman and Ford would have gotten along good together.

Smith: Bess Truman voted for Ford in ’76. She told them.
Two quick things at the end: one, were you surprised by the extent of the public reaction when he died? Because this is someone who had been out of the public eye for quite a while. I was with ABC for part of that week, and then I was with the family, and it seemed to surprise some journalists to see it build as the week went on. That I think in part people were contrasting what they were seeing in the old clips with the state of politics today.

Bruno: I think those of us who were old enough to have covered Ford were not surprised by the outpouring. I think the younger generation that’s really coming in now, were very surprised - who was this guy? Unfortunately, many of the younger reporters have not done their homework and they are not very well versed on things that they should know as reporters, and they just didn’t understand. They had no frame of reference for Jerry Ford, so they were surprised.

Smith: Well, plus – let’s face it, Ronald Reagan owned the Republican Party at that point.

Bruno: That’s true. But those of us who had covered, I don’t know of anyone who didn’t have respect for Ford.

Smith: Speaking of Reagan, in 1980 did that whole crazy vice presidential thing – was that serious? At any point was that real?

Bruno: I remember that so well. I was sitting in the room ready to go with Barbara Walters and I forget who else was there and my sources told me that that was not going to happen - that it could not happen – that the Republican Party did not want it to happen. And the Reagan people with a few exceptions, did not want it to happen. Oh, George Will was the other person. And my sources said it wasn’t going to happen, it couldn’t happen, it never was real. Cliff White told me that, a very good guy. Cliff told them that couldn’t happen, that wasn’t going to happen. He was involved. And so, no, I didn’t think it could happen, either because I couldn’t find anybody who wanted it to happen. How it got started, I’ve never known.

Smith: There is a wonderful story – you mentioned Barbara Walters – she literally was outside Walter Cronkite’s anchor booth, banging on the door, because
Cronkite had Ford, and she wanted either to join the interview or make off with him.

Bruno: That’s Barbara. She’s fierce.

Smith: How do you think Ford should be remembered?

Bruno: Ford should be remembered as the man who led us out of Watergate. Unfortunately, the promised land only lasted a short time for him. Most of us couldn’t even get into it. But I think he led the country out of Watergate. That was the most important thing. And that’s the way he should be remembered.

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

Bruno: Yeah, about five or six years ago, when he came in for the luncheon to present the awards.

Smith: Right. The Press Club.

Bruno: Yeah. That was the last time I saw him and talked to him – only briefly.

Smith: Isn’t that revealing, that his Foundation would have a press award. What does that tell you?

Bruno: It’s unheard of. Only they could do it. It’s a great tribute to him and to his mentor, Pete Lisagor I don’t think people realize what an influence Pete had and how he used it properly. There’s a terrific guy.
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this.

Meijer: My pleasure.

Smith: Two areas I really want to focus on: some of your own contacts with the President, of course, but also, you are a real scholar of the period and culture that produced him. Tell us about Western Michigan and what defined it, made it distinct politically, culturally, fifty years ago.

Meijer: I have to step back and say, as I think about it, it’s almost difficult to disentangle President Ford from Grand Rapids. I mean, you drive in on the highway and you see the G.R. Ford Freeway. Well, G.R., Grand Rapids, for someone of my generation, growing up in the Fifties and Sixties, he was a continuous presence and almost a definer of what Grand Rapids felt like. Earnest, plainspoken; I almost want to say bland in the sense of not a colorful personality, not exciting around the edges. Solid and so reliable that I feel like I’m defining an ideal childhood and how much President Ford was both a product of that same environment and part of that ideal childhood. He was an ever present figure at every little parade and Red Flannel parade in Cedar Springs, and from my own perspective as a kid whose father had business around the community. I was often a little kid at the Red Flannel parade, or the Fourth of July at Michigan Ave parade, or whatever it might have been. I think for a lot of people, he also represented the federal government to Grand Rapids. This is an area that maybe because of President Ford’s particular approach, is not filled with government pork. There is very little federal presence here in terms of bases or facilities of any kind.

Smith: By the way, isn’t it ironic that the most visible example should be the Calder sculpture? Which seems so out of character with the Gerald Ford that you’ve described, and that I know to be true.
Meijer: It’s perfect. And the Calder – what is Calder Plaza – is officially Vandenberg Plaza because it had been planned with a monument in his honor that was displaced. I think it might have been a fountain, but it is Vandenberg Center to this day. But it’s been totally supplanted by this wonderful piece of contemporary art, which of course, came in part because of the good offices of President Ford.

Smith: Actually that’s a perfect way to set this all up. It also suggests – he was a guy with a basically safe seat – and yet, as you say, he was here as much as he was, even as he was rising in influence, clout, whatever you want to call it in Washington. Because by the mid-Fifties, for example, he had been drafted by the Old Bulls to be on this CIA oversight effort – oversight of all the intelligence agencies, which is revealing in and of itself.

Meijer: Indeed.

Smith: Tells you something about what the establishment thought about this promising young guy. What does it tell you about him that he was here as much as he was, when he didn’t have to be?

Meijer: And this in an age when congressmen were still raising their families in Washington. So it wasn’t the jet back to the district every weekend pattern, except for him, in many cases, it must have been. Because it felt like he was a ubiquitous presence. Now, maybe that was simply because of his longevity, because there is no sense of perpetual campaign. There was just a sense of Jerry being there; being around; being a willing participant in every Rotary Club event and civic function that came our way.

Smith: Do you remember when you first met him, or really were aware of his presence?

Meijer: No, because I was always aware of his presence. For some of us, and Richard, I think you may have had a similar experience, my great year of great political awakening was 1966, and that was the year of Romney, Scranton, Percy, that great wave of moderately progressive Republicans. Jerry pre-dated that and wasn’t a part of, wasn’t identified with that. He was so stolid as a
representative that you didn’t see him as part of any great wave. So it was sort of – when did he displace Halleck?

Smith: ‘65.

Meijer: Okay, so in a sense he was a precursor - or he was seen by others as part of that wave. But I don’t have a first memory because I can say I was probably five or six in the late Fifties and saw him at a parade greeting my parents. I probably went with my dad to a Rotary luncheon or something and saw him over those years.

Smith: Let me back up because I’d love to paint in the background. We have been talking to a number of people and have some wonderful stories, sort of laugh out loud stories in some cases, about the influence of the Dutch Reformed or the culture - political and otherwise. But it was interesting, because Werner yesterday took pains to distinguish between their influence and that of, for example, many in the religious right today. Which is a valuable insight. But in their case, it was more a kind of insular, almost cocooned, culture within a culture. Which did not translate into anti-Catholicism, for example.

Meijer: Nor did it translate into being a part of the governing class of the community. Jerry was part of that mainstream Protestant tradition dating from before the waves of Dutch immigration came in. And the Dutch immigrants tended, at least originally, to be more blue collar, and even as they were upwardly mobile, they remained quite insular. And so they would support a good, sound Republican, but they weren’t further right to be chafing under good moderate Republican rule, nor were they influential in the party. This was what Jerry with his Episcopal membership was – and East Grand Rapids is not filled with Dutch surnames in the way that other parts of the Southside of Grand Rapids are.

Smith: That’s interesting because it does fly in the face of the outside notion of West Michigan as monolithic; even in Ford’s coalition, it was a coalition, which tells you something about his appeal, and also about his ability to juggle. Who was Frank McKay?
Meijer: Frank McKay—the easy description being Republican Kingmaker. He was for a while state treasurer, controlled many Republicans in the state legislature to the point that people wanting state contracts knew to talk to Frank. He was the fixer, either taking a fee or a bribe from whoever he could. When my dad and grandfather built one of their first stores in Grand Rapids, and they had a handful of supermarkets and were financially rather shaky, somebody told them to talk to Frank McKay and he could get them a loan from one of the local banks. And they did, and he got them a loan. Years later the banker said, “Well, if you’d just come to us directly, we’d have given you the loan.” But they were small town people who didn’t know whether that would work, and so Frank ended up for his Bal Harbor resort in Florida coming in and loading up on steaks every year before he went south, as his fee for arranging financing for that store. And many people thought he owned part of the company. But Frank McKay was the ugly face of party politics in the region and in the state.

Smith: So his influence extended beyond Grand Rapids?

Meijer: Oh, very much throughout the state of Michigan. Yes. He was a statewide figure in the party.

Smith: Was there an ideological component to it, or was it simply a boss who delivered services and extracted his price?

Meijer: Classical boss. Yes.

Smith: And Vandenberg was a foe? Or where did Vandenberg fit in?

Meijer: Vandenberg went so quickly from the newspaper, where he somewhat pre-dated McKay’s greatest years of influence, to Washington when McKay was wielding his greatest influence in the Thirties and Forties, that Vandenberg never had a lot of contact with him. So it was probably an uneasy relationship, but they weren’t relying on each other.

Smith: Did Vandenberg distance himself, in a sense, from Republican Party politics in the state?
Meijer: Yes. His own precinct failed to vote for him in 1934 and he’d had very little contact with the state party after he went to Washington. He did cursory stuff at the gubernatorial level, but had never as an elected official been intimately involved in state politics.

Smith: What was his appeal to the electorate, given what we think we know in retrospect about him, in terms of personality and approach? Particularly given what seems to be a kind of transformation that occurred?

Meijer: Like Ford, he was scrupulously honest so there was never any question on the integrity side. This is a guy who liked to drink, but he went outside the three mile limit during Prohibition to do it. He was a terribly hard worker, very diligent, and so even though he had some small claim to fame as a bit of a blowhard orator in his later years, he did his homework, and early on, when between his appointment and his first election, just a matter of a few months, introduced legislation calling for reapportionment based on the 1920 census. There had been no reapportionment since 1910. It had been held up in Congress because the South didn’t want to give up seats; they would be losing to the industrial Midwest and to the West. Michigan stood to gain seats, and Vandenberg really pushed for that. When Hoover came in, in tandem with Vandenberg’s first election, California interests were very, very much interested in that as well. And Vandenberg pushed through reapportionment, gaining Michigan additional congressional seats. Well, that won him support throughout the state.

He, I think, saved and built up Selfridge Field over in Detroit. He did some Detroit area high profile things that played well there. And, at a time when there was, at least in some quarters in the Midwest, some concern about the pace of change in the New Deal and the federal government’s accelerating accumulation of power, Vandenberg picked his battles wisely and picked high profile ones to oppose. Went along with the New Deal when it made sense, and really finessed that with the voters back here. At the same time that he was responsible for the creation of FDIC, which, even though Roosevelt laid great claim to his own thereafter, was indisputably a cornerstone of the economic recovery and of the salvation of the banking system. So he was
hanging on through the New Deal years, and then as the Republicans were so
decimated in – he was elected in ’28, so in subsequent elections when the
majority slipped into minority and then into tiny minority in ’32, ’34,
Vandenberg survived in ’34.

Smith: Was that his toughest race? ’34?

Meijer: Yes, it was his toughest race and he was the only Republican senator from an
industrial state who was returned that year. He and Alf Landon were the two
Republicans who most visibly bucked the trend that wiped out senators and
governors around the country. And so his profile within the party, just in
terms of the sheer numbers, quickly went forward. Locally he’d been the
newspaper editor for twenty years and had that kind of intimate relationship
with the town that comes from being in that role for that length of time. And
so he had been sort of booster and honest mirror of the community for a long
time. So people felt - even if he as a personality could be a little aloof and a
little prickly - he was such a known quantity that people here were
comfortable with him. He did things – the national park at Isle Royal - did
things early in his tenure on a statewide basis that quickly won him support as
a credible figure. And the Democrats in Michigan – it also had been a
historically Republican state before the New Deal. And so when the
Democrats couldn’t get Frank Murphy to come back and run against him, they
didn’t have anybody else real strong.

Smith: When did he first see himself as presidential material?

Meijer: As with so many political egos, I’m sure much earlier than any of us would be
aware. But there is first public awareness of him as a dark horse in 1936. So
he is re-elected in ’34, and simply by virtue of that re-election, he’s one of the
few people standing.

Smith: Was he seen as a potential running mate with Landon?

Meijer: Landon wanted him. He was Landon’s first choice and he evaded that. And so
Landon picked Knox after that. Yes, he was seen as the preferred running
mate for Landon.
Smith: What relationship – personal and/or political – existed between Vandenberg and whatever tradition he represents, and Gerald Ford?

Meijer: You would know more about this than I do, but it’s a wonderful image to think of Ford being in that gallery in Philadelphia in 1940, cheering for Wendell Willkie. And this is the case where I think Ford had grown up with a general respect for Vandenberg. I don’t have any evidence of teenage years interaction when Ford was coming of age and still living in Grand Rapids.

Smith: His dad - had he been politically active? Was there a time you can trace his involvement in local Republican politics?

Meijer: President Ford?

Smith: Or his father.

Meijer: His father, of course, had been part of that front with Dr. Ver Meulen and other people fighting the Frank McKay machine. But this is, of course, after Vandenberg is in Washington. So, if I recall from the Vandenberg materials, there may be a Gerald Ford, Sr. letter or two of just friendly, general supporter constituent correspondence, but not a close tie. And Vandenberg would have gone to Washington when President Ford was sixteen years old, I believe, and so there would have been – there was no contact prior to that that I’m aware of. And so then President Ford was gone from Grand Rapids most of the years after that.

Smith: Sure.

Meijer: So you’ve got the great image of, in 1939, prior to the outbreak of World War II, Vandenberg was viewed as one of the leading contenders and he was sort of the, maybe the leading contender in the eyes of much of the Republican establishment and of contemporary journalists – talking about reporters. He was kind of every editor’s choice, partly because he was one of them. He’d been an editor for so long, he was one of the founders of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. So that was his world and they were very comfortable with him, so he was sort of the…

Smith: Inside choice.
Meijer: Yes, today we always say the inside the beltway choice, which, of course, nurtured his aspirations far beyond what might have been realistic outside the beltway. He was an inside the beltway choice, but he was also one of the leading isolationist figures of the time. So he’s gaining his profile to a considerable degree because he is leading the fight against the repeal of the arms embargo. That position becomes discredited after the Nazis invade Poland in September of 1939, and so Vandenberg still has a very high profile but his whole…

Smith: Too high a profile in this case?

Meijer: Exactly. He’s too much identified with that movement. So then he goes into the Wisconsin primary and Dewey beats him. Dewey is much better organized. And you’re going to remember this stuff better than I am, if I can _________ ’40 and ’44. Dewey beats him; so he goes into the convention with the Michigan delegation pledged to him and a few others, but with a small chunk of votes. And then, of course, we all know that Wendell Willkie totally overran everybody and probably would have liked Vandenberg as his running mate. There is the story that Vandenberg tells of Willkie wanting to talk to him about a place on the ticket. Vandenberg says, “Well, I’ll flip you for it.” And of course, Willkie had other designs. But Ford there, identifying with the bold reformist, charismatic Willkie, rather than with Vandenberg.

Smith: Even though Ford himself, at this point, belongs to America First at Yale.

Meijer: Well, and of course, that’s that whole America First Yale thing. America First has got to be one of the most misunderstood organizations in its origins, with Sargent Shriver and Kingman Brewster. I mean, the founder of it, Robert Stewart, did you ever interview him?

Smith: Yeah. Once.

Meijer: I did, too. And none of these guys were anti-Semitic flame throwers. They were students opposed to the war.

Smith: Idealists, presumably having learned the lessons of the first war.
Meijer: Which weighed so heavily and played itself out in so many ways for all these folks. So, how do you reconcile Ford between America First and We Want Willkie?

Smith: I don’t. I don’t know enough, except that Ford becomes representative of a party that is in its gut and its heart and maybe its head, more inclined to America First, but is literally swept off its feet by this phenomenon. This Obama-like phenomenon.

Meijer: To what extent was Eisenhower Willkie-Lite?

Smith: And you project what you want to believe. And early on Willkie was pretty malleable. You could define Willkie as pretty much whatever you wanted him to be.

Meijer: And he was running a little bit to the right of Roosevelt. He was going along with Roosevelt in terms of aid to the Allies.

Smith: But also, if you’re a young Republican who has suffered through – you’ve crossed the desert of the last eight years, Hoover represents something, and Landon was futility personified, and then all of a sudden…again, I don’t mean to keep coming back, but I mean there is this Obama-like – that’s the parallel, in some ways.

Meijer: He’s one of these generational figures. Teddy Roosevelt clearly was.

Smith: Transcends, reinvents, is a whole new face, and you invest your emotions even more than your hopes. And who knows? I would have loved to have been sitting next to Ford in the galleries.

Meijer: He was a grad student, he was in his mid-twenties.

Smith: Of course.

Meijer: But what is interesting for Ford is, he would have seen Vandenberg as this sort of exemplar of his hometown ideals, but someone who, projected onto a national or international stage, was tired stuff. And philosophically suspect in terms of isolationism.
Smith: Un-electable for all of those reasons.

Meijer: Yeah.

Smith: Someone made a very convincing case. He said how Ford said to him, I think, during and after the presidency, how he never felt he got credit for being the rebel that he was. And you know, if you strip away the stereotype - and it's Charlie Halleck, Charlie Hoeven before that, obviously the ’48 campaign, and maybe going back to ’40. Maybe this was all part of young Jerry Ford. And let’s face it, the old cliché about a good mind having the capacity to entertain opposing viewpoints - America First as an organization of young idealists - then maybe it’s not such a reach to look at Wendell Willkie who personifies youthful idealism and logic be damned.

Meijer: And wasn’t going to get us into the war quite as aggressively, perhaps, as Roosevelt was.

Smith: The older I get, the more I’m convinced that the single biggest factor in politics is not ideological, but generational. And this illustrates it to a T. What Wendell Willkie is, is a modernizer. And to someone in Jerry Ford’s position at Yale, modernizing the Republican Party, however you define that in policy terms, would have been awfully appealing.

Meijer: Absolutely.

Smith: And presumably Arthur Vandenberg would not have been the man to do that. Estimable as he was.

Meijer: Vandenberg’s later ability, like you say, to balance those conflicting positions, is what won him his admiration. He was more colorful than Jerry Ford in his early Senate career than Jerry might have been in his House career, but represented some of that same Midwestern stuff. Like Jerry, both were having to work toward leadership positions with what was at that time, both wings of their party. And that centrism from a historical perspective is too easily boring and stereotyped. But it means that they were both working awfully hard to get along with the Tafts over here, and in Vandenberg’s time, with Borah and
Norris, and in Jerry Ford’s time, I don’t who would be comparable – Goodell or the Eastern folks. And at the same time, Taft and that family.

Smith: Remember the old cliché about Americans being philosophically conservative and operationally liberal. You can almost say that Ford, at least at one point in his career, is philosophically something of a liberal and operationally much more of a regular.

Meijer: Yes. But was he philosophically a rebel?

Smith: Well, instinctively, maybe. Certainly the kid shouting “We Want Willkie!” The veteran taking on Jonkman; and even the sort of established figure taking on the establishment in ’62 and ’64, ’63 and ’65. We’ve been told by a very good source that he was approached in ’58 when Halleck took on Joe Martin. He was approached then about running, and he said he didn’t want to do it. He was biding his time.

Meijer: Thinking about parallels again, talking about Vandenberg’s ego. No question. Loved to be flattered; but he really didn’t hunger for the presidency in any way, shape or form. It was just like, hey, why not be? But the other part of it – I’m not going to knock myself out in Vermont and New Hampshire.

Smith: It’s the equivalent of Mondale saying I don’t want to spend the next two years in Holiday Inns.

Meijer: Exactly. President Ford always said what he really aspired to was to be Speaker of the House. Vandenberg, I would think, his comfortable thing would have been President pro tempore of the Senate, which he finally was in ’46. But it was a senatorial ego.

Smith: Which is the easiest to caricature.

Meijer: Oh, exactly. But it is - we have to remind ourselves - different than that sort of vaulting ambition that says, “I’m going to be president.” And neither Ford nor Vandenberg had that. Ford must have had an ego, but it was better checked than most politicians.
Smith: Lee Hamilton said something very interesting when we talked to him. He talked about Ford as being very ambitious, but smart enough to keep it under wraps, which is unusual in Washington.

Meijer: Yeah.

Smith: And we’ve been cautioned – the notion of Ford as guileless doesn’t mean he was without ambition or calculation.

Meijer: Yeah.

Smith: You don’t get where he got with…

Meijer: You don’t challenge Bart Jonkman. It partly was ideological and partly was the modernizing impulse; but you also have an ambition of a young guy on the go.

Smith: Knowing what you know about the culture of West Michigan at that time, does it make sense to you there is this notion that the President delayed formally proposing to Mrs. Ford, and certainly delayed the marriage, until after the primary, without telling her why. And it has been suggested that in this political culture divorce was *verboten*. And it could very well have been a political negative for this upstart candidate who is taking on an entrenched incumbent, to further saddle himself with the reputation of marrying a divorced woman.

Meijer: I think it is totally plausible. Obviously, it’s pure speculation, but when you are a first time candidate, you are running on your vita. In his case, you’ve got a war record, but you’re not running on any kind of job experience, and so what you’ve got is resume.

Smith: And character.

Meijer: Right. But more broadly speaking, and to have that as a key piece of your biography, if you could wait until after the primary, seems like that makes sense.

Smith: What does it tell you about Ford that he took on Jonkman in ’48; and did Vandenberg involve himself in any way in that race?
Meijer: As I understand it from President Ford, Ford went to Vandenberg and said, “I want to challenge Bart Jonkman. Will you endorse me or will you support me?” And, as I’m understanding it, again from President Ford, Vandenberg said, “I will quietly support you.” Jonkman was a long time incumbent and a fairly near neighbor of Vandenberg’s. He lived right down the block or around the corner. And so Vandenberg was not going to openly support Ford to challenge his incumbency, even though Jonkman had been the classic Taftite isolationist who was a pain in the neck to Vandenberg, as Vandenberg had evolved so far. So Ford felt like, “I’ve got Vandenberg’s support,” but it wasn’t publicized during the campaign. It was the kind of thing Ford would have been able to share with other people, but not an open letter in the Herald or to the press.

Smith: It's a little unusual for an incumbent senator to, in effect, oppose someone of his own party. Was that consistent with Vandenberg’s prior conduct?

Meijer: I’m not aware of any parallels with it. But at that point, in ’48, Vandenberg is absolutely at the peak of his popularity and influence. In the eyes of the country and in his own eyes, he would have risen so far beyond what he would have seen Jonkman’s very naïve, outmoded, world view, that he would be all for seeing him replaced by a bright young guy who seemed to look at the world the same way he did, whose father had been not a close friend, but a supporter. Yeah, this is just what you would like. In fact, President Ford was saying, when he arrived in Washington in late fall of ’48 for the first time?

Smith: Or January of ’49.

Meijer: January of ’49. Vandenberg’s birthday is in March then, so March of ’49. Arthur and Hazel invited Jerry and Betty to dinner. I think they had dinner at the Shoreham. It happened to be Vandenberg’s birthday and Ford was very touched by that. He mentioned that a couple of times and that it was a kind of warm social embrace. It was just the four of them and it happened to be the Senator’s birthday, and that meant a lot to President Ford. So clearly Vandenberg was very sympathetic, quietly encouraging in ’48. He’s also so involved internationally that he's not here at all. But very welcoming when Ford gets to Washington.
Smith: And we also get a sense that Jonkman had made the mistake of losing touch with the district – physically of not being back here as often.

Meijer: I haven’t paid attention to that. I don’t know what Jonkman’s style was. You could hang on as a Republican in a safe district for a long time, but he was out of touch with the temper of the times, and certainly would have looked as behind the times as Vandenberg did in 1940 when war broke out.

Smith: You were talking to President Ford about Vandenberg; I can imagine the nice things that he would say about Vandenberg. Did he identify any weaknesses at all?

Meijer: I couldn’t get it out of him, and perhaps because it’s not in President Ford’s character to say that. I came away from the interview wishing for those – you realize as an interviewer – what did I fail to ask? - because I couldn’t elicit that from President Ford. What he started out saying, because I was prompting him a little bit about Vandenberg’s intellectual stature and how he was viewed, and President Ford said, “Well, you know he was a very bright guy. He’d been editor of the newspaper.” As though that title bestowed on Vandenberg an intellectual stature that was unassailable. But that was the way he looked at it. And again, that’s probably coming from youthful impressions. Then you really don’t have any contact until ’48. Richard Rovere wrote a story where Vandenberg was the leading candidate for president of the world – give this as inside the beltway stuff – because when Truman was in his nadir and Vandenberg had so brilliantly, apparently, pushed partisanship aside – that’s when Ford is re-entering Vandenberg’s world, in a sense – when they are coming together in Washington and you’ve got the freshmen and your hometown senator is America’s senator at that point.

Smith: A legendary figure. Yeah, exactly. Let me see, because I’m trying to get the chronology straight here. In ’48 when Ford runs, he goes to see McKay early on. So McKay is still a power.

Meijer: What does McKay say?

Smith: Oh, there’s a story where McKay keeps him waiting for four hours.
Meijer: Oh my God.

Smith: And then brushes him off. And then later on there was the incident with the hut, that was put within sight of McKay’s office, or whatever it was, and he wanted it removed and they refused to remove it. But if McKay is still a power, if not the power, locally, this effort in which Gerald Ford, Sr. was involved to clean up Republican politics by getting rid of Frank McKay - you wonder if there is a parallel here. McKay is not going to give Gerald Ford, Jr. the time of day because his father is…

Meijer: Oh, sure. Right.

Smith: McKay’s days were numbered at that point?

Meijer: My guess, and I haven’t studied a lot of Michigan politics in the Forties and Fifties, my guess would be that McKay’s world of influence had really shrunken, so he was probably still an important figure locally. He was an important figure in the party. He was key to Willkie’s nomination. Have you read Charlie Peters’ book, *Five Days in Philadelphia*?

Smith: No, I’m embarrassed to say. I’ve heard it’s wonderful.

Meijer: Delightful book. Charlie Peters talks about McKay - one of Willkie’s attributes as this reformist, not a modernist candidate and non-political guy, he didn’t come in with any IOUs. And he wasn’t going to compromise himself. Well, it was all very appealing, except that he made an exception in Frank McKay’s case and told him that McKay could have a say in all Michigan judgeships – federal appointments in Michigan. And so with that, at a crucial time, the delegation that had been holding out for Vandenberg, but it was apparent that Vandenberg wasn’t going to have a chance, McKay swung the Michigan delegation, so in 1940 he clearly had a lot of power there, to Willkie, and I don’t know how many ballots that was into the fight – that was a pivotal moment.

I have a letter that I shared with Peters (because we interviewed him for the documentary) that he was glad to see, from Willkie to McKay, inviting McKay down to Rushville, Indiana to meet with him when he came back. A
lot of it could have just been political platitude, but in Peters’ eyes this reflected a special relationship.

Smith: That’s fascinating.

Meijer: It’s safe to say McKay was totally not ideological in that respect.

Smith: You grew up and obviously had contact with Ford; and your dad is obviously pivotal in creating this institution. Were those basically after Ford left office?

Meijer: Yes. President Ford went to Congress in 1948. My dad was never terribly active politically, and my folks didn’t move to Grand Rapids until 1951. So, they saw him in a ceremonial way, but really not up close until my dad became involved with the committee for this museum. And then he can tell stories, which I don’t think he told, of being in the men’s room next to President Ford and President Ford, on two different occasions, one where President Ford is talking about “I’m going to spend my next few years working on the library and museum. That’s going to be my chief activity.”

Smith: Raising the money.

Meijer: “I’m embracing that as my job.” And then the other one was complaining about, “had Reagan gone to Cincinnati in 1976.” That we’ve all heard, but a difference. I don’t know how realistic that was, but he certainly was hot about that.

Smith: He wasn’t one to hold grudges. I think one of the problems with the DeFrank book, which in many ways is wonderful, is because of editorial decisions it leaves an impression that this was something he dwelt on.

Meijer: It wasn’t in his temperament to look at things that way.

Smith: If you asked him, and he felt comfortable around you, he’d say that. He obviously felt very comfortable around your dad. But it wasn’t something that defined his days. But your dad - it’s sort of legendary, he offered a site on the outskirts of town for this place. We know there were a number of people who thought it was questionable to put it here at the time. Has this been at least a catalyst in the subsequent transformation of downtown?
Meijer: I think it’s been a catalyst. I wish I could say – I don’t want to over play it – it’s certainly been a factor. And I think to locate here had to overcome some of the resistance of people like my dad, who grew up in a suburbanization of America mentality, where we need big parking lots. And he didn’t want to see an institution of this stature constrained because people couldn’t get at it.

Smith: That’s why we have big parking lots.

Meijer: Right. Exactly.

Smith: Certainly when he came to town you’d see him. Did he change over time? Or did your view of him change over time?

Meijer: I didn’t perceive it. I’m remembering my first sort of major involvement with the museum was I chaired or co-chaired the World War II exhibit. I don’t know if you remember that. Was that before you got here?

Smith: It was before my time, but I remember the exhibit well. It was a blockbuster show.

Meijer: And I remember being there with President Ford when we opened it, and again, I get this confused with stories I’ve read or heard from you and family and friends. But he would wear that same overcoat, raincoat, all the time. You’ve heard this, too.

Smith: No, no.

Meijer: I don’t know who was telling me that Betty would complain about that raincoat – maybe it was one of the kids. And he just wouldn’t change it. But I had the privilege of walking through the exhibit with him, and we were looking at a model of the Monterrey, and he was so self-effacing in talking about his experiences. And he would say, “Yeah, yeah. I was on that deck and we had to be pretty careful because it got pretty rough out there.” But how much of that is humility and how much is sort of lack of narrative intent or skill…

Smith: I always say he was the least self-dramatizing of political figures.
Meijer: Yeah. But you could see in him a warmth of recollection, but you didn’t get an expression of that.

Smith: That’s well put; an important distinction. And it’s funny because he did say on more than one occasion that if he had it to do over again, he would have spent much more time mastering communications. He was well aware of that deficiency. But, of course, in one on one campaigning, he was superb.

Meijer: Later, that would have been one of those un-modern things that he was lacking compared to the next generation of politicians.

Smith: Yeah.

Meijer: He must have sensed that in Kennedy as a contemporary.

Smith: But without the slightest trace of envy. Opposites attract – two more dissimilar people, it’s hard to imagine. But by all accounts, I don’t want to overstate it, but they had a relaxed, casual friendship.

Meijer: But wouldn’t Jerry have been – he may have been of Grand Rapids’ middle class, but he was also very much at ease with the east coast Yale establishment in a way that Nixon, obviously wasn’t - if you think of the three of them.

Smith: That’s a very interesting observation.

Meijer: He wouldn’t have been insecure.

Smith: Right. And the other thing is, I don’t think it is possible to overstate the bonding experience of the war. I’m curious, for him, having gone through the Vandenberg transformation, to believe that “this time we’re going to do whatever it takes not to repeat the past.”

Meijer: And as you talk about that, the people in Vandenberg’s generation had the scars and the experience of World War I to react to, and they chose different ways of reacting to that. But there was no bonding experience. World War I didn’t touch that many Americans as soldiers, so you didn’t have them coming out of the trenches saying, “How do we do this?” You had them in all different backgrounds. And so the Ford-Kennedy-Nixon generation would not
have been...they were just coming of age after the war. They weren’t in positions of influence. So somehow the Truman generation had to struggle to form a consensus that already existed for the next generation, but that also came more naturally to the next generation. I don’t know how you separate those strands.

Smith: It’s safe to say that Gerald Ford was a true fiscal conservative.

Meijer: Well, certainly that veto pen was a brilliant thing.

Smith: Your dad was pivotal in adopting a somewhat more imaginative investment strategy for the organization.

Meijer: Yes, that’s right.

Smith: And I do wonder, Ford as a child of the Depression was wedded to this “we invest in bonds almost exclusively.”

Meijer: But so was my dad, but he was accustomed to take certain risks. And that’s where at some point, President Ford - in much the same way that someone is an editor, or somebody is that or that – “Well, somebody is successful in business,” so I guess I could do that. But again, just not insisting on your own way.

Smith: I found it fascinating that as he got older, he didn’t become more conservative. On the contrary, he became in many ways more open, more tolerant, more accepting. Part of it, I think, was that the party just moved so far to the right. I wonder how much of it was Mrs. Ford’s influence. Am I imagining things? When he was in office he was seen as the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge. And then, of course, came Reagan, and conservatism itself was redefined, and the social issues became the litmus test. I wonder if there is a kind of Midwest conservative: stolid, figures of integrity, who looked upon abortion or a sexual preference – those weren’t political issues. Those were things you didn’t talk about. For a long time he didn’t talk about the broken family he came from.

Meijer: Right, and probably postponed the marriage, or engagement.
Smith: But he actually learned to be more comfortable with those things late in life, which is intriguing. And, of course, he had teenage children – all of these factors.

Meijer: And he’d been in Washington for a long time, for good or ill, but typically that would move you to the center, I would think. Now how much – and this is very far afield – but how much is that the same journey of mainstream Protestantism? That in your childhood, things would not have been talked about and would not have happened; whether it’s Episcopal, or Congregational or Methodist, or whatever it might be – these were generally forces of conservatism, if they were forces of anything in the teens or Twenties, and they would be viewed as very progressive today.

Smith: That’s interesting. But he could get very outspoken about his concerns about what the right wing was doing to the party. And how much of that was residual resentment of Reagan.

Meijer: But he upset Halleck by appealing to the east coast country club Republicans with whom some of us have great sympathy. That he’d been there all along, and how much of his perceived conservatism was trying to play to the party, versus playing to Grand Rapids or reflecting Grand Rapids? I don’t think that that’s an automatic characteristic of his background.

Smith: What all this would suggest is that he’s a more complex figure, both publicly and I think personally. I think he was a very private person. There’s a sense that he may very well have taken any number of things with him to the grave.

Meijer: But superficially, talking about his thrift, to some extent, and to the extent as you are keenly aware that the Foundation and the legacy is sort of a family business, it was very interesting - if you were working on the statue for the Rotunda, and we were looking at competing proposals - Steve shared with us that one of them was much more expensive than the other – a higher profile artist, even though we really didn’t like his proposal better – we’re delighted with the course we chose. But Steve said, “Dad would never go along with that.” Like, don’t even think about taking it, it costs twice as much as the
other candidates. I don’t imagine there are other presidential museums exercising that particular judgment.

Smith: I always found it fascinating that the Foundation, when they decided to redo the museum, did a fundraising campaign in secret. It was never public.

Meijer: It hasn’t figured out how to engage the community. And that’s a fundamental need of the institution and how to serve the Grand Rapids/Washington/Ann Arbor axis. That’s been a real trip.

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

Meijer: I believe it was at the last Ford Foundation dinner that he attended. And that was the occasion where he was a little bit slurred in his speech, and hearing about it the next day from whoever I spoke with, about how bad he felt about that. Much worse than the reality was.

Smith: He said, “That’s the last speech I’m giving.”

Meijer: There’s a sense of finality about that. Yeah. And already coming from California made it a much more arduous prospect than if you had chosen to stay in Washington or someplace close by. But knowing that the return was a difficult journey, anyway, and if I’m not able to return and function as I think I need to – that had to be hard for him.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction at the time of his death?

Meijer: Yes, in the sense of taking a narrow Grand Rapids view, you don’t understand how hungry the country and the world are to pay tribute to someone who represents something that we took for granted. And that made it more precious.
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Smith: First of all, Mr. Bosscher, thank you for doing this. Tell me, what was the 30-30 Club?

Bosscher: I was a student manager and 29 football players of the South High team of 1930. We were state champs. We played in a snow storm on Thanksgiving, ten inches of snow and the kids at the school, for two days, they shoveled that whole field and it ended up in a 0-0 tie. But Frank Cook was declared ineligible because he had signed a baseball, professional, so they had to forfeit everything.

The 30-30 Club, we met every Thanksgiving, every Thanksgiving morning at nine o’clock for 75 years. Every five years, we had our families with us. We did that until there was just Jim Trimpe in Grand Rapids. We met for two years. Leon Joslin is out in Seattle.

Smith: Was one of those meetings at the White House?

Bosscher: Yes. I was president of the 30-30 Club for years and Jerry Ford was my vice president and the vice president of the United States. I said, “You know, the vice president has charge of the next meeting, you’d better invite us.” So, he goes back to Washington and he sent out invitations from the vice president’s office. Next week he’s president. He withdrew all the original invitations and sent out invitations from the White House. So we had a bunch of invitations. And then we had luncheon there, and had a tour of the White House in small groups - going to see parts of the White House that we’ve never seen.

That afternoon, he took off for some out of town business, but then we had a tour of different companies around, the US Mint, we spent the weekend there.

Smith: I know this was a long time ago, but tell me, what was Jerry Ford like when you knew him as a player, as a kid?
Bosscher: He was a leader, he was a natural born leader. He was in football, basketball, and track. He did field events and played regular in varsity basketball, but then a leader in football. He was all-state center. He goes on to Michigan, he played the freshman game they had there, he made the all-freshman team. The next year he followed Chuck Bernard, an all-American center from Michigan, he followed him. He played for three years or two years really regularly.

Smith: You say he was a leader. How did that manifest itself? How do you define leadership?

Bosscher: I would say he didn’t have any enemies. He was friends with anybody. I mean, he’d come to town, I’d say to some friend of mine, “Do you want to go out and meet Jerry Ford?” “Are you going to see him?” “If I get close to him, we’ll meet him.” One time we were out at the airport and only could get about five feet from the fence and I says, “Jerry, I’d like to have you meet ‘so and so’.” He reaches way over that fence and shook hands with the guy and that guy said, “I wouldn’t have believed it.” He had friends all over. And I suppose that’s just the way he was in the White House. They said he wasn’t a very good president, but it’s coming out now, he was pretty good. It’ll finally show up.

Smith: Did he have a temper?

Bosscher: I wouldn’t say he had a temper, no. No, he never got mad, but he was a good leader, he could get guys to play hard. He was just a good leader. In fact, I first met him when I was about in the 6th grade. We used to play down in Madison Park. Now that new Madison Park is Ford, named after him, they’ve torn the old one down. And we used to play a little ice skating there and play softball, a little pass-and-tap. Then he went to South, we were in senior’s session 203, he was in A-1 and I was in 7-2, but we were in the same session room. So, I followed him all the way through high school, just tailed behind him. (laughs)

Smith: What’s the difference between South and Central?
Bosscher: Well, in Central, that’s my opinion, they’re of the old school, the old people on the hill, people more sophisticated. South took in Burton Heights all the way over to Eastern and Franklin. I was just inside. Where I lived on Thomas I could’ve gone to Central. In fact, one girl went to Central, a boy went to Christian High, another one went to Tech, and I went to South. I had two brothers that I followed. In fact, all five of us children graduated from South.

Smith: It’s interesting, because it has been said, that one of the reasons specifically that he went to South was because it was a much more diverse student body.

Bosscher: When he lived on Union, he was in the South district. So he got started in athletics, and they moved out to East Grand Rapids, but he got an old Ford and he drove back and forth to school. So he stayed at South then. I’d say for two or three years, he was living out in East Grand Rapids.

Smith: How diverse was the student body at South? I mean, did you have different ethnic groups? Different economic groups? Blacks? How varied?

Bosscher: I would say South was a mixture. We had them from Lafayette, Sheldon, Franklin, a lot of Italians - a lot of those went to Catholic Central, but a lot of them went to South, and to the south end, Burton Heights, and over near where I lived. So it was quite a variety of classes. Two hundred and thirty, two hundred a class, a high school class.

Smith: Was he sort of a big man on campus?

Bosscher: Yeah, but he wore it well. He wore it well. In fact, a friend of mine said, “You should see the love letters he used to write to my sister.” This was before the first girlfriend he had. Ford used to sit and park in front of her house on Grande Ville Avenue. (laughs)

Smith: (laughs) We want to know more. I was going to say, did he have girlfriends?

Bosscher: Oh, he played the field. He played the field.

Smith: And who was the young lady in question to whom he wrote these…?

Bosscher: The first one? You really want to know? (laughs)
Smith: Sure!

Bosscher: Hondorp, was her name. I graduated with her sister, Gertrude. Mary
Hondorp.

Smith: And what did she look like?

Bosscher: She was a lot different than his wife now. She was a little shorty, the one he’s
married to now. In fact, this is her second marriage. She was married to a
Warren first, but then she got rid of the Warren name and used her original
name. They were married in Grace Episcopal Church.

Smith: Were there other girlfriends after?

Bosscher: Oh, I suppose he had a lot of them.

Smith: He was popular with the girls?

Bosscher: Yeah, but I would say Mary Hahndorp (?) was the closest one. That’s where
his car used to park on Grande Ville. (laughs)

Smith: What did a kid, or a teenager, do in Grand Rapids in the 1920’s or ‘30’s?
What did you do for fun in Grand Rapids? I mean, you weren’t in school all
the time. Did you work?

Bosscher: I was very active in the YMCA. Before I went out to Fisher Body, I was the
boy’s physical director at the YMCA. There was just two of us, me and the
instructor and we had all the boys classes. But the YMCA didn’t pay much
and I went back to school for the last half year just to do something. I took
machine shop from a fellow named Paul Structer(?). He later went down to
Davis Tech, and he was in a men’s class, and then he went to General Motors
and was in personnel there. Then he was the first personnel director at Fisher
Body. I heard that a big, heavyset man was personnel director. I said, “I bet
that’s Paul Structer(?).” So I went out to see him, we chatted. He used to take
me – he didn’t have any kids – he used to take me to these father and son
deals he belonged to and I was his son. Paul Structer(?), he says, “What kind
of job would you like?” I said, “I’m only interested in tool die
apprenticeship.” I was the fifth employee out there and the first apprentice
class. I was assistant safety director for a couple of years, and the war broke out and everybody had to run a machine, so I had to go back to the tool room. You couldn’t get off work 7 days a week.

Smith: Was it unusual then for high school students to go on to college?

Bosscher: In high school, Bill Schuiling and he were running for class president. Bill Schuiling beat him out. Later on, Ford’s in the White House and Bill Schuiling’s the vice president at a big bank right down the street.

Smith: Tell us about Bill Schuiling.

Bosscher: Bill Schuiling? He was all brains. He was a very good student, not active in any extracurricular activities, where Ford was always busy in athletics.

Smith: Was it brain versus brawn?

Bosscher: Well, a little bit of both, but you couldn’t tell it between them they way they reacted to each other. Ford didn’t have any enemies, unless he bawled someone out for not working hard enough playing football.

Smith: He was a hard worker?

Bosscher: Oh, you betcha.

Smith: Did he get that from his family?

Bosscher: No, he was the adopted son of Ford, I forget what his first name was, but his mother just died just a few years ago. She lived in town here.

Smith: What was she like?

Bosscher: She was very nice. Very nice. But he didn’t have any brothers or sisters except the two half-brothers.

Smith: But they were pretty close.

Bosscher: Yeah, very close. He just had two boys and every 5 years, we’d have the families for Thanksgiving breakfast. We met about eleven o’clock and he came one year with his two older boys before he had the third and fourth. We always heard from him. He called us every Thanksgiving and he’d stay on
that phone until everyone who wanted to talk to him got a chance to talk. In fact, one year, when I was out in Porter Hills Rehab, I had fallen down the stairs here, and I was out there for about five weeks - no, five days. This time I was out there six weeks. But, while we were at Porter Hills, Burgess Wisner was there, he was our secretary treasurer and I was president. So we’d been out at Porter Hills on Thanksgiving. And I says to some of the people that were there, I says, “If you want to speak to Ford, to be introduced to Ford, you come on while we’re having breakfast.” I went over when the phone’s ringing. “Hello, this is Jerry calling.” He talked to anybody that wanted to spend some time with him.

Smith: I want to go back to this campaign, this first campaign that he ran for president and lost. Do you remember what grade that was?

Bosscher: Well, when he ran for [Congress], the 30-30 Club got together and met at his home and all got signatures to run against Barney Jonkman. Now, Barney Jonkman was an old timer. I said, “You’ll never beat Barney Jonkman,” but he beat him the first year.

Smith: Why was Jonkman so popular?

Bosscher: I don’t know why he was so popular. I knew him real well, and his family, we went to the same church.

Smith: What was he like?

Bosscher: Altogether different, altogether different. I mean, Ford could make friends with anybody. Jonkman was a little bit hard to reach, but he kept winning and winning until Ford ran against him and Ford beat him. Now, that’s unusual for a first time running for federal office. He got in.

Smith: I assume Jonkman was surprised. He expected to beat this…

Bosscher: Just like now, they’re saying Ford didn’t have a very good record as a president, but things are coming out now, that he made some moves that weren’t popular at the time, but they’re coming out now. That’s the way he did, silently he did good things.
Smith: Did he campaign in high school? You said he ran for president in your class.

Bosscher: He ran for president, but Bill Schuiling beat him out.

Smith: Did he campaign? How do you run for president in high school?

Bosscher: You get some teams – people that are in favor of Schuiling, people that in favor of Ford and they bicker back and forth and finally, they have an election. Bill Schuiling beat him out.

Smith: Was it a popularity contest? What did you debate?

Bosscher: It wasn’t a popularity contest because Ford would’ve won that, but Schuiling was a little more of a student and they wanted him for a president. But later on, he gets up in Washington as a vice president. Ford’s in the White House.

Smith: Were they friends? Did they stay in touch?

Bosscher: I don’t know any who didn’t like Ford. I mean, athletes at other schools always spoke highly of Ford. He always played fairly and he was just a great guy. I mean, he being the only son for a while, then when Ford married… He never carried, that I can remember, his mother’s name. If he did, I forget what it was.

Smith: Leslie King was his birth name, then of course he took Gerald Ford’s.

Bosscher: He was very young when she married Jerry Ford from the paint company.

Smith: Do you remember the paint company?

Bosscher: Oh yeah.

Smith: How many people worked there?

Bosscher: Well, he was never connected with the paint company, Ford wasn’t.

Smith: Just his father?

Bosscher: Yeah, his father. His stepfather.

Smith: As far as you could tell, they were very close?
Bosscher: Yeah. And his stepfather died before his mother died. His mother died just a couple years ago.

Smith: What was his stepfather like?

Bosscher: I never really met her, really. She always kept to herself. I met her when they were living out in East Grand Rapids. They were married then and that’s where all the other children were born in East Grand Rapids.

Smith: And, obviously, Grand Rapids has changed a lot since you were students together. What was the community like back then. Very Dutch?

Bosscher: Well, I think growing up it was probably known as a Dutch town because there were so many Christian Reformist schools and churches. In fact, I was brought up in Baxter Christian School until about the sixth grade. Things were getting tough, my folks couldn’t afford tuition anymore, so then I went to South. Went to South in 7-2.

Smith: We know there were a lot of churches, were there a lot of movie theaters?

Bosscher: Oh yeah, more so than they are now. There was one in Lafayette, one in Burt Heights, one in Madison Square, there were two other smaller ones in Westside, down in the North End. But there were about five smaller theaters and they were very, very active. Ten cents. And I was so short, I was ten cents until I was about 15. I was soaking wet about 90 pounds when I graduated from high school. Went to Fort Sharon(?) and played in the band. I was a drummer in the band and they went through to get some uniforms. First of all, I had size 4 shoes, pants you couldn’t get them small enough, so they hung over the rolled parts, collar was about this (gestures a loose collar), so I sent home for some smaller clothing. Fort Sharon, for about two years, I was there. I was the smallest corporal in the CMPC and they had a competition in rifle shooting. And they had the smallest one from each company from the men. And I won that, but when I’d sit in the sitting position, they had to have folks sit behind me. (mimics rifle kick back and laughs)
Smith: Now, were you in Grand Rapids during the Depression? What was life like in this time? How bad was it?

Bosscher: I can remember the Depression years. I don’t know how my mother and father really survived it. It’s back in it now.

Smith: What was it like?

Bosscher: They didn’t even have welfare that they have now. But my mother always had food on the table.

Smith: How’d they manage with so many people out of work?

Bosscher: My father was a salesman. He worked at Hayes Barney(?) for awhile. He was never really unemployed for very long, in fact he dug those ditches for the original Holtzman Field(?), put in the drainage ditches for the outfield when that was built and that was done by city workers.

Smith: Now, President Ford was an Eagle Scout. Were you ever a Boy Scout?

Bosscher: No, I was always active in the Y. I would start going to Y camp when I was ten years old. In fact, I got my first membership on the Christmas tree when I was ten years old. I was standing marksman. And I’ve been a continuous member now for 83 years. I was honored a couple of years ago in one of the Y meetings as the longest living member; not the oldest, there are guys there that are older than me, but the longest living member.

Smith: Did you know the president’s brothers, the other members of his family?

Bosscher: Oh, yeah, there was…I think he only had one or two brothers?

Smith: Weren’t there three? Yeah, Tom, Jim and Dick.

Bosscher: Yeah, but they all went to East Grand Rapids.

Smith: Was it a close family?

Bosscher: Oh yeah, he always was, as far as the family went. And he was always close to his mother.

Smith: Really?
Bosscher: Yeah.

Smith: Did you know her?

Bosscher: I met her a few times. She lived in those apartments on Foam(?) Street in college.

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw President Ford or heard from him?

Bosscher: Yeah, let’s see. It was one of his visits in Grand Rapids. I saw him just one other time he came to Grand Rapids in one form or another, not maybe to speak to him personally.

Smith: Why do you think the 30-30 Club stayed together so long?

Bosscher: I know there was the state championship. Some of the fellows just joined the last two or three weeks. I know Jim Trimpe joined the team in the last two or three weeks, ‘cause he was quite a track star, fast. And his track coach never wanted him to go out to football and Gettings was always after the track coach to release Trimpe so he could put him in. So he only played, I think, the last 5 or 6 games he was with the South varsity.

Smith: Who was your coach?

Bosscher: Cliff Gettings.

Smith: What was he like?

Bosscher: Really good leader. He was the only coach we had and he got on those guys. We practiced out at Garfield Park, and if you came late for practice, he’d start them running around the swimming pool and then he’d forget about them. (laughs) They’d run around that pool until it was time to go back into Grand Rapids.

Smith: Do you know if Ford was ever late for practice?

Bosscher: If you ever saw Ford, loaded as much as that old Ford he had. Everybody could get out to ride from Garfield Park to Grand Rapids. That was a long walk from about Burton Street to Hall Street.
Smith: How could he afford to have even an old Ford?

Bosscher: I don’t know. He got that Ford as soon as he moved out to East Grand Rapids. And he drove that back and forth to work and to school. He worked all the time. He worked at old Bill Skougi’s hamburger place across from the school. He worked there for lunch hours.

Smith: And that’s where he met his father.

Bosscher: Yeah, that’s where his father showed up one day. And he met him, but he said, “I don’t want to see you again.” Told his father, “We’ve met and I don’t want to see you again,” because his father abandoned him and when Ford was kind of making a name for himself, his father shows up. So he says, “We’ve met and I never want to see you again.” I never knew about his original name.

Smith: And Bill Skougi’s, it was a hamburger place? And it was across the street from the school.

Bosscher: Yeah, across the street from the school. Served a lot of hamburgers and ice cream sandwiches. In fact, all the athletes that worked there worked there over the lunch hour.

Smith: Did you know that he wanted to go on to college? That he wanted to go to the University of Michigan?

Bosscher: Yeah, in fact, after he got out of the varsity and enlisted, another fellow and I hitchhiked down to Ann Arbor, hopped over the fence to get in. People were going over one fence, the police were over at another. We were going over the fence over here. Sat down and we saw him play against Illinois. That was the first year he was playing, because Chuck Bernard was the All-American center.

Smith: Was center the only position he ever played?

Bosscher: Yeah, played basketball and he did field events and track – shot put, discus. Now, Leon Joslin, he continued in his athletics, he’s got a world record in senior Olympics.
Smith: What do you have to do to be a good center? What particular qualities does it call for?

Bosscher: He has to be likeable, well fed(?), and don’t have any enemies.

Smith: Did you go to the funeral?

Bosscher: Oh yes. In fact, it was quite an honor. Leon Joslin came from Seattle for the funeral. He said his daughter picked him up, she lived out on the coast, she picked him up and he flew in time for the funeral. We had front row seats. And when all those dignitaries were coming in, they came in, shook hands with us. We met the governor of Michigan, the vice president of the United States and all the representatives, anybody that came, they came across and shook hands with us.

Smith: Do you remember back to when you were sitting there? What did you think about Jerry Ford?

Bosscher: Well, he was just a great guy. We met, we used to play in Madison Park, had a lot of friends down there. That was when he was at Madison School and then went out to South High in the 7th grade. He wasn’t an all “A” student, but always got good grades.

Smith: Were there teachers that he had or you had that were particularly important? Can you think of any school teachers that were especially… I mean, you mentioned the coach.

Bosscher: He probably had Ed Levally(?) and probably had …

Smith: His favorite subjects were history. He took Latin and he didn’t care for it.

Bosscher: I don’t think he took Latin. He probably took French or Spanish like I did. (laughs) You really had to like languages if you took Latin, could speak Latin. What could you do with it? Interpret? But if you could speak some French “oui oui”. (laughs)

Smith: Were there any other mentors, anybody who really had some influence on him? Besides his parents who had influence on him, were there other people
you could think of, people in the community or people around the school, that he sort of looked up to or hung around with? You know, other influences.

Bosscher: He wasn’t a top student, top level. But he always had passing grades. You never had to worry about him being eligible for athletics.

Smith: Is there something about Grand Rapids in those days that you miss? Is there something that’s gone from the town you grew up in?

Bosscher: Oh, I don’t know. All through high school, I delivered railroad timetables. There’s a printer down at the Pantlind Hotel, he’d put out these – they’re a loose leaf affair – they’re train schedules - the front would always have the month on it. So with that route, it took me all over town. It’d take me about three or four days after school. I’d get out, I’d get out of school the last two periods. I never had any classes the last two periods all through high school. And I kept that until I finally gave it up. There were a lot of offices, different offices, I couldn’t even figure out why they had those things.

Smith: The Pantlind Hotel was a pretty fancy place, wasn’t it?

Bosscher: Yeah.

Smith: Was that the big hotel in town?

Bosscher: Yeah, I used to go in the back door down through the path and the print shop was way in the front. I could’ve gone through the front down the stairs, but they wouldn’t let me. I was just a commoner. (laughs) I had to go through the back door. (laughs) I always rode a bike until one day my bike was stolen from the Y. I think the first time I had to go down Pantlind Road, I did it on roller skates and I went to the police department and said, “Do you have any bikes that are still workable?” Well, they gave me one and I kept it a couple months and I was going to take it down to Shorty Slater(?) and have it fixed up a little bit and he said, “Hey kid, I just got your bike in. The kid that stole my bike tried to sell it to Shorty Slater, but Shorty knew my bike, so I got my old bike back again.

Smith: One last thing, besides teammates or maybe teammates, who were Jerry Ford’s friends? Did he have a best friend?
Bosscher: I don’t know of any particular fellows unless they were teammates of the football squad’s top men, Art Brown, Stuey Schiltzer(?), Al Elliot(?), Dale Heismann(?).

Smith: They all sort of hang around together?

Bosscher: Not necessarily hung around together. None of them lived near him. He lived on Union until they moved out to East Grand Rapids. I lived just a block from him on Thomas.

Smith: Were you ever in their house on Union Street?

Bosscher: Yeah, it was your ordinary big house. In fact, the fellow that took it over remodeled it a little bit. Didn’t change the looks of it. Got a black and white photo of the home of Jerry Ford.

Smith: Thank you, thank you. Is there anything else you want to add?

Other: Mr. Bosscher, I did want to ask you, when you knew Jerry Ford in high school, did you ever have a sense or the classmates around him have a sense that this guy is really going to go places?

Bosscher: I was a year behind him. So I was never in the same sessions as him as we’re growing up. We had the first session when we started there, but after that I was always in the session behind him. I can’t say I know of anybody that didn’t like Jerry Ford. Or that he had any enemies. There were maybe some guys that he beat up on the football field.

Smith: Did you ever think he’d be president?

Bosscher: No, I mean, I didn’t think he’d ever run. But he was congressman for years and he didn’t introduce too many things, and it comes out now that he was quite active, but he must’ve been well enough to be Nixon’s successor. To jump from congressman to president, it was quite a jump for him, too. They say, “Well, he wasn’t a good president.” But it comes out now, he did a lot of good things.

Smith: Takes awhile sometimes.
Bosscher: And it’s just too bad that he didn’t live a bit longer to enjoy some of the things they’re giving him credit for now. He was in good health until he died.
Smith: First of all, tell us the difference between Vail and Beaver Creek.

Frampton: Well, they’re both part of the Vail Valley, but they’re separate communities. Vail was here first. It really started in the early 60s. Beaver Creek didn’t start until 1980 or ’81. So, they’re two distinct communities although they’re only four or five miles apart.

Smith: Could either one of them happen in today’s regulatory/environmental economic climate?

Frampton: The answer is probably not. And, in fact, around 1980 or ’81, I’m not sure exactly, Sports Illustrated had a wonderful article on Beaver Creek. It was a major article and the title of the article was “The Last Great Resort” and that was ’80 or ’81.

Smith: And is that in the tradition of, say, Sun Valley?

Frampton: What it basically said is that there really aren’t very many places left in the United States to build a project like Beaver Creek. That the environmental rules and regulations basically made it extremely difficult and, to some degree, the money was too significant to get anybody to do it; but it was more the environmental issues - that there were just not any places left. And if you really look at it, there hasn’t been a new resort built in the United States in a mountain community since Beaver Creek was built in the early ’80s.

Smith: Is it fair to say that this is an outgrowth of Vail?

Frampton: That’s a pretty good description, yeah.

Smith: How did you first meet the Fords?

Frampton: That’s a great story. I became president of Vail Associates, which is a public company, in 1982. Vail ran the Vail Ski Mountain, which was a very
profitable business, and was involved in building Beaver Creek, but they had
gotten in financial trouble, probably because this business culture or this
company was skiers. Also, in 1981, ’82, the recession was difficult. So, the
company had gotten in trouble financially and I was hired to be president of
the company and this was unusual for somebody to come from the south and
who had only skied a few times.

Smith: What had you done before?

Frampton: Well, I’d been in the resort real estate business in Hilton Head, primarily, and
other places. They needed somebody to come in who had an understanding of
real estate development because of Beaver Creek. They also wanted
somebody who understood operations, and I did. But it was golf and tennis as
compared to skiing, so I wasn’t hired for my skiing abilities. I became
president at a young age; I think I was 38 in 1982. And one of the first things
you had to do is go meet President Ford, who was actually moving into his
house near Beaver Creek. He was originally living at his condo in Vail and
he decided to move down here along with Dean Keaton, who was a good
personal friend, and Leonard Firestone, who’d been ambassador to, I think,
Switzerland, if I’m not mistaken.

So I’d been here literally two or three or four days and I got this call from
President Ford just out of the blue. It’s a big deal, I mean, a former president
calling me. I took the line and he introduced himself and he said he wanted
me to come down to his house because some of the landscaping in the street
that was not on his lot, didn’t look very good. And I said ‘sure’, so I got in
my car and went down to Beaver Creek. He and Betty were there. I’d been
on the job two or three days at the time and he walks out. There was a median
in the street and it looked pretty scruffy.

Smith: Of course, it was brand new, wasn’t it?

Frampton: The house was brand new. Well, the street had just been built, but it was a
big median and it had not been landscaped very well. It didn’t look very good
and he didn’t like it. And so, he said, “We’ve got to get this fixed.” And he
had said that he talked to somebody that worked for us who ran landscaping
and this particular guy had said they were finished, that they weren’t planning on doing anything else. And I said, “President Ford, we’ll have the landscape guys over there tomorrow and it’ll look good the next day.” And so, I called somebody, I don’t remember who, and literally the next morning, we had these cute little girls out there planting the flowers and it looked gorgeous. And because I did it in one day, I think it started a pretty good friendship with President Ford and Betty. I mean, like all of the rest of us, they wanted the street to look nice, which was special. So, that was my first meeting.

Smith: Were there things about them that surprised you?

Frampton: That he was just a comfortable person. That was what was nice about him and Betty both. And I always remember about three or four weeks later, they asked us to dinner, which was a big deal. Of course, Susan, my wife, was terrified as you would expect - former president. We went to dinner and there were four other couples and he just couldn’t have been nicer. He asked her meaningful questions about our family and our kids and why we were here. And when he asked them, it wasn’t perfunctory. It was like he really had an interest, and that was nice and comfortable.

I have to tell you one little cute story about that dinner because this was a big deal. By the way, Leonard Firestone was there and three or four other couples. We got there and the dinner was early, like 6:30, and we had a drink on the porch and then we went in and had this nice dinner. It was at a round table and it was very nice. We all ate and we’d been there, I don’t know, an hour and a half or two hours and we’re still talking and I could sense that this could last for another two hours. President Ford just stood up and said, “This has been a terrific evening. I appreciate all of you coming.” And we all got up and left because President Ford did not like to stay up late. But he handled it with great care and at 8:30 we were home.

Smith: Tell us about Dean Keaton because that name keeps coming up

Frampton: They were obviously close friends and they got to know each other, I think, in California, if I’m not mistaken. When President Ford built his house here, Leonard Firestone built his on one side and Dean Keaton built his on the other
side. In the early years, Dean spent a lot of time here, but as he got a little older, he didn’t spend as much time. But they just were friends, is how I would describe it. They weren’t in business to my knowledge. They may have had some business connections, but it was a kind of personal friendship and Dean was a nice guy. He was chairman of the AT&T Golf Tournament. He may have actually been the chairmen of it when it was the Clambake with Sinatra and all those guys, but he was in that California crowd. He was a nice person.

Smith: Now, you were very significantly involved in the Vail Foundation.

Frampton: Yeah.

Smith: Which built, among other things, the Amphitheater?

Frampton: Yes, the Foundation has done a lot of things. We built the Ford Amphitheater, raised money for that. We actually built it once and then we tore it down and built it again.

Smith: Really?

Frampton: Yeah.

Smith: Do you remember roughly what it cost?

Frampton: Well, the rebuild was about twelve or thirteen million dollars which would probably be about 30 or 40 million today. And, of course, the Foundation was involved in building the Vicar Center here in Beaver Creek, which Ford was involved in, and we ran all the ski racing, et cetera. And, you know, they asked President Ford to go on the Foundation board and he was on that board from 1982 until he passed away. We had two board meetings a year, big board meetings. I don’t believe he missed a single board meeting and, if he did, I don’t remember it. We would always get him the book a week before time and he’d read it. He always asked some good questions. And the other great thing about President Ford is that we started on time. We’d started at 8 o’clock and we didn’t start 8:01 because he always got there perfectly about 10 or fifteen minutes until. He wanted to start on time and that was the trick we learned. But he was a good board member, is the point I’m making. It
was not some perfunctory thing. He was engaged. He read the book. He had questions and he was very thoughtful of our board for a long period of time.

Smith: Let me ask you - it may be an awkward question. Was he a generous board member? I mean, because I’ve seen his name on some things.

Frampton: Well, he always made his annual contributions, he and Betty, to the Ford Amphitheater and they were generous financially. We certainly had a lot of donors that gave a lot more money, but he always gave money. Every single year, he made contributions in different amounts, but he was particularly generous in just that he worked. I mean, I can’t tell you how many times, we’d call him up and say, “President Ford, we need you to call so and so,” and he’d make those calls or he’d meet those people for coffee. And that’s really what you’re looking for in a board member.

Smith: The reason I ask is because he was a fiscal conservative in the traditional sense. As president, he had not been reluctant to veto bill after bill after bill, probably the last president to ever hold the line on spending. And there is some dispute over how generous a tipper he may have been.

Frampton: That’s probably Luke and Liz saying that.

Smith: No, I think, at the restaurant, they say it was 20% which, frankly, comes as a surprise based upon what we’ve heard of on the golf course.

Frampton: No, I don’t know that. I do remember one time we were thinking in the Foundation of starting an endowment and President Ford said he didn’t like the idea of an endowment at our organization. He said he thought if we had to go out and raise the money every year, it would keep us on our toes better and we would be more customer service oriented. So we really never raised an endowment. And I think, in our particular case, it was right though there are other cases where you need to do it. If you go back to how they were involved - I know on numerous occasions he’d go to the public schools and also went to Vail Mountain School where our kids were. I say ‘numerous’, he did it once every year or so, but I remember him going in and talking to the kids at Vail Mountain School and explaining the fundamentals of the three branches of government and the checks and balances and so forth. So, I think
it was pretty nice that a former president living here would make an effort to do something like that. There were a lot of instances with that kind of involvement.

Smith: We’ve heard that they were, as in the desert, not only very visible, but actively involved in a lot of civic activities.

Frampton: And they worked and they actually did some things. And I guess he always kind of enjoyed Vail. People didn’t follow him too much. I mean, they respected him, but he could be a little bit of himself.

Smith: It has also been suggested that they were significant in helping to establish this as a summer resort place.

Hampton: Oh, there’s no question. I mean, I wasn’t here during those early years when he was here, but you can’t even begin to measure the impact he had on Vail and helping to create Vail. I mean, if you go back to the Ford Golf Tournament, it was phenomenal for the 20 years that went on and all the people that came here as part of that. I mean, it was truly phenomenal.

Smith: And when you were developing Beaver Creek, was he there at all? Their house was already there. Did you have conversations about what this area was going to look like?

Frampton: Well, we did, although the people who had planned it actually before I came here had done a really good job on the master plan and had communicated it effectively through some models and so forth. So, there was an outline that was quite good. It was a really good master plan. So, if you were buying early, you knew what the hope and the vision was for Beaver Creek. On the other hand, very little of it was here, so what you didn’t know was if it would be implemented.

Smith: Sure. It was an abstraction.

Frampton: It was an abstraction. That’s exactly right.

Smith: If you look out here today, is there anything that significantly departs from or adds to that original plan?
Frampton: Well, I think the thing he was so helpful on was the idea of the Vicar Center. Actually our company came up with the idea, as a part of the real estate development, to build a performing arts center here in the middle of the village, to activate the village, make it more lively, and certainly more diversified. But it was expensive. I forget what it cost, but it was fifteen million dollars which would be 40 or 50 million dollars today. And so we, as a developer, couldn’t afford to do all of that. We made our contribution, but we had to get private funding to do that and President Ford was incredibly influential in the raising of that fifteen million dollars. I mean, he made phone call after phone call and got behind it and stood up in public meetings, probably not unlike he did for some of the wonderful things he worked for out in the desert. But we raised that fifteen million dollars and it’s an incredible facility. I don’t know if you’ve seen it, but it’s absolutely wonderful.

Smith: Is it one large hall?

Frampton: It seats about 500 people, it’s under the ice rink, it’s phenomenal. We’ll have about 100 events every year, phenomenal artists that go there. It’s really added to the fabric of the Vail community and one of the things I know President Ford made a speech on one time. I remember the speech was how to develop an arts program where the children of the Vail Valley could have an opportunity to experience the arts center. What we did is we started an outreach program with the public schools and when we’d have an artist here, who’s maybe playing at night and we’re paying him money, we’ll often go to those artists and say, “Would you be willing to put on for ‘free’ a concert for kids during the day that afternoon?” and so forth. And, last year, we had about 6,000 children go to some event at the Velar Center. To be able to get that many kids incredible exposure to art, dance, music, theater, drama, etcetera, was pretty cool. So, there’s no question that that was something the Fords were very supportive.

Smith: And what is the population of the Vail Valley?

Frampton: The range is 40,000 living here full time. Obviously in the middle of the ski season, it goes up.
Smith: By the time you came out here, was he still skiing?

Frampton: He was still skiing. He skied a pretty good while. I can’t remember exactly how much longer, but, no, he skied in the ski season and he was good.

Smith: Did he ever say anything conversationally about the caricature - the whole Chevy Chase business?

Frampton: No, I don’t say that we ever in essence talked about that. But, you know, two observations. I mean, one, it was true, he was clumsy. He was obviously a great athlete, but he was clumsy. I mean, I probably played golf with him ten times, or 15 times, and he was a pretty good golfer, but he couldn’t get out of a sand trap. And a sand trap requires a little finesse. It’s different than hitting the ball. He’s the worst player I’ve ever seen out in the sand trap. He just could not get out. So, there was a little bit of truth to that. He was a good athlete. As you know, he swam every day at least once and sometimes twice. He obviously was a great football player at Michigan and whatever, but he was not a finesse athlete.

Smith: That’s well put. Later on, I think Mrs. Ford mastered the computer pretty early.

Frampton: Oh, he’d been terrible at it.

Smith: He could read his email, but he couldn’t respond to it.

Frampton: Oh, absolutely not. And I think another thing, sports-wise, I always got a kick out of - he was always such a Michigan sports fan. So throughout the fall when he was here - because he used to stay here through November, nothing else happened on Saturday - on Saturday afternoon, President Ford got in front of the TV to watch the Michigan Wolverines and that was a given.

Smith: And you didn’t interrupt.

Frampton: You did not interrupt, though I was lucky. I got to watch one game with him; it was one Saturday, with four of five people. It was fun.

Smith: Did he get very involved?
Frampton: Oh, yeah, he was. Absolutely. He was a fan. He could tell you all the players and the coaches and so forth, which is nice.

Smith: And I take it that they had a number of friends in the area.

Frampton: Oh, yeah, particularly some of the people that were here early, people like the Meijer’s and Pepi and Sheika and the Slifer’s and the Kelton’s. There was a whole group of people. And when you’re here early in a resort - and that would be earlier than I was here, although we got it to some degree - there’s kind of a pioneer spirit, you’re kind of all in it together.

Smith: And you had your vision vindicated over time.

Frampton: No question.

Smith: Did you ever see his temper?

Frampton: No, but I saw Betty’s one time. We were laughing about it last night when I was talking about this interview. We have something here we call the Porsche Tea Dance and it’s held during the ski races every year. So, about 4 or 5 o’clock in the afternoon, they have this tea dance and they have, you know, coffee and tea and that kind of stuff. Well, Betty loved to dance and President Ford’s like me, he’d just as soon be shot as dance. And they were playing some song, I don’t remember what it was right now - it was a band, it was like Frank Sinatra or something - and they were sitting at the table with three or four couples and ourselves. She wanted to dance and he didn’t want to and I thought she was going to kill him right there on the spot. And she finally reached over and grabbed his arm and absolutely physically yanked him out on the dance floor. Anyway, I did see Betty mad.

Smith: You talked about his punctuality. It was a religion, punctuality, and she’s quite the opposite. Did you ever observe that?

Frampton: I’m not sure. I don’t think so.

Smith: What about his sense of humor? You told me he wasn’t a joke teller.

Frampton: I think being in that kind of position, you just have to, by nature, be a little more serious.
Smith: Did you talk politics? Contemporary events?

Frampton: We did talk politics a little bit. Not at great length. In my own particular case, I’m a moderate Democrat, but in many respects, if the Ford of the Republican Party were in power today, I’d probably be aligned much more closely with Ford and his beliefs. I mean, he was a fiscal conservative, absolutely, but on the other hand, he didn’t take it to the extreme that some groups take it today. I mean, he was pro-choice, as we know.

Smith: In my eulogy in Grand Rapids, I made reference to the fact that most of us get more conservative as we get older. Fiscally, he certainly remained a traditional, budget-balancing conservative. But when it came to a lot of social issues…you wonder whether it was partly that the party had just moved so far to the right, or whether maybe she had some impact or the children or what it was. And then I wonder, having gone through the intervention with her and the compassion that all of that entailed, whether that was a factor. I’m thinking of abortion rights or gay rights, things that you don’t associate with the conservative Republican.

Frampton: Oh, very much so. I think that’s right. And I can remember him lamenting the days when there was more collaboration and you didn’t have the poison in the air. I can remember him making a few comments about him and Tip O’Neill. That they would strongly disagree on the issues, but they would sit down, they wouldn’t personalize it, and they would look for common solutions. And I thought that was good. And he wasn’t, in my opinion, so anti-government everything. I mean, I do believe I’m right that, in his presidency, he put in the gas mileage EPA rule. I’m not sure if it was the EPA. So, he recognized that there was a role for government. In certain circumstances, it needed to be temporary or it needed to be modified because he was conservative, but he wasn’t extreme. And he also recognized that we all kind of need to work together here. I can remember him saying this - we would be more successful if government and business and people worked together in collaborative partnerships.

Smith: That says something about how the relationship with Jimmy Carter evolved. Again, if you’d done an interview with him in 1977, you’d get a very different
portrait of that relationship than if you talked to him twenty years later. I’ve often wondered if one of the things that brought them together is that they both ran against Ronald Reagan.

Frampton: Could be. But Ford was somebody who wanted to get things done. He was action oriented. I mean, clearly he was a Republican, but he also just wanted to do good things for the country, where politicians, in my opinion, today are just so paranoid in preserving their own party that they lose any sense of doing some smart balancing.

Smith: I’ve also wondered whether part of the fiscal conservatism was a by-product of the Depression.

Frampton: Of course. He’s the same age as my parents. Absolutely. My mother still saves the Christmas wrappings from one year to the next as I’m sure President Ford would, too.

Smith: How do you think he handled aging?

Frampton: I think he handled it great. I don’t know about that last couple of years because we didn’t see him then, but up until then. How old was he when he passed?

Smith: He was 93.

Frampton: Then certainly through 90, he was terrific because he was coming back here. I played golf with him, which I thought was wonderful. I’m going to guess he was 89 or 90 and he wanted to play. He called and we played four or five holes. He wanted to play so bad and one of the security guys stood behind him so he could stand up. It was just unbelievable. He couldn’t stand up, yet with the assistance of this guy, we played like four or five holes. And, by the way, he was not embarrassed by that at age 89 or 90. I mean, he was glad to be out there.

Smith: We’re told he was very competitive.
Frampton: Oh, yeah. He wanted to do it. And, of course, the other thing is that he always was on top of everything. I mean, you could talk about almost any political subject. And that was really before the internet if you think about it.

Smith: Great newspaper reader.

Frampton: Oh, yeah. And he would talk every week, I know, to a lot of people whether it be former presidents or colleagues, et cetera. He was engaged.

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

Frampton: You know, I’m not sure that I do. No. I don’t think I do. A good man.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Frampton: That’s a wonderful question. I just think as a giver, somebody who gave a heck of a lot more than he took, whether it be with family or work or business or government or whatever. He was a giver.

Smith: That’s interesting because, you know, there was criticism of him for ‘commercializing’ the ex-presidency, which really boiled down to the fact that he went on boards. You’ve already mentioned your board in particular. Our understanding is that he took the same attitude toward all the boards that he was associated with. I mean, he was never window dressing.

Frampton: Wouldn’t everyone want to make some money for his family or his kids? Let’s not begrudge that. I mean, he made some. He certainly didn’t get rich, super rich, but he was good. But he wasn’t preoccupied with that. I mean, we were a volunteer board and he’d go talk to the kids at the school. He may have been on the American Express board for a long time and I remember he was on the Travelers’ board. But all that time, he was leading a balanced life.

Smith: And that’s what didn’t get covered.

Frampton: Right.

Smith: The campuses he visited. The charity work that he did.

Frampton: Exactly.
Smith: And, again, he and Jimmy Carter, one of the things that brought them together was the fact that both had to raise the money to build their presidential libraries. For him, that was something like fifteen million dollars, which doesn’t seem like much now, but to him it was pretty daunting at the time.

Frampton: A staggering amount of money.

Smith: Absolutely. For someone who had never spent much on a congressional campaign, he really had nothing to compare it with.

Frampton: Right. Interesting.

Smith: She had a lot of friends.

Frampton: Oh, yeah, I think one of the great things she did was the Alpine Gardens here.

Smith: We went yesterday. Very Impressive. What were the origins of that?

Frampton: You know, I’m not sure I quite know to be honest.

Smith: Did it start before you arrived?

Frampton: No, I just don’t know how it began. A wonderful lady I knew, Helen Fitch, and Betty were close friends and, a landscape architect, Marty Jones -I don’t know whose idea it was at first - but they were all there very early. She loved flowers. Flowers that are housed here are always gorgeous in the summertime. She used to go out there on Saturdays and pull weeds.

Smith: Really?

Frampton: Right, in addition to doing some fundraisers. But she worked like everybody else.

Smith: That’s great.

Frampton: Yeah, that was very nice.

Smith: And I take it there were people here, some of them have said as much to us, who had occasion to avail themselves of the Betty Ford Center.

Frampton: Oh, yeah, absolutely, throughout the community.
I’ll tell you another cute story about the Ford’s, a fun one. He had called one time and said he wanted to go play golf in Steamboat which is an hour away. And he said, “I’ve been playing golf a lot in Vail and I’ve heard Steamboat’s a really pretty place. I’d like to go there and play golf.” So we set up a trip with four couples. We got a bus and the idea is we would leave here in the morning at 8 o’clock or whatever, go over there and the spouses would go into downtown Steamboat and shop and have lunch for a couple of hours while the four guys would play golf, and then get back together and come back. He said he wanted to go and who he wanted to go and I called the other two couples. We were all set up. Sadly, I got the flu the day before, so what I’m now telling you is secondhand. I’m crushed that I didn’t get to go, but I’m pretty sure it’s true.

That night was the night of Desert Storm, the night before the golf trip. Of course, it was the first war that was really ever covered live by CNN and everybody was glued to their TV sets. But the next morning the group headed to Steamboat on the bus, a very simple old bus, and they got to a little town between here and there called Yampa. I mean, Yampa is a crossroads - if fifty or a hundred people live in Yampa, I’m surprised - and there’s one bar downtown. They get to Yampa on the way to golf and the bus breaks down. They have a couple of Secret Service guys there, too.

So, the four couples walk into this very grungy bar at 8 or 9 o’clock in the morning and it’s really grungy and there are one or two guys in there. They walk into the bar and there’s nobody there, but there’s a TV going on and it’s CNN covering the Gulf War. There’s a bartender there, of course. So, they all sit down and they get coffee or food or whatever and, of course, the bartender immediately comes over to start asking President Ford all these questions about the Gulf War, I mean, ‘Should we?’, ‘Should we not?’, this, that, and the other. Of course, this bartender had been up all night long and he knew a lot and was just absolutely right. Well, they had to bring another bus which would take about an hour and, from what I understand, about the time the other bus got there, there were about fifty people that had come to the restaurant because word had spread throughout the community that a former
president was in there and he was answering questions about the Gulf War. Anyway, I don’t know if you want that on tape, but it’s a great little story.

Smith: Were you surprised by the amount of reaction when he passed away? He’d been out of the public eye awhile, but it was really significant and it seemed to build as the week went on.

Frampton: Well, I think we were all surprised in some respects and then we weren’t surprised. If you took time to think about it, it was amazing how many people from here went to the service out in Palm Springs and then we went to the National Cathedral and it was an outpouring. I think maybe if you think back about it, it was a little bit of nostalgia and that politics has gotten so darned ugly now and so unpleasant. I just really hate it. If Ford represented anything, it would be a little bit more civility. Maybe people longed for that a little bit.

Smith: I think there’s a lot of truth in that and I think there’s a whole generation that were being introduced to him for the first time, they were watching these old film clips, and comparing it with the ugliness of contemporary politics. And it was right at the time the country needed to feel good about itself.

Frampton: Yeah, no question. That’s a good point.

Smith: What’s the future of this place?

Frampton: Well, I think, Vail will continue to do great. A lot of the reason why is because of the good foundation work Ford and others did here. It’s pretty much built out now, but as long as we have great skiing and 80 degree weather and no humidity, we’ll do fine.

Smith: You have a lot of elements going for you.

Frampton: Exactly.
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Smith: Obviously, I’d love to talk to you about August of 1974, but, did you have any contact with Congressman Ford before he became vice president?

Thomas: No, not really. Only to the extent that he would come to the White House in the Nixon era, and would brief us on meetings - brief us to let us know what had happened. Yes, from that aspect, yes. But I really didn’t know him.

Smith: Were you surprised when he was nominated to be vice president, or was it really, as we understand it, that basically Congress said, this is the one guy who we’ll confirm?

Thomas: I can’t remember whether I was surprised, but I understood that he would be part of the club, and that I think that he would do the right thing for them.

Smith: What was different about Congress in those days? Because we hear about this bipartisanship and the civility, and yet that wasn’t exactly an era of good feeling – in the 60s and 70s.

Thomas: Well, I think everybody liked President Ford, or Congressman Ford, or whatever. They liked him. They didn’t feel that he was venal as some of the others later became. And as much as he fought for his own party, he still wasn’t mean spirited, so I think that everyone liked him, Jerry. You really did have a feeling that he was not so partisan and vindictive.

Smith: Was it a different culture on Capitol Hill in those days? Let me give you one example: in those days you had two parties that each had a liberal wing and conservative wing.

Thomas: That’s true.

Smith: Which meant, presumably, that you had to – even within your own caucus – you had to have some experience in dealing with people with whom you were ideologically in disagreement. Which was good preparation.
Thomas: I think there was much more of a sense of politics as the art of compromise. You definitely had that feeling that, except for maybe the southerners on the issues of civil rights and so forth, who were really off the deep end - Bill Bole(?), and so forth. But I think definitely you had the sense of… Bipartisanship was carried to the hilt later on with Reagan and so forth. I mean, that bipartisanship-partisanship.

Smith: When did you first decide that Richard Nixon was going to have to resign?

Thomas: In October, ’73. My office was sending me with Henry Kissinger for the next flare up in the Middle East, and Kissinger was going there as a mediator. And even though he denied he had any role or any plan, of course he did. We went to Israel, we went to Saudi Arabia, and so forth, and Kissinger in his usual candid, credible way, told us no, he had no plan or anything. When we left Israel all the Israel radio had the whole plan laid out, so, it caught up with him.

But it was a great opportunity to cover a story and go to the Middle East, but I told all my friends I couldn’t say no to my boss to take a trip like that. But I said, I want to be here, because Nixon is going to have to resign. I wasn’t so intuitive it was all laid out really. So I really didn’t want to go, and then I thought: well, Kissinger has to accept the resignation under our…at least I’ll be part of act. And the first thing, I got on the plane with Kissinger and I said, “Is Nixon going to resign?” He said, “What? What are you saying?” in his lovely accent. You could never mistake this man. But anyway, so I definitely had the feeling that he was finished.

Smith: It’s funny, your timing is perfect because, of course, it was in October when Agnew resigned, and then came the Saturday Night Massacre. And this trip was after the Saturday Night Massacre.

Thomas: That’s right.

Smith: What are your memories of the Saturday Night Massacre? Did it feel like a Constitutional crisis was enveloping the country?
Thomas: Yes, it did. And it was a Saturday night and everybody was off to different banquets and so forth, and it struck the whole town. It was shocking. I think you have to call it trauma. It was a political, traumatic moment. Might be also moments of courage when you had people standing up against it.

Smith: Maybe you could take a minute – for people who didn’t live through Watergate, for whom it’s just in a textbook, and they don’t know what it was all about – can you encapsulate what the offense was or offenses that go by the name of Watergate?

Thomas: Well, I think you had great moments of courage in terms of Cox turning down business, and then, of course, Nixon had his friends who were willing to take over the Justice Department, but you definitely felt an emptiness, a tragedy. All of these things, because it wasn’t us. These things don’t happen in America. I really think that it showed how bereft Nixon was, and how he was on the ropes.

Smith: And how did he look at that time? How did he conduct himself?

Thomas: He began to look like dead man walking. You could tell that he was very, very upset and I was with him when he had gone to the hospital. We were covering him there, and then when he came back in the Rose Garden. He had a real flare up of, what did he say…

Smith: Wasn’t he in the hospital when the tapes were revealed? Remember, one of his trips to the hospital…

Thomas: That’s when he realized that…

Smith: That the taping system was revealed.

Thomas: But when he came back to the Rose Garden, he said something very classic, that he wasn’t going to wallow in Watergate and so forth. But we knew how upset he was and the whole family, and he said this to reporters and the cameramen, because those were the only ones in the Rose Garden. I think everyone knew that it was almost over by this time.

Smith: And could you see that with the family’s behavior at the time?
Thomas: Yes.

Smith: Did Mrs. Nixon ever say anything to indicate that she, for example, understood the seriousness of the situation.

Thomas: You could see that she knew a lot in terms of the pain of the whole thing, and resented it, of course. But also she showed that she loved her husband. We asked her questions that probably no other First Lady would answer, because she really stuck by her husband. It must have been very painful because we didn’t let up on her at all. And I’ll always regret that I didn’t write her a note or something to say how much I admired her. She was a real human being, a great human being, and not a Plastic Pat, as they tried to send her off. I was in a dilemma of saying, well if I write a personal note to her, as a reporter, it might compromise me. But I should have done it, and I’ll regret it all my life, because she was so nice. She was a wonderful lady.

Smith: We did an interview with Lucy Winchester, her social secretary, and discovered she had a marvelous sense of humor. And occasionally a ribald sense of humor. Lucy told the story about – they’d just come back from their first trip to Europe – and someone on Haldeman’s staff, thinking it was the height of sophistication, had picked up in Paris an inflatable female doll – a sex toy – and brought it back. Lucy found out about it and thought it would be a riot to inflate it. She told Mrs. Nixon, who thought it would be equally funny, and it turned out the President had invited the DAR over to the White House that day – upstairs to see…so Mrs. Nixon and Lucy Winchester are walking down the west hall, walking hand in hand with this blown up doll, deciding where to put it. And they finally put it in the Queen’s Bedroom. Which again, is not what you’d thought of as Pat Nixon in public.

Thomas: No, she’s very bright, but she also had learned in the years of politics that the quieter you are, the better off you are.

Smith: Do you think she disliked the political life?

Thomas: She disliked the pain that she went through in 1960, and then she didn’t want him to run again. She played a very low-key part in ’68. She was along, but that’s it. Because in 1960 they ran her as Pat for First Lady, and the rejection,
or his failure to win, she felt that very personally. So she was rejected. So that was very hard for her. And after that she went into a real solitude – almost seemed to reject everything. But I ran into her once during that in between interregnum and it was in New York City and she was taking her two daughters, young daughters to a museum on a bus. She seemed to be having the time of her life – free at last from all those things. That’s why I think she really enjoyed New York and she enjoyed the freedom from…and he runs again.

Smith: Did you have a sense of what the relationship was between Nixon and Ford. Because there are all these stories that clearly indicate that Ford wasn’t his first choice for vice president. And there are stories to the effect that he regarded Ford as his insurance policy against being impeached - that they would never go ahead and get rid of him because it would mean Jerry Ford…which was a real misreading of Congress. But, does that dovetail with what your sense was of the relationship?

Thomas: I think that the Fords were never invited to the family private quarters which was shocking. I’m sorry – the Fords were never invited to the Nixon – so you didn’t feel any closeness at all. Empathy, maybe, for everybody’s suffering, but not close.

Smith: And Ford was on a tightrope. He was in this very awkward position where, on the one hand he had to be defending the president; and on the other, he couldn’t defend him to the point of losing his own credibility. Because, no one wanted to admit it, but, let’s face it, he could find himself…

Thomas: Well, he was on the road promoting Nixon, and yet at the same time getting the truth – that it wasn’t going to hold. That Nixon was going to have to go, he was getting that word assuredly. So I think he was in a dilemma.

Smith: You think he knew before the first of August, and I don’t mean the specific of the tapes or anything like that, but the historical account has always been, Haig called him at the beginning of August, told him about the smoking gun. They realized they were never going to live in the vice president’s house and all that. All of which I think is true, but do you think that someone with his
political experience and instincts and contacts, do you think that’s when he really first thought he might be president? Or he might have surmised earlier?

Thomas: I think he knew. He knew enough politics to know whether you can survive the storm or not. I think he definitely knew that Nixon couldn’t hold on. I’m sure.

Smith: For people who weren’t around, those last days in the Nixon presidency, what was the mood like in the White House and in this city?

Thomas: It was darkness at noon. It was inevitable. As inexorable as a Greek tragedy. Nothing he could do could put Humpty-Dumpty back together again. He was holding different – his people, the PR people, were doing the best they could in every way. They were having sessions with reporters and so forth.

Smith: Really? Was he, himself, available?

Thomas: Not in that respect.

Smith: What was the message they were trying to communicate to you? That it was business as usual and he was going to just keep on being president?

Thomas: That’s what his message was. He was not going to…President Clinton was asked outright whether he was going to resign when this Monica Lewinski thing came up, but no one asked Nixon that. But it was there like a dark cloud. It was, as I say, it was like going to a Greek tragedy and you know that everything was going to be doomed at the end.

Smith: For example: the tape, the smoking gun tape. Did that take the press by surprise? Was there any advance notice – any leaks, any reporting that indicated that there was, in fact, in these tapes something that might terminate the Nixon presidency?

Thomas: Well, you began to get the idea that something was terribly wrong. Nothing parsed. And the Post, by this time, had eighteen reporters on the story. So did the New York Times. It was relentless. Every day you picked up another paper and steps that showed that there was no way out. It was closing in on him.
Smith: And the night that he resigned. Do you remember when you heard that he was actually going to go? During the day, or did you know before? It was a Thursday night that he made the speech to the country, Thursday night, the 8th of August.

Thomas: I was on some sort of program in Virginia and I was rushing back for the speech. I came in through another gateway, not the usual northwest gate, but the back of the White House. I was running and I ran into President Nixon, who had come across from his office in the EOB, and he looked pretty haggard. I said, “Good luck, Mr. President.” By this time I knew it was fatal. And he said to me, “If you’ve ever prayed before, pray for me.” And then I went into the press office and then he claimed that everything was in the transcript and so forth, and it was doomsday the night before we knew.

Smith: So then you have a new president. Take us through that rollercoaster. On the morning of the 9th, when first you have Nixon’s farewell, and then two hours later you have, in the same room, you reboot the country. Were you in the White House for the Nixon farewell?

Thomas: Yes. And I was in the East Room for both things. “Our long national nightmare…”

Smith: Describe those.

Thomas: I thought that it was so poignant with Nixon delivering his swansong and his wife standing next to him, and the girls, tears coming down their faces when he…and he didn’t even mention Pat. Everybody noticed that. He talked about his sacred mother and so forth. So, I didn’t fault him for that because how can think of everything, and there she is with you.

Smith: He said afterwards that he couldn’t have gotten through it if he had mentioned Pat.

Thomas: I believe that. I think that’s true. And then, of course, he quoted Teddy Roosevelt, “Pick yourself up, dust yourself off…” and a lot of presidents have quoted that, too, including this one. Dusting yourself off. But the whole front row of the staffers were crying. It was tremendous in history.
Smith: Did you think: there has never been a day before like this in American history, and hopefully there will never another?

Thomas: That’s right. The same thing. And, of course, there had never been a day like Kennedy’s assassination, and LBJ being sworn in on Air Force One. So these things do happen, and you’ve got to be ready for the big shock.

Smith: The mood, I assume, was very different a couple of hours later? Obviously, it still must have been very somber, the mood in the East Room when…

Thomas: I didn’t see any jubilation or anything. But solemnity and very somber in the sense that you felt very sorry for the Nixons waving goodbye and so forth. Really realizing what they must be feeling, and then the Fords saw them to the South Lawn. I don’t think you had any great sense of exuberation.

Smith: Mrs. Ford said it was the worst day of her life, afterwards. I think on multiple levels, because they were friends, they’d been friends, but also because I don’t think…

Thomas: Ford always looked like he was going to cry. He had that kind of face that…

Smith: And, also, I don’t think she wanted to move into the White House. I don’t think she wanted to be First Lady.

Thomas: No. We went to pick them up the next day at his home and he was doing his own English muffins, and toasting it. It was the one colorful piece we had on him - makes his own breakfast.

Smith: I think anyone knowing Mrs. Ford - he’d probably been making his own breakfast for years. I don’t think he did it for your benefit.

Thomas: It was the same routine. That’s right. Everyone liked President Ford, the man. Not just a nice guy, but a regular guy. And he wasn’t the new guy on the block. We had seen him so much, and we knew him. He was Jerry to most people.

Smith: Was there a different atmosphere in the press room after that – just in terms of the relationship with the…
Thomas: Yes. We thought a big cloud had been lifted because it was darkness at noon for six months. It was sad when he left us all in – he didn’t, but whatever or whoever saw to it, so that he could take his last walk around the grounds. We were locked in the press room. We couldn’t come, we couldn’t go, we were detained, we thought there was another coupe de tat or something.

Smith: Was that on the morning of the 9th - the morning of the departure?

Thomas: No, I’m not sure.

Smith: Tell me about Jerry terHorst. Who was he?

Thomas: He was the greatest press secretary the White House has ever known, in my White House.

Smith: For not very long though, was it?

Thomas: He was honest and he had the highest integrity when he left because there are certain things, certain press secretaries, when they leave their jobs, they go right to kiss and tell books. But their moment of greatness is not at a time when it should be which is, you can’t, you’re not going to do this. You’re not going to say this. You’re not going to tolerate something that goes against your sense of honesty and integrity. I always say in my speeches that Jerry terHorst was the best. He lasted one day almost – just a few days.

Smith: What made him the best?

Thomas: Because he resigned when his own integrity had been really assaulted, he felt. A couple of reporters, one for the Miami News, and I think the New York Times, had come to him on Friday and told him that they understood that President Ford had sent an emissary to San Clemente to pardon, to issue a pardon for President Nixon. Well, Jerry went to Phil Buchen, who was counsel, and Buchen denied it, and I guess he was told to keep it totally secret. Anyway, so Jerry came out and told the reporters, “Nothing to it.” Didn’t say preposterous as they always used to say, but something to that.

And then, I guess, the next day, it was Saturday and he was told the whole thing and told the truth, and he decided to resign. But he felt, personally, that
he had lied to reporters and that just absolutely went against the grain. But he stayed in office until that Sunday, but he quit by the end of the day. And I remember that Sunday, I was wire service so you’re always on the body watch, and President Ford decided to go to church – St. John’s across Lafayette Park at eight o’clock mass or service. So we usually go into the church when he’s in, but this time we didn’t and we were waiting outside and President Ford came out of the church and I said, “Mr. President, what are you doing for the rest of the day?” Because we wanted to go home and sleep. And he said, “Well, I’m going to have an announcement pretty soon.” So the AP man and I raced across Lafayette Park and went toward the press room in the White House and told, I can’t even remember saying it, but I was told that I told my office that President Nixon was going to resign.

Smith: Was going to be pardoned?

Thomas: Was going to be pardoned, yeah, I’m sorry. There was something in Ford’s voice and whatever. And I said, “It’s not official or anything else, but I’m saying this.” So, sure enough, in an hour or so, around ten o’clock I think it was, we went into the Oval Office as a pool of reporters and President Ford announced the pardon. Full and complete and whatever the wording was, pardon of Nixon. Well, you know we ran out of the press office, but he didn’t have TV on. They just brought in the still photographers, which was – I don’t blame them in that respect. Of course a lot of America would have been sleeping at that time. But anyway, it was…

Smith: And what was the reaction?

Thomas: My reaction?

Smith: And those around you. Yours and the country’s.

Thomas: I wasn’t too shocked.

Smith: Did the timing surprise you?

Thomas: Yes, the timing did, because I thought one month – because it indicated a deal. I mean, you definitely had this feeling that Nixon was given a pass. And I’m sure he was and we weren’t aware, but I was positive that the family had
been calling – the Nixon family had been calling President Ford. And Nixon was also very, very worried. We understood that he was maybe having to go to district jail or something, and it was a horrifying thought. So, I think that a lot in the country didn’t agree with the pardon at all. It isn’t that they wanted revenge, it’s just that I think they felt that an ordinary, so-called, criminal would have gotten less.

Smith: What do you say to the argument that, say Ford hadn’t pardoned Nixon, and – well, you had to have been there because he talked about the first press conference. I think it was the 28th of August – it was right at the end of August, and he went in there, I think maybe naively, because he could be naïve sometimes. Didn’t he have this, almost sense of, innocence about him.

Thomas: You always felt he was innocent of everything. And you always felt that his staff were the ones that were more diabolical.

Smith: But he went into this press conference believing that people would want to talk about inflation and the economy and the Middle East, and that’s not what you wanted to talk about, was it?

Thomas: No.

Smith: What did you want to talk about?

Thomas: And he didn’t want to tell the truth, that he felt sorry for Nixon. I think that was it.

Smith: His recollection of that press conference was that it was taken up with questions about Richard Nixon. Nixon’s papers, and Nixon’s…

Thomas: Absolutely. We were totally dominated by it. I asked him whether he was going to go the judicial route, or whether he was going to pardon him. And I got this very fuzzy answer.

Smith: He left that press conference angry. And I think it was anger partly at the press corps for obsessing about Nixon, and maybe a little bit of anger directed at himself for naively believing that it wouldn’t be about Nixon.

Thomas: That it wouldn’t be, yeah.
Smith: But, that said. If he hadn’t pardoned Nixon, the other side of the coin is, that preoccupation would have continued. The country’s obsession with Nixon and supposedly Jaworski was telling him that it could be up to two years before a trial began, assuming you could get a fair trial in the District of Columbia, etc., etc.

In retrospect, do you think the pardon was necessary? Lots of people, obviously changed their mind from their initial reaction. What would have been the consequences of not pardoning Nixon, of letting the legal process play itself out?

Thomas: I think it would have hung over the White House, no question about it. And I didn’t agree with the pardon at the time, but time is a great healer. I think everybody softens their attitude in terms of, was it right or was it wrong? Life goes on and you pass on. I thought that he moved too fast and he left a question mark in the minds of most of the public that the fix was in. That there was a deal, which he had to deny often, early and often.

Smith: You know when he said when the Kennedy Library gave him the Profiles in Courage Award, he said, after – he’d been answering that question for twenty-five years. He said, “No one asked the question anymore.” Because it was the Kennedy’s, in effect, putting the seal of approval on what he had done. It just transformed the atmosphere.

Thomas: We never got the whole truth. The American people never get the truth. Every commission that has investigated, like the Kennedy assassination, everything else – the people involved in these commissions, they go a certain point, they learn a certain truth and they refuse to make it public. Certainly on 9/11, I mean there are so many questions. The president was warned, almost to the moment, in the sense of who’s going to do 9/11 and he didn’t act on anything. And everything else. And Oswald.

Smith: Did you ever talk with Ford about the Warren Commission?

Thomas: No, and I wish I had. I wish I had because I think that nobody wanted to step up to the plate. Because I think maybe they think they are saving the country
– I don’t think that. I think, to leave all these question marks in history, especially when they come close to the truth and they step away…

Smith: What would be an alternative theory that you think at least is plausible? Do you think the Cuban connection, or the Mafia connection, or some combination of the two?

Thomas: Either of those, but they should have laid it on the line. I think that history is painful, but I think that we should not be denied. Because that’s always my question: “why?”

Smith: So you think that we, even now, don’t have the full story of what happened leading up to the Kennedy assassination?

Thomas: I don’t think we have the full story at all. I think Oswald did it, but I think there were forces…for example: Ruby. Why would Ruby be tipped off that Oswald was going to come through the police library in Dallas, the exact timing, have a loaded gun, sandwiches for the police – bribing them with a sandwich – and shoot him. They say the alleged excuse was he felt sorry for Jackie. Give me a break! He was in custody, going in for his first major interrogation. No, doesn’t parse. Not that anything makes sense.

Smith: Speaking of assassination attempts, of course there were two on President Ford. Were you present for either of those? The two assassination attempts on Ford in California?

Thomas: I was there on one.

Smith: The first one was in Sacramento, at the state capital.

Thomas: I wasn’t in Sacramento.

Smith: And then in San Francisco.

Thomas: Yeah, San Francisco. That was shocking. I thought nobody would want to assassinate President Ford. He’s a nice guy, he hadn’t hurt anybody. No, it was a shock. These were real aberrations – it’s like Hinkley – just out of the blue, for no reason that makes sense. No logic. It wasn’t revenge or anything that you could really…
Smith: Was there a different mood? When the Nixons left the White House, was there just a different mood around the place?

Thomas: Oh, yes, definitely. A big sigh of relief because we had been living with this day to day and there was a lot of obvious suffering.

Smith: Was it more open, or relaxing, relatively speaking? How was it different? Ford was clearly someone comfortable with himself, so there wasn’t this melodrama surrounding.

Thomas: Yeah, we were more comfortable with Ford, obviously. Nixon was not a people person, except if he was addressing a crowd of three thousand. But one on one he was, “Do you like my shoes?” “Do you like my cufflinks?” Anything for no small talk.

Smith: Or very small talk.

Thomas: It seemed so awkward. I think he was very reserved, very shy in a way.

Smith: Remember, he famously described himself as an introvert in an extrovert’s profession.

Thomas: Is that right?

Smith: Which suggests self-knowledge.

Thomas: That’s right. No, he had those moments when you were never quite sure…

Smith: And tell me about Mrs. Ford. Did you know she had a problem when she was in the White House?

Thomas: No, I didn’t know of any problem on drugs or alcohol or anything. I thought she was fabulous. Honest.

Smith: Tell me about her.

Thomas: Well, it’s a question of what can you say after you say you’re sorry? She was not afraid of the truth and I think she believed that if you told the truth, people would certainly accept it, and not pre-judge or judge. She called them as she
saw them. I loved her for that aspect. You asked her a question, she gave you the answer. It was fabulous.

Smith: But controversial in some quarters.

Thomas: She wasn’t afraid to say she had been divorced, or seeing a psychiatrist, it was just normal life. And yet, for every other First Lady, it was…

A couple of reporters and I were at a tea with Mrs. Nixon and they were passing around sherry, and we saw Mrs. Nixon reach for the sherry, and then pull back. We said, “Take it, we won’t write about it.” It was one of those – in those days women – it was different. Betty Ford wasn’t afraid of anything. Or at least you had this impression. She was so straight and honest. Ask her a question, she gave you an answer.

Smith: Of course, the famous *Sixty Minutes* interview got her in all sorts of hot water.

Thomas: I wouldn’t be a bit surprised.

Smith: What if Susan had an affair, talked about marijuana. Now, in the White House, I assume, I’ve been told, that all the political staff sort of gasped. That they saw her at that point as a real political detriment, and it was only later, to their astonishment, that the polls came in and discovered that, except for some conservative Republicans who were probably going to vote for Reagan, anyway, that she was an asset.

Thomas: Very candid. But, I think Ford told her, “You lost me 150,000 votes.”

Smith: But it didn’t shut her up, did it?

Thomas: She gave an honest answer, I wouldn’t be a bit surprised what she said.

Smith: Did you see much of her while they were in the White House – did she have much contact with the press?

Thomas: We did. We were allowed to cover things and she was always very kind.

Smith: Did she seem happy to you?
Thomas: Yes. Not jumping up and down, but I think she definitely felt at home and nothing went to her head. She took us all in stride. I’m relating to how she dealt with the press.

Smith: And the kids?

Thomas: They were normal. They were teenage, and I’m sure they gave their family some moments – parents, I mean.

Smith: Vietnam and the fall of Saigon. You are in the middle of that story. Tell me about the mood. First of all, there apparently was a real raging debate going on in the Oval Office about how frank we should be in acknowledging that this is the end. What is your recollection of the days surrounding it?

Thomas: My recollection is being at Andrews Air Force Base – there’s a big picture of that. We were running after Ford, and he didn’t want to say. So we were trying to get a quote from him on the fall of Saigon and so forth. I said, “Why is he running away. Why doesn’t he just stand here and say, “Yes, it’s all over. Hurray.”

Smith: I’ve seen the film, there’s a smile on his face. It is sort of almost a cat and mouse.

Thomas: Yeah, that’s true, but also, I think that America doesn’t lose anything. And that was not a big victory, it was a total defeat and it left a lot of bad feelings, I think. It had Reagan and everyone calling it a noble cause every five minutes. I said, what noble cause? It certainly was not a noble cause and we were defeated. So the Vietnam syndrome of trying to get rid of…so I thought that President Ford felt that it was not a great honor for the country.

Smith: He said it was the most humiliating experience of his life – to be in the Oval Office and watch.

Thomas: He’d been in the Navy and so forth, and I think you have a different sense about what you fight for.

Smith: What was his historical role? Was it to clean up the messes left by his predecessors?
Thomas: I think there was a lot in the past that you had to get rid of, and there was no formula for doing it. How he faced this, what do you? How do you tell the American people it’s over, but it’s not a big raving victory. So I think there were touchy moments. No question. And on the resignation, the pardon, the same thing. He couldn’t say, “I felt sorry President Nixon.” You can’t say that.

Smith: Plus, let’s face it, he had a rough economy. It was turning around by the time he left and I think one of the things he always regretted was, obviously, and one regret they don’t get a second term.

Thomas: He had a lot of touchy moments, he really did.

Smith: Do you think the pardon, in the end, is what cost him the re-election? Or the economy?

Thomas: I think the pardon hurt him a lot. Because, as I say, people thought – I don’t know, I can’t speak, I shouldn’t say people thought – but I do say that a lot of people thought that a deal was made. And that rubs you the wrong way, even if it was a sympathetic move. Things were not going well. I think that President Ford made a big mistake when he said he was going to do the same thing that Nixon had done in terms of the domestic policy and everything else. And people said, “What is this?”

Smith: Of course, eventually, he got himself a cabinet of his own with some very good people. A lot of people look at that cabinet, once it was remade, and they say, if nothing else, here’s a guy who is secure enough in himself to surround himself with some high power egos and intellects.

Thomas: That’s true. But I don’t think people really knew him. He didn’t have time enough, and he should have had Jerry terHorst and not some of the successors. I don’t think they understood him, but Jerry did. And he would have helped him help everybody. He’d been a newsman twenty-nine years for Michigan and Washington, and so would have known how to handle things. I think that constant Ford falling…
Smith: The story that no one ever knew. When he fell down those steps in Vienna, in the rain, he was holding the umbrella for Mrs. Ford and he slipped and everything, and falls. And the people around him, the sycophants, were all berating the press and the photographers for taking the picture. And he said, “Of course they took the picture. If they hadn’t they would have lost their job.”

Thomas: That shows you how honest a man he is. Very good.

Smith: I don’t think Lyndon Johnson would have said that.

Thomas: No.

Smith: You saw him after he left office. You saw him on a number of occasions. I know you were out at a conference that we did out in Ann Arbor.

Thomas: Yes, he was very nice. We were like old friends, then. In fact, I saw him at the convention before he collapsed and he gave me a big hug and he seemed in good spirits and seemed to be fine.

Smith: He actually liked reporters.

Thomas: Because he teased them a lot, too. I think he did like reporters. Because we liked him – he knew that. There was a feedback there. You couldn’t dislike President Ford.

Smith: It is no accident there was a journalist among the eulogists at the cathedral. It was originally going to be Hugh Sidey and then he died. So it was Tom Brokaw.

Thomas: Oh, that’s how it happened.

Smith: Yeah. Were you surprised at all by the reaction – that there was as much reaction when he died. You’d see these streets lined with a lot of young people who weren’t even alive when he was in the White House.

Thomas: I think there was definitely a sense of loss because he behaved – he didn’t overstep the line in any way and he was very respectful, and I remember once
calling him about President Bush, because I was very unhappy with the moves that he was making.

Smith: Bush ’43? The current President Bush?

Thomas: Bush ’43, yes. Especially the curbing of civil rights and torture, secret prisons. Well, I called President Ford, but it wasn’t on that subject, except that I got into it. And he got very angry with me because he knew I was trying to lead him down the garden path, you know. He felt very personally angry that I would even touch on such subjects and try to diminish him in the eyes of President Bush. So our encounter was not very happy, but I thought I would be very remiss if I didn’t question him on these moves – the things that were happening to the country.

Smith: Do you think it was difficult for him having Rumsfeld and Cheney and O’Neill – his people?

Thomas: They were his people, but he loved them. He really thought they were stalwart and just very good. Cheney had his respect and so forth. I think that they were different then. It’s unbelievable. Cheney, very, very quiet. He’d move around – you never had any sense about him at all until he became a Congressman and voted against Head Start six times. I thought, “Who is this man? I can’t believe it.” And then of course, when he went into the White House, he was really diabolical. Operated behind the scenes. He was right hand in glove with the neo-conservatives on all things.

Smith: And Gerald Ford was no neo-conservative.

Thomas: No, not at all. And he certainly was a man you could deal with in a bipartisan way and many things. I think he put the country first.

Smith: That’s the perfect note on which to end.
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Smith: First of all, thank you so much for doing this. Mrs. Ford’s been told and is very appreciative of your willingness to talk to us.

Haller: A great lady. A great lady.

Smith: Why is she a great lady?

Haller: Because she respected everybody. For instance, for me, she let me do my thing. She knew I was a professional and as a matter of fact she is the only First Lady actually who gave me several recipes like the one for the rib roast the way she wanted it done. Things like that. And beef stew with walnuts. That I had to do, and that was her recipe. She was a great lady. I mean, I never hear her make any complaints. She might have made some suggestions about food, but that’s it. The President, he was great. I mean, he had a great appetite.

Smith: Did he?

Haller: He'd swim every evening and he kept trim. He’d go outside and swim every night. He was a great guy. So were the kids. Michael, I didn’t see him too often. I think he is a minister. And then there was Jack and then there was Steve. They were great people. One time, when they were there about a year, Jack told me, “Chef, you know, I’m here and I’ve never had a bad meal.” I said, “You’re never going to get one. It’s not happening.” I mean, I was at peace with these people.

Smith: That’s interesting you say that, because of all the families that have lived in the White House, they’re the ones who never expected, never aspired to live there. Did that make them in some ways different?

Haller: Oh, absolutely. They didn’t have the pressure like other presidents had because a lot of presidents, when they have the election or before the election
Smith: Let me go back a little bit. Tell us a little bit about yourself before the Fords entered your life. You obviously had been at the White House for some time.

Haller: Yeah, twenty-one years.

Smith: Twenty-one years. And how did that begin?

Haller: I emigrated from Switzerland. After World War II, the United States, the prestige they had in Europe was unbelievable. I mean, they got rid of Hitler. I was in the Swiss Army and didn’t have to fight, fortunately. And then made an apprenticeship and I spent another six years in Switzerland to perfect my skills, all in 5-star hotels. And then, in Bern, the capital of Switzerland, a hotel owner gave me a chance to go to Canada. I wanted to go to Canada and then the United States. So I went to Montreal and worked there for three years at the Ritz Carlton Hotel and then I came to the United States. And then I worked in some fine hotels like the Hotel Hampshire House in Central Park South and then again Park Avenue at the Sheraton East Hotel that was also a 5-star hotel. But at the Hotel Hampshire House, there were people like John Wayne, Bob Hope, and Lucille Ball. They all had apartments there. So that was a great job for a so-called Executive Chef.

Then I went over to Park Avenue, a bigger job. That was in the 60’s, and I worked there for four years. And then I got a phone call. I had made myself a name in New York about being a good chef, so I got a phone call from Mrs. Johnson saying that they’re looking for a chef and asking me if I’d be interested in the job. I said I would be because I thought the prestige and, hey, it’s the tops. So January 1st or something like that, I went to Washington. I was interviewed by Mrs. Johnson. Very, very nice lady. I spent there at least an hour and she told me to please the president is not easy and I said I’d find that out later. And then there were ladies in the background, you know, sitting there and looking at me and probably after they were talking, “What do you think about him?”

Smith: Did she talk about their preferences in food?
Haller: Yes, she did talk about food and she wanted to know if I’d be flexible. Not only French cuisine. Whatever they wanted, that’s what they’re going to get.

Smith: Including barbecue?

Haller: Well, at that time, they used to have a Barbecue King, they called him. They brought him from Texas and he, the Barbecue King, I saw was excellent, absolutely excellent. Barbecued small ribs and he did absolutely a fine job, so I didn’t have to do that. On top of it, President Johnson had the battle of the bulge and doctors told him he has to go on a diet. He had to watch his diet. That’s what it was.

But one time, one evening, we had dinner and it was roast beef on a Sunday night and I had so-called pole beans from Florida and I saw there were too many strings on there, but I served them anyway. I couldn’t do anything else. So, the butler came out and served the dinner and he said, “The President wants to see you.” So I went in and I said, “This doesn’t sound good.” And he had the strings of the beans in his hand and he gave them to me and he said, “I give you the strings because I don’t have time to take them off next time.” I put them in my pocket. And the First Lady and Lucy were there and they were raving about the dinner. It was just before the wedding, before Lucy got married, so they didn’t want the chef to leave without telling them. I wouldn’t do things like that. I mean, the President was right, but he was very polite, he called me “Mr. Haller.” He could’ve called me something else, you know.

Smith: He loved tapioca pudding, right?

Haller: You had to have it ready all the time. There was a guy that used to be a Navy chef. He was the breakfast and lunch cook and he always made the tapioca pudding because he knew how to do it right. We always had that. Absolutely. If he wanted tapioca pudding and there wasn’t any tapioca pudding, he really would so-called raise hell, but it never happened. Never happened.

Smith: Now you had another wedding, of course, in the Nixon White House.
Haller: I had Lucy and then Linda. Two weddings. And then there was Patricia. That was during the Nixons, yeah, had another wedding. By the third one, I knew what I was doing. Always, every time, 600 people. And they used to call them hors d'oeuvre, in other words, like a meal from a buffet. And Johnson, for instance, I saw him inspect the buffet before the dinner. I said, “Wow, I hope everything is alright.” But I saw that he already started to eat before everybody came in so I knew everything was okay.

Smith: I’ve often thought that Mrs. Nixon hasn’t gotten in some ways, the recognition or the credit or the appreciation that maybe she deserves.

Haller: Yeah, she worked in the background.

Smith: Was she shy?

Haller: She was shy. No question about it. That’s the word that just came out when you asked me. She was shy. She was. A few times she wrote out some menus for me of what they would like. She was very nice also. Every Monday, I sent the menu up to the First Lady for the whole week. And, believe me, when they had guests, then we had the first course, the main course, salad, and dessert. When they didn’t have guests, we would serve a main course and salad and nothing else. No dessert. And that was for four different [presidents]. Even for President Ford. I started always out with the first course and they said cut it out. They didn’t want it. They went on TV every day, you know.

Smith: Let me ask you. Before he became President of course, he was Vice President. Did you have any interaction with him before he was President?

Haller: No, none at all.

Smith: Okay. How difficult were those last months of the Nixon presidency?

Haller: We could feel it. It seemed when you work at the White House, you get attached to the First Family and the First Family gets attached to the people who work for them. And we could see that the President was under stress and the whole family. But he used to come into the kitchen and talk to me about food. So now I have to tell you about his last morning at the White House.
By law, the old president has to be out by 12 o'clock, noon. And the new president comes in after that. With President Nixon, 7:30 I was upstairs in the kitchen and was ready to make breakfast for him and there he was in pajamas and bare feet talking to the butler in the kitchen. And when he saw me, he walked over to me, by this time I was at the stove, he shook hands with me and he said, “Chef, I have eaten all over the world, but your food is the best.” I remember that like it happened yesterday. So that was quite something I thought because he was leaving and all that stress, and I thought, he says that to the chef, and I thought that’s pretty cool. I said that was great.

Smith: Were you in the East Room when he said his goodbye that last day?

Haller: I was in the East Room, yes.

Smith: That must’ve been very emotional.

Haller: Yes. And then we saw him leave the White House and go in the helicopter. We saw him when the helicopter was talking off to the Air Force airport, and then it was for the last time and he went to California to San Clemente. And that was it. And then the Fords came in and they fit in pretty good.

Smith: Let me ask you something. Mrs. Ford wrote in her memoir that once they moved into the house, actually it was about a week before they moved into the house, but once they moved in, she was walking down the second floor hallway and saw staff and said ‘Good morning’ and no one responded.

Haller: Nobody knew her.

Smith: And she went to the usher and said, “Is there something? Do they not like us?” And he explained, “No one thought that at all. It was different with the Nixons who were a little more formal, maybe, so the word went out, “Feel free to converse with the First Family.” Was there that note of informality, I guess, is what I’m after?

Haller: If the President came into the kitchen, all I said was, “Good evening, Mr. President.” That’s it. I didn’t say, “Oh, Mr. President. How was dinner last night?” Nothing like that. They see so many people, they’re sick of seeing so many people. You have to understand that. And when he was downstairs in
the corridor walking, when he came, I disappeared. I mean, he knew I was working there. That’s what it was. They were afraid to talk to her.

Smith: Now, they got over that.

Haller: They got over that, sure.

Smith: Was that because of how the Fords were?

Haller: Yes, yes, absolutely.

Smith: How were things different?

Haller: Well, listen, every family is different. Every family is different, you know. And it’s like what I said, he didn’t have to run for president and he came in and the congress elected him, which was a great honor. And I thought that was a great selection. I thought that he deserved it and that he did an excellent job. I was surprised that he didn’t make it for a full term of four years. I was really surprised about that.

Smith: Early on, Mrs. Ford talked to you about food.

Haller: Yes, in my book, in the kitchen, she talks to me about food. And sometimes she came downstairs in the ground floor kitchen. In the White House, they had three kitchens. The second floor kitchen is for the First Family. My kitchen at home is bigger. The ground floor kitchen is for banquets and then there is a kitchen for a sous below the ground floor. That’s for the staff, the White House staff, which I had to take care of, too. Talking about the White House staff only I mean the staff in the residence which was about 85 people.

Smith: Now, it must’ve been that second floor kitchen, that small kitchen, the famous photo of him making his English muffins.

Haller: Oh, yeah, that’s the only time he made the muffin, you know, at the White House.

Smith: Oh, really?

Haller: I remember, I even told the guy sometimes working upstairs making dinner, he was a sous chef, he made the dinner upstairs. I mean, I couldn’t be there
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for 16 hours a day. I told him, “Hans, tomorrow, don’t stay there for dinner because everybody is to be out of the kitchen.” And he didn’t like that. He said, “Why?” I said, “Because the President’s going to go making his English muffins.”

Smith: Was that for the benefit of the press?

Haller: Yes, absolutely.

Smith: But as far as you know it’s the only time he did it?

Haller: It’s the only time.

Smith: Because I always thought it was because Mrs. Ford was not a morning person and I thought it was as easy for him to make his own breakfast as to wait for her.

Haller: I’m sure that he probably did, but at the White House, the butlers wouldn’t like that.

Smith: Tell us. What is the function of the various staff?

Haller: The butler does serving. They’re serving things and on state dinners. They also, I tell you, which was wonderful - they make sandwiches. I was not a sandwich guy. They always did on the first floor - they made sandwiches when they had parties. The butlers did that. And then they also took care of the silver and all the dishes. That was very important. If somebody broke a dish, fortunately for me, it never happened. It never happened that I cracked something. But then they wanted to make sure that they’re going to tell them. Just don’t put it in the garbage can. Now, think, this is in the inventory and take one plate off, you know. I mean, that can happen. Really, there’s one incident when a very good guy, a window cleaner, he had to clean the windows on the outside. He was physically fit, I tell you. And he’s hanging there, you know, he’d hook himself up and clean the windows outside the White House. When he was finished, he started again down at the bottom. You know, I don’t know how many windows, 40 windows? And then also the chandeliers, he had to clean. And in the East Room, they had a chandelier and he had to turn it and clean it and turn it and turn it and turn and all of a sudden,
bang, the chandelier came down and it crashed on the floor because he undid it in the ceiling, but that was never in the press.

Smith: Let me ask you, I’m sure it was that second floor dining room where Mrs. Kennedy had that gorgeous French wallpaper with scenes of the revolution – and Mrs. Ford had it covered over.

Haller: The family dining room? Okay, that was possible, because downstairs there are pictures in the so-called Diplomatic Room.

Smith: Yes. I think that’s the same, but this was military scenes.

Haller: The military scenes.

Smith: Yes, military scenes. And the story was, someone asked Mrs. Ford why she had it covered over and she said she recognized it was beautiful and historic but it wasn’t pleasant looking at scenes of battle while she was eating.

Haller: That’s absolutely her prerogative if she wants to do that.

Smith: Did she make changes? Either physically to the White House, or were there things that changed because she wanted them to?

Haller: Not much. They went along with what the staff was doing. I mean, the staff is very good. They know what they’re doing. Absolutely.

Smith: I’m told he’s very friendly anyway and that for some members of the staff, it took a little bit of getting used to. Specifically, I’ve been told a story about one of the butlers. It was a weekend and the President was watching football and he insisted he come in and join him and watch the game. I think the butler didn’t quite know how to respond.

Haller: Oh yeah, absolutely, he could do that. No question about it because if it was on a Sunday, he was alone there maybe, and he wanted to watch football. Some guys, they like somebody with you when they watch football. And I believe that he definitely would do that.

Smith: And I’m told with other butlers, he would talk sports. I mean, it was a relationship of equals.
Haller: Yes, absolutely. And one night, the butler’s telling me afterwards, they asked him because Jack is not here for dinner. Then the President was laughing, and said, “Yeah, maybe he doesn’t like the food.” You know he was talking with him. “Maybe he doesn’t like the food.” “Well, he’s not here, don’t worry about it.” And Jack was probably somewhere else eating pizza.

Smith: There’s a wonderful story about Steve when they first moved in. He told his parents he was going to turn in early. In fact, I guess he’d invited some friends over and they had food from the kitchen. The next morning at breakfast, the President asked how his evening was and before Steve could answer, he pushed forward the bill - because the First Family pays for their own food.

Haller: They pay for their own food, yes.

Smith: So that’s how he knew Steve was actually partying the night before rather than having turned in as he said he was going to. Did the kids have friends in?

Haller: Yes.

Smith: Much?

Haller: Not very much, I don’t think. I wouldn’t recall that they had a lot of friends in. The only thing I know is that they came into the kitchen and they’d make their own sandwiches sometimes. And Steve for instance, I think he never went to college. When he was 16, he bought a Jeep and he had a Secret Service man with him and he worked on a range. He worked for a farmer. And then, afterwards, somehow he got very successful as an actor. Did you see the series there? I don’t remember the name anymore, but that was running about for ten years. So, he did very well there.

Smith: Now, Susan, famously, had her prom in the East Room of the White House, her senior prom. Do you remember that?

Haller: Oh yes, I remember that.

Smith: Did you have to cook for that?
Haller: Oh yes. And Susan is a very nice person also. Terrific. All the way terrific. And then if you go to 1976, it was the biggest year for me as a chef at the White House because it was the Bicentennial, the 200 year celebration of the United States. They built a tent in the Rose Garden for 250 people. 250 people! You know, I mean, the kitchen is small at the White House, the ground floor kitchen and it’s not much bigger than this here. So I asked the chief usher, which is a stupid name – chief usher. I mean, he’s the administrator of the White House. I said, “What are you building here?” He said, “Don’t you know? There’s going to be state dinners in there.” I said, “Wow, 250 people.” And then on top of it, the fiscal year changed. They cut the money again in the spring, in May, that’s when they get you your allowance for the year. Now here they changed and wanted it to go to October, so we had to go for six months with the same money than what we had for one year, we had to go a year and a half. That was no good for me because I needed extra people working for me. And so I really worked hard.

Alright, 250 people. And so the main course we’d served right from the kitchen out there into the Rose Garden. 250. The first person who came was the Queen of England; served lobster as the first course. Cold lobster. You see, you want a cold dish for a first course because you can work on it ahead of time. That dish was ready. I don’t know how I did it, 25 lobsters, four pounds each. That was just for decoration on a platter. We had like French service. People didn’t have plate service. Now they have plate service, which I’m completely against. I can tell you why.

Smith: Yeah, why?

Haller: Because you have to cook much too early for that and you have to put it in the warmer and by the time the guests get it, it’s warmed up. Especially with a small kitchen like that. 250 people in the White House using our plates takes a lot of space. You know, ten plates or platter. With the platter, you can also beautifully decorate it. You can do it very nice. And when I used to have first course, at first it’s always a cold first course. Then when the first course went out, I start to cut the meat. Only then. With the plates, you have to cut it earlier.
Smith: Are you told in advance whether by Mrs. Ford or whoever, “The Queen likes this food”, “She doesn’t like this food.” What kind of input do you have?

Haller: For the foreign guests, the State Department always sent me a notice of what the foreign guests liked and did not like. So we work around it. That’s the way it was.

Smith: And would Mrs. Ford be involved in that process?

Haller: Making the menu? That’s where she comes in. She never changed a menu for me. Never. Fantastic. I mean, that was great for me, so I was relaxed. When she ever talked to me, she was wonderful.

Smith: Did you see her sense of humor?

Haller: Oh, yes, and so did he.

So the State Dinner, first there was the Queen of England. I have to tell you if you’re interested in the food. A big platter, and for the lobster, we had a 50 gallon steamer. You had to put that live lobster on a wooden board and tie it up so it was like this. Because when you cook a lobster, the tail comes in, you know, I mean. So I cooked the 25 lobsters. I mean, when you’re thinking back, it’s absolutely nuts. And then that was about two days before we served it.

Then the next day, we already started to take, and then the lobster had to have the medallions for the lobster on top. See, and then I had vegetables around the lobster. And then one pound lobsters for each person, a pound of lobster, but it was shelled, no more shell. And the guests, they helped themselves. That’s they way it was. They helped themselves to the food. Then for the main course, we had medallion veal with wild rice. And if wild rice is made right, it’s delicious, you know, with nuts and the walnuts, or maybe almonds, and with a very good sherry wine. And then for a vegetable, green beans with peeled cherry tomatoes. That gives it a little color. For the cheese course, port salut cheese. Port salut is excellent French cheese. And endive and water cress salad. For dessert, a raspberry mousse, a big mousse, and baked
cookies. I think you would’ve enjoyed that dinner. That was the very first state dinner and for the Queen of England.

Smith: And I assume she enjoyed it?

Haller: Oh, yes, yes. And then Giscard D’Estaing from France came, so I gave him a real French menu telling him that we also know how to cook French. And then Chancellor Schmidt of Germany came. They all came. Usually I had maybe one or two state dinners a month. Here I had three and four state dinners a week. A week! And then the Prime Minister of Australia, Prime Minister of New Zealand. All the kings from Europe, the King of Sweden, the King of Belgium, King Juan Carlos of Spain, and on and on, they came for dinner.

Smith: Were you at any point introduced?

Haller: No.

Smith: Never?

Haller: No, never. No, because it wouldn’t be fair for the other guys. You know, I mean, you’d have to introduce everybody. Just don’t introduce the chef. I’m glad they didn’t. I was in the background, you see. And I mean, I got my accolades directly from the President and the First Lady.

Smith: What would they say to you?

Haller: They’d call up and say, “Chef, the dinner was absolutely marvelous last night.” That’s the way it went, you see. Going back in history here, during Nixon, Mrs. Eisenhower, they gave her a dinner because it was her birthday. And do you know what the grandson, he married—

Smith: David.

Haller: David married Julie. And fortunately, they had their marriage in New York in the Plaza Hotel before the one at the White House. So, I lost my thought. What did I say before?

Smith: The dinner for Mamie Eisenhower.
Haller: Oh, the dinner for Mrs. Eisenhower. So I had soufflé for dessert. Grand Marnier Soufflé. And it just happened to be a working breakfast for me. So I took her phone call for what she wanted for breakfast. And then she said, “Chef, how did the soufflé stay up? It didn’t fall in!” And I said, “Experience, Madame. Experience, that’s what it is. It is experience when you have to put it in the oven. The recipe I’ve done so many times. Experience. That’s what it is.” So the butler came out and he said to me, “You know, Mrs. Eisenhower said, ‘The chef here in the kitchen doesn’t want to tell me how he did the soufflé.’”

Smith: She was trying to get your recipe?

Did you ever have a disaster or were you threatened with disaster?

Haller: It just doesn’t happen. It cannot happen. You cannot embarrass the First Family. Maybe every time the most critical guy was me for a dinner. But the guests would not know that. But a disaster? No. It just can’t happen.

Smith: What are the things you worry about? When you say you’re critical, what are the things you think about?

Haller: A soufflé could be critical. I mean, that has to come out of the oven and then a very hot heater so the temperature stays the same in the heater from the oven so it doesn’t fall. And then the dinner is on the first floor. You had to bring the heating unit into the elevator and bring it to the first floor and then put it on platters and serve it and that soufflé stayed up. You know, I mean, things like that, we tried sometimes. That’s why I tried to have a first course and made always very nice decorations and I work ahead at that because if you work ahead of time then I can concentrate on the main course. You know, that’s the experience that comes in.

Smith: How large a staff did you have?

Haller: A staff of seven or eight people and then there were three kitchens. There was a kitchen for the staff, in which I had two people; one in the morning and one at night. And I’m talking staff, only the White House. The other staff, the President’s staff, they had their own cafeteria in the West Wing run by the
Navy. The Navy chefs were cooking for them. Simple, but good. No problem there. And then the ground floor kitchen and then the kitchen on the second floor.

Smith: When President Ford announced the pardon of Richard Nixon that was a hugely controversial thing.

Haller: Yes.

Smith: Does that penetrate the White House itself? I mean, can you sense the mood of the place or if it’s a crisis atmosphere? The fall of Saigon, obviously, six months later was an incredibly difficult period.

Haller: It was unbelievably quiet about there. We never spoke politics.

Smith: Really?

Haller: No, no, no. You didn’t speak politics. We just didn’t do that. And you didn’t ask why or whatever. Those moods, you know, like when Nixon had to leave, we were kind of stunned, but nobody expressed his opinion. You didn’t do that. That’s how it was there.

Smith: You’re an escape from all of that in some ways. I mean, you provide a normal environment.

Haller: A normal environment to the last day. That was our job.

Smith: But could you see the impact of outside events on the First Family? You know, at the end of the Vietnam War, President Ford said that was the worst day of his presidency. Could you sense the impact on them just as human beings?

Haller: When the President from the office came over for dinner, he left it over in his office. That’s the way it was. That’s the way presidents did it.

Smith: This may be awkward, but you obviously had a lot of interaction with Mrs. Ford. We know later on because she’s written about it, she had some problems. Did you see that then?
Haller: Never saw it. The only thing I saw was they would eat dinner very late at night. About 9:30. Not all the time, but most of the time. And that was kind of hard on us and there was a cocktail served before. If you’re hungry and you don’t have cocktails, you want to eat at 6 o’clock or 7 o’clock, not at 9:30 at night. And that’s all I can say.

Smith: That’s fine.

Why does every First Family seem to love the solarium? They all seem to gravitate towards that room?

Haller: Which one? Which room?

Smith: The solarium up on the third floor.

Haller: Oh.

Smith: Is it because it’s informal.

Haller: Absolutely, yes.

Smith: You know, there are pictures of Ike up on the balcony grilling steaks up there. I don’t know if any other presidents did that.

Haller: No. No. You know they had the kitchen up there, too. You know, we had lunch, never dinner, in the solarium and if I had a soufflé, I made it up in Ike’s kitchen, which still had an old stove in there.

Smith: Really? Because he was a cook himself.

Haller: Yeah, he liked to cook. Yeah. That’s what they told me, the porters.

Smith: Do they tell stories? Because obviously some of them have been there a very long time.

Haller: The butlers?

Smith: Yeah.

Haller: They’re very, very discreet. There are some stories that I wouldn’t repeat, but they know what they’re doing. And if they said something to me, then it was
just me, all alone in the kitchen. There was nobody else. From one to the other, they’d say it because they knew I’d keep my mouth shut. That’s the way it was.

Smith: Do you remember there were two assassination attempts on President Ford about three weeks apart out in California? Did that shake things up at all?

Haller: No. No. Nothing at all.

I was going to say something which I could come back to it. Well, one time, when I’m done, I took pictures when all the pine trees are all lit up. I was in uniform, you know. I went outside to take some pictures at night. And all of a sudden, I hear footsteps. Six policemen come running and they didn’t know who it was and they said, “You’re going to get shot if you do that again.” And I have thousands of slides and I still have to work on them and look at them again. And the White House photographers gave me the film for free, meaning that they got the film for free from Kodak.

Smith: Really? Now, there’s someone, David Kennerly, who was almost a member of the family.

Haller: Yes, and I know him. I know him.

Smith: He was a character?

Haller: He was a character. He was a terrific character. Terrific! Terrific.

Smith: You may or may not remember this, when we were talking to the social secretaries, one of the things they all ran into was sooner or later someone at a state dinner would try to switch nametags, would try to fool around with the seating arrangement at the President’s table. Does any of that ring a bell?

Haller: That didn’t trickle down to me. I was not involved.

Smith: And I assume 45 years ago that people smoked a lot more than they do now.

Haller: 45 years ago, they had cigarettes on the banquet tables. Absolutely ridiculous. That comes from the south, you know, the Senators from the south. You have to have cigarettes there. That was terrible. And then, talking about smoking,
the Navy chef smoked in my kitchen. I said nothing so he did it and he
smoked upstairs with Johnson’s friend there. I’ve forgotten his name.

Smith: Jack Valenti.

Haller: Yeah, he used to bring him cigars to the Navy chef! He smoked! He smoked!
And then the pastry chef would smoke. And then the head butler, the maitre
de, John Fickland, was always with a cigarette in his mouth. Nobody said
anything. The usher in his office smoked. And I think Rex Scouten smoked
in the beginning a little bit and then he cut it out. And this guy, John
Fickland, because of cigarettes, he died. I mean, he got cancer or something.
I mean, he died rather young, you know. That is absolutely amazing.

Smith: And I know when we’ve talked to people like Letitia Baldrige, people like
Bess Abel, going back to the 60s—

Haller: Bess Abel I know well.

Smith: They would be the first to say the culture was different in terms of drinking.
People just drank more.

Haller: Oh, yeah. Yeah, absolutely. No question about it.

Smith: Did it affect entertaining at the White House or what you served?

Haller: No, no, no. You wanted to serve good food and plenty of it if there was
drinking. I mean, the biggest party always was the press. The press, the food
and the free drinks, they go for that.

Smith: To the outsider the Christmas season is magical, but it must be an enormous
amount of work.

Haller: Yeah, every day parties. Besides the party that all came as part of the months
of July and August during 1976, Christmastime is unbelievable. Lots of
work. Yeah, there is a tremendous amount of work.

Smith: And I’m told Mrs. Ford loved Christmas.

Haller: She loved Christmas. Yeah, they seemed to all love it. Yeah, well, we went
over it. We made it. And that was it. Thousands of people coming, mostly
cookies, but still you have to make them and people think making cookies, eh
it’s very easy, but you’ve got to make cookies and you have to have a big
cabinet and have cookies in there.

Smith: I’ve been told that President Johnson on occasion, not frequently, but it was
not unheard of for him to show up with a lot more people to a meal than
perhaps you expected.

Haller: I never knew how many he had for dinner, especially on the weekend. At 5
o’clock Sunday night, they started calling people up to come over for dinner
and who would say no? You might have 12 or 13 people. It was kind of
wasteful because you always had to be ready for a lot more for dinner.

Smith: And did the Fords do anything like that?

Haller: No, no, never, but the Johnsons did.

Smith: And were they at Camp David most weekends?

Haller: Who?

Smith: The Fords?

Haller: Oh, yes, they did. They’d go up to Camp David. Everybody likes to get
away from the White House.

Smith: Now, does that give you the weekend off if they’re in Camp David?

Haller: Yes. Yes, that was nice. But then there is always some like the one daughter
of Nixon, Patricia, they begged her to go to Camp David and she didn’t want
to go. Then I had to go in and just cook for her. That happened. That’s the
way it is.

Smith: Tell me if you remember the foods the Fords particularly liked.

Haller: They liked red cabbage with pork chops. Did you ever eat red cabbage?

Smith: No.

Haller: Probably not. With my mother, I learned a lot. We had a big garden and
actually my grandmother was French. My mother learned her cooking from
her mother, my grandmother. And we had a big garden, so I used to go and fetch the vegetable from my mother and see how she cooked it. So that’s how it started that I really loved cooking. And that’s the way it was.

Smith: The Ford had dogs, right?

Haller: Yeah. It always happened like this. There was always somebody on the groundskeepers’ staff who selected himself to do the dogs. And, hey, Rex Scouten didn’t object. “Do you want to do the dogs? Go ahead. Do the dogs.” I had the other job. So that was no problem like that. We also sometimes had cats. You know, during the Carters, we had cats. You never asked me about the Carters. They were nice people. Sometimes he’d come into the kitchen and he’d say, “Chef, very good supper.” They wanted to live like the average American, you know. They were very frugal. Very frugal. But one time his brother was coming. Billy with his Billy Beer, you know? And I said, “Mr. Carter would you like some lunch?” He says, “No, I’m on a liquid diet.” That’s exactly what he said. I said, “Well, that’s easy for me.”


Haller: The Fourth of July, I remember absolutely very well. The Truman balcony has a beautiful view of the Washington Monument. A beautiful view there, you know. And they had the buffet dinner out on the Truman balcony and they had guests invited. And if I would write something about that day and evening, I would say that’s when everything stopped in Washington. And the next day it never was in the newspaper. Nothing. I had to wait until at least 11:00 or 11:30 until I could go home because all the streets were completely blocked. People standing on the roof of their cars and watching the fireworks. I mean, that’s when the city stood still. This was absolutely amazing. That was a fantastic Fourth of July evening.

The Fords had a good time with their guests and on the Truman balcony. So around 11:00 o’clock, the traffic started to move a little bit and then I was able to go home. That was fantastic.

Smith: You said you were surprised when he was not elected. Do you remember? Were you there on election night?
Haller: Oh, yeah, I was there and one of the members of the White House working there in the office knew the Fords and she came in the kitchen during the election when the results started to come out and she said to me, “President Ford is not going to make it.” That’s what she told me. But there was quiet and no big deal.

Smith: There are some people who thought it took him a little bit of time to kind of bounce back from that. Did you notice any chance?

Haller: No, nothing. Nothing.

Smith: No.

Haller: No, no. Like I said, they definitely left the work at the office if possible. But, naturally, it’s 24 hours a day, you know. I mean, a president never has a vacation. If he was going to Hawaii or whatever, it was not a vacation. They always have something to do. But they’ve got to get them away some time. Give them a break, you know.

Smith: That brings up something. Chevy Chase and Saturday Night Live and the comics made fun of him, but he actually was a very good athlete, wasn’t he?

Haller: Oh, yes. Yes. Swim every day. Very good. He would swim outside.

Smith: Even in winter?

Haller: Oh, yeah, summer or winter, he would go outside, but that type of water was heated, too. Before, they had a pool inside for Roosevelt. And then the President made it bigger for the press because they used to call it the dog house. And then some people wrote letters, “What dog house costs $500,000?”

Smith: Did you work with the social secretary?

Haller: Very much. Very much. Some were nice. Some were not so nice.

Smith: Now, we know Maria Downs is a friend, so you must have worked with Maria during the Ford period.

Haller: She came later. There were two secretaries.
Smith: That’s right.

Haller: Do you know the first one?

Smith: Nancy Ruwe.

Haller: We called her the Screwy Ruwe. I mean, you’d better shut that out.

Smith: I’m not surprised.

Haller: Oh, please. Because she was! I hope I don’t get in trouble by saying that.

Smith: No.

Haller: But Screwy Ruwe and she used to have a green dress on and we called her the Green Lizard. And she asked me once, “How many social secretaries have you went through?” Like I was responsible that day for their release. I mean, Screwy Ruwe, I’m telling you. One time, she wanted to serve soup at the end of a dinner or something or other because it was in a Wednesday paper in the *Washington Post*, serving soup on the end.

Smith: Do you have to, in the back of your mind, keep the press in mind? Because I’m sure the press is always looking for something.

Haller: Yeah, the press, I had to learn to keep my mouth shut. I mean, you had to watch it.

Smith: There was the famous incident when the Queen was there and the Marine band struck up *The Lady Is a Tramp*.

Haller: Meaning she was a tramp?

Smith: Yes, and they were dancing. The Fords and Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip and unknown to anyone the Marine band played *The Lady Is a Tramp*. That was not a very good idea. Diplomacy in the United States is not always working out. *The Lady Is a Tramp*. It’s ridiculous. You know what I mean?

Haller: I’ve been working for years on a biography of Nelson Rockefeller. You must have had some contact during the Ford years when he was vice president. Did you have any contact?
Haller: Terrific guy. Terrific guy. Would say, “How are you, Chef?” Things like that. Talking like everybody else. He wanted to be like everybody else. I mean, middle class. You know what I mean? He was a great guy. Absolutely.

Smith: Of course, they were the first couple to live in the vice president’s house. Did you have anything to do with that or was that normally separate?

Haller: Nothing to do with that. Nothing. The Navy took care of that.

Smith: That’s right.

I know the social secretaries get together from time to time, but were there ever meetings of the chefs?

Haller: Yes, there are 25,000 members of the Culinary Federation of Chefs. And then we have the Club of Chefs’d’Chef. It’s French. The French started that for the Chefs of Heads of State. And there is a French company that makes this jacket. This is a French jacket. And I’m an honorary member to that and we went all over the world for free, I did. I even was in Morocco in Italy, Sweden, Switzerland, France several times, Belgium, and in Hong Kong. We had a great time. When they came to Switzerland, that was boring, but the food, you know, that was fine. Everything was great. So, this lady, I’m not saying anything against her and absolutely she’s got to be pretty smart. I talked to her, but talking about size, I was impressed how tall she is. The chef there is a Philippine. If she’s five feet, that’s it. I mean, as a chef, she has some tall guys working for her. I mean, it looked funny. It looked funny.

Smith: A couple of things and we’ll let you go.

Do you remember at the end of the Ford presidency, I assume there comes a time, whether it’s on inauguration day or whatever, when the staff is lined up and there’s a goodbye - formal or informal? How is that handled?

Haller: It was very informal. It’s always different. Every president has different things.

Smith: Really?
Haller: Yeah. It was informal. The President came into the kitchen and said, “Do you know I’m going to leave in a couple of days? It was nice. Thanks very much for what you did for us. We enjoyed it here.” And she was talking like that the same way.

Smith: Are people sad to see them go?

Haller: Oh, I was. I don’t ask. That’s another thing. You don’t ask another guy, “Are you sad?” because you don’t talk about it.

Smith: And obviously within a few hours, there’s another family that you’re serving.

Haller: Yeah, yeah. That’s how it goes. It’s amazing. But they need a lot of help from the staff. And then later on they start to get to know what they like.

Smith: After the Fords left the White House did you have any contact in the later years? Did your paths ever cross?

Haller: They always sent me Christmas cards and I sent them, but not really. No. Well, I sent them a book signed that’s probably there in the library.

Smith: What did you think when he passed away?

Haller: I thought that I felt bad in part. I mean, he was great. A great man. A great man. Absolutely.

Smith: Why do you say that?

Haller: Well, because he treated everybody like he liked to be treated. Like he liked to be treated, he treated everybody like that. And they respected your work, what you did, to a high degree. Absolutely. So did she, Mrs. Ford.

Smith: Did she enjoy being First Lady?

Haller: I think so. I think so, because of the way she acted and the way she presented herself and everything. I believe so. I believe very much.

Smith: For people who don’t know, who think it’s just all glamour - there’s a lot of work that goes into being First Lady, isn’t there?
Haller: There is a lot of work, but they have people, high-class people working for them, very efficient people working for them.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Haller: He should be remembered as the president in a very, very serious time when President Nixon had to leave the White House which was a historic moment, it never happened before, I understand. He took over and he held the country together. He knew his way with the Congress and I think that they were happy to help him even to run the White House. It was very, very important for the country. He did a very, very good job.

Smith: And, finally, how do you think she should be remembered?

Haller: Well, she should be remembered - there’s always a good woman in the back and that’s the way she handled herself. She has so much respect for everybody who worked for her. She was very thankful. Very thankful. And absolutely a terrific lady and when I call her a lady, I mean a lady in the way a lady should behave. One time we were downstairs in the tent, there’s a picture, I think, in the book, I was talking to her and it was just a pleasure to talk to her. And she used to give me some more spiritual help to get things done.

Smith: How so?

Haller: Well, because the way she was talking to me and when you get praised, it helps a lot. It’s even better than money. Money is not everything. And that helped a lot because Rex Scouten - today thinking back, he should’ve paid me more. But when I go to Switzerland, I always say, “Listen guys, I don’t make much money, but I live very good.” That’s it.

Smith: One last thing that just occurs to me. Of course, she had her breast cancer surgery just after they moved in to the White House and in those days people didn’t talk about breast cancer. I mean, that was an enormous change that she brought about. Did that change anything in the White House? And when she came back did it take awhile?
Haller: It changed in the country and she talked about things that happened every day...that was great help for people who had breast cancer or were going to have breast cancer.

Smith: And there’s that wonderful picture. I think she was still in the hospital and Susan filled in one night - the first time she’d ever worn white gloves - but there was a reception or something at the White House, maybe it was a diplomatic reception, but Susan filled in for her mother and there’s this wonderful picture. The President, I think, is in white tie and it was a state dinner and Susan is elegantly dressed and she probably would’ve preferred blue jeans.

Haller: Her mother was sick.

Smith: Yes, her mother was sick and she was filling in for her.

Were they very close, the family?

Haller: Yes, very close. You never heard them slamming doors or anything. French doors.

Smith: That’s very revealing and a perfect note on which to end. Thank you.

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Smith: You obviously had contact with Congressman Ford before he became vice president.

Kissinger: Yes.

Smith: What was that like? Was it before the Nixon presidency?

Kissinger: It was well before the Nixon presidency. It was well before I was Henry Kissinger. It was when I was a professor at Harvard and I ran a seminar called the Defense Policy Seminar, to which we invited people with practical experience. We invited Jerry Ford to meet with that seminar and tell them about the legislative process with respect to defense. Then afterwards Ford kept in contact with me, occasionally calling me when there was some issue. Neither of us ever thought we’d end up in the White House, much less together. We had a warm relationship before then.

Smith: When you look back was there a moment, whether it was the smoking gun tape or the Supreme Court decision or whatever, that you, in your own heart, thought spelled the end of the Nixon presidency and the transfer of power?

Kissinger: I have to say two separate things about that. The power was sort of flowing away. That was noticeable for months. But you sort of got used to that and you thought that this might go on for the rest of the term. It wasn’t obvious to me that there would be a specific climax.

The first time that it became clear to me that there probably would be a change was when this tape became available. I think I learned of that tape, I guess, on Saturday or Sunday. If I remember correctly, it was released on a Monday. Diane Sawyer, who was with the press office at the time, called to alert me that this was going to come out. I remember she even said, “This is going to go on forever. This is just going to be another one of those things.” But then once it came out, I thought this would lead to a climax. As it
happened, Ford called me on that Monday as part of my regular briefings of the vice president; I didn’t refer to the tape and he didn’t refer to the tape. I did not really think I was being disingenuous, but I didn’t think it was my role as a presidential assistant to…

Smith: Is it possible that everyone was avoiding the most unpleasant of subjects?

Kissinger: Ford?

Smith: Yeah, knowing that events…

Kissinger: No, it was the tactful thing to do. What was I going to say? I was already secretary of state. I was both secretary of state and security advisor. Anyway, it was the tactful thing to do. Then the next day there was a Cabinet meeting at which there was sort of a rebellion of the Cabinet members. They were saying they needed the full disclosures. And Ford – it’s all described in my memoirs – Ford was very tactful. He just spoke of consequences of what needed to be done, but there was no talk of resignation by anybody at that meeting.

It’s unprecedented that at a Cabinet meeting Cabinet members speak against the president. Ford didn’t speak against the president; he just laid out what would happen in the pursuit of the issues that were before us – not the Watergate issues, but the business issues. And from then on it accelerated. Then Ford called me, I think on Thursday morning, that he wanted to see me. By that time it was clear that Nixon would resign. He called me, I guess it was either Wednesday or Thursday, and he asked me for the meeting. You can look it up in my memoirs and the phone records.

Smith: It is interesting that yours is the only name, of course, that he mentioned the night after the president made his resignation speech.

Kissinger: Exactly that.

Smith: When he went out and met with the press outside his home in Alexandria.

Kissinger: I’m not rational about Ford, both my wife and I love him.
Smith: Let’s back up just a bit because you, obviously, did spend a lot of time with him while he was vice president.

Kissinger: Yes, I briefed him at regular intervals, every two weeks.

Smith: Tell us about your impressions about his intelligence.

Kissinger: Look, his intelligence was high. He was not, at first, very articulate. He didn’t really become articulate until after he had left the presidency. But his intelligence was very high. His analytic ability was very high. His manners were very unassuming and he wouldn’t pound the table and say “I have three points on this…”

He would sort of listen to people and distill their thoughts. He was a very good judge of people. He treated them in an open and trusting manner. If you ever lost his confidence, then you were in trouble. If you ever did something that he considered immoral or unreliable…But he handled disagreements – you never had to worry that if you disagreed with him that it would be taken as a personal event.

Smith: One thing and then we’ll move on. He writes in his own memoirs that he was upset to see a story – I think it was in Newsweek – that indicated that President Nixon – I believe that he had Nelson Rockefeller in for a visit – and in the course of that conversation, according to Newsweek, had said to Rockefeller, “Can you imagine Jerry Ford sitting in this chair?”

Now, the reason I raise that is, because we know that John Connally was Nixon’s first choice for the vice presidency. I’m trying to get a sense of what Nixon, and to some degree, the immediate folks around Nixon, thought about the vice president.

Kissinger: Well, I don’t know what the people around Nixon thought. I know what I thought. I thought very highly of him. I never thought of him as a president because he wasn’t on a career path that would lead to the presidency. But I had heard Nixon say the same thing. But he might have said that about 99.9% of the universe. He might have said it about Nelson Rockefeller. He wouldn’t say it about John Connally.
Smith: What was it about Connally?

Kissinger: Nixon had the subconscious hope that when Congress looked at any of the likely alternatives, they would conclude that it was too dangerous - and it was dangerous - to make a change of presidency in middle of a whole series of crisis, and in the middle of the Cold War. But he did make these observations and he turned out to be wrong.

Smith: That raises a large question. We’ve talked to a number of folks who were there on the 8th and the 9th, and particularly for the swearing in on the 9th of August. Afterwards, I guess there was a receiving line, and then there was a reception in the state dining room, and several people have had the same observation that – and it’s not surprising – that you could see the Nixon people peel off. I raise that in the larger sense of, how much of a challenge was it for the new president to integrate, to be fair to, to weed out – how much of an issue was that in terms of fashioning his administration with his own stamp? Was there passive resistance?

Kissinger: Once the presidency had moved, changed, there was not scope for passive resistance. You can’t resist the president in the White House. There was the practical problem of people, in the midst of doing certain things, how they were going to turn over, and secondly, at what speed Ford would replace them. The only part of it that I knew was that quite a few of them called me up and asked me to intercede with Ford on their behalf. I took the position that I couldn’t do that - that I would stay out of domestic affairs.

In my part of the White House activities Ford left it up to me what staff I had. He made no attempt to change any of my staff members. We kept going just as before. He took on, in the first few days, the problem: how do you make a transition for foreign leaders - that we still have authority in Washington? He took on a staggering load.

We arranged meetings with the ambassadors of each region. So we had the Africa ambassadors, the European ambassadors, the Asian ambassadors - there were five or six groups. Each of them took about an hour because Ford had to say something, and we sort of outlined for him what the themes were
that we were pursuing, but he wasn’t reading a script. So he would meet with these ambassadors, talk for maybe twenty minutes, and then give them a chance to ask questions for another half hour. But you just add this together, that’s six hours right there. Then he saw one-on-one the ambassadors of Russia - of the Soviet Union, of China, I think England, some of the key NATO allies. You have to look up whom he saw.

Smith: Sure.

Kissinger: We have a list. And you add all of this together, that’s a staggering load and he did it with calm, equanimity, he never made a false step. Vietnam – he saw the ambassador. Then we sent out a bunch of letters around the world. Now, again, the staff work was done in my office but Ford was heavily involved. All I’m saying is take the first three dates then, on the second day he was in office, the Cyprus crisis blew up.

Smith: Plus you also had the Glomar Explorer affair that day.

Kissinger: Yeah. But that was interesting, you can’t say it was a fun part of the presidency, but it was something we had done.

Smith: Did he know about its existence?

Kissinger: No. I knew about it, I sort of knew they were doing it. I wasn’t following it. But he handled the transition with calm, dignity, and authority.

Smith: He also had to pick a vice president.

Kissinger: Yeah, that came, not in the first week.

Smith: Did you talk with Governor Rockefeller during that period?

Kissinger: No.

Smith: No.

Kissinger: I talked to the president. I was so close to Rockefeller that everybody knew that I was for Rockefeller. If you go through my phone calls you’ll find that a number of people called me up and wanted me to support them, and I always said, “I can’t do it because I’m basically for Rockefeller.” So then they said,
well if he doesn’t get it…But I was not involved. Ford did talk to me about it, peripherally, [he] wanted advice. But I was not a factor in the Rockefeller nomination. Ford got to that by himself.

Smith: Also, he says it was during that first month, he was inclined to announce that he would not seek a full term in ’76. And he says you were the one…

Kissinger: Now, that I did discuss with him.

Smith: Yes, he said you were the one who, in effect, talked him out of it.

Kissinger: I told him he must not do that. That he’d become a lame duck immediately and that then everything would be geared to his succession. And he accepted that view.

Smith: Was it difficult integrating the Capitol Hill crowd, the Grand Rapids crowd, the Nixon crowd, his old Congressional buddies?

Kissinger: I’m not a good judge because I saw him every morning for half an hour to an hour, whether we had business or not. He and I took the view that it cannot be that there is no business between the president and the secretary of state. So if we didn’t have a crisis, we talked strategy. So, yes, the Capitol Hill crowd, as you’d expect, the Ford people coming in fresh, wanted to make a mark for their president and to show distinctions, and it would show up in occasional press leaks. But those were incidents; they were not major elements because I had the great confidence that Ford would never do anything behind my back. So whatever criticism we had I’d hear from him.

Smith: Did he criticize? Was there criticism from time to time?

Kissinger: It didn’t happen that way because he and I had such a warm, personal relationship that sometimes he didn’t agree, but it never got to a confrontational issue. I sometimes modified my position, it could have happened, but I don’t even remember a clear case where I said, “Let’s do this,” and he’d say flatly, “No.” On the other hand, he was a strong leader. I’m not a good judge here, I could mention incidents and some of them mentioned in their memoirs where they think they scored great victories. But it didn’t affect any real thing.
Smith: Let me ask you about – because it’s so emblematic of a Ford presidency that to this day is not terribly well known. For example, there are people, certainly on the right, who remember Alexander Solzhenitsyn not visiting with the president. I suspect they probably don’t remember his asking, I believe Ambassador Dobrynin about the Lithuanian seaman…

Kissinger: First of all, let me first talk about that Lithuanian. There was an outrageous incident where the Coast Guard had turned over a defecting Soviet sailor to the Soviets. So, at the first meeting with Dobrynin, without any advice from me - I was sitting there, the secretary of state - Ford said he would appreciate it if the sailor were released. He was a Soviet citizen and Lithuania was part of the Soviet Union at that point, he was a Soviet citizen. He had defected. We didn’t have a leg to stand on, except for humanitarian considerations. That was a typical Ford move. No advice from me. I was stunned when I heard him say it. But it worked.

Then Solzhenitsyn, and let me make a general comment on the Soviet relations. Solzhenitsyn came about, actually, I was on vacation when the decision was made originally. I think Senator Helms wanted to arrange for a Solzhenitsyn meeting with the president. There was never an issue about a meeting. He agreed from the beginning that he would see him. But what he didn’t want was a media circus about seeing him. And so Solzhenitsyn and Helms had agreed that he would come in, maybe take one picture, a White House photographer picture that you can then release.

That would have been no issue. But Ford did not want a media circus about it. He was negotiating with the Soviets at that time about an arms control agreement. It became hugely controversial as a sort of a symbolic issue. The fact, however, is that all the numbers that Ford was putting forward were exactly the numbers that Reagan adopted, and that all the attacks that the right wing made on the SALT agreements when they got into office, they implemented it and didn’t try to change it.

So, here is an unelected president coming in at the end of a crisis, in the aftermath of a Middle East war, while the situation is highly unsettled, and it’s the right wing people who were never to be heard from when the going was
tough. Suddenly started into a policy of confronting the Soviet Union and picking issues like Jewish emigration, in which Nixon had already achieved an emigration rate of forty thousand, from seven hundred to forty thousand. And after the Jackson people got into the game, the immigration when down to around fifteen thousand and never came back.

Smith: I think the number the president cites in his memoir - Dobrynin indicated that as long as there was nothing in writing - that they would be prepared to go as high as fifty-five thousand.

Kissinger: Exactly right. Except they could not commit themselves to a number. They might wind up in a position where they would have to expel people to meet numbers. But the Jackson people didn’t want an agreement, they wanted the issue. Ford and Gromyko met, and Gromyko said the number could be fifty-five thousand. So then the Jackson people came up yes, but they have to be distributed evenly around the Soviet Union, or maybe they had to come mostly from Moscow. They put certain conditions, but made it clear that they did not want an agreement and they announced – we told Jackson, we know this, and this is going to happen. Why don’t you watch and see whether it happens.

So he stepped out from being told by Ford what would happen and announced it as his success. Then, of course, it blew up again. Not only as his success - but Ford didn’t care who got the success, got the credit - but they announced it as proving that if you put real pressure on the Soviet Union they yield.

Smith: To an outside observer, it seemed as though there were real crosscurrents in U.S./Soviet relations during this period. Because on the one hand, you’re building the policies of détente, and yet, at the same time, there are proxy wars going on, particularly in Africa.

Kissinger: But that was the nature of the relationship. We had used détente to reduce the Soviet influence in the Middle East originally. We were going to do the same thing in Africa. We were going to tell the Soviets, if you value this relationship, the right wingers wanted a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union, and then when we did that, they passed whatever that amendment was
the Tunney amendment that prevented any real effort in Angola. If you look at the actions of Ford, he was tough as nails on the ____________ issue. He wanted to be tough on the Angola issue, but the Congress cut off the support for him.

He wanted to do the honorable thing in Vietnam, which was to not cut off aid to a dying patient, it was more of a symbolic and moral issue. He and I knew very well, at that point, after two years of Congressional cutoffs, where aid went down from two and a half billion to seven hundred million dollars of aid, and the South Vietnamese had to ration their artillery when they got under attack because they were running out of supplies. We knew what the end would be. But it seemed important to Ford, and with full support from me, that the United States not stab a dying ally in the back. So Ford thought it was important to keep going up to the Hill and ask for aid, and even if that aid would never be delivered so that we would not end something in which thousands of Americans had been killed by turning on the people that we’d been supporting.

Smith: We talked to Mel Laird a few weeks ago. Laird loves Ford, but in some ways has never forgiven him. Laird still thinks that you could have gotten the seven hundred million dollars out of Congress, and it’s hard to point to what more could have been done. But he believes that a president who really…

Kissinger: What is he talking about?

Smith: He’s talking about the seven hundred twenty-two million dollar request for…

Kissinger: And why wouldn’t we get it? How did he blame Ford for that?

Smith: As far as I can tell, he didn’t try hard enough; he didn’t employ all the power of the presidency.

Kissinger: That’s absolute, total nonsense. I went through that. Laird is as much responsible for the mess at the end because he acquiesced when he was advisor to Nixon in the Watergate period. He helped draft a compromise that cutoff military action in Cambodia. But I don’t want to get into that sort of thing. The issue wasn’t seven hundred million, the issue was they had cut aid
from two and a half billion to seven hundred million. And Stennis had told us
we might get three hundred million in the supplementary appropriation. And
that then came before the Congress and the Congress was reluctant. Now it is
ture that the only two leaders who would defend the position were Ford and
me. We couldn’t get the other Cabinet members to go up to the Congress.
They’d find ways of weaseling out of it. So, if Laird thinks there was a way to
get them to go up there, he knows something I did not, but the Congress was
determined. There was no way to get more money.

Smith: And isn’t the best evidence of that, or at least evidence of that, the fact that
as soon as Saigon fell, they wanted to pull the plug on any money for resettling
Vietnamese refugees.

Kissinger: Absolutely. They were determined, and it was a serious situation. During the
ending period of the Vietnam war I suffered from the illusion that if we could
get a decent settlement, an honorable settlement, the right wing would be
satisfied with having met our honor and the left wing would be satisfied with
peace. And so you’d have a united country. But the opponents of the Vietnam
war did not want success. They were afraid that if you could say they
succeeded, that we would do it again.

Smith: They had a vested interest in failure.

Kissinger: They justified their attitude by saying they wanted to save lives. But on that
basis, you’d have to quit any war because you can always save lives
immediately by not fighting. You pay the lives later. It happened in Vietnam
very quickly with the boat people and with the murders in Cambodia.

Smith: I take it Ford was genuinely angered by that initial Congressional…

Kissinger: Ford was heroic. He could easily have said, as some of his Michigan advisors
said, “This isn’t my war,” but he basically took the position that this is
America, this is not a person. Four presidents have been involved here.

Smith: What was it like in the Oval Office in those last hours?

Kissinger: Well, you should read the phone conversations with Ford when I tell him it’s
now. We have to pull the plug because the airport is coming under artillery.
The whole debate, say, in the last two months of Vietnam, the only debate was, do we pull the plug right away, or do we keep it going for as long as we possibly can to evacuate as many people as we possibly can? There was no doubt how it would end once the North Vietnamese could put all their army into the South, and we had no right to use any countermeasures. The South Vietnamese army was running out of ammunition and also made some strategic mistakes. But Ford, and I’m going to say I, and of course, Scowcroft and people like that, we thought we had a duty to as many Vietnamese and even Cambodians to get out, so the real debate in the country was, we kept testifying for aid so that Saigon’s morale wouldn’t crumble.

Ford had some decisions which _______________ recognized. There were two thousand Americans left in Saigon and we could have taken them out fast, but we took them out in very slow increments, so that we had an excuse for being there with our military establishment - to take out Vietnamese. And we managed to save close to two hundred thousand. I think a hundred and fifty thousand plus Vietnamese. It was a great achievement of Ford’s. Now what was the atmosphere? It was very calm, but I called him, I think it was a Monday night, but I forget, it was at night and said, “Tan Son Nhut airport is under attack and we now have to evacuate by helicopter and we can’t take anymore out.” There were about five thousand people at the airport. Ford said, “Okay.” And then he started crumbling and it took about two or three phone conversations which you can incorporate into this on the record, in which you see he’s giving the order, he knows he’s got to do it.

Then he says, “Can’t we do something for these five thousand people that are lining the airfield there?” But he was always calm in crisis. The way it worked was, with all respect, the Pentagon wanted to make sure that if anything went wrong, they’d stick the White House with it. So they meticulously tracked every helicopter with us so that they could say they had an order to get out. And then every hour or so, I’d give Ford a report. I didn’t report every single helicopter to him. It was a sad period, but we weren’t there wringing out hands because we had this evacuation to do.

Smith: He wasn’t despondent?
Kissinger: He was never despondent. When you’re in real trouble, despondency doesn’t help you. But, anyway, that wasn’t his nature.

Smith: The relationship with Secretary Schlesinger – was it just bad chemistry or was it more substantive than that?

Kissinger: No, actually, I think if you’d given Schlesinger truth serum, he would have agreed with Ford and me. But, I think the relationship with Schlesinger is best summed the following way: I once said to Ford, “It’s a pity that you have to keep adjudicating disputes between Schlesinger and me.” He said, “Henry, you have to understand the following: Schlesinger’s fight is not with you, it’s with me,” he said, “He thinks I’m a dummy, and he thinks I have to be run by somebody, and he thinks you’re running me. And this won’t stop until either I make him believe he’s running me, or I fire him.” And that’s what happened.

Smith: Which was a very shrewd reading.

Kissinger: Very shrewd, and it takes a strong man to say, “He thinks I’m a dummy.” But it sort of grated on Ford that Schlesinger would come into the job with his high IQ rapping and putting a leg over…you probably picked that up elsewhere, too.

Smith: Yeah. That’s interesting.

Quickly, let me ask about Vladivostok. We were talking to Donald Rumsfeld who, I would say sort of dropped this, that we came close to bargaining away the cruise missile. As part of the SALT, as part of the ongoing SALT talks. How would you characterize the cruise and its…

Kissinger: The cruise missiles were put into the budget by Nixon. The Pentagon had wanted to cut them out for budgetary reasons, and we had put it in. You know, Rumsfeld is a smart guy, but he thought his political future was tied to not getting the SALT agreement because the right wing would never forgive him for having the SALT agreement. So he developed incredible ingenuity in coming up with things that backfired. The cruise missile, nobody wanted to bargain away the cruise missiles, because we had wanted them in the budget to begin with. There probably was some technical point, they probably had
some _______________, but that wasn’t the issue. We wanted to be sure of cruise missiles. When you get into the legalistic fine points of SALT agreements, you could always find something. Of course, you have to give something up, but we never thought we were giving…it was never an issue to give up cruise missiles.

Smith: The Helsinki Accords—which of course are a classic example of how history rewrites contemporary judgment - I take it there was some dispute between some, at least at the Pentagon, and yourself.

Kissinger: Well, the right wing view was that we were recognizing the borders of the Soviet Union, which is technically what we didn’t do. There was a clause in the agreement that said, “Borders can be changed only by negotiation,” which meant that borders could be changed. There was nobody who was advocating starting a war with the Soviet Union. At that time the conviction was that the Soviet Union had much superior conventional strength, and you never hear that argument anymore. Because the agreement that was made in Helsinki was the precise pages(?), which made it possible to undermine Soviet rule in Eastern Europe.

Smith: Was there, though, this ongoing tension between the Pentagon and yourself? I don’t mean on the personal level. I mean in terms of issues and the approach to…

Kissinger: Look, you have a lot of retroactive heroes. There was some mumbling going on, but I say that there is no tension until somebody says something. You find me at any point in which Rumsfeld actually objected to something Ford was going to do. Rumsfeld’s skill was to screw up the bureaucratic process in such a way that no substantive discussions could take place. He didn’t have the right people for the meeting, he didn’t have the papers, so he achieved what he wanted – to drag it into the primary season. And then Ford decided that he couldn’t fight a detailed battle on these issues. One, he was conducting a primary campaign. If there hadn’t been a primary campaign, it was very easy to come to an agreement. At that point we had the back of it broken, and it became the basis of what later emerged. Have you talked to Scowcroft about this?
Smith: Not yet. He’s on the list.

Kissinger: Well, talk to Scowcroft, he can give you chapter and verse.

Smith: Quickly, speaking of the ’76 primary campaign: the question came up, of course, just on the eve of the Texas primary, of whether you would go to Africa.

Kissinger: Well, it didn’t come up that way, but the way Ford and I worked, I could tell him what I needed to do. Sometimes he might have a different – I can’t think of when he had a different view – but never did he say, this is politically not good for me, on any issue. Nobody will ever have me around for my domestic political judgment. But before I went to Africa, I said, “Now, you know, Mr. President, when I get to Zambia, I will make a recommendation for majority rule in Rhodesia. That’s a big change and you have to tell me whether this interferes with your primary season. I don’t know that.” And Ford said, “We conduct foreign policy of the United States, we don’t do it for primary campaign reasons.” And so I made my speech a week before the Texas primary, it was a disaster.

Smith: Politically?

Kissinger: Well, it helped lead to a huge defeat for Ford in Texas. But, again, like so many things Ford did, it turned out to be what happened.

Smith: And at the convention, we talked to Stu Spencer, among others, who said this thing, obviously, was very close, and the one thing that Stu and those folks didn’t want was to give the Reagan people an emotional issue.

Kissinger: Yeah, it was a political mistake. We had to do something because there were thirty-five thousand Cubans in Angola and we didn’t want the Communists to dominate all these independents’ movements. Could we have waited three weeks? Probably.

Smith: His point was, when you got to the convention and the platform, the Reagan people had this very hard line platform, which implicitly repudiated, at least parts of the Ford foreign policy. And there was a very heated discussion over this. The politician’s position was, give it to them. Because if you give them
an emotional issue, they just might stampede the convention. It’s said you opposed that on principle…

Kissinger: I was not involved in the convention discussions. I didn’t come to the convention until everything was already done at the end. As a matter of principle, as secretary of state, I took the position, “I can only tell you what I believe to be in the American national interest. I can’t tell you what political assessments you have to make.” I didn’t like the platform. That’s absolutely true. But I didn’t really fight. They knew I didn’t like it, but I don’t think you will find, other than their knowing I was not thrilled by it, I didn’t do much about it.

Smith: You’d become an issue, was that awkward? Did the president ever discuss it with you? I think at one point you even offered to resign.

Kissinger: But that was different. I offered, when he changed Schlesinger, and changed Colby, I said to him, “If you want to make it a clean sweep of these things, and bring in new people for all the key posts, I’ve written a letter of resignation in draft form. Tell me whether I should complete it.” And he wouldn’t hear of it. But that was…

Smith: And that was also the time when the vice president was dropped, in effect.

Kissinger: That was a big mistake.

Smith: Did the vice president talk to you at that point?

Kissinger: One of the great things of Nelson Rockefeller – I was as close a friend as he had – that in all the time it’s the one decision of Ford’s that I found inexplicable, and which was wrong. And Ford himself, said that all the rest of his life. But never did I hear Rockefeller complain. I describe it as he had an unbelievable sense of public service and he went through that whole year, which had to be humiliating for him, that last year, never saying to me privately, “This is hard for me.” Never. Nor did he say, “Look at Ford, he brought me in. I went through a humiliating confirmation procedure and a year later he fires me.” Never said that. It was one of the noble things of Nelson Rockefeller.
Smith: Did you know about the pardon before it was issued? Did you participate in any…?

Kissinger: This will have to be the last thing. I did not participate directly in the discussion with him about it. I had one conversation with him about it because I had had a lunch with one who had been legislative aide to Eisenhower.

Smith: Bryce Harlow.

Kissinger: Bryce Harlow. One of the great…

Smith: The Wise Man

Kissinger: The Wise Man. We had lunch and he told me and I agreed, that Nixon would never make it through a trial. That he would have some sort of a breakdown, that he could not stand that humiliation. So, as a result of that lunch, afterwards I told Ford that I’d had that lunch, that Bryce was of that view and that I wanted him to know that I was of that view, too. And that I thought the spectacle of putting the president of the United States before a criminal court was something that the country should not have to face. He asked one or two questions, and then the next time I heard from him was the night before he announced the pardon. But not to ask my opinion; but to tell me what he was going to do.

Smith: One last quick thing and I’ll let you go. You said at the beginning that you weren’t objective, you were not rational about Ford, what did you love about him?

Kissinger: He was a normal American. He did not have the obsessiveness of those who spend three years on the campaign trail. He thought that his job was to do the best job possible. He didn’t care so much about the public opinion polls of every move. He thought his duty was to serve his country, to bring the country together. He was always calm and he was extremely polite to his subordinates. He had a terrific sense of humor. He had a great family life, and when you talked to Ford, what you saw is what you got.

So you could absolutely count, and you’d seen everything there was to see when you dealt with him. But he also had great courage. But he never bragged
about any of these qualities. If he were here he would be embarrassed to have me talk like this about him. But when you think to his funeral, there was such genuine emotion, and even among the public. When we drove with the casket from the airport into town on a Saturday night – it wasn’t announced – there were people on the street. I think back to my association with Ford as the high point of my governmental life.

Smith: Penny Circle has said that of all the people around the president, she’ll never forget [that] you, in many ways, showed the most continuing personal concern when he had that mild stroke in Philadelphia. You said to her, “Call any time of the day or night…”

Kissinger: We loved him. I said we – my wife and I. One of my sadnesses is, he wanted me to come out and see him one more time, and I didn’t realize how close to the end he was. So we set a time, maybe a little further ahead than we should have. I had to go out anyway, on its own, I wasn’t going to charge a plane, I think January 15th, something like that, to see him. And I just missed him. But we talked on the phone, as Penny will tell you. Often – at least once a month. But more often when something came up, he’d call me Or I would call him, and we were on the board of American Express together.

Smith: And he was an active board member. He wasn’t just a name on the…

Kissinger: Oh yes. He came to the meetings.
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Vladivostok, 12–13
Smith: Thank you for doing this. How did your paths first cross with Gerald Ford?

Goldfield: I was a first year law student at Suffolk University Law School up in Boston.

Smith: I know it well.

Goldfield: And one of my professors had some relationships in the White House and mentioned that there was a program known as the White House Summer Internship and asked if anyone was interested. I walked up and responded, and that professor became a good friend. So I applied to the White House for the internship. I had worked Republican politics in Connecticut and California. I’d been a Coro Foundation Fellow out in California and did some work with a number of the senior lieutenants around then Governor Ronald Reagan and I thought it’d be a great opportunity to visit Washington. I had been a very short-term intern for Senator Weicker in Connecticut way back when, so I didn’t know any one person that could get me into the White House. This was at a time when Nixon was basically transitioning out.

Smith: So this was the summer of ’74?

Goldfield: This started in, I believe, late ’74—

Smith: Nixon leaves, of course, in August of ’74.

Goldfield: Right. It might’ve been the summer of ’74 that I started.

Smith: I mean, was Nixon still—?

Goldfield: No, he had left, but his people were still there. Pam Powell was still there running Youth Affairs in the fall, I believe, of ’74.

Smith: Can I ask you about one of the things that intrigues us and, maybe as an outsider, you had a unique perspective on?
Goldfield: Sure.

Smith: Clearly one of the challenges that Ford faced, with no transition, was meshing the existing staff - Nixon people, whom he didn’t want to tar unfairly with Watergate - his own people from the Hill - and then such others as, over time, came in there. Did you sense tensions?

Goldfield: I didn’t sense any tensions. What I was going to say was that I didn’t know any one person well enough that could get me heard as a potential candidate as a White House summer intern. So I basically contacted everyone I knew in Republican politics and finally I got a call from Pam Powell’s office saying, “We’ve accepted you on one condition.” I said, “What’s that?” They said, “That we don’t get another call or letter on your behalf because it’s taking up too much time.”

But, to answer your question, I didn’t know President Ford well, but I saw him in action quite a bit and was in an atmosphere where you could get a good sense of the man and see him quite frequently. But I was only a White House summer intern. I think that he was, above all else, a very fair person. He had a very good heart, a very good intellect, and was unbelievably fair-minded as an individual. So, I don’t think that he was about to toss somebody over the side because they had worked for President Nixon who then had to resign. So, you saw a number of key individuals remain in various offices, including political offices, during the transition and during President Ford’s tenure. And I think that’s testament to his fairness. If somebody was talented and loyal, he was not going to throw them over the side.

Smith: Did you have any contact at all with Bob Hartmann? Clearly, Hartmann was an important and, in some ways, polarizing figure.

Goldfield: Right. I had very little contact with Hartmann. I started off in the White House Summer Internship and then was asked to stay on the permanent White House Counsel’s staff with Phil Buchen and his team. So, I transferred and was fortunate to get into Georgetown Law and graduated from Georgetown Law.
But as part of the process, every week the White House Summer Interns – some of whom are still my closest friends – would interview people. I remember one session with Don Rumsfeld, who was then chief of staff, I believe. He came in and we sat around on couches and all had a discussion with Rumsfeld and he then opened it up to questions after he spoke for a few minutes. My parents happened to be visiting from Connecticut so he was gracious enough to allow them to sit in on the session. I had just read a *Newsweek* article and I said, “Mr. Rumsfeld, *Newsweek* just portrayed you as ‘a Haldeman who smiles.’ Do you have any reaction to that?” I think I saw my parents both shrink down as low as they could in the chair. Rumsfeld gave a very quick ‘excuse me’ response and then came back to the question. But, it was a time where we were able to spend some time with these senior assistants.

Clearly, the most time I spent with members of the senior staff was with Phil Buchen who was, again, one of the most fair-minded, stable, thoughtful, great judgment individuals and the right guy for the time. I mean, we’d gone through such pain and agony and angst as a country over Watergate and over Vietnam, and to have someone with the relationship and trust that President Ford placed in Phil Buchen and to have the judgment that Phil Buchen had, the good common sense, and the strong legal capabilities - I was really honored to be able to participate in the White House Counsel’s Office. And it was a good predicate; I served in President Reagan’s White House Counsel’s Office, not so much because I was the best law student in America and chosen for that, but, as I describe it, having had a couple years with President Ford in the White House Counsel’s Office, I knew where the fire extinguishers were. And I think a lot of the White House Counsel’s Office is understanding what to use to put out what kind of fires. And I was fortunate to be given that opportunity.

Our assignments in White House Counsel’s Office as law clerks ranged from who can use the Seal of the President in responding to sixth grade classes to spending time on what to do about the Watergate tapes to spending time on War Powers when there was an incident between North Korea and South Korea over the chopping down of a tree, as I recall. So, it was just a really
wonderful opportunity to have sort of a seat in the room to see some of these things going on.

Smith: Let me back up a bit. This may not be fair, but did you see things, or could you understand why *Newsweek* would characterize Rumsfeld in that fashion? He’s a tough guy.

Goldfield: Very tough guy, very smart man. Tough, but not tough just to be tough. I thought, when he had Dick Cheney, who I have huge respect for as a solid, loyal American with the fortitude to do what he thinks right, irrespective of the “politics” of a decision. I’ve seen Rumsfeld since the Ford years but only on a few occasions. I think he’s a tough-minded, bright fellow. I may disagree at times with his positions on policy, but I think he always did what he thought was correct. Maybe sometimes it wasn’t the right policy to engage, but I respected him as usually trying to do the, in my view, right thing. And I think you can tell a lot about a person by who he has next to him and to have Dick Cheney next to him said a lot to me about Rumsfeld.

Smith: Some of the people we’ve spoken with, beginning with Dorothy Downton, the President’s personal secretary have suggested that there was a difference of sorts in terms of how each ran the White House. And they were not being particularly critical or praiseworthy of one or the other, but just suggested that it was a somewhat more relaxed atmosphere under Cheney.

Goldfield: Than under Rumsfeld?

Smith: Than under Rumsfeld.

Goldfield: I don’t know the answer to that. I think each had their own styles. Dick Cheney can be extremely – how should I put it – tough is the wrong word. He has a clear focus and I think he is strong in his beliefs and put politics aside if it’s the right thing to do. And I think that carried with Mr. Cheney right through to his being Vice President more recently. I think that President Ford was a fairly relaxed sort of fellow. He was not a hard-nosed, take out the hatchet or hammer kind of fellow. And I think he had - even as a Republican leader on Capitol Hill – tremendous respect from the other side of the aisle and I think he used that currency wisely. You know, he had a tough time with
the legacy of Vietnam, with the economy, and was really challenged with Russia which was a major challenge at the time. It was not an easy time, but I think he was exactly the right person to give America back its feeling of trust in their President.

Smith: One way of looking at the Ford presidency sees a trajectory of someone who came into office with a congressional mindset...who some would say ‘grew,’ some would say ‘evolved’…the story of the Ford presidency is about, without losing the skills that he had polished on the Hill, learning the difference between a congressional and an executive mindset. In other words, learning to be President.

Goldfield: Well, I think he learned quickly and I think he often got frustrated, in my recollection, with his congressional colleagues, particularly when it came to foreign policy. You know, I think he said something to the effect ‘We can’t have 535 chief executives when it comes to foreign policy.’ So, I think he evolved very quickly because, once you assume the mantle of President, your role becomes very clear and the decisions you have to make are right in front of you. You often don’t have the luxury of prolonged debates over months or years because decisions have to be made that affect our national security, our foreign policy. I think he evolved and understood quickly that there should be a separation of powers and that the President as chief executive and Commander-in-Chief ought to have the ability to act and enact in a decisive manner. And yet he remembered his congressional days and I think he had some sensitivity to what was happening in the Congress. But it still had to be frustrating in light of ‘You can’t have 535 commanders-in-chief.’

Smith: But there is irony that this man, by his own proud admission a child of the House, a product of Congress, should find himself, in many ways defending executive branch prerogatives against assault from Capitol Hill.

Goldfield: It’s ironic, but I think also, as I said, he learned very quickly that the decisions you have to make as commander-in-chief don’t give you the luxury of being able to convince a majority of 435 members of the merits of your position. We’ve got soldiers whose lives are on the line. We’ve got national security interests that are threatened on a daily basis. So you’ve got to step into a role
where you’ve got to make decisions that you believe protect on national security and foreign policy interests, and worry about the politics later.

Smith: Which brings us to the War Powers Act. I’ve been told that every President since its passage has, to varying degrees, at least in private, insisted that it was of dubious constitutionality. But none of them have wanted to try that argument in the courts. So, you have this sort of grudging acquiescence.

Goldfield: Well, it’s basically, I think, a delicate balance where you’ve got significant tensions at play. As I said, I think that Congress, in terms of its constitutional role, versus the Executive Office of the President and its constitutional role…there will be dramatic tensions. And I think they really get joined when it comes to something as serious as war and peace or the War Powers Act. Again, I think the President, as Commander-in-Chief, has to be able to act without having to go through a long, drawn out congressional debate as to whether he has the authority to do this or that. The President derives tremendous authority, not just from the Constitution, or legal interpretations over time by the Executive Branch of War Powers Act, but by a number of the emergency powers the President derives from such as the International Emergency Powers Act. And I think that everybody understands how critical it is for the President to be able to act decisively and in timeframes that are sometimes less than what others from the Congress might think are reasonable in order to protect our national security. After the fact many, I would guess, might debate whether it was a decisive act within the President’s Constitutional prerogatives or a declaration of war. And, you know, that tension is probably a healthy tension - that there is that debate. But I don’t think that debate should forestall the President being able to exercise his authority to protect the nation when it needs to be protected.

Smith: I imagine a classic case in the Ford years would be the Mayaguez incident, where clearly it was in a fog to begin with, with things developing almost minute-by-minute. Just in an operational sense, it would be difficult to keep people informed.

Goldfield: It is, and how to inform the Congress, when to inform the Congress, and where’s the line, is going to be the subject of countless speeches, articles, and
criticisms by both sides. Again, I fall back on the constitutionally derived prerogatives of the President, on the side of the Executive, when it comes to much of this. Because, when you’re there, you realize that there isn’t the luxury of time. You’ve got to act. You’ve got to respond. American soldiers’ lives are often on the line and our security is on the line. That’s not to say that someone should act precipitously or without the facts, but I’m not sure that you can ask for permission in each and every case. I think that the Counsel’s Office has made pretty clear where they believe the line is in terms of what triggers the Congress’ role under the War Powers Act.

Smith: Presumably, Ford had an advantage – a credibility built up over many, many years of interacting with his colleagues on the Hill - that he brought to that kind of situation which you can’t really quantify. That said, however, clearly things were changing and the ’74 election did produce a bumper crop of, at the very least, skeptics, profound skeptics, who did not have that personal relationship with Ford. Was there a tension there?

Goldfield: I wasn’t at a level to really understand or see that tension play out firsthand, but, you know, people were rightfully skeptical of presidential decision-making as a result of the Watergate episode. So, I think, again, the healthiest thing for our country is open debate. I think debate gives us the opportunity to air all sides of an issue and hopefully the decision maker is smarter and reaches a better decision as a result. I think that the skeptics were rightfully interested in what’s happening, what the information is that’s causing the President to put troops on alert or the like, and why aren’t we better informed about that. And I think, again, it goes to a balance, there ought to be strong consultation where there can be such - but, again, we can’t take one incident and then tie the President’s hands with respect to his ability to act in a reasonable fashion in the face of a threat or danger to our national security. So that tension, I think, will always exist and I’m not so sure that’s not a healthy tension.

Smith: Well, there’s a reason they call it healthy skepticism. But when healthy skepticism shades over into cynicism or a kind of reflexive distrust of the
executive – and, certainly, there were pockets of that as a result of not only Watergate, but Vietnam as well—

Goldfield: As I said, with the legacy of Vietnam, of Watergate, etc., we were in very troubled waters. The skeptics are right to be skeptical, but that skepticism, I don’t think, should detract from the powers enumerated to the President as Commander-in-Chief to protect our security.

Smith: What was the mood around the place – and I realize you weren’t in the Oval Office – but just generally around the White House in April of ’75 as it became clear that Vietnam was falling?

Goldfield: Well, you couldn’t not be affected, especially by everything that you saw on the television every night about what was happening in Vietnam. There was a very serious mood. But, again, I think I’d be exaggerating or overreaching to say that I was there as a firsthand observer in the Cabinet Room or Roosevelt Room or Situation Room. I wasn’t.

Smith: Were you in the Counsel’s Office at that point?

Goldfield: I was in Counsel’s Office starting in June of ’75, as I recall.

Smith: Yeah.

Goldfield: But I was able to see just how tense a situation it can be. I remember getting a call to come in because - and I’m trying to stretch my memory a bit - a couple of our soldiers had been shot at or killed when they were cutting down a tree that was blocking the view of North Korea at the time, I believe.

Smith: Right.

Goldfield: So, seeing how tense that was gave me, I think, a real bird’s eye view into how tense situations can be. And, certainly, with the fall of Vietnam and what the President and his Cabinet and National Security staff had to deal with, you could feel the tenseness. But, again, I wasn’t a participant in the Security Council debate.

Smith: One of the criticisms that has been made over the years, particularly of the early months of the Ford presidency, was that wasn’t up to Presidential
standards. Now, clearly, that’s a broad brush when you consider people like Bill Seidman, who went on to very distinguished careers, and Buchen as well. Part of it was the congressional staff. It was less Grand Rapids *per se*, but there was a sense that there were some people who rose to the occasion and others who—

Goldfield: Well, some of them rose to the occasion and went on to be members of Congress themselves. But what I think the Grand Rapids team brought was some sound judgment, a sense of self-confidence without being arrogant at all, there was no arrogance, very smart individuals. Whether it was Bill Seidman - who was a very good friend - or Phil Buchen or others, I think what the country wanted, President Ford brought them, which was ‘You can trust us. We have good judgment. We’re solid. We’re honest.’ It was a time that trust was sorely needed because of Watergate and because of the skepticism surrounding Watergate and Vietnam. So, I think there could not have been a better person for that job at that time than President Ford. There was never any arrogance about that man and he took his role seriously and I think he clearly understood how the Congress worked. And, as I said, he had friends on both sides of the aisle and I think he used that currency when he had to, although, you couldn’t use it each and every time, nor did they cash it all the time in terms of Congress’ response.

Smith: If you talk to someone who didn’t know who Phil Buchen was, describe him, what he did, and what his role was.

Goldfield: I’d say that Phil Buchen was as much a “counselor” to the President as he was Counsel to the President. He understood his role was to protect the Office of the President from a counsel’s standpoint, from the perspective of protecting the legal authorities and protecting the President and the White House staff in terms of understanding where the red lines were in terms of the law and making sure that everything operated at the White House and within the Cabinet agencies according to both the letter and spirit of the law.

But, I think Phil’s true strength was the fact that he had such a close relationship to the President from their days as law partners. Phil had tremendous judgment. Again, there was no need for him to have any great
limelight and he would always give the President his honest assessment of a situation as counselor. And, I think, because of who Phil was as an individual, the President wanted him as a member of the Cabinet. As I recall, Phil was one of the few counsels who also had the rank of Cabinet member and I think that was critical, not just for the internal deliberations that occurred, but also for people’s perception, that here you have the President’s top legal advisor sitting at the cabinet table to ensure that some of the misguided transgressions of the past - there would be no countenance of that in this presidency.

Smith: When you came into that office, did he explain the governing principles of this office or this administration? How were you initiated to the Ford-Buchen view of things?

Goldfield: As a White House summer intern, we got a snapshot on a weekly basis, if not more frequently, of senior White House staff and mid-level White House staff, what they were working on, how the place operated, what the priorities were, et cetera. And, if you spent time reading as much as you could about what was happening at the White House in terms of internal memos or the daily press briefings, you got pretty smart pretty quickly on what the issues of the day were and where the President stood on some of these issues. But, you also got the sense from your weekly interviews with the likes of Don Rumsfeld, as I mentioned, or Hartmann or others, as to how they viewed the priorities and the process. And that was very, very instructive. I think I was - I don’t know - 24 or so years old at the time and a law student. But it was very instructive as to how the White House operates and that it’s a place that’s filled with human beings with their strengths and with their weaknesses and one got to see that it’s not always perfection in terms of either the process or the substance because it is human beings that are the players.

Smith: The Justice Department had been at the heart of a lot of the problems. One senses that, for example, in choosing Ed Levi as Attorney General or John Paul Stevens for the Court, that the President (presumably Phil Buchen) were very cognizant of the need to clean up the situation.
Goldfield: I think these appointments were a reflection of President Ford and his own character. Phil Buchen knew how to qualify and quantify that reflection of the President’s own character and desires. So, whether it was Ed Levi or Stevens – and I think - was Scalia the head of Office of Legal Counsel at the time?

Smith: May have been.

Goldfield: I may be mixing up my presidencies. But there was always—

Smith: He was at the Justice Department.

Goldfield: Right. I think during the Ford tenure, he was the head of the Office of Legal Counsel, but it was a very compatible and healthy process between White House Counsel’s Office and the Justice Department. And, again, I’ll use the word trust. While we didn’t always have to agree, that debate produced a better product. There was never a sense that Justice was telling us what we wanted to hear as opposed to what their view of the particular issue or their response to the particular question should be from their standpoint. And so that’s why, I think, the judgment, the character, the self-confidence, but not arrogance of many of the senior White House staff really served the President well. Because it wasn’t telling the Justice Department ‘You will do this.’ It was respecting their own independence and intellect. Again, lawyers often disagree, but it was disagreeing without being disagreeable and allowing the debate to occur.

Smith: It was explicit that Ed Levi and the Justice Department were to be non-political. For example, he had nothing to do with the campaign in ’76. Did that extend back to the Counsel’s Office as well? To be as non-political as you could be?

Goldfield: I never considered our office to be partisan. That was true under Phil Buchen and President Ford and it was true under Fred Fielding and President Reagan because, once you allow yourself to be more partisan than providing unfettered advice based upon the law, I don’t think you serve the President’s interest. That doesn’t mean we weren’t political ourselves, but they weren’t asking us for a political opinion. There’s a political office at the White
House. We had to review everything that went into the President’s office or that came out from a legal standpoint. Was it based on sound legal principles and sound legal reasoning? Under what authorities was the President being asked to take some action? Was he acting within those bounds? Now, we’re all human beings, so I’m sure our own political desires crept in at times, but by no means were they the overriding or the centerpiece of anything that we did in either counsel’s office. The President got fair, unfettered advice. The senior White House staff got fair, unfettered advice, whether they liked the particular advice or not.

Smith: Is it fair to describe the Counsel’s Office as the President’s in-house lawyer, in-house law firm? Describe the Counsel’s Office.

Goldfield: Counsel’s Office had to deal with such a huge range of issues. While the issues all in some way touched upon Presidential authority, many of them were pretty far removed from the most serious issues of the day. So, he had a group of mostly very smart, very seasoned lawyers, again, who understood what their role was and I think, at least as far as the two counsel’s office I was fortunate to be members of, we never tried to stretch our role into something that it wasn’t. So, it was a pretty good group of smart lawyers that came from various backgrounds. We’d sit in staff meetings and there’d be a healthy discussion of the issues, free and healthy discussion of the issues.

Smith: And Buchen would preside over that?

Goldfield: Well, I’m trying to remember. I’m not sure that I can recall back that far as to those staff meetings, but he had people like Bill Castleman and Rod Hills and Barry Roth and Ken Lazarus and Bobby Kilburg, for the most part, really top-notch lawyers who didn’t have an axe to grind or personal agenda.

Smith: We’ve interviewed Bobby. Had there been a woman in the Counsel’s Office before her?

Goldfield: I don’t know. I don’t recall. She is terrifically bright. She was a fabulous lawyer and, again, one of those individuals who was not afraid of speaking truth to power and that’s what you need in Counsel’s Office. It doesn’t mean that you have to be nasty in how you speak truth to power, but you need to be
able, as a lawyer in that office, given the issues that sometimes you have to
deal with, to be able to speak truth to power and she clearly was one of those
and was respected for that.

Smith: And, clearly, Buchen welcomed that.

Goldfield: Welcomed that. Phil did not shy away from whatever the advice was that
needed to be given. He never shied away because it may not be the most
politically expedient answer. Never shied away from that. And that, I think,
was the value of his tenure and, in my view, the value of Fred Fielding’s
tenure.

Smith: Did Buchen ever talk about the pardon?

Goldfield: I don’t recall ever having a conversation with him about the pardon. But,
again, it was so long ago that we may have had soft discussions. But I don’t
think I did.

Smith: Did he ever tell Ford stories? They’d been friends for so many years. Did he
ever talk about his old friend?

Goldfield: No. He may have done that with some of his peers. Don’t forget, I was a law
clerk. I was not one of the lawyers for the President and when I wasn’t in
Counsel’s Office working, I was going to law school. So, I wasn’t privy to
too many of those conversations. But there was healthy camaraderie in the
office and a tremendous amount of respect for both Phil Buchen and the
President. So, I’m sure that there were occasions when Phil talked to Bobby
or the like and there was a story or two, but it was a wonderful family at the
time in Counsel’s Office and I think that was real important to the spirit that
pervaded the office in the White House. President Ford had such respect from
everybody that was there and deservedly so. And, as I said, some of my best
friends today are people that I met in that White House at the time.

Smith: Ed Levi’s a pretty impressive figure, isn’t he?

Goldfield: He was very impressive. Again, I saw a lot of what came out of the Levi
Justice Department, but I’d had very limited exposure to the man himself as a
lowlv^law clerk in that office.
Smith: And John Paul Stevens may be one of the last justices to be chosen on the grounds of sheer legal talent as opposed to an ideological or philosophical bent. Clearly, the President was persuaded that Stevens was a moderate or moderate conservative. Stevens himself always insisted that he was and that he remained the same. There are those who claim that Ford – because, of course, you had this running narrative that Presidents are surprised by the people they put on the Court – and so there’s a desire to put Ford in that. The fact of the matter is that he was extraordinarily proud of that selection.

Goldfield: Because of the character of the person. I think that’s what mattered a lot to President Ford. And, again, I didn’t know the President very well. I got to know his son Jack a bit and stayed in touch with his son Jack for awhile. We’d hung out together as some of the younger White House staff members would.

Smith: Did Jack introduce you to any of his celebrity friends? Bianca Jagger, for instance?

Goldfield: I stayed pretty low-key, but Jack was a friend and Rod Spackman, another White House summer intern who’d been one of Jack’s closest friends. So we hung out together. But, going back to your question about Justice Stevens, I think it goes back to the character of the individual. What I think the President cared most about was - you’d assume that the person would meet the standard of legal excellence - but then what’s the character of the person? My guess is that meant a lot. I remember getting a call from Phil Buchen saying, “You’ve got to take a letter up to the Supreme Court and you’ve got to leave right now. Call us every five minutes when you’re in the White House car.” Well, it turned out that was the letter in response to the resignation of Justice Douglas. I didn’t know it at the time.

Smith: Of course, there had been a history.

Goldfield: Right, but I didn’t know at the time. That’s what I was carrying up there or carrying back, but I knew something was up when the car pulled back into the White House and all the cameras are flashing all over the place. That was sort of my little snippet of history.
Smith: You delivered it to Justice Douglas’ chambers?

Goldfield: Yeah.

Smith: His secretary?

Goldfield: I don’t remember at the time because I didn’t know what I was delivering, you know. Was it an invitation to a White House dinner?

Smith: So you didn’t know it was a response to his resignation.

Goldfield: No.

Smith: Okay.

Goldfield: Which, you know, showed that I wasn’t really part of the senior decision-making process. But I didn’t realize what it was at the time. On the way back in the car, I think somebody told me what I was involved in, but not when I was taking the letter up, as I recall. But it was a great opportunity to work in a White House to see it from the inside out. Again, it’s filled with human beings, most of whom are tremendously capable, tremendously trustworthy, and hugely loyal, not just to the President, but to the office in which they serve. I got to see a lot of really great people work and I think sacrifice lots of family time for their country.

Smith: I realize you were insulated from politics, but there’s no more political place in the White House, than particularly in an election year. Looking back and knowing what you know now, was there a sense that the White House was slow to take the Reagan challenge seriously? To accept that Reagan would in fact run, or realize just how formidable a challenge Reagan might pose?

Goldfield: Well, a few of the people that helped me get to the Ford White House were Mike Dever, Ed Meese, and others. They’d helped me a bit because I knew them when I was a Coro Foundation Fellow and I had helped run a campaign for one of then Governor Reagan’s cabinet members, Brian van Kamp, who was running for Secretary of State. Also, Craig Fuller, who was, and is today, one of my closest friends in life, was a Coro Foundation Fellow with me, ran the Youth Programs for Governor Reagan, I think, so I got to spend a lot of
time with the Reagan folks. So, from my perspective, serving in the Ford White House and being very loyal to President Ford, I understood full well how creative and smart and politically astute those folks were. At the same time, Stu Spencer was running the Ford campaign. His daughter Karen was a White House summer intern and today is still one of my good friends, as is Stu. But Stu Spencer is as good as it gets in terms of Presidential politics or politics at large.

So, I think they realized how formidable Governor Reagan was, but they also realized the power of the bully pulpit of the presidency. And, you know, I think the American public saw in President Ford somebody they could trust. Now, why didn’t we win the election against Jimmy Carter? I’m not sure of that. I just think that with the legacy from Watergate and the legacy from Vietnam, people wanted a change from that. But President Ford came pretty darned close to winning that election. As I recall, in Ohio or Hawaii, I forget what it was, it wasn’t that much of a difference. They were very close. If those states had come in for Ford, there could’ve been a different outcome. We were all very disappointed, crushed that the man who we believed in so much didn’t get the final nod from the American public.

Smith: Afterwards, he said to intimates, “I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer.” And there is a suggestion it took him awhile to bounce back.

Goldfield: Well, it has to because, when you’re spending so much time running for that office and in that position at the time, you put your heart and your soul into that race. He was a competitive guy in that respect, as one would hope he would be, and I think he gave it a tremendous fight. Again, we were all disappointed knowing the man from the inside that he didn’t win that election. But he’s not somebody, my guess, that ever held many grudges. He had enough self-confidence without being arrogant that he could move on with his life and do so with his head up high. And he had self-deprecating humor. I mean, we hung out with Kennerly, too, at times, and Ford made fun of himself and he wasn’t afraid to engage in that self-deprecating humor which is part of the man and part of the character why he was so well liked up on Capitol Hill.
Smith: Did you resent, on his behalf, the *Saturday Night Live*, caricature – which was kind of a metaphor for whether this guy’s up to the job?

Goldfield: In each and every one of his important actions, I think, he left the public feeling better off than before and they realized the character they had in the man. So, I think that the public caricatures of President Ford not being able to chew gum and walk - you know, the fellow was a hell of an athlete and he went to pretty well-respected academic institutions and law schools, so I think he probably sat there and laughed when he saw it rather than resented it and threw something at the TV. He was very comfortable in his own skin and that came across to everybody who came in touch with him, very comfortable in his own skin. And, as I say, I had nothing but tremendous respect for the President and Mrs. Ford and the family. I think we were lucky to have him at the time to fill what was a huge gap at the time of trust.

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

Goldfield: Very, very limited contact with Mrs. Ford. Maybe in passing. As I said, I had much more contact having a beer or two or three with Jack, you know, because we were the same age and hung out.

Smith: Where would you hang out?

Goldfield: Oh, we’d be at a friend of ours at a summer place near Annapolis. We’d just go there and hang out and do things that kids in their twenties do, drink a beer or two and enjoy themselves. We all worked pretty hard and so, you know, it was all good-natured fun. Other than some beers, I didn’t see anything other than that going on. Maybe too many beers at times, but what twenty-year old hasn’t had a couple beers more than he or she should’ve?

Smith: How do you think Gerald Ford should be remembered?

Goldfield: As the right man for the mission and the mission was to fill the gap. There was a huge gap. There was very little trust, very little respect for the office of the President. And, what we needed was somebody to rebuild that bridge, to fill that gap, so the public could once again have trust in their chief executive and commander-in-chief and those around him. And I think his legacy will be
that he put us back on track, that he then filled that gap because he was a man of such strong and good character. And I think he really left a legacy that will be long remembered as people pay tribute to his character and how important that character was to help heal the wounds of Watergate and, to some extent, Vietnam.

Smith: So character counts.

Goldfield: And that’s what I said. When he made appointments, character counts.
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this. How did your path cross with Gerald Ford?

Eck: Well, before he was vice president was he Minority Leader?

Smith: He had been Minority Leader, right.

Eck: He’d been Minority Leader when he came. We didn’t have a hospital then, we just had a little clinic. At that time, the closest he could get into Vail was Grand Junction and they helicoptered him up to where Home Depot is now, which was the Bill Nottingham ranch. In fact, he got to be friendly with them to a certain level and went down to the house for dinner. And, I guess, even Bill with his cowboy boots and Neva, his wife, ended up in the Oval Office as his guest at some time. So, you can see how personable he was in interacting with the common folk around.

But in the first place, I was working with the Ski Patrol. I’d been a Vietnam veteran and my first year here was ’71. And the Ski Patrol guys, seeing Vail growing and instead of treating just broken legs out on the hill, they were treating heart attacks and medical problems. So, I got to work with them and actually took two winters off to Ski Patrol full-time. But when his medical team came out there, they were intending take over and take care of Ford. You know, he was vice president and especially when he became president. So, we found these fellows who were basically Navy medics to follow him around. I think Lukash was in the position at the time, Bill Lukash. He worked things out with me as far as what to do around the little clinic.

Now, it’s easier because we have a full bred hospital. But we had put together a cardiac program. This is before EMTs and paramedics were even invented. No one else had done it to my knowledge in the world. We had old defibrillators and cardiac drugs on the mountain. And we put together this rather sophisticated kit - actually, it started with an old suitcase - but we
actually ended up with a pack because we were outdoor folks, mountaineering. The Ski Patrol had to be able to take it down efficiently and know how to work things in the snow. Because, in the snow, you’re not like in a warm operating room or emergency room, which most doctors, and frankly, a lot of the medics who came with him were used to. In fact, several came out of Washington and they had goulashes on and arctics and they had their gloves pinned to their shirt. And they were going to take over.

Well, we decided, as the Ski Patrol guys, not to interfere, but we would help them. But we also knew just watching them walk around that they were foreigners to snow. So, I remember, one of the medics got to be very well-known to everyone. We used to call him Ten Bubble because of some of the partying - drank ten bubbles before we could get on with the rest of the evening. And this is part of the background stuff that went on which no one else knows about.

Smith: Is that one reason why there were agents who particularly liked to come out to Vail?

Eck: Yes. Yes, they all got involved. I mean, actually, they still have homes here today and people in the community especially. Our head of the Ski Patrol director at the time was Paul Postwhite. And he and Larry Buendorf are best of buddies. In fact, Buendorf was at one of my weddings, just attending because he had his own place here for a couple of years. But we all got to know each other. Anyway, they were impressed with this pack that we had put together, the cardiac pack, which now is almost standard. And they modified everything they had in the White House as well as what traveled with him in the medical emergency pack based on what we had. They would call periodically and ask ‘What are you doing out there?’ and ‘What’s going on?’ And we found at least through Ford, and I understand the next couple of presidents, because we had still the same contingent of what we used to call Sneaky Pete’s rather than the Secret Service. That was our little game with them. They would call and interact. We would tell them where to go and what the new equipment was and what we were doing.
But, I can’t remember his name, old Ten Bubble, but we got him out there on a snow mobile and we were going to show him a typical setting if something bad might happen. And the first thing he did when he stepped off the snowmobile was step and posthole down to his waist and he was helpless. He had just his galoshes around. All of a sudden, he looked around and said, “You guys take over. We’re getting out of this. We’ll just be back and help you.” So, from then on, the Ski Patrol got engaged, and actually before every time they came out, they used our protocols and our medications which followed him around. Now, what we had established in ’72, ’73, and ’74 is used everywhere. I think other people not necessarily copied us, but that is just what evolved as the emergency medical system got more sophisticated.

So, anyway, I had a connection there. They knew who I was and involved. When he became president, he was good friends with the Gramshammers. There was some medical issue there and they wanted someone involved, so Sheika Gramshammer actually sent them to me and we got along very well. I’m a small town kid from northeastern Pennsylvania, the Pocono Mountains. He’s from Grand Rapids and had an amazing rapport with the whole family. So it was privilege to be involved with that.

Smith: Was it, in the abstract, at all intimidating?

Eck: The first day I was going to meet him. I was there and knew he was coming in, and I was a little intimidated personally. The moment he got in, he just started talking like myself. I mean, I didn’t grow up in a big city. I went to a small town high school, a small college. I did go to medical school. So, our vocabularies were somewhat similar. I mean, you could tell. So, there was a bond. And after the first time, he agreed to call me Jack. He wanted me to call him Jerry. I said, “Out of respect, it’s President Ford” this is a different deal. And Betty was Betty and I was Jack and we got to know the kids. Of course, the kids came out then and they were younger and they interacted with other ski instructors and Ski Patrol people. In fact, some of them had some parties back at the White House, which I guess I’ll leave to some other historian. So they got to be part of the community, too.

Smith: At that point, Beaver Creek didn’t exist, as I understand.
Eck: That’s right. It did not.

Smith: And Vail was smaller and less elaborate than it is today?

Eck: Yes, the core of Vail, you see, was just about what it is where there’s the main street. Where the big parking structure is there in town, actually, when they first came, Lions Head parking structure wasn’t there, but the later periods it was. But there were actually in Vail three little hotels, The Night Latch, Poor Richards, and Short Swing. Of course, the Fords didn’t stay there, but then there was a gravel parking lot. And you came across the Covered Bridge, it was still there, and those core buildings you see in those streets were there. And Mill Creek, where they stayed at the Bass residence, and they got to be good friends with Fitzhugh and Ilene Scott who were next door neighbors and they shared a swimming pool between them. Both Fitz and he liked to swim.

So I got involved with the Scotts, who were patients of mine, too, and there’s another story out there that goes with the Scotts that we can come back to. So, they actually shared pools and through social events, I would come over when the Fitzhughs and Scotts were entertaining. Actually, he was the first architect here in Vail. He was the guy that put the curve in the street. If you notice, when you go across from where The Left Bank restaurant is and you go by Pepi’s and you go by Gramshammer’s, it’s a curve put there on purpose. Fitzhugh always wanted it so you didn’t know quite what was around the corner and entice you to walk out and of course you have the spectacular Grand Traverse on the Gore Range come into view, he put in there. Anyway, that part was interesting. And they had the old gondola there which was parallel to the New Vista Bahn, which is the high speed lift now. And another chair lift and that was it. Another gondola was put in Lion’s Head which had a bad accident in ’76 or ’77 and they had to modify that but then everything expanded west.

Smith: At that point, the President was very much an active skier.

Eck: An active skier, yes. And, in fact, when he skied, Pepe Gramshammer was always there. He was his instructor and our ambassador.

Smith: Pretty good instructor.
Eck: He was a great instructor, the world’s best. And they had a contingent of Ski Patrol guys. And everyone had their own nicknames and they had their own nicknames on the crew. Chupa Nelson and George Cisneros were always assigned the Fords when they came out. Of course, they knew all the Secret Service, so everybody interacted and interplayed and it actually worked very well.

Smith: Sounds like it was pretty relaxed.

Eck: It was really relaxed and it was a lot of fun. I mean, people were serious. The Secret Service had a big telescope which they’d mounted on top of one hotel, so they would see in above the hill while the rest of us were working. And I remember one day, the Ski Patrol, which was very, very proud of their perfectionism and how well they took care of people. The Secret Service got a jab in because at the end of the day when you would ski, everyone would come down and we would have to go over the whole mountain and we did what we’d call a sweep. So it was sweep time and you’re looking for people that are hurt or injured. Every once in awhile, somebody would hide in the trees because they’d want to ski by themselves and you couldn’t find them. But that was a real ritual. Now, it’s easier because we still do it but we use radios. Then we only had one or two radios on the mountain. So you had to wave off to each other visually when you’d clear a slope. Well, apparently, somebody was missed and one of the Sneaky Pete’s up there was looking at the telescope and found them and called the Ski Patrol guys and gave us a hell of a ribbing. So, yeah, the jousting occurred a lot. It was wonderful.

Smith: So, at that point, was there basically one ski area?

Eck: Yeah, it was really Vail. Beaver Creek didn’t come on – they started doing things there in ’74 or ’75, but until it really came online, it was ’76, ’77, ’78.

Smith: Was there ever in fact any kind of security scare that you were aware of?

Eck: If there was, I’m not aware, but I’ve forgotten. I think there was one time someone was concerned something would happen, but it got to be a comedy of mistakes and errors. I can’t remember. But nothing ever serious happened. I think the thing that they recognized, though he didn’t verbalize it until years
later. They were comfortable here, because, again, if you’ve got a national figure or even John Elway and you walked into Vail unannounced, there’d always be a crowd. Here no one ever bugged them. They let them go. I’m sure people would turn their heads and look or point, but they really mixed in.

Smith: Which I think they would’ve appreciated all the more because, even when he went back to Grand Rapids, I think the bane of his existence were autograph seekers, particularly, commercial. And he got to the point where he recognized them and that was hard to shake. But my sense is that here that was not a concern.

Eck: It really wasn’t. And I’ve got to hand it to him because he and I had conversations as he retired and he had more time, and especially as he got a little older, he would reminisce and we would sit in the office one-on-one and talk beyond immediate issues. And I guess he used me for sort of venting and sometimes not venting, but one thing he kept bringing up, he said, “You know, there was a responsibility to being president. People come and they interact.” But he didn’t mind it around here that interaction, because he knew it was friendly and they’d been involved in the community. And if they asked for signatures, he said, “You know, that’s part of it. They respected it. I don’t mind signing some.” But the bane, like you said, was the commercial guys. If it was some kid or someone else, he said, “That’s my responsibility. They go to me and this is it and I expect that.” So I thought there a very, I hate to say it, mature way to look at it.

Smith: It’s a very interesting recognition - that a former president has a kind of unique responsibility; it doesn’t end when you leave office. How would you characterize his skiing?

Eck: I would say he was advanced intermediate. When you only ski once a year or a couple times a year, no matter who, that’s good. He was stable and he was strong. Was he pretty? No. But he was comfortable. I mean, if you looked at him and not being like high Ski Patrol level or instructor, you would say he’s got a way to go, but if you were someone else, you would probably say he’s a good recreational skier. And he was safe and he was strong. Now, I used to hear the rumors about winging balls on the golf courses. Frankly, I’m
a hacker and I wouldn’t want anybody out there. I would nail them right away. There he was a world class athlete. Was he All-American? I can’t remember what level.

Smith: Yeah.

Eck: More athletic than some of the pundits there who used to tick me off.

Smith: That raises a question whether in any of those conversations - the whole Chevy Chase caricature - Did it bother him?

Eck: If it did, he didn’t express it. He’d say “Oh, damn it,” and he’d go on. He wouldn’t sit and dwell on anything. To me he had a nice perspective on it.

Smith: What did bother him?

Eck: You know, from my perspective, not an awful lot. It’s really interesting and I’ll come back to your question of what I think. I used to sit here and think, “Here I am. Who else in the world would have the privilege? I’m one-on-one with the guy who held the most power in the world and he respects me for what I know. I respect him for what he knows. And it’s just two guys hanging out.” I mean, there wasn’t any intimidation.

Smith: In fact, a relationship of equals.

Eck: Yeah, and I never thought of it that way, but once I got comfortable with him. Until after he passed away. I said, “I just can’t believe that in my own life that I had the privilege of doing that.” But back to the one thing that would bother him. He would say some things that annoyed him and it really wasn’t the public, but it was either some other political thing. And he wouldn’t say it adversely, he would just shake his head. “Well, I’m not going there.”

Smith: From a very early age, I think, probably from his folks, he was taught to seek the good in everyone. He made a very conscious effort to do that. The only two people I ever heard him speak disparagingly of - and the worst epithet he could come up with was “He’s a bad man” - one was Gordon Liddy and one was John Dean.
Eck: I actually never heard him comment on those two. He would say, “Things happen in life which, at the time, seemed awful and annoyed me, and now I look in perspective it really doesn’t matter.” Not that he was dismissive, obviously, whatever made an impact on him, but it was good.

Smith: Did he talk about Nixon?

Eck: No. I never asked. I know some doctors can be in people’s faces and I had some nice mentors, myself. And my position, as seeing a patient, was not to get into ‘What’s wrong with this? What happened?’ but rather ask open questions and let them take the time and talk. My philosophy was the patient really knows what’s going on and they know how to talk to you about it, and if you ask the right questions, they’re going to give you the diagnosis. You don’t even really need labs, you just guide them. My relationship was more open, so actually, he did most of the talking, almost what you’re doing with me here as a diagnostician. That was my style and maybe that’s what he liked. I don’t know.

Smith: He clearly took care of himself all his life. I assume there are good patients and not-so good patients. I assume he was a good patient.

Eck: An unbelievably good patient. Most patients never follow the prescribed medications, they do their own thing, and they’ll apologize for it sometimes, but that didn’t bother me. Again, openly, I would say, “That’s all the best I can do. I’ll be glad to help you in every way you want to and if this doesn’t work, how do you want it to work and I’ll try to make it work for you.” And I would use that same openness with him. So, I didn’t treat him very differently in my diagnostic style than with anyone else. I just wasn’t an in-the-face doc, I think.

Smith: Did you ever see the temper?

Eck: Yeah, occasionally.

Smith: How would that manifest itself? Was it on the golf course? On the ski lift?

Eck: I mean, I’d see it there in the office as “Damn that guy,” but I never saw it out there in the community. I purposefully stayed away from the limelight. I had
opportunities where I could be seen and I could see some people around town who wanted to be seen. But I’d say, “You know, I’m a physician. I’m out of it until he wants me there.” I just stayed out of it.

Smith: We’ve been told that the temper it was like a summer thunderstorm. It would erupt and then it would disappear. It was almost a cathartic kind of experience.

Eck: I never really saw that. You know, the most amazing time in my life was actually the last time I saw him. And I don’t think I’m breaching anything right here.

Smith: There were clearly a number of folks who didn’t want them to come up here those last couple summers.

Eck: Oh, a lot of people didn’t. And I said, “It’s up to you” because I got the calls.

Smith: You did.

Eck: Yeah. And I set things up. I said, “Whatever level he can come and function, I have no guarantees that he’ll survive here, but I’ll make it work for him whatever. If he needs the oxygen or needs the care.” And he had good folks with him. But near the last year or two when he was here, I got our cardiologist engaged with helping out, Larry Gaul. Larry is an interesting character. When he came here, he was a college drop-out in the ‘70s. Worked as a waiter in the Red Lion. Long story short, went back to school and finished it and went on and became a cardiologist at the Hershey Medical Center where he did his training, which is internationally known. He returned here because he was a ski instructor at one time.

But when he [GRF] was having difficulty standing up, he’d get light-headed and fall, I was part of the background on that. We got down to the end and I don’t know how much of this they reveal, so I’m going to be careful what I say, but we sat down there and we knew that the heart was failing, the heart valve was gone, I’d seen the echocardiograms.

Smith: Congestive heart failure?
Eck: Yeah, congestive heart failure. He had a bad valve. And that whatever we needed to do, would do one or two things. The most we could say, you’d have two years left. Or the other option was surgery but he might die in surgery immediately.

Smith: Was that the Mayo Clinic option?

Eck: Yeah. And, this is where I learned the character of the man. That’s what impressed me, I’ll never forget in my life. So the setting was discussed that we would send him to Mayo. The Fords had a connection there and, fortunately, our cardiologist Larry Gaul knew the cardiologist up there, Buzz Miller, and they talked about it. And the other option is, if you do nothing, you probably have six months to whatever quality time he could spend with the grandkids. So, a decision is, do we go to Mayo and get an operation right now? Or do we sit back and know you’re going to have an okay struggle like you’re doing, but still function - he could still look out the window and see the kids come by - and be gone in six months, no more than a year or two? Or just head out to the desert? What do you want to do?

So, the setting was, he was confined to a wheelchair. Myself and Larry Gaul went up to the house in Beaver Creek and there was Vaden and Susan and Betty and Larry Gaul and myself and they rolled him in and we just sat there in a circle. No one from the Secret Service, they were all gone. No one was in the room. There might have been someone else, one of the nurses or caretaker. I can’t remember now. So I sort of set the stage of what we’ve got, what he was dealing with. Because this is when he wanted to go back and do that last, remember he was back in Washington at one of the Medal presentations when he had a tough time and he had to sit down.

Smith: Yeah, that was the last meeting of the Ford Foundation in D.C.

Eck: Right. And we set him up with special drinks to use, you know, Propel, which was a fluid he took all the time. We told him to stand up and wait awhile before he moved. He finally started mentally, not able to get it because he wasn’t getting enough blood pressure. So intellectually, I saw it, so I knew it was happening on TV. So, anyway, we set the setting and then Larry Gaul
actually then went into the details of all those options which I just outlaid. If
he went to Mayo right now. He might need a bypass surgery and might need
the valve. If it was successful you might have a maybe okay two years. You
might die right there and miss it.

Smith:
I don’t mean to interrupt, but I was talking with Penny through all of that. I
remember her telling me that the people at the Mayo were very confident that
they had these procedures and everything else and they wouldn’t have advised
it if they didn’t believe there was a good chance of succeeding.

Eck:
Right, because he still was fit. As fit as he could be. You know, someone
else maybe we would have discouraged it, but with him, the same thing, we
let him have the option. But how this rolls out is what impressed; I’m going
to tell you next. So, I’ve gone through those details and Larry laid it out and
he asked everyone in our circle for their opinions. We had a big coffee table
here and there’s sofas all around and all two, four, five, six of us were sitting
there. So, he was in a wheelchair and he would rock back and forth, you
know, he was a little fuzzy at times, but he started talking about some things.
He was clear-minded and he listened to the options that Dr. Gall laid out.
And he looks up after sitting there for five or six minutes, I mean, it seemed
like it was just silence, he says, “Vaden, what do you think I should do?” So,
of course, this caught Vaden by surprise, so Vaden went on with what he
thought. I’m not going to reveal what they talked about. And he said,
“Susan, what do you think?” I think one of the sons was there. I can’t
remember, but it wasn’t Jack. I think Mike was there. He said, “Mike, what
do you think?”,” “Betty, what do you think?”, “Larry, what do you think?”,”
“Jack, what do you think?” So we all tried to be supportive, informative, but
tried to take the heat off it.

It didn’t matter to us, it was his decision. And he stopped and he sat there for
five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes, and said nothing. We all just
stared straight ahead. And then I saw him rise up like this and I thought God,
he looks like an athlete. I mean, you could see determination. He says, “Let’s
go to Mayo.” And I’m still getting chills just talking about it. Just like that.
Within an hour, the jet is on its way here. Everybody is scattered. They’re
doing their thing. Larry and I got things taken care of on this side. And they had him out the door. And a couple hours after he left, I got a call from the Vail ER and that’s when Betty had her clots and Susan was going to be with her. So, I got her transferred immediately to Denver because I wanted her to see a cardiovascular surgeon. I’m not going to go into her medical file. The vascular surgeon stabilized Betty then flew her to Mayo to care for her so she could join President Ford at Mayo.

And, of course, once things didn’t work out, I mean, he got the bypass surgery, but obviously he couldn’t tolerate the medicines which he needed to support the heart, (it kept failing) so they sent him home to the desert. And that was September, October, and of course he was gone the day after Christmas.

Smith: But the issue was that basically, as you say, he couldn’t tolerate the medicines.

Eck: Right. If the medicines could have sustained him until his heart could’ve regathered its strength and its rhythm, I think he would’ve gone another two years. I really do. But the medicines kept dropping his which he couldn’t tolerate. But the point of the story is not the facts of medicine, but it was the way he came to his decision. And I was talking to the head of the secret sorrow contingent at the time, a tall fellow, he comes back every year. I see him at the concerts. He has a Polish name. Wonderful guy, he was the lead Secret Agent at the time. And I related, I said, “I can’t believe it. I just saw this going around and asking everyone’s input and sitting and then coming to his own conclusion.” He said, “You know, that’s exactly the way he ran everything at the White House and how made his major decisions.” I said, “Bingo.”

But I saw a part of his life that no one else except the inner circle saw. And the impact it had on me, the chill I got, to see how he made the decision, you can still see he had that competitive edge. That’s why I said he rose up. It was like ‘I’m going to block that guy. That guy’s not going to get by me.’ He was willing to put it out there, take the risk, and go for it. The rest is history. Anyway, I had to tell the story.
Smith: It’s a great story. One of the agents who we’ve interview, a guy named Todd Matanick, had a wonderful story. The last time that he left the Eisenhower Medical Center, maybe a couple of months before he passed away. But he gets out of the hospital and in the van with the Secret Service and they said, “We’ll go home now.” He said, “No, I want to go to In-and-Out Burger.” And they drive to In-and-Out Burger. He gets out of the van, he walks into In-and-Out burger, and stands in line. I mean, this guy had just got out of the hospital and he had to have his hamburger.

Eck: Did he have his butterscotch ice cream?

Smith: I thought it was always butter pecan.

Eck: Butter pecan.

Smith: You mentioned the butter pecan ice cream. Whenever I was around him anyway, he seemed to be an incredibly disciplined guy.

Eck: He really was.

Smith: In a lot of ways, including his diet. That seemed to be the one indulgence.

Eck: He swam diligently every day, even at the end when he could only do a half a lap or one lap. Of course, he had one of the Secret Service there in the pool. But, I mean, he was with it. He had it and he was focused. He was incredible. Also the personality of both he and Betty is, when he had more time there and he would start having more illnesses - I had a very busy practice - unannounced, they would come into the office and they would see me because I would always want to defer to him. He’d say, “Jack, I know you’re busy. I’ve got a book. I’m going to sit and read. When you get a chance to get to me, I’m here.” And sometimes Betty would come.

One day I will never forget. She’s in there and she’s sick. This is a different day from that day. She said, “Jack my agent out there is sicker than I am. Go take a look at her first.” I said, “Really?” She said, “Yeah, go see what she looks like.” So, I’m walking out in the hallway and of course there’s this woman agent and she’s obvious because she’s got the thing in her ear and the wires all connected and said, “Betty said she wants me to look at you first
because she says you’re worse than she is.” And she just rolls her eyes. It was cute. But that’s the way they were. They were respectful of everyone else and everyone’s time. At least at that point in their lives.

Smith: A conversation I remember having with Penny over a fairly extended period of time; I think it got to the point where it was difficult for the staff. And I think it was difficult in some ways for the Secret Service because they’re not to provide medical treatment. That’s not their job.

Eck: They’re not medical people. They told him that many times. They were at risk. They didn’t want the liability, but they were it. They were the caretakers.

Smith: Exactly. And you don’t have to live in the White House - there’s got to be a threshold that’s very difficult to cross when you acknowledge to yourself that you need help first of all. Secondly, my sense was that Mrs. Ford was very reluctant to have caretakers. I mean, she wanted to take care of her husband.

Eck: Absolutely. The affection between them was incredible. I mean, it’s easy to say and somewhat trite to talk about them like two teenagers or whatever, but they cared and respected. But you could see it any time he was making a speech around town. He would say, “Betty and I,” it would always be “Betty and I.” In fact, from that, I picked that up. I sometimes give talks and speeches and I use my wife, and I thought, if he can do that, I care about my wife enough to do the same thing. So I copied it.

Smith: You’re right. It was a great love affair. It was also in some ways a classic of opposites attracting. The most obvious discrepancy - I mean, he was religiously punctual and that was not her bag. And he clearly had adapted himself to her schedule rather than the other way around. Did you see that at all?

Eck: Yeah, I did. I could see that. I can’t give you for instances, but I’d just been involved with social functions so many times that I could tell there was interesting things happening, that he was adjusting all the time. I really didn’t have as much access to him - I kept myself from it as far as personal access - when he was president. I just respected everyone else and I was here if he
needed me. My access came a little more when he came back here and he was retired. Things became a little more casual. He would call the house. He had the number. It was interesting that he felt comfortable. For instance, just to show you how neat it is. I missed his 90th birthday or whichever one they had here. They had a champagne party and they had Dom Perignon. My own parents were failing. My dad had just passed away. My mom was 94. So I was going back and forth.

So, whatever that party, I couldn’t make. My wife made it. She was there. And they had talked, he got to know her and Betty got to know our family. So, that story aside, a couple months later, I had a sister who was visiting in town, she was in Denver, and I had a caretaker who was one of the…actually he was a good skier himself, but he drove backhoes. But I have a little five acre property and a barn and he sort of lived there, gave him a free place to stay and he was glad and he actually helped me out. So, one day, I didn’t know it was going on, I was gone. I was in the hospital seeing a patient. And my sister comes up to the house and this caretaker’s name was Butch. And here’s President Ford and Betty getting out of the limo, coming up with a couple of bottles of champagne and caught them both by surprise. But because I couldn’t make it, they wanted me to have it. Well, they didn’t have a clue I wasn’t here.

The mix up was, the Secret Service came up like they usually do, it’s going to be a little of a surprise, but where I live up this valley, you couldn’t get cell phone service at the time. So they came in, I found out later from another neighbor, they checked the place out and said, “Well, Jack’s not here. He’s probably at the hospital.” So they couldn’t get the communication. Meanwhile, the entourage drives in and assumes everything is clear and sees my sister and Butch out there. So they left the champagne and were very cordial. I still have those bottles set aside today. I couldn’t be there, but the fact that they personally would come out. They didn’t send an emissary or what could have been a major – and then they sent me a note. They always sent notes saying “I heard your dad’s not doing well”, “Your mom’s not doing well.” That was just so thoughtful. They didn’t need to do that.
Smith: And clearly they were not just visible, but in a very hands-on way, were actively involved in the community.

Eck: Absolutely they were. We actually tried in the mid-80s to get another Betty Ford Hospital here and use her name. And Betty was really a treat. People like Fred Green and Ed Rainey, you probably know they’re good friends with them.

Smith: We’ve talked to Fred.

Eck: Okay, and he was helping us set up from this side. He was quite a business man and he had other people that he knew from out there, because they went back and forth to the desert. And Leonard Firestone and some other folks that were their friends were going to maybe help support getting this here. So, myself and Doris Kirchner who’s actually now the CEO of our hospital, was actually, here as a COO of our hospital. At that time (she later went with Mike Shannon when he was president of Vail and then moved to the desert and started his KSL businesses). She became his HR person. Actually, she just retired and came back here. We needed a CEO and eventually she stepped up. But she and I were working from this side with Fred going back and forth with Betty. So, Doris and I flew out there one day and Betty looked at everything, we met John Schwarzlose and the whole crew out there. And every one of us said, “Yeah, we need to have this in Vail. We could use it. We had a clientele who could afford something like this.” It almost seemed like a go.

And then Betty called apologetically about two weeks later and didn’t talk to me personally but she talked to Doris. She said, “You know, I really want this going. It makes sense. It would go, but I just can’t.” And Doris said, “Well, anything we can do to help?” She says, “No, I know myself. If you’d known us when you’re here visiting that day, I was up cleaning the tables and I was up putting things aside and if it has my name on it, I get too over involved and I have to make sure it’s okay if it carries my name. And she said, “That takes an awful lot of time and I know if it was Vail I’m going to do the same thing in Vail.” “And, I think,” she said, “that would just wear me down.” So that was the reason she backed out. But isn’t that classic?
Smith: It is classic, because I knew the issue existed of in effect franchising the name.

Eck: And we wanted to be the pilot group because everything was in place. We had the same players that went back and forth.

Smith: Again, if this is uncomfortable, you don’t have to go there, but prior to the intervention that took place in ’78 out there, did you sense a problem?

Eck: No, I really didn’t. I wasn’t involved with them in that inner social circuit that they worked here. Again, I was in the background, even though I took care of all these same people they were with. I kept out so I didn’t see it. I didn’t have that contact. And I can’t say I was surprised, not because of her specifically, but that whole group of folks that are high-end, I mean, they do a lot of partying at a different level and that’s not to be critical or judgmental.

Smith: Two things. One, you look at the political culture 40 years ago. People just drank a lot more than they do now.

Eck: Oh, it was very different than now.

Smith: And, secondly, I found it fascinating, when we went out to the desert to talk to people, that it was a particular problem with the elderly. That there were people who had retired out there, been very successful, very accomplished, and indeed often there was almost a connection between the more accomplished, the more successful, but that it was a problem that particularly afflicted people in their ‘retirement years’.

Eck: Well, even if people would have a tendency, at least in their working years, they wouldn’t be at home or in a place they could do it except in the evenings or maybe an occasional cocktail at lunch if they did it. I mean, the worker bees wouldn’t be allowed to do that, but they could discreetly do it because it was a business meeting. But once they had the freedom, there’s vacant time out there. I mean, I can see why it would happen inadvertently - not that it was necessarily need - it’s just tradition.

Smith: Sense of humor? People who know her well know that she has a somewhat more ribald sense of humor than he did.
Eck: Yes, she does. I love that picture that came out after she left the White House where she’s on the table. That black and white photo. I said, you know that’s classic.

Smith: Free spirit.

Eck: Free spirit, yeah. He had a gentle sense of humor. He liked a ribald joke. He told me some jokes occasionally and we would share it. The first time I heard one, I thought “Geez, I don’t know if it’s protocol.” But even patients I got to know after awhile because it’s unique in an area like this - my patients were more like friends than patients. I didn’t have to look in the chart to see who’s walked in the door next. You’re part of a community. So, he would share some of his jokes with me. But again, I just stay out of that because of our professional relationship.

Smith: In my eulogy, I mentioned the fact that most of us, as we get older, tend to become a little more conservative. Partly nostalgia for what was and also we have more to conserve. And that didn’t seem to be the case with them. Some of it was the Republican Party moved further and further to the right on a lot of issues, particularly social issues. And I’ve often wondered, because, by the end of his life, they were sort of marooned within the party. A woman’s right to choose was an obvious issue, but there were others, too. Gay rights. Issues that you wouldn’t normally associate with a “conservative Republican” president. And I’m wondering how much of that was her influence on him. How much of it was just a kind of innate compassion that perhaps was intensified by the experience of the intervention and everything that followed? How much of it was maybe picked up from the surroundings out here? A little more libertarian, a little more liberal socially?

Eck: You know, he and I never talked much politics. Again, it was bantering, the social things about Vail. He always asked me questions about what’s happening in Vail. The only time something ‘political’ came up was when Clinton was in the White House. Remember, because of inflation, the stock market, the world looked very rosy. And Clinton took the fact and he turned it around and we have a big surplus and we still had a trillion dollar debt, but it was on the books. And he was reading the newspaper and shaking it around
and said, “What do you think of all this, Jack?” which is the first time he asked me something like that. I said, “Well, you know, the economy, frankly, at times, it sucks. And he’s taking credit for a lot of this positive stuff.” And he said, “It’s interesting, I was made to look good and bad in the economy. Carter didn’t look good.” He talked about Reagan and his economics and turning around and, all of a sudden, Clinton came in and things look really rosy. Of course, that was before the 2000 crash. And he said, “You know, we’d like to take credit for when it’s good, but frankly, all you need to do is have Greenspan in your financial team. And we all looked at it that way.” In other words, the implication was, it didn’t matter what anybody did. The fact that Greenspan was there was the reason it did, even though the presidents take credit.

Smith: Do you think he was cautious about discussing politics with people? That he sort of held back a little bit from expressing opinions or raising subjects that might lend themselves—

Eck: Again, I wasn’t that involved in what he discussed with the President, because I was his doctor. We kept that distance. But he would occasionally come in. A lot of the old guard in town here had a Friday luncheon group called the No Name Luncheon Group and he would come over periodically and he was pretty open especially around people like Fred Green and Keith Brown and Bill Hanlon, you know, folks that he knew. And he was as wide open then as anybody could be. Within ourselves, ours was casual, it was social, it was light, it was personable on both sides, but I really didn’t get into politics with him. I’ve taken care of other presidents and vice presidents and ambassadors and foreign folks; I mean, they just kept referring me up not because I’m unique, I just happened to be in Vail where they came. But I saw a lot of these people and, first of all, I found out they’re like everybody else. And, frankly, they had the same gastrointestinal problems every other traveler has. Even though they looked very distinguished in front of these panels all over the world, they had diarrhea or constipation or anything or insomnia because of the jet lag. They’re human like everybody else. I got to know them there. So, nothing really transpired that much that could answer your question.
Smith: The altitude really wasn’t a problem until near the end?

Eck: Yeah, I mean, over the years, I got to see some of the - particularly when he was here - some of the press folks, I remember Helen Thomas and some of the other folks here would have problems with the altitude. Some I didn’t see, some my colleagues would see, but it did impact even some of the Secret Service, in fact, because they would be so macho, they didn’t want to leave. A couple of the guys, there were some problems with certain blacks or Mediterranean people have that their blood cells actually change. Sickel cell trait, for instance, when they’re at altitude and some of them were having trouble and wouldn’t leave and finally you just have to get them out because they were so mission-oriented to be here that they didn’t want to be a failure.

But the Fords never had that until near the end. But, again, they were in their 90s and they had a multiple set of problems and they would come in out of town frequently. If they would come and stay, you have to go through the acclimatization that’s probably what you’re feeling for three or four days and then all of a sudden you’re okay. But leave town for a day and then come back – in and out – that’s tough. That’s really unique.

Smith: And obviously she loved this place as much as he did.

Eck: Oh, absolutely. She really did. And I know from talking to other people, she would be checking in with her Vail friends, many of them - Margie Burdick, who is in a nursing home, particularly - in Grand Junction. You’ve probably heard that name. Sheika and Donna Meyer. The whole cast of characters.

Smith: But they had a lot of friends here.

Eck: They had a lot of friends here and it wasn’t just friends that were their friends because of who they were, but they were friends who were there before they were in the White House. Even at the time when he was just starting to get outside of being just a country lawyer and into the ranks of politics. So, the friendships went way back there. It wasn’t just because they were special people because you and I have seen people who search out someone because of the person, they want to rub elbows. These were just down-home friends
that they would’ve had if they were back in Grand Rapids or Alexander or wherever they were.

Smith: Were you surprised at all by the extent of public reaction when he passed away? He’d been out of the public eye for awhile.

Eck: Yeah. You know, as I told you from how he made the decision to go to Mayo, I mean, that had still been in my mind. When he died, I had family for Christmas in town. I was invited to the private funeral in California and initially declined. However, the family and friends made sure that I was on a jet, my wife and I, to go out to the private funeral. We didn’t want to go back to Washington. I’m not into the big stuff. But that’s where I learned more because there was a couple hundred of us there and we viewed the casket and then we had a huge line which (I don’t know if you were there), wound around the church waiting to see Betty who was sitting up in the high stool with Susan holding her up. But just her conversations as we all stood in line, most of us knew each other, showed the impact of the guy and how history treated his decision to pardon Nixon much better than he was looked at early on.

And I think that’s a testimony to the man himself. First, of his courage to do it, because he knew it was going to sink him. He absolutely knew that. He had told me that on one occasion. He said, “I know this was going to get me, but we just had to get through it.” And when I was in Vietnam, I was one of the country’s killers when I came home. I came up here to Vail to get away for a year because I was 101st Airborne Division and saw a bunch of combat up there, even though I wasn’t in most of the danger. A couple of times it was because I was a flight surgeon for a helicopter outfit. I wasn’t in a hospital, so I knew what it was like to be on that side.

I was over there when Kent State happened. We didn’t hear about it until a couple months later when the Stars and Stripes, which was managed news, frankly, came in and we didn’t have cell phones. I called home once for my grandmother’s 80th birthday, but I had to take a line on a phone by a telephone pole and try to get through, which was hard. So, we didn’t have it, but I just felt isolated. And when I came back here, I didn’t want people to know I’d
been there. So, we had a bond. He and I talked about the feelings about that a couple of times. He wondered what it was like. I said, “You know, I’ve got to tell you from me, personally, I felt ostracized internally. People like me as a person, but I didn’t share that inside stuff. I didn’t want people to know.” I said, “You know, whatever you did there,” and this is back in the 70s, I tell him, “I respect that. We had to get through that stuff.” I was just tired of the race riots and the country being torn asunder, being in the midst of the action in ‘Nam, being in the midst of the action.

I actually went back after my first year in Vail and started an orthopedic residency in Philadelphia. I left after four months because they were having their race riots that year. The Temple Medical School, they had cops surrounding the whole school, protecting. I mean, this was in ’72, ’73, ’74. Just before I came that second time, which was when I interacted with him, I had to get out of there. Even though I had gone to medical school and knew my way around an urban area, it was terrifying. I said, “I just couldn’t handle that after the ‘Nam experience.” So, I said, “from my experience, you had to nail it.” And he just sort of shook his head at the time. Didn’t say thanks for supporting, but it registered.

And then to stand in that line, I told my wife later, and listen to what people said, then to reflect back, he knew he did the right thing. He knew he was going to be getting it. I know it was bitter, because I think it got tight there between he and Carter near the end, but it was tight as far as when he knew he was going to lose. But the fact that I think he still felt an element of chance that he’d make it. I said, “That had to be just destructive.” I never really went into that because I wanted to keep our relationship personal as a doctor. I don’t know if I answered your question.

Smith: He said the most humiliating day of his presidency was to see the United States, after all of that blood and treasure and sacrifice, in effect, being kicked out of Southeast Asia.

Eck: Yeah, but on the other hand, I don’t know if I ever impacted him the way I used my personal experience to say I was relieved he did it. And maybe it didn’t matter, but if you think of the other people who happened by
coincidence to be in the riots or be involved in it, he saved us. We knew it. But no one else knew that until later.

Smith: And then the coda, in some ways his finest hour. Because the moment the helicopters took off, Congress wanted to pull the plug and forget that we’d ever been there. And he was adamant that we had a moral obligation to bring out as many of these refugees as we could. And, basically, he shamed Congress into living up to the original financial commitment.

Eck: He did.

Smith: One of the really moving things periods of my life at the museum, we managed to get the staircase that was on top of the U.S. Embassy that people went up to get in the helicopter. And not just American personnel, but thousands of Vietnamese. And Henry Kissinger said, “Why would you want to remind people of that?” And Ford, very interestingly, said, “First of all, Henry, it’s part of our history, we shouldn’t forget it.” But, secondly, Ford saw that staircase, not as a symbol of military defeat, but as a symbol of the desire for freedom. Which takes a certain imagination that I don’t think people always attributed to him.

Eck: And I didn’t know this story until you just told me.

Smith: And so, not only did we get it, but he then came back to Grand Rapids and we invited the Vietnamese community of West Michigan, which is quite large, and there must have been 500 people and it was obviously a very bittersweet occasion. But who else would wish to be publically associated with the low point of their presidency? He came back from California and did the event and it was just overwhelming because some of those people who were there, went up to him and said, “I was one of the people who went up that staircase.”

Eck: My gosh.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Eck: I think he should be remembered as a good guy, thoughtful, very humanistic. He was not a pushover. You could see the attributes of a good athlete play
out in the decisions that he made and, frankly, I think he saved us from ourselves by making that big decision too which cost him the election.
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Smith: It is hard to know where to begin because there is so much to your story. But let me ask you, first of all, to describe for us, who are accustomed to a very different political climate, what Congress was like in 1963, and for the rest of that decade, when you were a member from Virginia – a Democrat.

Marsh: A Democrat, yeah. Well, of course the overriding event to occur in the early sixties, of course, was the assassination of President Kennedy in November ’63. Interestingly, that was my freshman class. Rumsfeld and I were classmates in Congress, and a lot of other players that we know. But the assassination of President Kennedy was a force that impacted very much on that Congressional class. And that class remained very, very close. I think a lot of that related to the assassination because of the very turbulent event. But the Congress probably was beginning to develop into the more stronger divisions, but it had not, at the time. It was more collegial.

True, there were political battles that had to be fought. I think President Ford was a tremendous example of that – what most people don’t realize about President Ford were the strong ties he had on the Hill that went across the aisle. I’ll give you an example. Ford and I kind of looked at, accessed things the same way. We kind of reacted philosophically. Our views on issues were the same and when he became President, among the tasks I had was oversight of the legislative process. I did the intelligence reform, chaired that for him. The fact that we served together on the Hill, there was a means of communication that was kind of like Sioux Indians who could talk to each other, you know. He never had anywhere near Republican majority. For him to be successful, he had to work across the aisle. It was very natural for him. He said, “Look, in working these issues, why don’t you talk to Andy Biemiller.” Andy Biemiller was a congressman who had been elected in 1944,
was defeated and came back in Ford’s class. Andy Biemiller had served another term and became the chief vice president for Congressional liaison for the AFLCIO. He had been a member of the Socialist party and was as liberal as you could get. But Ford said, “Jack, go talk to Andy Biemiller and tell him I said I wanted you to talk to him about seeing if the AFLCIO can help us on stuff on this Hill.” So I did, I went to see Andy and, strangely, we had an agreement, it was an understanding. They would help us on the Hill on issues that related to national security, but they had their own agenda, and we knew what their agenda was – it may relate to minimum wage or right to work, or something. They didn’t expect our help then, and they knew we were going to oppose it. What we would do, we would team together – the staff of the AFLCIO, their legislative staff – worked with our people on both the House and the Senate side. If there was an issue, and I saw this happen, where on the Senate side there would be a labor issue that we were opposing, it wouldn’t be labor necessarily, but an issue they were supporting and we were opposing. On the House side it would be a national security issue that we were both supporting – we’d be working both doors, but on one side we’d be working against them, and on the other side we’d be working together.

That came out of Ford’s association. People also, I don’t think, had picked up on the fact that when Ford was debating as what to do with the pardon issue, and I had been involved in that. I was aware of it. There was this tremendous hire and cry that he not testify on the Hill, demand that he testify there, but resist _______________. Ford said to me one day, we were talking about something they had written to get sent up to the Hill, and I said, “You can’t sign that.” He said, “I know I can’t.” Because it stated that there had been no contacts or conversations. He said, “Jack, how well do you know Carl Albert? You know him?” I said, “Of course I know him,” because I’d been on the Democratic side. It’s strange to me – not strange – but I’d admired him. He said, “Go up there and talk to Carl. Tell Carl anything he wants to know and tell him I need his advice, or what he thinks would be best for me to do.”

So I made a summary of this and took it all up there to Carl and sat there and talked with him. Of course, he had recommended to Nixon that Ford be the Vice President. He said, “Jack, tell him, come on up here. It’s not going to be
The greatest thing for this country is the honesty and the integrity, which is his reputation – that’s what we need.” And he said, “You know, the best thing that can happen to this country is the success of Jerry Ford as President of the United States.” I went by to see Mike Mansfield. Mike was a very taciturn individual. He always smoked a pipe, and he was walking around and we were talking in the Senate corridor. Mike turned around and looked at me, took his pipe out and said, “Jack, tell him not to make a habit of it.” (laugh) He starts puffing on his pipe and away we go. But I saw that time and time again. The arrangements for that hearing which were carefully structured – that is a very dangerous thing for a seated President to do - people would look at that - Peter W Rodino, who was chair of the House Judiciary Committee, he was Ford’s classmate in ’48. They came to Congress together. Rodino pointed that out to me. Of course, I knew it. Rodino, Dick Bolling, Wilbur Mills, these giants on the Democratic side, were admirers and had great respect for Ford.

Smith: Where did that bipartisan consensus come from? Why was it at such variance with some of the LBJ-inspired play-football-without-a-helmet, and all that sort of thing? There seemed to be a dichotomy between what insiders, who really paid attention to the House, in particular, what they thought they knew about Ford, and some of the outsiders, if you will, who even then called into question, among other things, his intellectual capacity.

Marsh: That was terribly wrong because, as you and I both know, he had a good mind, a very, very good mind. Something about Ford’s background I’ve never seen pointed out, and most people are not aware of it - Ford had more congressional service than any person who has ever served as President of the United States. People like Lyndon Johnson didn’t – Johnson had a year less than Ford. Johnson had House experience, that’s certainly true, but Ford – first it was his personality – his very nature. He was just a good-hearted, hail and hardy individual. Also, I think that World War II had an impact. At this time two-thirds of the Congress were still veterans. They had shared mutual experiences. Ford had a magnificent combat record in the Navy in World War II. And I think there was some of that camaraderie that was like you had after the American Civil War, between the Union and the Confederate veterans,
and there was this mutual respect because they were veterans. I think also a factor was the fact that Ford’s first office was the Congress, House of Representatives. He had not come up, he was not the child of a political system – hadn’t been a councilman, touching the local chairs in order to move into positions of responsibility. So he did not have a real partisan background. You have to remember, he was even for Wendell Willkie back there in the early forties.

Smith: How different was it – people are always trying to figure out why our politics are so polarized and often ugly today. One theory I have that I’d like to bounce off of you is, forty years ago each party had a left wing and a right wing. Now clearly, one party was more liberal than the other. One party was more conservative than the other. But if you were a Republican, you had to at least take into consideration the northeast - the Rockefeller Republicans, some urban Republicans, and a number from the Midwest who were certainly internationalists and some were moderate to liberal. In other words, the party was more diverse. That is true of Democrats as well. Obviously there was a southern wing, which is largely gone today. It seems as if the people who insisted that it would be logical to have a truly liberal party and a truly conservative party, have gotten their wish at considerable cost.

Marsh: I think you’re right. And I was surprised that Mike Kirwin from Ohio, who was one of the old barons of the Appropriations Committee, more of a labor type candidate and a real fine man, made exactly the same point you did. I’m dealing with a man then who was close to 70 when I was a member, and he would observe to other Democrats, like in the Democratic caucus, that the southern Democrats are very important. They kept this party going when things didn’t look good back in the 1920s, and he felt that was a strength having the southern areas. But you had to put up with them sometimes, which he didn’t like, but he felt it strongly. I think you are exactly right because you’d better be careful what you wish for, you might get it.

Smith: Did Ford get along with everyone in the House? There must have been some people that didn’t care for him or cotton to his style-
Marsh: I think there is an interesting thing, Ford got more respect as President from Democrats than he did from Republicans. I observed it. The Republicans couldn’t bring themselves – they had trouble realizing that Ford was President of the United States. To them, he was Jerry, the Minority Leader that you go and send all kind of terrible tasks like to make a speech at McGakey’s field for the campaign, you know. They leaned on him, all the time. His challenging Charley Halleck – there were scars. Les Arends didn’t like the Republican whip. Les Arends was not close to Ford. I think there were some who were jealous of, more people in the Republican Party, more jealous or resentful of his achievement as President, than in the Democratic. He had a series of dinners down there at the White House because Ford knew he needed to reach out, and he liked these guys and he did it by party. Had a White House dinner for the Democrats and same thing for Republicans, and some of the Republicans got to throwing rolls around. But you rarely ever heard any of the Democrats call him anything but Mr. President. That was not true of Republicans – there were some Republicans who called him Jerry. It didn’t bother President Ford, but it was a difference you could discern. Others commented on it, people like Max Friedersdorf who was doing congressional work. You could notice the difference in attitude between the two parties toward the man.

Smith: What were his strengths as a Minority Leader? His strengths as Republican leader in the House?

Marsh: I’ll tell you something that I think that people did not realize. Ford worked hard, but in that hard work, he studied hard. I would tell people in the White House – don’t ever give him a sheet of paper if you don’t think he’s going to read it. Lengthy things. Boy, those things would come back with marks on them when he went through it. He had a mastery of issues. Ford’s greatest strength was the one that would make a great president, but which was never realized - his knowledge of the process of governing, which rose largely out of his knowledge of the budget and appropriations process. He was a master of the appropriations process. Ford knew the budget better than any person in the White House, save for a few experts. I’ve seen him have Paul and me and others really moving fast to keep up with him.
In fact, we used to get concerned. He’d stand there working on the budgets and all, and of course you know the story of the scheduling of time is a big problem in the White House. But he knew the budget process and is the only president since Harry Truman to brief his budget to the press. Now that’s a high risk operation, if you don’t know it. So he knew the issues that were coming up, he would listen and compensate for conflicting views. And it was that ability to reconcile differences that were a tremendous strength. He was a heck of a good guy - he and Mike Mansfield. People don’t realize how close he and Mike Mansfield were.

I’ll tell you a story about Mansfield that caused me to really admire him. For example, Wilbur Mills, who took a terrible rap because he became ill. When he had those episodes, they were the result of an illness. The illness was alcoholism. But when he was in his prime, there was no better person. I can remember Ford saying to me, “Jack, go up and get Wilbur to tell you how he thinks this bill is going to come out.” And I’d go up there and get Wilbur in the cloak room. Wilbur would say, “On that particular…he’ll win this, but he’s not going to win this one, and this one is kind of up in the air.” So we’d know where to put our time and priorities. Invariably Wilbur was right, but he wanted Ford to succeed. It was an interesting thing. Those guys were all rooting for him. I told you about Mike and the Majority Leader of the Senate. I think his desk set that he had was a gift of Mike Mansfield. Mike gave that to him when he became President.

When Ford went to Helsinki and they called. Would I come up to the Hill and meet with them? Of course, I did. Mike carried the conversation, was in the lead. Hugh Scott was obviously supporting. Mike said, “Jack, I think you ought to call the President and tell him to pull down this Turkish aid bill.” He said, “It is very controversial, we may not win it. I don’t think that he should have to suffer a legislative defeat while he is engaged in an international conference.” That was, say, Wednesday. We had beaten Mike on Monday on the other issue of Diego Garcia, which Mike was very strongly opposed to and we had beaten Mike, and we beat him pretty soundly on that. So I went down to the basement of the Senate Office Building, and I called Helsinki. Ford was actually in the conference and I got hold of Dick. I told Dick what
Mike had said and he went in and talked to him. Ford sent back, “No, I want
to go forward with it.” So I went back down to the White House and I got a
call in about an hour, and it was from Mike again. On his behalf, it was Hugh
Scott, and wanted me to come back up there. I had outlined to Cheney what
the problem was, and I when I got back there this time, Mike had now ten or
fifteen other Senators, the power of the Senate, they were all sitting in there.
He explained again why he felt we ought to pull that bill down. Of course, he
was very nice, but he was very firm.

There was a consensus there in that room that was supportive of him so he
said, “Well, Jack, what I want you to do this time - I know you got in touch
with him - I want you to make a memo and tell the President what my views
are, what our views are.” So I did, I did that very thing. I went back down to
the White House and got Max Friedersdorf, because I knew Ford was going to
want a nose count, a vote count. So I got Max in there and we figured out a
very good memo, I thought, and I knew that he would want to know what vote
count was. It was something like 45-45 with ten undecided, so we were going
to be gone, depending on how the five would break. I felt that they would
break our way and I put in the thing, I recommended to President Ford, to go
forward with it. I thought we would be able to win it.

I went back up and saw Mike personally, told him that President Ford had
gone over the memo and all and to go forward. You know what he did? He
walked out of that office very businesslike, he walked on the Senate floor and
he did the kickoff speech in support of Ford’s bill. And we did win it by a
couple of votes, but Mike subordinated anything that was partisan, or what he
thought was. He genuinely liked Ford. I think that was one of the greatest
things he brought to the Hill, that spirit of outreach. He and Tip O’Neill were
close friends – really close. I remember I saw the Washington Post one day
and Tip had a speech he had made out in Boston, and just lambasted Ford’s
policies. It was awful, it was scalding and I walked in there and I said, “You
see this Post edition?” He had and he was laughing about it. He said, “Get Tip
on the phone,” then he said, “I’ll get him.”
He picked up the phone and he called Tip up and he said, “Tip, I read this speech, I see all these things you said about me up there in Boston. You know what I’m going to do? I’m going to come up to Boston and tell them what a lousy Congressman they got.” And then the two of them got the hurrahs. But that was a healthy thing to look at it that way. Ford knew Armed Services, too. If you look at his appropriations experience, took him onto the sub-committee of appropriations for the Department of Defense, and at that time the intelligence program was kind of reviewed by a little handful of people, six or seven members of the House and Senate, and Ford was one of those. A lot of these issues that came up with intelligence, he had already dealt with them.

Smith: I take it is true that in the House there are work horses and show horses and that your reputation precedes you. People take you seriously if you take the work seriously.

Marsh: Members of the Senate who might someday watch this would be very upset, but the appropriations process, which originates in the House, which flows from the original power to raise taxes, comes from the House. The appropriations process, by tradition, begins in the House. The House members on the Appropriations Committee cannot be on another committee. They have to be on the Appropriations Committee. They can be on two sub-committees of the Appropriations. The Appropriations Committee is known for thorough examinations and hard work. Ford had the work ethic. He was very disciplined. He could compartmentalize things. Now we work, now we play. He had mastered that. Appropriation members do the hard work on the bill, and actually the appropriation bills are reviewed by the Senate, but the work has already been done in the House. He knew the budget and he knew the appropriations process - he and Hale Boggs, the Democratic whip. He and Hale were close friends. It was a very, very close friendship.

Smith: I had read, in fact, that on more than one occasion they would debate at the National Press Club, and it was their custom to drive down there together and to decide on the way what topic they would debate that day. They would have their debate, then afterwards they would go together and have lunch.
Marsh: I had not heard that, but I’m sure that is correct. It sounds like Ford

Smith: You were a Democratic congressman from Virginia through 1970 – is that right?

Marsh: I was elected in ’62 and I did not seek re-election. There was a revolt in the Democratic Party in Virginia and they required candidates for office to sign an oath that they would support the national ticket, which I refused to do. Harry Byrd refused to sign it also. A number of the members of the state legislature – I was not putting up with that.

Smith: Now you had a pivotal conversation with then-Congressman Ford right about the time of the Watergate break in. Didn’t you?

Marsh: Yeah. He was the Minority Leader, of course. What had happened, I had an office there at that building, what was called CREEP, Committee to Re-Elect the President. Terrible acronym for a presidential campaign. It was 1701 Connecticut Avenue, you can see the White House. I was up on the top floor, the Campaign to Re-Elect was down on the fourth floor, and Mrs. Mitchell used to spend a lot of time coming out there to the dismay of their campaign. So an effort was made - let’s find a way to take care of Martha - so they came up on my floor and they rented office space there – on my floor. You know, when you just open up a new office, you don’t have a phone, you don’t have a fax, so you come in and you borrow your neighbor’s office to use their phone and all.

So I learned the person who was in charge of this was McCord, who was the head of the security, who was also the head of the break in group. When I picked up the Washington Post after it happened and I looked and there’s his picture, the fellow who’s been coming in my office. So I figured it had to know something about it.

It happened that I already had a meeting with President Ford that morning, that Monday morning, and he asked me about it. I told him what I just told you. I said, I think the White House was bound to be involved, I’m not saying Nixon is, but I think somebody very high up has got to know about this. He went down the street that day to a leaders meeting and Ford challenged
Mitchell about involvement of anybody from the White House. Mitchell didn’t shoot straight with him – didn’t tell him the truth. But it alerted President Ford.

Smith: He really did expect everyone to be truthful with him, didn’t he?

Marsh: Yeah.

Smith: Is that naive? It says a lot about his character. Is it something that a president can afford?

Marsh: Bob Hartmann and I talked – Bob knew President Ford well, and Bob and I talked about this. There was a naïveté there that was very real and very wholesome, but if taken too far, could be very, very difficult. It can cause you problems. At times Ford would use the naïveté – he was very skillful with it at times.

Smith: How so?

Marsh: By acting with a certain naïveté he would disarm people. I found that a lot of times, when we thought he was being naïve, he wasn’t being naïve at all. He had learned to use it, but it probably related more to his assessment of other people and who he got around him.

Smith: In all the years I knew him, I only heard him speak really despairingly of two folks. I’m sure there were others, but one was Gordon Liddy and one was John Dean. The worst thing he said was, the worst term he could come up with was, “He’s a bad man.” That was the harshest epitaph that he used.

You joined the vice president’s staff in January of 1974. I believe as Assistant for the National Security?

Marsh: National Security advisor. See I was the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Legislative Affairs, and had been named to them not quite a year before. President Ford was very much aware that I had that post. What happened, when he was named a candidate for the vice presidency - every vice president is given an assignment. Well, Cheney has reformed it and put power in the vice presidency, which is a good thing. I’m all for that. Lyndon Johnson was
in charge of space – that’s what Kennedy gave to Lyndon Johnson - the space program. Nixon very wisely assessed that he, Nixon, was going to have a problem and that problem was going to affect his legislation on the Hill. So he gave Ford farm aid and national security legislation, he really kind of just turned his legislative program over to Ford. He knew that Ford knew that stuff. Ford needed somebody on his staff that could do that and whether Bob Hartmann recommended, I don’t think Bob did. Of course he really didn’t know me at the time, but Ford knew who I was, and I was the Assistant Secretary for Defense, and Nixon had specifically asked that I be put in that spot. So Ford got me over to do that and to do national security.

Smith: When you went, at the beginning of 1974, did you think Nixon could survive?

Marsh: I went over there I think in February. I thought there was a strong possibility that he would not, because in a way, I had learned more of this Watergate business and the plumber’s thing because of this other thing that was fed to me and there was somebody on the NATSF staff that told me about the plumbers. I was kind of taken aback that that operation was over there.

Smith: You obviously had some discussions with him during that period before the Nixon resignation. He was walking a tightrope. I assume he was in a terribly awkward position.

Marsh: This is where I think Bob Hartmann has never received his real credit. It was funny, we had an understanding Ford, Hartmann, and myself. We would never discuss the status of the Watergate proceedings because all three of us felt that if we started doing it, invariably it would get out and be leaked and that would be the worst position Ford could be in. By us taking that position, every member of the Vice President’s staff was put on notice, “This is off limits. You’re not to talk about it because Ford doesn’t talk about it.” Now Bob and I would because what Bob did – he could be a pretty crusty guy – Bob handled his public appearances. What Bob tried to do: one, he wrote his speeches, but he tried to keep Ford out of Washington about as much as he could, and it was obvious what he was doing. Bob handled the press – he was always in between Ford and the press. There is a fraternity in the press corps, too.
Smith: Ford had proved he could relate – in his personal relations with the press.

Marsh: Yeah, very good. Bob recognized that you couldn’t get Ford too close to Nixon, yet you couldn’t get him too far from Nixon. I always felt that Bob was the person that struck the happy balance.

Smith: Why was Bob Hartmann a controversial figure? What was it about Hartmann that made him a bit of a lightning rod?

Marsh: That’s a good question. You had to learn to know Bob, and we became very, very close friends, and I admired him a great deal. But he was not as concerned about relationships and personal relationships – he was just a rough guy to deal with at times, if he wanted to be. He was one of these fellows that if you got beneath the surface, it was great. But with the President of the United States, you have so many contacts, you don’t get below the surface very much with anybody.

Smith: What was Ford looking for in the people around him – what kind of qualities do you think, both on Capitol Hill and later in the White House – what personal, as well as professional, qualities?

Marsh: I think for people – a lot of people around him, particularly staff people around him – there was what I would call an old shoe quality to Ford. You don’t get people that are really flashy, too flashy, I mean stunningly attractive. He was more old shoe, those were the immediate staff. I think Ford had a magnetism about him. I don’t think – I know he did. A magnetism that, as a man, he just had it. It was a persona. Like Washington – although Washington maintained a very strict dignity. Ford was more relaxed, but it was a magnetism that glowed. Jerry Ford, a superb athlete. That caused a lot of people to move into the Ford orbit. Ford, among those people, would select out those who he had special desire or need. Rumsfeld was an example of that. Don, when he hit Washington, came in with a little bit of fanfare. He was a young Congressman 29 or 30 years old and Mr. Sparky – a lot of personality.

Don was really the person who introduced me to Ford. But Ford drew that type of people. Then out of that array or herd, you might say, he would pick
the cattle or horses that he wanted. Mel Laird was one of those that he was close to. A congressman from California, just a whole array, and those were the people who were with him when he defeated Charlie Halleck.

Smith: There was a rap, particularly during the early presidency, that the staff was still not only too Congressional, but too Grand Rapids. That was thrown around as a euphemism for not quite ready for prime time.

Marsh: Yeah, I think that attitude was – the Ford White House was very Congressionally oriented. The people in it, you had Rogers Morton, Tom Kleppe, Don Rumsfeld - any number of them. I can’t even recall them all, and in addition to those, it was just layered with staff members who had been on the Hill, on both the House and the Senate. They were very good, but that was true, and they charged them based on spokes of the wheel.

Smith: Was that congressional? Is that evidence of a congressional mindset?

Marsh: Yes, because here as a member of Congress he could not, nor could I or others, you can’t expect your constituents to go through a staff process. If a member of Congress is out there and somebody who has got a veteran’s pension claim or something, you can’t say to him, “Well, that’s handled by Sue McCarthy.” You take it. The Congressman takes it. But then gives it to Sue. Everything in a Congressman’s district, everything comes to him. He parcels it out inside his office whichever way he wants based on whoever can handle it. But with the White House you’ve got have some pretty stern staffing rules to do it. You pay a price for everything, but you also have benefits. And having a congressionally-oriented White House, I think is a good thing because you reduce the possibilities of rupture and friction between the Legislative and Executive branches, which today has become extremely difficult.

End of tape one.

Tape two begins

Smith: Let me ask you, and I realize this is somewhat speculative, unless, of course, Ford never discussed it with you. During his vice-presidency a lot has been
written and a lot has been speculated about – about the relationship between Ford and Nixon. Whether Nixon felt that Ford was defending him with as much vigor – and yet Ford was in a clearly awkward position. Tom DeFrank, I don’t know if you’ve read the DeFrank book or not, Tom made a great deal out of a single slip of the tongue that Ford made. In a private conversation with DeFrank, in which, as Tom interprets it at least, Ford acknowledged that this was going to end with Nixon’s resignation. At least that’s how Tom chose to interpret this particular incident. He then made Tom swear on a stack of bibles never to reveal that conversation.

But it does raise the interesting point – with Ford being somebody who had been around on the Hill as long as he had, being a shrewd vote counter - it’s one thing to want to believe that the President is telling you the truth, but he couldn’t have been so naïve as to rule out the distinct possibility that Nixon would be forced out of office. Did you get a sense of how that developed over those months what was your relationship with the White House?

Marsh: Mine was pretty good because I had been Assistant Secretary of Defense. Al Haig and I were close, personal friends. Al and I lived in the same neighborhood. I knew him when he was a Lieutenant Colonel. I happened to pull a National Guard tour, and I served my National Guard duty for a month in Vietnam and ended up with Al’s unit, in a fox hole. So I had a very good relationship. Al would talk with me frequently about things. I didn’t go over there except if I had to, but Al enjoyed a good relationship with Ford – a very good one. Ford was one of Al’s strongest proponents to be Secretary of State. And wrote letters on his behalf to Reagan to do it.

But the executive roadway I knew between the White House and the old EOB is just about as wide as the Potomac River instead of a street. It is distant in the best of times and the Watergate period was not the best of times. And it was kind of dangerous. You want to stay out of these things because you didn’t know who was involved and what would eventually happen. Ford maintained a good relationship with Nixon. He never talked about Nixon – never heard him indicate anything in terms of moving into the presidency until the last two or three weeks. There was some appointment that Nixon
made which Ford disagreed with and he made a comment to me at the time, “If I was President I would have picked this fella over there.”

Ford was very disciplined, very carefully controlled. I think Nixon probably viewed Ford as a second string on the Michigan football team. Nixon viewed himself, I think, as President, significantly superior to Ford based on experience. Nixon came to Congress in ’46, Ford came in ’48, and Nixon helped him along and stuff. It was more of a seniority relationship between the two men. Ford was scrupulous about observing that etiquette, or respect between the two men, the two offices. The day that Ford learned that he was going to be President, he had been called and told – I think Al called him, Al Haig – that Nixon was probably going to want to talk to him about some of his plans. Nothing definite, clearly indicating that the decision would be discussed about stepping down. Ford had gone over to the Blair House. I had gone with him, made the award of the Medal of Honor posthumously to seven families arising out of Vietnam. When he came back he knew he was going to be getting the call. He was remarkable about maintaining his cool in light of that. The call came and they said, could you come, the President wanted to see him. They were there for about an hour and fifteen minutes, and they came back and he said, “Nixon is going to resign. He wants to resign as of noon tomorrow.”

I had a funny feeling - it was a funny feeling to realize that the guy across from you can be President tomorrow. If it’s a ballot box you don’t know until they count the ballots, but to be told that somebody you’re talking with is going to be President. Bob Hartmann said, who do you want swearing you in? I remember that was the first thing that was raised. Al had given him somewhat of a heads up that it was moving towards resignation several days before. Ford was slated to go out to the new vice president’s quarters, which is another story. That was his initiative, and that was his cronies on the Hill, Carl Albert and those guys all put that together for him.

Smith: The vice president’s residence?

Marsh: Yeah.
Smith: Really? What is the story?

Marsh: Well, I used to accuse Ford of living on Jolly Trolley Lane in Alexandria, and when he saw he was going to be vice president, he thought the vice president ought to have quarters - he and Tip O’Neill and Carl Albert on the Hill and Bob Michael. Bob Michael and those guys all together introduced a bill. Well, it is the only piece of legislation that I ever saw that was written and introduced and got passed that was so bad that it wouldn’t work and you had to go do it again. (laugh) So I had to go back up there. We worked the bill back through. Ford apparently had told them that, “If we get that house now, it won’t be any expense.” You can imagine, I think he really believed it. This is a long story, but you asked for it. Clem Conger was in the White House.

Smith: He was the curator of the White House.

Marsh: Yes, and he knew how to spend money, too. So we get this house all put together really fast, get the bill passed.

Smith: This had been the residence of…

Marsh: The Navy - didn’t want it to happen…

Smith: The Naval Commandant?

Marsh: The Chief of Naval Operations. And they were opposed to it. But we got the bill through. Ford said to me that we can’t let this cost any money. Well, it happens that once you make it the Office of the Vice President of the United States, you immediately have security concerns that you don’t have with the Chief of Naval Operations. So they put together a book for me, a great big Sears and Roebuck catalog, and I sat down with him and I said, “Now, they are suggesting that you go about this in three different stages.” He’s very conscious of the cost – he said, “What’s the first stage?” The first stage are the requirements of the Secret Service. You have to have them.

He said, “How much is that?” I said, “That’s going to be $33,000.” (Demonstrates how Ford frowned) Then I said, “Now I’ll go to the second phase – that’s painting and drapes and stuff like that.” He said, “What’s that?” I said, “I think it’s $150-200,000.” By now he’s really having gas pains. So I
said, “Now there is a third stage.” He said, “What’s the third stage? How much is that?” I said, “That’s $450,000.” He took the book and he closed it up and said, “No, we can’t do this. Jack, you go tell Betty.” (laugh) So I went up Jolly Trolley Lane with the wish book under my arm and explained to Mrs. Ford that we couldn’t do that.

Smith: How did she take the news?

Marsh: Well, I really didn’t know her that well. She was a good trooper about it, but she was clearly disappointed. They got back into it and they did agree to increase the expenses on it. But the reason I remember so well – President Ford was supposed to go over to the house the afternoon that Al Haig came over and said, “Look, I think there is a chance that the President is going to resign.” Ford never showed that in anyway. He went on over to the house and talked about the drapes and all that kind of business. And to have in the back of your mind that possibility that you are going to be President of the United States by the end of the week – that’s pretty-

Smith: Actually, I can top that because that night they had dinner at Betty Beal’s and nothing was said. Needless to say, it is a pretty impressive acting job.

Marsh: It was. Ford’s schedule – he didn’t have anything to do with this – his first schedule that afternoon for that block of time was Rog Morton, who was Secretary of the Interior, but it wasn’t Rog Morton, it ended up being Al Haig.

Smith: Vast amounts have been written, but walk us through those days when the possibility of a pardon was first introduced – because you were clearly at the center of all that – and cautioning the vice president. Was that an instance where he initially was perhaps overly trusting?

Marsh: Probably. Yes. I think that’s a good observation. Al came over during the Rog Morton block of time, but it was not for Rog Morton – it was for Al. Al discussed – and I was not present in that – nor was Bob Hartmann present – but Al discussed generally and gave strong indications that we would going to have to make some changes. Nixon was going to probably resign and this sort of thing. That was the nature of the conversation. It was not firm that he was going to, but it looked like it was definitely moving that way. I think Al may
have used the term “You need to prepare yourself.” I think what Al was doing was, “you shouldn’t be blindsided by this suddenly coming up,” which it made sense.

I saw it when he went in the office. He talked to the President and I had to see the Vice President about just going up to the house. And so when Al came out I went in the office. Ford looked thunderstruck. I had never seen him that way. It was like someone had told him his house had burned down. He recovered from that – he wasn’t un-composed, babbling or anything like that – I think it was the enormity of the developing situation – suddenly the sum of it – it’s here and it’s going to probably happen. He was contemplating that when I went in there, but he was – it was kind of like he was stunned. He went on over to the house and then, before he left he talked to Hartmann, and Bob came down hard over against it. Really quick. Bob said, “I want you to talk to Jack,” and Ford said, “I can’t do it right now because I’m going over here to this house. I’ll do it in the morning.” Bob insisted that he do that and President Ford did talk to me.

Smith: That night or the next day?

Marsh: The next morning. Of course, actually he was running late to go over to the house.

Smith: Now, I assume this is one of those frequent instances where Hartmann more than compensated for Ford’s lack of suspicion – or guile – whatever you want to call it. Where Ford saw the best in everyone, you probably do need to have someone around you who can imagine the worst. Or at least see an agenda where maybe Ford didn’t see it.

Marsh: Actually, the way you described it is very, very accurate. He saw the dangers that Ford didn’t. Bob was very outspoken with his views. Bob did not tell me what it was, but he told me that there was a matter come up that he wanted Ford to talk to me and Ford had promised to. And the next morning Bob prodded him again and he got me in and he laid it out. I’ve thought about it many a time, naturally something like that you don’t forget it. That situation could be portrayed in a way that you will do this country a favor and you will
be doing the right thing for the republic to pardon the President in order to get him out. I think if you ever get Al here, and this is conjecture on my part, Al and Fred Buzhardt. Fred Buzhardt had a key role, he’s deceased. I think he did.

Smith: He was Nixon’s legal counsel?

Marsh: He was legal counsel and I also had legal counsel. But Buzhardt had come over from Defense. Buzhardt and Haig were at West Point together. I don’t know if they were classmates – for some reason I think maybe Buzhardt was maybe a year ahead of Al. He wasn’t present, it was just Al. A lawyer could make a very, very strong case either way. Either to pardon or not to pardon – to get him out. I think that Al and Fred and a couple of others were having real problems of trying to – they were concerned for the country and it would be best to get Nixon out, but how do you that. It would be two ways, either get him out by inducement or get him out by resignation. So when people talk about Ford being too naïve in that presentation - I know – I’m positive that Ford did not give absolute assurances, but he may have been – Al Haig may have assumed that he had made more headway than he really did. Bob knocked it down and Ford presented to me the next day. I knocked it down. I just – very plain that – nice conversation, but my view was that he ought not to do that.

Smith: And then he called Haig? Was that the sequence - to just kind of go on the record?

Marsh: There was a little bit of time, a couple of hours maybe had elapsed. When I got hold of Bob, I told Bob I thought we were going to have to get a third party in. In a way, Hartmann and I were too close to it. Get somebody who might be objective – and that was Bryce Harlow. We talked about it and Ford agreed to that. So we brought Bryce in. And then after the conversation with Bryce he called.

Smith: Bryce Harlow was the quintessential wise man, wasn’t he?

Marsh: Yeah. I think he was a person of great integrity and his methods and personality were very good as a moderator.
Smith: The eighth of August, and the ninth of August, the Nixon resignation and the Ford swearing in – what are your memories from those days?

Marsh: Well, I remember I was up almost all night long. I think President Nixon had mentioned that, or suggested, he was very amenable about it – I think he suggested to Ford that it would be a private ceremony, be sworn in in the Oval Office. And Bob said, “No, you’re the President of the United States, you are going to have it where you want to have it, and you ought to have it in the East Room.” And Ford agreed. It was my job, then to get 216 people, the right 216 there, and we worked in the office almost all night long. Of course, we got John McCormick there and I knew John McCormick had an aid named Johnny somebody who lived in this area, and I said, “Go get Johnny,” because Mr. McCormick will want Johnny to be with him. So they found Johnny jogging and they picked him up and got him down. But Ford thought a lot of McCormick and McCormick thought a lot of Ford.

And so what we did, I tried to structure a protocol and the protocol was first his family, and then secondly very, very close friends – like Phil Buchen and others – and there were members of the King family who were invited and attended, who were his half brothers or sisters. We had the Congressional class that was elected in 1948, all those who were fellow Congressmen – they were there, and of course the House leadership. So you couldn’t complain about the protocol – it was fine.

Smith: There is a wonderful scene – it is so Ford – but the first day they actually started moving into the Oval Office – he walks up to the door and there’s a Marine standing there saluting, and holding the door open. He walks over and he said, “Hi, I’m Jerry Ford and I’m going to be living here. What’s your name?” (laugh) Now, can you imagine anyone else reacting in that way? In some ways that is very congressional. Or maybe that’s just west Michigan.

Marsh: Well, that’s Jerry Ford, the Congressman. That is the kind of thing a Congressman might do, but the kind of thing a Jerry Ford Congressman would do. He never took himself seriously, in my view.
Smith: If he ever was inclined to do so, Betty was on hand probably to make sure that he didn’t.

Marsh: That’s true. The other thing that I keep referring to it as Jolly Trolley Lane out there, I kidded him about that, too. But I lived over in Raleigh in the same kind of circumstance. What’s interesting about Ford ascending to the presidency is that the Nixons, in effect, had not moved out. They had gone, but all their personal things, furniture and all that, had to be moved. He couldn’t live in the White House and they lived out there in Jolly Trolley Lane and so the White House was out there in Alexandria, but what the Secret Service had to do - because Ford was very insistent that none of these people be inconvenienced, and they were delighted to be the neighbor of the President - they cordoned off the whole block. Everybody had passes. These people that lived in there, they were given a pass – they were part of the White House and they could come and go – but the whole area was cordoned off and you’d see this White House Presidential train coming down the parkway and swing on down across the bridge over into – it was a different experience.

Smith: I’ve been told that his first order was to get all the listening devices out of wherever they were supposedly there were so many, I guess several days later someone found one still in the wall in the Oval Office.

Marsh: I think so. I knew that was happening, but I don’t know who was doing it. I assume that Bob Hartmann, I’m sure, was overseeing it.

Smith: I assume that Ford was genuinely mortified at the thought of a president taping people with their knowledge.

Marsh: Yeah, he felt that totally improper. But Johnson had been doing that and there is some indication, I’m not sure of this, but whether or not Kennedy had done it.

Smith: It was a long tradition, if you will, going back to Roosevelt.

Marsh: Yeah.
Smith: Who were his heroes among Presidents? We know he put up Truman’s portrait, which surprised some people at the time. I guess Ike was up there and Lincoln. Did he have much sense of history?

Marsh: I think it would have been helpful if he had more sense of history. Of course, I’m from Virginia and you are from Massachusetts, and you’re beat over the head all of the time because you’re looking at the past and thinking about the past. Ford didn’t do that – his thinking was very logical – very compartmental.

If you had a proposal that we will call the letter D, that’s what you want, that’s your goal. If you got this project, this will be your policy, it’s over here at “D,” well, you go see him, and you’re at “A.” He’s going to ask you, how do you get from B to C to D. He was a very, very practical thinking man. He was realistic, feet on the ground. But, I think history enables you to perceive - I wish Ford could have had a greater sense of history. He used to kid me about it. I had introduced the bill for the Bicentennial of the American Revolution in 1963 when I went to Congress. So when the Bicentennial came up, it was my task to do Bicentennial efforts for the President, not the general Bicentennial for the country – but the dedication of the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, for instance. They cut the tape of that through a signal sent from Mars.

The Queen’s visit – he was very excited about the Queen’s visit. He looked forward to her. The Ambassador asked me to come up and visit with him. The Ambassador said the Queen will come, she wants to come, but we’re not just sure when is the best time to come. Can you get some ideas out of the President for when the Queen should come? So I told him I would. I went to see President Ford and I said, “When do you want her to come?” He was elated, he said, “Oh, have her come on the Fourth of July!” I called up the Brits and I said I don’t know that you’d want to do it on that date, right on that date or not, but I said, “He wants her to come on the Fourth of July.” I think he nearly fainted, but she came around the tenth or so and it was a wonderful visit.
Smith: But, we learned later on that a disproportionate number of guests at the dinner were uncommitted Republican delegates and their families.

Marsh: Is that right?

Smith: Yeah. Of course, it was a month before the convention and it was going right down to the wire.

Marsh: Yeah, I know things like that will be done by senior campaign people – they aren’t going to ask a soul – they just go ahead and do it.

Smith: I believe you took part in the preparations for that first press conference toward the end of August, 1974 and a lot of people when they write about the pardon, they leave that out. My sense was that, in his own mind, that was, at least, a triggering event. That he may very well, at that point, have been favorably inclined, but that he left that press conference genuinely surprised at what he thought was the continuing preoccupation of the Washington press corps with all things Nixon.

Marsh: He was right about that. I’ve thought about the pardon thing, and often felt maybe we should have done some things, or things that we could have done that would have made this better or go down differently. It is correct, you had a situation where Ford’s got a presidency, just after the oil embargo, the economic crisis was starting, the Vietnam war was going on - and then Mrs. Ford was coming down with this terrible cancer situation. The things that this man had on him, I don’t think anybody has ever looked at that. He is very serious about government and you try to bring up some issue of government and the press corps were preoccupied with the pardon – it just enraged him. I was sitting in the Oval Office when he came in after that press conference. I think what we should have done, this is the benefit of hindsight, I think what we should have done is that we should have – he should have begun to lay a predicate. You know, there is an argument, there is a concern about the Nixon pardon – to remove the suddenness of the announcement-

Smith: I once spent three hours with him in a Grand Rapids hotel room. And like most people, I thought, there must have been a more adroit way of doing it. And you know, I went away pretty much dissuaded that, given the poisonous
political atmosphere of that time, the first trial balloon would have been shot down before it ever cleared the trees. I don’t know how – you are absolutely right – legally, intellectually, but given the inflamed emotions and the very fact that that press conference was so dominated by questions about Richard Nixon, if he had said, or caused people to believe, that he was giving serious consideration to a pardon, that’s all anyone would have discussed, and probably, with a lot of hostility. I’d love to hear a strategy for softening the impact of the pardon.

Marsh: I just think that if he had kept bringing it up in several different press conferences, and get the American Bar involved in it, it would be different. But that was not Ford’s way, but, boy, it throws a thunderclap when it came.

Smith: How much of that first month was, in fact, influenced by, if not preoccupied with, Nixon? That first month was defined, maybe as a better way of putting it, by uncertainties over Nixon’s fate?

Marsh: Quite a bit. There were things that were incidental to it which are not apparent, which were troublesome. The President, when he left Washington shortly before noon, Air Force One was no longer Air Force One when it flew over Missouri. But when he left Andrews Air Force Base it was Air Force One and Nixon took eighty-five or so staff people with him. Very, very large number. One of the tasks that I had, or my office had, was the transition of Nixon, which there were a lot of difficulties because the animosity was so great on the Hill that senior members of the Congress, over on the Senate side, wanted to stop and deprive him of his pension. I had to talk to the President. You couldn’t do that, shouldn’t do that. But nevertheless, that was the kind of poisonous problems we were –

Smith: You said that was something you discussed with President Ford?

Marsh: Yeah. I told the Senator, I just listened to him what he wanted to do, but there were all types of punitive things that they wanted to do to him. That passed, but getting that Nixon transition group down was a big task, and I’ll tell you who did it. It was a fellow named Russ Rourke, who is since deceased. Russ was my deputy and he deserves credit for that. Dealing with Nixon and trying
to get things for him he needed from Congress and all, was not an easy task. It permeated the White House.

Smith: In retrospect, was it naïve to believe that it would go away overnight simply because Nixon had gone away?

Marsh: No, it would be naïve to think it was going to go away and it did not because the question came up about removing things from the White House, tapes, and all, and Fred Buzhardt. It was a constant, constant irritation.

Smith: Were you present in the Oval Office or elsewhere when there were discussions of pardon.

Marsh: No, in fact, it’s interesting, and nobody knows, all we really know is what happened over on the Ford side – the vice president’s side. I told you that when President Ford talked to me about the pardon, he had a sheet of legal paper – it was yellow like this – and he pulled it out of his pocket for me to read. You’ve probably heard this, on one of these was a very, very accurate summary of the law of pardon, under the Constitution – and the American Constitution does permit a pardon for crimes before prosecution. It is very clear. So it was an indication with that piece of paper that that was being given to Ford to assure him that one, he had the authority. The second piece of paper –

Smith: Was this early in the presidency?

Marsh: This was when Haig came over there.

Smith: When he was still vice president.

Marsh: He was vice president. And the second sheet of paper was a form, all in handwriting, where all you had to do was take the sheet of paper and type it up and you had a pardon. All you had to do was sign it. He showed me the papers. I recognized the handwriting. The handwriting was Fred Buzhardt, because Fred Buzhardt had been a general counsel in the Department of Defense, I was the assistant secretary and we’d been having to work the Hill on a number of issues involving the windup of the Vietnam war. So I immediately recognized it. I don’t think Al Haig knew that much about what a
pardon was or anything else. I think Fred Buzhardt – there was his handwriting on these two sheets of paper. It wasn’t Al’s, I know that. I know it was Fred’s.

Smith: And presumably Buzhardt would not have done that entirely on his own, without some inspiration from his client.

Marsh: You would think. It was an instance of a ploy that a lawyer would probably make to a client, maybe we can take this route. I don’t know that that’s the case, but I do know there were two pieces of paper, and I know that one of them was a form for a pardon.

Smith: Did you know the pardon was coming – we jump ahead to September, the first week of September – how many people were in the loop?

Marsh: When he talked about the pardon that he was going to announce, the pardon, as I recall, was announced on Sunday.

Smith: Yeah, Sunday, September 8th.

Marsh: I think we had the meeting either on Friday or Saturday and there was Phil Buchen, myself, Bob Hartmann, and Al Haig were in there.

Smith: Now, did he announce this as a fete accompli, or was it a discussion?

Marsh: Yes, he indicated that he was going to pardon him. Bob and I both, separately and independently, went at him to raise it again.

Smith: Following this meeting?

Marsh: Following the meeting. Bob talked to him – see we did not do it in that environment.

Smith: Because of Haig’s presence?

Marsh: I just felt I could do more with him if I talked to him one on one. Then President Ford used to eat in a little dinette off the Oval Office. He would eat in there. My concerns were the association of the pardon and the earlier conversations – it would have been far better if the word “pardon” had never been mentioned to Ford, because that would have been the logical course of
action, anyway, and he would have done that. But you don’t have to inspire it with him – he knows who thinks like that. I went in, he was eating his lunch, and my concerns there were the charge of a deal linking the two events. I told him, I said, “Look, you’ll probably want to throw me right out of here, and you may, and I may make you mad.” He said, “Jack, I know right where you’re coming from, but there was no deal.” I said, “I didn’t think there was one, but I wanted to bring it up.”

Smith: Over the years there has been talk – he gave, not varying versions, but he gave weight to differing factors. For example, it has appeared in print that Julie Nixon Eisenhower had either directly to him, or through third parties, communicated real concerns about her father’s health – physical and mental. That somehow that was a factor – for lack of a better word, the humanitarian element. Was that something that was discussed to your knowledge, or was it in the background at all?

Marsh: I know that Ford had concerns about Nixon – you know it was questionable that Nixon was going to survive there for a short time. Ford did express concerns about that, and probably, maybe it was a factor. I don’t know.

Smith: The other thing in that first month, that tends to get swept under the rug, but I’ve always thought it part of a larger strategy of national reconciliation, for lack of a better word. And that, of course, was the VFW appearance and the amnesty program. How did that come about – because on the face of it, it is a curious, defining moment.

Marsh: I think this shows a side of Jerry Ford that he’s not quite as conservative as people think. He has a great empathy for people in certain situations and I think he genuinely wanted to try and be helpful, sort of remaking of the country or reconciling of the county to the Vietnam war. And I think that he felt that there were a lot of people out there that should have served and didn’t, and avoided the draft. But that didn’t bother him. But it happened. Of course, he got into problems with the VFW, I guess you know that, for having done that.
Smith: More remarkable in some ways than the actual program, is the venue in which he chose to announce it. Not many presidents would walk into that buzz saw.

Marsh: I know (laugh). A very interesting thing that happened on that – he came in there, the speech was on a Monday in Chicago or St. Louis, I think. He came in there Friday and the speech had been written and Hartmann knew this. Bob and I were the only two that knew. Ford showed me the speech to read. It was just a regular speech about the VFW and strong national defense and all that. And then he pulled out two separate pages, which nobody in the White House knew were in the speech which Bob had written, and those were the amnesty pages. He inserted them into the speech and gave it. (laugh) The people in the White House didn’t know he was going to do that. That really caused him a lot of reaction, but I happen to agree with you. His desire to do that before the VFW was clearly planned and very deliberate, because it was a veterans’ organization, he knew the executive director, who was a fellow named Cooper Holt. Cooper Holt really became enraged and we had to work for a whole year to get Cooper back into the net. He really got upset.

Smith: One last thing, and that is those first few weeks, part of it was the spokes of the wheel, but also, let’s face it – you had a White House that was still overwhelmingly populated with Nixon holdovers. There were very few Ford people. How much of a problem was that? The cultural shift, if you will?

Marsh: This was something that was recognized and it was discussed. I think part of President Ford’s rationale on that, and it is typical Ford, he had a lot of good people on that White House staff that had absolutely nothing to do with Watergate and they were victimized by it. But the Nixon brush at that time was a broad stroked one and everybody got tarred. So I think – and I’m not sure if Ford and I talked about this or not, I think we may have – it was deliberate – he wanted to let these people exit the White House in a gradual attritioned way, without a summary end of their service. Because by serving with President Ford from September to January, if you went out in the Washington environment and market – you had experience in the Ford administration. It makes you much more marketable, whereas you don’t raise
suspicions. If you stayed there with Jerry Ford, you must be okay. You weren’t involved in Watergate. That was a part of his planning on that.

Smith: I assume General Haig presented a particular challenge.

Marsh: Yeah. But his was a little different. We have to go back up to the pardon hearings on the Hill. The pardon hearings which Ford attended, as I said, the full chair of the committee was Peter Rodino, his classmate. The sub-committee, there was a sub-committee hearing – it was not a full committee. The sub-committee chair was Bill Hungate, who was my classmate in Congress. That thing directed that the Ford pardon was broader than Ford. People overlooked this. It involved Buzhardt, it involved Haig as witnesses. When they got ready and the end of the year came, Hungate made a motion to dismiss, to discharge the committee without calling Haig and Buzhardt. And it only carried about one vote and that was Hungate’s vote. Hungate shut the hearing down. But Stennis, the United States Senator had sent word that he, in fact, wanted Haig given an assignment out of the country. He did not want him to be Chief of Staff of the Army because he felt he would be a continuing lightning rod. So Stennis, in effect, said NATO. That created a problem with Goodpaster. Goodpaster was a wonderful man and Al went to that assignment and did quite well, but Stennis wanted him in Europe, not in the United States. Not that Stennis was against Al, but recognizing the problem that he would cause, in his view-

Smith: You were one of the people who urged President Ford to go up to the Hill. Obviously there were a number of people who thought it was a bad idea, an unprecedented idea. But I believe you were one of the people who supported him.

Marsh: Bob Hartmann was not opposed to it. When the letter came in from Hungate, I took the letter to him and I showed it to him and of course we had to go through the ritual of having it staffed out – and the poor people writing it didn’t know about these meetings and all. Ford knew that I was not opposed to it – he knew that I supported his going to the Hill – and Bob did. Understandably, most of our staff didn’t, but I thought it was a good idea. When they put all the staffing papers together and they had prepared an
answer which, if sent to the Hill would not have been correct. He looked at it and he said, “Jack, there ain’t but one way to do this. Go up there and lay it out.” And that’s when he said to me, “Go see Carl,” because he wasn’t going to go up to the Hill unless Carl blessed it.

Smith: That’s a perfect note in which to end this conversation. Obviously, we would want to schedule another one.
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Marsh: And it’s my view and I’ve come to more think of it as, I try not to think of it in terms of the Ford presidency, as it was an interregnum. [Neither Reagan was a significant gap between historical events.] You have the Cromwellian period in English history, then after you have the English Bill of Rights. And I think with the Ford presidency, it was an interregnum. When you look at it as being an interregnum, then you can appreciate the full greatness of his leadership and as a president. If you look at him as a president, you’re comparing him to people who have gone through the election process, which he didn’t. He came into this through the 25th Amendment. He skipped the campaign trail and he really went from the office of vice president into the presidency.

So, I think if you look at it as being an interregnum, then you see him having to deal with these forces that were very evident at that period in time. One, the Vietnam War had not ended. But, Richard, people also forget that the Cold War was still an intensive struggle. One where the Soviets were making a big push. So, we had the Vietnam situation, I guess we had the Arab oil embargo, we had the economy situation. We had the problems involving the anti-war protestors, which were raising Cain. You then had also the things that relate to changes in the Congress. But even before that, and I was in the Congress in the 60s, there was already beginning to develop in the Congress a push back as far as the Executive Branch was concerned. That was evidenced in the Freedom of Information Act and the Privacy Act and many, many others.

Smith: War Powers.

Marsh: Yes, and the War Powers. And, you know, I handled the War Powers for Ford with Congress. And so did Vern Newsom(?). But he did not feel it was constitutional. I think he’s right, it is not constitutional. We know that now.
Smith: Was a decision made not to test that theory because your political capital was so depleted?

Marsh: I think the decision on that, and I can recall the discussion on that, there was so much on his platter. Why take on something else? So develop a system that you realize the statute was out there, but you are not bound by it, which was the position that he took. We tracked the statute. That was our admitting that we had to track it, and we took a position that we don’t have to do this, but we’re going to do it anyway. And a decision was made not to test it in the courts at the time.

Smith: Where did you apply it - for example, the Mayaguez incident?

Marsh: No, the first application of it came with the evacuation of Vietnam after the fall of Saigon. When the president, and I remember it well, he dispatched, as I recall, the 7th Fleet to the Vietnam borders to help and assist in the evacuation and other things. But it could be considered a very war-like act, because there was a question as to what would be the Chinese’s reaction to that.

The first instance pointed to the flaws in the statute that would play in from then on. The first question was, if you look at the War Powers Act as written, it says “the Congress.” Is that 435 or 535? Is it the armed services only? Is it the appropriations? Is it the leadership? You couldn’t identify them. So we came up with our own definition of what “the Congress” would be. They’d be some 20, 22 people, equally divided, House and Senate, jurisdictional committees. Highly classified, that was highly classified. Not because we didn’t want our people to know about it, but because if we identified them publicly, then those individuals could be tapped for surveillance and to find out what was being discussed by the president.

So the efforts involved in the 7th Fleet were the first instance where we used it. We used it about six times as I recall, maybe seven; the Mayaguez, the Phnom Penh, the Cambodian situation. We had two evacuations, as I recall, or three, of Lebanon of U.S. citizens. And every one of those situations, except the last one, and that was done deliberately. The last thing on
Lebanon, they did not file a report on that because we wanted to show that we did not accept the statute.

Smith: What was the reaction?

Marsh: They didn’t notice it. They didn’t catch it. Incidentally, George Bush, the first President George Bush, was our ambassador or representative in China. And it happened that, when the evacuation [took place], the Speaker of the House, Carl Albert, and the Minority Leader were both in China with George Bush. He had designated an ad-hoc Speaker, John ________ in California, but we had members in Europe, we had members in Spain, we had some in different parts of the country here. It was a nightmare to try and reach those people even though there was a diligent effort made to do that.

What happens, Richard, with the War Powers Act, the media gets inside your decision cycle. What I mean by that is, before we would advise these 20 or 21 people, Brent Scowcroft and the General Counsel’s office and representatives of state and others would draft up a very short summary of what the incident was. That was then read verbatim by one of our legislative people and then they would record our member’s response and those summaries were then filed. And they were given to the president, too, but he was in California, so it ended up with all these members thrown around the globe and President Ford’s in California. It showed how the Act simply did not work. But he tracked the statute. I remember it well.

Smith: You mentioned Vietnam. Let’s kind of focus on April of ’75, because as we said earlier, we heard from Mel Laird recently who obviously loved the president, but was and is quite critical in his comments about what he perceives as a failure of leadership across the board. And I don’t think I’m putting words in his mouth when he suggests that a President of the United States, even under those circumstances, could go to Congress and get whatever the sum was to sustain the South Vietnamese government and prevent what happened. What’s your response to that?

Marsh: The Vietnamese collapse - efforts were made to try and get some financial assistance to the Vietnamese. That failed. You could not get a bill through.
You could not get support for a regime that people were complaining about back then in support of the war. There was so much resistance to that. The Vietnam thing poisoned the Nixon administration, it poisoned the Johnson administration, would’ve poisoned the Kennedy administration for a lot of different reasons. One of those was the draft and the terrible unfairness of the draft. But you could not sell if you tried to do things to the effect that it was a futile thing.

Smith: But a full court press was made, a serious effort was made to—

Marsh: I think what occurred is that, before you do it, you try to find out where your support or where your help is. There was none. Vietnam was that goat. The administration was, and I know Henry felt bad about that because of the Paris Peace Accords.

Smith: See, that raises a key issue here, because one senses within the administration, at the end, a tension between those who, for lack of a better word, I use Bob Hartmann and the people who produced, for example, the Tulane speech - where the president in effect publicly proclaims the war is over. And Secretary Kissinger, who it has been widely written, would not have delivered that speech, would have taken a different approach. I may be grossly over simplifying, but were there those tensions at that point within the administration. How would you describe the breakdown?

Marsh: There weren’t those kinds of tensions. I never saw any strains or stresses between Ford-Kissinger, even on those issues. My suspicion of Henry is when President Ford made a decision, Henry would acquiesce on it. Now, he may not have necessarily agreed that that was the right approach, but on Vietnam, Ford fully sensed where the public was. He also, in support of the war, would’ve continued to support it, but he was a political realist. Richard, you had going all these things that started involving the CIA, the Church Committee, the Pike Committee. You had the fallout of the things that involved the war in Dey Brinkin(?). We have to keep in mind, this was the first instance in American history that I can recall where the integrity of the President and the Oval Office was attacked and undermined.
And so you had a weakened presidency. And then you had the intelligence community which came under attack both in the House and the Senate, in the House by the Pike Committee and in the Senate by the Church Committee. And those things went on for months and months and months and it really changed dramatically the dimensions of the intelligence community. It also would lead ultimately to the establishment of an intelligence community in the House and the Senate. Not in Ford’s administration, that happened under President Carter, but all this undermining and all, and this unrest.

Smith: Let me ask you about that because you raise a fascinating point. I’ve read that, I think it was early in ’75, that Seymour Hersh ran this lengthy piece spilling a lot of beans, the family jewels, whatever you want to call it.


Smith: And the President read the piece. Was that, in fact, news to him at that point, what was in that article? Because out of that grew this multi-front investigatory effort.

Marsh: It would spawn, in effect, several different efforts. The first and most immediate was the Rockefeller Commission, which was an examination of wrong-doing and improper actions by the intelligence community and assassinations.

Smith: Which was widely and cynically perceived as an attempt by the White House at damage control at, in effect, having an investigation, but our investigation.

Marsh: I think that’s probably a fair statement because it put you in a burden. You can’t be President of the United States and have these kinds of revelations that had certain kinds of substance of truth in them and ignore them. You’ve got to do something about it. What happened then, you would then have the Ninze(?) Committee in the House which then collapsed of its own weight through dissent and strife inside the committee, which led to the Pike Committee. But in the meantime, the Church Committee had gotten up and had started to run on the Senate side.
Another thing that aided and abetted this attack on the Ford administration were the elections of 1974. In the ’74 elections, the Republicans lost 40-some seats. It was really almost a veto-proof House. I think it was one fourth or 288 to 141 or something like that, to 144. On the Senate side, you lost 5 Senate seats. But, the House group that came in, the House freshmen, were loaded for bear.

Smith: The Watergate Babies, so-called.

Marsh: Right, and they were going to correct the Watergate situation, they were going to reform Congress. They did change the selection of committee members in the House from the Ways and Means Committee over to another _________. They changed the seniority system. That was a very, very rebellious sort of casualty. And I think, I’ve always been of the view, well, I know for sure, they had gotten together before they were sworn in to discuss what they were going to do. And they found that they had a balance of power and they imposed their efforts on it. But now, with those _______ majorities in the House and Senate, it was extremely hard to defend an administration position on the intelligence increase. You couldn’t do it in some instances and they were just killing us with these subpoenas for materials from the Department of State and the CIA.

Smith: A couple things: One, was Ford in fact shocked by what he read in the Seymour Hersh story?

Marsh: One must remember, and we overlook the fact that, Ford as a House member had jurisdictional committee assignments that took him into the areas of intelligence. He had a far better grasp on the American intelligence program than people realize. That probably kind of hardened him. I’m confident that he was really taken aback by what was revealed and that’s evidence, I think, Richard, by the efforts that he took in his administration. President Ford reformed the American intelligence community.

Smith: How?

Marsh: Well, he had a group in the White House and the group was called the ICG, Intelligence Coordinating Group. That was Phil Buchen, Brent Scowcroft,
who represented Henry who was representative for the Defense. Bill Colby of the CIA and Levi, who played a role for which he has never received the credit he should have received. He was a great anchor to that. It was a coordinating group, I chaired the coordinating group.

Smith: That’s fascinating - that the Attorney General would be part of that effort.

Marsh: And he was a voice of, Levi was one of these people who could listen to these things and summarize it in two or three sentences and he’s right at the heart of it. He was very quiet, but he was very thorough. And, out of that, came an effort for which he’s never been recognized. He adapted the Attorney General’s guidelines that related to the FBI and it would flow out of that particular thing.

An interesting thing, and I was uncertain how to deal with but I finally dealt with it by accepting it, was Bill Colby brought his own lawyer to those hearings. Rogovin, Mitch Rogovin. And Mitch sat in and eventually Mitch became a very valuable ally, he was very helpful. At first, you wondered whether or not he was going to be adversarial from the standpoint of trying to protect Bill Colby. But I would say that he became a more attractive member because he got so upset at the Pike Committee that he was driven to our side.

Smith: And how did the Executive Order on assassinations come about?

Marsh: It came out of the Rockefeller Commission. _____ the first of its kind. People think its law, it is not law. The Assassinations Prohibition is an Executive Order of the United States. It’s from Ford, Ford put that together. I suspect that Rockefeller probably recommended he do that.

Smith: I gather from what you say, you dismiss those who dismiss the Rockefeller Commission as in any way a white wash. Whatever the original political motivation was, it produced change.

Marsh: Well, the efforts of the Rockefeller group were subsumed in these other White House groups, the Intelligence Coordinating Group. It did provide a number of factions. It raised a lot of things, some of which could be clarified, some
probably which could not. But the elements of the Rockefeller Commission were pursued by the Church Committee.

Smith: Was the president at all in an awkward position, in effect, defending Colby and the CIA while simultaneously undertaking an independent investigation of the Agency? What was the dynamic? There would seem to be something of a conflict.

Marsh: This is a view. I knew Colby. I knew Colby well. A magnificent World War II record in the resistance. A great record in Vietnam. I am of the view that he was so enmeshed in, and part of, the Vietnam strategies and policies and programs, that he should never have been the Director of the CIA because he was being called to witness on the Hill and he was put in a terrible situation. I mean, after all, if you’ve got a Director who’s coming to your meetings and he’s bringing his own lawyer, you feel you’re putting the person in potential jeopardy there. And people forget that when Ford and Colby parted ways, Ford offered him the ambassadorship to NATO. I’ve discussed that with Bill Colby. I was with President Ford when Colby was released and also Jim Schlesinger. I sat in on that.

Smith: How long had that been in the works?

Marsh: President Ford got there Friday and told me what he had decided to do. It was very apparent that he had made a decision on what he was going to do.

Smith: And this is jumping ahead, but over the years, this has also been enmeshed, the whole dumping of Rockefeller. There were those who see the long arm of Don Rumsfeld in this shuffle. And the President said, in effect, even then, “No, this was my doing.”

Marsh: That’s true. He told me on Friday what he had decided to do with those shifts. To my knowledge, Vice President Rockefeller was never mentioned in that. Ford was not comfortable with Jim Schlesinger. I had to work for Jim, I’d been his Assistant Secretary of Defense. But President Ford was not comfortable with him. When that shift came about, he told me on Friday, and I could tell that he was telling me in a way, “Jack, this is what I’ve decided to do. I’m informing you. I’m not asking you for your advice.”
Smith: Was it just about chemistry with Schlesinger?

Marsh: I think that’s all it was and I think probably if Schlesinger had more frequent access to the Oval Office that might not have happened. But if you look, there’s a great disparity between his access to the President.

Smith: Over the years it’s been portrayed as the President feeling somewhat resentful of what he took to be a condescending attitude on Schlesinger’s part and that the chemistry just never worked.

Marsh: I think your description is probably accurate. Jim to some degree in my view misjudged Ford, particularly as to his abilities and latent abilities. We both know Ford had these enormous abilities and many of them, he didn’t care if we could see them, we didn’t know that they were there. Ford told me what was going to happen on Friday. On Saturday night, I’m home and Don Rumsfeld calls me and said, “Jack, maybe you ought to come down here. Nobody’s sitting in on the meeting with either Schlesinger or Colby and I think probably somebody ought to sit in.”

Smith: Now, that raises a question. Why not Rumsfeld himself?

Marsh: Well, I guess, he was Chief of Staff, he didn’t want to be involved in it.

Smith: Of course, to be fair to Rumsfeld, he in some ways was a party of interest.

Marsh: At first, he wanted me to do it. He wanted me to call Jim Schlesinger to get him to come to the meeting, which I told him I would do. Then he called and said, “I think you ought to sit in.” And then the next instruction was, “I think you ought to go with Cheney and go down and sit in the meeting with Sadat,” because Cheney was going to be new and Don was sort of an old hand with him and I said I’d do it. I went down there and I sat in on those meetings that they had and it was real polite. Ford offered Jim the Chairman of the Board of Economic Advisors, as I recall. I don’t think he ever mentioned that Ford had offered him something, but he did. And I was there for Colby and he did the same thing with Colby on NATO.

Smith: How did Ford broach this unpleasant subject? It’s never easy to fire someone.
Marsh: No, it’s not easy. He was rather direct. It was a very courteous conversation. It was not an extensive one. And Jim, I think, was probably pretty surprised by it and, of course, wanted to put forth his own views about his service, but Ford was adamant. It was very apparent he was adamant that he was not going to change his mind and, “I made it. You can have the Economic Advisors, but this is my decision. We’re going to have another Secretary of Defense.” I don’t know whether he told him who it was going to be or not.

Smith: And, of course, it turned out to be Rumsfeld.

Marsh: Yeah.

Smith: Now, obviously this is a supposition, again, over the years, there’s something about Don Rumsfeld, I guess, generally it’s this view on the part of some people that he’s sort of behind the scenes pulling all these wires. And this was a great Machiavellian. Look, he got rid of Klutsky(?), he got a cabinet slot, he got this guy to replace him as Chief of Staff, he got Rockefeller out of the picture therefore opening the way in theory in ’76.

Marsh: Another factor is George Bush.

Smith: Bush is deep-sixed over in the CIA.

Marsh: As I recall, I believe he sent Elliott Richardson to the Court of St. James or to Commerce. There were several cabinet vacancies and George’s appeal, the appeal to George Bush was, “Look, the President wants you to come back to assume the post at CIA.” So, what happens? Stennis and others representing the Hill view, they take the position, “We don’t want to do anything that might be politicizing that and George Bush is a natural candidate to be vice president.” I don’t know whether he said that directly. So then, George had to write out a letter. He was kind of putting himself in political purgatory. I had to give the letter to Bush to get it signed and he was not happy about signing that letter, and I don’t blame him. But that condition was placed on him by the Senate and I don’t know if Senator Stennis was the spokesman, but he was representative of the people - they just didn’t want to start political trends in the CIA.
Smith: What would you say to those who think that Rumsfeld played an instrumental role in orchestrating this?

Marsh: Richard, I have to say I honestly don’t know because, one, I was very close to Rumsfeld, I was close to Cheney, and I was close to President Ford, and I hadn’t picked anything up about that. When I got down to Florida at the house there, I got on the phone and called. See, Don and I were congressional classmates. We were both elected to the 88th Congress and our offices were one or two doors from each other. It was a long, old relationship and I could talk to him very frankly. And I called him up about taking the job of Secretary of Defense and he was reluctant. We got Cheney on the phone and Dick and I both really leaned on him to take that job. He had never indicated to me - he certainly, it appeared, was concerned about the very dimension you mentioned being somewhat later becoming apparent or about a question being raised about. He had never indicated it to me, and when I was in Florida, I called him and I was surprised by how stern or adamant he was that he would not take the post.

Smith: But you finally convinced him.

Marsh: I know I said to him, “The President really needs you. This is something you’ve got to do.”

Smith: But you must have been aware of the friction between Rumsfeld and Rockefeller.

Marsh: Yeah, and I’ve never understood that because it seemed to me that that was a natural political ally.

Smith: Let me spin this, because Rockefeller, who I think exaggerated - almost with a little bit of paranoia - that said, he comes to the administration having been told, and I’d be interested in your opinion as to whether this was true or not. But having been led to believe he would be the domestic equivalent to Henry Kissinger. That, you know, the Domestic Council was his. This was a policy-making branch of the administration and all this. And I think he convinced himself that it was going to be different from other vice presidents.
Paradoxically, I talked to someone who was close to it who tried to talk him out of it at that point and went through all these reasons. And Rockefeller, after about 15 minutes, said, “Bill, everything you say is true, but you have to realize this is my last chance.” And I think when you strip everything away, you come to the fact that Rockefeller saw this as, in fact, his last shot at the presidency, which seems a little bizarre in retrospect and which may help to explain, in some measure, the extreme sensitivity that he had toward a potential rival [Don Rumsfeld]. Remember, Rumsfeld’s name had been on the short list of people considered for the vice presidency. There was no shortage of people in town who were talking about Rumsfeld as a potential running mate, et cetera.

And then you have this structural problem where Rockefeller comes into the White House believing he’s almost a deputy President for domestic policy. And Rumsfeld comes into the White House to perform the function of the Chief of Staff. And it’s an administration that decides pretty early on there aren’t going to be new domestic programs. We’re not going to launch a lot of new initiatives until we get a handle on the economy, until we bring spending under control. So, in other words, at the personal level, the relationship between the President and the vice president was a warm one, but ideologically, philosophically, Rockefeller had to have known that he was coming into a climate less conducive to the kind of government than he was used to in New York state. In many ways, Don Rumsfeld became the face of that. Does that make sense?

Marsh: 

I think that is the argument that is frequently made. To me, of significance, and I’m sure you probably interviewed, is the Jim Cannon presence. Jim Cannon was the front guy for Rockefeller during the whole pre-confirmation process. And Rockefeller had a very bright and able guy, Bob Douglas, a lawyer who’d been a general counsel I think for the state of New York. Douglas and Cannon came in here. I dealt with them because I had certain responsibilities to President Ford in reference to the Rockefeller confirmation. I had developed such a close relationship with Cannon and Douglas, and particularly Cannon, that when Rockefeller’s confirmed and Cannon came in for the Domestic Council, I figured that was the ambassador or emissary of
Nelson Rockefeller and would be his window. And I guess you’ve talked to Jim many times. Has he ever discussed that?

Smith: Well, it became very awkward for him because the vice president’s man had exactly that role, but over time the head of the Domestic Council worked for the president and Jim was put in a terribly awkward position.

Marsh: Yeah, he had a deputy that worked in there with him, able guy, Jim Cavanaugh. I learned to know the vice president much better than I had and we became pretty good friends.

Smith: As you got to know him better, was there anything that surprised you?

Marsh: Richard, the first thing that surprised me about Nelson Rockefeller was how an individual of his stature and family reputation could adapt himself to the subordinate position that he had. I was impressed by that.

Smith: How did that evidence itself?

Marsh: He made it very, very clear that Ford was boss. He would, in effect, say that. And in decisions that were made it was a case where he saluted and you knew sometimes he didn’t go with the decision, but anything that Ford wanted him to do, he did. And he did it in a way where it was obvious that Ford was the leader and he wasn’t. And that impressed me with him as an individual of his qualities. He clearly saw a role that he had been placed in and he was going to perform that role and perform it well. The only little, slight alteration, and maybe you know this, he made it plain he was not going to stay in the vice president’s house and he lived in his home in Foxhall Road. I think he refurbished the vice president’s house, but I don’t ever think he spent a night in there. That was sort of a little evidence of independence. But he was a very, very able man. And he met and talked with people. He brought with him down here Dick Parsons and you know Dick.

Smith: We were talking about the filibuster rule in the Senate which had been two-thirds to invoke cloture, 67. And it changed.

Marsh: Right, it changed to 60 votes and the author of that was the vice president, who, of course, is the president of the Senate. Vice President Rockefeller
made that recommendation before he did it to President Ford. President Ford was aware of it. I don’t know if President Ford was necessarily enthused about it, but he went along with it. Assisting the vice president was a fellow named Dick Parsons, young attorney. Dick had a bush cut.

Smith: An afro.
Marsh: What’s it called?
Smith: An afro.
Marsh: Yeah, he had an afro. A heck of a nice guy. The story that I heard, Senator Thurmond had some question about this and he went to the vice president and the vice president said, “Well, my lawyer says this,” and “My lawyer says that,” and that came up again and Strom Thurmond wanted to see him and said, “Well, let me see your lawyer.” And when Strom Thurmond saw Dick Parsons there with the great big afro and all I think it really gave him pause. But that was a product of Nelson Rockefeller, the change in those filibuster rules. I’ve never seen anybody refer to it.

Smith: And my understanding of the background of that was the renewal of the Voting Rights Act. That this is what precipitated the debate. That was the background and the discussion that Rockefeller had with Parsons, Rockefeller had Parsons sitting in the gallery signaling him what to do. I mean, he made a chart. Of course, Nelson loved charts because he was dyslexic. He made this great big chart showing all of his options as the Senate’s presiding officer. If this happens, you do this. It’s almost like they were giving hand signals. Nelson had prepped, but he had Parsons up in the balcony in effect as a back-up. It was in the context of the civil rights movement, and legislation to which the Rockefellers had always been dedicated. And it came back to haunt him because it wasn’t just Thurmond, but I believe Senator Tower and a number of other who made their unhappiness with the vice president known to the White House.

Marsh: They may have, but President Ford stood by him on that and it went through. I think it went through because there wasn’t much build up before to do it, there wasn’t much press discussion. Suddenly, it happened. And that was
Vice President Rockefeller that did that. It’s not generally known that he did, but he did.

Smith: When you stop to think, imagine in today’s political climate, when you need 60 votes to get anything done, imagine if you needed 67 votes to get anything done.

Marsh: Yeah, you couldn’t get it. The current environment, you wouldn’t be able to do that.

Smith: I’d like to hear your take on whether Rockefeller was jumped or was pushed, or was there something in between?

Marsh: That I don’t know. I know that Ford has since lamented at the Rockefeller dinner in New York, that it was one of the worst decisions he made. I think he used the term “cowardly”, I’m not certain. Ford regretted that decision later on. I think there were forces that were at work in the campaign that caused Rockefeller to say, “I just don’t want to be involved in this.” I think he reached a level of what he was willing to put up with.

Smith: It’s interesting you say that because the President also said, and in some ways, it was a very shrewd observation on his part, if you step back from the actual decision, who said what to whom, the President concluded that Nelson wasn’t happy as a vice president and that a second term would only be worse. That he would lack a certain fulfillment - which suggested he [Ford] was more observant than people give him credit.

Marsh: That was a point I wanted to make. What you said is true. It indicates a quality of President Ford that others didn’t know, his great skills in reading people but not indicating that he’s read them. I’ve seen it many, many times.

Smith: And, for a while, that would include people like Bill Colby and Jim Schlesinger.

Marsh: Yeah. Yeah, because what happens inevitably, Richard, is that what you have with that capability is the risk of being underestimated. And Ford’s career as President was underestimated as to what he did. I point out to people and I had mentioned this to you before, President Ford had more service as a
member of the United States Congress than any person who had ever been
President of the United States and that shaped his attitudes about things.
Ford’s great strength never came out, never came out. One, he understood the
workings of the federal government. The other president who did was
Lyndon Johnson. Both of them had different methods of evidence of that, but
what Ford had that Johnson didn’t have, Ford knew and understood the
budget and the appropriations process of the United States Congress. That is
a wonderful, wonderful ability, but it is a tough quality to sell on the
campaign trail.

Smith: Yes. Let me ask you. Was the administration, and the President in particular,
including those around him, pretty slow to perceive how serious the Reagan
challenge could be? Talking about, not in ’76, but in ’75, was there a
temptation to believe that at the end Reagan wouldn’t run, after all? There
was the 11th Commandment with which he was associated. Or a tendency to
underestimate how formidable an opponent he might be?

Marsh: The two men were very, maybe they were too much alike, but Ford reached
out to Reagan when he appointed the Assassination Committee and he asked
Reagan to serve on that committee and he declined. He didn’t do it. And
that, to me, was a first signal.

Smith: That was the Rockefeller Commission?

Marsh: Yeah. And if you go back and look at the records, I think you’ll find that
Reagan turned it down which indicated to me he wanted to be his own man.
He didn’t want a relationship with Ford.

Smith: Did you have discussions leading up to the campaign about Reagan?

Marsh: No, I was not involved in the political campaign process. That was handled
by different people in the White House, the chief’s office and Cheney. But I
didn’t get into the political campaign and maybe it was because I’d served in
the House as a Democrat. I wasn’t that involved in the political process.

Smith: The whole controversy over New York City and

Marsh: Drop Dead?
Smith: Exactly. What are your memories of that? Clearly there was an intense debate going on. I’ve talked to Bill Seidman at length about this and he was someone aligned with Rockefeller. One senses that Bill Simon and Alan Greenspan took a very different viewpoint and that there was a bit of a tug of war going - almost for the soul of the President. What do you recall?

Marsh: I don’t recall but I was aware of it or some of the discussions in the Oval Office in reference to it. But as you pointed out, Bill Seidman was carrying that. I think it was one of those things that your liaison, meaning your liaison with the community and community leaders, probably broke down. I think that probably could have been avoided by better communication between _______. As I recall, Hugh Carey, I think. Was he mayor at the time?

Smith: Carey was governor at that point and Abe Beame was mayor.

Marsh: Carey had been a member of the House and I think as they seemed to reach a resolution, they didn’t really communicate. There was not enough communication between the people. Let me mention something to you, Richard, that was pure Ford and was his idea. But after the ’74 elections we saw that the Democratic majorities, the House was going to be almost veto-proof, better than two-to-one against us. That was very, very high numbers in the 60s, members in the Senate. So we had this program, you may recall, we had this program, No New Spending except for defense and energy were the two areas that were exempt from it. Ford discussed with me his plan for handling legislation and what he called a veto strategy. It was his strategy and it was a very well conceived strategy.

So what President Ford did was, one, abandon the traditional southern Democrat-Republican alliances except for where it’s helpful to use them. And then go with an interest where allied with the interest are constituencies that are Democrat that ________, for example, agriculture, that he vetoed and sustained that veto with New York Democrats. What happened was he used his Republicans as a base and then he used what he called Floating Coalitions, those were his words, Floating Coalitions. If, after the ’74 elections, the Democrats were fully in control, they became very assertive. The issue was energy, the big issue was energy. You can’t build energy
alliances along political lines, they’re geographical. People want low prices for heat, you know, Republicans and Democrats in the Northeast and they want half prices in the Sunbelt and the oil regions. So what Ford would do, and I would know what the coalitions were, we would _____ those coalitions. If you were to look at the vetoes, he vetoed probably more than any other president had vetoed. And this is an area today where presidents are not following his example. It was very carefully constructed.

At the sub-committee level, you introduce a bill and remember the liaison team would tell the subcommittee chairman, “I don’t know where the administration’s going to be, but that’s not something they’d want.” If that goes on and goes to the next stage, there’s a clear warning. If you bring that bill out of committee, you’re going to be in trouble. You vote on it in committee and then the whole barrage comes on to defeat the bill and Ford had clearly told them that will be vetoed, at every stage that it would be vetoed. They would pass it and he vetoed it. And you know, he sustained those vetoes, I think, all but five.

But it was with this Floating Coalition, we got more Democrats than we did Republicans to sustain his veto. I called him up and reminded him what had happened and of course he laughed, but that Floating Coalition and the veto strategy, when I hear these presidents today talk about it, they’re not developing the veto strategy sufficiently. You’ve got to communicate it before you do it, what would happen. He was saying his differences with the bill, send it back, and the Congress would amend it and take out the adjunctive provisions and then he would sign it. The housing bill, as I recall, was exactly what happened.

Smith: It’s interesting because Hugh Carey told me years earlier, he said, “You know, Jerry Ford’s never gotten the credit that he deserved for helping to save New York because,” he said, “it was his tough love approach that actually forced the city to make some very difficult politically unpalatable decisions and budget cuts that would not have taken place otherwise.

Marsh: I think you had made reference to this sometime before about Hugh Carey. I’m going back a couple of years ago on the New York thing.
Smith: Were you at the convention in Kansas City?

Marsh: Yeah, I was in the suite there with the president and I remember he would want somebody to listen to his speech, but he had a habit where he was in the other room so he wouldn’t have this situation where he was trying to make this speech to one person. And I listened to it and I rode with him to the convention that night.

Smith: All the people still debate what signals were given, whether they were misunderstood about asking Reagan to be on the ticket. My understanding is that they were both explicit that the condition for the Ford-Reagan meeting, set by the Reagan camp, was, “Don’t ask him to be on the ticket.”

Marsh: Yeah, I think that’s right.

Smith: And there were those later on who said, “Well, only if he’d asked Reagan to be on the ticket with him, who knows.” But also, I gathered at that point that there was no love lost between the two camps.

Marsh: I think that’s correct and that would be evidenced four years later in Detroit where Ford was there. Reagan came in and President Reagan brought a peace pipe, an Indian peace pipe up.

Smith: Now, were you there?

Marsh: Uh-huh. I was involved in the negotiations through it.

Smith: We heard Bob Barrett tell a fascinating sort of theory. I think I’m putting this accurately, he’s not asserting this, but he’s raising this as a possibility - that all of this was in some ways a head fake on the part of the Reagan campaign to send an unmistakable signal to the country that, “Hey, I’m more moderate than you think I am. I’m willing to make this very significant gesture toward the middle of my party” but that it was never seriously pursued.

Marsh: It was seriously pursued and the negotiations were two major meetings. I was involved in those, Bob Barrett, Alan Greenspan, and Henry Kissinger.

Smith: How did this come about? You presumably went to Detroit without any expectations that this would go on.
Marsh: Oh, I had no idea that that would come up. I think, Richard, the presidential candidates in assessing the campaign in the front end are so concerned of assuring victory that they would reach further than they would normally to another party. This is true of Nixon. He was awfully concerned in ’72 that he was going to be defeated in an election that he won handily. But these concerns that he wanted to get Connally and everyone in there with him, but I think that the Reagan camp on the eve of this nomination felt that there’s one way to sew this up. If we had Jerry Ford on the ticket, Reagan’s going to be elected. I mean, it was a hard-nosed political decision.

Smith: Now, remember, four years earlier, they’d picked Dick Schweiker for his running mate. So, I mean, it wasn’t the first time that they’d thrown the long ball when it came to a running mate.

Marsh: When we went in there, Ford raised the ante by indicating if he was going to be vice president, he wanted Henry to be there, Alan Greenspan, I think.

Smith: How did this all unfold? Who, first of all told you about this? Was it President Ford who said, “I’ve heard from the Reagan people”? Or how did that come about?

Marsh: No, he didn’t communicate it at all to my knowledge with the Reagan people. He kept the visit earlier in the afternoon with the peace pipe. But we went over there - it was simply to talk about it. Ed Meese was there on the other side. Ed came in to the second iteration, but then when we went back with these suggestions that President Ford had, I think it just shocked the whole Reagan camp. I think they wanted to ________ advanced rigor mortis. Then Walter Cronkite got it on the news and they came back. There was still a measure of real interest there.

One of the things that hurt was the convention got out of control and it was run ahead of us. I had said that night, “I think this has reached a stage where the principles have got to get together by themselves and work it out,” because it was that close. It was very close. I think Ford would’ve fallen off some of his points and I’m pretty sure President Reagan would’ve acquiesced to something if Ford would. My thought was if we could adjourn and then
sleep on this one night and then get the two men in the next morning by themselves, we probably would get it worked out. But what happened, the convention, Helms got up and nominated somebody and it got out of control. We couldn’t control the convention. It was going too fast for us.

Smith: And of course the media were feeding the fire.

Marsh: Yeah. And I went back there later that evening and talked with Ford. The room was very, very dark and he was sitting there in the semi-darkness and he said, “What do you think?” And I said, “I think you’d better pull the plug on it.” And he said, “I do, too.” He said, “That’s what I felt all along, so I’m going to do it.” So, that was it. That was just the two of us. His heart wasn’t in it, I don’t think.

Smith: What about Mrs. Ford?

Marsh: Oh, I don’t think she wanted anything to do with it. I can certainly understand. Although, she would’ve gone along with it if that’s what he wanted to do, I’m sure she would’ve gone along with it. But, it was one of those things as it began to unfold and be developed, and of course that’s the beauty I guess of the means of conversation. He was able to see it in a perspective that what was best to do that politically it was not best to do it. Two, personally, it was best not to do it. Now, I’m putting words in there as well, but that was my assessment.

Smith: And he never looked back after that.

Marsh: No. And he campaigned for President Reagan. I was with him on the campaign trail. He campaigned for President Reagan for a week, almost a week.

Smith: Let me ask you. Of course, you played a distinguished role in the Reagan presidency. There is a sense that there weren’t a lot of folks in the Reagan White House who would return Gerald Ford’s phone calls. And I’m not talking about the top; I’m talking about below the top.

Marsh: I never heard that.
Smith: You never did.

Marsh: I never heard that. I don’t know what the relationship was after he left the presidency. You know, Richard, Ford also has never gotten credit for the Helsinki Accords and there’s a strong view by a lot of foreign affairs experts in political science that it was the Helsinki Accords that would lead to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Smith: It is interesting. If you go back and look at the clips, there were criticizers at the time, not only on the right, they were criticized by Jimmy Carter who subsequently hailed him as, in fact, a milestone on the road to the end of the Cold War.

Marsh: But Ford, in my view, has never got the credit for a lot of things. That’s the reason I refer to him as the interregnum.

Smith: The interregnum. It’s an interesting concept. I’ve often thought, sort of counter intuitively, that it’s a mistake to see the Ford presidency as a coda, just sort of the end of the Nixon presidency, but that it is in many ways a period that breaks with that past and is more about foreshadowing things to come, the classic example being economic deregulation or energy policy. You’re right, you have this odd dynamic. In the one hand, you’re pursuing détente, at least in terms of arms control, but at the same time, you’re fighting proxy wars in Africa and elsewhere with the Soviet Union. It’s a point where the word ‘détente’ became a political embarrassment.

Marsh: That’s true.

Smith: I mean, how did he handle the transition, if you will, from Nixonian détente to this kind of hybrid policy toward the Soviets?

Marsh: He was very frank with the Soviets as you know in the situation of the raising of the Russian submarine which occurred just as he was about to be President. We had to stop it from being raised. You see, that exercise had gone on for quite some time. There was no Soviet surveillance of it. Two or three days before he became president or a week before he became president, a Soviet submarine
surveillance trawler ended up on the scene. They were bringing it up and we had to stop it. That was a highly sensitive operation.

Smith: That was the Howard Hughes ship, the Glomar Explorer.

Marsh: Yeah. But you’re talking about the bridge about how Ford would move into other things. He began a program of amnesty which was very, very controversial.

Smith: You told us and we want to get it on the camera if you don’t mind because you had that funny story, funny now, but probably not funny at the time, of going in to the President the day before he was to go in to the VFW.

Marsh: Well, and he’d put the amnesty references which were one and half or two pages. The speech had been prepared and there was nothing about amnesty in it. _____________ to the VFW, of all places to go, it was probably the only good one. But then what he did, he had Bob Hartmann write a page and a half that would outline the amnesty program - he sandwiched that into his speech. That part never got staffed up. Nobody knew that he was going to say that. And he did. That really, really caused us a furor.

Smith: And there’s a story involving Steve. You told a story about going into town the day before he went to Chicago that Steve had not registered for the draft.

Marsh: No, that was not unusual because when the draft was abandoned, a lot of the young men said, “The draft’s abandoned. You’re okay.” What happened, we had this stand-by statute that a youngster, 18-years old, didn’t know was there and that said he had to go register. And the oversight or neglect to that was not unusual to have done.

Smith: But it didn’t come as welcome news to the president.

Marsh: No, because it was the day before he was going to make this speech in Chicago.

Smith: Did you have much contact with the family?

Marsh: No, not too much. I saw Susan more because she was more there at home. So, I saw Susan. And I knew the other boys. Steve was the same age as my
oldest son and both of them were seniors in high schools in the area. My son was a senior in Arlington.

Smith: You must have been around them the time that Mrs. Ford had her cancer.

Marsh: I was. I went with him.

Smith: Went with him to the hospital?

Marsh: Yeah.

Smith: What was that like?

Marsh: Well, the first thing, we flew in the helicopter when we should’ve gone by car. Fog had set in, completely obliterating everything.

Smith: This was Bethesda Naval Hospital?

Marsh: Yeah. So we had some trouble getting out there just because the weather was bad, but we got there. Of course, he was with Mrs. Ford himself.

Smith: Now, was this after the surgery, before the surgery?

Marsh: After. We came back by car and the thing I associate with the trip is that he had the Economic Summit they were having at the Hilton Hotel, and he went to that event. It was one of those situations where your heart goes out to somebody who’s having that kind of a problem and also Mrs. Ford who’s having a terrible problem. And here he is confronted with an Economic Summit of all these people to discuss the economic situation. Richard, it was at the Hilton. I’ve always been somewhat defensive on his policy called WIN, Whip Inflation Now. It’s my recollection that that summit recommended those types of actions, but what happened, as we later realized we were going into a recession, what you needed was an opposite thing where you need a tax reduction.

Smith: You knew you were whipsawed in terms of economic policy.

Marsh: Yeah, but I felt that the policies he was trying to produce all along were consistent with what was recommended.
Smith: That trip out and coming back from Bethesda, was he emotional?

Marsh: Oh, no. No, he was not. He was somber, very somber. And I think he was very relieved, one, that the operation was over and, two, that the operation was a success, but regretful that Mrs. Ford had to suffer like that. But he was very, very much in command of his faculties, but somber. And we just rode along. I didn’t have to say much and he didn’t want me to say much. It was one of those situations.

Smith: It’s hard for people today to realize what a groundbreaking thing that was for them to go public with that news. We take it for granted today, but 35 years ago it was not a subject that people discussed.

Marsh: That’s right, they didn’t. That was back in ’74 and people were reticent to discuss something that really was a national problem, the cancer and having that operation, and I think Mrs. Ford made a landmark decision to do that.

Smith: Let me ask you because there was the famous 60 Minutes interview and some of the other things she did that defined her as a model of candor, openness in many ways. At the time, clearly there were people that thought that you were paying a political price for her frank opinions. What was your sense of this?

Marsh: I think what you’ve said - in the White House that view did prevail. As I mentioned, I didn’t get into the political things, but I think you accurately describe what was the view in the White House. After all, you’re coming up on an election and your base, your solid Republican base, those were the ones you were concerned with. I think some of that rectified itself in the way that she handled it and all. She said something on 60 Minutes, I think, if that had happened shortly before the election, [but] it happened with about 14 months to go.

Smith: But I think people in the White House were surprised that the country had changed, in reaction to Vietnam and Watergate - people found candor refreshing. Clearly some of the Republican base did not, but a lot of other people did. And she became in some ways a heroine to a lot of folks in the way Harry Truman is admired today for his frankness.
Incidentally, next month would mark the end, not next month, in May, we mark the end of the Berlin air lift anniversary. People forget as to the day 60 years ago that air lift was going on. And I tell you, those kinds of things impact a president and his decision making and people who look on the Ford thing, they don’t think about the Cold War going on. The Cold War was going on. It was a tough, tough war.

I want to clean up that part because after talking to Mel Laird, you know, Mel has this idea of how, if only Ford had waited until he came back to town…because he had this plan to bring a bipartisan delegation with both Houses down to the White House to appeal to the President to issue a pardon. And I don’t want to prejudice your answer, but to me that seems something that might work in theory 35 years later, but it’s hard to imagine given the incredibly charged political climate of the time, that any advance telegraphing of this thing would have touched off a political uproar. It’s hard to imagine how you could do it in a way that wouldn’t be shot down as a trial balloon.

Richard, you’re right. I have naturally over the years thought many, many times about the pardon and how we could have done it differently that would have brought a different answer. I’m not sure you could’ve gotten that many congressmen together to come down because the anger that existed in the Congress toward President Nixon - probably a lot of it was unwarranted, but it was there and they were angry. I recall there was a significant effort, it didn’t go because calmer heads would prevail, to revoke his pensions. I know that happened because a member of the United States Senate of his party told me that they ought to do that. He told me personally. And that was a very widespread view. It was the view that Nixon should be penalized and punished.

That resigning wasn’t enough.

Right. In fact, they felt that he should not have been pardoned. Of course, people don’t realize that the pardon power that the President of the United States has gives you the authority to pardon pre-indictment and so the authorities where there for him.
Smith: But then the other criticism was made, “Okay, I can buy into the pardon if you had got more out of Nixon.” The fact is we never got. I don’t know if you’ve seen *Frost/Nixon*, but the whole thing is based upon this notion that David Frost was going to get Nixon to trial and he never got him to court. And the worst thing about the pardon was that it absolved Nixon from confessing, from coming clean, from providing some sort of emotional catharsis to the public.

Marsh: One of the tasks that my office had in the White House was to run the transition for Nixon after he got out in San Clemente. And when he left Andrews Air Force Base, he had Air Force One and I think there were 50, 60, maybe 80 people who were to be staff members and all. The Congress went after him and they used the pocketbook. And what they did was they, in effect, reduced his transition authorization by agreeing to fund only 7 or 8 people. So there was all kinds of animus.

What I think might have helped, the pardon decision I don’t think would ever have been popular, but as a question of law, I think if President Ford could have had at least two or three preceding press conferences where each time he could have said, “I do have a task force in the American bar and there is a view that…” where he creates with the press an attitude that he is giving it some theory. And then after the third or fourth public venting of that in the press group, go ahead and do it. What caught him I think was the suddenness of the event.

Smith: And that press conference was typical. That August 27th or 28th press conference where Nixon predominated, that was a turning point.

Marsh: And that was Ford’s reason for doing it and he’s correct, you could not, at the time up until the pardon, you couldn’t get anything done in the White House on domestic and foreign relations. Everything was consumed by the pardon. Everything.

Smith: Do you think it might have been different - of course, Nixon almost died that fall.

Marsh: I think Ford went out to see him.
Smith: Politically, it was right before the ’74 election, worst possible time. But that’s Jerry Ford. Do you think a pardon would’ve been any more palatable at that point if it had been in effect linked overtly to Nixon’s health? Would there have been any more sympathy at that point?

Marsh: The elements you’re describing really did occur after he’d gotten out and gotten settled and after the pardon, too. I think you’re probably right. Yes, I think it has merit. I think that’s probably right.

Smith: My understanding is that there were at least informal discussions with the special prosecutor’s office. One factor that’s been cited over the years was Jaworski, or the people around Jaworski, were indicating that it might be a very long time indeed before Nixon could get a fair trial in D.C. That no one really knew how long. I mean it’s one thing to say we should let the legal process run its course. That’s fine if you know when that’s going to be, but if its two years, to pick a number out of thin air—

Marsh: Or even six months.

Smith: That changes the equation.

Marsh: I think the problem that the legal people had, Buchen’s office and others, is that you didn’t want to see a criminal trial start with Nixon in the dock. And you had to get ahead, see, what would have happened is you had to get a grand jury indictment before it had been referred for any action. So there was some discussion, and I know that Ford wanted to get ahead of that, he didn’t know how he would handle it.

Smith: Haig told us that far from pushing the pardon idea, at least as he constructs events now, he was simply putting Fred Buzhardt, it was Fred Buzhardt on his own that sort of put together this option list. And Haig—

Marsh: And Haig was the messenger. Yeah, I don’t know what Al has said about it in your interviews, but.

Smith: He indicated that it was a neutral role, that he wasn’t there as Nixon’s agent, he wasn’t there advocating a particular course, that he was in fact the messenger of Fred Buzhardt’s.
Marsh: There for Fred Buzhardt, who was probably the one who discussed this with Nixon.

Smith: You know, he told us Buzhardt told him because Buzhardt had been his counsel over at the Pentagon when he was secretary.

Marsh: Who was this? Laird?

Smith: Yeah. He said Buzhardt came to Laird a month after. Remember, Laird came back in to the White House for a while during Watergate. And Fred Buzhardt came to him within a month of his appointment and said, “I want you to be careful. I’ve been listening to these tapes and the President is involved.” And that was the first confirmation that Laird had. He was in this impossible position there, in fact, defending the President while being confided in by the President’s own lawyer. I asked Haig if he’d listened to the tapes, particularly the smoking gun tape. He said, “It all goes back to Buzhardt. Fred Buzhardt gave me some very wise counsel. He said, ‘Whatever you do, don’t be alone in a room with a tape.’”

Marsh: You know, your series of interviews developing indicate that there’s a role that Fred Buzhardt played in all this that is not generally known, because you’ve heard it from me, you’ve heard it from Laird, and you’ve heard it from Haig. The three of us aren’t the ones putting all this together.

Smith: Were you surprised when you heard about the existence of the White House taping system?

Marsh: No, not too. Of course, Lyndon Johnson put it in there. I wouldn’t necessarily approve of it, but I would not be surprised if there were some because in the nature of the presidency, your conversations might be taped.

Smith: One last thing on or off the record, because obviously it’s delicate. Haig also claimed that he was perfectly willing to stay on. That apparently the president, he thought, wanted him to stay on. And that he went to the president and denounced members of his staff for personal misconduct in the White House that allegedly had been passed on to him by Secret Service. And the President’s response was, “Well, Al, you’ll have to let me handle this.”
And then Haig said, “Well, you’ve given me an answer as to whether you want me to stay on.” Now, there clearly was friction between Haig and some of the people who came in.

Marsh: Hartmann.

Smith: Yeah.

Marsh: That was very, very heated. Al would get very strong in his views about that. The thing about Al leaving was, of course, you knew he went to NATO and Rumsfeld came in behind Haig. And I think I told you before, his assignment to NATO was not President Ford’s doing. It was the request of the Senate Armed Services Committee and namely, Stennis, conveyed it. They liked Al, had a great respect for him, but they did not want him to be in the Pentagon as chief of staff there or other four star, not that he couldn’t do it. And I think I mentioned this to you before, Richard. The congressional action, the subcommittee headed by Hungate of Judiciary was directed to, not just President Ford, there were several other people, Buzhardt and Haig. And they were to be the next witnesses in line on the Hill and I’m sure it’s the Senate view that that was kind of evidence of their own point that he would be better in Europe. So Hungate who was subcommittee chairman at the end of the year in December, he closed the hearing and the vote was three to three, but Hungate had the committee chairmanship, he had the vote and he voted with the Republicans to close the hearings now, which was a very, very healthy development because otherwise they had Buzhardt and Haig and who else up there on the Hill to testify.

Smith: Is there one last thing either that we haven’t asked or something that sums up the Ford presidency, something about the Ford presidency that people need to know beyond what we’ve discussed?

Marsh: I think we pretty well covered it. I think Ford, people were misled. He’s a far more intelligent man and he used that, at times, to indicate not what he knew, but what he wanted you to think he didn’t know. But to me it’s a remarkable thing of the strength of the system he came into the vice presidency and the presidency. And I think that he got so much help from people that people today don’t realize he got from, the Speaker of the House, Mike Mansfield, to Tip O’Neill, who
were very, very interested in his success. That shows, I think, the best part of our system.

Smith: One thing before I forget, on the election of ’76, where you at the White House?

Marsh: Mhmm.

Smith: Do you remember the mood of that night? I mean, when you were going into that you basically had closed the gap. When you were going to into that, did you have a feeling as to how it would go, the Carter-Ford race, election night, ’76?

Marsh: I wasn’t down there with him that night. I was down there with him the next morning. And you may recall Mrs. Ford spoke for him because Ford completely lost his voice.

Smith: What was the mood like at that point?

Marsh: It was pretty grim. It was sad, certainly there was a sadness there, but it was a grim time.

Smith: Did it take him awhile to bounce back from that?

Marsh: Yeah, it took, I’d say, a week. You know, Richard, people don’t give Ford credit for a lot of things. For instance, on the transition, I was asked to run the transition to the Carter people. Ford has his own views on that, too. I remember it very well. He got the senior staff in, and this is only a day or two after the election, and he tells the senior staff that the continuity of our government was a very, very important thing and the success of the Carter transition was very important, and that he expected everyone to contribute to that successful transition. He didn’t want anyone to put in any tricks, roadblocks, which, very much like Ford, we wanted to do every bit of good to make it a success because it was necessary for the country. He made that statement and then he said, “Please understand, though, the policy until the day of the inauguration will be made by the Ford administration and I’ll make the decisions and our government, in effect, will be run by the Ford administration up until that day.”

He was wanting to lay the ground rules of behavior in saying they apply the rules of whose responsibility it was to run the government. I can’t tell you, to have the
president make that kind of a statement, particularly if you’re trying to run the transition, is so important. And I would say, in fairness to Mr. Bush, he issued a very good transition plan, which was good. But Ford personally got the staff together and told them that. Of course, that goes to the decency of the man.

Smith: Perfect.
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Smith: First question. Was the Ford White House slow to wake up to the Reagan threat, both that Reagan might in fact run and that he would be as formidable an opponent as he was?

Baker: Well, I don’t think they were slow. Then, of course, I was not in the Ford White House. I was Undersecretary of Commerce.

Smith: Who was Secretary at that point?

Baker: When I went up there, it was Rodgers Morton who ended up being Chairman of the President Ford Committee. After President Ford asked him to go over and chair the committee, he appointed Elliott Richardson as Secretary of Commerce. So, I worked under both Morton and Richardson, but for almost three or four months, I was the acting Secretary of Commerce, the interregnum between the time that Rog left and Elliott came in.

Smith: As you imagine, there’s been a lot of overlap with Nixon and Watergate in this project and a number of people who have characterized Elliott Richardson - and some of those, surprisingly to me, have emphasized his presidential ambitions.

Baker: I wrote in my book, Richard, that Elliott was a Boston Brahmin and he was very cerebral. So cerebral to the point that sometimes his writings were so esoteric, you couldn’t really understand them. And I have the fondest regard and affection for Elliott, but he was a politician, too. And he enjoyed running for office, he enjoyed campaigning. He was a bit formal.

Smith: Nelson Rockefeller, as vice president, said to someone, “Elliott Richardson’s so stuffy that when he’s in the room, you can’t breathe.”

Baker: Well, that’s the impression he gave to people, but I think if Elliott liked you, he would not come across as being stuffy. But, to people he didn’t know well, or that he might have thought less of, he probably did.
Smith: Do you think he saw himself as a president?

Baker: Oh, sure. I think he was very much of the view that he could’ve done it. I don’t think that he was very realistic in thinking that, given the make-up of the Republican Party at that time and the imperative of getting the nomination before you run for president.

Smith: Rogers Morton took some heat for the performance of the campaign. Was that unfair?

Baker: Yes, I think largely unfair. A lot of it resulted from an unfortunate photograph that was published, if I’m not mistaken, on the front page of the Washington Times where they’d asked him some question about the campaign and he said, “Look, I didn’t come over here to be the captain of the Titanic” or something like that.

Smith: “To rearrange—“

Baker: “To rearrange the deckchairs on the Titanic.” And, in the background, there were liquor bottles because we would celebrate each primary after it was over, so we’d celebrate the ones we could and commiserate on the ones we couldn’t. But Rog ran a good campaign in my view. I mean, he really did. Those stories, I think, is one reason they opted to make me Chairman of the President Ford Committee. I mean, that was one of the reasons, but the real reason, I think, is Rogers was sick with cancer. He had prostate cancer and he had it pretty severely.

Smith: Did Ronald Reagan’s challenge ultimately make Gerald Ford a better candidate? Which is not the same as saying whether it helped him or hurt him in November.

Baker: I think you could argue that it might have, yes. It might have. It certainly meant that he had to spend more time campaigning. And, you know, a lot of people have written that Ronald Reagan was a master when the red light came on the camera and that Jerry Ford would freeze up when the red light came on the camera. And it wasn’t that Jerry Ford would freeze up, in my opinion, it was simply that he was thinking about what he was going to say. But there
was always a short pause between the question and the answer. And it gave
the appearance that maybe he wasn’t entirely sure. If you read my book, you
saw where I quoted Stu Spencer in there as being very straight with
everybody - and at one point he said something to the effect that, “Just
because you’re no fucking good, Mr. President,” or something like that. And
the beauty about Jerry Ford, who was just a marvelous human being, a
wonderful person, is he would laugh at that and say, “Well, that may be right,
but I’m getting better.” But he became a damn good candidate, I think. I
thought he was an extraordinarily good candidate. Look where he came from
in the general election, twenty-five points behind in August and dead even on
election day. Lost by only 10,000 votes out of 81 million votes that were cast.
You’d turn 10,000 votes around in Ohio and Hawaii and Ford would’ve been
elected.

Smith: Does that fit into the larger trajectory? Ford supposedly said that what really
hurt was losing the job just when felt he’d mastered it. And one way of
looking at Ford’s two and a half years is as someone who came into the
office, to which he’d never aspired, who had a congressional mindset,
congressional skill set, and who had to learn – not unlearn those talents, but
learn executive talents, learn communications, learn what it means to be
president. Did he grow into that job?

Baker: Absolutely. I think that’s absolutely correct. He had never had any real
executive experience. I can’t remember when he was first elected.

Smith: ’48.

Baker: ’48. So, he’d been a legislator for many, many years, which is one reason he
was such a good consensus politician, I think. But he had to learn executive
skills and he did so and did so very, very well.

Smith: When did you come on to the PFC?

Baker: I came to Washington in August of ’75. Rog Morton, when he was moved
from Interior – which he didn’t want to do – to Commerce, he wanted his own
deputy. And I’m sure that George Bush, who at the time was in Beijing as
our representative there, suggested my name and so did some other people
down there in Texas who’d been helpful in Republican politics. And I interviewed with Rog and he decided I was the person he wanted. Don Rumsfeld was the White House Chief of Staff at the time. They were concerned about the Reagan challenge. They certainly were concerned about it in May or June of ’75. And Ford had only been there less than a year at that point. Rummy wanted to appoint Bill Banowski who had been the president of Pepperdine University and was national committeeman from California – a close Reagan associate – with the idea that that might...you know. But they also offered Reagan, if you know your history, they also offered him a job as Secretary of Commerce and one other position in the cabinet, which he turned down.

Smith: I think it was Secretary of Transportation.

Baker: Well, it may be. I don’t know the answer.

Smith: Something improbable.

Baker: Anyway, I came in August of ’75, became Undersecretary of Commerce and it was in late April and I went on a campaign trip to Texas. I was one of the few Texans in the administration. And I went on the campaign trip to Texas with President Ford and on the way back, he asked me to go over to the PFC, the President Ford Committee, to become the delegate hunter in the nomination fight with Ronald Reagan. And that was because his delegate hunter had been killed in an automobile accident.

Smith: Jack Stiles.

Baker: Jack Stiles.

Smith: Nelson Rockefeller went to his grave convinced that Don Rumsfeld did him in and that he also deep-sixed George Bush to the CIA. But also, Rocky didn’t age well. He had convinced himself that Jack Stile’s death was not accidental.

Baker: Oh really?
Smith: Yeah, literally. He thought Bill Colby was a Soviet agent. I mean, he had this kind of paranoia.

Baker: Well, what would he think would be the motive in getting rid of Stiles? He was just a personal friend of the president.

Smith: Exactly. But he’d convinced himself that there were people around the president who didn’t want to see him reelected. I’ll leave it at that. It’s pretty far-fetched.

Baker: I find that bizarre.

Smith: Yeah. But, April is a critical moment because they’d won New Hampshire and they’d won Florida. They seemed to be on a roll, but its pre-North Carolina and Texas.

Baker: Just barely pre-North Carolina.

Smith: Okay.

Baker: If it was pre-. I’m not sure whether it was pre-North Carolina. North Carolina is where the Reagan campaign dug themselves back into the race, actually. And then you had Missouri and Texas and I remember shortly after being sent over to the PFC, I went to Missouri with the president and we lost all but three delegates and they were governor and some of the others. Then we went to Texas and we lost 100 to nothing, including John Tower, the only Republican who’d been elected state-wide in Texas since Reconstruction. And they wouldn’t let him be a delegate, wouldn’t let him have a seat. I mean, it was a blood bath.

Smith: Was there resentment because John Connally withheld his endorsement in that contest? I think he harbored some vice presidential aspirations; at least that’s what we’ve been told.

Baker: I don’t know the answer to that. I don’t remember. When we had Connally, as a Texan, I was sort of put in charge of him and, if I’d been Chairman of the PFC, I wouldn’t have been doing that. This was probably when I was the
Deputy Chairman for Delegate Operations. But I don’t know the answer to that. I can’t remember. That was thirty years ago.

Smith: As Chief Delegate Hunter, what could you offer people besides intellectual arguments about the president? We’ve been told, for example, that the dinner for Queen Elizabeth was full of uncommitted Republican delegates.

Baker: It wasn’t full, I may be mistaken, but I believe I took an uncommitted delegate to dinner. We would take uncommitted delegates to White House dinners. I remember we gave some uncommitted delegates tickets to the ships…

Smith: Oh, the tall ships?

Baker: The tall ships. Well, with the anniversary—

Smith: With the Bicentennial. Fourth of July.

Baker: Bicentennial. Yeah, that’s right. But we were very careful. Extraordinarily careful. You’ve got to remember that we were running this campaign in the immediate aftermath of Watergate, where we’d been wiped out and we had an overwhelmingly Democratic Congress that was prepared to investigate anything and everything that happened. And, man, we crossed the Ts and dotted the Is. I kept a log, a memo, of every solicitation that came to us from an uncommitted delegate or prospective delegate that was improper. These delegates would say, “Well, look, I’ll vote for Ford, but I want to be on the Federal Communications Commission” or “I want to be on the Federal Trade Commission.” We would enter all that just to make a record - just to show that we wouldn’t entertain that.

Smith: We heard about a family – I want to say from New York, not Manhattan, but from the Bronx or Queens or something – supposedly some woman who kept going back and forth and was finally called and asked, “What would it take to nail you down?” And she wanted to bring her family into the Oval Office to meet the president. I guess it was a pretty scruffy looking group.

Baker: That’s perfectly permissible.
Smith: Oh, sure.

Baker: I mean legal. Totally legal. Had we been met with a request like that, we would’ve tried to arrange it. On the other hand, if she’d wanted an appointment for something for herself or somebody in her family or something that is inappropriate, we would write it down so we had a record.

Smith: Were you surprised by anything in the course of that, just in terms of what people expected, what they wanted?

Baker: Well, I think we had a fairly substantial number of requests that were inappropriate and that’s why we kept that log and kept a record of it. But it was a fascinating experience for this reason: It was the last really contested convention in the history of either of the two major parties. ’76 in Kansas City was the last time it went to the floor. The nomination, that is. The last time a presidential nomination went to the floor of a convention. And we didn’t know, we weren’t sure, from day to day whether we would win or not. I’ve written about this, as you know, and I’ve said that I never could understand why the Reaganites, instead of doing – what was it? About naming your vice president in advance and they named Schweiker.

Smith: An unemotional, bloodless procedural issue.

Baker: Yeah, it was a technical, procedural thing. Why didn’t they come with a platform that said, “Fire Kissinger”? That would’ve really grabbed a hold of some of these people.

Smith: You’d think they’d try to have it both ways. I mean, you very shrewdly gave way on the foreign policy plank.

Baker: The 14-C, wasn’t it?

Smith: It’s interesting because Stu Spencer agrees with you. He thought Sears made a fundamental mistake in putting so many eggs in the basket of a procedural issue. As opposed to going after the emotional issue of foreign policy.

Baker: That’s correct.

Smith: Now, he got the foreign policy plank because, in effect, you rolled over.
Baker: We would not let that become an issue because we were fearful, and I think rightly so, that we would lose enough delegates. It was a pretty close contest, as you know.

Smith: Right.

Baker: I think we only won by 100+, maybe 105 or so delegates out of 3,000 on the floor.

Smith: And Tom Korologos tells the story that Kissinger was more than slightly miffed and wanted to put up a fight and I don’t think grasped—

Baker: And so did Rocky.

Smith: And Rocky, yeah. And Kissinger in one of his patented threats to resign and Tom says, “If you’re going to quit, Henry, do it now. We need the votes.”

Baker: Who said that?

Smith: Tom Korologos.

Baker: Korologos. “If you’re going to quit, do it now.”

Smith: You can see Korologos saying that.

Baker: Yeah. “Henry, if you’re going to quit, do it now.”

Smith: Yeah.

Baker: Well, you know the flap I got in, too, by announcing Kissinger’s retirement from the Ford administration. If you read my book, the second one I wrote, not the one about being Secretary of State. But I wrote a book – you’d enjoy it because it’s a political book – *Work Hard, Study, and Keep Out of Politics*, which was my grandfather’s mantra. So I entitled the book that. But, in that, I write about having been sent to Oklahoma as a lowly Undersecretary of Commerce to raise some money during the primary. And I got to the home of a banker down there and it’s a nice, quiet little group of check writers around the pool and I’m told there’s no press in attendance. So, I gave my little pitch and then take questions. And one of the questions was, “Will Henry Kissinger be in the second Ford administration?” I said, “I can’t conceive of
that happening.” Well, it turns out there was a stringer for the *Daily Oklahoman*, the college paper there, and he wrote this stuff.

By the time I got back to Washington, it was on the wires. And I went to a ceremony in the Rose Garden and on the way out, Nell Yates, the president’s secretary, came by to see me and said, “Before you go back to Commerce, stop off and see Mr. Cheney in the Chief of Staff’s office.” I went in there and Dick’s sitting there and said, “I understand you announced Henry’s resignation.” I said, “What are you talking about?” He said, “Well, that’s what the press is saying.” I said, “Oh, that couldn’t be. There must be some mistake.” He said, “Look, don’t worry about it. Just go back and make it right with Henry.” So, I went back to Commerce, called the Secretary of State, who was a more than imposing figure in that administration, and groveled my apologies, which he was reluctant to accept. He’d never met me before. Three or four days later, I went to an event over at the State Department, I go through the line, and I introduce myself to him. He says, “Oh, you’re the guy that announced my retirement.” A lot of interesting memories from those times.

Smith: We talked to Peter McPherson. Interesting. He said his recollection of what really fueled the Reagan challenge in the months leading up to its formal announcement – one was the refusal to meet Solzhenitsyn, and the other was the common situs picketing legislation.

Baker: Peter was my Deputy. He's a man of great talent and he was President of Michigan State. He was head of AID. I have great respect for Peter, but the common situs picketing issue would’ve operated the other way. That’s really where I think I first became noticed by the Ford White House because I was the acting Secretary of Commerce when all that came up and I argued in the Economic Policy Board that President Ford should veto that bill. And there were a lot of people arguing that he should sign it, including John Dunlop, the Secretary of Labor - because Ford had indicated when it was first introduced that he would be inclined to sign it. Dunlop resigned, but I really made a big stink and the Economic Policy Board sent a memo to the White House saying, if you do this, you’re really going to make it awfully hard to get the
nomination over a Reagan challenge. And he vetoed it and Dunlop quit. So, how can Peter say common situs picketing?

Smith: He may have thought leading up to the veto...

Baker: Well, having supported it initially, not saying from the very start, we can’t live with this.

Smith: And the sense that it was an administration initiative.

Baker: Well, that may be. Common situs picketing would’ve been anathema to any conservative.

Smith: Explain the issue briefly. Why is it such a hot button?

Baker: It was illegal then for a labor union to go on a site when they have a grievance with one employer and picket that site and then have their picketing apply to all the other unions at the workplace. In other words, if one union had a dispute at a site, this legislation would’ve made it legal for them all to strike. I think that’s what it is.

Smith: So, you can certainly understand why it would be out there.

Baker: Anyway, I do remember that it was just an anathema and here I was, a conservative Republican from Texas and the debate on this in the Economic Policy Board was scary to me because I thought, “Boy, if we do this…” This was very much anti-Right-to-Work and so forth and so on.

Smith: Yeah. Did you have much contact with Bob Hartmann?

Baker: I did not have much, no.

Smith: Generally, how bitter was that convention in ’76?

Baker: I think it was very, very bitter.

Smith: Remember the dueling entrances by the candidates’ wives?

Baker: Well, you look at what I just told you about the Texas delegation. They wouldn’t let the sitting senator – the only Republican ever elected statewide in
Texas since Reconstruction – wouldn’t let him go as a delegate. It was a tough deal.

Smith: And presumably that spilled over into the vice presidential selection process. I mean, all these years later, there are still people who will tell you differing versions of what Reagan did or did not impart. The overwhelming evidence we have is that the Reagan camp, beginning with the candidate himself made it crystal clear that he did not want to be asked to be on the ticket; indeed, made that a condition of their getting together subsequently.

Baker: Well, the Reagan camp did, but you really must get this book, because I write about it in one chapter of this book in detail. Here I am, the White House Chief of Staff for Ronald Reagan and I’m sitting in the Oval Office – just the two of us – and I said, “You know, Mr. President, if President Ford had asked you to run with him and you’d agreed, you would probably never have been president.” And he said, “Well, Jim, that may be so, but if he’d asked me, I would’ve felt duty bound to run.” I’ve got this all. You’ll find that fascinating. But, what I think, and he certainly wasn’t lying to me. He didn’t do that. That’s not the way Ronald Reagan was. But I know that his campaign came and said, “We will have the unity meeting provided you don’t ask the Governor to be a vice president.” Well, that’s all Ford needed. He didn’t want to ask him to be vice president. He didn’t want to ask him and Reagan didn’t want to be asked.

Smith: Well, then, let me jump ahead, because there’s this bizarre sequel in 1980. Again, people are still debating over whether it was ever real. There are some people who think it was kind of a show on the part of the Reagan people.

Baker: No, I think it was real.

Smith: You think it was real?

Baker: I think it was real and I was not a Reagan person then. I was a George H. W. Bush person. And, interesting, I’d been President Ford’s campaign chairman in ’76. Before I signed on with George Bush in ’88, we went to see President Ford. I went to see him to say, “Mr. President, is this going to be okay with you?” And George went to tell him he was going to run to show him the
courtesy as the former president. So, we called on him out there in California. Interestingly enough, I flew into the convention from Omaha, Nebraska, where I’d been at a board meeting for Dick Herman’s company. Dick Herman was a national committeeman from Nebraska. Close friend of both George Bush and Jerry Ford. And I flew from Omaha in Jerry Ford’s plane because he happened to be there and they were talking about all this stuff on the way in. But I know from a fact from talking to the Reagan people that I worked with that it was very real. But it would never have worked, Richard. I mean, again, I wrote in the book, I said to President Reagan, “Mr. President, how would we have addressed President Ford? Would we have addressed him as ‘Mr. President/Vice President’ or ‘Mr. Vice President/President?’”

Smith: Yeah.

Baker: It never would’ve worked and they both came to that conclusion after awhile. I think one of the conditions he put down was he wanted also to be White House Chief of Staff and Vice President and maybe there was another one. I can’t remember.

Smith: Actually, he got that idea from Nelson Rockefeller, who toyed with the idea in ’76 of going back on the ticket, but only if he could be Chief of Staff because he had decided that that was the role that a vice president could constructively play.

Baker: But he couldn’t have gone back on the ticket because President Ford had asked him to step down.

Smith: Right.

Baker: Isn’t that your understanding?

Smith: It is, yeah.

Baker: And you want to know what I think? I want to tell you something I think. I think that was a terrible mistake as it turned out. The campaign was so close that I think if he had kept Rockefeller on, I think he still would’ve gotten the nomination.
Smith: You do?

Baker: I do. And I think we would’ve won the election. And I think if he’d had Reagan on there, we clearly would’ve won the election.

Smith: Presumably, the Schweiker pick was designed to bring Drew Lewis and the Pennsylvania delegation to Reagan.

Baker: That’s correct.

Smith: Was that a hope? Was it based on something more than just a hope? Did they have reason to believe?

Baker: You’d have to ask John Sears that. I don’t know whether they had more than reasonable hope, but there was never any question, from our standpoint. I mean, Drew said, “I’ve committed. I’ve been here. I’m going to be here.” And he was. So, it not only didn’t work, I think it sort of backfired on him a little bit.

Smith: Well, it took some of the purity out of it. I mean, it made it easier for people like Clark Reed, I imagine, in the end to go with Ford.

Baker: Probably did. Reed and perhaps some others, some of the uncommitted.

Smith: After the convention, the acceptance speech which everyone agrees was probably the best speech Ford ever gave and his challenge to Carter to debate - did that begin the process of at least shifting the dynamics of that race? Taking the offensive?

Baker: Well, if you’re asking me if I think that was a successful campaign strategy, I do. I think he had to do something to shake it up. As I told you, when I took over as Chairman of the President Ford Committee, we were 25 points behind. That was in August. It was there at that session in Vail where I think he threw the challenge out. Here’s a sitting and incumbent president saying, “I want to challenge…”

Smith: I’ll never forget hearing Mark Shields, who was not a Republican partisan, talk about what a great campaign Ford ran and in particular how good the media was. You had Bailey-Deardorff?
Baker: Bailey - Deardorff did a great job.

Smith: And probably the last jingle that people remember...“I’m feeling good about America.” The man on the street interviews. I mean, the whole package.

Baker: The whole thing was good and how about the Joe & Jerry Show? With Joe Garagiola.

Smith: Yeah, where did that come from?

Baker: Well, they hit it off.

Smith: Just chemistry?

Baker: Well, yeah. They were cutting one spot if I’m not mistaken and they hit it off so well and it was so entertaining, they decided, “We’d better do more of these.” And they were very successful.

Smith: And Pearl Bailey was also in there. I remember the election eve broadcast was from Air Force One and you had Joe Garagiola and Pearl Bailey. Interesting mix.

Baker: And President Ford couldn’t speak. His voice had gone.

Smith: At the end - we talk about Ohio. He went back to Grand Rapids and had a very sentimental homecoming. Might he have gone to Ohio instead? Was there a debate at the end of the campaign about where to send him?

Baker: I don’t recall there being any debate at that time, but let me tell you something. Nobody ever worked any harder than he did in that campaign. And, as I say, on the last day, he couldn’t speak. I don’t recall an argument about whether we should stop off in Ohio on the way home to Michigan.

Smith: Yeah, basically.

Baker: I don’t recall that.

Smith: The moment you heard the Polish gaffe, did you know that you had a problem?
Baker: Yeah, we did. And, again, I write about this in detail in my book. Henry called the president after the debate and said, “Mr. President, you did a wonderful job. Marvelous. Really terrific.” And so it was really hard to get the president to go out there and say, “Yeah, this was a mistake” or say, “I misspoke and here’s what I meant by that.” That’s what we were trying to get him to do and it was hard. Kissinger’s going to take a trip to Africa. Kissinger was the bete noire of the conservatives. And before going to Africa, they wanted him to come into the White House – this was just before Texas, so I was still at Commerce – they wanted him to come into the press room and brief about his trip at the White House.

And I called Dick on the phone and I said, “Dick, you’re not really going to do this, are you, just in advance of the Texas primary?” He said, “Look, I’ve tried to turn the old man around on this and I broke my pick. Now, if you want to come over here and try, you’re welcome to.” I said, “I do.” So, I came over there and I think by that time he’d already asked me to become the delegate hunter, so I had a little more leverage than just the Deputy Secretary at Commerce. So, I went in, Dick and I, and we sat there. I remember saying, “Mr. President, this would be very detrimental in the southern states and particularly in Texas. Why don’t you just let him go do the trip? Why do you have to have a big, splashy press conference beforehand?” And the president’s sitting there going puff, puff – you know, he always puffed on that pipe – he said, “Well, Jim, Henry’s doing a remarkable job and I think he ought to tell the American people about it.” And he said, “And, anyway, the thinking Republicans in Texas will understand.” I said, “Mr. President, there are no thinking Republicans in Texas on this issue.”

Smith: We’ve established he was stubborn. Did you ever see his temper?

Baker: Who? President Ford?

Smith: Yeah.

Baker: Not too much. You know, I saw Reagan’s because I was his Chief of Staff for four years and two weeks and he had one, too. You didn’t see it often, but
you could see it. I don’t recall ever seeing Ford just really lash out at someone.

Smith: At the end of the campaign, did you think you’d caught up? Did you think you really had a good chance to win?

Baker: We knew the Gallup was even going into Election Day. And then we knew we started getting the exit polls and they didn’t look real good. We went over to share them with the president at 4:30, 5:00 o’clock in the Oval Office. I remember going over with Teeter and maybe Stu, Teeter and Stu and I and maybe Dick. And the president didn’t seem to be too upset about that. He said, “Well, those are just exit polls.” But we were very hopeful because the Gallup was even and then we got the bad news of the exit polls, but we still lost so very narrowly. I remember thinking to myself at 3:00 o’clock in the morning, the morning after Election Day, “This is the most bizarre thing in the world. Seven years ago, I was a Democratic lawyer in Houston, Texas, and now I have run a campaign or been chairman of campaign for an incumbent Republican president in the closest presidential election of my lifetime.” Well, guess what? If you remember what happened in Florida in 2000, you know it wasn’t the closest presidential election of my lifetime. But it was very bizarre because he came from so far back.

Smith: Did Texas hurt especially? I mean, was he counting on Texas?

Baker: Not after—

Smith: Not after the primary?

Baker: Well, Texas was a big passel of electoral votes.

Smith: I think we’ve been told that Connally assured him as late as Election Day that it was in the bag.

Baker: I think Connally was very confident that we would carry it and we didn’t. But, I mean, had we done it, we’d win. You know, it almost would’ve done it in the Electoral College. It would’ve flipped Ohio and Hawaii.

Smith: Did you see him later that night? Were you at the White House?
Baker: No, I was at the election headquarters downtown and I had to do the press stuff down there. As I say, it wasn’t until 3:00 o’clock in the morning. I was in communication with the White House, but I wasn’t over there.

Smith: Did it take him awhile to bounce back? We’ve heard that.

Baker: You know, I’m not the best one to answer that because when the campaign was over, I only saw him two or three times after that while he was still president.

Smith: He went around and told some people, “I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer.”

Baker: Then they became fairly good friends.

Smith: They did. I’ve sometimes wondered if one of the things that brought them together was the fact that they’d both run against Ronald Reagan.

Baker: That’s true. That is. Absolutely. And they both in effect lost to Ronald Reagan, although President Ford didn’t lose to him, but that challenge damn well hurt us. I mean, you can make the argument that he became a better campaigner and I think he did, but the challenge hurt.

Smith: Next to last thing and maybe it’s awkward, but there’s no shortage of people who say that if Governor Reagan had done more in the fall campaign in places like Mississippi and maybe Ohio that it could’ve spelled the difference. What’s your take?

Baker: You know, I’ve lead or helped lead five presidential campaigns and every damn one of them you can go back and find this or this or this or any number of things that would’ve made a difference. You can argue that if Governor Reagan had been more active, it might’ve helped, rather than just being supportive of the cause and the effort. Who’s to say? But that was probably as bitter a primary as either party has experienced in many, many moons. So, it’s pretty hard to say. As you say, sensitive for me because I love both of them, I was privileged to work for both of them and privileged to work for George 41, as well. And, you know, I tell people I’m the luckiest guy in the world because I got to work directly for three wonderful men, wonderful
characters, and beautiful human beings. All three of them. And then got to serve another one as a private citizen in various capacities.

Smith: In the Reagan White House were there lingering resentments toward Ford? I don’t mean at the top.

Baker: No. In our White House?

Smith: Yeah.

Baker: No. Now, I’m not aware that he felt that way. I really am not. And I never heard it from anybody.

Smith: Certainly in terms of President Reagan himself.

Baker: No, no, no, no. You know, President Reagan is completely without guile. I mean, in fact, some people would take advantage of him. He believes the best about people. But I never noticed any animus toward President Ford in the Reagan White House.

Baker: Well, he came to the Baker Institute, at the groundbreaking ceremony we had for my institute at Rice University. Showed up there with George H. W. and we had Carter and Reagan by television. So, President Ford was there. I used to call him every time I’d go out to California in the desert and go by and see him. But that was the only way I saw him.

Smith: Did he express concern about the direction the Republican Party was going?

Baker: Yes. He had the view that the party was moving too far, too fast to the Right.

Smith: Particularly on social issues?

Baker: Yeah, I don’t know that he said particularly on social issues, but generally speaking. But, you know, I didn’t have that many conversations with him after he left office where we would talk about that. We’d talk about other things, but we didn’t talk about that.

Smith: Were you surprised by the amount of reaction when he passed away? Because, you know, he’d been out of the public eye for awhile. And it almost grew as the week went along.
Baker: You know something? He was the right man for the country at the time and he restored our pride and confidence in ourselves and he made the hard decisions. He would veto bills that were bad policy and, as you say, he pardoned Nixon and, boy, didn’t we see that every day in the campaign. It cropped up every day.

Smith: Do you think it was a significant factor contributing to his defeat?

Baker: Absolutely a significant factor. Huge. But people loved him and that’s what you saw with the accolades that poured in after he passed away. And I’m still on the Board of the Ford Foundation and I interface every now and then with Jack and Susan and Steve. Betty, of course, is frail right now, but still pretty good upstairs.

Smith: Last thing: how do you think he should be remembered?

Baker: Well, I think, as I said, I think he was the right man for America at a very, very difficult time in our history. I don’t know many people who could’ve come in and done it with the class that he did it. And, you know, people could disagree with Jerry Ford, but nobody could dislike him. He had a wonderful ability, he was a consensus politician. He could reach across the aisle. That’d come from his years of legislative experience up there, many of which were as Minority Leader. But I think that I’d answer by simply saying he was just a beautiful human being and I think that people now recognize that and they recognize he was the right person at a very difficult time for America. That was a terribly difficult time.

Smith: People tend to forget. I mean, we’re always in the crisis of the moment, but imagine someone coming in with so many problems and without the legitimacy of an election.

Baker: Of an election, that's right.

Smith: Without a transition period.

Baker: That’s right. No transition. And not elected. The only unelected president, probably, we’ll ever have.
Smith: And presumably that made it all the more important for him to win that ’76 race.

Baker: That’s right. Yeah. And to come so close from so far back. Really close. Those kinds of defeats sometimes hurt more than the wipeout losses.

Smith: Last thing and then I promise we’ll let you go. Tell us about his intelligence.

Baker: I think President Ford was extraordinarily intelligent. I’ve already said that he didn’t come across that way on television because I think he would always stop and think about his answer. The question would come and there would be a pause. But he was a Phi Beta Kappa, right? Am I wrong about that? I think I’m right about that.

Smith: I think you’re right.

Baker: And, you’re bound to have a fair amount of intelligence if you graduate Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Michigan.

Smith: And the last president to introduce his own budget. Remember? To brief his own budget in front of the press.

Baker: That’s correct.

Smith: Because he knew every line on that budget.

Baker: He knew that stuff. Well, he knew that from his years of serving in the legislature, but he knew the intricacies of government from the legislative standpoint, not as much from the executive. But since the Congress are the ones that deal with the budget, the Congress appropriates and so forth, he knew that backwards and forwards. Well, what do you think would’ve been different if he had won?

Smith: I think there’d be a Truman-esque aura around Ford. Ford and Truman had a lot of similar qualities. They were plain-spoken. They weren’t flashy - Midwestern, straight shooter - and I think that would’ve made more of an imprint on the country, obviously, given another four years and the legitimacy of an election. In terms of specific policies, who knows? I mean, presumably
the Panama Canal Treaty would’ve gone forward. It’d been put off because of the Reagan challenge.

Baker: Yeah, but politically it would’ve been a cataclysmic event. You would not have had pictures of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush or George W. Bush in the White House. I mean, it would’ve been totally different.

Smith: But you might also not have had pictures of American hostage in Tehran.

Baker: That’s right. There would’ve been a lot of substantive things as well. I’m just talking about on the politics side.

Smith: Yeah, you’re right.

Baker: If he had won that election, he could’ve then run for another term and then Ronald Reagan might not have been president. George Bush would not have been vice president and then president. And then George W. would not have…

Smith: That’s a perfect note on which to end. Thank you.
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Smith: First of all, what does it bring back to be in this room?

Greenbaum: A lot of wonderful memories. But interesting enough, most of the experiences that I had with President Ford were outside of the official surroundings, so to speak. We shared many dinners together.

You haven’t asked me, but I’ll volunteer it anyway, how we first happened to meet the Fords. My wife and I started going to Vail, Colorado many, many years ago. Specifically about 1968, and we stayed at a place called the Lodge at Vail. So after several years there we said, “Well, it would be a great place to buy a condo.” So I bought the condo and as we were going up with the realtor, I said, “Who lives down the hall there?” And they said, well, so and so lives there and so and so lives there. I said, “Who lives at the end of the hall?” He said, “A congressman.” I said, “What’s his name?” They said, “Ford.” I said, “Never heard of him. What state?” And they proceeded to tell me and so forth. Anyway, we never met him at that point.

It was a couple of years later when he became vice president, that we did meet him. We had a cocktail party for him and had a wonderful evening. One thing led to another and our relationship blossomed because they followed us wherever we went. I’m just being facetious, obviously. First we were in Colorado, then we moved from Vail over to Beaver Creek, where we bought a place and the Fords bought a place over in Beaver Creek. We moved here from Louisiana, here being Rancho Mirage, in 1976. Well, that was the same year that the Fords moved here. One thing led to another and our constant contact with one another kind of evolved into a real friendship. So much so that initially, when I met Betty, I was serving on the board of the Eisenhower Medical Center here in Rancho Mirage.

I finally left the Eisenhower Medical Center where I had chaired several events for the Betty Ford Center, and Betty asked me to go on her board,
where I still serve today, very proudly, and very proud of the work we do. But, going back in time, that was the beginning of the relationship.

Smith: In those early days, when you were just sort of getting to know them, did anything about them surprise you?

Greenbaum: Yes. The fact that, here I was, talking to the former president of the United States, and former first lady, and I didn’t realize it. So much so, I’ll give you one good for instance. One of the discussions we had - oh we’d already known them several years, and had broken bread with them several times, and my wife, who just tells it like it is (she is very special to me, and she’s very special anyway) - but the four of us were having dinner one night and something came up about the Warren Commission. Well, my wife is from Louisiana, so she had very, very strong feelings about what took place and so forth, and she did not hold back at all with President Ford. And I’m kicking her under the table, and she’s looking at me and I says, “Honey, he was head of the Warren Commission.” And she keeps at it. Well, anyway, I ended up getting a letter and book from President Ford about the Warren Commission, where he stood by his findings of what the Commission finally resolved. But that was, I think, the most telling thing about him, and both of them.

You never realized you were in the presence of greatness because they were the personification, and Betty still is, of just being regular folks. We used to go out for dinner, the four of us and just have a casual dinner, and again, it was the same feeling. One of the nicest things about all the years that we shared experiences was, about once every couple of weeks or so, I would invite President Ford over to our country club here in Rancho Mirage for lunch with the guys. And he was one of the guys. Without exception, everybody who joined us during those lunches would come over to me later and say, “You know, I can’t believe he’s such a nice person. Not just a nice person, but a normal person.” And, unfortunately, that position is not shared by some of our other previous presidents, but we won’t go there.

Smith: Did he talk about his days in the White House?
Greenbaum: Yes. And I’m sure you have all the nitty-gritty – well, let me mention this. We discussed his coming into office as far as the pardon of Nixon and so forth. And he stood by it for many, many years, as he did until his death, that he did the right thing. But it really came home when President Clinton was going through all of his trials and tribulations those last couple of years when they tried to impeach him, etc., and he told us, he says, “You know, I’m going to say the same thing I said when I forgave Nixon. We need to forgive Clinton. Sure he was wrong in what he did, but we need to get on and remember what’s good for the country.” And to me that was very, very telling. It really was.

Smith: He took some heat for that.

Greenbaum: Oh, absolutely. I think it probably cost him the election. He said that he felt that it did cost him the election, and he said when it happened, he said, “This will probably cost me the election, if I do this. But I’ve got to do what’s right for the country.” And he lived his whole life like that. Just a very stand up type guy.

Smith: Tell me about when you first met Mrs. Ford. Now was this before the Betty Ford Center had opened?

Greenbaum: Well, yes, actually it was.

Smith: Let me ask, it may be a delicate question but she’s written about it. Were you aware of her problem at that point?

Greenbaum: Yes. I’m going to tread lightly on those – yes, I was. I knew Betty had a problem because I had been with her, and I realized that something was wrong, I wasn’t quite sure what, and then I found out later exactly what the situation was.

Smith: Tell me about the genesis of the Betty Ford Center, because, clearly it was much more than her just putting her name on this place. I mean – let me back up because I’ve been told that she saved Leonard Firestone’s life.

Greenbaum: Exactly. Well, I know you talked to some of my friends that are very involved with the Center, and also familiar with her past, and I’m sure they filled you
in on all the blanks on that. Yes, she felt the need, as she said, between
Leonard and Betty, they realized there was a need to help other people. By
taking their feelings and going the next step, they hired John Schwarzlose,
who has been with the Center since its inception. He’s still president and CEO
of the Center, and between the two of them, they built it into what it is today.
I would give equal credit to both of them, or I’d say, all three of them.
Leonard, Betty and John Schwarzlose.

Smith: Tell me about Leonard Firestone, because in some ways he’s maybe the
unsung hero in this story. Most people don’t know the name or certainly
wouldn’t necessarily associate him with…

Greenbaum: Well, in the early years, I really was never that close to Leonard. I was with
him on social occasions, but I never had occasion to really go one on one with
him too often. I just heard a lot of wonderful things about him. He was a very
caring individual.

Smith: For her, this was like – I use the analogy of Kathryn Graham, almost – in
middle life suddenly being thrust into a situation where you’re responsible for
a very large operation.

Greenbaum: She was and is a gutsy person, okay? I’ve watched her. She has all the
humility that anybody could possibly have. She’s very modest in her own
way. At times I think she really forgets the power that she really has. And I
say power, the power of her presence. I’ve been around her and I watch her
with our patients at the Center, and these people hold her in awe. Last year we
had our twenty-fifth anniversary here for the Betty Ford Center, and Robin
Williams came and entertained, and I must tell you, Robin Williams referred
to Betty as Teresa.

Smith: Mother Teresa?

Greenbaum: Mother Teresa – thank you. I knew something was wrong there. And she got a
big kick out of it. But it was true. We had, I think, 1,700 people there that
night. And everybody, without exception, just being in the presence of Betty
Ford was being in the presence of greatness. It was electrifying.
Smith: Had Robin Williams been a patient?

Greenbaum: No, not at the Center, but if he were I couldn’t tell you. But he is in recovery, and he was remarkable because he did something that I don’t think he’s ever done before. He had relapsed and he was in the second round of recovery, and he exposed himself. And that’s tough to do. By exposing himself, I mean, he let it all hang out, as only he can do, and it was just a fascinating, wonderful, special evening. It really was.

Smith: What is it – do you have theory, or does she have a theory – putting aside the emphasis on celebrity, what it is about creative, driven, sort of type A, whatever cliché you want to use - or is it something about them that seems to make them particularly vulnerable?

Greenbaum: You probably would be a better judge of that than I would. I really can’t put my finger on any one thing in particular. And I’ve been around other people of great reputation and what have you, and what makes them different from other people – I wish there was one common thing, but there isn’t. Everybody has their own little thing.

Smith: I mean, presumably there are physical components involved, and there are psychological components involved. That’s grossly oversimplified. Maybe there is obviously no one element that explains addiction.

Greenbaum: I can’t really tell you what sets one person apart from another, other than the fact that something shines, something radiates, and both Betty and President Ford have this, or had it.

Smith: Do you think for a while the public thought that most of the patients at Betty Ford’s were celebrities?

Greenbaum: Oh, very definitely. We still have that problem. That’s the good news and the bad news. The bad news is a lot of people think, well, I can’t afford to go there because it’s strictly for celebrities. And it’s really not. Less than one percent of our patients represent that particular type clientele. The vast majority of them are just from everyday walks of life. The good news is, because of that exclusivity, it gives us a little shine that other institutions
would like to have. They say, well, gee, I’d like to be a place where they have all these famous people.

Smith: It’s interesting, I assume you were part of the discussion, when folks in other cities have approached Mrs. Ford about, in effect, franchising.

Greenbaum: Oh, yeah. Actually, I can go a step further. There are bars all over the world that are the Betty Ford bar, or what have you, and we have to spend a lot of money protecting our name. But Betty, and rightfully so, is very protective of what we do. And bigger isn’t necessarily better. We know that. As a result of this feeling, we’ve maintained a relatively small number of beds on campus. We have a hundred beds on campus, and we have around fifty-eight off-campus, here in this community, though. We’ve been very, very protective of the name, but what we’re trying to do now, we’ve started something called the Betty Ford Institute, and what we’re doing there is trying to take the things that we know and teach these things to other people.

We have a children’s program that is second to none, and by children’s program – these are children of parents who are going through or have gone through treatment, and we want to make sure those children don’t feel responsible for what their parents have done. We’ll hopefully be able to teach other people. We have a program called SIMS, Summer Institute for Medical Students, whereby we take X number of medical students and teach them about alcoholism. Because, unfortunately, and I don’t want to digress, but basically, too large a percentage of the population don’t recognize the fact that being addicted is a disease.

Smith: She probably, as much if not more than anyone, has managed to remove much of the stigma.

Greenbaum: Oh, absolutely. I have a number of personal friends of mine that are almost, I won’t say that they are proud to admit they are alcoholics, but they’ve come out of the closet now. Much to the benefit of everybody else, because, as a result they’ve encouraged other people to participate in recovery.

Smith: Do you think she fully realizes what her impact has been?
Greenbaum: Yes and no. Sometimes I know she does, and other times I don’t think she realizes the magnitude of it. We are second to none – I say ‘we’ – the Betty Ford Center is second to none anywhere in the world. It’s just an awesome thing. It really is. I don’t know if you’ve been – have you been on the campus?

Smith: I have been there in the past.

Greenbaum: And so I think you realize what I’m talking about. It’s like being on a college campus. But the education is a hell of a lot more important than anything you get out of college.

Smith: I remember being told stories when I visited that it was not unusual - whatever time of day or sometimes night - there might be a patient coming in, a woman of a certain age, didn’t want to be there, very resistant, who had parallels with what Mrs. Ford’s story had been. And they’d call her at home and she’d go down there and sit on a bed and hold the woman’s hand and walk her through her own story.

Greenbaum: That’s right. And I’ve got to digress just briefly because, to me, one of the most telling things that I remember about the Fords and their humility and how wonderful they really are, was a number of years ago an individual showed up at their home about six o’clock in the evening, rang the bell, or went through Secret Service, and they said, so and so was out here, and you’d probably know the name if I’d mention it, but I’d rather not. And he said, “I’m here for dinner.” It was the wrong night, even the wrong week. Well, Betty and President Ford, to their credit said, “Come on in, have a drink,” and this individual had no idea that he’d shown up on the wrong night. Now, I don’t think my wife, as wonderful as she is, I don’t think she could carry it off like that. But it gives you a pretty good indicator of the kind of people they are.

Smith: As a businesswoman, she had to be – I’m told she was pretty hands-on.

Greenbaum: Absolutely. To her credit. And what was good about it, or is good about it, is the fact that Betty has always had the capacity to get involved and to express herself, but she had the wherewithal to know when to back off, and to listen to
other people around her. That’s a real art, because too many of us, and I know I’m guilty at times, I’m very big on my ideas, and I’m a little slow sometimes, to listen to other people’s ideas.

Smith: Did you sense, over the years, a growing confidence on her part? She was doing a lot of things that she had never done before.

Greenbaum: Yes. It was almost trial and error at times. But she didn’t make many errors, to her credit. She really didn’t.

Smith: And she obviously was a significant fundraiser.

Greenbaum: Absolutely. Listen, we miss her right now. She’s still around, thank God, and I hope she’ll be around for a long time, but she’s not as active as she used to be. And as a result, we’ve had to go out and do it on our own. We still have the benefit of having her name, which is a very big asset for us.

Smith: Did you raise an endowment, or are you working on an endowment?

Greenbaum: No, we have an endowment, like every other institution. It’s not as big as it was, thanks to our economy right now, but we’re going to get it back.

Smith: The joke used to be, between the Fords, that the President had, for fundraising, east of the Mississippi, and Mrs. Ford had west of the Mississippi.

Greenbaum: I remember that.

Smith: I think they occasionally poached.

Greenbaum: Every now and then.

Smith: Tell me about your friendship with the president.

Greenbaum: I’ve been blessed knowing a lot of people throughout my life who made a difference to me. And I would have to put President Ford at the top of the list, and not because he was a former president of the United States, but because of his human qualities. We would go out and play golf, and I remember one time we had a caddy, a nice young man, and we got through and I said, “Let me take care of the tip.” I pulled out, I forget what, maybe forty or fifty dollars,
and he said, “No, you’ve got to give him more than that.” I said, “President Ford, this is very appropriate.” He says, “No, these young men, they work hard…and if we’re in a position to help them, we need to do it.” And so I ended up giving him a hundred dollars. But, really, that was the type of thing that he would do and he taught me things like that. I figure if he can be humble given his background and history, I sure as heck can practice a little of that myself.

Smith: Now the other side, he was very accessible to people.

Greenbaum: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: But I know one of the two things that annoyed him, sometimes, were autograph seekers.

Greenbaum: Yeah, but he was good. He handled it well. Because these people would come up in the middle of dinner, unfortunately too often, and ask for his signature, or wanted to say hello. Or they would come over to Betty, and say, “I’ve been through the Center,” and this that and the other. And they were very gracious about it. I never heard them make any derogatory comment about that at all. I knew it would drive me crazy. It really would. Although I would say the vast majority of times, people were very respectful of him – at least here in the desert.

Smith: They were very visible around here, weren’t they?

Greenbaum: Oh, extremely.

Smith: Very involved with a number of causes and activities.

Greenbaum: Oh, yeah. I’m smiling right now because I’m thinking of something. A number of years ago, President Ford was going through a lot of illness and so forth. He had just been released at one particular day from Eisenhower Medical Center, and he was picked up by the Secret Service, and they started bringing him home and he said, “No, we’re not going home right away.” They looked at him and said, “Why?” He said, because he loved hamburgers, and particularly from In and Out Burger. He says, “We’re going to go to In and Out Burger.” So, lo and behold, they drove him about five miles from here
and took him to In and Out Burger. He got out of the car, and he proceeded to stand in line at In and Out Burger. Now it was very crowded. Obviously, everybody let him through. But the idea that he wanted to go to In and Out Burger, and he was going to stand in line to get his hamburger, it was very telling.

Smith: Especially coming from the hospital.

Greenbaum: Oh, yeah. I mean, he had a little, a few eccentricities. One of them, he loved to buy lottery tickets. I think it was either once a week, or once every two weeks, he’d always go out and buy a couple of lottery tickets. As far as I know, he never hit it big, but he bought his tickets. He loved it.

Smith: That’s wonderful.

Greenbaum: And he loved his golf. And he loved his football, he loved his University of Michigan.

Smith: And I’m told that to sit with him and watch a game was unlike most such exercises. I mean, he was very focused on the game.

Greenbaum: Absolutely.

Smith: He had a sense of humor.

Greenbaum: Yes. He had to. Anybody that didn’t have a sense of humor in that position, they are in trouble. He loved a good joke, he loved to play golf, he loved to laugh about his golf game. And he was just a good sport.

Smith: As you know, from childhood on, and with considerable success, but he had a lifelong effort to control his temper.

Greenbaum: You see, I never saw – I did see his temper a couple of times. And I’m not going to go into that. But he’s human.

Smith: Well, no, but that’s exactly what I mean. I don’t mean it critically, but, would you see it on the golf course?

Greenbaum: No, not too much on the golf course, no. He was smart enough to realize that you don’t get mad on the golf course, it doesn’t do any good.
Smith: What were some of the things that they were involved in? Tell me about the season here…when a lot of charitable events are scheduled almost back to back. And they must have been visible.

Greenbaum: They supported everything and anything that they were asked to do, just about. It was really wonderful. Bob Hope did the same thing. They were invited to all the events and wherever they could, they went. Not because they really wanted to go out and be part of the scene, per se, but they felt an obligation and they lived up to it. They were a vital, vital part of this community, as they were in Colorado where they lived. And to this day, people still talk about them. I have friends of mine that come up to me, oh, fairly regularly, or, I say friends, people that I know, but I don’t know them intimately, and they come up and they say, “I remember when you brought President Ford and Mrs. Ford over here and how wonderful they were and how warm they were and how meaningful it was to us.” I hear that all the time.

Smith: Maybe that explains in part those 57,000 people who overnight went through St. Margaret’s to pay their respects.

Greenbaum: Absolutely.

Smith: That’s a lot of folks.

Greenbaum: It sure is. And I was privileged to go to Washington, D.C. for the services there, and obviously, it was a different kind of service, but it was very meaningful.

Smith: We’ve heard from a couple of folks, I think you were with him the day over at the country club, maybe it was his last golf game, I’m not sure. It was a hot day and he was having some problems.

Greenbaum: Yeah, I don’t think that was the last time he played golf. I played with him that last year when he was playing golf. And it was difficult for him. There was a time he would never let me do what I did. But this time he hit the ball in a trap a number of times – sand traps or bunkers – and I would take the ball out and gently put it over here. And he never said one thing or another, he just
went ahead and hit the ball. But prior to that he never would let me do something like that. He just had a good time. People had a good time being with him. He was a fun person.

Smith: What is it about golf – what is it about that game that is almost obsessive?

Greenbaum: You’re not a golfer.

Smith: I’m not a golfer.

Greenbaum: To me it’s not obsessive. To me – I have three very important criteria for golf and I think President Ford probably felt the same way. One, is to be out there with people you enjoy being with, and that’s what it’s all about to me.

Smith: It’s social.

Greenbaum: Yeah. There are a handful of people in this world that make a living playing golf, I’m not one of them, and obviously President Ford was not. Number two is the fact of being out there in good weather, and number three is the golf. The golf being the most incidental of all of them.

Smith: One person suggested it’s a game where basically – it sort of cleans out your head. You have to focus on the ball.

Greenbaum: I’m not that serious about the game. I haven’t gotten to that point and my game reflects it.

Smith: Tell me about his relationship with Bob Hope.

Greenbaum: They had a great deal of love and respect for one another. They really did. Bob would come up to Vail, well, let me back up. President Ford started the Gerald R. Ford Invitational Golf Tournament in Vail many years ago. And because of his relationship with Bob, Bob Hope would come up and entertain, etc., and the relationship just kind of grew from there. It was something to behold. You could tell that they really loved each other, and enjoyed each other’s company. I know you’ve had a couple of people here who were as very, very close to Bob Hope as they were to President Ford, so I’m sure they’ve probably given you a lot more detail than I ever could.
Smith: If you were trying to explain him to people who never knew him, or back up –
the public, stereotype, cliché, nice guy, but questions raised about his IQ and
sophistication. I don’t know how you’d want to describe that – there is a
certain amount of snobbery involved. We were sitting here last night with
Lorraine, the cook, who had an extraordinary story of her own to tell. I asked
if she was surprised by the reaction to his death that was so overwhelming,
and she said, “No, I just thought finally he got his due. And I thought, for
years, I’ve known all of this about President Ford, particularly his character
and his integrity, and better late than never.”

Greenbaum: Well, you know better than I how fickle the public is, okay? And I think this
is probably the best example of it when you see the fact that after his passing,
that people all of a sudden, it was like the windows had opened, or the sky
started lighting up. “Oh, he was really a great person. He wasn’t guilty of this,
he didn’t do that.” And it’s disappointing. I guess that’s human nature,
unfortunately. Because it really did – he got all the credit he deserved
afterwards.

Smith: Time was good to him, in that he lived long enough to know that most people
had come around to his way of thinking on the pardon, for example. The
Profiles in Courage Award at the Kennedy Library was a real turning point. I
happened to be with him that day and I think it was one of the great days of
his life. But if someone who never knew him said, “Tell me about Gerald
Ford,” particularly something that might surprise people, how would you
answer that? What’s important for people, particularly younger people to
know about him?

Greenbaum: That’s a great question, but it’s a difficult one to sum up. That you don’t have
to be born from a wealthy family. You don’t have to have a lot of things that
people think you have to have to become great – whether you’re president or
head of a corporation, or what have you. We see it every day, and he was at
the right place, at the right time, thank God, because what he did, I don’t think
anybody could have done a better job than what he did. As far as some people
questioning his intelligence, he was bright, he was extremely bright. He was
as bright as anybody I’ve ever met. He had a grace about him, a graciousness
that most people don’t have. I would challenge the vast majority of people I’ve ever met in my life that they could have the success that he achieved and be as humble as he was. And that’s what a lot of it’s about. That’s what makes him special. The greatness but the humility that went with it. I envy him for that, I really do.

Smith: Did he ever talk about the war?

Greenbaum: Oh, he talked about his experiences on the aircraft carrier, when it was going through a terrible storm and he nearly got washed overboard. He loved to tell that story. He took great, great pride and joy in telling about it. Other than that, he really didn’t get into it too much. There are a couple of things, though, that he was just trying to reminisce that he shared with me. A couple of stories I prefer not to tell. I don’t know, there was nothing in particular that I can think of at this point, as far as the war is concerned.

Smith: It is interesting, because when we were planning the funeral, with their input, there were two revealing things. The one thing that he was adamant about was, he didn’t want a caisson through the streets of Washington. And I heard the story from a good source. Someone who obviously didn’t know him at the military district in Washington tried to, for lack of a better word, shame the president into accepting this. And he used words to the effect of, “Well now, Mr. President, you wouldn’t want people to think that you were a second rate president?” Well, needless to say, that argument didn’t carry much water. He was lucky he got out of that room with his head.

Greenbaum: It was difficult to intimidate him. I saw several instances where people would try to put him in a corner and he wasn’t about to go there. He had very strong feelings about where he had been, what he had done, and he wasn’t about to change his mind on them. I said, the Warren Commission being one of them. To the day that he passed away he said, “I stand by what I indicated at the hearings.”

Smith: Were you surprised at all by the public reaction at the time of his death?

Greenbaum: No, not really. I would have been surprised otherwise.
Smith: Because, I know from within the media bubble, I can tell you – there are a lot of folks in the media who were surprised.

Greenbaum: Well, they should have been because they were part of the guilty parties, which is not unusual in this day and age.

Smith: You miss him?

Greenbaum: Yes. Very much. I think of him very, very often, and I savor the times that I’m with Betty now, because we talk about him as though he is still here, and I feel that he is.

Smith: It’s rough for her, isn’t it?

Greenbaum: Yes. They really had a real, real love for one another – a real caring. I feel that way about my own wife, but I know most people don’t have that deep feeling for one another. And Betty and President Ford respected one another and that goes a long way.

Smith: We’ve heard from a number of people who have said that as long as he could travel, he loved to travel. But the day didn’t begin and it didn’t end without a call from him to her.

Greenbaum: That’s right. And of course, you know all about his love for swimming. He had a pool built at their home in Colorado and it would be snowing outside, but he’d get in that pool religiously. He did it here, and that’s when I knew he was in trouble because the last – I forget how many months – he didn’t go swimming – and that was important to him.

Smith: He was a very self-disciplined guy, wasn’t he?

Greenbaum: Yeah, it was something we could all learn from.

Smith: Any other stories?

Greenbaum: No, not really.

Smith: Well, I can’t thank you enough.

Greenbaum: I thank you for the opportunity.
Smith: This is great and the In and Out story is priceless.
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Smith: Obviously, the bulk of what we are going to talk about is Mrs. Ford, but being in this room must produce its own memories. What’s it like to be back here? John?

Schwarzlose: It’s an incredible room to be in, and the first memory that comes to my mind is the role that President Ford played behind the scenes of the Betty Ford Center. He was very careful to be not out in front, but behind the scenes. And so often, when we sent out a quarterly financial statement, Mrs. Ford would take it to President Ford and say, “Honey, look this over.” And then within an hour I would get a call, “John, can you just stop over for a minute?” And because the Center is so close I’d come over and he’d ask some questions and we would talk and then I’d leave. Then I knew that he would fill Mrs. Ford in. But he always played this role like that, and so when you were called to this room it was always a special thing.

Smith: And I’m told that there were events – for example, I guess you have an alumni reunion every year – and he could be seen cooking hot dogs – that sort of hands-on involvement.

Schwarzlose: Memorial Day we have a cookout for all the patients and all the staff, and he and Mrs. Ford every year came, and shook hands with every patient, every member of the staff. His reputation was handing out soft drinks, Mrs. Ford was giving the hamburger and hot dog buns, and she made sure that he was over there and it was just really something how it happened.

Smith: Tell me, Dr. West, how did the Betty Ford Center come to be the Betty Ford Center?

West: Well, it came to be as a result of – first of all the need in the minds of Betty Ford and Leonard Firestone – that there should be a place to treat one of the most common diseases there are in the United States. It’s an addictive disease.
And so both Betty and Leonard Firestone were very much involved. Their concerns were for the people who suffered from this because they were knowledgeable themselves about the disorder, which is called addictive disease. So they talked about it. Both of them were on the board of directors of Eisenhower Hospital, and they got people interested in this idea, and from there generated a move to put together a program to treat addicted people, both alcohol and drug addiction. I’m not sure how they decided to pick a part of the property that Bob Hope gave to Eisenhower to do this, but they picked a corner eventually of the campus to build the buildings that eventually became the Betty Ford Center.

Smith: So it was always seen as, in effect, an adjunct to the Eisenhower Medical Center.

West: It was called the Betty Ford Center at Eisenhower. And I came out here from Chicago having retired as a surgeon in 1981, although I’d been vacationing out here before that. And there was a program going on at Eisenhower Hospital for addicted people. It was called an outpatient program and I was asked to be part of that by Joe Cruz, who was also interested in the genesis of Betty Ford Center. And I remember him coming to me, he was building at Eisenhower things that a physician would do in a program like this: give lectures, do examinations, and so forth, and so on. And she was in another part of the same floor of that hospital building with people who were talking about drapes and furniture and all that kind of stuff, so I knew something was on the way by the time I even got out here.

Schwarzlose: You know, another interesting part of that, even before the Center opened, that both President and Mrs. Ford were involved in. Jim, when the decision was made to build a treatment center, people said, “Well, Mrs. Ford, you’ll put your name on it?” And she said, “Absolutely not.” Her point of view was, as a fairly recent recovering alcoholic woman who had gone public about that herself, to put her name on it was putting too much pressure on her. She said, “What if I take a drink? Alcoholics and addicts can relapse.” But President Ford, more than anyone else, Leonard Firestone in a more minor way, convinced her that putting her name on the treatment center would be like a
beacon. It would say, “Here’s a special place of help.” But that was not an easy decision.

Smith: It’s into the language now. It’s part of the lexicon.

Schwarzlose: Absolutely.

West: It turned out to be a fortuitous move, although entered into by Betty with doubts and concerns about all the things that would go on with having a place named after you. It turned out to be the greatest thing as far as this is concerned.

Smith: Let me ask you, because it’s one thing to decide to create a center – explain for the layman – there obviously must be a wealth of different approaches to treating these problems. How did you decide to design the curriculum, if you will, for the Center.

West: Well, the curriculum has been designed by - a curriculum that works - has been designed since about 1935 by a couple of fellows, Bill Wilson and a fellow by the name of Dr. Bob Smith, I believe his name is. They designed a program from the Oxford Group from which both of them were members, that had twelve steps in it.

Smith: Now popularly known as Alcohol Anonymous?

West: They eventually called it Alcohol Anonymous. At first it was just a program, it didn’t have a name on it. But eventually they called it Alcohol Anonymous about two or three years after it got going, in about 1936 or ’37. So that program had already been functioning 35 or 40 years before Betty and Leonard got involved in the business of making a program. It was a program that had been tried and found to work. So Betty founded the program on the basis of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholic Anonymous, which includes the treatment for addiction.

Schwarzlose: The program, medically, psychologically, spiritually - those Twelve Steps - forms the core of the program. And what’s interesting, all these years later, and over 90,000 patients later, that still forms the core of our program. Where a lot of places who treat alcoholics and addicts have kind on gone on to
newfangled ideas and things – we have stuck to the core from the very beginning. Dr. West and I were somewhere and someone said, “Boy, the Betty Ford Center is sure old-fashioned.” And Dr. West and I smiled at them and said, “Yes, we are.” We took it as a great compliment. If you have a system that works, that reaches people, why change?

Smith: And what was her involvement in this period of definition, if you will, of exploration, of deciding what you were going to be and how it was going to be administered? How involved was she in all of that? It must have been a process of self-education.

West: Well, Betty Ford went through a treatment program herself at the Navy Hospital under a Dr. Joe Purch(?), where the basis of the treatment was Alcoholics Anonymous. So when she graduated from that program and came here, she joined all the rest of the members of Alcoholics Anonymous in this community and developed friendships with all of them in her activity in this program. So when she and Leonard and the rest of people that were involved in shaping this program – the Betty Ford Center – it started out they already had this program that they knew worked. It’s as though someone would come to me as a surgeon and say, “You know, I learned a new way to take out an appendix.” Well, there’s only one way to take out an appendix, and not only that, it’s the only way to treat this disease.

There was an article I read in the New York Times just yesterday about some place in the southern part of California – it’s a very expensive place where many movie stars go – although some movie stars come to the Betty Ford Center. And the person who was talking about this with the interviewer said, “It’s very fancy, we have all kinds of different amenities to please the patient, but the people who persist in sobriety, without any relapses, are those people who stick to the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.” So all treatment centers that work have that one basis of recovery.

Schwarzlose: What Betty and Leonard did, as Dr. West was describing, they traveled around and said what place has taken that Twelve Steps core and made it work? And they ended up feeling like a well-known place named Hazelton in Minnesota had probably done the best job of incorporating that in their
treatment. So they reached out to Hazelton. That’s how people like myself and others ended up coming here because smartly, Mrs. Ford said, “We don’t have to reinvent the wheel here. We need to take what works and then make it work here.” With one caveat – Hazelton and other centers at that time often had two or three men to every one woman. And Mrs. Ford, much like she turned the world around with breast cancer, said, “I am not going to have a male-oriented treatment center that women have to fit in to.”

And so today, all these years later, fifty percent of our patients have been women, is probably the part Mrs. Ford is as proud of as anything else. And I tell people all over the world, it’s totally because of her. There is no other reason why this has been such a drawing card for women to seek help.

Smith: Is it harder for women than for men to initially seek help?

Schwarzlose: Well, I think it’s harder from a couple of perspectives. Earlier we used to say the stigma for a woman alcoholic was worse. Mrs. Ford would often in her talks refer to the fact that many people connected an alcoholic woman as a loose woman, or a woman with lower morals. And Mrs. Ford did her best to break that stigma down, but that was a very real thing. But today, it’s interesting that it’s still harder for a woman, because with all the progress that we’ve made in our society, we still find it harder for a woman to leave for thirty days or more. It’s almost like that old scenario of the husband leaving and saying, “Well, I’ll miss you and the kids. See you.” And the woman is leaving and the husband says, “Who’s going to watch the kids?” So we think we’ve made a lot of progress, I think we see examples all the time that we still have a ways to go. But Mrs. Ford made such an effort to break those barriers down, and that’s why that fifty percent ratio is such a tribute to her.

Smith: It is interesting because for a while people equated the Betty Ford Center with celebrities. And I assume that gave a mis-impression of what you are all about. Clearly, you had some celebrities, but they were distinctively in the minority.

Schwarzlose: In our number of patients over the years, well-known patients don’t even make point one of one percent, but it’s interesting that in the early days, when
we had some well-known people go through, I think Dr. West and I and Mrs. Ford all felt that it had some positives to it, too. It was almost like if so and so can go, then I can go. It’s interesting why we don’t get as many celebrities today is because we treat everyone as a VIP. So there aren’t special privileges for anyone over anyone else.

Smith: And is that not universally the case?

Schwarzlose: No. In some places they cater to the celebrity, and that’s fine if that’s what they want to do. That is not a hard decision for us because the model for us is Mrs. Ford. When she went to treatment at Long Beach Naval Hospital, she was treated like everyone else.

Smith: How difficult was that for her initially? Is there a period of resistance that’s almost universal?

Schwarzlose: Well, Richard, her four children and her husband did an intervention on her. That was a very difficult day. And her feeling, which is typical of people going through that, was anger. How could my own children and my husband turn on my like that? And what you hope is that through tough love that that anger turns to a realization of how hard that was for them to do that. And that’s what happened with Mrs. Ford, too. She agreed to go to treatment. It was a very difficult thing to go. She and President Ford chose to make an announcement about it because of the incredible positives that came from the breast cancer announcement. Again, hoping that it would help a lot of people.

Smith: Is shame something that you have to overcome first?

West: Yes, shame is part of the multiple syndromes of chemical dependency or addiction. And one of the things about going into treatment is the development of what you would call a surrender to the idea that you have an illness that requires this kind of hospitalization or treatment, even outpatient treatment. That comes relatively slowly, but it usually occurs in about the first week or so. Once a person is in a community of other recovering people, they talk with each other and eventually reach the common idea that we’re here because we weren’t able to not do what we were doing. Meaning, being actively addicted. So it’s a very essential part of the treatment. After that the
rest of the Twelve Steps kick in, in the way of changing a person to be
different than they were when they were addicted. But that involves every
type of discipline in behaviors like selfishness, fear, dishonesty, and
resentment are dealt with in the treatment program – which changes the
person. Because they aren’t that way during their addiction. Usually they’ve
got all kinds of psychological difficulties.

Smith: Has there been a difference, shall we say a stigma, for lack of a better word,
attached to alcohol dependency as opposed to drug addiction?

West: Yes, there is. Originally, the Betty Ford Center dealt primarily with people
who were addicted to alcohol because it became known as a center for the
treatment of alcoholism. But as time went on and as populations changed
somewhat, drug addiction became more common, but it was not thought of as
a place where you’d go to the Betty Ford Center for treatment. And
eventually, over time, more young people and some older people came in who
were addicted to those agents like cocaine, opium, and other mood altering
substances. Since addictions all work in the same circuit of the brain, all of
them, the Betty Ford Center came to be known as a place that treated both
alcoholism and drug addiction.

Smith: Have you had well-known alumni who have maintained ties with the Center,
or come back from time to time? Becoming, in fact, ambassadors for the
place?

Schwarzlose: We do, however, most of the alumni who serve in that kind of role are not
well-known. They are just active in their communities and just reach out as
ambassadors and things. One of the interesting things about once you begin to
get well, it’s hard to be in some kind of celebrity status like you were before.
A good example of that is, at the Center Mrs. Ford is not Mrs. Ford. Mrs. Ford
is Betty. And more to patients, even, than to staff. Staff, still out of respect,
will say Mrs. But to patients - that’s Betty. And it is said with incredible
respect, but the familiar first name, and Mrs. Ford loves that. That’s like: you
have the same disease I have. It gets it down to the bare essentials. It says so
much about Mrs. Ford.
Smith: Tell me about her involvement, direct involvement, both administrative, for lack of a better word, in policy, but also very much one-on-one patient interaction. How did that evolve?

Schwarzlose: Well, it did evolve. But because her name’s on the place, Jim and I saw her so involved. Before we opened our doors we did a shakedown cruise and divided the staff into half, and have each spend three days in treatment because we wanted to check everything from the showers to the facilities. And Mrs. Ford went through, too. She wanted to be very much a part of that. It was a new thing for her. Her image was, this will probably be a Southern California facility with all the population out here. She really didn’t realize the impact she would have. The morning we opened, October 4, 1982, a Monday morning, she went on Good Morning America with David Hartman, and the world knew that Mrs. Ford had opened this center. But in the early days it was growing experience for her.

I remember, we’d been open about three or four months and Mrs. Ford and Mr. Firestone came in my office and they said, “John,” and they seemed quite anxious, quite concerned. They said, “John, how are the patients doing?” And I looked at these two incredible people and I said, “I don’t have the slightest idea.” And I think they were ready to slap me or slug me, and I said, “Because, if we all hired the right professional staff, the right nurses and counselors and physicians, then we know the patients are doing fine.” It sounds like I was a smart alec, but it was a great lesson for both of them that, as board members, as founders, they couldn’t go in and treat. What they could do is provide the environment, the place, where healing can take place. You didn’t have to with them about lessons like that twice. They really got it, didn’t they, Jim? They understood. They would often have Dr. West and I over just to talk about how things were going. They loved to hear about it. But I don’t think you and I could cite an example where they interfered with treatment, I really don’t think…

West: No, the system worked and they were involved in the way it developed in picking the people who were involved in the development, too. There is one other thing I want to mention, too. Throughout the history, early history and
later history of the Betty Ford Center, every now and then, some woman would have a particular problem that really affected her adversely with weeping and isolation and so forth. The counselors would call John to get Betty to come over to talk to these people. So she always had a little coterie of specially meeting people who only she could help by talking with them. They would be so impressed. But not only that, but that she would talk the language of recovery to them, and it was so helpful which is such a plus for this treatment center.

Schwarzlose: And she would do it day or night. She would come about every other week to have lunch in the patient cafeteria. She’d sit right in the middle of the room. Every four weeks she would lecture to the patients formally. And in all those years of doing it, every time it was her turn to lecture, she would come in and she looked scared to death. I said, “Mrs. Ford, the patients just want to see you. They don’t care even what you say.” “Oh, but what I say is very important.” We have a place called the Serenity Room at the Center, so every time before she gave a talk to the patients, she’d go into the Serenity Room and just experience the quiet and the serene feeling. She took it so seriously. But she loved those special roles that she had.

Smith: Did she tell her story? Is that how you connect with people initially?

Schwarzlose: Well, she told her story – not only how she got into treatment – but even more importantly, what’s happened since treatment. And all the good and the bad, and what’s worked for her. Those were always closed – just the patients and Mrs. Ford, so she could be very, very open with them.

West: There are other things, too. She talked with all the people, mostly women, from a history of experience that she had. And no matter what the problem is, with most addicted people, the problems will come in clusters and they are very similar to each other. So she would have been through all the kinds of things she would talk to these people about. And that’s the thing that locked them in from the standpoint of being empathic of what she was talking about. They just knew that this lady was experienced in what they were going through.
Schwarzlose: Absolutely. And that was her real love. Now, in addition to that, she was chairman and founder, so she also took that administrative side. How do you run the board of directors, and what’s the right thing to do? She was wanting to do it the right way. One of the interesting things that became kind of a habitual thing over the years is, at least two afternoons a week, she would call me about 3:30-3:45, “John, I’ve got a few things I’d like to go over with you. Can you come over to the house?” So, before I’d get in my car and run over to the house, I’d call my wife because I had a young family at the time, and say, “I won’t be home for dinner.” I knew that.

I’d go to the house and bring all the papers, and she wanted to go over everything. She wanted to do this the right way, go over everything. Well then, invariably, about ten minutes after five, in the room would come President Ford, walking over from his office. I would jump up and say, “Hello, Mr. President,” and he’d say, “Oh, John, don’t get up. I know you two are working, I don’t want to bother you. I’m just going to watch the local news over here.” So he’d go over and sit in his chair and turn the news on. Usually Mrs. Ford would say, “Honey, turn that down a little bit, would you?” Well, within five minutes, Mrs. Ford and I would be talking about something, and he would turn in his chair, “Now honey, are you sure about that?” And Mrs. Ford would go, “Now, Jerry, you’re watching the news.”

And no one would believe it, but it was like a sitcom. For me, it was so funny and so loving to watch the two of them. And sometimes he would just turn his chair around and work with us. Sometimes he’d stay and watch the news. But the fact that she had this Center that was helping so many people, made him so proud. He would talk about it all the time.

Smith: They laughed about this later, but you know, she received the Medal of Freedom long before he did. And there were a number of those instances…my sense was he was just delighted for her to get the recognition.

Schwarzlose: He was. He actually shared with me, and I know he did with others that. He said, “Yes, I know that I was President of the United States and the way that I became president was a quirk of history. But, long-term, Betty’s impact, historically, will be greater because of breast cancer and because of addiction,
and how many people she ______.” And he felt that – that was not just saying something. He really felt that.

Smith: In terms of how ordinary people live their lives, very few presidents have an impact that she’s had. Simply by being herself, she made it a lot easier for people to be themselves.

West: I think one of the important things about the success of the Betty Ford Center was the relationship between the CEO – that’s John – and Betty, as the chairman of the board. They had an understanding that almost acted as though, without words, they could get ideas across to each other. Because that had to happen, and many of the times that that occurred in a hospital for people who suffered from a disorder. It’s really a brain disease, involving alcohol, cocaine, opium addiction and so forth, because those kinds of people are under such stress while they are in the program. However, Betty had a kind of aura that imposed a sense of peace to all the buildings. So one of the things that people would say as the weeks went on, they would say, this is a place of peace. And that was so important to them.

Schwarzlose: And, as you say, the campus was so important to Mrs. Ford. She would say to us, “Okay, now these four buildings here are twenty years old now. And they are used by patients 365 days a year. So what do we want them to look like to the six new patients coming in today? Twenty years old? Or a place of welcome and a place of ….” And so, she always made sure that part of our budget was renovating – new carpeting, new chairs, making the place filled with love, because she knew, as Jim said, the environment was so important.

West: Very important.

Schwarzlose: She was insistent that the treatment be gender specific, which was unheard of at the time. So the groups, the halls are divided into men and women’s halls. And she insisted on that. She would go out and speak. One of the things that says a lot about Mrs. Ford, she’d go to Dallas, she’d go to Denver, she’d go to Atlanta. When she’d go those places, she’d talk a little bit about her story, a little bit about the disease, she would not promote Betty Ford Center at all. And people always said to her and to me, everywhere you go, you’re telling
people it’s okay to ask for help. Not at Betty Ford Center – anywhere. And they always felt that – that she was like the spokesperson for recovery, for people getting well.

But there are so many funny things that happened. After a while, people would say to her, if she allowed questions and answers, they would say, “Well, Mrs. Ford, why didn’t you go to the Betty Ford Center?” And Betty always would just smile until it hit them that if she hadn’t gotten well there wouldn’t have been a Betty Ford Center. There are just stories like that. Mrs. Ford has a personality that - I always say to people - you have no idea how real she is. She and I’d be walking around campus and she’d say to me, “John, I hope people understand that I didn’t do this. God is who made this a special (?) and made this happen, and he used me as an instrument. But I didn’t do this.” And listening to her, I wanted the world to hear that because it was so real.

Smith: Their faith was very strong, wasn’t it?

Schwarzlose: Absolutely.

Smith: It wasn’t at all transparent because of the religious traditions in which they were each raised. One sensed that it was a defining part of character.

Schwarzlose: Well, it was, and it is interesting, Richard, that in her recovery, because getting well spiritually is so much a part of the recovery from addictive disease, she and President Ford both seemed to grow spiritually. It wasn’t about how often they went to formal church, which they did. But it was about the way they were growing spiritually, and together. It showed in so much – you and I were both there when they both got the Congressional Medal of Honor, and I’ll never forget that talk when President Ford was appealing to the Republicans and Democrats that unless we learn to get along – and he told stories about fighting all day long with Tip O’Neill then going out to dinner together. Why isn’t that happening anymore? Anybody who was at that talk – for me – I’ve never forgotten it. That was a very spiritual talk from my point of view, of reaching out to people.
When Mrs. Ford and I went on Larry King, four different times Larry King asked Mrs. Ford to come out and talk about addiction. She said, “I won’t do it________________________.” So they sent me there and I would tease all the way as we would drive to the studio. And she would say, “Now, I want you to take all the hard questions.” And I said, “Mrs. Ford, they are not going to ask me any questions. They are going to be asking you questions.” She said, “Well, I’m going to figure out a way to get them over to you as quick as I can.” So what would happen; [when] she was asked a hard question, she’d kick me. The very first time we were on Larry King, she kicked me so hard on one of the questions her shoe came off, and there was a bang. When we went to break Larry King said, “What was that noise?” And she told him the story. That’s Betty. That’s Betty up on the table in the White House dancing – that’s Betty.

West: Betty was really a soft kind of a person. Very gentle, very kind, soft spoken, but basically a firm person, too. She also had ways of expressing that firmness and this was with everybody in society because she has a lot of friends around, and everybody knows her as a kind of soft person. But, on some issues, including addiction and her Center and so forth, and so on, she can be very firm. Not harsh, but she had ideas that are unswervable about the way that Center should be run and is.

Smith: Give us some examples, if you can think of one.

West: Well, she had a lady she was sponsoring, and I know that that lady would be expected to go to more meetings than she’d been going to, to stay well. But I know that Betty – I wasn’t at this occasion - but I know that she spoke firmly to her. Because that was the important thing. Other people’s sobriety was number one in her goals, in this particular life for her. And it will be part of the legend of her – that she was the perfect example of a person, her home treatment worked, but that also comes with all the benefits of a successful recovering person.

Schwarzlose: Another example of the firmness that you speak to; as you remember, the day we opened the Center, we also started our family program. And people criticized Mrs. Ford for that. They said, “Well, get your treatment thing going
first, and then you can deal with families.” She knew, from her own experience with the Ford family, you have to get everyone involved. And so we started from day one, and that’s been one of the things that stands us apart from a lot of other places. And then about twelve years ago, led by Mrs. Ford, we started dealing with children, and we’re still one of the few places in the world with children from seven to twelve years of age, who are living with addiction every day of their life through usually their mother or their father or older brother or sister – and it wasn’t about her being a pioneer, or starting something new – she knew you had to get every member of that family involved. And that’s where I think a good example where you describe as firm, that she knew what was right and she stuck with it.

Smith: Tell me about the finances of the Center. She presumably was a significant fundraiser. Was it a founding goal to make this place as accessible to as many people as possible?

Schwarzlose: Mrs. Ford wanted this to be place that anyone could pick up the phone and seek out. One of her favorite expressions to me is, “John, I want to make sure our charges to the patients are low enough that a schoolteacher in Nashville, Tennessee could come in for treatment.” Why she picked that? But she did. So she would push and push to keep our charges as low as we possibly could. As a non-profit, obviously we didn’t have to have a profit or any return, because that wasn’t about being a non-profit. She insisted that ten to fifteen percent of our patients at all times were getting scholarship help, where they paid a little bit and then the scholarship funds paid all the rest. I described it as “Mission Driven.” She was driven to make sure our mission to reach out to as many people as possible was successful. Now what that took was a lot of successful fundraising, led by her.

When we opened our doors - the first four buildings she and Mr. Firestone had to raise six and a half million dollars to build those first four buildings. They went out to friends, corporations, foundations, and raised the money.

Smith: It probably was harder to raise then, than maybe it would have been ten years later.
Schwarzlose: Oh, yeah, it was. And Betty admitted that that wasn’t something she had done a lot of before. And so she’d always say, “Leonard took me under his wing and taught me how to raise money.” One of their funny stories was they had gone to Las Vegas to see Frank Sinatra perform on someone’s jet. It’s a short trip from Palm Springs to Las Vegas, and there was probably twelve people on the plane, and this was right as they were beginning to raise money. And Mrs. Ford on the way back, on the plane said she had this captive group, said, “I’d love to have this group be the first donors to our treatment center.” And people said – well, what do you say to Mrs. Ford – but they looked around and they said, “What do we have to write pledges on?” Well, the only thing they could find was cocktail napkins. So people, and we still have some of those early napkins – people wrote their pledge on the back of a cocktail napkin. It still counted.

She became less and less bashful about asking people for help. In reality, the main givers have been people and families who’ve been touched themselves. And they are the ones who want to give something back in most cases.

Smith: As an administrator, I suppose she’s not in the position of having to hire and fire. What kind of oversight, for lack of a better word, does she provide? How hands-on?

Schwarzlose: Her hands-on as a chairman was always more, I think in many cases, because her name was on the place. With her grandchildren being out of town, and even more so in the years when President Ford was traveling as a former president, this was her main focus. But interestingly enough, we had over thirty offers to start other Betty Ford Centers. People would say, come to Denver, we’ll give you the money, we’ll build it, you come and put your name on it. And she said no so fast to those, she said, “I’m not going to franchise this. This is not about franchising.” Some of her wisdom – this is something that she did to Dr. West and I since we were there at the beginning, and I use this as an example of – people talk about executive practices, and best practices – of what this woman did. We’d been open about three years and she came to Dr. West and I and said, “I need a commitment from you two.” And I said, “You mean to stay at the Center?” She said, “No, to me.”
Now, think back all these years. How smart of her. So, when someone would come and say, we’d like you to come here and we’ll double your salary – it wasn’t even a question, because it wasn’t about leaving the Betty Ford Center, it was about leaving Mrs. Ford. And I thought about that so much over the years – the wisdom of her to think that way. But that’s how she did. When there were issues, when there were problems, I would come and talk to her about it. She wasn’t the kind to just right there say, “Well, here’s what I think we ought to do.” She’d think about it a while and maybe a day later or two days, I’d get a call, “John, I thought about this option or this option.” Well thought out.

Smith: There are some parallels. I’m thinking of Katherine Graham’s story. Someone who, because of family tragedy was sort of pitched, fairly late in life, into becoming an executive, and the rest, as they say, is history. She really created a whole new life. Talk to me about the succession. It’s obviously one thing to create an institution, and I think in some ways it’s even harder to institutionalize it - to make certain that after you’re gone, it’s going to maintain the standards that you want. When did that begin to be a concern?

Schwarzlose: Well, it’s interesting that the first thing she did in 1993 was establish a chairman’s council, which was a national advisory council. She always kept her board to about ten or eleven people – very small. The first person she put on that advisory council was President Ford. And she really loved it that it gave him an official role. And as he would introduce himself at every chairman’s council meeting, he would say, “I’m a former president, she’s the current one.” And people would laugh. But the two, President and Mrs. Ford, and I’m so fortunate that I’m the one they would share this with – “it would be our dream that a member of our family would want to carry on this dream.” Susan was asked to go on the board of directors. I’m pretty sure no other promises, but would you serve on the board? It meets six to eight times a year, Susan said yes immediately. She later then was asked to chair the finance committee. And then finally in 2003-2004, Betty began to talk to Susan about, at some point, “I’m going to want to step aside, I will stay on the board, but I’d like you to be the chairman. I would love if my own daughter is my successor.” And so, in late 2004, Mrs. Ford brought it up to the board. The
board was excited, was enthusiastic, especially since Betty wasn’t retiring, but had Susan be the chair. And Susan, to her credit, from the very beginning, said, “I have one purpose, to keep my mom’s dream alive.”

Susan would do things like, at the 25th anniversary, she stood up in front of 1,800 people and said, “There is only one chairman of the Betty Ford Center, and that’s my mom.” And I give her a lot of credit to say that. But she really wants to keep this alive for her mom, and Susan and I are already beginning to discuss who in the next generation of the Ford family might have an interest in this. Which would now obviously be Mrs. Ford’s grandchildren. If there is no one with an interest, we’ll have to go in a different direction, but that would be the first choice, I think.

Smith: That’s interesting, because that obviously is a story of continuity. All things evolve and change. How does Mrs. Ford handle that side of things? Change? Within continuity.

Schwarzlose: Well, she handled it incredibly, partly because what Susan did was put her arm out and join, saying, “Let’s do this together, Mom.” The two ladies, again in their wisdom, at every meeting, put me between them. And so I’d have bruises on both sides.

Smith: Was she still kicking you?

Schwarzlose: They kind of have fun with that. Up to the time of President’s Ford’s death, they were like that – just arms together. His death has changed that. I’m still on the phone with Mrs. Ford several times a week. She wants to know what is going on, but it’s not the same.

Smith: Is she still grieving?

Schwarzlose: Yes. And so what I do as one person in this is, when we’re together I tell these stories about him coming over at five o’clock and about things he would do for the Center. As you know so well as a historian, those stories are what keeps it alive. But she is still grieving.
Smith: On a personal level – to people who never knew Betty Ford, except they’ve heard the name, or seen the grainy clips of old footage – what should people know about Mrs. Ford?

West: I would say that Mrs. Ford – I always called her Betty, because that’s the way we talked with each other at the Center – Betty will always be an elegant, gracious lady who relates to anybody that talks with her. [She] is very direct, very honest, very sincere, and she emanates a kind of a love to most of the people that come in there as patients. That’s what I would say about Betty.

Schwarzlose: And I think that’s very well said. The only thing I would add to it is, President Ford would often say to people, “It was never my goal to be president. I wanted to be Speaker of the House, if there was a goal.” In many ways, Betty would say the same thing: I never intended to become the face and voice of recovery. It was something I never set out to do. I am a recovering alcoholic and addict, I have the disease. I’ve been able to make a difference in people’s lives, again as an instrument, and I’m very glad I’ve been able to make a difference like that. But it wasn’t like something she set out to do. We talk about them being from the Midwest. Dr. West and I are from the Midwest, we see that in both of them. They are not complicated people, but they are very sincere.

Smith: Perfect. Thank you so much.

Schwarzlose: Thank you, it was a pleasure to talk about them.
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Smith: How does it feel to be in this room?

Hart: I’ve always loved to come in here. When you come in here, I miss him because whenever I came in here, generally he asked me to come in. And I think it’s a very special room. I’m glad we still have it here. We’re not ready to let it go.

Smith: We’re hoping, down the road obviously, to recreate it at the museum in Grand Rapids.

Hart: And maybe even use some of these pieces.

Smith: Yeah.

Hart: Won’t that be nice? Yeah.

Smith: When did your paths first cross?

Hart: I worked for a vascular surgeon for twenty years and then I went to the McCallum Theater to be the CEO and the production department artistic – director’s executive secretary. So I was there and President Ford was on the board – board of trustees – and so I had known him and met him before, and then I saw him frequently when I was at the theater.

Smith: Let me just back up – why would he have been on the theater board?

Hart: When the McCallum Theater first opened here, he was very instrumental, along with the McCallum family, which is the Parma’s – Mrs. Parma is a McCallum. And Bett Simon, Carol Props, a whole group of people – Bob Hope and his wife, Delores – they all got together and decided that there needed to be a performing arts center here in the valley. So they had the Fords come along and they all raised monies and they started a theater. So President
Ford was on the board of trustees for many years. I think he may have come off for a while and then came back on. And he enjoyed coming.

Smith: Really? So he was an active trustee?

Hart: He was active and he would always call me or say, “I’d like to have this,” and, “Jan, when can I come?” So, I set up – it was kind of in a U shape – and I sat up near the very front of the table and he always sat right across from me so he could get my eye, or I could make sure he had what he needed. He was always very gracious, very nice. So what happened was, I had found out that they were looking for someone, had spoken with Penny, and I said, no, I had a job. I was used to being in jobs for a long period of time, and it just kind of happened that I ended up coming for an interview with Penny. I had a hard time coming over here, because it was hard for me to extricate myself. But, one day I just picked up my purse and walked out and no one said anything. And then I came back over and met with Mrs. Ford, and then we had a board meeting at the theater and President Ford, before we got started – no one knew – and, boy, he just spoke right up. He stood up and wanted to let everybody know that I was coming over to work in his office and I was going to work with Mrs. Ford and he went on and on. He was just really wonderful about it, but I was in shock. And then the whole room was abuzz, and that was an interesting meeting for me.

Smith: Did you interview with both the Fords?

Hart: Actually, President Ford had spoken to me before at the theater. When I came back over to interview with Mrs. Ford, she met me at the door, and I interviewed with her just strictly by myself. President Ford had already said it would be wonderful to have me.

Smith: How was the job described to you?

Hart: That I would be Mrs. Ford’s personal assistant. That I would travel with them. That I would take care of all of her correspondence and I would attend functions. I would stay and get them ready, or her ready – whatever the case may be.
Smith: And get her there on time?

Hart: And always get her there – that was something that I really tried hard to do because that was something that was brought to my attention. I said, “Well, I can do that.” There were a few times that I wasn’t successful, but the majority of time… and then the rest I think you just had to learn on the job. I don’t think that when you initially take this job, you ever could really be told what you’d be doing, how much time it would take, where you’d be going, the people that you’d get to meet, the planes you’d get to fly on.

Smith: And you started when?

Hart: I started in ’02, in December of 2002.

Smith: They were still active?

Hart: They were actually pretty active, yes. Mrs. Ford still spoke. She spoke both at the Center every month and attended everything there. She went places and then she spoke, and she was quite active then. I think that that probably lasted for two years and then she started scaling back a little bit. Since Susan was on the board over at the Betty Ford Center, it was easy to start to transition, and there were some things that Mrs. Ford felt that Susan could do and that she didn’t need to do. Then this last year – a year and a half, really – I think, since President Ford’s passing, she’s decided that she really doesn’t have to do those things. She told me she’s retired, so when I ask her, she says, “I don’t have to do that anymore, Jan. I’m retired, did you forget?”

Smith: How much of that is grieving?

Hart: Mrs. Ford is still grieving. You know how they always say you can be lonely in a crowd? I think she still feels that way. She has staff, she certainly has us all around, but it’s not the same. So it’s nice to be able to just sit with her and let her talk and she can tell you how she really feels and you understand. I lost my father this year and I realize how difficult it is, in any circumstance, but to be married to someone so special for so long, and have such a wonderful bond, some people never get over it. She does pretty well, but she’s still grieving.
Smith: Was the first anniversary particularly difficult?

Hart: I think for her it was. As we got ready for the Christmas holiday, you know there is a lot going on. I found that I tried to do more to make it easier – whether it was getting the tree up, or helping decide on purchases, or whatever it was that she needed. It just made it simpler because she wanted everything to be the same, but she just didn’t have it in her to do it herself. And this year, we’re moving right along. Christmas season is upon us. It’s similar, and she keeps reminding me that it’s getting close. And I say, yes. And she often wonders why she’s still here. And I say, “Well, God has a purpose for you. It’s His time, not ours.” And we’re thankful that she’s still here. I certainly am. I feel very blessed to be in this job and I know that I’m here and I took it for a reason, and I’m thankful for that. I remind myself of that often.

Smith: One senses that their faith was very important to the Fords.

Hart: It was.

Smith: It wasn’t perhaps as publicly known or flaunted as some, but it was a very important part of their lives.

Hart: It was, I know, for both of them, Mrs. Ford especially. She spoke about that often, especially when she gave her talks over at the Betty Ford Center, or wherever she went. She always mentioned that because I think that was a real turning point for her to turn her, what they called, their higher power. But they loved their church and President Ford was very religious in that way. And it meant a lot to them. They went to St. Margaret’s here, and they went as often as they could or were able, or when they weren’t traveling. They considered that church their home church. It still means a lot to her.

Smith: I remember being amazed at the numbers – there were 57,000 people who went through – overnight – out at St. Margaret’s.

Hart: That was really fascinating to see the outpouring of love. That’s one thing that I didn’t realize. You know, when you’re in this job sometimes you are in a bit of a bubble and once you get over that whole excitement and awe about where
you’re working, you’re working. When you ever mention Mrs. Ford’s name, people love her – love her. Speak so highly of her, always want to know how she’s doing, or doesn’t she just look beautiful? But people who got in line and took those buses up to the church, it was amazing to me because they’ve really touched everyone in some way in this valley - just like they did up in Vail. From the common person all the way up.

Smith: They were very visible.

Hart: And it showed. Very visible. They would go out. Mrs. Ford used to love to just sometimes stop by Long’s Drugstore and shop for birthday cards, and the people’s response, and she enjoyed that. They were, in some ways, very regular people on occasion.

Smith: They had favorite restaurants.

Hart: They always loved to go to Jillian’s, and many of their friends did. Jillian’s had special tables for them and they would do special little cards for the table and have flowers for them. But they loved several restaurants and they enjoyed going out with their friends. Very much so.

Smith: We were both extraordinarily moved yesterday by Lorraine’s testament to her experience with the Fords.

Hart: Isn’t she dear?

Smith: Which was just remarkable.

Hart: It was a perfect time and match, I think, with Lorraine. And President Ford loved her. So did Mrs. Ford, but he really looked out for her and took care of her. And I think that Lorraine reciprocated that – it meant a lot to her. Whenever I have questions, or if I needed someone to fill in as chef, I could always call Lorraine, and either get suggestions or say, “Please, please, could you come?” one night and she would be willing to.

Smith: Tell me about Mrs. Ford’s sense of humor.

Hart: Oh, she does have a sense of humor. What wit! Sometimes she surprises me. She just comes up with things and I look at her in awe, and we just laugh. She
loves that and I think President Ford loved that, too. She really has that witty side, and she still does. She still does. She is fun to be with. I bet she was always great fun. Always up for it. I think that she still is. And she is very intuitive, she really does know what’s going on, all the time. Every now and then, she’ll say something that will catch us by surprise. I like that because it makes me realize she is there – she is still herself.

Smith: We heard stories earlier about how they were big movie buffs.

Hart: That would always be funny – she’d go, “Jan, I think that we’ll get some movies.” And I’ll say, “Would you like me to run over and pick some out, or what would you like to go see?” And she would just get in the car with the agents and they would go to Blockbuster and she’d walk in and pick out a few, and they’d come back home and they’d watch them. Always watched movies. Sometimes Mrs. Annenberg gives her movies – sends them over. And Mrs. Ford will watch those and send them back. It’s a nice evening. They used to spend the evening eating in the study, and then they might watch a movie together. She still does that.

Smith: And the kids – spent probably more time around her towards the end?

Hart: Definitely. For President Ford?

Smith: Yes.

Hart: Yes. Definitely, yeah. They always wanted to come out and visit. You never quite know, but you know that you’re getting near the end, and they were all very good. Susan had been here for quite a while. They would come and go. And then all the boys were here and she happened to leave and then she came back. Mrs. Ford loves it when the kids come around, she really enjoys it. And they enjoy one another. The kids play with one another, they throw barbs and they really have a wonderful relationship and it’s kind of fun to see.

Smith: And as grandparents – what were they like as grandparents?

Hart: They love their grandkids. They were fortunate they spent so much time with them. I look back at some of the pictures and the stories that they tell, or Mrs. Ford shared – all of those years in Beaver Creek – at the house and skiing and
all their little matching pajamas, and all coming down, and they had wonderful memories. They were very fortunate that way. And all the grandkids were there, and they had special little beds that they slept in and it was just really ideal. The kids still come to see her. She had grandkids come for Thanksgiving, and more coming this coming week, and they are constantly in and out. I think that that is really great for her – her family. Very family oriented.

Smith: She always loved clothes.

Hart: Well, I would say she still does.

Smith: It helps that she can wear them well.

Hart: That’s right.

Smith: Not everyone can.

Hart: Isn’t that the truth? There is one thing about Mrs. Ford, she always looks good, but when she gets dressed up to go out, she just hits that door and she’s on, and she looks fabulous. She does. She still does. She just doesn’t get dressed in ball gowns.

Smith: What was a typical day, if there is such a thing around here, for you?

Hart: Now?

Smith: Well, no, say when they were more active. What was it like?

Hart: Well, you’d come in in the morning and you’d do schedules for the week or month, and Mrs. Ford might have many things on the schedule and you’d stop in to see her first thing. You’d go over everything for the day, find out if there is anything that she needed of you, and she could do like four things in a day. Very busy. And then she always tried to be home - she and President Ford always like to have lunch together. So they would come home and have lunch together, and then we’d start again in the afternoon. Often times they’d have something in the evening then, so I would stay and get her ready. Every now and then President Ford would drag me in and say, “What do I wear?” or
“What tie should I wear?” And I’d say, “Why don’t we go ask your wife? Better she make that decision for you.”

Smith: Now there are stories - he very rarely threw away anything. And there are stories on occasions of him showing up in a particularly memorable suit, and her saying, “You’re not going to wear that.”

Hart: There were those times. There were times that he insisted, and that’s just the way it was going to be. And he would always be ready before she did. So he would go out and sit in the study and wait for her. And other times she’d say, “No, you have to change.” And then he would. I think he would do just about anything for her. But she would say, “No, that’s not it. That’s not it.” But, you know, it was really fun having those times and those moments where it was just them getting ready to go, or we’re all getting ready to go and they would leave in the motorcade, and I’d drive behind. Very special, close, times that people don’t often get a chance to be part of.

I remember the time we went to Bob Hope’s funeral, and we were staying in a hotel, and everything was over for the day and I’d stopped back by, and he said, “Come back in your pajamas, we’re getting in ours and we’re going to sit and play some cards and have some ice cream. I expect you back in ten minutes.” And that was great fun because they were wonderful together and they could make you feel very much at ease at those times.

Smith: You mentioned Bob Hope’s name. It has come up more than once this week. Seeing his last years and how he was, well…exhibited, in some ways…

Hart: Yes, exactly.

Smith: Must have been a sobering experience – for anyone. And I wonder whether…

Hart: I think sometimes, too, Mrs. Ford would look at that and always think, this is something that I don’t want, or I would hope that wouldn’t happen. But they were so close for so long, and Mrs. Hope right now is 99, and they still converse and send each other gifts. Everyone is aging. Mrs. Ford goes, “My, everyone – we’re all getting older.” And I said, “That’s what happens.” But
we were fortunate with President Ford in that that never took place. Mrs. Ford was always very careful, I think, with that.

Smith: I sensed that they both enjoyed, and almost actively pursued having younger people around them.

Hart: They did. I think that they had a lot to share and they enjoyed being around all types of people, all the time. It was just part of their life, but they did like to have younger people around. I just think of them up in Beaver Creek. They would get together with friends and laugh and just have the best time. It was wonderful to see – that was wonderful to see because that’s something - that everyone’s family is so different. My parents certainly never were in that kind of ________, but they were much quieter. This was great fun to see because there was always something to go do, or something to get dressed for, or had people over for drinks or hors d’oeuvres, or let’s meet before we do this. There were so many places that they went, that they enjoyed doing.

Smith: Did they have favorite television programs?

Hart: Mrs. Ford loves Dancing with the Stars, and they used to watch that. They watched a lot of things. They watched A&E, the Discovery Channel, they would watch old movies – the History Channel. He, especially, enjoyed those things and so they always did that. Would watch nightly news – every night, 5:30, they’d watch the news. And movies, they always enjoyed that as well.

Smith: And at least once a year they’d go to New York and do theater.

Hart: They did. Mrs. Ford – she loved that. That was really fun for her because New York is an exciting place to be. They haven’t done that, though – they didn’t do that, I should say, for probably a good six-seven years or so.

Smith: I remember hearing that they’d seen The Producers.

Hart: Yes.

Smith: That may have been the last trip they took to New York.

Hart: Yes. And they loved going to the McCallum. They would go there for a variety of events – there was the 9/11, a lot of things, and the Fords were
involved, or were guests of honor, or honorary chairs. But they loved to go to shows there and meet up with all of their friends in the Founders level, and go for dinner there. Afterwards, when they had certain shows or Broadways or singers, they always did that. And Mrs. Ford still supports that.

Smith: Did you go up to Vail?

Hart: I did. I was lucky enough to go up there in Beaver Creek, and I would stay probably about five or six minutes from the residence so I’d always be close.

Smith: And they obviously loved the place.

Hart: They did. That was a special house. It had space for everything. I loved that house. It was fun to be there. I’d never really been there before. I’d been to Vail and driven through or stayed, but it was a real delight to have the opportunity to be there. I didn’t stay the entire summer, I would go up for weeks – like six weeks at a time and come back home for a week or two and then I would go back up. It was relaxed, and it was nice having the office just downstairs in the residence and I could pop up and down all the time.

Smith: Penny and I had joked that the office was referred to as the Black Hole of Calcutta.

Hart: It was. That was the tiniest little spot and cell phones wouldn’t work in there, and everything was very close. It was one, two, three, as far as desks go. Agents had about this much space in front of us. But there is something fun about that when you look back at it because it was the summer, and what’s not to like about summer up in Vail? So, we were very fortunate to be able to tag along with that.

Smith: What was a typical day like up there? I heard that he actually would go and get the mail.

Hart: He would. He would come down, or he would drive down the hill, and go to the post office, because they had post office boxes there, and Mrs. Ford would go outside. It was nice because they could just be themselves. And they knew almost everyone, of course, in the cul-de-sac, so many of them were friends. It was very relaxed. It was enjoyable. You could just go up and President Ford
would always be there. You could see him in his office as you came up the
steps, and he would say hello, or ask you to come in. Or they would be sitting
in the living room or having breakfast or tea. And they were very
approachable then. It was a lovely, lovely place.

Smith: But he worked in the office.

Hart: He worked in the office. He’d go in there for the day, and he’d sit in there and
read with that big bay window behind him, and he enjoyed it. He always
wanted to come to the office and that was one nice thing he was always able
to do, even here. He could always walk over and sit at the desk, whether he
had a lot to do at the end or not. But it was nice to have him here. Felt normal.

Smith: And it probably felt abnormal when he stopped coming over.

Hart: Yeah. Even Mrs. Ford, she doesn’t come over as often, and I miss that. So I
try to tell her everything that goes on. And she knows that I’ll do that, so it
just keeps her abreast of what goes on over here since she’s not over here as
much. But she knows it’s here and I think that sometimes that’s all she needs
– is to know that, if she wants to, the office is here, and it’s the same. And she
likes that – she likes knowing that.

Smith: Do you remember the events surrounding his 90th birthday? There was the
tribute at the White House.

Hart: Yes. We stayed at the Willard – that was a very big thing. And it was exciting
– it was an exciting time. I remember he was very excited about it, too. And
all the kids were there and everyone looked so wonderful, and going to the
White House was always a special treat. They treated us all well, and I say
that because, I’m just Mrs. Ford’s personal assistant, and they still were so
kind to me and I really appreciated that. I remember the cake that had these
little chocolate coins of President Ford with his face and they brushed them
with gold. So I wrapped mine up and put it in my handbag, and I still have
that in my freezer. He was thrilled with everything. He felt really wonderful, I
think, and it was an exciting evening for him, and everything working up to
that. So, it was a special time.
Smith: He had the big event in Grand Rapids.

Hart: Yes.

Smith: Which I think was the last time he was back in Grand Rapids.

Hart: That’s right. Yes.

Smith: In one sense, it was right about that time that he really had to cut back on the travel.

Hart: He started to cut back more. Yeah. Like Mrs. Ford always said to me, “There’s a time when you know you don’t have to do everything anymore.” And I think she is right. It’s just knowing when that time is for you. But, for him, I think that he did start to slow down and, just like Mrs. Ford says, it’s okay to be retired.

Smith: In one sense, he never really wanted to retire.

Hart: No, and he didn’t. By coming to work and always being active or going into the conference room, he’d come back after lunch and walk by and go, “Is there anything to sign?” And they’d go in to see if there was anything that he needed to do. And it was the sameness of the day that he had done for so many years, and that meant a lot to him because that’s who he was. It’s that work ethic, you know. So many holidays, and that’s it. Because when you come to work, that’s what you came for.

Smith: Well, we heard about the working Saturday.

Hart: Yes.

Smith: And then when we pointed out to him that the next day might be a holiday, he would say, “I didn’t vote for it.”

Hart: That’s true. We gave up one holiday, and we took it as the day after Thanksgiving instead, so that we could have two days in a row. But President Ford would have worked every day, I think, if he had his own way.

Smith: Did he talk about his early days? Did he reminisce much?
Hart: I think that, if I was with the Fords, or if we were traveling, or afterwards when we got to our destination, sometimes he would do that. Or he would mention certain things, “Well, you know what, Jan? We did this back when, and do you know who this is in that photo?” He was always really good about that because I didn’t know all of that. Then he and Mrs. Ford would then begin to chat. And that was really fun because I just felt like I was a fly on the wall.

Smith: The other side of that coin is, I only heard him disparage two people. And the worst that he could think to say about someone was, “He was a bad man.” That the worst. And one was Gordon Liddy.

Hart: Yes.

Smith: And the other was John Dean.

Hart: I heard that, too.

Smith: Did you hear any others?

Hart: No, I don’t think that I can think of anyone, really. Not to me, anyway.

Smith: And, of course he became really good friends with President Carter.

Hart: He did. They really did have a nice relationship from what I could tell. They were on Air Force One. They flew with us at the time of President Ford’s demise, and they were just wonderful, warm people. And Mrs. Ford always spoke highly of him and said how much President Ford and President Carter forged a wonderful relationship. And, of course, Rosalyn did with Mrs. Ford. In fact, they just had the parity bill pass and that was long in coming for mental health, and insurance rights, etc. So, they’ve worked long and hard on some things, and it’s nice to see them all work together.

Smith: I wasn’t aware of it at the time, because when you are doing something like that you’re in a fog, but I read afterwards, at the funeral in Grand Rapids, when I was doing the eulogy that Mrs. Carter was weeping in the pew.

Hart: Yeah.
Smith: Who would have imagined, thirty years earlier that that’s how the story would end.

Hart: And Mrs. Ford always said to me, “Times have changed in the political arena some. Before you could be on differing sides all day long, but you always socialized together, and you put that aside, and you were just gentlemen and ladies.” She says that has changed maybe a little bit and that was very true, I think, with the relationship with the Carters. Things change. Thank goodness time does change and soften. President Ford always said he had a great relationship with President Carter.

Smith: When did he stop coming into the office? Was it a matter of months?

Hart: Yes, I think that that’s really about it. He would come over sometimes and he would sit there. He might come over and take a little short afternoon nap here, or watch sports on TV. And if Mrs. Ford was away, it was just really nice. To him this was just like a room in his home, and it was a space where he loved to be. And it was easy because the sidewalks that connect the two, and it was just so close. We always loved to see him come over.

Smith: And one sensed, from the conversations that took place, that Mrs. Ford was reluctant for a long time to have outside help.

Hart: You know, there is something in your mind that you think, oh, you mean I actually should consider this? I think anyone might be that way. But that was tough because it meant the beginning of a change. And I know that even after President Ford passed away, we were concerned about her being by herself in that big home. It’s not a good time to be by yourself when you’ve just lost your husband and your children finally have to go home. She didn’t need it, she didn’t necessarily want it, but she finally realized when the kids said, but Mom, we want someone here with you. And it makes perfect sense. You can have Secret Service around you and you can have staff you can call night and day, but if no one is actually in the home, you wouldn’t know if anything happened. So she slowly got used to that idea and found out it wasn’t so bad, but that was an adjustment.

Smith: Well, and the Secret Service – they are not caregivers.
Hart: No, they are here for protection. I think that sometimes other people might forget that. That is just strictly their role. And so our role is very different with her and she has household staff, of course, and she has nurses there now. It’s nice. It’s different people to speak to during the day. And then I’m in and out constantly during the day. I see her when she gets up and at the breakfast table, and she’ll call me over. I’m there at lunch and go and visit with her before I leave. Sometimes I don’t get home until really late. But it’s an important time and I think it is important for her to know that we’re here. And I love it when she talks. She talks to all her friends or calls, sometimes has them over, because that’s important, too. You have to remember who she is and respect that, and realize that we are just staff.

Smith: So she’s not a recluse?

Hart: No. No, she’s not. She’ll have friends over for lunch. If she goes out and gets her hair done, she might come back and place a lot of calls and just chat with all of her friends. But she speaks to friends every week. All the time. I think it’s easy to become, not necessarily a recluse, but to say, I feel comfortable here. When we were away for the summer, it’s really nice to stay with her for those three month’s time and it’s hard to let go of that when I come back. But we have really great times together. It’s nice to just to sit and talk and go over stories and remembrances, and have her speak to friends, or see friends when she’s there. It is just a different time, now, for her.

Smith: Does she talk a lot about him?

Hart: She does. And I think that that’s important, too. I think some people are very careful and other people bring it up all the time. I think that there is always timing, there’s a time and a place, and when they want to talk, I think that they should. And I think it’s good to talk about him, too. I have very fond memories of him. He was always so kind to me and very sweet. Mrs. Ford was in the hospital one time, I remember, up in Beaver Creek. She was getting tests and they decided to keep her overnight. He said, “Well, okay. Do you want to drive back with me?” And I said, “I have my car, sir.” So I drove back and he called me and said, “Well, I’d like you to have dinner with me.” I said, “I’d be happy to.” So the chef would make dinner and those were very
unusual, very sweet times, I thought. Some I’ll never, ever forget. And for that I am eternally grateful, because I never would have imagined that I’d be doing this.

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

Hart: Yes. I left – my family is Scandinavian and they always celebrate on the 24th, on Christmas Eve – so I generally would drive up on Christmas Eve with the family to see them. And I stopped by and said goodbye, and he’d always hold my hand real tight, always wanted me to assure him that I would take care of Mrs. Ford, and I wouldn’t leave. And I promised him I wouldn’t.

Smith: Was he in the study?

Hart: Yes.

Smith: I thought he was in a hospital bed, but it was in the study.

Hart: Yes, that’s right. Because it was out where everyone was, and there was light and he could look out at the golf course, he could watch TV, they could sit and eat dinner together, so it was very nice. It kept him in the middle of things. And so, whenever I was there, which was often during the day, I always stopped by, or he always called me, and I went over. He would look at me and we’d chat, or he’d hold my hand and I would promise and he would close his eyes. So the last time I saw him was on the 24th. I said, “Merry Christmas,” and that I would hope to see him when I returned and I would be back on the 27th or the 28th. So I got the call on the 26th.

Smith: But he was conscious when you chatted.

Hart: Yes. We didn’t chat a lot, but he looked at me and squeezed my hand and then closed his eyes. Yeah.

Smith: Were you surprised by the overwhelming response?

Hart: Oh – the letters that we got afterwards – I think it took over a year for me to just get through everything – all the thank you letters, and all of the details that came in after the fact. It was astounding. We still receive mail for Mrs. Ford, or I should say, Mrs. Ford does. We still receive mail for President Ford
– which astounds me. When it comes from Boy Scouts or from military
asking for commendations and things and I have to break the news to them
that Mrs. Ford doesn’t do that, President Ford is no longer here. But the
outpouring came from everywhere. One of the most touching things for me
was in Grand Rapids, driving in from the airport and having the streets and
the freeways lined with people - from toddlers and little schools – all the way.
I just never witnessed that before, never will again, and never imagined that
two people could be loved so much. That was very touching. The Parmas
were in the car with me and it was interesting because Mr. Parma looked at
me and he said, “Jan, you need to start waving,” and I said, “Oh, sir, they
don’t know who I am.” And he said, “Oh, but you don’t understand. They
came out for this. The least you can do is just wave to them and acknowledge
them being there. They’re not certain who is in the motorcade. They just
know you are.” And it’s something I’ve never thought of before. That was just…

Smith: Was she touched by the response?

Hart: Oh, she was. She was just flabbergasted, I think. She would say, “Well, you
know, we’re from here. This is home.” But when you would go by the
museum - just the people across the bridge, and up and down the river, it was
just…

Smith: But even in D.C., I was working for ABC the first part of the week, and as I
said, in the media, they were astonished at the reaction, and how it seemed to
build as the week went on.

Hart: It did.

Smith: And I think a lot of it was, there was a whole generation that wasn’t even
alive when he was in the White House. And they were being introduced to
him for the first time and they were comparing with the status quo and he
looked awfully good. And one of the things that struck me in D.C. – first of
all, remember, from the very outset of the funeral planning, he was adamant
about one thing: there was not going to be a caisson through the streets of
Washington.
Hart: Yes, that's right.

Smith: Adamant. And yet, I had to be up at the cathedral that morning for ABC, so I wasn’t in the procession – but I was told there were people lining the streets all through Washington on your way up to the cathedral, as if there had been a caisson.

Hart: And they were, yes. I think that we had that everywhere. We even had that here in the desert, but Washington was fantastic, too. It was different because it was Washington, but you saw people everywhere. They would be in parking structures, you could see them at the windows of their offices, all up and down. I’ll never forget going up to the Rotunda and seeing the winding roads of just streams of people.

Smith: Over New Year’s weekend.

Hart: Yeah. Waiting to go. And you remember how cold it was. It was cold. They didn’t care.

Smith: And remember, outside the White House? The staff?

Hart: Yes. That was special. I don’t care who you are, that had to touch you because it just gave you goose bumps. Every part of that is ingrained in my mind. We all saw different parts of it because we were in different timing of the whole, but it was something spectacular for the entire nation. I think it meant a great deal to everyone. President Ford, even to this day, you hear so much about his integrity. I was just at an event at the McCallum for their 21st anniversary, and they had Dianna Ross the other night, and I was speaking to the doctor that I worked for for twenty years and he still had his Republican pin on, and I said, “Well, aren’t you ever going to take that off?” and he goes, “No!” But they all still talk about him, and about how special he was. I think that’s a true testament to his character and to who the Fords really are.

Smith: Well, and – just a couple of things and we’ll let you go – but I’ll never forget – we’d been told at ABC, right from St. Margaret’s, don’t be surprised if you see Mrs. Ford in a wheelchair. And of course, we didn’t. And then, at the end, she got out of the wheelchair, walked all the way down – that’s a long walk.
They had asked her after she got back here, why she did that. And almost matter of factly, she said, “Because that’s what my husband would have wanted.”

Hart: That’s right. That’s what he would expect of me. And whenever we’d talk about that, or what would you like to do, or how would you like to go? She goes, “No, Jan, I’m walking.” Whether it was from the museum out to burial site, it didn’t matter what the weather was like, or anything. She is such a lady that way, and she didn’t do it to put on the show, but she knew that this was what she expected of herself, and she did it. She did it.

Smith: And she wasn’t well at that point, was she?

Hart: She wasn’t. She wasn’t feeling that terrific then, but she decided that she would put all of that behind her and she’d get back to that later. She had something with her lungs.

Smith: I understand she is vulnerable to respiratory complaints, isn’t she? Lots of people are.

Hart: She is. That’s her Achilles heel. But she said, no, this is a different time. It’s almost as if it wasn’t about her then, it was about her dear husband, and she certainly lived up to anyone’s standards, I think, during that whole time. She did a fabulous job. I was really, not that I should be proud of her for that, but I was just really touched and very proud of the way she managed herself through that, and everything that she did because I didn’t think she would be able to do it. But she did. She surprised me.

Smith: And I’m sure that was commented on in the letters that came in afterwards.

Hart: Yes. She got everything from baby blankets that people made and sent, to enormous quilts where they went online and would get pictures of the Fords throughout their lifetime, and they would photocopy them and they would put them on paper, and then they would put them onto the fabric. And children in schools, it’s truly remarkable what people sent to her. And a lot of that we’ve sent on now to the library and the museum. Some things she still has here. She received prayer shawls, people were just really generous – and they still send
her things. Very generous, very generous minded people. People, I think, in the United States are very proud of who we are, and where we’ve come from and what we have and I think that presidents, past and present, and their families, are cherished. And it’s nice to see that.

Smith: What would you tell someone who never met him – what should they know about Gerald Ford?

Hart: I thought that he was – at first, when I was just a little afraid of him – but he was always so kind and considerate, and he never looked down on you. But he was fun to be around, for me, in my job. And I just think that he was a true gentleman. He would always say hello, he would always say thank you for anything that you would do, or really appreciate your extra efforts or your staying longer. He was always very generous that way to thank you or congratulate you, or just to make you feel comfortable. That certainly was lovely for me. He was a wonderful man.

Smith: Thank you, that was great.
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this.

Before your paths crossed with Gerald Ford - you’d been in the Nixon White House.

Jones: I was.

Smith: And before that, what was your background?

Jones: My background is, I was brought up in a small town out in West Texas. My dad was a rancher out there and his parents were ranchers and my mother’s parents were ranchers. My mother had a fortuitous experience in her life - her mother was determined that she would be an educated person. So she and her sister would trade off, working, teaching school out there, and send the other one to college. They went through two years at the University of Texas and then two years with their degrees at the University of Chicago. Then they both went on for Master’s degrees. My mother missed hers by a few hours, her sister got hers. And so it was always, “You’ve got to be an educated person.”

So, I wanted to be a football player (West Texas generates them). I got injured first game my junior year in high school. I decided I’d better get smart because I’m not going to be able to go play football at the University of Texas. I happened to know of, through fortuitous circumstances, a school named Phillips Exeter Academy and I wrote them a letter and said, “Hey, I’d like to come to your school.” I was diversity at that time, coming from a little town in Texas. I took their test and didn’t do very well, but they said, “Come to summer school.” I did. They said, “Hey, you did well enough to stay. We want you to go back a year.” I said, “No, let me try.” So I went from a junior in this little small high school to a senior at Exeter and made it. By the skin of my teeth, I made it.
Back then, most of the people went to three schools from Exeter. Ninety-four of us went to Harvard, 45 or so to Yale, 25-30 to Princeton. Seventy-five, eighty percent of the class, three schools. So, I went to Harvard, loved it. It just so happened that the head of the department of government was from my little home town. Maybe the only other guy that ever escaped from the magnetic field.

Smith: What was his name?

Jones: His name was V.O. Key. V.O. wrote one of the classic textbooks of government called *Parties, Politics and Pressure Groups*.

Smith: What year did you graduate from Harvard?


Smith: So you were there with Mr. Pusey.

Jones: Yes, Mr. Pusey.

Smith: And they still called them the “Silent Fifties.” On the cusp of the anything but silent Sixties.

Jones: And then went to Harvard Business School. Graduated in 1964. Went to New York City, worked for McKinsey & Company, which was a major - not worldwide in that time, it was sort of in its golden age - major consulting firm. It was basically a Ph.D. in business. I left there, bought a little company out near Chicago in McHenry, Illinois. Then the Nixon downturn hit me, leverage buy-outs were no longer possible. I was in sort of the early leading edge of how you did that. Then a friend of mine who I had gone to business school with and who I’d got a job at McKinsey - I’d been there since summer, they had three summer associates and I was one of them - I recommended a number of people in that class. His name was Fred Malek. Fred’s here. Anyway, Fred landed in the White House. He came in with Bob Finch over at HEW. And then Haldeman liked him, brought him over to the White House and Fred asked me to come down for six months to help him reorganize the White House personnel office.
So, I came down and worked on getting that office straight, it’d been the victim of a power struggle between John Mitchell, who had had the personnel operation and was overseeing it, and Haldeman, who took it over from the Attorney General. And as I went along there, I really enjoyed it. Mitchell landed at the campaign and wanted someone to audit the field operations in the campaign and what better than a McKinsey guy to set up a system to make sure the campaign was operating well and effectively in the 50 states. So I went over there and I’d been there about a month and Mitchell was gone. The break-in occurred. Mitchell was gone. The campaign was in turmoil and I was given the job essentially of organizing and running a 50 state campaign, the campaign in the 50 states, which I did. We had a marvelous experience. McGovern was an unfortunate candidate for the other side and we won 49 states.

Smith: Let me just back up a bit because, during the campaign, how much internal concern was there about Watergate?

Jones: My side of the campaign was totally clean. Malek was there. He had the voter blocks, Farmers for Nixon, Veterans for Nixon in the field operation and I was the deputy to Fred running the campaign in the 50 states. Magruder’s group organized that break-in. We thought some funny business had probably happened, but were totally untouched. Didn’t think much about it. Yeah, well, “Mitchell and Magruder…” Never thought, never thought that it would have gone into the White House.

Smith: When you see what has become, what we’ll call accepted history, say the Woodward-Bernstein version of events - is there anything with which you take particular exception? Is there an alternate history?

Jones: Let me answer your first question before you ask that one. We knew that there was a guy named Fred LaRue, there was a guy named Bob Mardian, there were Magruder –

Smith: Were they Mitchell people?
Jones: All of those were Mitchell people. We knew they were involved, particularly LaRue and Magruder. Magruder was a weak, sort of too ambitious fellow, not much character. So we knew that those fellows were into skullduggery.

The other thing that everyone asks why in the world would you want to do that? The DNC is not effective, it’s not important. And so it was sort of a “Stupid” - “Probably Magruder currying favor” - “Let’s don’t worry about it. Let’s go win this campaign.” So, at the time, there was not a lot of fuss about it. It was fairly clear that some of these fellows probably did that. There’s no question, you know, the head of security was caught.

So, later, there is some serious question about John Dean’s role and whether or not he was instructed to do these things and whether or not he was the intermediary, as he claims, between Nixon and Haldeman and Mitchell, and so on. There’s been a book about his interest in this and I talked to the guy years ago, years ago now. You know, I guess I come down to the thought that - Magruder once told me his opinion of what happened and he said that the reason they broke in was that Nixon was concerned that – who was the chairman?

Smith: Larry O’Brien.

Jones: Larry O’Brien, who worked for Howard Hughes, knew something of Nixon’s brother’s transactions with Hughes and was worried those… And apparently Nixon’s mother got some money, too, if you remember, maybe $100,000 to pay off a mortgage or something. I’ve forgotten all of the details of it, but there was something there. I guess I’ve come to the thought that probably Nixon did it, probably instructed it done.

Smith: How will we ever know that? Is it possible there’s something on a tape somewhere, or something that was erased on a tape somewhere?

Jones: Well, you may or may not know, I was, after the gap was found, the custodian of the tapes.

Smith: Really?
Jones: Yeah, and I think the tapes have been looked at pretty carefully. My guess is there’s nothing on the tapes. Although the only chance, I think, is that the people who might know - Chuck Colson, Jeb Magruder, Dwight Chapin, Larry Higby, who was special assistant to Haldeman - the people who might have known, Fred Fielding, would toward the end of their lives talk about it. That’s the only chance, in my view. Now, Haldeman had a diary published and so on, but we don’t really have a lot of light on it at this point.

Smith: When you say you were custodian of the tapes, was there at any time to your knowledge any consideration given at the top to destroying those tapes?

Jones: No. I will tell you an interesting story and this begins the Ford administration. Fred Buzhardt, as you know, was formerly general counsel here, was still a Strom Thurmond guy, was the President’s -- Nixon’s - chief attorney on the tape matters. I mean, there were other attorneys, but Fred was the most trusted attorney and did all. The tapes could only be listened to by four people, Nixon himself, Rose Mary, Al Haig, and Fred Buzhardt. I don’t ever recall Al listening to one. The president rarely did. He asked that they be delivered to Steve Bull, who was his personal assistant. Rose Mary Woods and Fred Buzhardt were my two major customers.

I had a book that had every tape listed on spreadsheets with dates and a receipting system. If Buzhardt wanted a tape and he would call, actually Haig would call and say, “The president has given permission for Fred to listen to the blank tape.” And so I would take it to Fred and he would sign a receipt for it, you know, “On this day, I have received…” And then, when he was through with it or at the end of the day, I would go get it, sign a receipt that I received it in order to have a chain-of-custody. Then I would enter initials and time in and time out on the spreadsheets so I could see at a glance who had heard what tape when.

The interesting thing was, when President Ford came into office, there was sort of a scurrying about. Nixon called and wanted his tapes and President Ford agreed to give them to him, apparently, or someone did. I think Phil Buchen did. Perhaps President Ford, I’m not quite sure. Anyway, Buzhardt then calls me, I think two days, maybe three, after President Ford was sworn
in and said, “Jerry, pack up the tapes, the military fellows who were flying
daily flights out to San Clemente will take the tapes out and some of the
papers this afternoon. So, please get them boxed up and ready to go.”

I had a vault, only key, EPS officer outside, two alarms, the only combination
and then five combination safes, fireproof, again, only combinations were
with me. So I went in there, hot, hot, hot. It was in August, oh God, it was
hot in the basement of the EOB under a stairwell. And I packed the tapes up
and then Buzhardt appears knocking on the door. No one ever entered the
vault except for me. So Fred comes in and he says, “Jerry, we can’t do this.
We’ll all go to jail. Unpack them.” And so we were within probably 45
minutes of loading all of those boxes full of tapes on a dolly, into a military
van, delivered to Andrews, and flown to San Clemente.

Smith: Do you know what sequence of events transpired in between those
conversations that you had?

Jones: Yes, I do. Phil Buchen, either he himself changed his mind or he got
someone else to change their mind and counterman the order. And I do not
know whether it was Buchen to Ford, “Mr. President, we shouldn’t do this”,
or whether it was the president having second thoughts, or whether Buchen on
his own said ‘no.’ Now, I don’t believe Phil would have said ‘no’ on his own.

Section Not Released

Smith: Where were you in the last, in the final days? I mean, where were you in the
White House?

Jones: Okay, I’ll tell you. After the campaign in 1972, I came back to the White
House personnel office again, which is the office that recommends to the
president who he might consider to appoint to the presidentially-appointed,
confirmed by the Senate positions, as well as screening all the other non-
career positions for political and other type, legal and FBI vetting. I went
back there. President Nixon decided we had a number of “spent volcanoes”
in his terminology. We were charged, a group of us who had been there in the
past, with sorting through whose resignation should be accepted. As I recall,
at the end of the day, beginning of January, there were of the 500, as I
remember, excluding US attorneys and ambassadorial appointees, there were 555 PAS positions then. By about the 10th of January, 355 of those slots were open.

Smith: Really?

Jones: Yeah. Some of the people were resigning and others were asked - their resignations were accepted. But a small team of us, about six or seven people, worked through all of the personnel and the PASs and recommended to the president whose letters he should accept.

Smith: I have to ask you, what kind of factors were weighed? I mean, was ideology…?

Jones: Capability and whether they cooperated with the Nixon agenda. And we had a lot of people that did not cooperate with the Nixon agenda, who basically did their own thing and Nixon was really upset about that. So he had a chance to get them and he got them. So, we did that.

Smith: Did that include members of the cabinet?

Jones: Well, you know a lot of people would debate about these things, but Mel Laird left as did others. So, we did that. Then, oh about the 10th, 15th Malek went to be deputy director of OMB under Ash, and Haldeman called and said, “You’re the guy to run the White House liaison office. You’re it.” So I became the special assistant to President Nixon running the White House personnel office. Haig then comes in a little later. Haig and I get along beautifully. I filled, I think when I left there, ten of those 355 positions were open. You always have a float(?) of open positions. We’d done them, we filled them in the middle of the Watergate. In the middle of it and we, I think, we did a great job. Let me say that.

Haig then called me about, oh, I can’t really remember, early 1974. “Come over and see me.” Went over and [he] said, “You finished the job in the personnel office. I want you now to become staff secretary. And there’s a job, by the way, an extra assignment. You will be the custodian of the tapes.” So, I took them over then.
Smith: Did you have a sense, did he have a sense, was there any kind of collective sense at that point – if you’re talking about the beginning of ’74, you’ve got - Agnew’s gone, Ford’s been confirmed –

Jones: Oh, the Agnew thing was really interesting. I got a call from Camp David from Haldeman. “Jerry?”, “Yes, sir”, “Do you know how many positions the vice president has?” “Well, he has a number and I have a book right here on my desk. Let me look here. Ah, about two pages of positions, about 50, I’d guess.” He said, “Would you send a list up tonight to Camp David by helicopter?” “Yes, sir, I will.” Next day, he calls me, he says, “Prepare letters of resignation for the vice president for all positions except the vice presidency, please.” “Yes, sir.”

Smith: Let me get the timing of this right.

Jones: This is before it broke. It was before it broke. In January ’73 or even earlier in December ’72.

Smith: Okay, because Haldeman left. I mean, they left, what, in the late spring of ’73?

Jones: Yeah, so this was early. This was before anyone knew that Agnew was on the chopping block and they cleared him out. So I had to do that. It was very interesting. And so, you know, “What’s up folks?” Very interesting. Anyway, so, I did that.

Smith: Wow – I obviously didn’t know that. No one else did. So, by early ’74, is there anything such as a collective mood or prognosis around Haig in terms of the future?

Jones: It daily got worse. Every day it was worse. The drip, drip, drip of the Felt leaks, the Saturday Night Massacre –

Smith: Did you suspect, did people suspect –

Jones: Yeah, it looked as though it was coming out of the FBI. We didn’t know from whom, but it looked as though it was the interview notes from the FBI investigation. That’s what we thought at the time.
Smith: And why would someone in the FBI have had – what was the motive?

Jones: Well, who knows what motives are but clearly somebody was sticking it to Nixon for their own reasons, whatever they might have been. In Felt’s case it was ‘duty, God, and country,’ I’m sure, but then because he’d been passed over.

Smith: It’s a little more complicated than it seems.

Jones: Yeah. So, the answer is that we were embattled. There was no question about it. Nobody knew how it was going to turn out, however. And, I will tell you my personal view, and I think most of my colleagues’ view. Very few people left the White House, only Shultz left the cabinet, very few people bailed on Nixon. And the reason for it was, there were two reasons. The first one was, and I remember it vividly - my thought here - Nixon would not be so damned stupid as to have done this. It just can’t possibly be true. He is much more clever than this. And the other one was, is that Al Haig was a commanding presence. What a wonderful man. He’s an American hero in my opinion. He held that government together. And he negotiated the deal with Jaworski. And he negotiated the deal with a somewhat to, perhaps, majorly incapacitated president. And he kept the train on the tracks. Al Haig, if he never did another thing in the history of the United States, he is absolutely a hero and should have been recognized as the hero he was. He hasn’t been, but tour de force, absolutely amazing thing. And he kept the cabinet together, he kept the government together, he kept the White House together and he kept Nixon together. It was amazing.

Smith: You talked about every day getting worse and at the same time obviously no one knew how it was going to wind up. At the same time, knowing the tapes were this sort of unknown commodity that presumably at any point something might surface that would lead to exactly what happened –

Jones: Nixon could not possibly have been so stupid as to do this. Cannot possibly. He knew the recording system was there, for God sakes.

Smith: Were you surprised when you first heard of the existence of the recording system?
Jones: Uhm, no. I was not surprised. What did surprise me was the extent of which it was a part. As it turns out, Roosevelt had a crawl space in the Oval Office and he had a secretary crawl in the crawl space and take shorthand notes at the air conditioning vent near the desk. So it had been going on a long time, a long time. But the thing that was strange was the extent to which it was done.

Smith: Is there a story or anything that illustrates, again for people who weren’t around then, the mood as it evolved during that sort of surreal summer? Or is it a sense that you just sort of went along and then you went over the cliff?

Jones: We were going along and there was a critical date. We did one thing, we published a big book of recordings, expletives deleted. And I had to publish that book.

Smith: Looking back, the expletives, the language, had as much impact on ordinary Americans as anything in particular that was said.

Jones: It’s about like Blago.

Smith: Yeah, it’s one thing to think about it in the abstract and it’s another to hear it.

Jones: What happened was, was we were on essentially a flat line. The critical decision was: Will executive privilege hold? Can Sirica make the president turn the tapes over or not? And so we were tracking along through that lawsuit, a lot of leaks and so on, but the presidency was operating, decisions were being made, things were being done…

Smith: And you assumed you had at least enough votes in the Senate to win a trial.

Jones: Right. At that time, it looked as though Nixon could survive if he could win the executive privilege argument. Well, the decision came down. The tapes had to be given up and that’s when it became a difficult thing. And I will tell you exactly how it happened, I remember it vividly. The decision was made. Nixon was in San Clemente. The decision was not what we expected it to be. I think most of us thought we would win that case. I certainly did. I think he should’ve won it, frankly, but he didn’t. And the case then, I was called by Ken Clawson who was the director of communications who was in San
Jerry Jones

Clemente, and he said, “Jerry, you think it is possible that the president could stiff the Supreme Court in this decision?”

So that was, then, he’d clearly been told to sound out the people in Washington about what was going on. And Bill Timmons, I was in Timmons’ office when that call came to me, Timmons was counting noses in the Senate and we were leaking votes and I just told Clawson, “If the president does that, he’s done. It’s over. It is totally over. He cannot do it. He must deliver the tapes.” So, I was told to pull the tapes together, but before that, that same afternoon, Haig said, “The president wants Fred to listen to the June 23rd Oval Office tape. Would you please go get it and give it to Fred?” So I took it over to Fred and Fred usually kept the tapes to the end of the day and I’d gather them all up. That day, he called me back in, oh, 30-40 minutes, 45, met me at the door of his office, handed me the tape and he said, “Jerry, it’s all over.” My guess is, I probably knew that even before Haig did and before the president. Interestingly enough, that tape had only been listened to twice before, both times by Nixon. That latest one in May. So he knew. He knew.

Smith: At that point, now, does Haig listen to the tape?

Jones: No, Buzhardt listened. Then I had to gather them up, I’d forgotten how many of them there were, 20? 25? I gave them to a guy named, uh, I’ve forgotten his name [Jim St. Claire], one of the attorneys who took them up to Sirica.

Smith: Okay, so Haig, as far as you know, never listened to the June 23rd tape.

Jones: [shakes head] Buzhardt.

Smith: Okay. What was your sense of the relationship between, for lack of a better word, the Nixon people and the Ford people at this delicate juncture? Was there resentment that Ford was out on the road, not in town defending his boss?

Jones: People weren’t paying much attention to that. I mean, I wasn’t. There were some discussions and some leaks about Ford getting ready to take over the presidency if he had to and so on. Maybe other people were paying attention
to it, but, you know, we had some pretty good incoming fire and that was not a major topic, frankly, not a major topic.

Smith: That makes perfect sense. It has been suggested through the years - everyone knows that Ford wasn’t his first choice - but that he [Nixon] looked upon Ford as his insurance against impeachment.

Jones: Well, I’ve heard that and it could’ve been his thinking, but it was terribly wrong because the Congress would have far preferred to have Ford there than a damaged Nixon, I think. So, if that was his calculation, it was incorrect.

Smith: What was Haig’s role in navigating these incredible rapids? I mean, just in terms of steering Nixon, I mean, at some point Haig had to have come to the conclusion that, for the good of the country, there had to be this outcome.

Jones: Well, the conclusion was inescapable. The headcount slipped away.

Smith: Did that happen immediately once the court decision or the…?

Jones: Once the court decision was made, I believe Timmons that day, and you should talk to Bill, I believe his headcount was death to Nixon. I mean, it was done, I believe that day.

Smith: And was that because the court made this ruling and…because people didn’t know yet what was in the tapes, or if Nixon defied the court?

Jones: No, you know, I just think finally there was the tipping point and it went. But you need to talk to Bill on how those headcounts went because I’m not sure, but it seems to me that day we were under water or it was very close.

Smith: Do you remember when the actual “smoking gun” was revealed, do you remember your –

Jones: Done. It was done. Everybody knew it was done. From the time of the decision to the time of the resignation was only four or five days, wasn’t it? It was a very short period of time. Frankly, I’ve forgotten, but it seems to me the decision was early August and Nixon was out by, what, the 9th? What was the date?
Smith: I think the decision was a little earlier than that. I think it was a little earlier.

Jones: Could’ve been.

Smith: But clearly the death throes were –

Jones: It was a very short time period, I mean, just a blink.

Smith: What was Haig doing during that interim?

Jones: Haig was negotiating with Jaworski, he was negotiating with Ford, he was negotiating with Nixon, he was keeping the Cabinet intact, he was...you name it.

Smith: Over the years countless times, the whole idea of whether there was “a deal” comes back to what Haig said to Ford. And was Haig speaking for Nixon? Can you unravel any of that?

Jones: I can’t. I have no visibility into it at all, nor do I think very many people do.

Smith: Would Haig have been, is he a free agent in this? Or is Richard Nixon his client?

Jones: My guess is, you know, I think Haig had a very complex view of what he was trying to do and he was trying to save the president, if he could. If he couldn’t save him, he was trying to save the country. He was not trying to disserve President Ford and it required balancing a lot of interests here and I think he did his damnedest to do that. And when he finally realized that Nixon could no longer be saved, I think he then tried to put together the deal that would allow Nixon to get out of there, Ford to get in there, without unbelievable constitutional debacle. Now, whether he – my guess is he took some liberty with positions in order to get both sides to agree. That would be my guess. But I have no idea, that’s totally un - nobody knows but the guys that were there. And as far as I know, Haig’s never talked about it very much.

Smith: He has been, I think it’s safe to say, made out to be the heavy by some - that he was sort of pulling strings to do Nixon’s dirty work and taking advantage of Ford’s naïveté. Without knowing what was said, I assume you think that’s a mischaracterization.
Jones: I do. I do. Here’s what I sort of think, and this is total speculation.

Smith: Understood.

Jones: The issue of, one of the things that got Nixon to step down, was that if he was impeached, he would lose his pension. And so, if he resigned, he would keep his pension. That was one part of the deal. Then there was the question of would there be a trial post-resignation and would he be sent to jail. And he was sitting there caught on that one. “Well, God, don’t want to do that.” So, if I were guessing, what Haig says is, “Hey, there’s a deal here if you’ll pardon him, he’ll leave now so we don’t have to go through all this.” Now, whether Vice President Ford said ‘yes’ or ‘no’, whether Haig said it in those terms or not, my guess is he lead Nixon to believe that Ford would save him. And whether Ford actually said he would do it or whether Haig read from their conversation that he would do it, I think Nixon thought so. Then we began to get the phone calls from San Clemente after Nixon was there and President Ford was in the office about, “Where in the hell’s my pardon?”

Smith: Really?

Jones: Yeah. He talked to several, a lot of phone calls, particularly to Haig. Yeah, there were. There were. The man was distressed and frantic.

Smith: So he clearly believed there was a deal.

Jones: If he didn’t think, he at least was strongly recommending that if you don’t do this it’s going to absolutely rip everything. You’ve got to do it. From my view, Haig called me up to his office one day, staff secretary’s [office] is down in the basement, and said, “Jerry, what do you think about a pardon?” And I said, “Well, Al, the fact is that we’re not able to do the country’s business with this boiling. All of these decisions that we’ve held over for months as we’ve gone through this have to be made. The president’s being pounded to death on the whole Nixon thing, it’s distracting. We’re not getting the country’s business done. I don’t see how, without a pardon, without getting this off the agenda, the president is going to get to be president.”
My recommendation was absolutely pardon. Do it now. The staff secretary sends anywhere from ten to twenty decision memos up to the president every afternoon. And he’s got to go through them and decide and send them back to you by in the morning, usually. They almost always came back by in the morning. Heavy, heavy extracurricular, you don’t see that, but from sometime in the late afternoon to sometime by 7:00 the next morning, a lot of heavy decisions have to be made. I didn’t see how President Ford could operate the presidency under the kind of fire that he was getting over the Nixon thing. I told Haig, “I don’t see how he can do it.”

Smith: Were you ever in a conversation about the pardon or just a general - the issues that you raise - in which Ford was present?

Jones: No. Absolutely not. Haig asked me my opinion, asked me what I thought. And I told him, point blank, this is what I think.

Smith: Well, it’s interesting, because he asked you your opinion. Did you have a sense at that point that Haig thought this was a done deal or was he asking you, I won’t say ‘going through the motions’, but –

Jones: I had the sense that President Ford asked him to find out what people thought.

Smith: Okay.

Jones: I thought, why else would he have done that? He could’ve on his own gone down there and said, “Mr. President, this is what your staff thinks.” And Haig, I think, trusted me as sort of a political seer person. I just don’t know what he did. I don’t know who all he talked to. I know he talked to me. I don’t know who else he talked to.

Smith: Was there any sense, and again this is after the fact - the argument makes perfect sense that we’re paralyzed and we’re not governing and we don’t see how we’re going to be able to –

Jones: Well, the other problem was, you could see it was going to get worse, it wasn’t going to get better. And so, here we go, show trials for Nixon, Ford’s trying to run the presidency and we’re having show trials.
Smith: And supposedly Jaworski was saying it might be a couple of years before there was a trial.

Jones: And the other thing is, now, the president said that he didn’t intend to run. My view was that he had to run. And I from the early, early on, wanted him to run. And you’ll hear later if we have time, I worked very hard on that. I became his scheduler and sort of news manager head later. Cheney asked me to flip with a guy named Jim Connor who then became staff secretary and I took Connor’s job. Basically ran an image management effort.

Smith: The Rose Garden Campaign?

Jones: That was part of it. I mean, it was a long, involved series of things that we did, but it was the most interesting thing I did at the White House, frankly.

Smith: Let me back up one moment because I want to ask you something. I’ll never forget, when we were talking to Stu Spencer, no, it wasn’t Stu Spencer. Leon Parma told this story: on the morning of the 9th, when he was at the last minute kind of pushed in the East Room with some folks from Capitol Hill and the ceremony took place. He said, obviously, it was somber, there’s no mood of celebration. But when it was over, there was a receiving line and they invited folks down, I think to the state dining room, for a reception. And he said, “You could watch the Ford people who were sort of outnumbered at that point, but people from the Hill, friends and that sort of thing, they all headed down there. And the Nixon people all sort of peeled away and went off to do their own thing.” Now, that may be an exaggeration, it’s a very understandable emotional reaction at that point, but it does raise this large question about the problems posed by integrating a Nixon staff with this interloper.

Jones: Well, it depends on your viewpoint. I had a different viewpoint from that. One thing is true, is a number of the Nixon people should have gone and would go.

Smith: Voluntarily or…?
Jones: Well, some went voluntarily. Some didn’t. But I had an unusual relationship with President Ford, I don’t know why I did. He trusted me for some reason or another. And I remember before he became president saying, “Sir, anything I can do to help you, I want to.”

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Now, one of the things that happened is, early on, Haig went in to President Ford and said, “You’ve got to keep Jones. He’s the only guy that knows how the White House works,” the decision-making process and so on and so forth. President Ford called me up there, Haig was there, and he said, “Jerry, I want you to stay as staff secretary for me.” I said, “Yes, sir. I will.” That was within a day or two or three – fairly quickly. Now, on the thing about the Nixon people peeling off, I didn’t go to the swearing in. I had an assignment from Haig and the assignment was, “Jerry, the Ford transition group wants to implement a decision making process here called ‘spokes of the wheel’ and I want you to write, for the president, a paper on how the chief of staff works and why it works and why a ‘spokes of the wheel’ system will not work.” I stayed up all that night and delivered to Haig the next morning to take in to President Ford a paper on how it worked and why and why you had to do it that way.

Smith: Was the “spokes of the wheel” a congressional mindset?

Jones: Yes, oh yeah. Yeah. That ground’s been plowed pretty well, but the thought was: here Haldeman and Erlichman and Kissinger kept everybody out and the president didn’t know what he had to know. What we need to do is open up the presidency. But it can’t work that way. I mean, it’s a disaster when you do it that way because you have to be able to ensure that everybody has seen the decision and had commented on it and the president knows what they think. He can decide against these. He can decide knowing what the down sides are, but he’s got to know. And what happens when people jump in there, it makes an easy decision, it looks easy. Then suddenly you find, “Oh, my God, we didn’t know this” - “We didn’t know that” - “We didn’t know that.” And unless you have a staff system that ensures you know those hidden
things, you get killed and you begin to make mistakes and you can’t ever, ever get out of the hole.

Smith: Did they learn the hard way?

Jones: Well, the Whip Inflation Now was the great example of that. That never got staffed. It wasn’t looked at.

Smith: Did it come out of the speechwriting operation?

Jones: Yeah, it did. Hartman VFR direct to Ford. Nobody ever saw the speech.

Smith: Really?

Jones: Yeah.

Smith: Wow.

Jones: In the meantime, I briefed Cheney, seems to me, right after Ford became president. And then Rumsfeld came over from NATO. Briefed them at length – Cheney several hours, Rumsfeld at least two – on the staff system, how the decision-making process in the White House worked, why you did it that way, why it was so important to do it that way, and so on. Rumsfeld stopped me in the hall on his way back to NATO and said, “Don’t let them change a thing until I get back.”

Smith: Did he know in advance he was going to have the role that he had?

Jones: He did. I think after those briefings and after his own discussions with others, [he] went to President Ford and said, “I won’t take this unless you keep this chief of staff system in place.” I think you’ll hear from himself if that’s what he said. I believe that’s what he said. I think he’s even told me that’s what he said. I’m sure he’s told me that’s what he said. It had to be. And President Ford said, “Don, can we ease into this? I agree with you, but can we ease into this?” Because it was basically overturning his entire transition team, Seidman and Marsh, Hartmann, Buchen, that whole group got overturned.

Smith: It’s funny you mention that, because to give you another example of where a man’s personal characteristics defined, not always necessarily for the better,
his presidency. When Rockefeller comes up with the Energy Independence
Corporation…he comes up with this hundred billion dollar plan and it’s going
to be funded by moral obligation bonds just like New York State. And,
needless to say, it was not well received, and Bill Simon in particular, was
outspoken, but I think everyone really was. The story I’ve been told, by more
than one source, was that there was a Cabinet discussion of this and it was
very clear that it didn’t have a lot of support. The president indicated that he
would go along with it, and of course, as soon as the meeting is over, Simon
comes up to him and says, “You can’t be serious” and renews all the
arguments. And the president says, “Bill, you and I both know Congress will
never pass this, but I’m not going to embarrass Nelson.”

Jones: I don’t know that. Let me tell you what I do know.

Smith: Yeah.

Jones: After that, several of us, Cheney, Greenspan and me – there could’ve been
another one or two – worried about Rockefeller’s programmatic initiatives.
[We] got the president to say, “There will be no new programs,” which
undercut Nelson. That was the killer for him. I mean, we worked hard on
that and Greenspan lead the charge, but Cheney and others of us supported in
helping him, and the president had the courage to make that decision, to make
it public.

Smith: Now, that decision may be philosophically and economically consistent with
the needs of the time. The way you phrase it sounds though like at least some
of the useful ancillary fallout –

Jones: No, it was absolutely designed to stop Rockefeller. Absolutely, it was
designed to. And the president had incredible courage to make that decision.
Now, it was also required, but he was a conservative on budget matters.

Smith: In talking about Rockefeller’s reaction when he learned of this, my
understanding was that he was thrown for a loop because, where he came
from, you get elected by your programs.

Jones: You buy the governorship every time.
Smith: You come up with new ideas, bigger programs, newer programs –

Jones: Larger buildings, Twin Towers –

Smith: That’s how you win in New York.

Jones: Right.

Smith: Which also suggests a certain parochialism in Rockefeller that I think –

Jones: He was a vote-buying, liberal Republican.

Smith: Did Ford lead Rockefeller to believe that he would be in the domestic sphere like Kissinger was in the foreign sphere?

Jones: Yes, I think when they started that was the intention. And then Nelson started coming in with all this stuff that the president couldn’t live with for a lot of reasons, some philosophic, some were practical reasons. So people began to look askance, and then really askance, and then, “Hey, we can’t do this.” And poor Jim Cannon, oh my God, caught in the middle. And he –

Smith: He’s at the domestic council.

Jones: Running domestic council where all these programs were coming from.

Smith: Which Rockefeller thought would be his vehicle for implementing these ideas.

Jones: Right. And so Rockefeller got upset with Jim. “You’re not serving me, you’re serving Ford!” “Yes!” Jim says, “Richard Parsons said, ‘You guys better look and see who’s signing that paycheck.” He said that Parsons told him that, which is fascinating. Anyway, it began to be a real problem and the reaction was that we have to stop this and so the anti-bodies began to stop Rockefeller.

Smith: Nobody wants to blame the president, so you blame the people around them – so Rockefeller, it’s no news to you, went to his grave convinced that Don Rumsfeld did him in.
Jones: Yes, he did. And I told Rumsfeld that in a conversation I had with him a couple of months ago about his book. He said, “I didn’t do that! I absolutely didn’t do that. All I did was to ensure the president had the full story.”

Smith: Okay, but given the fact that there were also some political aspirations –

Jones: He didn’t smile when he said that, but he denied it vehemently because I said, “One of the things that I thought you did that was one of the most important things you did for the country was to get Vice President Rockefeller off the ticket.” And Don denied it vehemently and denied that he tried to do him in at all. And that Nelson had misunderstood.

Smith: Whatever the truth is there, it does seem that Rockefeller was, at the very least, maybe blinded by ambition or just naïve. For someone who’d been around Washington, and who’d been in those bureaucratic fights for years…there is also a theory that, at that point in his life, he was not the same man he had been ten years before.

Jones: It was a strange thing. He’d been governor too long, didn’t know how to be a vice president or staffer, didn’t talk to people, didn’t come sell them. These things just came full blown. And, you know, you can’t do that. There are a lot of interests.

Smith: And, remember also, every weekend, he’d go up to Pocantico, so he was a commuting vice president.

Jones: Right, so he just didn’t do the homework to get his viewpoints sold, if they could have been sold. He just didn’t do the homework. He put all that stuff out without proper conversation.

Smith: When Ford had that conversation with him or conversations, at the very beginning, all of which led Rockefeller to believe he was going to be a kind of domestic czar - here’s this notion that Ford came into the White House with a congressional mindset and that it took him a long time to, in some ways, grow out of that. I mean, it strikes me as that’s the kind of thing a congressman would say to someone.
Jones: Sure. No, I think there’s no question. President Ford was not ready in terms of having had the executive experience to be president. What I believe is true is that he became and I’ll explain to you why, he became a superb executive over time. He figured out how to do it. And one of the things I think is true, is, I think Don Rumsfeld helped him a lot on how you work through being president. I think Don was coach. You know, he and the president had a long background together. And Don, in fact, had been the guy that had engineered his elevation into the minority leader’s position. It was Don, it wasn’t Laird, it was Rumsfeld. They had a very trusting relationship. The president trusted him and I think Don was a really good coach. I would call him a coach. Now, Ford may not have seen him as a coach, but I think they had a lot of, “Here’s how you have to think about this” - “Here’s how you have to…”

Smith: How did you see that process unfolding?

Jones: Well, you couldn’t see it very well because Rumsfeld is extremely tight lipped. But what you began to see, is you began to see Ford emerging as an executive. Let me tell you, this is really terribly important. There are two things that are important here. First thing, back on the personnel matter: there were, in the domestic council, some really very bright guys - as there were in the National Security Council.

Smith: Holdovers?

Jones: Now, before the decisions were made about them, there were some others that were not so important. The Colson staff wasn’t so important, but the domestic policy staff was terribly important as was the national security staff. And one of the things that I felt was that we didn’t have time to reeducate a domestic council staff. And I’ve all but forgotten how I did this, but one of the things I did was, I got Cannon to keep the best domestic council guys and he kept them, a lot of them. And the domestic council functioned quite well under Cannon for President Ford. Now, the reason for that was that –

Smith: What was its function?

Jones: Well, what it does is, we want a program on ‘x’ health. Well, what should the program look like? What are the options? How should we do this? How
much does it cost? What do we include? All of that domestic council staffer on health did working with the relevant cabinet people. And so they would pull a position together. You know, “Here is a plan for the program. Here are the options. Here are the pieces to it,” and so on and so forth. And then it would go forward to the staff secretary who would staff it. The staffing process is you send it to the natural enemies of the idea and get their ideas, get their views. And so then you include those in the paper, “Mr. President, the recommended option is option 2C. You need to know that if this is chosen, these people react this way. These people support it.”

So he has this and he looks at it and decides, but the key is we didn’t have time. If Ford was going to run for the presidency, we did not have time to reconstitute a staff that was good enough to do this programmatic work that is the basis for being able to run for president. So I got him to keep Jim Cavanaugh, who was one of them, but there were a number of guys that we kept who were just excellent. And they did a super job and were very loyal to Ford and became quite close to him. Paul O’Neill at the OMB. There were a number of these people who stayed and they became the backbone of the policy apparatus of the Ford presidency.

The only one that leaked off was to Seidman, the economic front. But Simon was there and so Bill, frankly, was more powerful, Bill Simon than Bill Seidman, in terms of heft on policy matter issues, in my view. That’s how I saw it working. But the rest of the apparatus was, Cannon kept Cavanaugh as his deputy, as I recall. You know a number of those people in critical positions were kept and it was critical to the program work of the Ford presidency. Now the thing that you began to see in his decision making, it’s very interesting. As staff secretary, I would send ten to twenty blue folders up, those are decision folders. Sometimes a red folder which is a “You’ve got to look at this now, sir.” And he would do an interesting thing. There were two aspects of his decision making that made him, frankly, a far better presidential executive than Nixon was. First thing is that he would read one of these memos and he would say, “I disagree with the option you’re recommending. I don’t think this will work. If we want this to pass, this is not going to work.”
And so I’d get a note back, “Call the guys together, we need to talk about this. Schedule as fast as you can.” So he would call them together and would say, “This will not work. They will not pass it, so if we want something like this, we’re going to have to do it this way.” And they would talk about it and reform it and then go with it. Now that was very creative problem solving from the chief executive’s viewpoint. He knew the Congress, he knew what would work, he knew how you had to present it, he knew what could be done and not done and he would say, “This won’t work. Call them in. Let’s talk. We’ve got to rework this.”

Smith: So at least in that aspect, that flies in the face of conventional wisdom that he was too congressional.

Jones: No, no, no, no. This is as he began to really get on top of the job. And he knew what he knew and he knew what would work and he knew it better than anybody else in the White House, anybody else, and he used his executive capability to shape the programmatic work that we did. It was brilliant.

The other thing that he did is that he knew, because he sat on those budget committees, that budgets were what drove everything else in the executive branch. He spent unbelievable amounts of time on the budget. The OMB would have a budget meeting with the cabinet secretary, then OMB would review the cabinet secretaries and their views of that agency’s budget. And then the president would make decisions about what he thought, just with OMB’s ____. And then the cabinet secretary would have the opportunity to come appeal the decisions he didn’t like in front of the president with OMB there. So he would, for each department, through probably three or four different meetings on their budgets. He knew them better than the cabinet officers most of the time. And he would make the decisions on the budget of the United States that we were recommending. I don’t necessarily mean that the Congress did. But he knew the budget process so well that he could do that. As far as I know, he’s the only president that has ever spent that kind of time on the budget because he knew that it drove the world, drove the programs. They were the key decisions. He would, because he’d been in the
Congress, but he was also making the decisions on what he wanted to do and not do.

Smith: Unfortunately, that doesn’t communicate itself to the general public as “presidential leadership.” I mean, that term has been so theatricalized.

Jones: But the way you run the executive branch is you control the budget. You control the programs and you form them to what can be done with them if you agree that they should be done. And he did three things. He kept the people. He was willing to keep the people that were needed. And he did. He was willing to intervene in the decision making process and change it and discuss it. Nixon would never call a meeting to discuss a decision, ever. He would initial an option and go on. Now, he and Kissinger did the foreign policy stuff that way, but only the two of them. But Ford would have the whole room full, have everybody there. “Let’s talk about this.” And there was great loyalty. There wasn’t leaking, there wasn’t anything. The third thing he did was he controlled the budgets. He made the decisions. He approved the recommendations, or disapproved. He turned out to be a superb executive president, far better than Nixon was.

Smith: Fascinating because it perfectly captures the notion that this was someone who after a rocky start grew into the office.

Jones: He did. There’s no question that that’s true.

Smith: But again, that other whole side, the performance art aspect of the presidency was never his shtick. He probably, out of all of our presidents, has got to be, him and Eisenhower, the least self-dramatizing.

[Break]

Jones: You were just about to talk about image.

Smith: Yeah, because there is the whole administrative side of the job, which we talked about, and how he grew into it. The whole, for lack of a better word, theatrical side of the job, is something one senses he was never comfortable with.
Jones: Well, he loved to go on the road. He loved to be out there. He really did. And he was a hail fellow well met. He loved people and he liked to be with people and he liked to talk to people. So it wasn’t that he was a recluse like Nixon was. I mean, Nixon had to force himself to do those things. Got very good at it, but he had to work at it. President Ford was really a wonderfully nice man and really liked his fellow citizens. It’s just that he had no sort of ability to project a charisma. He had a very flat voice. Not an exciting, kind of gripping guy. Although I’ll tell you, I had to worry about that a lot, that was my job after Cheney asked me to take over the – frankly, it was a message management job.

We pulled together, had a 10:30 meeting every morning, sometimes in addition to that a 4:30 meeting in the afternoon. It was a pretty incredible group of people. It was me, as chairman, then we had Dave Gergen, director of communications. We had Bud McFarlane from the NSC. We had Paul O’Neill from the OMB. We had Jim Cavanaugh from domestic policy. We had Larry Speakes in who was the deputy press secretary. Sometimes Nessen came. We had the press secretary for the First Lady, a woman named Susan Porter. Terry O’Donnell, who was the president’s personal aide. Red Cavaney who was the chief advance guy and Bill Nicholson who was the scheduler. I think that’s about it. We met at least once a day, sometimes twice a day. And our job was –

Smith: This was during the campaign?

Jones: No, this was before the campaign. It began sometime in 1975. And our job was to think about what the president – I’ll use the shorthand – what he should do, where he should go, who he should see, what he should say when he got there. That’s what we were trying to think through. And our goal was very simple. We wanted – and this was before the day of the 24/7 news cycle – we wanted to be the lead story in the three major papers every morning, with our picture and our story, and we wanted to be the lead political story on the three major news channels every night with our picture and our story.

That was what our objective was. The president has to be covered, and if you have the president’s schedule and can decide what he’s going to do, who he’s
going to talk to, what he’s going to say, where he’s going to be, what it looks like, you can control that to an amazing degree. And that’s what this group did – tried to do. And, by the way, we were hugely successful. It usually was our story, our picture, our message. Now, it doesn’t mean that there weren’t counters to that and critics to that and so on, but at least when the president was covered, we could do that, because you can do several things. First of all, you can pick the venue, you can limit the exposure – one event a day – so they have to use that one if they’re going to cover him at all, and you can also be sure that it’s an attractive story. And so that’s what this group did.

Smith: Was there on-going tension with the speechwriting operation?

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Jones: Now, what happened was, there was a guy in the White House who was maybe the wisest man in Washington named Bryce Harlow. Bryce came to town to be George Marshall’s speechwriter. Anyway, Bryce was in the White House and I went to him and I said, “Bryce, I think even though the president said he is not going to run for office, we have to get in position to be able to run and I think he’s going to have to run. I don’t think you step out of the presidency and have any chance to maintain the presence. So he’s going to have to run. He may not know it yet but he’s going to have to. And this is what we’re thinking: I’m thinking he should go in 1975 to all the key states several times so that people know who he is, so that there is a ‘Yeah, we know who President Ford is.’”

So we put a program together in the scheduling group to get the president in to the key states, California, New York. We had a big board of all the states with pins in it, color coordinated, colored by months, by the cities we went to and we were trying to cover what we believed to be the key states in an election and the key cities and with multiple trips. And I went to Bryce and I said, “This is what we’re thinking about doing. What do you think?” He said, “Jerry, this is complex, so let me think about it a day or two.” He called me back, he said, “I don’t think you should do that.” But I was smarter than Bryce and I did it anyway.
Smith: Did you have a sense of what the relationship was between Harlow and Ford?

Jones: I think the president thought that Harlow and Laird were two great, great counselor guys that had seen so much that they just had some great wisdom. Between the two, Harlow was far and away the best. He didn’t have the ego, Laird unfortunately did.

Smith: Harlow presumably didn’t leak like Laird, who was the original leaker.

Jones: Oh, the worst. And so, anyway, we were going along fine, but two things happened. The first thing was, on all of the trips the president would bump his head on the helicopter and we couldn’t fix it. We simply couldn’t get him to think about it and he would hit his head almost every time. And so then it suddenly was that he was a Bozo the Clown problem. And then the other problem was, we got him shot at twice. And so the criticism, “What in the hell is he doing in San Francisco and Sacramento? Why in the world is he out there?” Well, we were trying to get the state preconditioned, but after twice, it was… So it backfired.

Smith: Let me ask you, because by that time it’s September of ’75, the criticism has been made over the years that the White House was very slow to take seriously the possibility of a Reagan challenge. To what extent was that, in fact, hanging over your heads, and was it a fair criticism?

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Jones: There were a couple of these things. Panama Canal was one of them. There were several. And this scheduling group could see it coming. Now, I do remember and you have it in the library out there: Bill Gulley was out in San Clemente. Do you know who Gulley was?

Smith: Was it –

Jones: The gunnery sergeant who wound up running the military assistance office.

Smith: Okay.

Jones: And he came back and he said, “President Nixon wants you to send this in to Mr. Ford,” and he told me what Nixon had said: “Reagan is a lightweight.
You don’t have to worry about him.” And I wrote that, “Gulley reports this from Nixon”.

Smith: What was the message? That Reagan…

Jones: …was a lightweight and he didn’t have to worry about him. So I sent it in there. Now, I don’t know what Ford thought, but here’s Nixon sending in, coaching. But our guys were terribly worried about this and that was one of the reasons that no new spending thing came. That we were trying to do a lot of defense against Reagan. We could see it. And Kissinger was pushing him towards détente; Reagan was on the other side. There were several of these things. So, I think the President was being pulled. I think the Kissingers of the world were pulling him in one direction. We were trying to offset that and we weren’t able to, but it wasn’t for lack of recognition. It was pretty clear to us that it was going to be a real tough go.

Smith: You know, it’s interesting – and this is purely speculative – but that’s a fascinating message from Nixon, because we talked to Stu Spencer at length when we were out in California and the other side of that coin is that Stu – of course, remember Nixon went to China right at the height of the New Hampshire primary campaign - Stu said Nixon knew exactly what he was doing. Stu at least interpreted it as almost thumbing his nose at Ford. That it was almost a hostile act.

Jones: I don’t think so. No, Nixon was sending back general messages. I know that you’ll find that memo out there somewhere.

Smith: Supportive or at least…?

Jones: No, telling him what he thought. There may have been others. But I don’t think so. Nixon didn’t like Reagan. None of the Nixon people liked Reagan. They would come to me. There was a guy named Waller. I’ll think of his last name in a minute. Great guy. His dad had been the chairman of, I think, Union Oil Company. Waller Taylor. Waller was a close in intimate of Nixon’s. Nixon joined his law firm after he lost the governor’s race in ’62. He would come in with just the most hilarious, nasty stories about how stupid Reagan was. And the whole Nixon crowd thought that. They all, all, did not
want Reagan to be president. Strongest Ford supporters and so on. I think they would have veered away if Nixon were thinking the other way. I just don’t think that was true.

Smith: This whole thing may have answered my question because of what you said, what you sensed the private relationship between Ford and Nixon was during this period. I mean, clearly there was no public relationship.

Jones: It got terrifically strained over that pardon thing, but once that was done and Nixon began to come back – you know, he wrote several pretty good books, I mean, more than pretty good, they were excellent. I never felt that there was rancor there, ever.

Smith: What was the difference in style management, whatever, political acuity say, between a Rumsfeld as chief of staff and a Cheney? Because clearly Ford valued both of them greatly.

Jones: Let me tell you one of the things that I think is a great story on this message management group. We were sitting in this meeting one morning, I’ll never forget it. We’d been working on ‘How do we fix this?’, ‘How do we fix this?’ We were working on fixing it, working on fixing it, weren’t getting it done. And the press was all over us about his hitting his head on the helicopter every day. Every day. And his flatness on the stump played into it, he sounded like Joe Palooka. “Played too much football without a helmet”, “Can’t chew gum and walk”, you know. All that stuff.

Dave Gergen was down at the end of the conference table apparently reading *Time* and he said, I think this was the spring of 1976 about now, “We should let the president brief the budget.” We talked about it. “Hell, yes.” He knows it better than anybody in the executive branch including O’Neill and Lynn. And so we put him out there over at the state department auditorium, a two hour briefing on the United States budget. And he turned to Jim Lynn to help him answer one question out of dozens. I don’t know how many. A hundred. He absolutely blew the socks off the national press and what they came back saying was, a guy that knows the budget that well, in that detail,
with that sense of how it went together is no klutz and we can’t continue this. It finished that story. And he did. I don’t know if you have a video of that, but he was a tour de force on the budget. I don’t think that a president’s ever briefed the budget before or since. And it was brilliantly done and he knew it. He absolutely knew it. And the press guys had to back off. We beat them.

Smith: I know exactly what you’re saying, but it didn’t translate into the increasingly theatrical nature of presidential campaigning.

Jones: No, he didn’t have it. He didn’t have that instinct. He simply didn’t have it. And so, what happened is we were sending him out on the campaign trail, Bob Teeter was our pollster for the campaign, and we would do campaign events. And we could see his numbers drop, his approval ratings. So Teeter would come over to me and say, “This is really puzzling. We think we’re making progress, we’re sending him out there and his numbers drop. We’d do better to keep him in.” And so I talked about this with that group, we said, “Well, let’s see what happens.” And so we started the Rose Garden strategy: we’d do an event a day, our event, our picture, our message, in the Rose Garden, in the Oval Office, in the Roosevelt Room, in the Cabinet room, even in town somewhere, but usually in the White House. And when I briefed the president in Vail after the convention, after that terrible convention that we barely won, about the campaign strategy, we were 33 points behind. We lost by half a point [sic].

The night he made that error in the debate in San Francisco, Gallup had a poll that they were going to release the next day that showed us even. Even. He pulled the poll, he didn’t release it. When he re-polled, we were minus seven. We slipped seven on the base strength of that debacle, that question, and we came back to within a half a point. Ten thousand votes, which in Ohio and Hawaii and we would’ve won the Electoral College.

Smith: Did you know that night that you had a problem?

Jones: Absolutely. The minute he said it, I got Cheney on the phone. Cheney was in the holding room out there, and I said, “Dick you’ve got to change this, you’ve got to fix it.” He said, “I know, Jerry, I know, I know. You’re not
telling me anything. We’ll fix it right after this is over.” Well, the president refused to fix it. He let it linger for four or five days and it just killed us.

Smith: It was that stubbornness again?

Jones: It was the stubbornness. In spite of the pardon, in spite of the recession, in spite of not being a great campaigner, all of that, we still would’ve won it if he’d have fixed that. You can make a mistake in a debate. But, if he had been willing to fix it that night, “Hey guys, I didn’t mean that they weren’t dominated. They obviously are, the Red Army’s there. I meant, in spirit, they’re not dominated.”

Smith: If you actually go back and read what he said, he’s on the cusp of it. He talked about the countries…If he’d simply said, “I know, folks. I’ve been to Poland, I saw the look in their faces.” He could’ve hit it out of the park.

Jones: But he missed it and then he wouldn’t change it because he thought he was right. And he meant spiritually dominated. And he was right.

Smith: Again, Stu Spencer, he said a part of the problem was that he heard that Kissinger had said, “You were brilliant, Mr. President. You were wonderful, Mr. President.” I mean, just sort of playing the courtier.

Jones: Here was the deal. The issue in the campaign in the end came down to this: did we know Jimmy Carter enough to trust him as president and is Jerry Ford smart enough to be president? And that mis-answer flew into the face on that one. And if he’d corrected it, if he hadn’t made it, we would’ve won in spite of the pardon, in spite of the recession, in spite of his not being a very good campaigner, and in spite of the close convention. I mean, that was a close call.

Smith: Going in to that convention, were you confident that you had it?

Jones: No. I thought we had it, but I wasn’t confident we had it. We should’ve had it. We thought we had it. The numbers said we had it, but it was close and, you know, close can go away.
Smith: The other side of the Rose Garden strategy, was exploiting to the fullest whatever the incumbency could give you. It was the Bicentennial year and the queen was coming and I’m told there was an astonishing number of Republican convention delegates and their spouses who attended that dinner.

Jones: Damn right. We used everything we could. Yeah, we did. What shame is it?

Smith: What kinds of things did you have that you could use?

Jones: Oh, tickets at the Kennedy Center, rides on Air Force One, I mean, a lot of things, visits to the Oval Office. I used to tour people through there. I was one of the tour guides. My office was just down the hall, right on the other side of the Roosevelt Room, on the inside office is where I operated the scheduling.

Smith: We’d been told by several people - it’s sort of symbolic - this all came down, in many ways, to Clarke Reed and the Mississippi delegation. Reed was famous for being bought and then not staying bought, for being very slippery in terms of his allegiance.

Jones: I got to know Clarke pretty well. He was always pal-sy wal-sy, buddy buddy. Always thought he was on our side. How did it turn out? As I remember, he came our way.

Smith: In the end, he brought Mississippi with him.

Jones: Yeah, that’s what I thought. And I always thought Clarke was going to do that. Now, my guess is he was trying to keep the wrath of God from falling on him from the conservative side, but I always thought Clarke was with us.

_Section Not Released_

Jones: Well, that and what wound up happening was that we wrote the campaign strategy in the White House. We had the president and we ran the schedule. Now, [Bo] Callaway made a run at me to run all the scheduling and he lost. So we controlled the key asset in this campaign.

Smith: And that would’ve been a decision made at the presidential level, who controlled the scheduling?
Jones: Yeah, and Cheney, of course, had an interest there, too, because all of this stuff goes through the chief of staff. Now, he trusted us and let us do what we recommended, by and large, but it was controlled by the White House and we wrote the campaign strategy. What the campaign did is two things, well, more than two things. It did the polling. It also said the issues we should concentrate on coming out of the polling and coming out of our state operations and it did the registration and got out the vote and all the delegate stuff and so on. And they did the advertising, but that was…

Smith: …which is very highly regarded.

Jones: …was highly regarded. They were simply hired. They paid the bills on the advertising and we all cooperated on that one. Bailey and Deardorff did a great job on that. And they shop all those over in the White House and we comment on the stuff and so on, so it was sort of a joint thing, but it was the fact that the campaign hired those two guys – it was their creativity, it wasn’t the campaign. And so what Spencer wound up doing was doing the delegate stuff. He and Jim Baker doing the delegate stuff and doing the campaign nuts and bolts.

Smith: He said something fascinating, he says the Reagan people really miscalculated when it came – one thing Spencer feared was that they would find a hot button issue with the platform. Not a process issue, but something that everyone could get around, you know, Panama Canal or something. And that’s why basically Spencer said to the president [re-détente], “Let it happen. Just give in. Kissinger won’t be happy about it, but that’s how we win or that’s how we keep from losing.” Is that your recollection?

Jones: I don’t particularly remember that battle, but it was clear that we couldn’t resist some of those things. I mean, Reagan cleaned our clock from North Carolina on.

Smith: He had the hearts of a lot of delegates, didn’t he?

Jones: Yeah, I think he did. I think he did. Here was my case, always my case to all of these people, “Look, you cannot change a sitting president and win. You simply can’t. Reagan has to wait. But you cannot change a sitting president
and have a prayer of winning.” And I think that won the day. I think Clarke Reed realized that you couldn’t. And I think that’s true. I don’t think Reagan could’ve won.

Smith: Did you have a sense of the Ford-Reagan relationship?

Jones: No. I will tell you, we were really pissed at Reagan and I think the president was, too. What in the hell is he doing running in a primary against a sitting president with the trouble we’re in here. What is he doing? This is selfish. This is egotistical. This is narcissistic. What is he doing? That’s what we all thought. I mean, it was clear to us that you can’t change a sitting president in the primary operation and then win. Maybe we were wrong. That’s what we thought pretty strongly.

Smith: And the whole thing in Kansas City about offering Reagan the vice presidency or not offering Reagan the vice presidency which is still argued to this day over what –

Jones: Well, Cheney and the guys can talk to you about that. My understanding of it from afar, I was not in the meeting, my understanding was that Reagan refused to consider it and that Ford acceded to that. And that was that.

Smith: The selection of Dole – was Anne Armstrong, for example, at any point seriously considered with idea that “We’re so far behind, we’ve got to – “

Jones: No, it turned on this. What our problem was was that President Ford, as I recall, had vetoed an ag bill and you’ve got to win in the ag states to win. And so, Ford had real weakness in the agricultural settings in mid-America and we were looking for candidates that would help us here because, if we didn’t have our base, we couldn’t possibly win. And so the two guys that looked like they could best help us there were Dole and Howard Baker. And when you looked at them, Dole helped more than Baker. That’s why he was picked. Anne, as far as I know, it was nice to talk about it, but she was never in the mix, because she wasn’t the Midwest, she wasn’t the corn states, the wheat states and so on. She wouldn’t help us there.
Smith: Were you delighted when Reagan announced Schweiker? Was that seen as something that backfired immediately or was it, in fact, a potential act of genius? Apparently, they thought they could flip Drew Lewis.

Jones: I think we saw it more as desperation, that he had to throw the long ball. And it didn’t work out.

Smith: Did you think at the end that you’d caught up?

Jones: I thought the morning of the election we had a 50/50 chance of winning it. The exit polls began to show that we were slipping and not winning Ohio. And, actually, we came closer in Ohio than we thought in the exit polls.

Smith: That night, where were you?

Jones: I was in the White House.

Smith: What was the mood?

Jones: Disappointment. Not shock because it was close and we were catching, catching, catching. But huge disappointment. The president was just terribly disappointed. I think he really thought he’d pulled it out and he was crushed. Took him awhile to get over it and he was a little bit angry at us.

Smith: How so?

Jones: Well, I had him out in Lubbock the next year and he was a little cross with me. He came to George Mahon’s retirement from the Congress out there. He was nice, but he was still a little edgy towards me. And we’d been great buddies, so he got over it, but he was really ticked that we didn’t win that thing. And he really trusted us that we were going to pull it out.

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

Jones: Almost none. Frankly, she was ill in several ways.

Smith: Was that known in the White House?
Jones: It was not known. Rumsfeld knew it. I knew there was something terribly wrong. I happened to overhear a couple of conversations and they were not good. I didn’t know what it was.

Smith: In the later years, did you have much contact with him?

Jones: Some earlier, but no, not really. He was always very nice to me when I saw him, very cordial. He remembered me well, I think. Certainly I did, he was a great guy to work for. I think he had a hugely successful presidency. I judge it more on ‘Can he really do the job?’ Yeah, you’re right about the showmanship stuff, but he really ran the presidency beautifully. That was a tour de force. He did a great job. By the way, I was strongly in support, as you know, of the Nixon pardon. I think that was essential and he did it and he still almost won the damn thing.

Smith: You were telling me about Rumsfeld telling him about the ship.

Jones: Well, what Don said was that the president was just so incredibly glad to see him that he just sort of came up out of himself and they had a really great visit.

Smith: That was about a month before he died.

Jones: Yeah, it was. He was very ill, but “Is that Rummy?” he said.

Smith: I can hear it.

This was great. I cannot thank you enough.
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this. You have a unique role as Gerald Ford’s biographer, but also as someone who worked very closely with him in the White House. And someone who covered his contemporaries in American politics during the period of his rise to national prominence.

What surprised you the most in the course of all your research?

Cannon: I think what surprised me, and in the course of my research, the degree to which Ford reflected on what he was doing, and what he was thinking at the time. I’ll give you one example. He was in his nineties the last time I went out to see him. I guess that was when we had our trustees meeting in California. I had asked to see him for a few hours with photographs I had of the highlights of his administration. I thought, I’ll ask him to help me do the captions for these photographs.

I showed him the first one and it was a photograph taken not by Kennerly, but by the White House photographer, whoever it was. It shows Ford sitting in the ante room of the president’s office. The photograph is shot down the hall looking at him in profile, and Ford is sitting there by himself. Nobody else in the office – just sitting there quietly, waiting to see President Nixon to find out what Nixon was going to do – resign or fight on. I showed him this photograph and he had instant recall of everything he was thinking at that point about the Watergate, about how Nixon had lied to him, about how much sympathy he had for Nixon and his family – all this going through his mind and what a foolhardy thing this was to have done.

He’s thinking all of this through, and what really surprised me was his total recall just from looking at that photograph of what he had been thinking at that momentous point, just before he went in. And his thoughts are interrupted by, I’ve forgotten his name now, saying, “Mr. Vice President, the President will see you now.” So he goes in and gets the word, finally. And then I went
through the other photographs with him, and what surprised me was how much he recalled from those photographs.

As you know, Richard, he made available to me the total of his conversations with Trevor Armbrister for his own “autobiography,” the extent of his thoughts - which he used very little of in his own book - but the extent of his thoughts about what was going on at the time. I finished not long ago, the section on his meeting with Brezhnev at Vladivostok. And what was fascinating was his detailed description of what he was like. He goes down the stairs and he sees that Brezhnev is kidding around with reporters and so on, and he looks at him and looks at his size first, realizes he is big, he’s bulky, he’s got big shoulders, he said he would have made a perfect offensive tackle. And he knows he’s going to like him.

So they start out talking sports. Ford’s briefed, of course, and says, “I understand you played soccer,” and Brezhnev says, “You played football,” and so they talked back and forth for a few minutes. But what was really interesting, and this is just one case, of Ford’s observations and recall about the people he met. This is one thing I am going to try to use in the book.

Smith: There is this notion on the coasts that Midwesterners talk slow, so therefore they must think slow – and I’m wondering, because he wasn’t a great communicator, in the formal sense of the office, do you think he got a bum rap on his intelligence, generally?

Cannon: Yeah, I think he got a bum rap. He was a far smarter man than people understood. He was far more interested in policy and the way things worked than, I think, any president we’ve ever had. He’s famous for having briefed on the budget in ’76, but that was not accidental. He had been in Congress twenty-five years, much of that on the Appropriations Committee, and he knew how every one of those programs had been formulated, who had supported it, why it was there, and whether it was Lyndon Johnson or somebody else who had initiated it. So he knew the detail. As for his intellect, I don’t think many young people in their early twenties could have coached full time at Yale and at the same time carried a full load in the Yale law
school, which was one tough school, I’m told. And he graduated in the top third of his class. He fooled people, really. He was much smarter.

Smith: It is interesting that you say that, because…

Cannon: I think that sometimes it was deliberate.

Smith: Okay, you took the words right out of my mouth. It has been suggested to us by one or two people that he used that reputation, that sometimes he would play the innocent, when, in fact, there were things going on that you didn’t know were going on.

Cannon: This was early in life that he had this impression of kind of a slow, a dull person. He was then, I guess, in his early twenties when he met Phyllis Brown. This stunning, attractive, intelligent woman that was the first major girlfriend of his life. She was very smart, a very good observer, and she told me she thought it was, in many cases, deliberate on his part when he sat and listened. But she said he knew everything that was going on. He remembered everything that was said, and when you talked to him about it later he could summarize it better than anybody else in the room.

So, I think he was grossly underrated for the quality of his mind. I became impressed, too, when he came to one meeting of Rockefeller’s Commission on Critical Choices. And because I’ve worked with the House, the governor designated me to be his aide for that meeting, and I was fascinated. He had come briefed, he knew what was going on, he asked good questions, and he told me later how much he had learned from it in the two hour session with all these experts talking about foreign policy, economic policy, and so on. He absorbed things much better, I think, than anybody.

Smith: One way of saying it is, he absorbed things better than he articulated them.

Cannon: Yeah.

Smith: Post-JFK, the country became so accustomed to and demanding of, perhaps, a kind of style and verbal facility. Television, obviously, drew upon that.
Cannon: Ford was dull by comparison. He appeared before the cameras with Everett Dirksen. Well, Everett Dirksen was a major performer up there, and all Jerry Ford could do was kind of stand by and admire his performance.

Smith: He played straight man.

Cannon: Well, he wasn’t even a good straight man. He was just there, and he looked dull. Of course, Johnson’s criticism – in Washington you can survive almost anything except humor - and Johnson’s criticism, which cleaned up was: he couldn’t walk and chew gum at the same time, was a devastating thing. Johnson said, “Well he played too much without his helmet,” and so on. He thought he was a stumble bum. Well, here was the best athlete we ever had being [criticized] by Johnson who couldn’t get out of a chair, athletically.

But anyway, I thought Ford was vastly underrated as a man and as a leader. But the people who knew him were the members of the House and Senate. And that, of course, is why he got to be president in the first place. They knew how good he was. They knew how honest he was, how trustworthy he was, how much of a leader he was. And how he was the perfect fit for the job at that time. Because Mansfield and Albert both knew, they told me later, Nixon was gone. And when we had to choose the next president…they said to Nixon, “This is the man you can get confirmed.” And once they told Nixon that, Nixon had no choice.

Smith: How much did the criticism hurt? Particularly the implications that either he intellectually wasn’t up to the job, or that he was, to use your words, a stumblebum.

Cannon: I think it hurt him with the press, and the press is the entity that portrays the image of the person. I think it hurt him badly with the press. Saturday Night Live, for example, the appearance of his stumbling. When he fell down the stairs in Austria, Phil Jones CBS said, “Well, we figured if he can’t walk down the stairs, he can’t run the country.” It hurt, no question about it.

Smith: How much personally, do you think it hurt Ford?

Cannon: I don’t think it bothered him very much.
Smith: Really?

Cannon: I think he was so assured, I think he was so aware of who he was, so comfortable with who he was, that it didn’t bother him. Hartmann told me that sometimes he would say, “Well, look, you’ve got to strike back at Johnson.” And Ford said, “No, it’s not worth the effort. It doesn’t bother me that much.” And I don’t really think it did. This was a man who knew that if you’re in politics, you’re going to get criticized, and it didn’t bother him very much. He was secure in his seat, secure as a person, secure as a human being. I never met anybody more comfortable with who he was.

Smith: That’s interesting. Let me ask you, I was going through some boxes of material for my book, and I came upon Rockefeller’s interview with Hugh Morrow about the Ford presidency, and I understand more and more why Oscar Reubhausen thought that those interviews should never see the light of day because it was not Rockefeller at his best, at the very end.

Cannon: Right.

Smith: He thought that Don Rumsfeld was blackmailing the president. Which tells you more about his frame of mind at that point. I suppose no one ever wants to blame the president.

Cannon: The fact is, and this, I guess it is heresy and disloyal to Rockefeller to say this, but Rumsfeld was right. Rumsfeld was right. Ford, when he first called Rockefeller, and this is a couple of weeks, two or three weeks after he’s in office, and asked him to be vice president, and Ford, having disliked the job intensely – and we’ll talk about it a little later – but having disliked it, knew Rockefeller, knew he was a man of action and experience and so forth, wanted to tell him that he wouldn’t just have to go to funerals and so forth.

So he told him, on the phone, in that first conversation, I’ll put you in charge of domestic policy. And then it took Rockefeller four months, a little over four months, to get confirmed. Once he was confirmed, Rockefeller and Ann Whitman and Bob Douglas and I came down on a rainy Saturday morning just before Christmas in December, ’74 and then Ford told Rockefeller what assignments he would give him, and he ticked them off, whatever they were.
One of them was, he would put him in charge of domestic policy, and Rumsfeld was at that meeting, and Jack Marsh and a couple of others, probably Hartmann.

We didn’t know exactly what the domestic council did, but we knew it was involved, obviously, in domestic policy. So, going back to New York we talked about that and Douglas and I agreed that if pushed to govern this, if you’re in charge of domestic policy, you must have your man in charge of the domestic council. So that in turn came around to whether it was going to be me. Well, Rumsfeld resisted this adamantly. He wanted to have his own guy and he didn’t want this dude, so the internal battle went on for better than, I guess, a month. Maybe a little longer. And finally Ford sided with Rockefeller and said, “We’ll have your man in charge of the domestic council.”

Well, Rockefeller’s first instruction to me was to get rid of everybody there. Well, I went in and I thought, well, I had no idea what this domestic council did, and I kept one guy which Rockefeller was opposed to. He said, “You should have got rid of everybody.” But he also said, “The first thing you have to do is get the best staff in the White House and I’m going to help you do that,” and he gave me a great gift of Dick Dunham to be my deputy, who had been director of budget in New York and was a very smart and able executive. And Art Quern who had been a program associate – what we called them in New York – a superior man. And Dick Parsons was to be my lawyer.

So with those three I had the nucleus of a really wonderful staff. We had a good start. Dunham, I gave him the responsibility to build the staff and he did. We had a really superior staff. Not generally really well known, but the budget for the domestic council is about fifty people. About half of them are senior associates, MBAs, lawyers, economists, and so on, and the rest secretarial. So we had good staff and we had our own budget. I asked the president if he wanted me to clear the appointments with him or the personnel office, and he said, “No, those are yours. You and Nelson do it your way. Whatever you want to do is fine with me.” So we had the freedom to do that.

We were also – this group was under the Hatch Act, except for Dunham and me – they couldn’t do any political work. This had been put through by
somebody on the Hill, thinking that Nixon would use all these people for his campaign. So we had this great staff and we had a good start, but we realized Rockefeller had thought he would be in charge of initiating a lot of new domestic policies. Well, I guess three or four weeks into the job, I got a call one Sunday night from Jim Lynn saying there had been a meeting at the White House…

Smith: Now, he’s head of OMB?

Cannon: Yes. Jim Lynn was the head of OMB, the senior staff had been there except for me. They had decided, and Ford had approved it, there would be no new initiatives that year. So that meant we didn’t have anything to initiate. We could not initiate anything. Well, I was so concerned about this because I knew Rockefeller would want to have initiatives and we were planning to have initiatives, that I called up the military officer and said, “What time is his plane going up to get him on Monday morning?” I don’t know – it was two or three o’clock in the morning. So I got on that plane and went up and met him at Westchester, and he looked at me and said, “It must be something going on or you wouldn’t be here.” I told him what had happened, and [he] just kind of shook his head and he said, “Well, it doesn’t give us any room to do anything.” I said, “Well, do you think it would be wise, at this point, for us to just get out of the job?” He said, “No, I think you ought to stay there and keep me abreast of what’s going on.” So, we decided to do that.

But the fact is, that we did initiate a few things. Parsons in particular initiated the first government-wide examination of what everyone was doing in battling illegal drugs. Nobody had ever pulled it together before, but I think it was some twenty agencies that were involved in this. And Parsons, on his own, with our approval – and Rockefeller and the president’s approval – set out to do this. It took two or three months and we had a really good summary. Parsons presented the findings to the Cabinet and so forth and we sent something to the Hill, but nothing ever happened on it. So fairly early on Rockefeller became very unhappy with the limited scope of what we were doing. And I think he just kind of opted out of it. I would try to keep him informed and he would just nod his head and not be very interested in it.
Smith: Someone told us, I wish I could tell you right now, I don’t think it was Rumsfeld, but someone told us the reason that they took that initiative and informed you that that decision had been made grew directly out of the first meetings that the president had had with the vice president, their weekly lunches where Nelson had the habit of coming in bubbling over with ideas and costly new programs. And it was a tactic, in effect, to kind of put the vice president in a box.

Cannon: I didn’t know that. But that’s perfectly reasonable. And that would be why I was not invited to attend the meeting on Sunday night, because they were going to do it and then tell me, as I said. Jim Lynn was designated to tell me this has been done. At any rate, about the time I got in there was when Ford was really beginning to learn how to run the White House. Rumsfeld had been there in September or October. He had come in and taken charge, and he was really managing the White House. And Rumsfeld, in my opinion, did a remarkable job of coaching Ford in how to run a White House.

Ford had always been responsive to good coaching, from the time he was a Boy Scout and a high school football player and so on. And Rumsfeld really in effect, became his coach. Rumsfeld then and now is a hell of a good organizer. Whatever else you may say of him, he knows organization.

Smith: Why is he such a polarizing figure, seen as Machiavellian and always with an agenda, and maybe an agenda behind the agenda.

Cannon: I suspect he is Machiavellian. But he rarely leaves any fingerprints. Why is he? Because he’s powerful, he is good, he is effective, and he rubs a lot of people the wrong way.

Smith: Dorothy Dowton tells us he tried to get her fired.

Cannon: I didn’t know that.

Smith: He had a candidate of his own to replace her as the president’s personal secretary.

Cannon: Well, as I say, he had his own guy and he wanted to work – but I will say that once I showed Rumsfeld I could do this stuff, I could manage these issues, I
could get it done, instead of kind of easing up, he poured more and more on me. And he would schedule me to do something I hate to do which is talk before the Cabinet. We’d go out on the boat and he’d have me make a presentation on something or other, and I don’t like to do that, and I’m not very good at it. But I think he realized that.

As a matter of fact, the first meeting after I became appointed to domestic council, at a senior staff meeting at eight o’clock, you go around the room and kind of show and tell. I had not gone in well prepared, very frankly. And so when it got to be my turn, I stumbled and hesitated and really did a very poor performance. And Rumsfeld - I’m sitting two or three down the table from him - turned on me and really excoriated me and said, “I thought Nelson Rockefeller was supposed to bring good staff people in here and you’re not briefed,” and you’re not that and so forth, and really laid me out in front of the whole full senior staff. The meeting broke up and I sat there in kind of a daze. Jim Lynn walked around the table and came over and whispered in my ear, “Welcome to the NFL.”

Smith: It must have put you in a very awkward position, though.

Cannon: It did.

Smith: Because of divided loyalties, in some ways.

Cannon: And I suspected it was deliberate – the first issue that I had to deal with was whether there should be a science adviser to the president. And it turns out that President Ford had asked Rockefeller to make a recommendation on this. So Rockefeller, being Rockefeller, assembled Edward Teller and ten other Nobel Prize winners, or whatever, and they had a session or two, and then Rockefeller made a recommendation, which he gave to the president. The president gives it to Rumsfeld and Rumsfeld gives it to me. And I take a look at this and I see what it is, and I say, “Okay, the first thing I’ve got to do, is go over and tell the vice president that I’ve been given this to staff out, to get everybody’s opinion on it.”

So I took it over to him, and said, “Governor, this is what’s happened here, and before I take any step further you should know that I’ve been assigned to
do this.” And he took a look at it and shook his head and said, “Well, if he
didn’t want me to make a recommendation, if he didn’t want to listen to what
I wanted to recommend, why did he ask me to do it?” And I said, “Governor,
all I can do is staff this out.” He said, “Well, go ahead,” and so on.

Smith:  The rejoinder to that is: he wanted him to make a recommendation, he valued
his recommendation, but he wasn’t the only voice that he was going to listen
to.

Cannon:  But he didn’t know this. He didn’t understand this. I’ve talked at length with
Parsons and Mary Kresky and others about this. He had been the one who, for
fifteen years as governor, was the one who made the judgments. He didn’t
make the recommendation, he made the final judgment. He listened to the
recommendations and made the decision. And he just couldn’t get accustomed
to the fact that he was no longer the guy who made the decisions.

Smith:  That makes sense; that makes perfect sense.

Cannon:  I think it’s as simple as that.

Smith:  Over the years people sort of obsessed about whether he was pushed; the
manner in which he was disinvited from the ticket. And it overlooks
something really interesting. It may have been a rationalization on Ford’s part,
or it may just have been this quality of thinking and observing at a deeper
level than most people gave him credit for. But I remember finding in all my
research, some interview in which Ford said something really very intuitive.
He stepped back and looked at the bigger picture. He said, “You know, I don’t
think Nelson would have been happy being vice president for another four
years.” And then he sort of explained why he thought he was unhappy in the
role. It isn’t simply a question of asking him to run again - again, there may
have been elements of rationalization involved.

Cannon:  I think the politics was the operative element there. And let me just add one
thing about this first assignment, the science adviser to the president. I
thought, well, this is my first thing to do for the president, and I said go down
there and ask him how he likes papers done. What he would like to know and
so forth. Well, this was a very instructive thing to me. I went down to see him
and I said, “Mr. President, how would you like your papers written?” He said, “Well, I don’t want any fancy writing. Just good, clear English, simple and keep it fairly brief.”

He said, “But I want to know what everyone thinks about him. I want everybody’s opinion to be included with this brief summary paper that you provide, which will be what the issue is, what the background is, who’s for what and so on. That’s for a summary paper. But give me everybody’s opinion, I want to know everybody’s opinion.” He said, “Now, on this issue,” he said, “I want you to do two things. I want you to get in touch with every science adviser to every president and ask him what he thought he accomplished for the president and the country. And secondly, I want you to find some outside observer who is qualified to tell me what he thought each one advised.” He said, “I really would like to know that – what each one accomplished for the president and the country.”

So I did that and it was a very, very interesting experience because here at the White House you can get anyone on the phone. Jerome Wiesner, Kennedy’s science adviser said, “Well, I don’t think I really did much science advising, because every time I showed the president, he’d say, ‘Now, tell me again, how does a radio work? How does it get from over there to over here so I hear it? How does it work?’” I talked to Nixon’s, he said, “Well, after I took a stand against Vietnam I never saw him again.”

So I talked to all of these guys, Vannar, Bush, and everybody else gave me a good rundown on what he had done. We gave that to the president and he had a meeting so that everybody could voice their opinion, and then he went back in the office and he called me in and said, “Now, Jim, I’m going to sign this. I want to do this, but I think we should have Congress authorize the science adviser to the president because they will pay more attention to this if they have passed the bill, so let’s do that.”

That was very interesting to me - the way his mind worked, what he wanted to know, and what his decision was. He told me once that he liked to write it down – what his decision was – because he’d found long ago that when you have a meeting with people, everybody hears what they want to hear, if you
don’t tell them otherwise. So he said, “I write it down, I write these decisions down, and you’re to tell them you’re to read exactly what their decision is and then tell them to carry it out.”

Smith: How difficult was it to integrate the Nixon people with the Ford people. How much of an issue was that early on? Was it a continuing…?

Cannon: It didn’t bother us. We got rid of them fairly quickly and I just told them. “Look,” Dunham and I said, “we’re making some changes,” and so forth. But we kept two or three on. Todd Hullin, but I think two or three we realized that they had done such a good job, even after we told them your time is up, but stay here while we find a replacement, they’d done such a good job that we said, “Dick, why don’t we just keep them on?” He said, “Well, if you don’t have any problem in turning around, why not?” So we did it. But we really had an outstanding staff, and so those two or three people that had been Nixon people presented no problem whatsoever because they were our people very quickly.

Smith: How about the broader White House culture? Did you sense divisions or frictions between the old crowd, if you will, and…

Cannon: By the time I got there they were pretty much gone.

Smith: Really?

Cannon: Because I didn’t become a domestic council guy until I think it was February of ’75. So by that time Rumsfeld had eased and pushed them out. There were very few people still there. We had maybe two or three. One was a troublesome guy, he’d been a Nixon advance man, and I let him go. But he managed to get a job somewhere else in the White House. But I didn’t have anything else to do with him. Friction in the domestic council staff? I didn’t have any. Most of these guys were professional. When Haig left he asked Rockefeller to take care of a senior secretary he had, Pat McKee. Rockefeller said, “See if you like her,” and so on.

So I did and she was older than the younger people I’d had around. Pat McKee. She had an astonishing record. I don’t know if this is relevant, but I’ll
just tell you this, anyway. Here’s this senior secretary, a private secretary who’s trustworthy. She had worked in the Veterans Administration, I think, and Johnson told Marvin Watson, “I want ten secretaries in here who are good looking, who can take dictation, who can type and don’t mind working late. They won’t be afraid to go home if they have to work late.” So she was one on trial. He liked her and she stayed there.

Now she was so trusted that she was entrusted to type Johnson’s speech when he said, “I’m not going to run again.” She stayed on with Nixon, she typed Agnew’s statement of resignation, she typed Nixon’s statement of resignation, and when Ford issued the pardon, she was so trustworthy that she typed the pardon statement and the pardon itself. She had been there through that many administrations. How many secretaries would have that opportunity today?

Smith: That’s amazing. In retrospect, should Ford have thought of someone else for vice president?

Cannon: Yes. Rockefeller should have taken Ronan’s advice and not done it, and turned it down. He could have done it, but the circumstances – the anguish over Watergate and so forth was such and the uncertainty with this new guy coming in was such that he could not honestly, given his sense of duty to the country, Rockefeller could not turn it down. He called me - I was up at our little farm in New York - and said, “Look, Jim, I’m going to do this. I’m doing it for Gerald Ford and the country.” It was different, and in his testimony for confirmation, they asked him, the Senate committee asked him, “Why did you change your mind?” He said, “Well, I’m older. Yes, I turned it down in ’60 and ’68, but I feel that now the circumstance is such that if I can help this president in this situation, I have no choice but to do it.”

Ford would have been better off to pick somebody else, as it turned out. But it was useful for that first few months and setting the standards and establishing the standards by which he would chose his administration because there was no question but that was a popular thing for him to have done in terms of the country. It was widely, widely applauded, and I think it was the right thing for Ford at that moment, but not the right thing six months later.
Smith: Right. Replacing the Nixon Cabinet and bringing in his own people is interesting. Rumsfeld told us that his advice to the president was that you should make changes early.

Cannon: That’s right. No question, immediate.

Smith: He put it in the context of, again, unlike what Rockefeller believed, Rumsfeld claims that he was reluctant to go to the Pentagon. That in terms of policy, he was probably more sympathetic to Schlesinger’s viewpoint, more – for lack of a better word – hawkish viewpoint, so that Ford wouldn’t be getting a new viewpoint, persae. And he put it in the context of urging Ford to make wholesale changes early. He thought when he did it, it was a mistake.

Cannon: That’s right. I think he’s right. Rumsfeld accepted the fact – by the time he got there, the afternoon after Ford had been confirmed, got there from Europe, Ford had already told Haig to stay and told the Cabinet to stay. And so Rumsfeld didn’t like that but he said, “Well, I have no choice but to accept it. The president has made this decision, he’s the president.” But when he came back in September, I think it was late September or October, to be chief of staff when he was formally made chief of staff, he persuaded Ford this must be done now. And Ford said that Rumsfeld had given him a timetable. These are going this date, this date, this date – right to the end of the year. And they carried it out.

Smith: Haig, in our discussion, was vehement in his insistence that he went to the president and told him he had to get rid of Hartmann and went on all of these alleged personal failings that Haig claimed the Secret Service had told him about. And he said, “Mr. President, I’ve seen another president fail because he wouldn’t get rid of people who were not serving him well.” And Ford’s response was, “Al, you have to let me handle this myself.” To which Haig said he then responded, “Well, then I have your answer to my question; you don’t want me to stay on.”

Cannon: I think that is more explicit than it happened, according to Ford, anyway. I talked to him about it a lot. It was a Saturday morning, day after he had taken the oath of office. Haig is waiting for him at eight o’clock in the morning with
a big piece of paper which we can’t find, unfortunately. It was ten to twelve pages that Jerry Jones had written on how the White House is run. And Haig had told Jones to write this paper because we’ll have to educate Ford on how to run this place. The degree of arrogance in Haig is, I guess, not astonishing, but it’s there. But at any rate, he gave Ford this paper and said, “This is how you run the White House, and if you want me to stay on I have to have all rights of hiring and firing everybody, and the first one to go will be Hartmann.”

And Ford, taken aback, still thinks he needs Haig for the time being – he was really taken aback, he was astonished, he told me, that Haig would show this effrontery. So he just simply said, “Well, I’ll be the one to handle Bob Hartmann myself.” By Ford’s account, Haig said, “Well, think it over and I’ll take a few days off.” And he came back in a few days. But Ford said, “At that moment,” told me, “at that moment, I knew he had to go as soon as I could get things organized around here.”

Smith: Why was Hartmann such a polarizing figure?

Cannon: Hartmann in the House had been chief of staff, which really doesn’t amount to much in the Minority Leader’s office. I know because I was chief of staff in the Minority Leader’s office in the Senate. Doesn’t amount to much, really. There is no real responsibility – you’ve got a few people to work with and so on and you try to hire good people. So Hartmann had been nominally chief of staff and senior adviser to Ford in the House and so forth.

So when Ford became vice president, Hartmann assumed he would continue in that role, and in fact, he thought he did. But very soon Ford realized Hartmann couldn’t organize a two car funeral, so he brought Bill Seidman in to organize the vice president’s office, which Bill effectively did. Hartmann wrote the speeches that Ford delivered around the country. Hartmann was a good speechwriter, not a great speechwriter, but a good speechwriter on several occasions. He knew what words Ford could pronounce, and would have difficulty with and he was very conscious of that. He wrote well in that way. When he got to the White House, Hartmann assumed he would be chief of staff over there, too. He clearly thought he was chief of staff; he never told
himself otherwise. It just wasn’t going to work over there and it was chaos as Rumsfeld and Cheney found when they came in to take over.

Hartmann is an interesting guy, but he’s a reporter, he’s a newspaper man. He’s not an executive, he’s a newspaper man. And he also has a kind of a bristly pride in himself and thought these guys are out to get me and so forth. Well, they were out to get him out of the way, get him over to what he did best, which is write speeches.

Smith: Was it safe to say he was both protective and possessive?

Cannon: No, I don’t think he was possessive of Ford. I think he was just vanity himself. He couldn’t stand not being promoted when the boss was promoted was what it amounted to. I think that was it, it was vanity more than anything else.

Smith: One last Rockefeller thing – he told Ford that Hartmann was the best political mind he had at the White House.

Cannon: Well, I agree he probably was.

Smith: Really?

Cannon: He was very astute in terms of the press and Ford was – how best to say it? – less astute in terms of the press than any other president we’ve ever had. He simply did not understand how the press worked.

Smith: That’s funny, because on a personal level…

Cannon: On a personal note - he had this great little cadre of people who rode with him on the vice presidential plane. He was loyal to them, they were loyal to him. Personally they liked him, they kidded him, but they didn’t write very good stories about him on the road. He could not translate that personal friendship into good publications, into good writing about what he was doing.

Smith: What didn’t he understand about the press?

Cannon: He didn’t understand how it worked. Well, a good example is the fact that when he’s having his first press conference and Hartmann and the others,
Hartmann in particular, is trying to say, well, now they’re going to ask about Nixon, the papers, etc., and so forth. And he listened for a few minutes and said, “Well, I’m not going to say anything about that.” And he kept persisting: well, how are you going to answer this and so forth? And he [Ford] said, “Look, the press is not going to ask me about Nixon. They’re going to want to know what my plans are to change the Cabinet; what my policies are going to be; what my foreign policy will be; what I’m going to do about Russia. Those are the questions they are going to ask. They aren’t going to ask me about Nixon. So I don’t want to hear any more questions about that.”

Now that is a good example of how he just was – there was just a density to his understanding about the press. He had never had a good press in the House. I talked to several reporters who covered the House when he was Minority Leader, and they said, “Well, if you wanted any news you went to Mel Laird. All you got from Ford was a kind of platitudes and no news.” He didn’t know how to make news.

Smith: You know probably more than anyone else - my sense is that Ford, I don’t know how to put it – that that news conference on the 28th of August is a turning point on the road to the pardon.

Cannon: Oh, there is no question about that. It is the turning point of that. No question about it.

Smith: He came away shocked.

Cannon: He was shocked. I talked to him at great length. I’ve talked to him more about the pardon than I think probably anybody else. He said, “I came back to the office and I said, ‘Goddamn it, I’m not going put up with this! They’re going to ask me about this and this and this.’” And then he read the transcript. Buchen brought in the transcript – you know they do it very quickly – and he read it and he got even madder. He realized how really bad he had been.

Smith: Mad at himself?

Cannon: Yeah, angry, furious with himself that he had screwed it up so royally, which he had done.
Smith: But is that the frame of mind in which you want to be making the most important decision of your presidency?

Cannon: This is a man who responds to something that happens, in my opinion. He was never, never, so far as I can tell or read, a person of his own initiative, except in his first campaign for the House. It was his initiative to challenge the incumbent and run for that office. But in the House you would never see, at least I could never find, a single initiative. There is no bill with his name on it, there’s no record of him giving a new idea on the floor. It’s a response. It’s in response on Douglas, Justice Douglas, for example. It is in response to what he felt was an unseemly article in a paper that somebody had showed him. He is a responder, not an initiator.

And so I think that it was a response to his own mistake that provoked this pardon. And the realization that something had to be done to get it off his plate. I have no doubt that he felt, not only that he had to get it off his plate, but the country has got to stop bothering about this. And the only way to do this is to sweep it off the table. I had the impression and Hartmann had the same impression, that this is the linebacker. This is the linebacker, just going in and charging against the interference, trying to wipe it out and getting it to the runner.

Smith: I was listening to Benton Becker yesterday, [talk about] the conversation in the Oval Office before the pardon, in which Hartmann points out, quite accurately, that this would be political disaster for the mid-term elections.

Cannon: Well, the four of them were in there when Ford told them. He said, “Now, if you have any ideas different, come in and tell me. I might change my mind.” So three of the four came in and said, “You sure you want to do this?” Buchen, Marsh, Hartmann – each one of them. And Marsh, most significantly, comes in and says, “Now, I don’t want to make you mad, Mr. President, but if you pardon him this is going to inevitably be connected to the incident of August.” Marsh was very careful to say this. And Ford interrupted him. He said, “Jack, I know exactly what you’re talking about. I’ve thought it through. They are not connected, not in any way. I’m going to go ahead with
it.” And Marsh said, “I knew at that moment that there was no connection in
his mind about it.”

Smith: By the way, is Al Haig blowing smoke when he presents himself as an almost
passive transmitter of Fred Buzhardt’s…

Cannon: Bull****.

Smith: …initiative?

Cannon: I am convinced in my mind that Haig was the prime advocate in that meeting
because, when four people were in there, Buchen comes in first. Ford
summons the four of them, but Buchen comes in and Haig is already there
talking to Ford and Buchen has the impression they’ve been talking about the
pardon.

Smith: This was in August?

Cannon: This is a few days after the press conference.

Smith: Oh, September.

Cannon: This is the meeting at which Ford tells the four, “I am thinking about pardon.”
But Buchen goes in and Haig is already there and somehow he has the
impression, he can’t be explicit about it, but he has the impression they are
already talking about the pardon.

Smith: Go back a month – the famous August 1st, or whatever when Haig, in effect,
informs the vice president that there was a smoking gun tape. Can you kind of
walk us through that sequence of events because it is the heart of the case of
was there a deal?

Cannon: Well, it is. Haig comes over, and let me see, Nixon calls Haig in early and by
Haig’s account and Nixon’s account, Nixon says, “I think I’m going to have
to resign,” and that is what he said. “Tell Ford, but just warn him that he must
get ready. Don’t tell him anymore.” So he goes over there. This is on the
record. And then Haig goes over, but Hartmann is there and Haig won’t talk
much. And so Ford goes to the Hill and Haig calls him up and says, “I want to
meet, I must meet you alone.” Hartmann objects, but Ford says, “Don’t worry, Bob. I’ll brief you on what happens.”

So they meet alone, maybe three o’clock or whatever it is. I’ve got it down in my notes somewhere. And Haig then is more explicit. By this time he says, “I have seen the tape that means he must resign. So he probably can’t hold onto the office.” He didn’t say must resign. But here are the options that are being discussed in the White House. And so he goes through: Nixon could pardon himself, he could do this, he could step back temporarily, under the Twenty-fifth Amendment he could do this, but the sixth option is that he could resign and Ford would pardon him. Now, this is characterized as six options, I think, after the fact, before Ford testifies, six options. And Haig gives Ford two pieces of paper. This is what was really significant to me. One is handwritten on a yellow legal pad, the explanation of a president’s power to pardon, and the other is a draft of a pardon statement. All you’ve got to do is fill in the name, hand it to a typist, and you’ve got a pardon.

So he hands these two things to Ford. Ford puts them in his pocket and Haig leaves and he tells Hartmann, “I swear you to secrecy on this,” and so forth, “but this is what he proposed.” Hartmann is outraged. He says, “For God’s sake. In effect, you let him do that?” And Ford said, “Well, I didn’t give him any answer. I just told I’d think about it.” And Hartmann said, “That’s probably the worst thing you could have done. Outrageous…you’ve got to do something about this. You talk to Marsh if you don’t believe me,” and Ford says, “Well, I’ll have to talk to him later,” because he was going out to the vice president’s residence with Betty and so forth. And he thought it would be cause for many questions if he didn’t go. So, he doesn’t talk to Marsh until the next morning. But Marsh asks to see the piece of paper. He looks at it and it’s handwritten. He recognizes the handwriting, it’s the lawyer…

Smith: Buzhardt.

Cannon: Fred Buzhardt, that’s right. Marsh had served over at the Pentagon with Fred Buzhardt and had a high regard for him as a lawyer and recognized the handwriting as Fred Buzhardt’s. So what Marsh figured out is probably exactly what happened. Nixon says, “I can’t talk to Haig about this, I have to
be in denial on this,” so he tells Buzhardt to draft it, to propose this, and Buzhardt gives it to Haig. I ask Haig why do you do this, he said, “I had no choice, I was told to.” Well, the only person who could tell him to do that was Nixon or Buzhardt for Nixon.

So late that night, this is what was really dangerous, Ford talks to Betty about it and says, “I’m going to tell them to do whatever they want to do.” And he calls Haig and tells him this. And this so shocked Hartmann and Marsh, they say, “Well, what was discussed?” Well, Ford can’t remember exactly. He said, “Well, not much, he didn’t say much.” But they call at one or two o’clock in the morning, they realize it’s going to be recorded and there’s a record of it somewhere and it’s going to be subject to subpoena at some point and so on. So they are terrified.

But Marsh can’t persuade him either it’s a bad thing to have done. And Ford – this is the best clue in my mind to Ford’s thinking – it is very complex for him, he’s conflicted. He doesn’t want to be president, but he is ready to do so if necessary. He doesn’t want to see Nixon forced out of office, but he realizes that it may be inevitable. He knows that Nixon can no longer govern and it would be best if he leaves office, but he has sworn to himself that he is not going to do one single thing to put him out of office. At the same time he thinks it would be in the national interest if Nixon would go. And so he is really ready to sacrifice his own life’s career if it means getting Nixon out of office instead of going through the process of six weeks to three months, if they impeach and convict.

So he has all of this and he explained this to me in some detail when I was talking to him in California. That he had all of this going through his mind, the national interest may be to get him out of office. And his personal interest is diminished. His personal interest is not “Man, I want to be president.” His personal interest is what is the best thing for the country? So all this going through his mind and that’s why he’s not convinced that he should turn this down out of hand.

But then they get Harlow in and fortunately Hartmann made notes on what was said and it’s in his book. Harlow was very eloquent about how he can’t
do this. And Ford believes Harlow and he hasn’t believed Hartmann, hasn’t believed Marsh, but he believes Harlow.

Smith: What was it about Harlow that made him so credible?

Cannon: Because he had served so many presidents, so well, and was so highly respected. He was a wise, wise man whose judgment was impeccable. And so, Ford had the greatest respect for him, as did so many other people, going back to, I guess, Eisenhower. So he thought, well, this is a man I believe and if he tells that it’s going to tank my presidency – he’s telling right. So, what can I do?

They write out what he is to say, and so he calls up Haig and says, “Whatever we discussed is personal and not to be used in any way, etc.” They wrote it out and I have it in the book. And Haig says, “I figured the staff got to him and he turned him down.” But I believe profoundly that Haig was finally the key person in getting Nixon out - he promising, “I’ll get you your papers, documents and tapes, and I’ll see that you’ll never go to jail.” And I think with that promise, Nixon agreed to resign.

Smith: Let me just nail down one thing in this timeline because the call that night before – the late night call to Haig, after he talked to Mrs. Ford - does one have a sense of what she may have said to him, or what her role was? Would she have been a reinforcing effect of the Hartmann…

Cannon: Betty? She read the papers. Betty read the two documents.

Smith: She did?

Cannon: She did. In fact, that’s in Armbrister’s report. That’s how I knew about it. And she read the papers and said, “Jerry, you can’t do this.” So they talked back and forth, and he explains what’s in the best interest of the country and so forth. They talked a couple of hours. And it’s an indirect conversation. At the end of that, she says what she always says - as she always does, “Jerry, I’ll back you up, whatever you do. I’ll support you in whatever you do.” And she did, of course. I think Betty was opposed, but listened to his reasoning. Ford would never let me talk to Betty about it.
Smith: Really?

Cannon: Really.

Smith: What does that tell you?

Cannon: If I said I wanted to talk to Betty for a few minutes, he would sit in and be very alert to whatever I was saying. He wouldn’t let me talk to her.

Smith: How do you interpret that?

Cannon: He didn’t want me to talk to her. He didn’t want me ask her a question because she was frank and forthright and might spill something. Ford didn’t want to talk to me about the pardon at first. But I said, “Mr. President, you’re never going to have a more friendly examination of what really happened. No more friendly account of what happened. And it would be best for you to just get it all out there and so forth. Well, he said, “I don’t want to talk about it.” And I said, “Well, tell me what you did with the two papers.” He realized I knew more than he thought. He said, “I destroyed them. I didn’t want them around.” And then he realized I knew more than…and I told him I talked to Haig, and Hartmann and Marsh and so forth. So then he opened up about it.

Smith: Is it logical to assume, given what we know about Mrs. Ford’s reaction on reading those papers, and the fact that it was after that conversation that he called Haig back, that it would have been to, if not put brakes absolutely on Haig’s initiative, at least to try to correct any misimpression that might have been left?

Cannon: No, I don’t think the late-night call was to correct it at all. I think it was ambivalent. I think it was continued ambivalence, in my opinion. Because he said, “Well, I can’t remember exactly what we said.”

Smith: Is it possible that he didn’t want to remember what he said?

Cannon: I think it’s probably true. He realized it had been a mistake when Hartmann and Marsh said, “My God, what did you talk about?” “Not much (mumbling).” I think he was very conscious of the fact that he shouldn’t have
made the call and probably – my guess is – that it was ambivalence all the
way through and Haig would continue to think, well he didn’t say no.

Smith: That raises a large question because the popular view, restated so many times
at the time of the funeral, was this was a man without guile.

Cannon: That’s right.

Smith: Guile is a pejorative, but shrewdness? The fact that – for example – in this
conversation, if for whatever reason, he didn’t really want to be fully
forthcoming, is that guile?

Cannon: No, I think it is embarrassment that he did it. I don’t think it’s guile. I don’t
think he would hesitate to tell Hartmann and Marsh what had happened if he
thought it was significant. But I think he felt, well, we just talked a little bit.
We didn’t… And probably they did talk about nothing. Haig said nothing has
changed and Ford thought, well, he’s still thinking it over, whatever he said.
We have no decision yet, or whatever he said, but the net of it would be that
Haig would say, he hasn’t said no. He hadn’t said no the previous afternoon,
and he hadn’t said no in the early hours, and not until the following Friday
afternoon did he call him up and say no. I don’t think it was guile, I think it
was uncertainty about what he had done, and should do.

Smith: Yeah. Makes sense. Would he on balance, on hindsight, would he have been
served better as president had he had a little bit more guile?

Cannon: Yes.

Smith: I mean, the Boy Scout influence which made him the perfect person for this
period.

Cannon: Right, but to get the job, to replace Nixon.

Smith: In some ways is a detriment.

Cannon: Yeah. Well, there was an extraordinary naïveté about Ford. In so many ways
it just didn’t register to him that people would take advantage of him.

Smith: Is that the price you pay for believing that I don’t have any enemies?
Cannon: I think it is simply a factor of his being. In high school he told me he decided on this when he was fifteen or sixteen years old, he decided that there was something good in everybody. And he would look for the good in everybody. And he accepted that there were bad people, dishonest people and so forth. Some of them were up in the House of Representatives. But he didn’t dwell on them. He thought, well, I’m looking for the good in people. I think there was a goodness about him that became naiveté.

Smith: It’s interesting that you say that. Most pols love gossip, and I always sensed – political gossip is one thing – but I always sensed that he was almost put off by it. That he would find a way to change the subject. It wouldn’t be in your face, but he was not a gossip.

Cannon: He was not a gossip. He would not talk bad about people. He did not believe bad about people. He thought, let’s look at the good side of things. The one thing that struck me about Ford that you haven’t mentioned, and I think this was a reflection of his strenuous daily schedule, was his use of time. He was absolutely adamant about not wasting any time. I know once or twice I was delayed for a few minutes. He was really angry for being late and would not have his time wasted.

Smith: And yet he had a wife who was famously late.

Cannon: That he had to put up with. But with subordinates – no. He absolutely would not tolerate any waste of his time. You know, some people would try to Bull**** in the office or so forth, he’d just wave it off – “No, let’s finish this.”

Smith: Very disciplined man.

Cannon: Very disciplined. Extremely well disciplined. And conscious of what he was doing. He told me once, for example, that if he was trying to deliberate on something at a meeting, he would deliberately take his pipe out and put some tobacco in it and light it. Because he said, “I used that time for thinking about what I wanted to say and how I should say it and so forth.” So he was of a very much more deliberate nature than you think of him.
Smith: Do you think he grew into the office?

Cannon: Oh, yes. Frankly, he grew tremendously under Rumsfeld’s coaching. Because Rumsfeld said, “You’ve got to delegate, you’ve got to do this. You can’t do everything yourself. You’ve got to change the people.” And so he gave him a schedule to change the people. You’ve got to do this – you’ve got to do this. And he did. And Ford changed.

By the time I got there, which was February, he had mastered the job, there’s no question about it. I was generally aware of the confusion because I spent a fair amount of time in the White House during the Rockefeller confirmation which lasted until December. And spent a lot of time with Jack Marsh, who was in charge of that. There was a lot of confusion and helter skelter in the ’74 White House, but not in ’75. It was working, it was functioning.

Smith: Before I forget, was Rockefeller under any pressure from members of his family during the confirmation period?

Cannon: Evidently not. I just finished a rewriting of that, Richard, and evidently not. But there was an astonishing series – it was almost all about money – not about issues – a little bit here and there about his belief in this and NATO and about what he would do about this or that. But ninety percent of the confirmation in the Senate and House was how much money he had.

Smith: Someone referred to it in one of our interviews as “financial voyeurism”.

Cannon: Oh, yeah. Exactly. Everybody wanted to know just how much money the guy had.

Smith: You may know the story – I may have told you the story. Tom Korologos told me the morning in the Oval Office, when the announcement was made, he introduced himself to the governor and what his role –

Cannon: Korologos – I’ve got that in the book.

Smith: …where Rockefeller is concerned that…

Cannon: I may not be as rich as they think I am. And he was right. They kept padding his assets. In effect, they made him list, for example – he started out at $133
million. That was a conservative estimate, which did not include the art, which he had pledged to museums. So they made him include that, and update these things, so that doubled just about. Then they made him include the value of the trust that John D. had set up for him - $116 million, but he had no control over that. And, in fact, from time to time, when he needed some money out of it - he got a good income from it – but from time to time he would have to go to, I think it was William McChesney Martin and beg for a couple of million bucks out of the trust because he had to pay for this or that or whatever.

But they finally got it up to two hundred and something million dollars, but that was excessively padded. And then in the House they demanded – the House I think really wanted to stop him – two-thirds of that House Judiciary Committee was rabid liberal, I mean way far left. They wanted a detailed account of how much every member of the family, every asset, and every investment and so forth. Well, I think there were 84 members in the family, the cousins and all and so forth. And Rockefeller said, “I can’t do that.” “Why not?” He said it would destroy the family. So he said, “Part of the reason is that my brothers and I have given different amounts to our children. It will come out and it will provoke all kind of resentment and lasting bitterness among the family. I can’t do that.”

Smith: Did he ever consider withdrawing?

Cannon: Yes, at that point. And he said, “Well, I’ll have to withdraw over that.” And Bob Douglas said, “Well, governor, this extreme invasion of privacy is a valid enough reason to withdraw, if you want to do that.” And he thought it over and said, “No, Bob. I’m going to fight it out.” And Bob Douglas managed with an artful bit of political work to persuade Rodino that he would send Richardson Dilworth down to give him an aggregate of what all 84 members had, but not person by person. And they did, and all that showed that they didn’t have any control. This was a myth. Rockefeller kept saying, “This is a myth.” They had less than one percent of ownership, the total family did, less than one percent in any corporation except Chase Bank, and that was about 1.3 percent.
Smith: Was Shirley Chisholm helpful?

Cannon: Well, she was. As a matter of fact, I’ve got the transcript of her talk. She made a really quite memorable speech about this. He was opposed by blacks, Jews, a lot of other people, and she took the floor and stood up there and faced a Jewish group and said, “Where were you when Nelson Rockefeller was persuading the government to send Golda Meir some airplanes?” And she took blacks and said, “Where were you when the Rockefellers were founding black colleges,” and so forth. It was really a good speech written by an odd little guy named Thad Garrett.

Smith: Who later worked for Rockefeller?

Cannon: A month or so later after that, I got a call from Shirley one day and she said, “Why haven’t you hired Thad?” I said, “I didn’t know we were supposed to.” She said, “That was part of the deal.” I said, “He’s on the staff.”

Smith: Well, there’s an urban legend that the deal included more than that. She supposedly had some estate in Jamaica. They referred to it as the Black Berchtesgaden.

Cannon: I didn’t know that.

Smith: Supposedly Rockefeller paid her…

Cannon: Well, I doubt that. Shirley, I knew her fairly well, I knew all the House members fairly well because I was sort of Rockefeller’s personal ambassador. We had a New York office, but I was a personal ambassador. And after ’70 and the reapportionment, we lost one seat upstate and one seat in the city. So I had to negotiate with all thirty-four, I think it was, for their district. So, I was the most popular guy in the New York delegation while we were reapportioning because everybody wanted to protect his seat.

Smith: And of course, Charlie Rangel tells the story about Rockefeller, in effect, drawing the districts to his specifications.
Cannon: Yeah, he did. He drew the districts so Charlie Rangel wouldn’t lose Mead Esposito. He was the Brooklyn leader then, and we gave him what he wanted for his district. I think he had six Congressmen in Brooklyn at that time.

Smith: And as I recall, you would liked to have gotten rid of Otis Pike, but the geography just wouldn’t work.

Cannon: We couldn’t. He was out at the tip end of Long Island. There is no way you could change the geography to rule him out.

Smith: Was the White House naive and/or unprepared for the Reagan challenge?

Cannon: Yes.

Smith: Did they wait too long?

Cannon: Both. They waited too long. In fact, in May, I think it was in May of ’75, by then I’d been there a couple of months and I couldn’t see anything happening. And I told Rumsfeld one day, “Look, we’ve got to get going here. We can’t let this drift like this.” And Rumsfeld said, “Well, I’m not going to be the manager.” So I said, “I want to go see the president and tell him you’ve got to get going.” He said, “You go right ahead. You can see the president and tell him this.” So I did. I talked to the president and I said, “Mr. President, we ought to really get started on this campaign.” And he said, and this is a rough quote, “Well, Jim, I figured this: that if the party wants to nominate me, if it feels I’ve done a good job, they’ll nominate me. And if the country feels I’ve done a good job, they’ll elect me.” He said, “That’s the way I’ve always done it in my district, and that’s the way I plan to do it now.” I said, “Mr. President, it doesn’t work that way. You’ve got to go out and get these delegates,” and so on.

But I didn’t budge him at all. It was only a few months later that Stu Spencer, I think, came in and said, “Hell, he’s running. Reagan’s not talking about running, he’s running.” And finally we got off the dime and got to work on it. But it was mid-summer, I think, of ’75 before we got started at all. And then it didn’t start well. Bo Calloway was a nice guy, but probably – Rumsfeld says Ford picked Bo. I guess he’s right, I don’t know. But Ford liked Bo and
thought he had been a good Congressman and so on. And was a Southerner, and maybe could get some delegates out of the South. Ford was absolutely, totally, innocent about how to run a national campaign. It had never happened, and curiously, although he had traveled all over the country for House members, he had no concept of how to win a presidential nomination. It had to be taught him, basically, by Stu Spencer.

Smith: On balance, do you buy the argument that Reagan made him a better candidate?

Cannon: No. Well I think he gave us a lot of practice. No question about that. But the fact is, that what Reagan did was convince that conservative sub group of the Republican Party that they should wait for him and not support Ford. And they didn’t. And there is no question about it, I think the pardon was…Stu told me once that a poll showed that seven percent of the Republicans were not going to vote for him because of the pardon. You lose seven percent of your base and you’re in trouble. You’re not going to make it.

Smith: In retrospect, has too much been made of the Polish gaffe?

Cannon: No. I think that was a critical thing because he was going upward and that just turned it back down. It was a stupid mistake.

Smith: And he was stubborn.

Cannon: About two days of stubbornness – and Ford could be stubborn. He really could be stubborn. Not often, but when he was stubborn, I mean, he was really stubborn. This was something, apparently, out of his childhood.

Smith: In the Reagan White House, when you had that situation occur, you could go to Nancy Reagan and she would try. Did anyone ever think of trying to enlist Mrs. Ford to convince him?

Cannon: I don’t think so. My impression was that she was always supportive of him. And she was the conscience to him. Not that he didn’t have a strong conscience himself, but when he would waiver to get something done, she would correct it. She was a very strong element of conscience in his decisions. But in the end she always supported him.
Smith: Tell me, when the famous *Sixty Minutes* interview occurred, were people appalled in the White House? In the immediate aftermath of that?

Cannon: I’m not sure, I wasn’t there yet.

Smith: Well, it was in ’75…

Cannon: Early ’75, I think. I think it was about January of ’75. I’m not sure, but anyway, I don’t recall being there at that time.

Smith: Was there tension? Were there people who saw her as a political loose cannon?

Cannon: No, I think people saw her as a tremendous political asset because of her candor, her frankness. And people just liked her. They often like the First Lady better than they like the president. But he was certainly true in his case. She had a lot of verve and spirit. She was kind of a free spirit, and everybody liked that about her. She had also been a good mother, raising four good children. I never thought she was anything but a major asset to him.

Smith: Was there an awareness that she had a problem?

Cannon: Yes. Internally there was. I know, because Maria Downs – have you talked to her?

Smith: I talk to her next week.

Cannon: Okay, good. Maria Downs used to invite us to all the dinners, the White House dinners, and Cherie, my wife, asked, “Why do we get invited?” And she said, “Well, two reasons. One, you don’t ask, and the other is, that it’s always good to have you around to organize a table or two in case we have a problem with Mrs. Ford.” Because sometimes she would come into the dinners looking – I don’t know if she was or not – but looking kind of zonked and out of it. But she liked being in the White House, very much, because she saw him more than she’d ever seen him before.

Smith: Do you think he felt guilt about the earlier years when he was away as much as he was?
Cannon: I never saw any evidence of it. I never saw any evidence of it whatsoever. He had set out in his first term, I believe, to be Speaker. It is what he wanted to be and he aimed for that. Not with all deliberation, but when an opportunity would come. He didn’t initiate any of his races for leadership. They all came to him, people came to him and said, we think you can beat Charlie Halleck.

Smith: When you stop to think about it, it actually explains what he said to you about his attitude, well if the country wants to re-elect.

Cannon: Yeah, that’s right.

Smith: There is an element of passivity here.

Cannon: That’s right. Personal passivity.

Smith: He would not, on his own, have written the OpEd piece calling for rebuke (of Clinton; here confused with second Ford Op-Ed on affirmative action).

Cannon: No, but that was a wonderful thing to have done. And it provoked me to go see Lee Bolinger, and Lee told me what the problem was, and gave me the idea of an amicus brief that, by all accounts…

Smith: Which we now know Sandra Day O’Connor referred to.

Cannon: Exactly.

Smith: It’s on affirmative action.

Cannon: That’s right, exactly. I initiated the brief, and I started trying to get it organized, but then a guy at the Army, a former Army counsel, took it over and got all these generals and so forth. He really made it happen, but I just kind of got it started.

Smith: But that also suggested Ford, more than many politicians, in some ways, was dependent on a staff.

Cannon: No question. He was dependent on ideas. Have you talked to Mel?

Smith: Yeah.
Cannon: Well, Mel was the one who kept pushing him. “Come out with some ideas, come out with some ideas.” But Ford, when he would try to have an alternative to a Democratic program in the House, he didn’t initiate it, he had somebody else do it. It was, in many respects, a passive thing.

You asked about the Polish question. I have no doubt in my mind that the real reason President Ford was not a more effective president and the reason he didn’t elected president, was because he was not a good performer. The White House has become such a stage. It is the number one stage in the whole world. And half of the president’s job is performing. Half of it may be managing, but the more visible half is performing. He just was not a very good performer.

Cannon: And it’s funny, the first month, all he had to be was not Richard Nixon.

Smith: That’s right. Exactly.

Cannon: And the very qualities that were perfect for a month. The press in its infatuation with irrelevant detail, made much of him cooking his own muffin and whatever the hell it was. It was insignificant, but that boosted him way up here because he was a man of the people, or whatever he was. And he was very popular…

Smith: And the truth was, probably Mrs. Ford didn’t want to get up and make his breakfast.

Cannon: That’s right. She was probably sleeping late. But he simply was not very good on television. He’d never been very good on television. Look at him in the House, and Mel Laird saying, “Get out there and do this, Jerry.” Or being shadowed by Everett Dirksen, or whatever it was. He had never been very good on television. He did learn how to campaign. My firm belief, Richard, is that this guy turned out to be a hell of a manager. He really managed the White House better than almost any other president we can think of, but he simply couldn’t portray the idea of a first citizen on television. He just couldn’t do it.

Smith: That’s why I say, going back certainly to Kennedy, the popular view of what a president does had been transformed. And Ford, in another era, might have
been seen as a much more successful president. In his last years, we’ll wrap up with this, in his later years they’d go to the convention, and they were part of this diminishing band. This guy who was the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge, came to be seen as…

Cannon: Right, that’s right. He was the real conservative. He was the acting conservative. Reagan and others are talking conservatives; Ford was a really acting conservative.

Smith: It is expressed, among other things through his vetoes.

Cannon: Yeah.

Smith: He was fiscally conservative. He was tight.

Cannon: Oh, yeah. He was stingy, he was tight, he was careful with his money and with everybody else’s money. We would sit in these budget sessions when they’d do their appeals and O’Neill and Lynn and the OMB guy, and I was in there as a kind of a foil so that they didn’t carry all the verbiage and so forth. Because every now and then they’d say, well we ought to cut this, that and so forth. And I’d say, “Well, Mr. President, that art budget item is very close to Betty Ford. I think you ought to think again about that.” He’d say, “You’re right,” and so on. But anyway, people would come in with appeals and they’d start to appeal and he would know more about it than they would, and in about five minutes they’d say, “Well, Mr. President, I understand. You’re right, we’ll take the cut.” But he was just one hell of a manager. With Rumsfeld’s coaching to show him how to delegate and so on, he was a splendid manager. Probably the best manager of any presidency since maybe Truman or somebody. Truman was a good manager.

Smith: I think he’s the only president to sign his name to a petition supporting gay rights. That represented change. He wouldn’t do that in the White House.

Cannon: That’s right.

Smith: How did he change? And was it exacerbated by the fact that the party was moving far to the right?
Cannon: No, I think the changes I observed were really changes that occurred as much because of Mrs. Ford as anything else. The changes that I recognized he made were influenced by Betty Ford, in my opinion. He simply was adamant about not doing anything, not making presidential decisions that would improve his chances to be elected. In fact, he was almost stubborn about that – that he would do it out of defiance. “Well, you tell me it’s going to help me politically, but I’m not going to do it.” He did not want to hear any of that.

Smith: But in their retirement years - I don’t want to just throw a label on it and say he became more liberal – but certainly his views seemed to have broadened.

Cannon: I think he moderated a lot of his views. Now that you mention it, I think he became more broadly minded in terms of understanding the world beyond the House, beyond the Congress. I think that was a tremendous change in his life.

Smith: He was still learning.

Cannon: Yeah. In the House he was a House man. He really looked at it like you do in the House and the Senate. You’re in a little world up there and you see that little world. But once he got out, I thought he expanded his knowledge and his beliefs.

Smith: Do you think his kids had any role in that?

Cannon: Yes, I think they did here and there. Yes, I do. I think they did. I think specifically they had a lot to do with his granting, not what he called amnesty, but conditional amnesty, earned amnesty, I believe he called it. I think they had, Michael and Jack, had roles in that because neither one of them was subject to Vietnam or had been drafted for Vietnam, but they had a lot of friends who were.

Smith: Did he ever tell you how he’d like to be remembered? Did he think about that?

Cannon: Yes. And I have it written down somewhere, but I can’t quote it exactly. But as a man who had served his country in a time of crisis with the best of his ability. Words to that effect – that’s about it.
What were his last words, do you know? Did you ever ask Betty or anybody?

Smith: No, and it’s all very sort of – I don’t know why there is such a veil thrown over a perfectly natural process. They were deeply resentful when he would go to the hospital and somebody in the hospital would tip off the press. He was deeply resentful. People would try to suggest this interest is understandable, and he would come back, stubbornly, I’m not president anymore. I’m a private citizen. I’m entitled to my privacy. That sort of thing. I suspect it had to have been very difficult for someone of his pride, meticulous in his appearance and everything else, to die by inches in public. And he’d seen Bob Hope, which had to have been a cautionary – he didn’t want to use a cane. There were all the indignities of growing old – he found distasteful.

Cannon: He was devoted to Betty, and they’d had a wonderful long marriage. But he still had a great respect for his early romance in Phyllis Brown. In my first set of interviews with him, I guess in mid-interview one day, he said, “You ought to go see Phyllis, she’s right up here in Las Vegas,” or whatever it was. And so I said, “Well, alright. I’ll go tomorrow and I’ll come back, if that’s alright.” He said, “Sure, go up and see her. I’d like to know what you think of her.” I called her. Penny gave me her number. I called her and said I wanted to come up and see her.

I flew up there and took a taxi out to her condo and thought how in the hell am I going to break the ice here. So the taxi had stopped in front of a florist shop. I said, “Wait here.” I went in and got her a dozen red roses and brought them back. When she opened the door, I handed her the roses, and said, “President Ford sent you these.” She said, “Oh, no. He never sent me a flower in all his life. But come on in.”

And we had a wonderful conversation. Her memory was not detailed enough for me to reconstruct it. But the summary of it was that they had met and taken an instant liking to each other. Had fallen deeply in love and they had the most wonderful time for two or three or four years. They went skiing together; they went to play tennis; they went sailing; they did everything. She was a brilliant woman. She made her living as one of these experts in bridge
playing – whatever you call them. She’d had three husbands and a son by one of them.

Smith: You know, at the end she wanted to come see him.

Cannon: Oh, yeah. And did come to see him.

Smith: And was turned away.

Cannon: And turned away, I know. I think that is unfortunate because – but anyway. She was not bitter about it, but she had the greatest regard for him and affection, and she said, “I would have been lucky if I could have married him, but it wouldn’t have worked out because I was just too much of a flirt.” And he understood this. He perceived very early that she liked too many boyfriends and this was not going to work if he was going to be in political life. It was going to be very awkward for him if he had a wife who wandered around and so on. So he prudently decided that was not for him.

Smith: Perfect.
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Smith: First of all, tell me about the 30-30 Club.

Trimpe: Well, what would you like to know about it?

Smith: What is it? How did it come about?

Trimpe: How it came about was that we played on Thanksgiving in 1930. Then we won the championship and then we decided that because it was on Thanksgiving, we always played on the Thanksgiving day, we always said, “Let’s do something.” Then we said, “Let’s meet every Thanksgiving” and that’s how it got started.

Smith: Who did you play?

Trimpe: Union High School.

Smith: Okay. And you were playing for South High?

Trimpe: South High.

Smith: South High, I’m told, was different from the other schools. What was special about South High?

Trimpe: They were just a down-to-earth outfit. Do you know what I mean? You just wanted to go to school there because everything was top tradition and it was a good place to be.

Smith: And was it a very diverse student body? The old story was Central High was a little bit upper crust.

Trimpe: No, no we were down-to-earth. I know Central, yes. They were kind of the elite at that time. And that’s where Ford’s wife went, she went to Central.

Smith: Was Jerry Ford down-to-earth?
Trimpe: Oh man, he was an organizer and I knew sometime, some place, he’d be famous for something because he could get you going, especially if you was in a huddle or something, he could get you going.

Smith: How?

Trimpe: All he had to do – and he’d do it in a nice way – he’d say, “We’re not doing too good. You gotta do this and this.” He organized you right away. He was the center, he was the center of the team.

Smith: I take it he showed leadership qualities?

Trimpe: Oh, even in those days he did, yes. He took the bull by the horns. I just liked the guy from the day one. I still like him.

Smith: Did you know his mother and father?

Trimpe: No.

Smith: What about his brothers? Did you know his brothers?

Trimpe: No, didn’t know his brothers either. All I knew was Jerry.

Smith: What was he like off the field? He loved sports…

Trimpe: Off the field, he was just like he was when we were playing. He was a down-to-earth guy, that’s all I got to say.

Smith: Worker? Hard worker?

Trimpe: Oh, yeah. And he didn’t have too much when he first started. He used to wash dishes in the eating place across the street from South High School just to get the money so he could keep going to school. He wasn’t a rich man.

Smith: That’s, I think, where he met his father, wasn’t it? Remember the story about his birth father who one day walked in?

Trimpe: Right, right. Yeah.

Smith: Tell me about Grand Rapids then - in the 1920’s. What did you do as a school kid? What’d you do for fun? Did you go to movies? Did you go
fishing? What did you do in Grand Rapids that you and the other guys, like a Jerry Ford, would do?

Trimpe: I lived on what they called the Black Hills. That was in the southern, south part of Grand Rapids. And it was during the Depression, I graduated in ’32 and it was ’31 and ’30 that was the Depression. But there wasn’t one kid that had to ask his parents for money. We always was out doing things. Even if you had to pick up junk. We never had to worry. My dad wasn’t poor, but he was an engineer on the railroad, and he made pretty good money, but that didn’t bother me any because I just figured I had to make it for myself anyway, regardless.

Smith: What was the Depression like here?

Trimpe: When it gets right down to it, you didn’t really feel there was a Depression. We had enough money because my dad could take care of us, but we always played with kids that needed the money and you knew what they felt like too. They felt a lot different than what I did.

Smith: Where there other guys who were friends of Jerry Ford? Can you think of other classmates or teammates that were friends?

Trimpe: The only time that I knew Jerry was when I went to South High School and that’s when I got familiar with him.

Smith: Were there particular teachers there who really stood out, maybe a football coach or other influences on you at South High?

Trimpe: They had a good bunch of teachers and you wanted to go to school there because you liked the people. That’s the way the whole school was. You just wanted to be part of it.

Smith: Did he know then that he wanted to go to college?

Trimpe: I don’t know whether he did or not. I don’t know whether he did.

Smith: Tell me about the championship game.
Trimpe: That was something else. It snowed and there was probably 6 to 8 inches of snow on the field. So now they had to go down there and shovel some of it where the markers went, so they put salt down there to melt the snow so you knew where the yard lines were. And we couldn’t wear cleats because they’d get all clogged up, so we called Goble & Brown [Goble & Brown was a sporting goods store in Grand Rapids] and they sent sneakers or gym shoes. They didn’t have cleats on them, they just had rubber soles. And that’s how you got around.

Smith: Is that the famous 0-0 game? Was that the game that ended 0-0?

Trimpe: Yes. I don’t think we got down past the, maybe the 30 yard line, and from there on, there wasn’t a footprint. And, I tell you, we almost made it. There was a guy named Louie Cooley that was on the team and he caught a pass and he was running and he slipped and fell and he would’ve made a touchdown. I’m sure he would. But, hey, that’s past tense. That’s just one of those things.

Smith: Who was your quarterback?

Trimpe: The quarterback then was Alan Elliott and he was a good one.

Smith: If the game ended 0-0, how did you win?

Trimpe: They had a fellow on the team of Union and he had signed up to play professional. And that took care of that. Actually, the game was forfeited because of that. He’d signed up already and he never should’ve done that. His name was Frank Cook. A big guy, too.

Smith: I take it they don’t have a 30-30 Club, the Union side?

Trimpe: No, but we invited them a couple of times to be with us on Thanksgiving and they came, too. It was nice.

Smith: Was there a long rivalry between South and Union?

Trimpe: There always was. That was the team you had to beat. You didn’t care about any of the rest of them, but you had to beat Union because they had a good team. They were in good shape.
Smith: How many games would you play in a season? 6? 7? 8? 9?

Trimpe: I don’t know exactly, I’d say about 7 or 8 because you played Central and Christian and Ottawa Hills and…

Smith: What other sports did Ford play?

Trimpe: I don’t recall. I went out for track, but I don’t remember him doing anything else. But he might have.

Smith: You kept in touch with him over the years?

Trimpe: Oh yeah. Yeah. I’ve got a picture out there. I tell you, every Thanksgiving we always arranged it so he knew where we were and he could call us if he couldn’t make it. He had a family and every Thanksgiving, it would be like us, you wanted to be with your family. So you can’t blame the guy for not wanting to come clear from California over here just to be with us. But he always called. I got a picture out there when the Grand Rapids Press came down there and they got a picture of me talking to Ford.

Smith: Once you went to the White House, didn’t you?

Trimpe: Oh, that was something else. I think that was one of the best things in my life was when he invited us to the White House. That was something else. He took us all around and if he didn’t take us, he always had somebody and they showed us everything there was around there in Washington. We were only there a short time, only there two days, but it was nice.

Smith: Did you have Thanksgiving dinner at the White House?

Trimpe: Breakfast. Actually, it was like a brunch, they had the breakfast and lunch all in one.

Smith: And was Mrs. Ford there, too?

Trimpe: Oh, yes. Oh yes, yes.

Smith: We picked up today, talking to one of your teammates, word about a girlfriend that we didn’t know existed of Jerry’s. Mary was her first name? Does that ring a bell at all?
Trimpe: I don’t recall that.

Smith: Do you remember his car? He drove an old Ford?

Trimpe: Oh yeah.

Smith: Tell us.

Trimpe: An old Ford. I don’t know where he got it but it was an antique, even at that time. He always drove us to school in that old Ford.

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him or talked to him?

Trimpe: I can’t remember exactly, but the last time I contacted him was when I wrote him a letter and asked him if it would be okay if we dismantled the 30-30 Club because there was only just a few of us left. And I said, “I wanted to get your opinion on it” because I didn’t want to say we were going get rid of it without going – I sent one to Joslin, he’s out in Seattle – I wanted to find out from him. He wrote me back. You’ve got a copy of that letter, haven’t you?

Other: Yes, we have.

Trimpe: And it’s signed by him, too.

Smith: And what did it say?

Trimpe: It said he thought it was a good idea because good things have to come to an end sometimes. So that was the 75th that we quit it, but that picture that I’ve got out there was from 1970.

Smith: Did you attend his funeral?

Trimpe: Oh man, yes. Yes, yes, yes. I got an invitation and the whole works. But, boy, you talk about security, we had to park at another church’s lot and then we were bussed over. The reason why we were bussed over was because they had to check you legally so that you could go and be at the church that he was at. They were scrutinizing you, I’ll tell you. The biggest thing was your driver’s license because it had your picture on it. And every time you did something, you had to get that out and show it to them.
Smith: What do you remember about him most? How would you sum him up?

Trimpe: He was always congenial. He was always glad to see his friends. Always.
Of course he had a lot of them, but he was a very nice guy.

Smith: Did he have any enemies?

Trimpe: I don’t know. I never heard of anybody that didn’t like him. Of course, I
didn’t know everybody, either.

Other: Were you in the same class as Jerry Ford?

Trimpe: No, he graduated in ’31 and I graduated in ’32. I always said he must’ve been
a little bit smarter than me. But that makes a lot of difference when you start
school to when you graduate. I think that’s what threw it off.

Smith: Tell us about that restaurant where he worked across the street from the
school. What was that? Was that just a hamburger place?

Trimpe: Yeah. A lot of the kids that was at South High School would go over there
for lunch. Of course they had a cafeteria in the school, too, but they liked to
get away from the school and get over there.

Other: Did you eat lunch there?

Trimpe: I ate there a few times, but a lot of the kids were poor and I would eat with
them. When we’d bring our lunch, then we’d swap a sandwich or something.
I might have a dill pickle in there or something that they liked, I’d give them a
dill pickle.

Smith: Did you ever see him working at the restaurant?

Trimpe: Oh, yeah, sure. He was always busy. He was a busy guy. He was always
busy. That was something else with him because he was always busy.

Other: Jerry Ford was in Boy Scouts. Were you in Boys Scouts as well?

Trimpe: Yes, I was too. I only got to first class, though.

Other: Was it the same troop that he was in?
Trimpe: No, no, no. I was in the south and he was in another section of town. My wife was with the Cub Scouts, she had a little troop of those.

Other: A den leader?

Trimpe: Yeah.

Smith: What’s the biggest change in Grand Rapids in all those years when you think back? Obviously, the town looks different, but beyond just the way it looks, what’s the biggest thing that’s different about Grand Rapids?

Trimpe: It just got bigger. Let’s put it that way. A lot of things fell by the wayside. A lot of the things that you did, you didn’t do them anymore.

Smith: Was it very Dutch?

Trimpe: Quite a lot them, but there was a lot of Polish people, too. Quite a few.

Smith: Including at South?

Trimpe: The whole west side was where the Polish were and then the south part of town was where the Holland people were. I lived where the Holland people were. Of course, where I lived, a lot of the men that was there, they worked for the Pere Marquette Railroads. The reason why they were there was because it was easy to get to from where it was. You could walk from the Black Hills and get down there and get your trip to go out.

Smith: At South High, were there any black kids?

Trimpe: I can only remember two of them and one was Siki McGee, and of course he played football with us. And the other one, I used to see him around once in awhile. But we didn’t think anything of it, they were just like you. There was nothing to say that they’re dark. That didn’t mean anything. You just said, “Hey, he’s dark. I’m white. What’s the difference? Nothing!”

Other: What about the make up of the football team, the different characters that played the different positions, do any of them stand out along side Jerry Ford?

Trimpe: We had some good people in there, but he was a – I don’t know how you’d put it – he was always an organizer. You kind of looked up to him. He was
the captain anyways, but that didn’t mean anything. We had quarterbacks that were, I don’t say they were as good as he was, but I always thought they would be.

Other: Was he voted the captain of the team by the players?

Trimpe: Oh yeah, we voted him in. He was a pretty good sized guy, too. And, of course, he was center and that’s quite an important part of being on the football team because you had a lot of stuff to do to keep the guys from coming in on the other side once you centered the ball.

Smith: Tell us about your coach. Who was your coach?

Trimpe: All the coaches that we ever had – he was Gettings, his name was Gettings – he was a young guy, he wasn’t much older than what we were. When he graduated from college, he was a young guy. I liked him in a way, but in a way I thought he couldn’t stand to lose. Or if we did lose or things were getting bad, then he’d want you to get in there and do some tackling and all that kind of stuff. One of the guys busted his collar bone just going in and hitting the other guy that hard. In a way, he was an organizer, too. Coach Gettings, he was a good man.

I had “Pop” Churm, he was the track coach. I want to tell you how I got to play football. I was running out for track and I’d done the 100, the 220 and the broad jump and the relay. Gettings was always after me down the hall because they wanted somebody in the backfield that could run and I was a pretty good runner. Anyway, I said to “Pop” Churm, “I think I’m going out for football” and he said, “You’d better think it over twice because if you get in there and bust a leg or something, you know what’s happened to your track, don’t you? Pssh, it’s gone. You can’t run the 100 and the 220 anymore.”

I finally gave in in my junior year and I finally went out for football. I only played two years. But you got a guy here that says, “Don’t go over” and the other guy that says, “I want ya.” So anyway, that’s how that happened. That’s how I got to play. The funny part of it was, when I got to play and I went out there for the first time, they’d already started to play already, er, just to practice. So I came out there and I had a new pair of pants and a new
jacket and everything and now I’m walking in there like that and, here, right out of the clear sky, you walk in there with all them duds on and these guys are in the old torn up ones and they’d think, “What the heck has he got? How come he’s getting all that junk?” I said, “I don’t know. That’s what they handed to me, so I took it.” That’s it.

Smith: That’s good! That’s exactly what we were looking for.

(to other) Anything else?

Other: In high school, did you help Jerry run for class president?

Trimpe: Oh sure, we was all for that, you know. Got to get him in there.

Smith: And he lost by two votes.

Trimpe: I know it. And the guy that done it, he was a smart cookie. Not that Jerry wasn’t, but he was an all ‘A’ student.

Other: Did anyone from the 30-30 Club help him campaign for congress?

Trimpe: I don’t remember exactly, but I used to see him all the time downtown there. And when you’d see him, he was going like a house on fire from one place to another. There wasn’t no grass growing under his feet. You knew he really knew he wanted to get there.

Smith: I get the picture. Thank you, thank you.
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Smith: Thank you for doing this.

Sweeney: Oh, I’m flattered to do it, though I don’t know if I have anything to say. To be candid with you, I don’t really know if I do.

Smith: What does it feel like to be back in this office?

Sweeney: Well, it’s changed, for one thing. But, yes, I was in this office when it was under construction and there was no furniture and there was no carpeting. It was built for President Ford and he has used it, but virtually not at all.

Smith: Did you have an expectation at that point in terms of what kind of use it might get?

Sweeney: No. I think everyone figured there had to be an office for him, but I think it was understood that he had his connections in Vail and Rancho Mirage and Washington and that he would never come back to Grand Rapids as a resident, and that this would not get an awful lot of use. But he was so revered that whatever anybody could do for him, they did do, friend or foe. And that’s what this office really represents.

Smith: Well put. Was there local resentment when it was revealed at the end of his presidency that he wouldn’t be coming back to Grand Rapids?

Sweeney: I never noticed it. I never heard about it. When he was defeated by Carter, by that time, I had already worked with him for probably almost a year. There was obviously the contingency that if he was not reelected or even if he was, that provision had to be made for his library and museum. And so, thought was going into it at that time. And again, the story is - I’m sure you’ve already heard about it - a fairly small group of local citizens put together something called the Gerald R. Ford Commemorative Committee. I don’t mean to demean the contribution of other people, but there were probably five or six people that really did the job and I can mention who they were.
Smith: Sure.

Sweeney: Carl Morgenstern, who was the former chairman of the board and the CEO of Old Kent Bank; Jordan Shepherd, a builder and contractor primarily for high-end housing; David LaClaire who was a local portrait photographer; Dick Ford, of course, President Ford’s brother; Fred Meijer of the Meijer food and department store chain; Harold Davidson, the managing partner at the Grand Rapids office of Ernst and Young; and myself. That was really the group that did this.

Smith: At that point, had a decision been made regarding Ann Arbor? Was this in any way a reaction to that? What did you know about the library?

Sweeney: At that point, I think that was a decision President Ford made himself, because he had two allegiances: clearly one to Ann Arbor, but clearly one to Grand Rapids. And I think it was a very creative decision. I don’t know whether somebody else planted the idea or whether that came from him whole cloth. I can’t tell you, Richard.

Smith: But isn’t that what a congressman would do?

Sweeney: Right. Exactly. Tip O’Neill would do that. Exactly. By the way, when do these things you’re doing get released?

Smith: Certainly nothing before 2013 and you can put any restrictions on it you want in part or in whole. We’re much more interested in having a candid conversation.

Sweeney: Fine, I will give you candid information. And these are not things that came to me in my position as an attorney, so there’s no attorney-client privilege involved and, even if there were, I really regard this interview process as part of my relationship with both the Commemorative Committee and the Foundation. There have been attempts since to try to integrate the library and museum at this location and I think you are aware of those because I think some of them were attempted, not necessarily under your auspices, but at the time when you were in charge of the library and museum. That has never gone anywhere and is not going to happen. The University of Michigan is
certainly not going to release its authority over the library. But there have been attempts by local individuals to try to see whether that could be arranged.

Smith: Do you know if any of those were discussed with him? I mean, was any of this during his lifetime?

Sweeney: Yes, it was discussed with him and it’s not something that he encouraged. It’s very interesting because one of the letters that went to him following my redrafting was a letter that went to the University of Michigan. I don’t know if it was ever sent to the U of M. I think it was. I don’t think Mary Sue Coleman was yet president, so it was probably under Lee Bollinger’s time as president of U of M. But President Ford did not encourage the effort. He didn’t say, “Don’t do it.” Again, the congressman, the facilitator, the great compromiser. But I don’t think he was at all enthused about the prospect. That is my view of it, particularly with the Ford School of Public Policy now being part of the Ann Arbor campus and with his affiliation with the library. But there were serious thoughts and I don’t think those thoughts will ever go away from certain individuals here.

But, here’s the little story I started to tell you. My law firm, when President Ford was defeated for reelection, I remember attending a partners meeting. I don’t think I was a partner yet, I actually started working with President Ford when I was still a fairly junior associate and it was something that came to me, not to the firm. But I remember the firm saying, “Well, let’s invite President Ford to become a partner.” And, of course, he very, very gracefully declined. I probably, at that point, knew President Ford and had a closer affiliation with him than anybody in the firm did, but, again, being a very junior attorney at that stage, I wasn’t even consulted on the matter. So that’s a little tidbit. And, of course, President Ford never did resume practicing law. He hadn’t practiced law for 50 years.

Smith: How did your paths first cross?

Sweeney: You know, I was thinking about that on the way here, because I knew that question would come up. I know the first time I met President Ford was when
he came to Grand Rapids around Easter in 1976. Part of it was in connection with the library and museum, which we were just starting to really get formally organized. And it was probably just a friendly visit. But he stayed at Dr. Bob Brown’s house. Dr. Brown is a member of the Commemorative Committee’s board of trustees and was a good friend to President Ford with a home in East Grand Rapids. That’s where I first met President Ford. In terms of how we crossed paths, because of my professional involvement as an attorney with the Commemorative Committee and what has followed, I’m not 100% certain why, other than I did do an awful lot of work with non-profit organizations, even at that stage of my practice.

I represented the Grand Rapids Arts Council, for example, and there were a number of others and, over the years, I’ve probably represented or been a trustee of 25 local charities of different types. So I think I got into it that way because they needed an attorney who had some experience with non-profits. They really needed to get a tax exemption, we needed to be incorporated, and it was really very much a grassroots effort. I wouldn’t call it unprofessional, but we never had anybody that was paid staff throughout the entire process. I don’t know that anyone other than our contractors ever asked for reimbursement of personal expenses during the entire process of constructing the museum and funding part of the construction of the library and the exhibits and so on.

It was a very interesting experience and really quite unique for somebody in my position. At one point, I was spending at least a day per week and often two days per week exclusively on this process. But it was very gratifying, very rewarding and I grew in my admiration for President Ford throughout the entire process.

Smith: Was it through the contacts you had with him or learning more about him?

Sweeney: A little bit of each. I mean, he was totally unpretentious. He didn’t stand on a lot of ceremony. Plus you already knew his record. I’ve heard you and others deliver speeches about his character and integrity and never a hint of scandal or duplicity. And that just became more and more evident as we were putting together the exhibits and getting into the history of his congressional and
presidential years and time in the Navy and so on. You could not help but admire him at whatever distance you were involved with him. And I can’t say that I had a real close involvement with him. I don’t want to suggest that. I probably met with him during the development and construction period half a dozen times maybe.

Smith: How worried was he? Oddly enough, one of the things that brought him and Jimmy Carter together was their joint realization that they had to raise the money to build their presidential libraries.

Sweeney: Correct.

Smith: And, for someone who was accustomed to running, not unopposed, but essentially in a safe district, not spending a lot of money in congressional campaigns, one senses that it was a pretty daunting task, now you’re a former president and the first thing you have to do is raise, whatever, $9 million for this building and whatever over in Ann Arbor.

Sweeney: Right.

Smith: Was that something that weighed heavily on him?

Sweeney: I’m sure it did. He did participate in the fundraising. Carl Morgenstern very much was the prime mover of the fundraising effort. But President Ford did participate, particularly with people that he’d had long relationships. And there were some foreign governments that contributed significant amounts of money. He always was frugal. I don’t even know whether he wanted this office. I think that he really did not want an awful lot of money put into furnishings and that sort of thing. But he was very active in the whole planning for the museum project. Very involved. We didn’t really do much of anything without consulting with him in some fashion, not always face-to-face, but sending blueprints and materials to him. He really ended up making the decision on the architectural firm and on the fundamental design of the museum. We made a recommendation and it was certainly something that he accepted, but he had the ultimate approval. The statue out in front of the astronaut, he had ultimate approval on that.
Smith: Is it true that he didn’t want a statue of himself?

Sweeney: Yes. I don’t know whether it’s still in this building, but there is the most gosh awful statue of President Ford. I don’t know what I would compare it with, but it looked like something that maybe Andy Warhol and Picasso together would do. I wouldn’t say Andy Warhol, but Picasso’s in there. Anyway, it’s a grotesque thing and I think that that was something that encouraged him even further to "Just don’t bother."

Smith: Parenthetically, one of the great ironies of a congressman who wasn’t noted for bringing home a lot of bacon to the district - the most obvious example where he really did involve himself in significant federal funding is the Calder sculpture which doesn’t fit into the image we have of Gerald Ford. It may have been Dick Ford who, when there was discussion, made clear he [President Ford] didn’t want a statue of himself [outside the Ford Museum] - the spaceman reflected his interests. And he said, “Whatever it is, make it representational art.”

Sweeney: Yes. I’m sure that that spaceman statue, if you examine it closely, you can see the texture of the fabric. Boy, that was a project. I will never forget that. The sculpture was basically a fee plus expenses and he, Judd Nelson, would send his expense reports in - just a pile of receipts - and many times we had to tell him, “Stocking your liquor cabinet is not something that’s included in the expenses of doing this sculpture.” But he was good at what he did. He was.

Smith: Were there alternates considered to the spaceman?

Sweeney: Yes. Well, there were alternates considered to that and there was a lot of pressure from some local artists to have a keynote type sculpture and I personally received some pressure on that account. I don’t know whether her name has been mentioned or whether you’ve interviewed her, but Mary Ann Keeler was involved. It is a Judson Nelson sculpture. I must give Judson credit for that. She was involved in that end of what we did. She was very much enamored of artistic types and she would be their advocate to make sure that we actually paid more than they asked and make sure that we didn’t
question any of their expenses. She and Judson Nelson came up with his ultimate appointment.

Smith: Was she involved in the Calder sculpture?

Sweeney: Not terribly. That’s Nancy Mulnix. I was involved years later. Nancy came to me, and I didn’t know her at the time. Calder actually preceded my arrival in Grand Rapids, but we did do a follow-up on that. There was a Calder celebration and it must have been the 25th anniversary of its installation and we had the head of the National Endowment for the Arts here, Jane Alexander. But Nancy Mulnix was the prime mover in that. Very possibly, Mary Ann Keeler was involved somehow, but that really was a one-woman show. As a young woman, she pulled that off and deserves credit to this day.

Smith: Very impressive.

Sweeney: Yes, it is.

Smith: There must have been some local head scratching.

Sweeney: There was. And so was the painting on the roof of the county building, which was a Calder that he scratched out on an envelope and that ended up being modeled on the roof. Our law firm paid for it since we had the best view of it. We paid for it for years and, every two or three years, the county would want it refurbished.

You mentioned Jimmy Carter. I go back further with Jimmy Carter than I do with Ford and I got to watch that evolving relationship between them in a very interesting fashion. I met President Carter on at least two or three occasions. They would do joint appearances at Ann Arbor or elsewhere. My law school was Emory University in Atlanta, which of course is where the Carter Center is today. I was actually asked to get involved in the Carter Library-Museum. I never did, I figured one is enough. But since they knew I had experience here, I was asked to at least lend a helping hand with some documentation or something, but it didn’t prove to be necessary. They obviously did a great job down there themselves.

Smith: I want to come back to that because that obviously is very important.
Let’s talk about the site itself because I guess it’s well known that Fred Meijer offered a site on the outskirts of town.

Sweeney: Yes, he offered a site up on Bradford, which is actually outside the city limits in the Grand Rapids Township. He felt it would be appropriate because Fred had the image of people coming here in droves. You know, families would come in their campers and busses would come up and we needed a large place for the parking. The parking was always just a huge issue. And, by the way, you’re bringing up parking lot nightmares for me and, I think, in your time here, you probably remember some of my conversations about it. That issue here at the museum site is just being finally resolved, by the way, with an affidavit that I’ll be filing in the records of the Kent County Registrar of Deeds within the next week.

Smith: In what way? Because you did end up with a lot of parking.

Sweeney: Far more than we needed, but we would’ve had even more because we started out with the site where the Grand Rapids Public Museum and Days Inn is located as part of the Ford Museum site. We had that property tied up through the city and we part swapped, part purchased it. We had a big controversy about a walkway from over the other side of Pearl to here so people wouldn’t get killed trying to get to the museum from their parking. Well, we didn’t have to go through with the walkway, obviously, because we’re on one contiguous site.

But the property north of us was owned by a local furniture dealer, Robert Sullivan and some of his associates. He was big in local sports. He owned the local semi-pro baseball team, the Sullivans. We ended up giving up our rights to the property south of Pearl and we ended up getting the property north, which is the north parking lot. It cost us a good deal of money; probably, to be honest with you, more than it was worth. In fact, I’m certain of it. But it was just a matter of getting the job done. I remember Fred Meijer was doing some of the direct negotiation, and Bob Sullivan played really tough. He played hardball.

Smith: What is the status of the north parking lot today?
Sweeney: I will tell you and I’m going to try to keep this as brief as possible. The Commemorative Committee - the predecessor to the Foundation - endowed the Foundation with what money we had left over. We gave to the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation and that became their initial endowment. The only property that we really had an immediate right to was the north parking lot, because the city wanted to make a big presentation at the time of the dedication. They wanted to be the ones that would turn over this property and the footprint of the museum to the GSA, the General Services Administration. At that time, the National Archives and the Presidential Library System were part of the General Services Administration. So we said, “Okay, fine. You go ahead and you give to the GSA.”

As far as the north parking lot goes, rather than go through a series of transfers, we were going to have the owners of that property, meaning Bob Sullivan and his associates, transfer the property directly to the GSA. I ended up drafting the deeds that those owners used to give the property to the GSA along with some other documentation that had to be filed. I offered to the GSA to record the documents so we have a clear record title. Instead, they wanted to hire a title company here to oversee the process for them and I ended up sending the deeds to that title company. Those deeds have never since seen the light of day. I know what happened to them. The title company sent them to the GSA and the GSA put them in a drawer somewhere. The GSA insisted on looking at them before they were actually recorded. So, at that point, and I remember it and I’ve got correspondence and phone records where I told the GSA, “Why don’t you get this thing recorded and get it done? I’m finished. I’m done with the Commemorative Committee. I’m not going to work on this anymore.”

It sat in limbo for many years until the Foundation felt this is a valuable piece of property. We can have that parking lot. I think you were involved at that stage. And, Richard, you are probably less patient with lawyers than anybody that I know because, frankly, you’re part of the problem and I’ll tell you why you’re part of the problem. I came up with a trust agreement between the Foundation and the archivist about how we were going to get that parking lot. We were going to make some money off it and we had some freedom to use
it. The Archives were happy with it. They were going to do it. But it required an act of Congress to transfer the property to the Foundation.

Smith: Can I interrupt? I want to ask you, because it’s all coming back to me, but because of the fact that the documentation had been sent to GSA and never recorded, did you ever lose ownership of it?

Sweeney: We never had ownership. The owners were still Bob Sullivan and his associates, as far as the record title was concerned. Now, I recorded a memorandum of our land contract which showed that we were purchasing it. I recorded the transfer of our land contract interest to the GSA. But the GSA just sat on the whole thing. And so, we had to get Vern Ehlers involved to transfer this property. And, of course, I already knew the title was not clear, but Vern Ehlers insisted on the Right of Reverter and, if you remember, the property had been appraised with a value of one dollar. The Foundation hired an appraiser to tell us after the act of Congress that, by giving this property to the Foundation with Vern Ehler’s Right of Reverter, it is, as a marketable instrument, worthless. As a possible use, as long as we don’t change the use, we can continue to use it as a parking lot. If we do anything else with it, we have to get the permission of the Archives and so on. But, I know the GSA had the documents because I’ve talked to their lawyer in Chicago 20-25 years ago, whenever it was, and I don’t think they ever sent them to the Archives in Washington when the Presidential Library System was spun off. I think they may have, but I doubt it.

So they’re sitting in a file in Chicago. But my affidavit will clear the title because we have an act of Congress transferring the property to the Foundation and, frankly, an act of Congress is even better than my affidavit. So, we’re in business. If anybody is interested, they should look a the file for the museum’s north parking lot at the Ken County Register of Deeds. The affidavit gives the full story.

Smith: But it must be used as a parking lot.
Sweeney: Yes, basically. It’s the most aggravating set of issues I’ve ever dealt with in my over 35 years of legal practice. Frustrating. It’s just frustrating. And you were part of my frustration, just so you know that. I remember.

Smith: And my motives were pure. I wanted to get access.

Sweeney: And you wanted a one page agreement and I said, “It's not going to work that way, Richard.”

Smith: I knew that intellectually.

Sweeney: Okay. But, anyway, that’s the state of it. Whatever happens.

Smith: Was there real debate about choosing this site?

Sweeney: Oh, yes, absolutely. Because, again, Fred Meijer wanted the site out on Bradford, but this was so logical in so many ways. There was a lot of controversy, though.

Smith: And what was on the site at the time?

Sweeney: At the time, the city owned part of the property and there were some abandoned buildings that the city had already condemned. The most controversial part of the entire acquisition was something called the Little Red Schoolhouse which was owned by Monarch Machinery, the Jackaboise family. That was where, apparently, and I’m not sure if this part is true, but I think it’s true, that it is where they actually started Monarch Machinery, in this little red barn. And the city was condemning it by means of eminent domain for a public purpose so it would become part of the site. I’ll never forget. I was in my partner John Logee’s office. John was mayor of Grand Rapids for quite a few years, I don’t know how many. But I was there the afternoon or whatever time of day it was when the Little Red Schoolhouse burned down. And Susie Logee, the mayor’s wife, was in the office with me and she virtually accused the Commemorative Committee and me in particular, of burning down the Little Red Schoolhouse so we could get the property for our museum. But there was nothing terribly useful here other than, where the north parking lot is, there were several storefronts.
Smith: We’ve been told that there were some people who saw it as inadequate. It really required an active imagination to envision what it might be. Was there in fact, in addition to Fred’s offer, concern that “Why do you want to put this facility here?”

Sweeney: Sure, from a commercial level, it’s not the highest and best use. I mean, you can do other things commercially with it. But again, the Public Museum is not the most economic use of that property either. Obviously, it’s become an attraction for the rest of downtown and I think on a net basis, it was a very appropriate decision, even on an economic basis. But, yes, there were people that thought, first of all, that we were really being piggish to insist on all this parking place, which, again, the museum does not need. We understand that. But this was something that probably Fred Meijer and Dick Ford were most adamant about. “We are going to have parking space.” And so we got it.

Smith: The other thing that is hard to imagine today, but if you go back 30-40 years, there was on the part of many people a real reluctance to come downtown.

Sweeney: Yes, that’s true.

Smith: And presumably, this was before the city had rediscovered the river. Launching a renaissance.

Sweeney: Yes, that’s true.

Smith: Which leads to the question of, and again I don’t want to overstate it, but how much of a catalyst was this institution in terms of what has transpired since?

Sweeney: I don’t want to overstate it either, but I think it certainly was a major catalyst. I think that it made possible the public museum across the road. Otherwise, I don’t know where it would’ve been other than its old location, which was really hopeless from an expansion point of view and a facility point of view. I think it’s been a lure to Grand Valley, another public institution, to locate where it has. And that renaissance, to use your term is continuing. I think it was a major influence. I really do.

Smith: I mean, for example, the impetus for the hotel and everything.
Sweeney: Absolutely, because the dedication of the museum occurred in conjunction of the dedication of the revised Amway, the old – now I’m even forgetting what it was.

Smith: The Pantlind.

Sweeney: The Pantlind. Exactly. That occurred simultaneously. That was the same period of time.

Smith: And was a burial site always part of the package?

Sweeney: Yes. Well, I shouldn’t say that, but certainly by the time we broke ground, it was envisioned in that location.

Smith: We’ll be talking to Marvin Dewinter tomorrow, but – and I guess there’s always controversy about this sort of thing - was there controversy about the design of the building?

Sweeney: Sure. We had a number of architectural firms submit designs. What goes with that, particularly in the local community, is you do get controversy and you do get pressure. But Marv came up with what was clearly the most creative and, from my standpoint and I think the other members of the committee, the most attractive alternative. He was very persuasive in our meetings with him and he stuck by his original plan to a very large extent. There was very little that anyone could do to move him off of his design. We were coordinating that with a group that you’re probably familiar with, Staples and Charles, who was the design firm for the exhibits. So, we had to coordinate all that together. But Marv did a very good job for us. He really did. And I have to mention the contractor, too, Owen Ames Kimball, an outstanding contractor. They happen to have been my client, but that had nothing to do with their selection as the contractor. But we did have outside people, outside of Grand Rapids, try to bid on some of these major parts, but we stuck with our choices and we felt we made the right decision.

Smith: It’s a very interesting building. It’s unconventional in some ways without being avant garde.
Sweeney: Oh, yes, that was all conscious on Marv’s part. You can verify that tomorrow. President Ford endorsed it without a lot of concern. I remember Marv brought his model in and it was not a terribly fancy model of the building. My recollection is that he used a mirror or something that was on the model to show the river. But that was certainly a major part of the consideration. Right out in front here, Ah-Nab-Awen Park, I believe it's called, was a sacred site to the Indians. So that all had to be preserved as part of the construction process. And the city did retain title to that park by the riverfront.

Smith: Were there obvious question raised about the design? Having been through this process several times, it’s always struck me as in some ways. You’ve got a local group with enormous enthusiasm and commitment, willing to do whatever it takes, but without the kind of necessary experience. I mean, you don’t build a presidential library all the time.

Sweeney: True.

Smith: And they’re unique institutions that have unique requirements and museums and so on and so on. And finding the right mix of professional experience with the grass roots enthusiasm and commitment—

Sweeney: First of all, Jordan Shepherd was a builder. Jordan Shepherd was the chairman of the Gerald R. Ford Commemorative Committee. He knew construction. He knew design. There were a hundred times - more than that - two hundred times, where Jordan contributed something that none of the rest of us would have considered. For example, when we were going to be putting the asphalt on the parking lots, he insisted that every bit of foundation or surface that had been there before, either be removed or pulverized, so there would not be a water table that could damage the asphalt. I mean, that’s just one example. The discussions about the elevator, the discussions about the windows, this is not necessarily the best use of space, I suppose a circle or square does better than this triangle kind of construction. You can look at that corner there, you have a plant there, but it’s really not the best use of space, but everybody, I think, was quite enthusiastic about the fundamental design. I really do.
Smith: I guess what I was trying to say is that it’s a dramatic building without being over the top.

Sweeney: You’re absolutely right. And I think that Marv took into account the concern about, you know, we’re basically still a conservative community and most of the people on our Commemorative Committee were business people and fairly conservative themselves. So, I think he pushed the envelope, but he didn’t rip it open.

Smith: Well put. I imagine there had to be concerns about cost. Did they reach the point where there were any significant modifications made during the design process?

Sweeney: On cost factors?

Smith: For example, NARA wishes, in retrospect, that they hadn’t put the fountain in. In fact, I think it’s almost an unwritten rule now that presidential libraries don’t have water features.

Sweeney: Really? I didn’t know that. Yeah, that was expensive, but we were prepared to spend more. I mean, the walkway would’ve cost a small fortune. You know, let me put it this way. Yes, there were concerns about finishes and so on, but I don’t believe that we ever compromised the fundamental structure or the design concepts. We got the conceptual design, which normally is one of the earlier parts of an architectural and construction contract, and I was responsible for that contract with Marv Dewinter and also with Evan Ames Kimball. I can remember we did have an issue about change orders, but they were relatively few given the size of the project. And again, as you said, we didn’t have the staff. Nobody was getting paid for our end of it. We did have, and he was very helpful, Will Jones, who I think he might’ve been with the U.S. Information Agency before he went to the Archives. He was the Archives point person on this project. He became the first Executive Director of the Museum and Library, so he had an institutional orientation that was also very helpful to us. But, no, I think we took the design and we did it the right way without major compromise.

Smith: The design of the gravesite, was that kind of always—
Sweeney: I don’t know how much Marv Dewinter had to do with that. I can’t remember that detail. Dave LeClaire, being a photographer and involved in the arts also, was involved in the discussions about the architecture, too, and had a good sense of it. He really did.

Smith: Now, President Ford was clearly a fiscal conservative.

Sweeney: Yes.

Smith: I think it’s safe to say that none of you or him at that point envisioned an endowment, for example, growing to what it is today.

Sweeney: I think that’s true and I think that at that point in time, I can’t say we had a lot of confidence in the National Archives to continue to support this place. It was a turnkey operation, as you know. We had to turn it over to GSA without them making a major contribution themselves. We did have some money. I can’t remember how much we had. I’m guessing it was in the hundreds of thousands rather than the millions that we had left over, but when you look at what’s happening with museums today, I read that George W. Bush is looking to raise $500 million. I mean, that’s several orders of magnitude beyond what we were looking at and a lot of our contributions were relatively modest. They really were. We worked hard.

Smith: The concept of a museum that, in addition to the permanent exhibit, would have programs and temporary exhibits. Was that not factored in at the outset, or was it imagined but on a more modest scale?

Sweeney: I think it was envisioned primarily by Staples and Charles, the design people, and also Will Jones. We did have this very large first floor space that has been given to the temporary type exhibit in addition to the core exhibit. So, I would say, yes, it was contemplated.

Smith: How did President Ford’s fiscal conservatism manifest itself?

Sweeney: We didn’t spend that much money. We really didn’t. I think he was very pleased with how things went. He did not want a cathedral to Gerald R. Ford built. That was not what he was looking for. In fact, I can remember when we came up with our statement of purpose for the IRS application for tax
exemption and the articles of incorporation and things like that, I think he was a little embarrassed about some of the language - that we were memorializing the life and times of Gerald R. Ford. He was interested in it from a historic perspective. And, I’ll tell you, one of the things that he insisted on, and sometimes with the opposition of Betty, was that he wanted the truth. He did not want this to be some sort of paean to him and it wasn’t. He wanted the helicopter exhibit from when they had to take the people from Saigon, the very last hold outs when we lost the war in Vietnam. He wanted things like that shown. He did not want to sugarcoat the Nixon resignation. And so, this museum - and I’ve been to many others, even some of the really old, old ones that aren’t really museums, you know, James K. Polk, Rutherford B. Hayes, Calvin Coolidge - this one is reality and, again, you deserve part of the credit for that.

Smith: I know what you mean in that it reflects his character and his view of history.

Sweeney: Yes, absolutely.

Smith: Did he change over time?

Sweeney: Yes. He changed over time in the sense that he did get a lot older but he never became less gracious. I did notice in his last, I would say, 18 months or two years, there was a noticeable loss of vitality and mental acuity. I remember, and I think you might have been Executive Director at the time, that his last appearance before the Washington Press Club did not include a question and answer period. He was under stress, but he was a very elderly man. He was still very fit, but he had some health issues. Those are the changes. But other than that, no. He was unpretentious as president. He was unpretentious as a former president.

Smith: One thing that struck me as curious, and I actually made reference to it in the eulogy, traditionally and stereotypically, we tend to become more conservative as we get older. I found that he, in some ways, defied that. Maybe part of that was that the party went so far to the Right, but, you know, he was very open and tolerant. I’ve often wondered how much was Betty’s influence upon him.
Joe Sweeney  May 10, 2010

Sweeney: Could be.

Smith: In that sense, he seemed a somewhat different figure from what he’d been in the White House.

Sweeney: Yeah, he may have done a John Paul Stevens on us to some degree, because that was his appointment. I should mention one thing about fiscal conservatism that you’ll find interesting and you may already know it. But I remember when there was the big run up of stocks during the high tech bubble and all of these funds were just making multiple returns of two digits, 20%, and so on. Well, of course, we had a fairly conservative investment portfolio. And, of all people, he and Fred Meijer said, “Let’s forget about these fixed income things. Let’s go into equities.” Far beyond what I as an attorney representing a non-profit would say was prudent. And, of course, we got burned pretty badly when the bubble burst. Now, that’s all been restored. We’ve diversified quite a bit, but President Ford went along with that. He was happy to go ahead and jump into the swimming pool with everybody else. And that’s contrary to what a fiscal conservative would normally do. But he endorsed that decision.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction at the time of his death?

Sweeney: Yes, a little bit. It was a real outpouring. It was incredible. Yeah, I was. The visitations, the funeral procession from the church to here and to the church. Yes, very much so. I think it was much more profound here locally than it was nationally. That was my impression. I could be wrong. But he really touched an awful lot of people in this community and in West Michigan. He really did.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Sweeney: By your eulogy. I’m not patronizing you; I mean that very sincerely. I think it was a remarkable document, a remarkable piece of literature. I think he should be remembered, first of all, as a good human being who had compassion. He was far more intelligent than people ever gave him credit for. He had wisdom, great character. Plus, one heck of a politician. He may not have been a politician of the stripe of Lyndon Johnson or Joe Cannon or Huey
Long, as you mentioned earlier, but he got things done. We could use some Jerry Fords today.

Smith: I’ve often wondered about the notion that he was without guile, because it should not mean that he was without calculation or ambition. And I’ve often wondered if he rather shrewdly put to use his reputation as ‘good old Jerry Ford’ and was underestimated.

Sweeney: I’m certain, Richard. I’m certain. I mean, Yale Law School, University of Michigan. He was no dummy. I think he was very shrewd. There were a lot of issues that came up involving individuals where a decision had to be made, you know, ‘Is this the right way to approach this person for money?’ or ‘Is the right way to handle this controversy?’ He had great common sense and great instincts and we ran into a lot of those. I couldn’t recite them all for you. I guess I mentioned a couple.

Smith: I remember one. It showed a vulnerability that you did not often see. At one point, he had asked Walter Annenberg for something, a fairly significant gift, but certainly within Walter Annenberg’s means. Annenberg turned him down and Ford was very burned by that. There was something very personal about that and he said, “I’m never going to do that again.” I mean, it was an unpleasant experience.

Sweeney: I don’t think he liked to solicit money. I don’t know that very many people do. I mean, Bob Hooker does. Peter Secchia does. You know, those two guys. But I don’t think President Ford was ever terribly comfortable and I also think that when he did solicitations, like from Mr. Max Fischer, for example, I think they understood his discomfort and I think it was very difficult to say no to him because they did know how difficult it was. So there was some compassion there and that probably served to his advantage, too, although that was not calculating. I think it was difficult for him. I do. Bob Hope turned us down, speaking of that, with all of his millions. I mean, Bob Hope, he gave us maybe a little bit, but probably what the little old ladies in church gave us, but he was a good friend of President Ford. I don’t know that President Ford ever directly asked him for money. Including all of the Foundation years. But Bob Hope held onto it.
Smith: My theory was he believed he would take it with him.

Sweeney: I think you’re right. Yes.

Smith: It’s interesting that you made reference to the last speech he did in Washington. Because he was very dissatisfied with himself and said the next day, “That’s the last speech I’m giving.” And I think part of that he had seen Bob Hope’s very public decline.

Sweeney: Yes. I think you’re right.

Smith: I think it was a cautionary lesson. It got to the point where Delores was dragging him out. It was painful in the circle to see.

Sweeney: It was.

Smith: You’d have to be pretty insensitive to have that not make an impression.

Sweeney: Yes, and they were close. President Ford never embarrassed himself. Nobody felt embarrassed for him. Yes, that last presentation was a difficult one for him, but I think that, again, given his age and everything else. There were some things that he did contemporaneously that were taped for television or other purposes, where he still showed real intelligence and mental acuity.

Smith: And to the end he remained very proud of this place.

Sweeney: Yes he did.

Smith: For all that he was modest about it, pride co-existed with the modesty.

Sweeney: Yes.

Smith: Perfect. Thank you.
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Smith: How did your paths first cross with Gerald Ford?

Baab: My first contact with President Ford began in June of 1988, which I think would have been just prior to his 75th birthday. And the occasion was the annual meeting for the Board of Trustees of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation, and it was the start for me – I was en route to nearly twenty years of service as the treasurer of the Foundation. So that’s how I got my start.

Smith: Presumably you are uniquely qualified to testify to the fact to whatever else changed, Gerald Ford remained very much a fiscal conservative.

Baab: Oh, that’s true. When I took over as the treasurer I had the background of my predecessor telling me that sitting in on all the meetings of investments for the Foundation, it was very much bonds. He didn’t want to get into stocks, very risky. There was a very high percentage of bonds versus stocks when the Foundation first started. So he was conservative in his investments, but he was also conservative in his spending. For years we have operated with a spending policy that says we will not spend beyond these parameters, and from time to time those perimeters get changed. But President Ford was always very much involved with setting those perimeters and always wanted to hear that we are living within the limits that we had previously set up as a board.

Smith: Do you think maybe being a child of the Depression had something to do with shaping his fiscal outlook?

Baab: I wouldn’t be surprised. I think if I had lived through it, it would have shaped me. I’ve heard stories from fathers and fathers-in-law of what it was like. And just hearing that secondhand, I think it would be very much an influence.
Smith: And I think it is also safe to say that notwithstanding that attitude, or maybe reflecting that, no one really then had an idea of having an endowment. It started off with a very modest endowment.

Baab: It was very modest. It was under five million dollars. It might have been a million or something. It really wasn’t much at all. I don’t think the start of the Foundation, from what I understand, was ever conceived in terms of what it is today. I think it was a learning process.

Smith: Was he part of that learning process?

Baab: Oh, yes. President Ford – my contact, as I said earlier, started at age 75, but I will tell you that all my contacts with him in public meetings, whether it’s the Foundation, Board of Trustees, or the Investment Committee, or one on one conversations dealing with my treasurer’s reports, I always found him to be very much…

Smith: Was he open to new ideas? Within these core convictions that he had, did his attitude evolve in terms of, for example, what the Foundation would do, what it would need.

Baab: The point I was going to make is that even though over that span of time, he had those core convictions. What impressed me the most was how alert he stayed. That’s the point I was going to make - that you can have these core convictions, and they led him. He had his values, he had his core convictions, but the point that surprised me is that I met him at age 75, and he was bright, sharp, well into his eighties.

Smith: Inquisitive.

Baab: Yes.

Smith: I remember sitting at a table and you put a column of figures in front of him, and it’s as if the years peeled away and he was back on the House Appropriations Committee. A column of numbers jumped off the page.

Baab: We would go over the treasurer’s reports with questions. Invariably, he had good questions. I was surprised at the depth of those questions. There are
people who probably have keener minds with financial backgrounds, maybe than he did, but I was also surprised when I’d give him a report that he would get right to the heart of the questions that I thought needed to be asked. He didn’t have wasteful questions; they were very thoughtful; showed a very strong command of the material.

Smith: He also did his homework.

Baab: He did his homework.

Smith: I don’t know what prompted it, maybe it was with you, but he was asking about Morningstar. He was sort of trying to get some comparative opinions about investment opportunities and mutual funds and so forth and so on. And one sensed that he was very comfortable talking about money.

Baab: Oh, yes.

Smith: I suppose he’d been doing it for most of his professional life.

Baab: Yeah. I think the fact, what you said earlier, the work on the Appropriations bills and the federal budget, he was comfortable with numbers. He didn’t have a fear of asking a dumb question. Some people might have that fear, especially when they are in a room of experts, maybe so-called experts. They might be reluctant, they might not understand something, but they don’t want to ask it for fear that they might look dumb or don’t understand it. He never had that fear. He was very confident.

Smith: That goes to the notion of someone totally comfortable in their own skin. How did he change over the fifteen years?

Baab: Fifteen or eighteen years that I worked with him? Interestingly, I found him to be the same at the end of that period as I did at the beginning. And I know that there are few people at his advanced age that could have a command of what he did. I was so impressed with that. It wasn’t just the financial part. You would appreciate this: when we went to the annual board of trustees meeting, typically in Washington, we would begin before the executive committee and full board meeting later in the afternoon, we’d start with a luncheon at the
National Press Club. And we’d present the Foundation’s Journalism prizes to some very deserving recipients. That would be done.

Then President Ford would be asked to make some brief comments, and then he would open the lectern and just say, “Okay, questions. What questions would you like to ask?” And I was always impressed that he could handle those questions, not only at age 75, but when he was 85 and 87, 88, he had not lost the ability to keep up with current events. He was able to handle the questions regardless of sensitivity. I was impressed that – I can’t recall ever, Richard – a time when he refused to answer a question. Either because he didn’t know the material, wasn’t current on it, or for some other reasons – too sensitive to talk about. He didn’t duck a question. He typically would hear the question, pause a couple seconds just to gather his thoughts, and he’d come out with the answer. And I can remember when he did that how I would sit there and listen to some of those questions and certainly I didn’t have his perspective of what all he had been through, but he impressed the daylights out of me that, here he was, that elderly in his life and still able to talk about any subject the press brought up.

Smith: It’s curious you say that because one of the things he really worked at, and I think prided himself on, was keeping abreast of current events. You’d get on a plane and everyone knew you didn’t bother him until he’d read all of his newspapers. And all of his newspapers, and there were several that he read every day. That was part of this self-education, maybe keeping young, but keeping current, at least.

Baab: I had the privilege with my wife to attend a dinner at his home one evening.

Smith: In Rancho Mirage?

Baab: Yes, Rancho Mirage. And I know that’s not unique to me, many others have done that, but we sat there, the six of us – two couples plus the Fords, and just talked about world events. Talked about what’s going on. No matter what remote part of the world, he was on top of it. And you could tell as he related things that he was in touch with the leaders of these countries. Yet, it wasn’t just, “I read this in the newspaper.” But he had ongoing contact with people
who he had met and people would call him to bounce things off of him. They considered him a source. I thought that was really insightful.

Smith: That’s interesting. Did you ever see him at a football game?

Baab: No, did not do that.

Smith: Or watching a football game?

Baab: No, I never had that privilege; I would liked to have done that. One of the things that first made us hit it off with each other was when he found out I was a University of Michigan grad. I’ve got the rings and the M watches and all that stuff. And that was always something, no matter what we were talking about; we always had that to talk about. It was something he had great joy and pleasure in talking about.

Smith: That’s interesting. And I felt that found expression in splitting this facility – the fact that he had dual obligations, in a sense. This was home and that was a second home.

Baab: Yeah. He loved to come back and go to football games when he could. And he loved to watch it on TV and talk to the people.

Smith: We had a great conversation with Lloyd Carr the other day, in which he described the pep talks that he would give every year – often before the Ohio game, if he could arrange it.

This place – tell me a little bit more, sort of institutionally – how you would describe the evolution, both of the Foundation and its mission over the twenty years that you were involved. How did he, first of all, set the tone or define the mission?

Baab: He wanted the museum and the library both to be something that was living. He didn’t want it to be a monument to himself. That was not said for effect. That was [said] in small groups. He would just make it clear, “I don’t want that. I want this to be of education to the people who will come to see it.” And anytime we talked about doing something, that was a key thing guiding him in his decision making. Will this edify the presidency and will it edify
democracy and the presidency and what all goes on in this country? A great love for the country, doing what’s right for the country – he wanted all of that to come through, not what he, as an individual, did to make it great. He obviously has a great legacy of things he helped to make. But there was no personal aggrandizement, if I can say that.

Smith: Although you weren’t probably part of the process then, maybe a little distance is even more valuable – Fred offered land outside of downtown and the decision, I think, made with the President’s strong involvement was to put it downtown. And it was almost a leap of faith at the time to put it here. Is it a catalyst for what’s happened since?

Baab: Was it a part of it? Oh, absolutely. How many cities in America can claim to have a presidential museum? That’s very distinctive. There are fewer of those, I’m sure, that there are professional sports teams which so many organizations like to point to – well, this city has this professional sports team – how does that compare to what this country is all about? I know it’s a popular thing, but Grand Rapids isn’t large enough to support a professional sports team. But to have a presidential museum, I think is something very unique, very special. Something you can be proud of when you come to Grand Rapids, and to Ann Arbor for the university to have that presidential library.

Smith: Those who knew him knew he spent a lifetime, mostly successfully, controlling a temper. Did you ever see his temper?

Baab: In all candor, I have heard about his temper, but in all honesty, I never saw it once. Sometimes there would be a situation in a meeting and I would say, “Oh I wonder if this will be the tip of iceberg. I’ll start to see it here.” I never saw it. Doesn’t mean it wasn’t there, based on what other people tell me. But I cannot say that I ever saw it firsthand.

Smith: I assume you must have been in the meeting, part of the discussion - because I know there was some disagreement - over the idea of bringing the staircase from the embassy here.

Baab: Yes. I was not involved in that meeting. I’d be happy to share that with you, but no, I was not a part of that.
Smith: Okay. Did you see his sense of humor?

Baab: Oh, yes, I did. In fact, I thought I saw probably a greater sense of humor from him say, even at the National Press Club deliveries because, he was not a sitting president anymore and more relaxed about it. Probably don’t have to be as concerned that tomorrow’s headlines in the Washington paper and New York Times is going to say, “President Ford said the following.” Not as high a profile. So he could laugh, I thought, easier probably than when he was president. He could relax more. I always found he was willing to poke fun at himself; a lot of people can’t do that. That, to me, always elevates people when they can poke fun at themselves.

Smith: Did you hear him talk about Ronald Reagan or Jimmy Carter or any of his contemporaries?

Baab: No. I can’t say. I know a lot of what’s been written, but I never heard him say, if there was a discussion brought up for instance when we had the re-dedication here of the museum. At the exhibits we had President Carter here for that, and other dignitaries. I only remember positive comments from him. And I suspect some of that – probably you know this better than I do – I suspect that after you get out of office, things look different. You put them more in perspective and appreciate maybe why an adversary did what he or she did.

Smith: And my sense is that he was a very positive person, generally. One thing I noticed whenever I was around him - most pols love to gossip - he didn’t gossip. In fact, it was interesting, I noticed a couple of times when people were doing that, he would subtly change the topic of conversation. He wasn’t speculating about other people or their motives or their misfortunes. It wasn’t part of him.

Baab: I never saw that part of him.

Smith: What does it say that year after year after year that people would come as they do and volunteer their services as they did? What is it about the man himself and what he inspired?
Baab: Well, I can tell you personally, it was a sense of great pride to be asked to be treasurer, and I told him that, “I assure you that I will do all I can as treasurer of the museum and the library. I won’t ever cause you to be embarrassed. I want you do to take comfort in the knowledge that we will make sure that we’re doing the right things, we won’t be hiding things, it will all be out in the open and there will be no ______________.” And he appreciated that. That’s what’s I’m about and I didn’t say it to make him pleased, I just wanted him to understand where I was coming from – that I was going to be a protective watch dog to be sure nothing was happening that would put him in a bad light and his legacy. And he was appreciative of that. And the reason I said that and felt that was, I knew people regarded him as a figure of high integrity. That word might even be considered overused by some people. We’ve heard the integrity a bazillion times – but it fits. And to not use it, you’d have to create a new word, because it’s really what’s he was about.

Smith: And I’ve often thought, in some ways, as a kind of decency is almost used as a condescending term.

Baab: Yeah.

Smith: As if it was sort of a substitute for sophistication.

Baab: If you weren’t up here on some - I don’t know if it would be an intellectual level, or what someone might be considering a high thing - to admire, decency doesn’t seem to rate up there as high with people. And it should.

Smith: Right. What is it about Grand Rapids, do you think, that defined him, or that he took with him wherever he went? What is it about this community that’s distinguishing?

Baab: I think the community reinforces the hard work ethic, which he had. You didn’t get to places of accomplishment by doing things half heartedly, cheating your way to get there, finding ways to achieve what you want without just doing it through hard work. I think the community reflects that and he came out of that type of an environment.
Smith: One of the meetings in the later years, I think, maybe was the next to last, or maybe it was the last one, I’m not sure – was held out in Rancho Mirage. The annual meeting was actually out there to accommodate them – or was it in Vail?

Baab: That was before me, I think.

Smith: No, this was toward the very end.

Baab: Okay.

Smith: It may have been the last one, where Mrs. Ford received the Ford prize and he announced, tongue in cheek, that he was Deep Throat. This was when all the revelations were coming.

Baab: In Rancho Mirage – oh I thought you were talking about Colorado.

Smith: Yeah. Do you remember that?

Baab: Oh, yes. That I remember.

Smith: And when he got up and announced that he was Deep Throat, did it take people a moment to realize it was a joke?

Baab: I recognized right away that it was humor. That was a great meeting.

Smith: What about that night stands out in your memory? Did you have a sense that it might be the last?

Baab: Yeah, there was that possibility. I can’t remember what the presentation was, but there was a presentation near the end of the meeting and it involved President Ford. And I thought that physically he might be winding down to a point where it could be. I started to sense that. As high accolades as I gave earlier to his tremendous memory and all, in the last year or two I finally started to see this happen. But you’re right, the Rancho Mirage meeting – there was an indication that there could be.

Smith: Were you here for his 90th birthday?

Baab: Yes.
Smith: What was that like? The whole community sort of took part?

Baab: Yes.

Smith: It was a big event.

Baab: Yes. All the things to do with President Ford here, even his funeral, everything – I think people have been surprised at the turnout that a lot of people who didn’t know him, know about him, and it wasn’t just a bunch of old cronies that knew him that turned out. There were people with no known previous connection with him that turned out for him.

Smith: That’s interesting. Were you surprised by the outpouring at the time of his death? Not only here, but nationwide – in terms of the media coverage and the response that it seemed to generate?

Baab: Yeah, I was probably proportionately even more surprised here because we’re smaller. And I figure that in a place like Washington, it’s the thing to do. You do that sort of thing and people turn out because it’s the thing to do. Whereas here people didn’t turn out because it was the thing to do, it was an expression of real appreciation and love for the man. So much was written. People who were interviewed for comments about him; of what he had done for them personally. Personal stories about what he’d done. And you’d say, man, that guy’s too busy, how did he find time to do all of that? I know when my own father died there was an obituary in the paper – no big deal. But I got a letter, not a sympathy card, but I got a wonderful letter from President Ford expressing his sympathy on what had happened, and it was in own words, it wasn’t Hallmark giving him the words. He had his own words of what he wanted to say about that and how important fathers are.

Smith: And he would have a unique perspective.

Baab: Yes, he would.

Smith: Good and bad.

Baab: Good and bad. The first two years weren’t so good, but he had great perspective after that.
Smith: Did you hear him talk about his early days or family situation?

Baab: No, I didn’t hear him do that. But that kind of thing he did for me, I know he did for other people. I got many letters from him over the years, thanking me for things I had done that I just felt like I had done in the course of my duty, so to speak. But he was a grateful man, very grateful.

Smith: Was that meeting out in Rancho Mirage, was that the last time you saw him?

Baab: I don’t believe so. I’m fuzzy as to when it was, but I don’t think that was. I’d have to check on it.

Smith: In terms of discussing investment policy or finances generally, how many people were involved. Was this the executive committee debating the policy?

Baab: We had some of the very well-known names of Grand Rapids sitting in there on the investment committee giving advice. These are some of the real pillars of the community here, and they were giving advice when we were pushing to move into greater investment in stocks as opposed to bonds, and President Ford was resistant to that. It took some of these stalwarts in the community to give their own experiences from their own foundations to say well, here, we’ve done this and here’s what our results have been.

Smith: And was Fred Meijer the chief proponent, at least initially of taking a more…

Baab: Aggressive stance in that investment policy, yes. Yes, he was.

Smith: And the President was persuaded? Or reluctantly persuaded?

Baab: Never to the point of as high a percentage as what these gentlemen and ladies would have liked. They would have liked more. One of the things about President Ford that always impressed me was that he was a good listener. At least when I was around him, he listened well. And so he would listen to these people, but he wasn’t a pushover, not a pushover at all. He listened, digested it, but in the end he didn’t go as far as they wanted to go, to his credit. It could have been easy for him to say, “Well, you are all into this more than I am with your corporations.” He still went by his own personal feelings.
Yeah, he was a good listener. I think you can see that when you see what he surrounded himself with in the Cabinet and the White House staff. If you look at what happened to those people after his administration disbanded and what those people went on to do, you have to be a good listener to put people in who’ve got minds of their own, who want to do things - to be able to put them into those positions of responsibility and not be threatened.

Smith: No, it’s a good point. Did you have any contact, or more than passing contact, with Mrs. Ford?

Baab: Not nearly as much. But my contact with her, whether it was sitting with her at a luncheon table or dinner table, whether it was a public event dinner table or at her home, she was extremely gracious; very down to earth. Those people didn’t have a bone in their body that pushed their own aggrandizement. They were very humble.

Smith: She has a sense of humor.

Baab: Yes.

Smith: Which I think could needle him at times, and he enjoyed being needled. It was that kind of comfortable back and forth. How do you think he should be remembered?

Baab: A great leader, confident in who he was, willing to do what was right for the country, far above anything that had an impact on him. The presidential pardon of Nixon speaks volumes – I can’t say anymore that would add to that as an indication of doing what was right for the country. That’s where his motivation would lie, and I don’t think he was concerned about his legacy and what people would say that would make him rank number one in people’s polls of the all-time greatest presidents. I think it was motivated by “When it’s done, did I do my best to be sure this country was taken care of the way it should, given what all was going on?” I think that was his motivation.

Smith: Anything else come to mind?

Baab: A very memorable time. September 11, 2001 is a date in history that all Americans will remember. They know it’s one of those few dates that people
remember where they were, what they were doing. Tragic events unfolded that day and it was meaningful to me because of the reasons that everyone else had. I was no less surprised than everybody else at the shock of what happened. But it’s meaningful to me in another way because on September 11, 2001, I had a meeting scheduled with President Ford to talk about the financial statements of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation. And we had our set up time. This was not unusual, we did this from time to time as it time pertaining to things financial.

Smith: Was that in Vail?

Baab: No, it was going to be a telephone conversation. It was a telephone conversation and so as the events of that day unfolded in that morning and we all became aware of just what an incredible event this was that was unfolding here, I started thinking, “My meeting to discuss the financial statements of the Foundation pales in comparison to what’s going on.” And I started thinking, “Surely he isn’t expecting me to call at our previously arranged time.” And so I thought, well, I’ll just run it by somebody else. So I called Marty Allen, the chairman of the Foundation and long time friend of President Ford, as you know, and I said, “Marty, here’s what I’m thinking,” and he listened to me and he says, “Yeah, John, I see where you are coming from. You’re probably right. If you don’t call him he won’t be surprised, he might be relieved.” And so I let it go.

At the time the telephone conversation was to take place and I didn’t appear, the phone rang shortly thereafter from Penny Circle, from President Ford’s office, asking, “Why didn’t you get on the phone? President Ford is wondering what happened?” And I said, “Oh, surely his plate was full.” She says, “Yeah, that’s true, but I think he wants to talk to you.” I said, “Even now?” “Yes.” So I was put through to President Ford and I apologized. I said, “I figured you would be inundated by the media for your reaction to the events of the day.” And he says, “Oh, John, you are absolutely right. The phone has been ringing off the hook. Reporters are at the door, the cameramen, they all are here.”
But then he added, “John, life goes on. Life should not come to a paralyzing
standstill because of terrorists. That’s exactly what they wanted to happen.”
And he says, “I will not give in to them and that sort of thinking. We carry on
our lives. We don’t stop paralyzed.” And then he added, shortly thereafter,
something to the effect that “Sadly, John, I firmly believe this is not the end of
this. Getting through this event, figuring it all out, sorting it, punishing the
guilty parties, we are going to face terrorism like this for a long time.” And
that was his parting comment on that subject. And then he said, “Let’s get on
with the business at hand,” and we proceeded to go into the usual discussion
of the financial statements. But I was impressed, surprised, that he felt
compelled to not let that stop him from doing what he was going to do that
day.

Smith: That’s a great story.

Baab: Another thing that pointed out President Ford’s concern for people and
showing his appreciation, a very appreciative man - when I retired from my
professional career, my firm held a retirement dinner to honor the occasion.
And at the end of the festivities that evening, I was just extremely surprised
that a video started showing and it was President Ford making some very kind
remarks about his appreciation for what all I had done for the Foundation as
the treasurer and serving on the executive committee. And I was just blown
away that he would do that. It was very humbling to think that he took that
kind of time. But I later found out that he just didn’t do like somebody came
to his home; he drove down to a recording studio and he did this video and it
wasn’t to his liking. They did it, I think, three times in order to get it right.
And that was important to him to do what was right.

Smith: That’s interesting, do you remember roughly when that would have been?

Baab: ’98.

Smith: Time was good to him. Poor Lyndon Johnson died the day before the Vietnam
Peace Agreement was announced. President Ford lived long enough to see
people come around on the pardon, and the Profiles in Courage Award.
Baab: The Profiles in Courage Award was a tremendous tribute to him. I’m sure he felt tremendously relieved that history had already started to come around and see him in the light that he had hoped he’d been seen in. Although he was a modest guy, he sort of felt like the record needs to be straight as to why we did this.

Smith: And the imprimatur of the Kennedy’s lent it a kind of legitimacy. He said, “For twenty years, everywhere I go, people have asked the same questions.” After he got that award, he said, “They don’t the questions anymore.”

Baab: Once Ted Kennedy said what he had to say – end of subject.

Smith: Yeah. It’s amazing. Well, thank you again.
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Carlson: Over the years, I’ve had the opportunity and the privilege to work with some of the most fascinating and dynamic people in the world. And without a doubt, the person who has impressed me most in all those years was Gerald R. Ford. He was a wonderful, gracious, humble, warm human being. I feel so fortunate to be a small, small part of the Ford administration; a guy like me to be associating with a president, especially Gerald Ford. I had the opportunity to get to know him, of course, on a public basis in meetings and so forth, but I felt very fortunate that I got to know him also, you might say, behind the scenes. I can go into a few of those things.

Smith: Sure.

Carlson: It was really special. But, first of all, every day, we would meet with the President about 10 o’clock every morning; Dick Cheney, Ron Nessen, the press secretary, and we would update the President on what issues were coming up that day. I would get to the White House about 6:15 in the morning and Helen Thomas would arrive about 6:30. Others would come in around 7:00 or so and I would mingle through the pressroom and talk to people and sit down and chat and have coffee.

Smith: So, let’s establish, you were on the press staff.

Carlson: I was deputy press secretary.

Smith: Deputy press secretary working under Nessen.

Carlson: Right. And so I would try to get a feel of what their hot button was that day, what was of interest to them, what kind of questions they were to be asking at the press briefing and so forth. So we met with the President at 10 o’clock. He would’ve already had his NSC briefing, his National Security briefing, but we’d just mention to him, “Today we’re going to announce this,” “We’re going to mention this,” and so forth. Once in awhile, we’d ask him for
guidance, but usually we’d be advising him about what was going on in the press that day. And the enjoyable times when that briefing would take 20, 30 minutes or so, and then we’d get ready to leave. Then oftentimes, we might chat about football, a Monday night football game, the University of Michigan, informally, and that was always, always a joy.

But the way I really got to know the President was probably through tennis. President Ford was a great athlete. I think some people know that; most do not. But he was great and he loved to play tennis. I was kind of the intermediary for outside people to play tennis. Within the White House, Roger Porter was, without a doubt, the greatest tennis player, super tennis player and was quite often his partner if it wasn’t Bill Seidman. But I would do things, play tennis, whenever he would call. I’d get a call like on a Saturday morning from the usher or somebody saying, “Could you meet the President for tennis this afternoon?” Of course, we’d drop anything to play tennis with the President. But I would get things like, George H. W. Bush would call me from Beijing, China, and he would say, “I’m going to be back in DC in about ten days. Can you get a match for us with the President?” And, of course, President Ford always loved to play tennis, especially with George Bush.

Smith: Really? Was there a chemistry there?

Carlson: Yeah, real chemistry. But one time I remember so well, Roger Porter was the President’s partner. George Bush was my partner and Bush hit a volley at the net, missed the President’s ear by an inch. Hard, you know, you don’t play that hard against the President. Bush did. And a little while later in the same match, he hit an overhead smash. Creamed the President in the leg. We stopped for a second and President Ford said, “George, your tennis game is improving. Did you do anything in Beijing besides play tennis?” And it was great. So he had a great camaraderie. Jimmy Baker was at Commerce in those days. He would come over. He’d call and he’d say, “Can you get us on the courts this week with the President?” That was always fun. Different things like the Swedish Ambassador to the United States, Willy Wachtmeister, great guy, loved to play tennis. These guys would just give
anything to come over and play on the courts with the President; some congressmen and so forth.

So I became that intermediary to help the outside get in. Of course, if the President didn’t want to play with somebody, he would say no, but I don’t think that ever happened. He’d always say, “I’d love to.” He was always so gracious and so warm on these things. We’d go to Vail, Colorado and play tennis in the bubble, in the snow, 20 degrees.

I remember one time, this guy walked up to the courts. We were playing and I saw this guy walk up and I said first of all, “How could this guy even get in here?” Secret Service was all around. We’re changing sides and the guy walked up and introduced himself. He said, “My name is Howard Head. Mr. President, I’ve always admired you…” and so forth. We chatted for a couple of seconds and he said, “I want you to see my latest racket and I want to give this to you as a gift.” And, of course, you know he developed the Prince racket, the oversized racket. That was back in 1975. He also gave me one and I laughed at it to myself. I mean, this big fat racket with a short handle. Of course, that became the way of the future.

Howard had developed the Head skis, the metal skis, the first ones, so he was way ahead of his time. I became friends with him. I met people, so many different people, great people, over the years through the President. I remember playing tennis with Don Rumsfeld and the President in Palm Springs, 95, 99 degree weather. Rumsfeld would come out and play in a wetsuit and President Ford said, “Is that healthy? Is that safe?” And Rummy would say, “I’ve only got 45 minutes. I’ve got to get a good workout in.” And so, those were fun times.

But I would also do things like, when we were in Vail, Colorado, either Ron Nessen or I, quite often I, because I got up so early, would go over and brief the President at 6:30 in the morning where he was staying at the Bass House in Vail and update him on what was going on with the press, the overnight stories. He would always have his National Security briefing, but this was on domestic matters, political issues and so forth. We’re sitting at this kitchen
table; Mrs. Ford would come down in her bathrobe, have coffee, sit at the
table, and it was just very informal, so relaxed, it was just wonderful.

Then, the President would say, “Betty, where do you want to go tonight for
dinner?” And it might be Pepi’s, for example. And so he’d say, “John, Pepi’s
it is.” So I’d go back and advise Dick Cheney and the Secret Service, etc.
They’d make arrangements that night, 8 o’clock at Pepi’s, and we’d organize
it so the President was in the corner. They’d never block off the restaurant,
but he’d be in the corner with about 8 people and then we’d have a buffer of
staff tables. I had about six or eight dear friends, half of them had condos in
Vail, and others would always come to Vail when we were there, because
they enjoyed it so much, seeing the press and the Brokaw’s and Cronkite’s
and stuff. And so I’d make reservations for them to be another buffer at the
restaurant that night. The Secret Service really appreciated that because they
knew, we knew who everybody was in that area of the restaurant. So I really
got kind of an inside look at the Fords in those days.

Smith: They loved Vail, didn’t they?

Carlson: Oh, wonderful. And President Ford was such a fabulous skier. I’d get done
with him at 7:15, and at 7:30, he’d be off to the slopes. He would tell me who
he wanted to ski with the next few days and we’d have it planned. One time,
the Olympic ski team was there training. He went and skied with them. The
guys told me and they weren’t kidding, I mean privately, they never saw a
fellow at age 60 plus be such a strong skier, such a great athlete. And so,
different people would ski with him and we’d set it up. It was really great
times.

Smith: And I also take it that they were beloved in Vail. That people in Vail really
held them in the highest regard.

Carlson: Absolutely, the same thing in Palm Springs. They just were revered wherever
they went and still are to this day, of course. Just to give you a couple things
on how gracious the President was to me. Walter Cronkite joined our
campaign. We were on like a 13-day campaign swing in 1976 and Cronkite
said he had wanted to interview the President. He was the evening news. He
was God in those days. He went to Dick Cheney and Cheney says, “Talk to Nessen and Carlson.” Well, I guess he talked to Ron Nessen and Ron said, “No, I don’t think so.” Cronkite came to me and said, “I just want to have a voiceover with the President. Just show me sitting with the President talking and I can show it on the evening news.” Barbara Walters had just become the anchorwoman on the ABC evening news. And he said, “The ratings are tough right now. Just let me do that. Just one camera, voiceover.” I talked to Ron Nessen and Cheney and I said, “What have we got to lose?” Cheney’s such a great guy, he said, “It’s up to you guys.” Nessen said, “I don’t favor it, but if you want to do it, Carlson, go ahead.”

So I talked to Cronkite, I said, “Okay, just a couple minutes, chit chat, voiceover, and so forth”. He said, “Absolutely.” I advised the President, “Cronkite’s going to be coming here in about 15 minutes. No questions, just chat about the weather. No voice, no sound.” We walked in with the camera man. The sound man stayed outside. We walked in chitchatted for about 10, 15, 20 seconds, then Cronkite says, “Mr. President, you wouldn’t mind if I asked a couple of questions on the record, would you?” And the cameraman pulled out the mike. And I was really, really upset. President Ford said, “John, don’t worry about it. It’s okay.” And I said, “That’s not the deal, Walter. That isn’t what we agreed to.” He said, “John, I just..” And President Ford said, “John, don’t worry about it.” Cronkite asked a couple of questions. They were mundane questions, the President did a wonderful job. We got outside. I was really upset with Cronkite.

The next day or the next opportunity I had to talk to the President, I said, “I’m so sorry that happened.” He said, “John, it was fine. Don’t worry.” He made me feel good. It was wonderful. And another thing after he left office, I’ll never forget this; I had just moved to Houston, Texas. This is like a year later. We’re buying airlines, acquiring airlines. The President was coming to town to give a major speech and they were having a private reception for him at the Petroleum Club which is the elite of Houston. All the big CEO’s were going to be there, about 20 or 30, before the big speech. And somehow I got invited to it and I’d just arrived in Houston. And so, the reception was like at 6 o’clock before the 6:30 major reception. I walked in this room – beautiful -,
you know, kind of in awe and there was the President talking to 15 or 20 top CEO’s, most from Houston and I kind of stood there because I didn’t know if I should go to the bar, should I walk up to the group, or whatever. President Ford saw me across the room. He waved, he said, “John, come here.” He walked halfway across the room, left the group, put his arm around me, brought me back to the group and introduced me, “You all know John Carlson, my valued staff member.”

What a great way for me to get introduced to Houston. It was fabulous and I felt, I mean, I could never buy that kind of introduction to Houston and it was so warm and they thought I was really important there in Houston then. It was truly wonderful. Another thing I did that I felt so very fortunate, they have an event called VANG, the Vietnamese-American National Gala. Every two years or so, they have this black tie event, six-seven hundred people. At each gala, they name the outstanding honorary Vietnamese-American. A couple of years ago, it was Gerald R. Ford. Mrs. Ford was going to go and accept the award and Susan called me like a week beforehand and she said, “My mother doesn’t feel like making the trip. She’s kind of frail. Would you go receive the award for my dad for my mother?” I said, “I’d be honored to do it.”

I got up there that night. They asked me to say a few words after I accepted the award for President Ford. There’s at least six or seven hundred people, the mayor, several congressmen, and all these Vietnamese and I talked about the fact how President Ford took office and shortly thereafter, we had the fall of Saigon and against many of his advisors and many in Congress, he immediately signed an Executive Order allowing about 200,000 refugees, Vietnamese refugees, to enter the United States. A lot of people said, “No, it’s going to cause a bad precedent” and all this. And he said, “They’re our allies.” And I was telling this to the audience. He said, “They were our allies and we’re going to stick up for them now.”

I went with President Ford and Mrs. Ford, as I told the audience that night, up to San Francisco and Pan Am had, they called it ‘Operation Baby Lift’, bringing back hundreds and hundreds of orphaned babies from Vietnam.
They went up the ramp, Mrs. Ford and the President carried off the first babies, the first orphans from Vietnam. No press, no coverage, nothing. It was just wonderful. And I said, “President Ford, with no publicity, he did this because he felt he needed to do it, he wanted to do it.” The audience was crying, sobbing. I mentioned how a few months later, we went to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas to walk through and give support to the Vietnamese refugee camp there. We walked through these tents. There are doctors and lawyers and educators in these tents, living there. It was an unbelievable experience.

Smith: What was the reaction to the Fords?

Carlson: Oh, unbelievable. First of all, to have a President come down there, but having a President who just allowed them all in the United States rather than having them be subject to imprisonment or murdered, you know, slaughtered in Vietnam. Hundreds, literally hundreds of people came up to me that night after that ceremony and the older people said, “We knew about President Ford,” and “Thank you so much.” The younger people didn’t know quite these things. They’d heard President Ford was a great guy, but they didn’t understand all this. One fellow came up to me, we’re all crying. I mean, this is unbelievable. His name was Dat Nguyen, big good-looking guy. And I said, "You look like a football player." And the guy with him said, “He was an all-American at Texas A&M. He’d played with the Dallas Cowboys, wide-receiver for 7 years, and now he’s coaching the Dallas Cowboys.” And Dat Nguyen and I talked. And he said, “I was born at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas in 1975 when you toured the camp.” And he says, “I don’t remember from the stories I’ve been told whether I was born before that or after that, so you saw my mother with either me in her arms or me in her belly.” And we talked about all these things. Unbelievable, unbelievable.

Smith: You know, in 2000 he came back to Grand Rapids. We had gotten the staircase from the top of the embassy in Saigon and there’d been a real controversy over it. Kissinger said, “Oh, my God, why would you want to do that? Why would you want to remind people of that horrible humiliation?” And Ford, who had a lot more vision than I think he was often credited with
suggested, “First of all, Henry, it is part of history. We can’t forget it.” But secondly, he looked at that staircase and he saw it, not as a symbol of military defeat, but as a symbol of the desire for freedom - every bit as much as that piece of the Berlin wall sitting out in front of the museum. And he came back to Grand Rapids and dedicated that. We had a large Vietnamese-American community in West Michigan and there were probably three or four hundred people there. It was bittersweet, but it was also very poignant. I don’t know of another President who would’ve done that, called attention, in effect, to what was really the low point of his presidency, although immediately followed by one of the moral high points. Because, as you say, everyone wanted to pull the plug and he was adamant that that would be another surrender.

Carlson: Maybe just two other things to mention. We had a press briefing every day at 11 o’clock, 11:30, and one of the last things to do after the press briefing was to get away from the press. I’d go work out every day and would run or lift weights or work in the gym and so forth. My code name then got to be in the White House - we all had radio names - was “Weightlifter”. So, one day Rumsfeld and Cheney mentioned to me that the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports was kind of concerned and upset. They didn’t have anybody they could really talk to on a regular basis in the White House, they needed somebody to be their liaison. So Rummy and Dick said, “Carlson, you like this stuff. Why don’t you just add this to your duties and talk to them.” So I got involved in that. They really hadn’t had much interaction with the White House.

From that point on, any time I would ask the President to make a statement, to sign something, “If you’re going give a speech, talk about the high obesity in the United States in the kids,” kids getting better nutrition, getting away from the television, exercise, all this. He did everything anytime we asked him. I’d be playing tennis with him and we’d be finishing and he’d say, “How’s the Council doing? Do they need anything from me?” It was wonderful. He was great.
One last point I’d love to mention; I guess it was 1975, on the budget. I’ll never forget this. The budget was 1,000 pages long or whatever it is. I had to put together a fact sheet of about ten or fifteen pages for the press corps. I literally worked on it for weeks and then the night before the briefing the next day, I worked all night, literally, with Jim Lynn and Paul O’Neill, the director and deputy director of OMB, to make sure all the facts were right and all this kind of stuff. The next day was the briefing and the person who did the briefing on the budget was President Ford. Everyone, the press corps, and the OMB said they’d never seen a President ever know a budget, not just superficially, but line items in each department. He could go into depth on these things. And I really felt kind of bad because the press corps would say to me, “Unbelievable what the President did,” but they didn’t write it. You know, because no President could ever, had ever, I’m sure even until today, doesn’t know the inner workings of the budget as President Ford did back in those days.

Smith: Is that, do you think, a product of his years on the Appropriations Committee?

Carlson: Absolutely. I think he knew the budget before he even got to the White House. He knew the process. But anyway, he was a phenomenal person and for me to be part of that time, it was unbelievable.

Smith: Let me back up a little bit. You’d been in the Nixon White House?

Carlson: Yes.

Smith: How did that come about?

Carlson: Well, I know you don’t have time for all this.

Smith: No, we’ve got plenty!

Carlson: I ran a U.S. Senate campaign in Washington State and I was written up in the *Wall Street Journal* in part of a large article, some little squib “the youngest campaign manager of one of the best organized campaigns in the United States, 24-years old,” or something “was John Carlson in Washington State.” Haldeman, Erlichman, or somebody there saw that. And when the Nixon team came to Washington State for 18 hours when he was running for
President, they called me and said, “We understand you’ve got this state pretty well organized. Could you help us organize those 18 hours when we’re going to be in Seattle?”

Of course, Erlichman was from Seattle, so I did a couple things that surprised him. First of all, we had a little welcoming ceremony at Boeing Field when they arrived. When they got downtown to the Olympic Hotel, fabulous, I had thousands of people there going crazy when Nixon came in. I had suggested to Erlichman that once the President arrives, go out, walk around the block, and get some fresh air. Of course, as you know, when the President moves, he’s got a press pool. Well, Nixon came out. They did exactly what I asked them to do. Went around the corner and when they went around the corner, there was a bus stop with about six or eight people there. They went crazy for Nixon. “Let me have a picture with you,” “Kiss my baby,” “Please run, we need you,” and all this. I’d said go in this café. They went into the café and people went crazy for him.

They were all my staff, all my campaign people I had planted along the way. Nobody knew that. So when they got back after the campaign stop in Seattle, they said, “When we win White House, you’ve got to come back and join us.” I said, “Sure. Sure.” Of course, they won and then they offered me jobs over the years and they didn’t sound right. And, first of all, I said, “Who would ever want to work in government and who would want to work in Washington, D.C.? I’m a businessman.” But what happened was, pretty much exactly as I’m saying it now.

In 1971, I guess it was, George Schultz was giving a speech someplace in Indonesia. He’d been gone for a week from Washington, D.C. He said something along the lines that “Richard Nixon will never impose wage and price controls.” An hour later in Washington, D.C., they announce the imposition of wage and price controls. They called me and said, “We need someone to sit in our 7:30 senior staff meeting every morning and then go out and call the Cabinet officers and tell them what the theme is for the day, what the issue is for the day. We want to get a common thread through every Cabinet officer. If it’s a transportation bill, the Defense Department should
know that, the health guy that, education should know that. Everyone should know what’s going on that day” and so forth. I said, “That sounds pretty interesting.” So I came back and that was my first job in the Nixon White House.

Smith: When Watergate happened - let’s define it as the ‘break-in’ - what were you doing at that point?

Carlson: I was assistant press secretary.

Smith: You were?

Carlson: Uh huh.

Smith: Working for Ziegler?

Carlson: Exactly.

Smith: What was Ziegler like?

Carlson: Pretty pompous, pretty arrogant. But he had a tough, tough job. It’s the toughest job there is. But it wasn’t easy.

Smith: When did the bunker mentality set in? Or had it already existed?

Carlson: I think it was there.

Smith: Yeah.

Carlson: And I think, you know, even Ron Ziegler didn’t see the President on a regular basis there at some point, and it was not easy. Very difficult times.

Smith: Was there a time when you began to think this might in fact end? Well, you had Agnew’s resignation. Did that come as a shock?

Carlson: Absolutely. I had no idea that he was taking money and doing all this stuff from his Maryland days. That was a shocker. I guess the real shocker was when Haldeman and Erlichman resigned. That seemed like the beginning of the end and you knew something really serious was happening. One night, I was told to go down and meet two distinguished guests who were coming in secretly through the south entrance of the West Wing, not through the main
entrance. It was Hugh Scott and Howard Baker, and they were coming in privately to see the President in the residence to tell him that they could not hold impeachment off. I had no idea why I was bringing them, but I heard it later, I was told, that’s the message that they brought to the President. Of course, I’d go to Key Biscayne with the President. I’d go to San Clemente with the President and they got to be more tense with the press every trip.

Smith: Richard Nixon once famously said of himself that he was an introvert in an extrovert’s profession. Rex Scouten told us, because Rex had been in the Secret Service and he had been the sole Secret Service agent with then Vice President Nixon, became very close to the Nixon family and thought the world of Nixon. Rex is very circumspect, but he felt that the Nixon he knew then was different from the Nixon in the White House. But he said something extraordinary. He said they’d be on a plane; just the two of them, and out of nowhere, Nixon would sort of pound his fist on the arm rest and say, “You know, I’m not tough enough. I’ve just got to make myself tougher,” which is a remarkable thing when you stop to think about it. I suspect people will be trying to analyze Nixon for as long as –

Carlson: Well, he was a brilliant guy. I would go to state dinners, not as an invited guest always, usually not as an invited guest, but I would go to ‘take care of the press.’ They would come in and do certain things, so I would go and would always want to be there when Nixon would give the toast. For example, the Shah of Iran, he would go on, Nixon, for 15-20 minutes, the background of Iran and Persia and that part of the world and the Pahlavi family and all this stuff without one single note. And the press would be so impressed. And I would see Nixon - for example, we would have little parties in San Clemente and he would sit there and point and he says, “That room up there is where I met with Brezhnev and we’d meet all day and try and negotiate something and make no headway. At 11 o’clock at night, Manola” or the –

Smith: The valet?

Carlson: “The valet would come and knock on my door at 11 o’clock at night and say, ‘Mr. Brezhnev wants to chat if it’s okay with you.’” And Nixon said, “We
accomplished more at midnight than we would all day.” And stuff like that was just tremendous.

Smith: Did you ever see him genuinely relaxed?

Carlson: I didn’t really get that close to Nixon. I would go down and I’d see him in San Clemente and I’d see him in Key Biscayne. So, I would see him with Bebe Rebozo, Bob Abplanalp. I’d see him in those situations, but I wasn’t close enough to interact with him.

Smith: When Ford becomes vice president, he’s obviously in a very difficult situation. He’s walking a tightrope, and one way he does it is to get out of town a lot. And there are people who have told us that there were, not surprisingly, Nixon loyalists in the White House who found some fault with the Vice President for not being sufficiently outspoken in his defense of the President. Did that tension exist that you were aware of?

Carlson: I never saw that. I always thought from day one that President Ford, and Vice President Ford was wonderful. And, of course, it’s interesting, if you go back to the first Nixon administration, when Nixon won in ’72, he asked for everyone’s resignation. Do you remember that? And 90 percent of the people were basically let go. And supposedly ten or fifteen percent were on the must-keep list. Ten or fifteen percent “We’ll find you jobs out in the administration, some place out in departments.” Everyone else was let go. And the guys who were all let go were saying, “I could’ve stayed if I wanted to, but…”

Well, I was on the must-keep list, but I was going to leave. I didn’t want to make a career out of Washington; I wasn’t going to stay. But I said, “If I don’t stay, if I leave and say I could’ve stayed, no one will believe it. No one will believe it.” And so I stayed. When President Ford came in, I was going to leave. Almost everyone left. And President Ford asked me to stay. Dick Cheney and Rumsfeld and I felt honored to stay, but I wanted to leave. I thought it would be better if I left, but I said, “No one would believe me if I said I could’ve stayed.” So I stayed another two and a half years, and it was wonderful; the greatest thing ever.
Smith: That leaves a couple things. We’ve been told on the morning of the 9th, following the East Room, the Nixon farewell. There was the [Ford] swearing in and a receiving line and a reception. A couple of people made the observation, and again, quite understandably, that, as they put it, you could see the Nixon people sort of peel away before joining the receiving line. Was that your sense?

Carlson: I don’t recall that.

Smith: That’s a stand-in for the larger question of how did this new President mesh? Rumsfeld has said that he was very explicit to the President that you should clean house early; indeed he was critical of Ford for drawing it out as long as he did. There were others who indicated that Ford wanted to be absolutely fair to the vast majority of Nixon people who had nothing to do with Watergate and he didn’t want to tar them with the broad brush of wrongdoing.

Carlson: That’s certainly how I would feel. I mean, first of all, for him to take over and all of a sudden have to put together a whole new staff is pretty difficult. And I was deputy press secretary. Ron Nessen, Jerry terHorst came in.

Smith: Yes. Tell us about Jerry terHorst.

Carlson: Jerry terHorst came right out of the press corps, of course. And I think it was very difficult for Jerry to all of a sudden be on the inside and having to hold back information from his colleagues. He got a lot of static from the press for joining the opposition, you might say. But I will say on the record that he didn’t like the job and at 7 or 8 o’clock at night would be sitting in his office and he’d be having scotch. It wasn’t good for him and he was under a lot of pressure and he used the pardon as the excuse to resign and it worked out best for everybody.

Smith: That’s interesting. You’re not the first to make that observation. There was sort of a Boy Scout quality that the President had. But here’s someone who’s been in Washington 25 years. The first press conference was on August 28th, which turned out to be a real pivotal moment in the Ford presidency. He goes into that press conference believing that people are going to want to talk about
inflation and Cypress and Greece and Turkey and all those things that he’s trying to deal with. And, of course, the only thing they wanted to talk about was Nixon and his papers and his tapes and his legal prospects. How do you explain that?

Carlson: Well, the press really disliked Nixon and I think all of a sudden to have a Boy Scout come in and they had all this venom still pent up from Nixon, and then, of course, August 28th, he hadn’t pardoned Nixon yet, had he?

Smith: No.

Carlson: It was like a week or two weeks before the pardon.

Smith: That’s right. And my sense is that this press conference was a catalyst.

Carlson: Beautifully put, because the feeling inside was that if we didn’t get rid of this Nixon situation and the ongoing impeachment, or the ongoing problems, that it would be around his neck forever. I remember so well, Ford was a fabulous person, and you remember, President Nixon had left office and he had phlebitis, was it? He was out in a hospital in Los Angeles. We were coming to Los Angeles. Ford told me, told us, some of the key guys that were meeting, he says, “It’s time for me to go see President Nixon.” And they said, “Oh, no. You can’t do that.” I think I was one of the leaders: “Can’t do that. Can’t do that. Bad image. The press will get all over that.” Everybody was against it. He said, “I cannot be in Los Angeles and not see President Nixon,” and went and saw him. It was great. I really, really admired President Ford for so many things, and that was one of them. He said, “I don’t care what the image is, I’m going to do it.”

Smith: Did the pardon come as a surprise to you?

Carlson: Yes. I knew about it about two, three days in advance. We were writing it and doing all this stuff, but it was a real shocker for me. But in hindsight, of
course, even a couple of weeks later, it seemed like the best thing to do. And even the press soon afterwards said that.

Smith: What was the immediate press reaction?

Carlson: Ford’s dead. Don’t even run for re-election; there was collusion before he took office – that was the big thing. The reason he got the vice presidency was that he would take care of Nixon if necessary. I don’t believe – I can’t say I’m certain – but I don’t believe there was ever any plan or anything like that ahead of time.

Smith: And then, of course, the fact that he would go up to the Hill and testify, which had never been done.

When Mrs. Ford had her breast cancer surgery - that also was unprecedented – the degree of openness. How did you find out about that?

Carlson: Well, I certainly really wasn’t close to the family, but I was closer than most, and so I started hearing some of this stuff ahead of time. But everything she did, like in drugs, I would see Mrs. Ford at 6:30, 7:00 in the morning, I’d see her at midnight in Vail and Palm Springs. Christmas Eve, New Year’s Eve we’d spend with the President at the Annenberg estate. All those things and I never, ever knew she had a problem. But I think she has done so much for women in coming out for drugs and breast cancer and everything.

Smith: Can you talk about their relationship?

Carlson: Oh, it was wonderful. I don’t think you’d ever find a closer couple ever, ever. And he’d even say in the White House, there was a thing certain of us had; whenever the President would move, certain people in the White House would have a bell on their phone. At 7:00 at night, it’d be twenty degrees out, the bell would ring on your phone, I’d pick it up and say, “The President is en route from the residence to the pool (swimming pool).” Two minutes later, ping, “The President’s in the pool.” And once in a while we’d need to talk to the President, we’d run down to the pool and say, “Mr. President, you just need to sign off on this.” It worked out perfectly because he’d get his bathrobe on and he’d be swimming laps in the pool, and snow on the sides. But he
would say, “I gotta go, Betty’s waiting for me and she’s got everything…” just like a regular couple. Betty’s waiting for me, got dinner, got to get back, and so forth.

Smith: The not so secret fact was that he was a stickler for punctuality, and he married a woman who was not. Classic case of opposites attracting. And yet he seemed to accept it pretty well.

Carlson: Yeah. One of the interesting times I had with the President was really completely informal. President Ford was invited up to spend a weekend in Pocantico Hills, Vice President Rockefeller’s estate. I became a Socialist after going up there. President Ford took three guys with him; Dick Cheney, Red Cavaney, and me. Remember Joe Canzari Wonderful guy. We arrived at Pocantico Hills and Joe Canzari took care of us, and this is off the track, isn’t it?

Smith: No, no. As I said, I’ve been working for nine years on a biography of Nelson Rockefeller.

Carlson: I can tell you some inside stuff if you want.

Smith: I’d love to hear it.

Carlson: But we arrive and Joe Canzari said, “What do you want to do tomorrow morning? Do you want to have breakfast and what time?” and all this. And he said, “I want to give you a tour of the estate.” I said, “I’d like to work out before anything else.” And he said, “Okay, we have an indoor pool, we’ve got an outdoor pool. Got a tennis court, got a golf range, got a bowling alley,” it was unbelievable. And then he showed us around the estate. It was unbelievable. He talked about how John D. Rockefeller had moved the railroad tracks fifty miles or something, and almost no family should have that much. He earned it, I guess. Of course, he earned it. But what an experience. Things like that - of course a guy like me would never, ever be going to Pocantico Hills if it wasn’t for President Ford. But it was an unbelievable weekend.

Smith: Did the White House wait too long to take the Reagan challenge seriously?
Carlson: Boy, that’s a good question. It certainly hurt the President and I tell people that I’m certainly not anti-Reagan, but I’m not pro-Reagan either because we begged Ronald Reagan to go to Texas and campaign for us in 1976. If we had won Texas, we’d have won the election. But that didn’t happen. And every time we asked – they didn’t say no – they just kept postponing it. But you are probably right, that’s a good way to put it that we did not take the Reagan challenge seriously soon enough.

Smith: Now, there is a school of thought that Reagan, in a perverse way, made Ford a better candidate in that Ford had never run for anything outside of his congressional district. And that thanks to people like Don [Penny] and others, he became a much better public speaker, etc. etc. On balance, s a question of opinion, was the Reagan challenge hurtful?

Carlson: I think it was. I think having negativity in your own party on and on every day for months, as we got in the primaries, it didn’t help. And I knew a lot of the guys in the Reagan campaign, on the Reagan team, and we talk about those days at this time. But again, Reagan was looking to ’80. He was setting himself up – if he didn’t make it in ’76, he’d be the guy in ’80. And of course it worked out that way. If Ford had won in ’76, Reagan probably quite likely would not have been president in 1980. Ford’s vice president might have been, perhaps. Who knows?

Smith: Tell me about Ron [Nessen]. We talked with Ron at some length. Ron maybe has mellowed a little bit. He’s pretty thoughtful about owning up to some of his mistakes. We’ve been told by a couple of people that following terHorst’s resignation, Bonnie Angelo was approached about the job.

Carlson: Hmm. I didn’t know that.

Smith: Which would have made her the first woman press secretary, but she had family commitments and so on. But it raises a question of whether a TV guy, at that point in his career, is necessarily the ideal candidate to take on that position. What did Nessen bring to the job; and what were the challenges that he faced?
Carlson: First of all, Ron was pretty close to Gerald Ford. He had got to know him, covering him as Vice President, and so that’s important. Also Ron is a very, very bright guy; a very quick study; he’s really good. We all had code names in the White House. Mine was Weightlifter. You didn’t want to have to memorize who was what, so you had something to relate to. His nickname was, if you remember, because of press briefings you get worked up like I’m getting worked now…he got worked up and his code name was Sunburn, because his face would get flushed and so forth. But you are absolutely right. Taking a member of the press and putting them in there is difficult because the other press members resent it. Phil Jones is a very good friend. I see him twice a year. And of course, they were tremendous rivals. And Phil Jones wanted that job.

Smith: Did he?

Carlson: Yeah.

Smith: There was a sense, particularly with the Saturday Night Live business…

Carlson: I was just going to say that…

Smith: That maybe there was a little too much ego for a press secretary. That a press secretary needs to be self-effacing in ways; perhaps at that stage in his career, Ron found that difficult.

Carlson: I remember right after Saturday Night Live, Chevy Chase and all that, we were sitting in the Oval Office. The first thing in our daily briefing the President said was, “Ron, I watched Saturday Night Live. I just don’t understand that type of humor.” And the President was hurt by it. Another thing, I don’t know if it hurt the President, I doubt it: but we were in motorcades a few weeks after Saturday Night Live. You’d have the motorcycle cops and you’d have Secret Service, and you’d have the President’s car, and then you’d have press and so forth. And we were in an open van, I was with Nessen a couple of times, there would be people along the roads. The President would come by and they would applaud; we’re going real slow; and then Nessen would come by and people would go crazy for Nessen. They’d just seen him on Saturday Night Live and it was remarkable. I
didn’t have any idea that people even watched that show that much. And I don’t think Ford even knew that kind of stuff. But I know he was not happy with Ron Nessen portraying him as a bumbling, stumbling guy.

Smith: With Nessen being on the show himself.

Carlson: Exactly.

Smith: You can look at the Ford presidency in a number of ways. One obvious trajectory is a guy who spends twenty-five years of his life on Capitol Hill, is really a man of the House, who has to learn to be an executive. In some ways outgrow some of the habits that he brought to the job. You want to keep the best of what you have, obviously, but at the same time learn to be a communicator in a way that you don’t have to be on Capitol Hill. Did you see that?

Carlson: That’s a great point. There’s a big difference between being a legislator and an administrator. But Rumsfeld was super. Rumsfeld came in to run the staff. And you might say Rohm Emanuel one of these days is a liaison with Capitol Hill, because he came from there. Well, Ford could talk to anybody, anytime, anywhere. So you might say Rumsfeld ran the staff day to day initially, before he went to the Defense Department, and did a great job, as did Dick Cheney. President Ford, as you say, had no administrative experience ever, probably, in his life. But he was great. I think he was able to motivate and lead just by example. He was superb.

Smith: Al Haig and Bob Hartmann may have been put on this planet to really piss each other off. Did you sense that at all?

Carlson: I saw it. Of course Bob Hartmann was a friend of the President’s forever. And I was sitting in the Oval Office one day with Bob Hartmann in our meeting, and we’re sitting there and Bob says to the President, “Information about me is being leaked. Negative information about me is being leaked. And the guy who is leaking it is sitting right here,” pointing at Nessen. And they kind of started screaming at each other. It’s the first time, the only time, I ever heard the President raise his voice. He said, “Bob, not here, not now.” And he [Bob]
kept going, and the President said, “Stop it Bob, stop it.” And so it was interesting times.

Smith: But it says something about his loyalty to a guy who, to be sure, had written some very important speeches for him, but who also brought an awful lot of baggage and never quite adapted to his role in the White House as opposed to what it had been on the Hill. To the point where there were two separate speech groups that were functioning; one in the open and the other to some degree at least, sub rosa.

Carlson: Well, Bob Hartmann, I thought, knew the President inside and out. And he knew what he thought; he knew how to write for him. But sometime you need to get to a different level and you need more of a national scope. But Bob was very, very close to the President and he knew everything about his thinking.

Smith: One senses that that was a very bitter – by that point – bitter rivalry.

Carlson: With Reagan, you mean?

Smith: Yeah, the Reagan-Ford thing. Going into the convention, what was your sense?

Carlson: I think we felt pretty certain we had the nomination, but there was still that small percentage of uncertainty. I actually was playing tennis with Jimmy Baker on top of the Hyatt Hotel, or whatever hotel it was. One hundred degree weather, I think it was. He pulled an Achilles tendon and it really slowed him down. But those were tense times and I don’t even, still to this day, when they went to talk with Reagan one night, John Sears and his guys about being involved in the presidency, vice president and all that, I still don’t know the accurate story on that. And I talked to the guys who were in those meetings and I still don’t know it. Jim Cavanaugh was part of that and of course, Dick Cheney. I’d like to know the inside story some day.

Smith: When you had this whole switch, when Schlesinger was fired and Rumsfeld took his place and the vice president was dumped, and George H.W. Bush was in effect, deep-sixed at the CIA. Nelson Rockefeller went to his grave believing that Don Rumsfeld was responsible. Now, it is also true Rockefeller
could get paranoid toward the end. He saw enemies and he believed that Don Rumsfeld was his biggest enemy and that Cheney was Rumsfeld’s extension. The President always maintained that, no it was his idea to do all of this. Did you have a sense that there was a problem in the Ford-Schlesinger relationship?

Carlson: Oh, there was. I forget his name now – Joe – he was his spokesperson. Joe Layton, you ever heard that name?

Smith: Yeah.

Carlson: We were getting ready to announce some major decision, pulling troops out of Lebanon, and I was called back from a tennis tournament on a Sunday or something and I came in and Rockefeller, Kissinger, and President Ford were in the Oval Office. They asked me for some things and they said we’re going announce at nine o’clock tonight we’re pulling troops out of Lebanon. By the time we announce it, they will be three-fourths out. But just be prepared, like at seven o’clock, you want to advise the press that at eight o’clock they are going to have a press conference and so forth. So I started putting everything in the works – everything was secret until a certain point – and then you’d advise the press, have the press conference and so forth.

About a half an hour before we announced this, Joe Layton announced it at the Defense Department. And it was a positive thing because we were getting people out of harm’s way and all this. It was a very positive thing. We were really upset that the Defense Department, Joe Layton, had announced it before the President announced it. And I said to Joe Layton, who is a pro in Washington, he was there forever, I said, “The President announces the good news, you announce the bad news. And you don’t ever do that again.” I don’t know if you can call it a rivalry, but Schlesinger, who I don’t know at all, brilliant guy, he would sit there with his pipe and he’d be thinking and he probably thought he was smarter than President Ford.

Smith: And everyone else in the room.
Carlson: And everyone else. And Joe Layton, of course, worked for him, and so there was that feeling there wasn’t real teamwork going on. That was one example that I experienced.

Smith: And then there is the vague, I don’t pretend to understand it, but at the time when Saigon was falling, there was apparently some real friction regarding the evacuation and how it was proceeding. Was it the low point of those two and a half years?

Carlson: Yeah, it had to be. Of course, President Ford inherited Vietnam, as Richard Nixon inherited Vietnam. But you keep trying to wind it down honorably and it wasn’t easy. Of course Kissinger was a hero in those days, wasn’t he? He was God and so forth.

Smith: And yet one has a sense that he wanted to go down with all flags flying and blaming Congress to the end for not funding the war. One of the things that I’d love to know the answer to is to what degree Ford agreed with Kissinger, that Congress should come up with another $750 million, or whether knowing the Hill as well as he did, saw it as a futile gesture, although a gesture worth making. Then there was the famous speech at Tulane where, apparently Kissinger had one draft and Hartmann had another that he handed the President on the plane, which basically said the war is over as far as this country is concerned. Was there a sense of that kind of debate going on within the White House?

Carlson: I did not experience that, really. I’m sure there were all kinds of things going behind the scenes that weren’t quite so open. The only time the President ever barked at me, was, and I’ll never forget this. It was in the last days of the administration before he’s leaving office, and I forget if it was the New York Times, said they would like to have an obit interview with the President. And Nessen said, “Carlson, you ask the President, I’m not going to ask.” So we got done with the regular briefing and we’re getting ready to walk out and I said, “Mr. President, it’s customary for major newspapers and so forth to do interviews that are held until you die. And the New York Times would like to make a formal request, and I’m making this request for them, to do this.” And
he said, “John, I’m not ready to die. Tell that to the *New York Times.*” And, of course, Tom DeFrank then did his thing for several years, right?

Smith: This may be unfair, but I would be interested in your sense of the book, because there are people who believe that Ford was, in some ways, exploited. There are other people who believe that Ford knew exactly what he was doing. Do you have a sense?

Carlson: Are you talking about Tom DeFrank’s book?

Smith: Yeah. He clearly had great faith in Tom, a great trust in Tom.

Carlson: I thought it was pretty darn good. I thought Tom did a great job and I didn’t know that was going on. I saw Tom all the time and I didn’t realize he was having those conversations every few months with the President. No, I thought it was a pretty good book, and I don’t think President Ford would have done anything he didn’t want to do.

Smith: Did you have much contact with the kids?

Carlson: Not a lot, no. One of the nice things, when President Ford died, I got a call from the family and they said, “You’re going to get an invitation to go back to Washington, D.C. for the big funeral at the National Cathedral. But if you’d like, we’d like to have you come over and be part of the smaller ceremonies here for a couple of days in Palm Springs. So my wife and I went over to Palm Springs and it was wonderful. It really was so much more intimate.

Smith: Were you surprised by the public outpouring?

Carlson: Oh, it was just wonderful, just fabulous, wasn’t it? I honestly think Gerald Ford was one of the finest human beings you could ever be around, and he never got the credit. One of my biggest disappointments in life is that we didn’t do a better job against Jimmy Carter in the 1976 campaign. The question is, “How could we lose to that guy?” It’s just so, so sad. But of course with the Nixon pardon, the economy, Vietnam, it was very, very difficult.
Smith: And who would have predicted, at that point, that years later they would become good friends. Which tells you something about Ford, in particular.

Carlson: Ford, he could become friends, he was so easy to get along with and so gracious.

Smith: You were over at St. Margaret’s and the public was coming in droves.

Carlson: Yeah. They lined up until midnight, didn’t they? And of course, Jack Ford and the family took turns in greeting the people as they came through. But they had a private one for us, I think, first, which was really, really nice. But it was just overwhelming.

Smith: Did you see him much after he left office?

Carlson: Not a lot, no. I’d come over to Palm Springs once in a while. Of course, we’d see him once a year at the June functions. I’d see him at business things, and of course I lived in Houston, different business things he’d be at. I don’t even know how he remembered our names unless somebody briefed him ahead of time, which probably could be. But he was fabulous, he was wonderful.

Smith: Where were you on election night ’76?

Carlson: With the President.

Smith: You were at the White House?

Carlson: I was in Grand Rapids.

Smith: That’s where he almost broke down with the mural at the airport, talking about his parents.

Carlson: I just was shocked that we lost that election. But looking back now I can see all the negative factors that figured into it.

Smith: Did you think you’d caught up?

Carlson: Yeah.

Smith: You did?
Carlson: Yeah, and I think that maybe, and of course you don’t know this stuff, if we’d had another week we would have won.

Smith: Sure.

Carlson: But, who knows? It was a tough campaign.

Smith: We’ve been told it took him a while to bounce back.

Carlson: I don’t know.

Smith: The day after, he’d lost his voice, Mrs. Ford read the statement; but we were also told he was telling people that he would help them out with jobs – he was thinking of their welfare, their future. Typical?

Carlson: Typical. I think it would have been so nice for the President to have his own four-year term; to be elected to his own four-year term, I think it would have given us all more confidence and given him more confidence and then see what he could do in four years. Of course, now he is known as the only un-elected president, which isn’t really fair because he took over in very, very difficult times. I lived with the Cronkite’s and the Brokaw’s, and those guys privately said so many great things, would sit in Palm Springs and chat at night. But they didn’t convey that in their newscasts and so forth.

Smith: How do you think Ford should be remembered?

Carlson: Well, I think people should realize he took over at a very, very difficult time. He assumed the presidency during the most difficult time, maybe, in our country. And he restored honesty and integrity to the presidency and he did it in a very humble way. I just don’t think enough people really got to know him those two and a half years. There is so much controversy from the Nixon pardon that carried over; then we started the campaign; then Reagan was challenging him. It was never easy during those times.
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Smith: First of all, thank you very much for doing this. This is clearly a very
different institution from the one that you came to in 1955. For people who
can’t imagine what it was like then, when you were a freshman - your Dad
had been in before you - and Gerald Ford was probably here for his fourth or
fifth term - can you give us an overview of what this place was like in the
mid-’50s and how it differed from the modern Congress?

Dingell: If you’ve got a lot of time, I can do that. The problem there is that the
differences are very large, but they’re very subtle. And they’re related not
only to substantive differences and political differences, but they’re related
very frankly to something else, and that was the times and the forces and the
sociological events that drove this place as they drive it in every Congress.
We were a post-war Congress at that time and the concerns that people had
were how we were going to get over the war. We were not yet out of it. We
were just beginning to get our peace time economy going because we
converted the entire economy to a war footing.

Having said that, this was kind of one of the cusps that we passed in history
where the Congress goes through a significant change. Congress was
undergoing a significant change because of the situation of the world; the
United States had become a world leader. We were important, but not
necessarily a leading force in the world before the war. That change was
going on. So, the Congress at that particular time would come in in January
and would adjourn sometime very close to the first of July or there about. We
hadn’t yet evolved the national budget in the sense that we have it today,
although we did have one. And the Congress didn’t have a conventional
budget. That was set up in sort of a hit or miss fashion by any administration
that happened to be running the place. And the Congress was a more reactive
body.
You have heard, I’m sure, almost everyone who talks about that time will tell you that that Congress was essentially a body that didn’t involve itself in all the issues that it does now. It wasn’t that kind of partisan entity that it is today. And, of course, we didn’t have television either in the nation or on the floor, although television was beginning to come in.

Smith: Was it more of a village?

Dingell: Well, Washington before the war was called “the little town in the woods,” and before the war - actually until the late 30s - the Congress would essentially leave town as soon as it got hot. They air-conditioned the place, so the Congress which had previously been here from about the 20th of March until the about the first of June, and then would come back for a special session in October if that was necessary, no longer did that. And the result was that the Congress had moved to essentially a six month session, although it came to the point where the Congress would meet for longer and longer periods. During the war, they would start on the first of January or the third of January, whatever the date might happen to be, and they would adjourn the Congress on the last day of December. And they often set the clock back so they made sure that the Congress wasn’t intruding into the affairs of the following Congress. And the body was smaller. We had two less states than we have now, although the size of the body was the same. Districts were much smaller.

Smith: Staffs were much smaller.

Dingell: Staff was much smaller. I had a staff of four. I had one roundtrip ticket home to Michigan, so I had to be pretty careful about how I traveled. I had no long distance telephone account. I had four typewriters. If I got more, I had to buy them myself out of my own pocket. And a member of Congress wasn’t particularly well paid in those days. And we had relatively small committees. The Commerce Committee was 29 at that time. Today, it’s much larger than that. We’ve got subcommittees of 29 members.

Smith: Presumably you do much more oversight today than you did then.
Dingell: Well, we do and we don’t. I learned oversight from my dear friend John Moss and a fellow by the name of Bob Lischman and others who understood how oversight was done. I’m not sure before that people really understood oversight, although there are people like Kefauver. And, of course, there was the great oversight that was done on the Depression to find out what were the causes of that. And then, of course, there were the perversions that you saw in McCarthy and the way he conducted his business. The oversight really sort of hit its flower in terms of high quality good work, when Harris became the chairman of our committee and a fellow by the name of Sam Rayburn decided he was going to have oversight to find out how the Eisenhower administration was subverting and suborning the regulatory process which he was the fundamental author of, if you remember.

But Congress has always had oversight. We haven’t necessarily done it well, but at this particular time we’re doing it sort of well. But oversight is something that you do with real focus on whether the law is being properly implemented, people are being properly served, and public monies are being properly spent. And it’s not really something that should be political and, unhappily, under both parties of late, it’s become quite political and it is opposed to something that’s more bottom-dwelling on seeing to it that the Congress is an ancient function. And this goes back to about 1699 when there was a British parliamentary committee that caused a collapse of the government over peace negotiations between Britain and France, which essentially sold out Britain’s Dutch allies.

Smith: We’ve heard from a number of people that one of the really significant differences between then and now is that members then tended to bring their families with them to Washington.

Dingell: That’s true, we did. And I’d bring them down and my dad did the same thing. In January, we’d load the whole tribe into the car and we’d usually rent a trailer. Come on down here and we’d stay here until the Congress would adjourn and would try to guess when that would be. It’d usually be around the first of August or something like that and then we’d go home.
Smith: And the suggestion is that the wives played a significant role in fostering relationships, social relationships across the aisle. That there was much more social interaction with people than is the case today.

Dingell: That’s true. And that was a very important thing. And it was particularly important because the wives lent a civilizing and valuable impact on the way the Congress worked. They moderated the more extreme behavior of the members and saw to it that friendships existed across the aisles. Kids on both sides of the aisle would date each other and we’d have marriages where people would get married across the aisle, kids of members on different sides. And it tended to make for a warmer, friendlier place. Members did things together and they would travel together and, of course, then you’d travel on boats and things like that as opposed to traveling on jet aircraft where you’re programmed for every second and you really don’t get to know anybody. It’s just sort of a rat race.

Smith: There are stories from the ’60s when Gerald Ford was Minority Leader and Hale Boggs was his Democratic counterpart. They would debate at the National Press Club and they would drive down together and decide on the way what they were going to debate that day. They would have their debate. And then they’d adjourn and have a drink and their lunch. It was a very civil, very friendly sort of relationship.

Dingell: Well, a few things about it. One, it was a different time. Two, they were different kinds of people. And, three, the pressures were a lot different on them. But that was more of a common thing that occurred here where members did become friends. They played golf together and at the House gym which was a wonderful institution, still is, but we had a game we called paddle ball. That was a rough, rough game and it lead to tremendous friendships over the years. Sam Rayburn took the gym crowd on one day and they just beat the socks off of him. And Sam said he’s never going to take that crowd on again. And Sam was a potent, powerful leader, if you will recall. And there were other things that went on.
Smith: Do you think there’s misplaced nostalgia for that period? I mean, are there things about that period that you are just as glad to see gone? Are there things that are clearly better about Congress today?

Dingell: Well, I have nostalgia for those days sometimes. That was part of my formative years, so I probably see it differently than the newer members. Most newer members don’t understand what happened or why or how the parties worked, and so there’s a sense of loss of the old way. There were faults in the way the Congress functioned then and there are faults now. And so the changes that benefit on some level, created this new array of faults to replace the previously existing set of faults. And, of course, it’s all in the eye of the beholder anyway.

Smith: You came here at the end of ’55, succeeding your dad. Gerald Ford had already been here—

Dingell: About eight years.

Smith: Okay. How did your paths cross and what was his reputation at that point?

Dingell: Well, I’d known Jerry when he was a young member. I worked from time to time on the Hill in different small jobs and so I kind of got to know him that way. And I got to know him through Dad. Jerry was very much focused on his district and on internal Republican politics. So, I got to know him, not real well, but we became close friends in the state societies. Those were quite important. And people belonged to the state societies and, of course, Jerry and I did and our wives did. And his wife and my first wife were kind of movers and shakers in the town and used to work to make things happen. So, we would get to know each other that way. Got to know our kids. And Jerry was a very good friend.

I remember one time, Betty had a baby rather late in their marriage and I remember we were feeling pretty good that night, so I spent the evening congratulating and telling him how great it was. And Jerry got this kind of sour look on his face because I think he thought that he was going to finally have a little bit of freedom to enjoy his wife and his business. And then, of
course, the same thing happened to me at a later time, so I felt the __(?)__
was sort of settling up my misdoings.

Smith: Did you like Betty?

Dingell: She’s a fine woman. And we still have a small correspondence between us. And she is not only a pleasant and nice person outward, but she’s a very decent, fine human being, which is much more important.

Smith: How tough was it for political wives?

Dingell: It’s always hard. The family always takes the beating for the members. If you look, you’ll see the tremendous number of divorces that exist here, the numbers of kids that get in trouble, and the family troubles that members have because of the pressures of the job. And I’ve seen it from both sides. I am the son of a congressman and I’ve raised kids and so I’ve seen both sides. I’ve seen the adverse impact on the family for the kids and I’ve seen the pressures that create that situation. It’s a very substantial thing. It’s no better or worse than it was at a different time from an earlier time, it just is a little different. And I can tell you that at one point, we had about 19 members in the Michigan delegation, but we had almost a majority of the members from Michigan that had divorces going on. And it wasn’t because they were playing around or anything, it was just the abnormal pressures that center on the family and makes it very, very hard for husbands and wives to maintain a sort of normal family life in this particular job.

Smith: Let me ask you. In the early ‘60s, there comes the Goldwater disaster for Republicans.

Dingell: In ’64.

Smith: In ’64, yeah. And Ford takes on Charlie Halleck. Now, earlier, of course, Charlie Halleck had taken on Joe Martin, so you had a little bit of a turnaround.

Dingell: That happens fairly regularly over there. If you remember, Halleck took on Martin, Ford took on Halleck, and then nobody took on Jerry. But, if you will recall, the successors in that had troubles and, as I remember it, there was a
terrible attack on Michael by Gingrich. And then Gingrich had his own troubles, as you will remember. And the Republicans do this much more than do the Democrats. And I won’t comment on that because I don’t know whether it’s personal ambitions or whether it’s traditions of the party to try to get rid of what they view as being ineffective leaders.

Smith: That raises a big question, because the older I get the more I think that generational factors are as important as ideological or other factors. I mean, in the late ‘50s, you had a sense that Joe Martin had become ineffectual and Halleck, who certainly wasn’t a Young Turk, but nevertheless took him on in part because—

Dingell: Well, he had losses. The Republicans didn’t take the Congress twice. Joe was an old-fashioned guy. A very nice guy, very much liked by everybody on both sides of the aisle. He had a terrible problem with the English language. We used to call him Mr. Malaprop after the character in the book. And, you’ll remember, he would always misspeak in pretty awful ways. One time, Charlie Halleck was bringing the Prime Minister of Indonesia in to address the Congress when Joe Martin was the Speaker. And Martin recognized the two of them, he says, “The Chair recognizes now the distinguished gentleman from Indonesia and the Prime Minister of Indiana.” And those were just mistakes that you can’t make too many of.

Smith: Then comes Watergate and Agnew’s resignation. And the story is that Gerald Ford became vice president in large measure because Democrats in Congress lead by Carl Albert and Mike Mansfield made it clear to President Nixon that Ford was the only candidate who would be easily confirmed.

Dingell: Well, that didn’t come as a great surprise to anybody. That was quite frankly common thought around. As a matter of fact, it was a consensus that there would be nobody else, because, if you’ll remember, times were very poisonous then. And Nixon had alienated everybody. The Republicans were angry with him because they had to defend him under intolerable circumstances.

Smith: Were they angry at the White House?
Dingell: Yeah, because they put on them an intolerable burden. There’s an old saying by Napoleon. At one time, his Minister of the Interior and the Foreign Minister quarreled about whether they’d accept this particular thing that Napoleon said was a crime and both of them claimed credit for having given this particular response, but they said, “It was worse than a crime, sire. It was a blunder.” And that was what Nixon had done in a rather appalling way apart from the criminal aspects of it. Of course, Ford then got himself in huge trouble over the pardon, which very truthfully seems now in the cold light of history the right judgment.

Smith: What was your reaction at the time?

Dingell: I was outraged. But then I knew Nixon, I knew him back to the first race he’d run and he was one of the dirtiest fighters in American political history. Although, in the cold light of history, he looks like a lot better president than some that have served since he was there.

Smith: And then Ford, of course, came up and did something no president has done before or since, he came up and testified here on the Hill about the pardon.

Dingell: He didn’t have much choice. Ford entered into the presidency of a country very much divided and angry. And Ford, to his vast credit, came up with a series of steps which abated a huge amount of the overwhelming hatred and anger that was burning in the country at that particular time.

Smith: Did that include the first step toward amnesty for Vietnam draft dodgers?

Dingell: That was one of many. Remember, the country was divided over Vietnam. We still had some of the lingering results of McCarthy and there was, of course, all that Nixon had done with wire taps and enemies lists and using the IRS to spy on Americans and Watergate itself and the lies and the things that he had done and said about Democrats over the years. So, Ford had to abate all this and that’s one of the reasons he pardoned Nixon is because he just didn’t want to have to run around the country explaining why Nixon was being tried or not tried and thought he’d get rid of that with one swipe of the presidential pen.
Smith: One way of looking at the Ford presidential trajectory is he spent two and a half years, not necessarily unlearning what he knew as a congressman, but learning how to be an executive, which one senses is a different set of skills.

Dingell: Well, he didn’t unlearn anything and what you learn up here is always useful, wherever the hell you happen to be. But, having said that, he did have to learn a whole new set of skills and Jerry, you’ll remember had never had any real executive experience. But there are some things about Jerry Ford that need to be said. First of all, one, he was a very decent man. Two, he understood government and he wanted it to work. Three, he understood people. Four, he had friendships that he could call on to help him to govern even across the aisle. As a matter of fact, he probably had as many friends on this side of the aisle as he did on the Republican side, and probably a few less enemies.

He also understood that he couldn’t govern if he carried with him all the burdens that had been created before him by McCarthy and Nixon and the others. And, so he went on to abate that - in that he was tremendously successful. And I will tell you this, Jerry had he had just a little more time to campaign, he probably would’ve been elected, not reelected. Because you remember he was the only unelected vice president and the only unelected President. But he frankly ran out of time. There was a very interesting thing, he not only had trouble with the Democrats, but we worked with him. I’d go down to the White House and work with him. I was chairman on the Energy Subcommittee and handled most of the energy policy.

The people down there, and I won’t tell you their names, but would constantly come by and talk to Frank Zarb, who is my beloved friend, and tell us about the latest things that the right wing had done to Ford in terms of the battle for the nomination for the presidency. And, very frankly, there’s good reason to think that they in fact sandbagged Jerry Ford to get rid of him and have a clear shot at the nomination next time.

Smith: One quick thing, because after ’74, you’ve got the Watergate Babies who come in the House. Clearly that’s a turning point in the history of the institution. A lot of the energy debate was over the decontrol of natural gas.
But there also was over control of a lot of things. And you must remember that that came about in good part because Henry Royce and I and a number of others pushed through legislation allowing the President to impose price controls if the economy began to overheat and inflation became a problem. If you remember, they had the WIN buttons and all the Whip Inflation Now. And so, there was that which was going on and Nixon used the authorities which we gave him over energy and the authorities we gave him over price controls, put them together and created the Federal Energy Administration which he had headed by my dear friend Frank Zarb.

At one point, the story goes that Ford had a handshake deal with the Democratic congressional leadership, including the Speaker and Senator Mansfield, on a schedule of decontrol. And they came back a week later and said, “We can’t sell it to our members.” Does that ring a bell at all?

No, it doesn’t. But I would tell you that Albert strongly favored decontrol. I think Mansfield did, too, although Mansfield didn’t talk that much about those things. Albert didn’t either, but you could read Albert a little more easily.

Jerry Ford said to people the thing that frustrated him so much about ’76 - in some ways it goes back to what you just said - is he felt he had just mastered the job when he lost it.

He may have. You never master that damned job. It’s the most hideously cruel complicated difficult task in the whole political lexicon.

Do you remember the last time you saw him?

I think up in Ann Arbor one time when he was up there for a speech at the Jerry Ford School.

Did you ever see his temper?

I never saw Jerry get angry. He may have, but I never saw it. We all get angry, but we show it in different ways. He never showed it to me.

Did he have a sense of humor?
Dingell: Sort of. He wasn’t a real funny guy and he didn’t have a great sense of humor. I want to make it clear I happen to like Jerry Ford a great deal, then and now. Now, of course, he’s dead, but there are good memories of him and no great criticisms of him.

Smith: Final thing. How do you think he should be remembered?

Dingell: Very well. Decent man. Strong President. He was able to work with the Democrats and the Republicans. He could work more effectively with Democrats because we had a different and more wholesome attitude about that than did his own people. He had some who’d work with him very well, but he always had those crazy far right friends that curse the Republicans so terribly. And they would always go out to knife him in the most underhanded ways, because winning was more important to them than the public interest. That remains the case today.

Smith: Last thing. Last because it is important. When Saigon fell at the end of the Vietnam War in the spring of 1975, I’m sure there was a desire on the part of a lot of people to put it the rear view mirror, to consign it to the history books. And the President got very angry because money that had been appropriated for the resettlement of refugees was at least temporarily taken off the table. And he put together this crazy coalition and got Congress to restore money and they brought out about 120,000 Vietnamese refugees.

Dingell: I don’t remember how and I never did any study of that particular interest, so I can’t give you an intelligent comment.

Smith: The War Powers Act?

Dingell: War Powers Act did not do that. War Powers Act was passed to curb Nixon’s excesses and see to it that that was part of a long term fight between the President and the Congress, the Republicans and Democrats on either side. And the idea was to see to it that the President was responsive to the wishes of Congress and it’s a battle that goes on now. You saw it over Korea, you saw it over events prior to World War II, you’ve seen it over Vietnam, and, to a limited degree at least, you’ve seen it over Afghanistan and Iraq.
Smith: Would you like to see restored the constitutional requirement that Congress declare war before we fight one?

Dingell: It’s still there. The trouble is, you have a built-in conflict in the Constitution itself. President is Commander-in-Chief. The Congress has the power of the purse. The Congress has the power to declare war. The president can commit troops and don’t think that the president, this president or any president, has not committed troops around the world in different places. And this goes back - I think if you and I were to sit down - you’d find that Washington didn’t, but I think you would find that Jefferson did and I think you would find that there were all kinds of commitments of American troops in different places as to carry out the American policy without the approval of Congress.

Sometimes there’s discretion with Congress, sometimes there’s not. Truman committed us to Korea and a lot of other presidents have done this. We were constantly in Mexico. Wilson did it, if you’ll remember. I don’t think Teddy Roosevelt did, but that wasn’t because he wouldn’t have done it, it just was because he never had time or a chance. So, it was a regular practice in global diplomacy in Mexico and South America - a regular practice of the American administration. If you look at the westward expansion of the United States it was largely accomplished by the president using arms, particularly against Mexico. But we came close to having a war over the Canadian border, particularly 54-40 and the Washington-Oregon territory.


Dingell: You’re welcome.
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Smith: First of all, thank you so much for doing this.

Engler: Well, thank you, I’m happy to sit down.

Smith: I want to talk a little about you and your entry into the big ring, if you will. You were a leading member of this whole generation of Republican governors, conservative Republican governors, who nevertheless were seen as creative in their conservatism, as problem solvers. I don’t know whether pragmatists is a misnomer or a pejorative, but in any event I would have thought that would have been very, very much Gerald Ford’s style; very reflective of his approach as well. Tell us about your life before it crossed paths with President Ford.

Engler: My first meeting with Gerald Ford that I can recall, where I actually had a chance to sit and talk with him, was when Elford [Al] Cederberg, one of his colleagues from the Congress, brought him to Mt. Pleasant, Michigan to speak to a little Lincoln Day dinner for Isabella County. It always struck me, the humility of the leader of the Republicans of the United States House of Representatives out on the road. And, of course, it was only later – I was a rookie state representative, it may have been my first or second term, so I’m in my early twenties in office – and I’m meeting this leader of the Republicans, who’s been in Congress a long time. I was born in ’48; so roughly at the time I was born, he goes there.

Years later we meet and he’s good friends with our congressman who has been there a long time as well. Then I learned how many days he spent on the road and traveled, then – even in the ‘70s it wasn’t as easy as it is today – and he’d been doing this for many years before then. What dedication and what sort of attention to detail. It gave him almost an encyclopedic knowledge of the country. But he was interested in Michigan because we were in Michigan – I was in the Michigan legislature.
Over the years, it was that sort of thread. I wasn’t in his congressional district, although I had Montcalm County, which is down in Greenville, kind of in his backyard. And so that sort of started, I guess, an awareness and a recognition of who Congressman Gerald Ford was. Then, of course later on, I became familiar and acquainted and friends with many of his friends, who had been longtime supporters. So I felt like even though we weren’t, on a personal level, chumming around, that I was friends with a lot of his friends, and I knew a fair amount about him.

Smith: Of course the flip side of that extraordinary dedication, as you say, to his job and to the party nationally, was that it left Mrs. Ford at home with the kids.

Engler: Yeah, so it was a challenge, yeah.

Smith: Political wives have never had it easy.

Engler: No, although, it’s remarkable. Back then, I think - something that has been lost today - is they moved to Washington. I mean, the story was the family picked up, it was not considered a problem back home. You were elected to go serve in Washington in the Congress, so you and your family went down there to this new job site. And you weren’t expected, then, back home every weekend; you weren’t expected at every function. You were expected to stay in touch. You were certainly expected, as they did when there were recesses and they were sort of reliable, you could count on this period of time being done.

The Congress didn’t try to stay in session throughout the entire summer. So you could, at the end of the school year, and at the end of the congressional session, go home for the summer, be there, be with your constituents. Go to the county fair in a rural district, do other things that you had to do to stay in touch, and you came back.

One of the things that much has been written and said about is the fact that because you were living here, wives became friends with other wives. Members became friends with other members, regardless of party. They knew each other at a level which developed the kind of trust and the ability to rely on somebody’s word. And you didn’t have to have it in writing. It didn’t have
to be some ironclad guarantee. If somebody said, “I can do that. I can support that,” you could, in fact, count on that being done.

Smith: It’s interesting, and a number of people have said that that is certainly a major contributing factor to the mood in this town, the lack of trust, the lack of knowledge, I suppose, that the two parties have toward each other. Alan Greenspan said one of the factors is the jet plane. And by that he meant members of the West Coast could get home a lot easier than otherwise, and they were, accordingly, less likely to bring their families to town. President Ford used to say it was much better when the staffs were smaller.

Engler: That’s right.

Smith: And when you didn’t have to spend all your time raising money.

Engler: I completely agree with that. The money raising has become an obsession because the campaigns are so expensive, and at least until a recent Supreme Court ruling, there were certainly lots of efforts to limit how you raised money. In effect, making it harder, making your dependency on outside individuals, or in some cases, outside groups, much greater. And that, I think, then leads to a problem of people’s independence and ability to approach issues.

So there is no question that that’s all changed. We sort of have to play the hands we’re dealt, it’s hard to go back and unscramble all of this. But I do think we actually are coming a bit full circle. Now you’re seeing some of the Internet fundraising giving candidates an ability with an appeal to reach a broad audience. The problem with it is that sometimes that appeal has to be so simplistic and so blunt that there is no nuance or subtlety. I think one of President Ford’s great strengths, and something that I identified when I became governor, was the fact - and this was certainly well after he’d been president - but he spent all those years, he’d been on the Appropriations Committee, he knew the Defense budgets inside and out, he knew about social spending. He knew really an awful lot. And of course, that remarkable moment when he, as president, actually presented his own budget.

Smith: It will never happen again, will it?
Engler: It will never happen again. And not because somebody maybe wouldn’t be smart enough, but they would not have put in twenty years of service to learn all that. And it does take learning. One of the real crippling things of term limits around the country, frankly, is that in these state legislative bodies we are not letting people build the kind of knowledge base that’s really important. And actually it’s harder today because the complexity of all these programs is so much greater. So, at a time when it’s harder to learn, you’ve now got less time to do it.

Smith: Kind of a misplaced populism?

Engler: Well, I understood the frustration because in the early nineties when that really came to a boil and much of the term limit movement started, they were all shooting at Congress. Because for forty years, the majority never changed. President Ford, nor anyone else, had realized their dream of being a Speaker in the House. There was one party rule. And so the frustration, all into Washington, ended up impacting state legislatures all over the country. And as a result, you have the unfair situation in the State of Michigan House of Representatives where the term of service is only six years. There are very few people coming in off the streets in six years who - maybe could master the school aid formula if they worked consistently - but they are not going to know about Medicaid, they won’t know about the prison system, or the highway system.

Smith: Remember, at that time you also had the Ross Perot movement, which was a real uprising, trying to get the political system to focus on the deficit. And it’s interesting, two years ago the National Governors Association for their centennial meeting, asked me to moderate a session. There must have been forty-five or fifty current and former governors. And, in essence, I asked them “What’s the one thing you would change?” Everywhere a hand went up and it was all term limits, for all of these reasons. Makes perfect sense.

Engler: Both Governor Blanchard and I were there and each addressed that very issue. We both said term limits because we both had seen it in Michigan. It really is the case. The other thing I think when I look at Gerald Ford and his preparation for the presidency – think of what he knew when he was thrust
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into that office compared to today. I mean, Senator Obama’s career would be but a brief moment in the long preparation that President Ford had. And you could argue, President Bush had six years as governor. That’s an important difference I would argue, because you actually are in charge. Even in the state - some people say, “The governor is weak in Texas, it’s constitutionally weak.” Well, you’re still viewed by the people of Texas as the person in charge. So you’ve got administrative decisions.

Smith: You still have to work with the legislature.

Engler: Exactly. So that’s a different thing than being - let’s lay back for a few years and then we’ll be in this executive branch.

Smith: It’s interesting because we start with Ford, when he became president. And we certainly saw it with Bob Dole. Subsequently we’ve seen it with other people. We’ve asked Walter Mondale about this. What is it about the congressional function, including great success on Capitol Hill, that almost disqualifies [presidential] candidates? Obama is obviously an exception. But he never intended to stay in the Senate. John Kennedy, fifty years ago, couldn’t wait to get out of the Senate. What is it about the legislative function – is it the lingo that people speak? Is it the fact that you’re dealing with a constituency of a handful of people, often behind doors, as opposed to the more theatrical aspects of presidential persuasion? What do you think are the elements? Because you’re right, in terms of the qualifications that say, Ford brought, the knowledge of government was unparalleled. But it was unbalanced by, for lack of a better word, the theater – or the self-dramatization.

Engler: Well, and today all of that has been of higher value, that’s all perhaps off the chart. We certainly in our history have had presidents who, when you look back at the old tapes – and that’s all relatively recent, but even some of them, the others, just the pictures - it was a totally different thing. I think in modern times, though, it is simply that there are so many barnacles attached to being there. You actually have to vote on things when you’re in the House and the Senate. You have a record and you can’t make it up unless you’ve only been there but a brief blink of an eye. And then you kind of slough it all off. If you
look at President Obama’s United States Senate career, there were really about 150 days. That’s about all when you look at how many days he was actually there, in session.

Smith: But apparently he was there long enough to know he didn’t want to stay there.

Engler: Well, yes, and he had an opportunity to leave and he was a senator. He was still – if you are there a day, you are a senator. And so he could say, “Of course, I’m a senator, I’m well-prepared.” I think that looking ahead – you saw it was an odd election. A senator could win only because both parties had nominated senators the last time. So, a senator was going to win. Put a senator against a governor and we’ll see in the future. But I’m intrigued about how politics works, of course, having spent thirty some years in elective office – won ten straight elections. And I’m not, perhaps, the likeliest candidate to be winning elections, but I always felt that once somebody can get there, their record and their performance then becomes sort of the measuring stick. And that probably, then, does trump.

Maybe that becomes a part of image, but it also does, I think, trump a lot of other things. And I think for President Obama it’s way too early to look at 2012. But when we get there, whether he had a lot of experience or not, coming to the presidency, it won’t matter at all – he’s got a four-year record as president and that will be the issue and where he would hope to go if he had a second four years.

Smith: I remember saying right at the time of the inauguration, when understandably the nation’s sense of pride was greatest, I remember comparing him to JFK in ’60. The day before he took the oath of office, John F. Kennedy was best known as the first Catholic to be president. But I guarantee you the day after he takes the oath of office, that won’t be the defining element. And I think the same thing with Obama, although there are elements in the press that want to keep defining him that way – I suppose because it’s an easy story, an obvious story.
Engler: I think there is also sort of an ideological aspect to this, because if I can define myself in a way that focuses on my uniqueness, maybe I can separate it from my record in performance.

Smith: Interesting.

Engler: And therefore, who would want to be part of spoiling the great history story that we’re playing out here? I always thought in the case of President Kennedy, and again, I was in high school at that time, so was not nearly as familiar. But it would have been a very different election in ’64 if he were running for re-election, given some of the setbacks he encountered in those early years. The tragedy of his assassination and then the rise of Lyndon Johnson, changed the complete dynamic of the campaign.

Smith: You talk about John McCain, who in many ways, found himself in an identical position to Bob Dole in ’96, i.e., being nominated by a party that was frankly, less than enthusiastic about the choice. And in some ways, I would say, between ’88 and ’96 – and Dole will say now that he shouldn’t have run in ’96, that ’88 was his year, and so on – and I thought in ’96 he seemed less authentic.

I always said, “The great thing you have is this kind of unpolished, Trumanesque, plainspoken quality. It’s pure Midwest. People may or may not agree with you, but they think you are telling them what you think is the truth.” And one sensed in ’96, anticipating McCain in 2008, you had a candidate that felt uncomfortable with what the situation required. That he was chasing the caboose as the Republican Party moved ever farther to the right, particularly on social issues. And you could trace that all the way back to ’76.

In effect, that’s almost where this begins, with the Ford/Reagan challenge. Ford thought he was - and he was - the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge. And he could never understand why people thought he wasn’t conservative enough. But it was a different kind of conservatism, wasn’t it?
Engler: It was, and it was also inside/outside even then, I think. Because here is the consummate insider. And so how could he have possibly have retained his authenticity if he’s been part of this problem for so long – discounting completely all of those years he was a voice, not in the wilderness, perhaps, but certainly in a party in the wilderness in the House of Representatives? They were in the minority all of that time.

Smith: Plus, remember, he is the insurgent who knocked off Charlie Halleck.

Engler: Absolutely.

Smith: And, of course, in ’48 he was the Young Turk who took on Bartel Jonkman over the issue of isolationism.

Engler: There is no question. I mean, it’s just the history up close. That’s why I think we’ll always need our historians because you do need to have the passage of time to be able to look back and put this in perspective. And that absolutely was lost. Of course, you had the other – do we need to say the word – Watergate, was swirling around and that obliterated so much else that we never had a chance. I was actually on the ballot in those years in ’72 and 4 and 6, so, the ’74 election was one of the roughest elections anybody running as a Republican ever endured.

I always felt, it was interesting, that this was a unique election in a couple of respects. It said a lot about the Republican Party. Because the Republican Party was so angry at itself that it punished lots of Republicans and it didn’t do it directly, but they did it out of disgust. They just stayed home. And we never would see that kind of reaction to other transgressions – let’s call them -should they happen out there. So you had, in other parts of the country, in gubernatorial or even congressional elections, kind of amazing misdeeds that were reported, but seemingly of no consequence to the electorate when they went to vote. But Watergate was such a searing experience for the nation; the first president ever to resign, and then the pardon.

Smith: I want to come back to that in a minute because it’s a huge topic, but let me just bounce an idea off of you. It goes back to what we’ve been talking about; Ford’s origins as an insurgent and his subsequent identification as an insider
who paid a price for that. The older I get the more I believe that the single biggest factor over time in politics, even more than ideology, is generational change. That it’s almost like an escalator, and you’ve got your time, and then before you know it, you’re past your sell date. And ideology factors into that, cultural factors factor into that - what do you think about that in terms of the element of generational change?

Engler: Well, I think there’s a lot to that, although it is important to say it as you’re saying it. It is generational, but it may not have to do with the generation of the candidate. Reagan - the older candidate became, in effect, the younger candidate because this is the leader of the sagebrush rebellion who rides in from the West. And this is very new, this is small government or minimalist government, in tenor. Now in fact, not so at all.

Smith: At least eluded once he got to Washington.

Engler: Sure, and a great practitioner. I think Gerald Ford was as much a practitioner of politics being the art of the possible as Ronald Reagan. But Reagan, being fresh, it was assumed that the deal he cut was a good deal. Ford, being the insider, it was assumed that the deal was an inside deal, that the fix was in.

Smith: And let’s face it, for all the people who were pining for Ronald Reagan, first of all, there’s only one Ronald Reagan. Ronald Reagan is not coming back to save you. Secondly, there are some selective memories. People, particularly the Tea Party crowd, sort of identify with Reagan and suggest that Reagan would be one of them. It’s part of Reagan’s genius that he, in effect, posthumously, can be seen from that wide a range of conservatives as one of them. But this was a guy who put Richard Schweiker on his ticket in ’76 because he wanted to win. This was a guy who apparently was willing to put Gerald Ford on his ticket because he wanted to appear moderate enough to…

Engler: I just started the Craig Shirley book – I don’t want to get off track, but it is a fascinating book.

No, but I think that’s right, I think that people would not – there was the public Reagan – this marvelous communicator – who, I think, did a very good job of always explaining where he thought the end zone was. But at the same
time, out on the field, he was running an offense that said, “Look, keep the ball, we’ve got to keep making first downs. We’re headed toward the end zone.” And I think that was a gift, a just flat-out genius that he had, that he understood that. I think that is very hard for many of us, and certainly myself included, to really be clear enough directionally. “What’s the goal at the end?” Even if you’ve got a good, confident sense about where you are and where you are trying to go and how much you’ve done.

Smith: It’s almost as if he communicated perfectionist ends, but he had a pragmatic means to get as close to there as he could. And as he said, “If I can get 80%, I’ll call it a victory.”

Engler: That’s right. That’s exactly right. And I’ll go back and start working tomorrow on the remaining 20. And you believed that he would, even if tomorrow there were other priorities which meant that that pursuit of the 20 had to be held in abeyance for a period of time while I move these other balls down the field. And I’ll say this: he had also a very broad vision of what that field looked like; whether that was an international or domestic policy.

Smith: And was that a result of the fact that he’d been at this now – I mean, it was a movement. He had a loyal following which he developed over all those years, out on the road for GE. I can remember him New Year’s Day, always hosting the Tournament of Roses Parade. He had come into our living rooms for a generation. We felt we knew this guy, we liked him. We were comfortable with him. You can’t put a price on that in terms of political appeal.

Engler: And remember, it was so much easier back then because - what were there – three major networks? If you were going to turn it on, your odds of finding him were much greater. Somebody could be dominant today on one of 1500 channels or something and that doesn’t mean there is very much dominance. So you end up – I was just reading a Walter Cronkite obituary and it was talking about how many homes he was in in the nightly newscast. And today, you can lead and you aren’t in nearly 25% of the homes that Cronkite had with a much smaller nation back then.
Plus, Cronkite himself used to talk about the day news changed. It was in ’77 when Elvis died, and CBS did not lead with Elvis’ death as the lead story that night. I think everyone else did. If you want to know the day when we began to succumb to a kind of celebrity journalism…Cronkite prided himself – he said people used to criticize him for being “Washington-centric.” And if you go back and look at those old news clips, two-thirds of the news that Cronkite [reported] was from committee hearing rooms on Capitol Hill. That was his definition of the news. Now look how far we’ve gotten away from that.

Absolutely. And we don’t even do the minor league training anymore. Because when I went in 1971 to the state capital in Lansing, of the three major Detroit stations, two of them had permanent bureaus; the third one had a crew that was mostly assigned there, had some other duties; and all major papers had reporters that were there. Today, there is virtually nobody covering the state capital anymore. And so you don’t get, in the states, that kind of political coverage to understand even how then it all might rise up and what that coverage is about. So the information about the political process and decisions that are being made almost doesn’t exist.

Again, it’s counterintuitive. Remember, it’s a very painful argument if you follow it to its logical extension. Sixty years ago we were famously told by Murrow of television’s possibilities. Television was going to transform our culture, it was going to bring us together, this instrument can illuminate, it can elucidate, it can elevate the public discourse. Well, we all know what happened to that.

Subsequently, we were told the Internet was going to do all of those things, and then some. It seems to me you can make a strong case that, at the very least, people have access today to more information than before, which does not mean they are any better informed as voters than our parents or grandparents were. And, in fact, the increasing fragmentation of the audience poses a challenge even to the bully pulpit. Because the president can get up and can give a great speech, and before it’s over, people are Twittering, and the blogs are doing real time analysis, if you want to call it that. In many
ways, the traditional, persuasive role that Harry Truman identified as the core function of the president is much harder.

Engler: In fact, I heard it suggested that the technology is now there. You could literally, instead of trying to respond to a State of the Union Address in a kind of traditional way, you literally could take a clip from the State of the Union as it is delivered – a clip aside, do a fact check, and then have a response that was an integration of video clips and sort of a factual rebuttal on certain points. Tonight this was said, these are the facts. And it is kind of interesting, it is so instantaneous, and so there is no time to reflect on both what was said, or the compulsion to do a response, even. Is it even necessary on the spot? So it’s not really a response because you have to write it ahead of time, so it’s an alternate viewpoint, but is that even…? I wonder about that whole process.

Smith: And remember, poor Eric Sevareid used to be criticized for offering instant analysis. Well, now you’ve got thirty million people who are offering instant analysis.

Engler: That’s right.

Smith: There’s no doubt that in a sense we have democratized the process, but I think with unforeseen consequences.

Engler: Even the founding fathers with the idea of a House of Representatives and another chamber that’s the Senate - one institutionally restricted to move a little slower, one that may be more responsive to the mob, to the crowd.

Smith: You bet. And remember Washington’s wonderful analogy – because Jefferson wasn’t there and from a distance he thought this reeked of the House of Lords. Washington used the analogy of a cup of hot tea, and you pour it in the saucer to cool it. And the House is the cup of hot tea, and the Senate is the saucer.

Engler: Exactly. And so that’s all at risk in one sense. How does the public or the policymakers, when it’s all instantaneous – the last thing I think we want is to sort of move to a system where everybody has got their finger on a button casting their vote.

Smith: A plebiscitary democracy.
Engler: And to me it’s a little bit that way. Even the act of voting - there are those who would like to – I think it’s pretty fundamental to a citizen performing his or her duty in society to actually once a year, or once every two or four years, cast a vote, actually have to think about it, either obtain a ballot or go to a polling place. But if that becomes, in some future date, everybody sitting in their home inundated with emails or video clips and people pushing buttons…

Smith: But the symbol of this is those horrible focus groups on cable TV where they…

Engler: With the dials…

Smith: Oh, and you watch the line and you think to yourself - because I used to be a speechwriter - that’s exactly what we intended. And they craft it to appeal to that process. What does it do to thoughtful, let alone nuanced, policymaking?

Engler: And I would say, what does it do to the ability to actually have a compromise, which takes into consideration that there are in fact, different interests? There is great antipathy toward people who lobby today, ignoring the fact that anybody who is on the PTA and goes and meets with the school board – they are lobbying. It’s just at a different level. People lobby all the time. They lobby to get a road paved in front of their house, or repairs made. But they see that differently than say their state capital, or their nation’s capital. But in reality, the policymakers there do have a bewildering array sometimes of interests. And there is a need to balance those off. But at the end of the day, there comes a point where you’ve got to stop balancing it off and make a decision. I worry greatly that we’ve got a country today where we can’t ever make a decision on a big issue.

Smith: Shelby Foote, a Civil War historian, used to say, “The fact of the matter is, the Americans have a genius for compromise.” It may be our greatest talent, it’s how we got the Constitution, it’s how we devised the nation. To be sure there are some compromises that turned out badly and had to be corrected later on. But, in effect, we were a pragmatic people. And most certainly that’s not the trend. The trend of political discourse, if you want to dignify it as such, is enormously influenced by the media. The Internet which allows people
anonymity to engage in character assassination, and certainly not raise the level of discourse. Consensus is a dirty word. But it’s the only way a country this large and diverse works.

Engler: That’s right and I don’t ever confuse the idea that consensus means unanimity, and I think that sometimes also gets to be a bit of a problem because it may be 60/40 this way this time. The next time it’s maybe 55/45 the other way. You don’t know, but it is the same process that I suspect that most families go through, and certainly families with children. There’s a lot of give and take and compromise that goes on. And it’s true in virtually every institution, especially why not in government where you are trying to represent literally everybody? There has to be, I think, give and take.

Smith: First of all, public policy is left out of the mix. The 24/7 news cycle demands a new storyline every day, and there are white hats and there are black hats, and there is very little in between. And it’s all played as entertainment. The old horserace aspect has been superseded by this 24 hours a day. John Eisenhower once said something to me about his dad. He said, “Moderates don’t have cults.” And he was putting it in the context, if not so much of ideology, but style, as opposed to the Kennedys, for example. Now, moderate may even be a loaded term, but substitute pragmatist or problem solvers, or consensus seekers; understanding that a consensus doesn’t mean surrendering, at least in principle, but respecting other people’s principles and finding common ground. And that’s what we say we want, but that’s not necessarily what we’re rewarding, and it’s certainly not what the media is celebrating.

Engler: But I think that’s why, to bring it right to today, why President Obama is in some difficulty. Because he claimed throughout the campaign that’s what he was, was somebody who would bring people together. He was going to do things differently, and then you see the spectacle of how they put sixty votes together, sixty only Democrat votes in the Senate to pass the healthcare bill, and how you literally acquire the last votes.

Smith: It is ugly. But is it, I assume, and I’m not speaking for them, their comeback would be, “Well, we couldn’t get any Republicans to seriously consider it.”
Engler: Because it was too hard. Well, yes, it is hard. But as even, I think, Olympia Snow made this point, who would be one I think, who would be willing and has certainly said in the past, she’s willing to work on some of these issues. Most of the major social changes that have been made – I think back to welfare reform that I was deeply involved with in the mid-90s – we ended up with significant bipartisan support, even though there were deep divisions at the beginning and even at the end, remembering that when President Clinton finally signed the third bill after two vetoes, even then he had people resigning from his administration in protest. But its center held on that and it was an accomplishment that was significant and I look at the last part of the twentieth century, and there is no bigger single social change that was probably positive and overdue than that one.

So you end up, I believe, with a process that can work, but people have to be committed to making it work. And in this case, today it’s different on healthcare than it was on welfare reform. Now, what made welfare reform different is you did have a Republican legislature, because the Congress had changed after the ’94 elections, and you had a Democrat president. So it was absolutely clear you had to work together. Today with one party in charge of everything, there are too many voices saying, “Well, hell, we don’t have to work together. We can do it ourselves. Maybe.” But as it turned out now, they couldn’t.

Smith: Let me go back to ’74. Were you in the legislature?

Engler: Yes, I was elected in ’70 for the first time.

Smith: And you almost coincided with Watergate?

Engler: Right.

Smith: And people forget, but of course in early ’74 Ford’s old congressional seat was lost to a Democrat. He had just become vice president. Nixon was still in the White House, and apparently Ford had tried to raise the subject with the president, who was not eager to hear it raised. How bad was it to be a Republican in Michigan at that point?
Engler: It was not bad to be a Republican, but all the Republicans knew they were in a very bad environment. Because the thing about Watergate - it was so personal to President Nixon. It wasn’t very rational to blame – I mean, the Republicans in Michigan didn’t have anything to do with Watergate. In fact, we were behind the guy with the white hat – President Ford became vice president. But Michigan was a tough, tough environment then because two things happened: President Nixon’s last judicial appointment, I believe, was the appointment of Congressman Jim Harvey to the Federal Bench, and then his seat was the first seat lost in Michigan’s when in the next special election Bob Traxler was elected to Congress.

Then President Ford was nominated as vice president, and when he becomes vice president, then that fall, his seat is lost and the loser of that seat – a lot of people said, “Well, the Harvey seat – gee, he ran his longtime aide.” It was a congressional aide, I think, that…

Smith: An insider.

Engler: Very much an insider running against a pretty popular, long term state legislator. But then it flips when you go to the Ford seat. Vanderveen is a complete outsider, Bob Vanderlaan was the Republican leader of the Michigan senate. The fellow who had managed my campaign was Dick Posthumus, both in 1970 and then helped me again in 1972. So Dick and I had worked together. He was a couple years behind me at Michigan State. Dick then, by that time, had become the youth chairman because the other thing that was happening, which certainly backfired for ‘74’s elections. President Nixon in ’72 – that was the first election in which eighteen year olds could vote. Because of the age of majority, he was pushing that to burnish his credentials with the younger voters. And of course, that coincided with the Nixon plan to end the Vietnam war and all that kind of thing that was going on.

And most of us in ’72 said the president had all this money, which now as it turned out everybody learned how it all came to pass, but all of this money was spent trying to run up the margin for the President and at the expense of Senate seats, of state parties, in some cases gubernatorial elections. So there
was complete fraying. I would say, of the relationships already with the Nixon team, the Nixon White House and everybody else. I can only imagine this, I’ve never actually read, but I’ll bet the private, if they stayed private or - House leaders like President Ford would have been appalled at this money being spent on the presidential election when it was clear they were going to win the election. Nobody cared if they won fifty states or if they won forty-three states, what they did care about? If you’ve got this extra money let’s help these House candidates.

Smith: Right, and of course, he wanted to be Speaker of the House

Engler: Absolutely.

Smith: He thought, this is my best chance, my last chance.

Engler: And it was. And so all of that – you go to ’74 and we lose these two specials, Dick Posthumus is going to run for Bob Vanderlaan’s seat. He was in that – that was his home area. And so he was already starting. Of course, Vanderlaan, would go to Congress. In fact, in the Vanderlaan office there were staffers looking for their places in Washington. They were a little bit, probably, like Martha Copley in Massachusetts this time. And I saw one comparison, Michael Barone, very astute on these things, talked about impactful elections and he said the Vanderlaan election in ’74 and the Brown election this year, as two that really – when you think about one election sending a shot across the bow, or maybe a shot into the bow. Those were, each in their own circumstances, that powerful.

So Dick was spending all his time out there and he came back shaking his head, saying, “I think Vanderlaan is going to lose.” And we’re saying, “How can that be? This seat is so solid. This seat is so Republican. It’s Vice President Ford’s seat.” He said, no. And so we started looking at local…and we actually – nobody thought this was going to happen. You didn’t have ten people, I think. And Democrats at the national level put a lot of people in it. It became a little bit like Brown at the end. It was, “Oh, my gosh.”

Smith: It’s a wave election.
Engler: Yeah. And then it wasn’t even close, as I recall, or not that close.

Smith: It must have, among other things, embarrassed the Vice President.

Engler: Yeah, I would think so.

Smith: Did you see him at all during his vice presidency? We found out subsequently, not only because of the unique circumstances – the tightrope that he was forced to walk. But apparently he really, really disliked the job. He just really disliked the vice presidency.

Engler: Yeah, and that wouldn’t be something where I’d have ever heard that because, again, he was so loyal and so circumspect, so institutionally correct. He would not have…so I didn’t know that. I did see him. By this time I’m still there, but I’m still pretty junior, so I’m dependent on the invitations from other friends.

Smith: Was there a statewide race in Michigan in ’74?

Engler: In ’74 there was a governor’s race. And it was Governor Milliken who ran. It was his second election. He had a rematch against Sander Levin and probably a good thing. It was a tighter election than he’d had.

Smith: But he hung on?

Engler: My closest general election was that year, too. We lost a lot of seats. We came back and we got pretty well wiped out in the Michigan House of Representatives.

Smith: Really? Were economic factors involved as well?

Engler: Not so much. I mean, we’d had a recession in the early ’70s, but we were more on the mend. President Ford, one thing that he did, he vetoed a lot of bills. I mean, he really showed that you could manage the federal budget. He was doing some important things. He had a superb team around him, too. I always say if you think back of the people who worked for him and then went on to do other substantial things, you can’t find a Cabinet collection that’s as formidable as that team that Gerald Ford eventually had.
Smith: But it also says something about him that he was comfortable enough in his own skin to surround himself with people whose egos or IQs might be greater than his. He had a Henry Kissinger and a Bill Simon, just for starters, or the pick of Nelson Rockefeller as vice president. That tells you something about the guy himself.

Engler: He was completely confident. I think, again, he benefited immeasurably from being underestimated a lot.

Smith: There are people who have suggested that he actually was shrewd enough that he made it work for him. That he knew he was being underestimated, and that he could, in fact, make it work.

Engler: Yeah.

Smith: That famous incident of getting up and doing the federal budget. Unfortunately, that’s not the sort of thing that’s translated to the general electorate. But when you stop and think about it, it’s pretty impressive.

Engler: And it was not lost on the Hill, I think. How empowering that would be for your budget director when somebody is trying to spend money in an area that it shouldn’t be spent in, to say, “Look, I can’t do this deal. You know full well the President understands. He knows.”

Smith: What was the reaction to the pardon in your neck of the woods? First of all, did it come as a surprise, the timing of it?

Engler: The pardon? We were loyal, so we supported President Ford and I think most people had the sort of reaction that it’s tough, and politically it’s really tough, but it is the right thing to do. We’ve got to move on as a country. And certainly, he’s had lots of after-the-fact vindication. I don’t know if they would have been as kind to him if he’d been able to win the election. It’s almost like since he lost…

Smith: That’s interesting. That’s a very shrewd observation. He was lucky because he lived thirty years after leaving office. Poor Lyndon Johnson died the day before the Vietnam Peace Agreement was announced. But Ford said, “For twenty years, everywhere I go, people asked the same question.” But when
the Kennedys gave him the Profiles in Courage Award, he said, “They don’t ask the question anymore.” It’s as if the imprimatur of the Kennedys wiped it out.

Engler: Amazing, but – yeah.

Smith: Were you at the ’76 convention?

Engler: No, I did not go there, did not go to Kansas City.

Smith: Are you glad?

Engler: Well, in hindsight, maybe. I must say, the people from Michigan are absolutely the worst people to ask about the ’76 convention, because there never was any question; everybody was on board with Gerald Ford. Everybody assumed he was the president, he would be re-nominated. Never even thought it was that close.

Smith: But you’d had a primary, remember at one point which was very hotly contested?

Engler: Very hotly contested. And just almost a shock that it turned out that Reagan walked away with a number of delegates out of Michigan. And this had implications oddly enough for 1980 and the Reagan term. That’s a different story, I think. But in ’80 people in Michigan were still, I would say, sulking over the Ford loss in ’76, and the irritation that this primary had likely cost the election. So none of the people really stepped up to be Reagan leaders. Kind of going all over the map you had Howard Baker as an option, you had George Bush as an option, and Reagan as a default option. And so he had these people from ’76. If you’re in ’76 and you are in Michigan and you are not supporting Gerald Ford, you’re probably not in the mainstream of the party. Now, I had some good friends who were, but they had a rebellious part of their spirit – they were sage brushers if you will.

Smith: Now, that’s interesting. Even though that year the convention is in Detroit.

Engler: Absolutely. We all forfeited a chance to be in the front ranks here of the Reagan movement.
Smith: The flip side of that, thirty years later, and stop me if you know all this, but it’s amazing how memories take on a life of their own. After the President died there was an effort launched to put a statue of him in Statuary Hall from Michigan.

Engler: Right.

Smith: And most people thought that was a good idea. Now, it meant, among other things, moving out Zachariah Chandler. I think the Detroit Historical Society or something wanted the statue and the [Ford] Foundation would pay for moving the statue. There was really no opposition, perse, but in the state Senate there were a couple of Republican senators who, it turned out, had been Reagan supporters back in the 70s, who just kind of prevented this from happening. And they weren’t quite smoked out in the open, but behind the scenes, they were…I guess the governor was willing to go along, but not to take the lead, surprisingly.

So anyway, what happened was amazing. A wonderful story. The House was fine with this, and it came back and it was the end of the session, and there was a sort of politics of delay underway and there was an African-American senator from Detroit, who got up on the floor of the Senate, obviously a Democrat – and said, “Let me tell you something about what kind of man Gerald Ford was.” His grandfather had been Willis Ward, who was the football teammate and good friend, and of course, Ford had always told the story about, and so forth and so on. And this guy went on.

Engler: He was a longtime __________________ in Detroit.

Smith: And what Ford had learned about race relations. Georgia Tech wouldn’t play Michigan. They would not play a team with a black man on it. And it was a wrenching experience for Ford and he and Willis Ward became closer than ever about all of this. And it was the only game the team won that year. The only game the Wolverines won that year was against Georgia Tech. So anyway, Ward had absented himself from the game rather than forfeit it for that reason. And Ford had talked this over with his father because he didn’t
want to play; he was in solidarity with his friend Willis Ward. Anyway, it was a remarkable story. And Ford wrote about it at one point.

But then this guy got up on the floor of the Senate and told this story, on his own, unprompted, from the Democratic side of the aisle; at that point literally kind of shamed these guys into silence and it went through. Gerald Ford did not care about monuments to himself, but I’ll tell you that if there is anything he would appreciate, it would be – because that was home.

Engler: Absolutely. No, I had not heard that because I just assumed that they would take care of that and it was one of those things that nobody ever called me and said, “You need to help on this.” I’m sure Peter [Secchia] and others back in Michigan were working on that. But I think that is a wonderful story, and I think that’s also why there is something to be said for these long careers, as I think rare as they are going to be in the future. I think it’s just not going to be the case. In fact, I think that’s probably not very good.

Smith: What kind of associations and contacts did you have? You were elected governor for the first time in?

Engler: 1990.

Smith: ’90. Did you talk with him?

Engler: I did. He actually campaigned for me. So he made some appearances for me, and I talked to him. He was, I think, very proud of the fact that I’d been able to win. One of the things that we did also, I guess prior to me getting elected, but I was involved, and we got Bob Griffin elected to the State Supreme Court, and that was always a good relationship. There was always kind of an odd relationship because in Michigan you had kind of a Milliken part of the party, which was kept small and quite insular, and then you had the Ford/Griffin – I mean, more of a – I think they were always more willing.

Smith: Was Milliken an inheritance from Romney, or was it separate from Romney?

Engler: He inherited, really. When Romney left, Milliken became governor, and then had two years before he had to seek election in his own right. And that was the ’70 election and he beat Sander Leven in that one and then he won three
elections in the ‘70s, like I won three elections in the 90s, just twenty years later, actually, all the way across the board. But I only served twelve years; Milliken’s the longest serving governor at fourteen years. But he always was surrounded by people who said, “Well, they did mention you in the ticket-splitter books, and Michigan was a ticket-splitter state,” all kinds of that stuff was out there. So they never felt that you could win, in effect, if voters were going to vote for Milliken, then they were probably going to also vote for a Democrat to balance that off.

Smith: Is some of that attributable to the, in those days, relatively greater strength of organized labor?

Engler: Sure. And I think also just a sort of a view. Politics is a tough game. I mean, it’s not easy. And I think then polling was becoming much more of a factor that everybody used.

Smith: It’s more of a science than a.r.t.

Engler: And so I think there was a lot of maybe reading things into things that, whether they were so or not, you thought they were so because that’s what this poll might have said. When I look back on that era, I just think the one that we feel very bad about is ’78 when Griffin said he was going to retire. And then the Milliken campaign team, really the governor himself, worked on him to come back into the race. And this was at a point when Congressman Phil Ruppe was already announced for that seat and it ends up Griffin had a very poor attendance record in ’78, because he was leaving, missed a bunch of votes. Carl Levin the city councilman of Detroit was running and probably Ruppe would have beaten Levin, but Levin beats Griffin because he’s clearly lost interest. He doesn’t even show up. It was an ignominious way for Bob to have to go out given all the many contributions he’d had, and the relationship with Gerald Ford, and the importance – I mean, Bob Griffin was the Whip in the Senate. He was a key guy.

Smith: One senses, and I don’t know him, but one senses on the campaign trail a more diffident figure. He wasn’t a natural in some ways.

Engler: That’s right.
Smith: He was better in office, maybe, than he was as a campaigner.

Engler: Oh, I think that’s right. I think a lot of us are probably that way, but I think there’s no question – and, of course, they hadn’t prepared because they were late starting. But this fell into the storyline ticket that way, we always felt that Ruppe would be fresh. Milliken would be the older candidate. In ’78 if you put Griffin and Milliken back together again, if they are going to vote for one and not the other, we’re going to get that vote. And then Milliken was running against the Democratic leader of the Senate, a good Irish-Catholic.

Smith: Sitting here listening to you talk - the gift that politicians have for taking apart this process – not only the language, but the way they eviscerate all of this, I assume the conversations with Gerald Ford must have been like that. You hear the famous stories about Nixon, who could tell you everything – everything, the history of everything. Politicians who really marinate themselves in this stuff…

Engler: By ’78 though, I was busy myself because I had challenged a longtime sitting member of the Senate in a primary because I had decided after eight years in the House it was either up or out. I wasn’t going to stay in a minority. So I had a primary which then made Traverse City - Bob Griffin’s home and Bill Milliken’s home - my constituency, as well. And I didn’t have Governor Milliken’s support in that primary, needless to say.

Smith: Was that seen as a conservative, moderate divide? Were you seen as the…

Engler: Yeah, I suppose. It was more of a…

Smith: Or was some of it generational?

Engler: I thought it was generational, for sure, because I’m thirty years old, with eight years in the House, running against a senator who is the number two ranking Republican in the Senate, but clearly beyond, I think, the shelf life in that body. The Michigan Senate, the Republicans in those days, had felt a real acute case of minority mentality, and you had a lot of other issues going on about alcohol problems and there were just some sad stories over there. And they had been there a long time, pretty ossified.
Smith: The subject comes up a lot in these interviews that there was just a different culture, thirty, forty, fifty years ago. That among other things, people drank a lot more.

Engler: A lot more.

Smith: It tended to be covered up, but it was just intrinsic to the political culture.

Engler: Well, it was. I mean you used to have - it was almost legendary in a couple of cases - but the Michigan legislature used to have a Monday night session where they’d work. People would come back at Lansing for a Monday night session, and Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday - and they would go back on Thursday night. But the Monday night session usually was the session that followed dinner somewhere. And that dinner often had a lot of liquid element to it. And so you got some pretty colorful speeches that night and sometimes those sessions would run on into the evening.

That actually was one of the changes after I became the leader. We kind of concluded we didn’t need the Monday night. We probably, in our own way, also contributed to the – there were just too many issues arising out of that. In fact, we actually changed to Tuesday morning. So we said, “Let’s do the morning sessions that will get people here.” If you did the committee meetings, they wouldn’t come until the session in the afternoon, so we flipped that. We’d meet in the morning and then have committees in the afternoon and it sort of worked. I’m way off of ’78 and Griffin and even Ford, but to get back to those guys, I think that in ’78, Milliken wins his third term then, the third election. Griffin loses, but President Ford, of course, he’s out of office.

But during this whole period and for a while there – and I know once he leaves office, he’s doing some boards, he’s doing some other things, because, in fact, he doesn’t have any money from all these years in public service, but public income as well.

So I think he kind of went through, I would say, almost a quiet period in there. But then as he began to come back. And of course, in ’80 you had the flurry at the convention, in one sense what that did do, it always struck me as a sort of restart of the public life of Gerald Ford. Because he was raised up and a lot of
good things got said about him, and from there he clearly was the elder statesman - going to be. And then when President Reagan was elected, he is the former president and we pay homage and he begins to take on this life which he then led until the end, I think. So I always was intrigued by, and it does go to a point you made earlier that people who have been around this game a long time, there is always a level of interest. What’s so and so doing? What’s this person up to? What’s happening over there? What does this mean? And it’s almost a shorthand.

Smith: He retained that, I assume.

Engler: Yeah, he did. He was very curious about things and wanting to know this or that. And of course, I was a bit involved during my legislative days with some of the Ford Museum because there were some state appropriations in that. We had a few other things that we worked on. And then as I became a leader in the legislature, was sort of directly involved in some of those kinds of things that surrounded the way in which we recognized the life and the times of Gerald Ford.

Smith: He took a lot of heat for going on some boards and doing some of the commercial things that he did. One thing that a lot of people never stopped to consider was that he had to raise all that money to build the library and the museum. And to him - I mean, today it’s nothing - but whatever – nine million dollars he had to raise. Plus he was a real fiscal conservative.

Engler: He was, indeed.

Smith: He’s probably the last president who was willing to spend whatever political capital he had through those vetoes in an effort to bludgeon the budget into some sort of…

Engler: And he knew how to put the pressure back onto the Congress. I think he was sophisticated in the way he did that. Of course, the other thing that maybe in response to his vetoes, I wouldn’t say that gave rise, I would think more later it just was the sharper political divisions. But now you’re stuck with these omnibus acts. Gerald Ford had a lot of vetoes because he got a lot of different appropriation bills. Today you don’t get that. You get the whole thing late, in
one 1,200 page bill. And so, that really removes a lot of flexibility for the
president. He can’t say, “You’ve done obscene things here in the agriculture
department, I’m going to turn that bill down,” because that’s just one of all
the departments. The only one you can really break out is defense.

Smith: I don’t want to point a finger at anyone, because I think history will regard
Ronald Reagan very highly. And in fact, if you put yourself in Reagan’s shoes
you can understand exactly where he was coming from when he said,
basically, I want a balanced budget, I want to win the Cold War, and I want to
rebuild the nation’s defenses. Again, if I can get two out of three, I’ll settle for
them and allow a temporary increase in spending, which they could have
argued away because if there was a peace dividend, you could imagine taking
care of it.

But twenty-five years later it’s become accepted among conservatives that
deficits don’t matter. Now, you have a party trying to redefine itself as a party
of fiscal responsibility. The Cold War is over, we won it so we no longer have
the Soviet Union to define us as conservatives. If we cede the issue of fiscal
responsibility, then what’s left? Social issues.

Engler: Yeah, not exactly happy hunting ground for Republican candidates in the past.
Although I do think there are a couple of things. First of all, I think Reagan’s
approach - one of the fundamental legs of the platform on which he stood,
was economic growth, and the importance of that for prosperity and jobs. And
I do think that that emphasis on competitiveness was a very powerful, very
important, antidote to the sort of malaise of the Carter years. So, there’s no
doubt in my mind that that kind of emphasis, then, built the kind of economy,
and whether that is measured through increasing innovation and deployment
of technology, our ability to compete our exporting. Not nearly as far as we
need to go, but we became more globalized and I think the world economy
required that American companies step up or somebody else was going to do
that. And that would be, I think, sort of an irretrievable loss for the
competitiveness of major American companies.

So all of that, I think, created a situation which later on – and Reagan is doing
it with Democratic Congresses, for the most part. He had the Senate for a
while, but he did not have the House. And so, when the 90’s and the ’94 election changes and you get a Republican House, even the slightest bit the fiscal restraint, coupled with now a stronger economic engine, balances budgets. We get to the point. So I would say, in examining the Reagan legacy, that the economic strength, the seeds of which were sown then, and harvested a bit later, led us to a balanced budget. Now where we go off track clearly is when we get to the end of the Clinton years, and I would think Clinton’s tax increases - I think there was a real debate about did they contribute to balancing the budget, or did they at the same time, sort of weaken our economic strength prospectively. That stuff all has longer tails than get acknowledged.

Smith: And they could have done both.

Engler: And I think there is a good case that they did do both. Because I think in the short term, immediately, you get some more revenue, but I think it’s at a price of future growth.

Smith: Right. Interesting.

Engler: And then, layer on that now suddenly 2001, 9/11 happens and we’ve got a global war on terrorism. And it turns out to be, because of the actual wars, both in Afghanistan and then Iraq, you end up with all these costs and that’s not paid for, and then we start down this path. So we end up in the situation where I do think that the country now has to be much more focused on the entitlement burden that we’ve voted. And President Ford did not add to that. I would say, arguably, the Reagan administration did not. I thought we made steps on welfare reform in the Clinton years to pull it back a little bit more. You’d have to say that the drug/Medicaid expansion did add, but then the response to the near fatal financial collapse blew it up beyond all reasonableness. And now we’ve got to go back and that goes to our earlier discussion. We’re so upside down the way we make policy today, it’s hard to see a path forward.

Smith: During your governorship, did you see him from time to time?
Engler: President Ford? Yes, I did. The last time I saw him was maybe— I don’t know how many months before he passed— Peter Secchia and I were out in California. That was on Peter’s board of directors— Universal Forest Products. He had a board meeting out there, so Peter and I went over. It was a few miles over to go and see the President. And I followed through Secchia.

Smith: How was he when you saw him?

Engler: He was pretty good. He’d had some health issues, but that day he was getting ready— there was a Michigan basketball game coming on. It was in the winter. And he was in pretty good spirits.

Smith: There is a story: this goes to his fiscal conservatism, because he was going on about all these football games he did watch and everything else. He had this ESPN cable, or whatever. Someone who knew him well was disbelieving. Couldn’t believe…

Engler: He wouldn’t put Direct TV in or something?

Smith: That he would spend the money. Someone gave it to him.

Engler: Oh my gosh.

Smith: Now, that’s a conservative.

Engler: I don’t know if Lee was there that day, but it was just— he had this level of support that was just terrific. He was just a grand man.

Smith: Now the last time he came back to Grand Rapids was for his ninetieth birthday.

Engler: Right. That was when we went to the old house, I think. We did all that stuff.

Smith: You saw him that day?

Engler: Yeah.

Smith: And how did he seem?
Engler:  Great. I mean, one always wonders – I think Michelle and I were both there – you kind of wonder if he is wondering if this is the last time I’m coming back here? Or the next time I’m coming back.

Smith:  But a big crowd turned out. It must have been heartwarming.

Engler:  Big crowd, affectionate crowd. It was warm – he really liked it. He had a durable group of friends, too. Some of these old timers had lasted as long as he did. So I always admired that about him. One thing that – this is a very little bit of a memory – but after he becomes vice president, what’s his first trip? To come back and do that Red Flannel Days parade because he promised he would be there for that parade. Now he’s not the congressman anymore, he’s vice president of the United States. He still comes back. And that speaks so many volumes about that honor and duty ethic that was part of every fiber of who he was. “I told them I’d do that and so I’m going to do that, by golly.”

Smith:  Two quick things and I’ll let you go. One is, like him, you had experienced, obviously under different circumstances, but you had the experience of going from a fairly lengthy legislative career, in effect, to learning to be an executive. What’s the learning curve?

Engler:  I had a little intermediate step to help me out because I had seven years as the Majority Leader in the state senate. So I was actually running a pretty large operation there. And I used to joke all the time, as a Senate leader then, I had more staff hiring responsibilities and was able to assemble what I called a government in waiting. We always argued that we were a little bit more like a Parliamentary system -that we had a shadow Cabinet. And I was able to bring a lot of people from my Senate to the governor’s office. And so, it was really wonderful.

But, like President Ford, I was able to bring a lot of people from my Senate staff to the executive office. And I had a whole host of people, my lawyer, for all those years in the Senate and then say twelve years as my lawyer in the governor’s office. She was spectacular. We had legislative relations people. We had department directors. My first budget director and treasurer were people that had been part of the Senate staff. So that was all part of that
preparation. But I think that there is nothing that really prepares you for being in that executive’s job until you are there. Because, I mean, the day you take that oath, then suddenly what’s happening in a prison somewhere is your concern. Is there a natural disaster that happens? I think of Frank Keating. He hadn’t been governor very many weeks and that Oklahoma City bomber incident hit and transformed how people viewed him, how he approached his whole job. And that can happen to anyone. President Bush with 2001.

Smith: Last thing. How do you think Ford should be remembered?

Engler: Well, I think he should be remembered, almost just the way he is being remembered; as a very honorable man, a rock of integrity, a person with an encyclopedic knowledge of government, and somebody who, in two and a half years had a profound impact. And I’m one who doesn’t believe that the short tenure of his presidency should be allowed to diminish the contributions that he made. And I am not talking to you about some of the foreign policy stuff as much as I am what he tried to do domestically, and the generation of leadership that he, in effect, launched, and the impact of all of those people.

I mean, if we look at the Ford legacies, post the Ford presidency, it’s pretty impressive the profound effect that he’s had on the American political process and on American governance. So I think he was clearly a transitional figure and it was a brief presidency, but I think an important presidency. And even though it was our first and only unelected president, we really had somebody there who made a significant contribution to American politics. And I do think that certainly having to take office and to help the country come back and steady itself after the first resignation of a sitting president, he’ll be forever owed a debt of gratitude by the American people.

Smith: They saw that, of course, he was a passionate football fan, passionate Michigan fan. I never saw it, but I’ve talked to people who did - many years he’d find a way to be back in Ann Arbor just before The Game and he would go down and give a pep talk to the football team. And all of a sudden, it was the Gerald Ford you never heard. He was eloquent and forceful and passionate and he connected emotionally with every one of those kids.
Engler: Michigan doesn’t have a tape of any of those talks anywhere in their archives?

Smith: I don’t think so?

Engler: God, that’d be great. Wouldn’t it be wonderful? I do know he was a great fan of Bo Schembechler’s [former U of M football coach] and Bo Schembechler reciprocated, __________ and he was a Michigan man. And I’d love – one of the great jokes of all time when Peter Secchia got a band to play the Michigan State fight song to welcome him onto a platform. He’s expecting the Michigan fight song, Hail to the Victors, and here comes the Michigan State fight song. It was very funny and they were forever doing those kinds of things. He was just a good, good man.
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Smith: First of all, thank you very much for coming up here and doing this.

Fifer: You’re welcome.

Smith: Tell me, first of all, how you got into the Navy and how you got on to the Monterey?

Fifer: Well, I was just out of high school.

Smith: And that was where?

Fifer: In South Bend, Indiana. Of course it was in ’43, so we’d already been at war from ’41-’42. Boy, I wanted to get in so bad.

Smith: Really? Describe for a generation that maybe has trouble understanding that. Why did you want to get in so bad?

Fifer: Pearl Harbor just really hit hard. Those kind of things just get to me. But I also could hardly wait to get out – when it was all over. So I went to Great Lakes, I think it was for three months. Then they shipped us in a troop train to California, and then took a troop ship to New Caledonia, which is kind of due east of Australia.

Smith: Today I think it’s probably Indonesia.

Fifer: Yeah, a pretty big island. I think the French owned it. We were there for a while, then they put us out on another troop ship and took us to the New Hebrides. One day here comes these ships. They had a big, real nice bay area there. And here come all these ships in there. The Monterey was one of them.

Smith: Now, let me stop you for a second because – were you under age when you joined?

Fifer: No, I was seventeen.
Smith: They took seventeen year olds?

Fifer: Yeah. Well, I don’t know. My parents signed, let’s put it that way.

Smith: Okay. Was this a bit of an adventure, initially – to see the world?

Fifer: Oh my goodness, it is a big ocean I tell you. I can’t get over it. It is huge. Even when you look at a map and you see these little dots, islands all over the place. But the Bunker Hill was in there and the Monterrey and I forget some of the other ships that were in there. And of course, everything was alphabetical – so it was you, you, you…And I don’t know how many fellows - they put us on the Monterrey - but there were seven of us – all of our last names began with a F. And they put us all in the same division, which was the air division, flight deck.

Smith: Now, did you have any knowledge that you were going to be put on a ship?

Fifer: You didn’t know it because on all the islands they had Navy guys. It was amazing how everything had to be shipped clear across that ocean – from food to ammunition – everything – guys. It’s a wonder we won the thing. But I think the enemy just spread themselves too far, I think.

Smith: Long supply lines.

Fifer: So then when you are in the air division, of course, they had warnings right away when you launched planes, you had to find the landing gear and sit there. They told everybody to take off and you pulled a chock(?). And then the wings had to be on the fighters. You released a lever and then the wings would slide out and then two or three guys would have to get on each wing and pull it up until they locked. When they landed they had to do the same thing the other way – they had to push it up until it locked.

Smith: I assume you were in this division – what other divisions made up the crew? What other functions?

Fifer: The gunnery division, it was just everything – your supplies, the quartermasters. A good friend of mine was a paymaster, and I had a good friend who was down in the engine room. Of course, they’d come up and visit
guys. I think most of the guys were from the East that were aboard the  
*Monterrey* at that time.

Smith: Was there a hierarchy? And I don’t mean in the formal sense, obviously, the Navy has a hierarchy. But was there an informal hierarchy? If you were in the engine room, was that less desirable than X?

Fifer: No, I don’t think so.

Smith: There weren’t functions, particular functions, that you would much prefer to do as opposed to something else.

Fifer: No, I don’t think so. I really don’t. Well, anyway, you did what they told you.

Smith: Well, of course. And did you do that function through the end of the war, or were people trained to do different things?

Fifer: You had to work as a mess cook for three months, if you were a Seaman’s 2nd Class or 1st Class. And then you’d go back in your division again after that. Then I got into the arresting gear group – which is the wires and the barriers that catch the planes when they come in. You started out as a chase and hooks. A guy from each side would have to run out and unhook it from the wire and I did that until the end of the war, actually.

Smith: Is there danger associated with that?

Fifer: Oh, yeah. You’re out there, before the plane even stops, you are on your way out there. All you do is watch that hook and if it catches one, you know he’s going to stop. So you are on your way out there. You had to wear real heavy gloves because of the wires. They were all chopped up and greasy. And you had to grab the hook and break it loose from the wire and then turn around and run because that props – he’s gunning it to go forward and you had to watch the props.

Smith: Did anyone ever not watch it? Did you ever lose anyone to an accident?

Fifer: One guy walked into one. Young guy, real young guy. It was towards the end of the war and he’d just come aboard, I think. We lost a guy that way. Like in the morning, when you first start up, all them props going and you’re sitting
there on the wheel waiting to pull – and when you’ve got to grab the thing, you get out of the way for the next one. It was a dangerous place to be, that flight deck.

Smith: Let’s see – there’s a flight deck and then there’s a hangar deck?

Fifer: Hangar deck, yeah.

Smith: And the hangar deck would be what? The deck storage?

Fifer: Yeah, and when they worked on the planes. In the bulkheads they had everything – wings and torpedoes and everything strapped up to the bulkheads. Whatever they’d think they would need to fix up a plane if something happened.

Smith: Now, did you have contact with Ford on the ship?

Fifer: No. I knew who he was, but no, I’d never talked to him.

Smith: You knew who he was.

Fifer: Well, from athletics, mostly.

Smith: Tell me about that.

Fifer: We’d get in a port and I’d go over to the elevator and hang a couple of baskets and they had teams. Of course, it was square, it wasn’t much of a basketball court. But that was fun to watch. You were up on the flight deck looking down on them all the time. And then when we had our – in Pearl we had a boxing tournament and he was a judge.

Smith: Really?

Fifer: A good friend of mine, a guy I graduated from high school with, come aboard. He was in the Marine division. They were a squad, maybe twenty guys, I don’t know anything about the Marines, but he won the heavyweight championship. Lt. Ford was a judge. But other than that, there were fifteen, sixteen hundred guys on that thing and you just didn’t see many people there that you didn’t work with.
Smith: Who was the captain?

Fifer: Well, let’s see. The first captain – was it Hunt? I think his name was Hunt. Then he got transferred and I think he took over Pensacola Naval Air Station. Then Captain Ingersoll and then there was one other, but I can’t think of his name right now.

Smith: You mentioned being a mess cook. How was the food?

Fifer: Not bad compared to the Army or whatever.

Smith: Are you saying the Navy ate better than the Army?

Fifer: Oh, I’m sure we did. Like on a holiday, we’d have the whole turkey and everything. I’d always give my oysters away to somebody. I didn’t eat them things.

Smith: How did it feel – you said yourself that Pearl Harbor was such a motivating factor – how did it feel to be sailing into Pearl Harbor?

Fifer: The first thing – you could see a lot of the damage even when we went. And it was the same thing when we sailed into Tokyo Bay. The damage – it’s all around – it was just all burned and rusted. And that was just a day or two after they surrendered that we sailed in there.

Smith: I want to get to that in a minute. The typhoon.

Fifer: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Tell me about anything you remember about the typhoon.

Fifer: Well, of course, we all heard the explosion when it happened.

Smith: Did you know you were about to experience this? I mean, were there weather forecasts that warned you in advance?

Fifer: Not that I know of.

Smith: Okay, it took you by surprise?

Fifer: That ship was so top heavy.
Smith: What made it top heavy?

Fifer: Well, it was built on a cruiser hull, which is narrow, and then the flight deck. Then your gun mounts and everything hanging over. It just rolled something awful.

Smith: Was that a problem, generically, with the ship?

Fifer: I think so, yeah. I’m pretty sure. I think they admitted that. And even the destroyers they lost in the typhoon, they admitted that they took the old destroyers and put all that radar equipment way up on the boat, and it made them top heavy. So I think they lost three destroyers in that.

Smith: Did it come upon you suddenly, or did it just kind of build and build?

Fifer: I think it just kind of built up. Of course, we heard the explosion.

Smith: Now, what was that?

Fifer: Our quarters were in what was called the poop deck – it was aft – and it was right underneath the flight deck. In other words, our overhead was the flight deck. Most compartments were down below water level, but we were up above. There was one hatch in that one bulkhead in the forward wall of the compartment. And if you opened that hatch, the elevator pit was right there for the aft elevator. So that was never opened, believe me. But we ditched it and someone else was doing all the work, we didn’t do anything. You had to almost hang on to everything. You couldn’t sleep or anything. Some guys would get in their bunk, but you couldn’t stay in the darn thing. It was that bad. So actually, we didn’t realize how much was going on until you read about it in books and things like that. I think when I read where Lt. Ford -the captain told him to take some men and go in there and put that dog gone fire out - he did it.

Smith: And what caused the fire?

Fifer: Well, the planes were sliding back and forth and there was some fuel in them, I guess. This was on the hangar deck. The flight deck, they were just sliding
off three or four at a time. We had them wired down, but the wires weren’t very big wires.

Smith: So you lost planes to the storm?

Fifer: Oh, yeah. I think we lost eighteen planes, or something like that, out of twenty-five. There might have been more than twenty-five with some of the extras down in the hangar deck. I don’t know how many were down there. But that’s where they’d take them when they worked on them, if there was something that took a while – instead of up on the flight deck where it was dark a lot of times. I read where Admiral Halsey, well, he had a job to do, too, because we were supposed to fly cover for General MacArthur to raid Mindanao, one of the Philippine Islands. And we couldn’t get out of that darn typhoon. I read where he left us, or was going to leave us, because we were dead in the water, I guess. All the water went down below and the engines all flooded out. We didn’t even know this.

Smith: Really?

Fifer: But I really give President Ford credit for saving my life. I think he did, I think he saved our lives by getting that fire out with those guys he took in there. And then the guys in the engine room got an engine going and we were able to maneuver then because you couldn’t even put your bow into all those waves in the wind.

Smith: Were the waves the worst you’d ever seen?

Fifer: Oh, my. I looked out once and there was one of the larger carriers – it was pretty close to us – because everything was grey to look out there. It was just shadowlike. I don’t know how close we came to it or whether they would capsize or something. That’s how bad it was.

Smith: There were waves up over the flight deck?

Fifer: In fact, somebody said the gun turrets were dipping water when it went the one way. Of course I didn’t see any of that, but somebody said that.
Smith: Now the fire – I’m trying to understand the sequence here – the fire was on the hangar deck.

Fifer: The hangar deck.

Smith: But when President Ford talked about almost going overboard, was he up on the flight deck or the hanger deck.

Fifer: No, he was on the flight deck. I think he came out and I don’t know if he was going to climb up into island, or if he was going to come down out of island, to the flight deck, and then I don’t where he was going to go. But I guess he slid all the way across the flight deck and there was about a half inch steel plate, and it was about this high above the flight deck and the catwalks, or gun turrets. That stopped him, I think they said – the paper or the books I read. His feet hit that thing.

Smith: His feet?

Fifer: Yeah. But he must have got back to the other side again to get into the island or wherever he was going.

Smith: To people who don’t know, what is the island?

Fifer: The superstructure. The bridge.

Smith: We’ve been told the typhoon lasted two days.

Fifer: Yeah, I think it probably did, a day and a half.

Smith: Probably seemed longer.

Fifer: Yeah. Oh, God. You just couldn’t do anything. You couldn’t stand up hardly. And I don’t know how he got those guys in there on that hangar deck. That hangar deck was a steel deck and all that water and oil and gas – I don’t know how he ever did it. I still think he saved our lives.

Smith: There are people who have voiced some criticism of Admiral Halsey for driving you into the storm. People have said Nimitz wouldn’t have done it.
Fifer: They didn’t know much about weather in those days, like they do today either.

Smith: What was your opinion of General MacArthur?

Fifer: Well, I always like the guy pretty well. But then I read things about how him and Nimitz were always trying to do something ahead of the other guy. What did I read – where Nimitz was coming in, he wanted to be in Tokyo first; but MacArthur flew in and beat him. It was those kinds of things. I didn’t care for them kind of things.

Smith: The enlisted man, you hear of the “Dugout Doug” references, that sort of thing. You were in Tokyo Bay you said, at the end of the war?

Fifer: Yeah, just for a couple of days, I think.

Smith: Before that, of course, you didn’t know about the bomb.

Fifer: No.

Smith: Were you all dreading the prospect of an invasion of Japan?

Fifer: Yeah. I think a lot of us were that way. Because Iwo Jima, they lost so many guys and Okinawa - 40-50,000 guys. And then we spent – what did they say? I think 57 days without even seeing land out there. And we were ready to launch planes that one morning when they cancelled it and told us about the bomb.

Smith: That’s extraordinary. I want to get that story. I’m curious, how much did you on board ship know about the rest of the war? I don’t mean in Europe, I just mean in the Pacific. For example, you mentioned Okinawa – did you know at the time of the battle what was going on? How did you get information about the rest of the war? Was it simply what your superiors told you?

Fifer: Yeah. We had a newspaper aboard ship. It wasn’t much, but it would tell some of the things about the war. Of course, we missed Iwo Jima because we had to go back after the typhoon. But we got back out there of Okinawa and, boy, that’s when all the kamikaze started.
Smith: Tell me about that. Did you have kamikazes hit your ship?

Fifer: Oh, no. We never got hit.

Smith: Did you see any other ships hit?

Fifer: I didn’t ever see any get hit by kamikazes, but we went in and we hit Formosa, which is Taiwan now. That’s way in there. That’s further west than Japan. So that was quite an experience. But in those days, all through the war, they always come out at night after us. They never come out during the day and it was always torpedo bombers. So we were trying to get out, after a couple of raids then you turn and try to get out, get further away from Formosa at the time. But they sent a lot of planes out after us that night and I saw the Houston get hit. It was pretty close to us. It took a torpedo and, boy, you could just see the fire coming out of the stacks. The very next night I saw the Canberra get hit the same way, another cruiser. Now I don’t know – Canberra is a city in Australia, but I don’t know if it was an Australian ship or one of our own. I don’t know.

Smith: Did they go down?

Fifer: No. Neither one went down. They towed Houston all the way back to Hawaii, I guess, or Pearl.

Smith: Wow.

Fifer: But I’ve got pictures of her that I cut out of magazines and boy, she was only that far out of the water in some places.

Smith: It’s hard to imagine anything more terrifying than in the middle of the night, out of nowhere, a torpedo. Was that the worst you could imagine?

Fifer: At night, you’re not doing what you’re supposed to be doing. You’ve got a far off station that you’re supposed to be at.

Smith: During the hours of darkness, when you’re lying awake, do you imagine what could be out there?
Fifer: Oh, yeah. You think about it. You can’t help but think about it. Oh, I know what I was going to say. The Chaplin would get on the speaker system and he would be telling you what was going on, if you were down – not on a flight deck. And that’s scary – “there goes a torpedo – it just went forward – I’ll let you know…” Crazy stuff like that. I think I liked it better if I was up on a flight deck and I could see what was going on.

Smith: Of course.

Fifer: I did see at Okinawa, I’m sure this plane was coming in. At night they would come in real low, but in the daytime, like at Okinawa, those kids, those kamikazes, they were just kids I guess, they’d come in from real high. And I stood there and I watched this thing coming and it was getting bigger and all of a sudden it seemed like it just stopped in mid-air and the wings just – one wing went that way and one went that way. He must have caught a five incher in the gut. He just went straight down. But I was just standing there watching him, and then I decided I’d better run. I’d just started to run when I saw him get hit. But I never saw a kamikaze plane hit another ship. I’ve got some pictures that one guy sent me that he said he got from ship’s photographer. And they show some ships getting real close to getting hit that must have been around us and he was taking these pictures.

Smith: So now we know - obviously, you didn’t at the time - we were in the closing months of the war. Do you remember when you heard about VE Day – the end of the war in Europe?

Fifer: Oh yeah.

Smith: Obviously that was a milestone, but did it make you think that you were closer to getting home?

Fifer: Yeah. We all said, let’s get this over with. They had broadcasts over the PA system when something like would happen – like the atomic bomb – they let us know about that.

Smith: After the death of FDR…when President Roosevelt died?

Fifer: Yeah, got that, too.
Smith: You don’t know about the bomb and you’re anticipating a likely invasion of the home islands, Okinawa squared. How did you learn about the bomb?

Fifer: Over the PA system. They let us know what happened when they canceled the raid, when we were going to launch planes.

Smith: Did they explain what an atomic bomb was?

Fifer: No, they didn’t. They just said it was something big. We had no idea what it was like. We weren’t too far from there.

Smith: That’s right. But, of course, it took two bombs to end the war.

Fifer: They had to save face.

Smith: And the Emperor. So after the second bomb, the war is over. How did that feel?

Fifer: Boy. Right away the guys are saying, “How do we get out?” That’s what everybody was wondering, how to get out. So right away they came out and told us how. We had to have 40 some points or something like that. But you got points for being married or having kids, or you’d get more points for being overseas, things like that. Your age made a lot of difference. So I didn’t get out until March of ’46.

Smith: Really?

Fifer: Yeah.

Smith: So you were in Tokyo Bay after the signing?

Fifer: No, before.

Smith: Before the signing?

Fifer: And we sent our Marine squad, they went ashore and I think they took some volunteers out of the Navy that wanted to go ashore. I didn’t volunteer.

Smith: You didn’t?
Fifer: No. I didn’t know anything about guns. And maybe two or three weeks they were ashore and then they all came back and had these souvenirs that they picked up and they took them all away from them.

Smith: Was there concern that they would encounter résistance from diehard Japanese?

Fifer: Yeah, I thought they would. And I think they did find a lot of caves and things like they did in Iwo Jima and Okinawa.

Smith: You could see Tokyo? You could see the devastation?

Fifer: Oh, yeah, in the Bay there – ships that were docked and sunk and everything was just tore up something awful. And that wasn’t from the atomic bomb, either. But they finally got it over with.

Smith: And from Tokyo Bay where did you go? You said you weren’t out until the spring of ’46.

Fifer: We took a cruise. I think we stopped in Okinawa, and we stopped in Pearl and then Panama, and then New York. And it took about a month, I think, something like that if I remember right.

Smith: New York look pretty good?

Fifer: Oh, I’d never seen it before and we led the fleet in because we had more time out there than anybody in the other ships, even the Enterprise. And, of course, they had the fireboats out there with the hoses and all that. And they made a flag – I don’t know if you’d call it a flag – it was only half red and half white and it must have been about two or three blocks long – that they flew when we came in. We all got a foot of it.

Smith: So now, did you stay in New York for several days?

Fifer: Oh, yeah. We were there for quite a while. And President Truman – we all lined up in the Hudson there and he came by and reviewed the fleet. They took us to Brooklyn Navy Yard and then they sent us home. That’s the first time I’d been home since boot camp. So it was a long time. Then I went back, then they sent me home again and that was it. I had to report to Indianapolis
for another assignment and I thought I’d just get enough points to get out. So they sent me to Norfolk and I had nothing to do there but stand a watch once in a while. Finally, New Year’s Eve a guy said, “We’re sending you to a ship down in Florida that’s the *USS Solomon*, and it’s qualifying new pilots, and they arrested your man down there. So I got sent down there. New Year’s Eve they put me on a train and sent me down there. So that was January 1 and in March they sent me to Toledo and I got out.

Smith: And breathed a sigh of relief?

Fifer: Oh, yeah. It was good, like I said, I could hardly wait to get out. And you lose all – you’re eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old.

Smith: You never thought about making it a career?

Fifer: No. They offered me $3,000 and they’d send me to school for three months, or something like that – or maybe a month – and I turned it down.

Smith: Do you have any idea how many *Monterrey* survivors there are?

Fifer: No. I got elected treasurer about three or four years ago, I think. We were down in Charleston. I think we were having a reunion and the guy who was the treasurer passed away and his wife was doing all the work. So they wanted to make her treasurer, but they couldn’t because she wasn’t a Navy person, so they said they wanted to know if I would take the treasurer’s job but she’d do all the work. All I had to do was sign checks. So I did. But then the next year they made her an honorary shipmate and she is our treasurer now. But she had a list, or her husband did, of about 140 that were paying dues.

Smith: Now would that cover not only World War II, but Korea?

Fifer: Yeah.

Smith: We’ll get this on the record: the *Monterrey* had a second life during the Korean War.

Fifer: But she didn’t see any action. In fact, they stripped all her guns off. She didn’t have any guns or anything. She just operated in the Gulf of Mexico. That’s what I did when they sent me down to Florida. We’d go out for two or three
days and come back. But we’d go out in that Bermuda Triangle area – I wasn’t crazy about that.

Smith: What ever happened to the Monterey? What was her final fate?

Fifer: I think they just scrapped her, finally, after the Korean War. The cabinet was CBL, ___ class and I think they loaned her to Spain or Portugal for quite a while and then they gave her back and I think she was down in Louisiana some place. But I think she is gone now, too.

Smith: How frequently do you have reunions?

Fifer: Every year.

Smith: You do?

Fifer: Yeah. First we were having it every two years, and then we started to run out of guys and I think like she had 140 that were paying dues. But they were both World War II and Korea. And we had one San Antonio trip we made and we had three busloads of people and that was in ’95. But it started to dwindle. And when I brought the guys here last year, we only had four guys from each war. And of course they brought their wives, some of them.

Smith: Did President Ford ever attend a reunion?

Fifer: Somebody said he did one time in – I don’t know if it was in Norfolk or someplace like that. But I wasn’t going then because I was married and had all those kids.

Smith: Did you ever have any contact with him afterwards?

Fifer: No. I asked Rose, her name was Rose, our treasurer, she lived in Texas, Sinton, Texas, and the President paid $100. We paid $5 and his secretary sent in $100 every year. But of course when he died, then she quit. When I heard about this new ship, I said to her, “How could we find out about this?” So she says, “Well, I’ve got his number down in California. I’ll call his secretary.” Well, she called and she started talking to this gal and somebody cut in. And I think it was the FBI or somebody and said, “Where did you get this number?” And she explained to him what it was, so she got to talk to this gal. Because
we wanted to find out about this new ship. I think she said it would be about 2013 or something like that before it was…but, boy, I’d love to be there for that christening. That would be wonderful.

Smith: I guess the final and most obvious question: how did your wartime experiences affect your life?

Fifer: I don’t think it had too much effect.

Smith: Really?

Fifer: No. Like I said, I went back to work that I hated – that job. I was a salesperson at a pay department at Sears. I couldn’t get along with those customers and then I went to school for a year. When you get out of school you have to start at the bottom, but I had some good jobs, worked for some nice guys all those years. I still have breakfast with them now and then, some of them.

Smith: Do you find the war memories don’t come back until later in life? Is it the older you get, that those experiences sort of mean more?

Fifer: Most of the time it’s when I’m in bed, before I fall asleep. That’s when I think about the old days a lot.

Smith: Well, that was certainly very much the case with President Ford, too.

Fifer: Really?

Smith: Yeah.

Fifer: Long time ago, though. That was the war to end all wars.
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Smith: First of all, thank you so much for doing this. Tell us a little bit about your life before you came into the Ford orbit. I sense that you had a lot of contact with him before his presidency.

Knebel: Well, I came to know President Ford when he was Minority Leader. I was minority counsel of the House Ag Committee and that was starting in January of ’69 with Nixon I. He was doing a lot of fundraising for Republicans and out and about every weekend; and Bob Hartmann, who was his chief of staff and major domo, was needing a lot of support for his speechwriting that he was doing. So I became something of a supplier of fact, fiction, and fantasy, and through the next few years as I was elevated to counsel of the committee, I came to know the Minority Leader very well.

Smith: What was he like?

Knebel: I think it’s almost overused, but in this case, it’s a very pertinent description. He was a decent human being. He was very fair, he would listen. He always had time to say hello. I used to run into him out at Burning Tree occasionally and he never failed to stop and ask about the family. He was a genuine guy. It was an honor and delight to work with him and for him. And as time went on I was moved downtown to become general counsel to the Department of Agriculture. Upon the resignation of President Nixon he hosted a thing the next day at the White House where every presidential appointee came through the line. I had a picture made with the President – it’s right there on the wall – he stopped and talked to me for probably five minutes – to the point that the Marines were in total consternation because everything was getting backed up. But in any event, it was a very memorable day.

I left the government about six months later and six months after that the undersecretary of Agriculture had a heart attack and he retired. Earl Butz went over and asked President Ford if he could bring me back as undersecretary.
President Ford said, “Well, I’d like to be part of that,” and he himself made the phone call to my wife and said, “I know Jack’s only been back in practice for six months, but I want you to work on him to come back to be undersecretary.” And so I did and went through the confirmation process and of course, that was in December of ’74, and then we went for two years as undersecretary.

Then when the President saw that he had a problem arising because of the Butz joke that was attributed to him, I was out doing a speech in Marysville, Ohio at the Grange Hall in the middle of the campaign of ’76. I never shall forget this lady come up saying, “Some guy here from Washington named Knebel? Phone call.” I had to go back through the crowd and on the phone is Jim Cannon who says, “The President wants to talk to you.” The President got on; he said, “Jack, Earl is resigning in fifteen minutes and I’m asking you to become the secretary.” He said, “Give me fifteen minutes because I want to deliver my comments about Earl in the Rose Garden.” So I said, “Fine, Mr. President, I’ll do the best I can.” He says, “You’re going to be fine.”

So I went back and I gave the speech which was a campaign speech for John Ashbrook, and we got out afterwards. The theme was that Butz has just taken a little break from the campaign, he’ll be back. I gave that same speech and we came out ten minutes later, we get in the car and a state trooper’s taking us to the next stop and it comes over the news that President Ford had accepted Earl’s resignation and Ashbrook says to me, “You should have been in theater because I would have never known he was gone.” I said, “Well, the President said do it. I do it.” I just had that kind of regard for him and he’s been very, very good to us, and through the years we’ve had a lot of fine times.

Smith: Let me go back to your days in the House. People all contrast then and now. Gerald Ford was part of that - clearly a Republican partisan, someone who wanted very much to be Speaker of the House.

Knebel: That’s an extraordinary point. I was appointed to West Point by Page Belcher, who was the ranking Republican in Agriculture. And back – this is before Watergate days – when the chief counsel of Agriculture from Texas – this is a Democrat – went on to be a judge on the Texas Supreme Court. Bob Pogue,
the chairman, also a Democrat, obviously, asked me to be chief counsel. He said there is no politics in Agriculture, and there really, truly wasn’t. Carl Albert was the Speaker and they treated me as if there was just nothing there. It was wonderful. The rancor came in later with Watergate, which _________, there had been, it’s not even a gradual deterioration, but it’s just no longer the same institution. I can’t imagine serving a Democratic committee as its general counsel in this day and age. So that in itself was unique.

When I went downtown to be general counsel of the department and ultimately to become secretary, Tom Foley was chairman of the House Ag Committee and Speaker. He proposed legislation to change my position as undersecretary to deputy secretary so that we have the same status as they do at State Department, when we’re under international negotiations. So the House is a totally different institution.

Back then when Ford was Minority Leader you had McCormick, and then you had Tip O’Neill, as the Speaker. There was no rancor. In fact, I was probably one of the last people to have lunch with Tip O’Neill before he died. After he retired he went up to Boston. It was just a different situation then. The people with whom you dealt, it was much like an old law practice. You shook hands, you did a deal. It wasn’t any more of this gotcha stuff. You didn’t have the Speaker calling people Nazis because they criticize a presidential program. It was just a different day.

Smith: It’s interesting you say that. There’s an amazing turning point during the Ford presidency. The topic was energy policy and the decontrol, gradual, less gradual, decontrol of natural gas prices. And the President, favoring of a more market-oriented solution, the Democrats in Congress wanting to delay that as much as possible. Anyway, he finally reached a handshake deal with Speaker Albert, Mike Mansfield. They came back a week later, sheepishly, saying the deal was off. They couldn’t sell it to their members. And that was post ’74 with the Watergate babies.

Knebel: Right. You had the beginning of the new Congress at that point. And I always took the position that President Ford’s election was lost not to Carter, but because of the pardon. And the body-politic had to cleanse itself of the last
vestige of Watergate. Whether history will prove us right or wrong on that point, I don’t know. But I do know for sure that the water was poisoned. He was absolutely right in saying that we’ve got to get past this nightmare. We were shocked. I can never forget that Sunday morning coming home from church when he came on and made the speech. But you know what? Had we not done it, we could have really had some serious problems. And if you remember the backdrop, too, was not all that great. The other thing about his presidency, which I was very proud of, particularly in retrospect, is the fact that he wasn’t afraid to veto things. He used the veto pen very effectively, and he kept fiscal discipline.

Smith: He was a real fiscal conservative.

Knebel: He knew exactly what he was about. And that came, I think, from his years on the Hill. I never will forget he and Ev Dirksen, those millions or those billions add up to real dollars after a while. And he took that to heart, and he, for that reason I think, will go up several notches as a viable and a wonderful president.

Smith: It has been suggested that in some ways - and this is often the case - his great strengths in some ways mirrored a weakness. For example, I only heard him speak disparagingly of two people. One was John Dean and one was Gordon Liddy. And the worst he could say was, “He’s a bad man.” That’s as bad as it got. He was genuinely shocked by the thought that Richard Nixon lied to him. Like many others, he was genuinely shocked when he heard the language on the tapes. There was sort of an Eagle Scout quality about Ford.

The first press conference, the one that I think was pivotal in bringing the pardon about when it happened. Late in August of ’74 he has a press conference in the East Room and he goes in believing – in retrospect somewhat naively – that people would talk about Cyprus and Greece and Turkey and inflation and everything except what they all wanted to talk about, which was Richard Nixon.

Knebel: Right.
Smith: Now, it’s a very fine line because on the one hand, it’s that very decency – I’m not using Eagle Scout in any way as a pejorative, it’s all of those qualities that made him, in some ways, the perfect person to lance the boil. But at the same time, was he not suspicious enough, I guess is what I’m saying, for a modern president?

Knebel: Well, that’s an interesting thought. I can tell you that up until a week before Nixon’s resignation, he was scheduled to go to Hawaii to speak to the American Bar Association. And Bill Castleman, as counsel in the vice president’s office, had invited several of us to go along; I as general counsel of Agriculture because I was to be president-elect of the Federal Bar Association. So we got a call the night before Nixon resigned to say the trip is off, but don’t unpack. In other words, don’t say anything about you’re not going.

But I just think that he’s one of those people who had abiding faith in the people he was working with. A lot of us believed, up until the very end, I know I had a difficulty with Butz because the general counsel of the department has a Constitutional responsibility to explain the infirmity of a president – the Twenty-sixth Amendment – and we’d had discussions and we were all to go into to see our Cabinet officers. And I can tell you that I got tossed out of Butz’s office three times in the morning before he finally agreed to hear the Constitutional situation of possible disability of President Nixon. This was within a few days of the resignation.

If there was a broad sweeping indictment, believe me, a lot of people would have been caught up in this same disbelief. A lot of people believed what they wanted to believe. You’ve got to remember that at this point in time you didn’t have the Howard Baker question, “What did he know and when did he know it?” But rather you had really partisan political stuff coming out; the tapes had been discovered, there was a lot of pieces that didn’t really fit completely together. Certainly there was a lot of smoke and I think people kind of put as much stock in it as they wanted to. And naïve? Well, perhaps, in retrospect. But we’re all 20/20 historians.
Smith: Compared to the alternative, in a town full of cynicism, maybe a little eagerness to believe the best of people is not a bad trait.

Knebel: And I think that was an inherent trait of President Ford. He gave everybody the benefit of the doubt. He used to have a very, very good outlook on those types of things. I can remember a few things on the House floor when they’d pull legislation and at the last minute when they’d scheduled a bill and they’d gotten votes and they’d gotten the rules through the Rules Committee and Carl Albert played the game somewhat differently. Carl being an Oklahoman, I could go over and talk to him and we always got the stuff done for Agriculture because it was meaningful to him and his constituency. So I didn’t have that problem, but a lot of the other type of legislation did.

Smith: Explain what you meant pulling the thing on the floor, what are you referring to?

Knebel: Well, in terms of debate, that’s the key of what a Minority Leader does. He’s got to decide who he wants to use in the debate and for what purposes. This is the strategy of the House, the well of the House is something – again, I think, it’s been gravely distorted under the last few years.

Smith: It was not only a different House, but it was clearly a different Republican Party. The center of gravity was the Midwest. Obviously, you had some Southerners whose numbers were growing, but probably more moderate to liberal Northeasterners.

Knebel: Well, it’s interesting, you are absolutely right. The Democratic members from the House, both the House and Senate, were really our best Republicans, in many regards, from a legislative strategy standpoint. And I never shall forget when Bob Pogue called me over and said, “Jack, I want you to be chief counsel. There’s no politics in Agriculture. We just have to keep the big city boys’ food stamps in check until we get the farm bill done.” And it was just that simple.

Smith: Was that the trade off?

Knebel: Absolutely.
Smith: I mean, you got urban votes through food stamps?

Knebel: Absolutely. That’s how it worked.

Smith: And presumably, less ideological. Clearly a case could always be made and was made by some, in terms of significantly reducing the role of the federal government, whether it’s price supports or whatever. But one senses that that really wasn’t a significant possibility. That there was a consensus about the role of the federal government.

Knebel: In 1970 we were getting ready to rewrite the Ag Act of ’70, which was a price support bill, and I shall never forget a delegation of Southern members with peanut farmer interests came in and talked to Secretary Butz and said, “Just give us one more time around.” You’ve still got the peanut program going today. But the one thing we did in ’70 and ’74 was to change that legislation so that if it was clearing the market, there were no subsidies paid. And I had the unique distinction in 1976 of sending my annual report to the President, which is required by law, being the only report filed since the first New Deal that had not paid any price supports that year. And that was because of the prosperity and the country had come back in ’76; and as we said, the barns and the fences were painted and the market was going great. We were selling grain to Russia.

Smith: Yet the rationale always extended for his selection of Bob Dole for the vice presidency was he had this real problem in the farm belt.

Knebel: Well, go back to Kansas City and that selection. There were three finalists in that vice presidential selection. And I shall never forget Bryce Harlow was in the room. We were all upstairs in the Crown Center Hotel, with the President. And Bryce Harlow said his poll showed that Ann Armstrong from Texas, the country wasn’t ready for a vice president, female. Howard Baker from Tennessee didn’t help the agriculture side as much as Dole did. And that decision was made.

Smith: Now, this was one of the meetings that went on in terms of choosing a running mate?
Knebel: After the nomination.

Smith: After the nomination?

Knebel: That’s right, that night. There were several of us and we were told that the President just wanted to spend some time with, I think it was Bryce and Bob Hartmann, and I don’t know if Dick Cheney was in that or not. He probably well could have been. But we all left. There was kind of a reception. The other sidebar negotiation that was going on at the time was, of course, Reagan, would he, wouldn’t he, no, yes?

Smith: Something which is still being debated.

Knebel: Yes, it is. And my wife was at the convention and she was very good friends with John Sears’ wife, and Sears, of course, was Reagan’s campaign manager. The two girls got together and got Mrs. Reagan and Mrs. Ford to a luncheon, which is as close as anything ever happened.

Smith: During the convention?

Knebel: During the convention.

Smith: Really?

Knebel: Yeah.

Smith: Tell us about that.

Knebel: You’d have to get her to tell you. She probably wouldn’t say too much. But it did happen.

Smith: Perfectly civil?

Knebel: Oh, absolutely. Very much so.

Smith: One thing on the House, because there are stories that – again, going back to what you said – Ford and Hale Boggs would have debates at the Press Club; they would drive down together and decide what they were going to debate that day; then get up and have their debate; and then go have a drink and have lunch and go back to work. You can’t imagine that happening today.
Knebel: Well, back then Tommy was working for the Joint Economic Committee, I was working for the Ag Committee, and we used to have lunch as often as not. The same type of thing. The first time you went to the Hill and you went to work on a committee, you usually got a call from somebody like Jim Eastland to come over and have a sit down at five o’clock. And the only question was, “Do you want ice or not?” And that was how it was. I’ll never forget when I first became general counsel downtown, I got a call from Eastland’s staff, Sam Thompson. He said, “The Senator would sure like to see you again and congratulate you on your appointment.” I said, “Yeah?” He said, “Five o’clock in his hideaway.” I said, “Okay.” We go up and sit down and he said, “Now, Jack, you know, Sunflower County, Mississippi has been declared a disaster area for the last thirteen years and so has number one (?) disaster declaration comes right in early January.” And I said, “I’m well aware of that Senator.” He said, “You’re not going to break a record, are you?” I said, “I’ll have to look at it, but we’ll certainly look at it closely.” And that’s how it was. Allen Ellender had his eightieth birthday, Lady Bird Johnson was up in his office and broke up a conference on the food stamp bill and Ellender had a great big pot of jambalaya and the staff ladled it out and Lady Bird…and it was a big thing. But Lyndon would show up occasionally. It was just a different era.

Smith: What changed it?

Knebel: Boy, if I knew that I’d be a handicapper. Even in retrospect it was a gradual erosion. I attribute most to post-Watergate election. Lack of trust. Breakdown. It’s just hard to say.

Smith: Well, let me throw out a couple of possibilities because you are absolutely right. I think that the Vietnam War and Watergate rubbed a lot of things raw. It certainly planted seeds of distrust toward government, generally. But then the media culture is an enormous factor. With the rise of cable TV, and the internet, both of which have many positive values, but both of which also can be used to exacerbate conflict because conflict sells, it sells dog food and it moves the radio dial. Whatever you think of the health care plan, for example, it’s a classic example of the media whipping up a controversy and then
exploiting it for ratings. Plus the gerrymandering of House districts. I mean, let’s face it, if you look at the number of truly competitive districts today…

Knebel: A handful.

Smith: Compared to forty years ago.

Knebel: It used to be twenty-five percent right?

Smith: Yeah, which means basically, you win a primary, which means you play to your base, which means the middle of the road. Hell, there are political consultants who deny the existence of a middle of the road. I talked to President Ford about this – forty years ago the prevailing political culture was, you went there, you fought for your principles, you went at it, hammer and tongs until six o’clock, but at the end of the day, people expected you to get something done. And the political incentives were there to write legislation; to find a consensus.

Knebel: Well, you know something that has always struck me? A personal example: when I was on the Ag Committee, there were fourteen people on the staff, four minority, ten majority. I was recently invited back there. There’s a hundred and sixteen or a hundred and twenty on the staff now. We wrote more legislation then than they do now. The members were more involved; they knew more. I have never been so shocked as to hear the likes of Henry Waxman saying, “I haven’t read that 1,000 page bill.”

Before, we used to have tutorials every week for the Ag analysts on the staffs, for the AAs and for the members. I can never forget, Tony ________, Pat Roberts. Tony worked for Bernie Sisk, Pat worked for Bob Dole, or Keith Sebelius in the House and then after Bob went to the Senate, Keith came to the House. They used to come every Friday afternoon and we would explain, section by section, each bill, what was amended, what had happened in committee that week, so that they would know, and they were better able to better represent their members. And the members had more interest.

Tom Foley used to sit on the corner of my desk when he was chairman of the committee, and he wanted to know everything in there. And he did. A great
legislator. But I don’t think that’s there today. Maybe there is too much money, maybe it costs too much to get elected and they get in and their first deal is - I know Butz got in trouble for it one time, he said, “The first thing a senator does, he finds his desk in the Senate and declares for president.” And you know, there’s some truth in that. There’s a modicum of truth in the way it operates today. It’s just a different institution.

Smith: Going back to ’76, what was the perception of weakness in the agricultural belt that, in fact, mandated Bob Dole’s function?

Knebel: Quite the contrary. I think it was really a reflection of the strength in grain sales at the time and that the country – and you’ve got to remember, California is the third largest agricultural country in the world. Reagan had beaten Ford in the primary in early June; in the meantime we lost a counter movement against Jerry Brown’s Prop 14. Jerry was the governor at the time and Caesar Chavez wanted to go on. We got the Farm Bureau going on that thing and if we hadn’t had the strong agricultural presence on the ticket, I don’t know that we would have. It turned out with California – I think Carter won it by a fraction, I don’t recall. But it was a much closer election than it would have, could have, should have been in that regard.

Smith: Tell us about Earl Butz.

Knebel: Earl Butz was an extraordinary human being. I didn’t replace him, I succeeded him. I was his general counsel, I was his undersecretary, I was his deputy secretary. I was, I guess like a son. I sat with him the night before he resigned. Hubert Humphrey came down the hall from their apartment house. Now there’s a good example of the bipartisanship, of how that works. Hubert came down and we all sat there and had a drink. The press was like jackals gathered below at his apartment house.

Smith: Was it like a wake?

Knebel: Yeah, bunch of lights and stuff. So we all went out through the laundry then and Hubert said to me, “You want to sleep at my place tonight?” And I said, “No, no, I’ll go home.” Hubert made a speech for me for my confirmation as undersecretary. And I guess the contrast, the comparison of what it is today –
if you can imagine John Kerry making a speech for somebody being appointed by a Republican. It just wouldn’t happen.

Smith: I think it was in October of ’76, when Humphrey is in the hospital and the President went to visit him. And the story is that Humphrey said, with a grin, “You’re getting some votes out of the Humphrey household.”

Knebel: Right. You were asking about Butz, and Butz used to josh with Hubert. He said, “The only way to keep the Metrodome up is they have to have Hubert come over every week and talk in there for fifteen minutes and he can keep the Metrodome up for two weeks.” But the fact is that Butz knew these guys and he could deal with them. We used to go up and see Herman Talmadge every Tuesday morning at 6:30 to go over what it was that the department needed and what his committee was doing on the Senate Ag Committee. Earl was very shrewd. He knew that after about ten o’clock in the morning, you weren’t going to get any of Herman’s good time, because there just wasn’t any. And it was very interesting the way he could deal.

I saw him get crosswise one time when Ed Muskie, during the Nixon impoundments – do you remember the impoundments of the federal funds? We had some FAA money and it had been impounded. Muskie had a hearing as to why it was impounded and I, of course as general counsel, had rendered an opinion that it was wise and sufficient exercise of legal judgment to do that. And so we went up and Muskie, as he was want to do, was ranting and raving and TV cameras were running and his ears turned red and his face turned red and it was probably unfortunate, but it was shortly after William Loeb had chastised Muskie’s wife – the Manchester Union Leader. Butz says, “You know, I wouldn’t cry over it, Senator.”

But he did have a way of getting crosswise with his vocabulary from time to time. In fact, I’ll never forget his dear wife Mary Emma said, “Earl lives by the tongue and he’s going to die by the tongue.” And she was very prophetic on that, it turned out. God rest his soul, she was right.

Smith: What were his strengths?
Knebel: I tell you, I had three bosses in government, Tom Kleppe, when I was at Small Business Administration off of the Hill, Earl Butz at Agriculture, and President Ford. And they all had the same common denominator – strength. You never had to question anything they told you. Everything that anyone of them ever said to me was always right on. And believe me, when you are somebody’s counsel, it’s nice to know you are getting it straight. And that was always the case with President Ford, with Earl Butz and with Tom Kleppe.

Smith: We’ll get back to Butz, but tell us about Tom Kleppe.

Knebel: Kleppe was a remarkable guy. He was on the House Ag Committee, ran for the Senate. Nixon appointed him to be administrator of Small Business Administration and I went down with Tom to be his general counsel. I left the House Ag Committee to be his general counsel. Tom had been mayor of Bismarck at a very young age, made a fortune. He invented Glass Wax, marketed Glass Wax. Tremendous guy. He was in the House, they had two seats, he and Mark Andrews. I think by the ’70 census they’d lost a seat, so that’s when Tom ran for the Senate. He ultimately ended up as Ford’s secretary of interior. Ironically, he read me my oath of office as secretary. Delightful person.

I, along with President Bush, Sr., served as his pallbearer a year ago February. Very great competitor. I used to play tennis with he and George Bush, Sr. and they were fierce games. Phil Rupee from Michigan was always in that game. I was counsel so he could just pull me out and say, “Let’s go,” and we’d go. The interesting thing about all those guys is that they all had more money than God, and I don’t think any one of them every bought a can of tennis balls.

Smith: You can tell the rich. They are different from the rest of us.

Knebel: Kleppe, in particular, self-educated person and very driven. But, as I say, he shared that trait with President Ford and Earl Butz and just a very, very straight, honest person.

Smith: And all workaholics? I don’t mean that as a pejorative.
Knebel: Not in the sense that hours were the big deal. Kleppe was a neat-desk guy, in there early in the morning, out early in the afternoon. Didn’t go to a bunch of socializing. Butz was pretty much the same way.

Smith: Tell me, because these guys were “conservatives,” and that’s a term that’s come to be redefined in a number of ways; post-Reagan and post-Gingrich, and as we speak. What kind of conservatives were they? Not least of all in their attitude toward the federal government?

Knebel: Well, I think that the common thread of all those fellows for whom I worked, and I think I’d put Dick Cheney in this, too. Many of us just didn’t think the government had to do everything. And didn’t want government to do everything. It wasn’t that they were anti-government, it was just that the old story was: it’s a liberal if you throw it a lifeline and it’s too far and the liberal forgets why he threw the lifeline. But it’s a conservative if it’s thrown out there and it’s not far enough and you’ve got to swim halfway to get there. That’s probably something of a bad cliché, but I just don’t think that anybody with whom I’ve been associated in government - and that’s why it’s so different today - really ever felt that government was the panacea. The Southern chairman, Bob Pogue, I member those fellows railing against the start of the food stamp program. “We don’t need to do that.”

Smith: You don’t think race was a factor?

Knebel: Oh, clearly it was subliminally, but there were a lot of ways that were ingrained in Eastland, Talmadge, Ellender, Spencer(?) Holland.

Smith: Boy, there is a name I haven’t heard.

Knebel: That were just different than George Akin of Vermont. Jerry Ford. Now that’s maybe a divide. I don’t know if it’s a distinguishing divide, or how you do that.

Smith: Well, it brings up a fascinating thing. I remember we talked to Walter Mondale about this. We talked to Ted Kennedy about this. The fact is, forty years ago, when you first arrived in town, a member of either body, you found yourself in an institution where there were two parties that actually had wings.
There is no doubt the Republicans were more conservative, the Democrats were more liberal, but that’s not to say that there was a totally conservative and a totally liberal party. So for example, Bob Dole says, he was told by his predecessor, when you go to Senate, “Spend some time with Senator Eastland.”

Knebel: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Ted Kennedy said he was told, “Spend some time with Dick Russell.”


Smith: But the fact is, within your caucus, if you were going to get something done, you first of all had to master the art of working with people who were not your ideological twins. Who represented a fairly diverse set of viewpoints within the party. And in some ways that was preparation for success in the larger body. That diversity is largely missing today.

Knebel: Well, we had George McGovern on the Senate Ag Committee and we were doing the conference on food stamps. George asked, as a point of personal privilege, if the conference could not meet on the next day, which was Saturday morning. And Al Ellender says, “Well, we’ve got to get this done before Christmas,” and he said, “Well, I going to give away my daughter, she’s getting married tomorrow.” And the eyes kind of rolled, and the big thing was that everybody wanted to roll McGovern. But you know, he pushed back and we said, “Okay, we’ll start at noon.” And McGovern came in with his top hat and tails and sat in the conference Saturday afternoon. But I don’t know if that would happen today. Maybe it would, perhaps. But it goes to show you how they bent backwards more.

Smith: Well, presumably as Minority Leader, Ford had to deal effectively with not only what passed for the right wing of his party…


Smith: But John Lindsay or Charlie Goodell – there were liberal Republicans in those days.
Knebel: Yeah.

Smith: And you think that prepared him for the presidency?

Knebel: I don’t know if you ever prepare for the presidency. I think it takes the measure of the man the minute he walks in. Ford was a creature of the House; made no beans about it. He passed up the opportunity to run for the Senate, I guess. He loved what he was doing. And as you quite aptly said, his goal in life was to be Speaker. That didn’t happen. I don’t know, maybe it’s just the basic man. A very decent human being. A lot of people said, oh he wasn’t the greatest idealist, he didn’t have a lot of stuff. But you’ve got to remember the time at which he became president, he had a very short time in which he had to make a decision as to Nixon, whether he would run, what to do with everything else on the scene, he brings Rockefeller in. I mean, this was a tough time.

Smith: No transition.

Knebel: Absolutely none. You were barely out of the era of John Dunlop and price controls. Something the other day that I had even forgotten about was the flu scare. I had totally forgotten that. When you’re in there, and I guess this is the point, things are going so fast. You talk to Dick Cheney about being chief of staff and how that came about. It is amazing. It is an incredible story. But when Ford found out, or I guess when Al Haig came to him and talked about the “deal” Ford gets his trip cancelled to Hawaii and all of a sudden he’s there. That’s almost as severe as Lyndon Johnson reading the oath on the airplane in Dallas. These are cataclysmic and I don’t believe that anything prepares you for it. I think it’s the measure of the man. We’ve been blessed as a country. There’s a theory in the House that the chairmanships of the House committees had always kind of dodged the bullet, so to speak, on avoiding people who should have been chairman.

Smith: Despite seniority.

Knebel: And I think that’s kind of broken down in the past few years. The iron forge of democracy is no longer a true and prevailing story.
Smith: One way of assessing the Ford presidency is that he came into office very much a man of the House, and in a sense, had to learn to be an executive - without forsaking the contacts and the qualities that he had exercised in the House. There is a reason that we don’t elect legislators to the office; for lack of a better word, the persuasive aspects of the job, the kind of broader political elements of the job. And there are people, Dick Cheney is one of them, who say – Don Rumsfeld told us – every day he [Ford] became better. He really became an executive. And in fact, the tragedy of 1976 was, just as he really mastered the job, he lost it.

Knebel: Yeah.

Smith: Could you see that, for lack of a better word, growth? Did he become more comfortable in the position?

Knebel: It’s hard for me – what’s the old saying – if you’re not the lead dog, the scenery never changes; and when you’re just a member of the Cabinet and that young fellow trying to come into something himself. I was very comfortable in my role as general counsel because I knew the statutes. When I became undersecretary I got budget responsibility and then all of a sudden I got the executive responsibility. So you’ve got your head down running so hard that it’s very, very difficult to assess “Oh my boss is doing a good job.” Far be it from me to suggest that anybody I worked for was doing a good job or bad job. I was just trying to do my job.

Smith: What were the main agricultural issues that the Ford administration dealt with?

Knebel: Well, one of the most outstanding was in ’74 when the Russians had a crop failure and Dobrynin came into see Butz one night and Butz wanted me there just so he’d have a witness. I was still in general counsel at the time. And the ambassador says to Secretary Butz, “We would like to buy X tons of grain.” We’d done our crop analysis and we knew what the carry forward was, and Dobrynin said, “From such and such a company.” Butz said, “Fine.” What he didn’t tell us was he was going to buy the exact same amount of grain from all five of the major U.S. grain companies, which put us in serious short supply.
Scoop Jackson had a head, the Senate Oversight Committee, it’s the only time I ever made the front page of the *Washington Post* like this, and the CEOs of the five grain companies were there. And then we went down afterwards and the President asked the companies to cut across the contracts, which they did, and that was averted. So that was a very interesting thing.

Smith: But was that portrayed as a grain embargo?

Knebel: No, the grain embargo was when the Ayatollah was trading and they cut across the grain contracts to Iran because of the Ayatollah on fuel. That was in ’73. This was in ’74 when the Soviets had a grain failure, a crop failure, which we knew about because of our satellites and they didn’t even have as good a monitoring system as we had of them. In fact, Dobrynin, I shall never forget says, “Well, now, tell me, what is it? How bad are we?” And I never will forget Butz kind of winking at me and saying, “You want to tell him or not?” And I said, “We’ll talk about that. We’ll let that one on the hanger.”

Smith: So the consequences of this was what, in terms of the farm belt? That you did not make as large a sale to the Soviets?

Knebel: We sold everything that we could and just kept a natural reserve going forward. As I said, the crop report that I filed, which was the ensuing year, the barns were painted, there was all new farm equipment out there, there was no carryover and everything was clearing the market so there were no payments. That was probably the central issue. We had, back in ’73 under price controls, we had the Australians trying to dump meat in, in the meat in port law. So we had some issues.

Smith: Let me just ask you because there was a sense that the relationship between the President and Secretary Schlesinger involved bad chemistry - that there was, for lack of a better word, perhaps a professorial manner about Schlesinger that some took to be condescending. Now, it’s interesting because we’ve talked to people who said, “Well, he talked to everyone like that.” He wasn’t just talking to the President like that, that’s just the way Jim Schlesinger talks to people. Did you sense a personality issue?
Knebel: Well, I really am not close enough to have evaluated that from a personal standpoint. But bits and pieces and dribs and drabs and, like I said, when you’re just doing a job, and you’re trying to make sure it gets done, you don’t sit around, unless you’re a gadfly. And I never shall forget when Butz was secretary he used to get upset with some of our folks who waited until he left town to issue press releases in their name. It was something. So there are lessons there.

Smith: Did you ever see Ford display a temper?

Knebel: No. In ’76 when we went out to Vail after the convention, it was pretty relaxed. We were having sessions and they’d gone to Russell, Kansas, to Bob’s hometown and then went up to Vail and we kind of retreated up there for a week or so. Susan was sixteen or eighteen at the time and she said, “Can you get some Forest Service horses so we can go on a horseback ride?” I said, “Sure.” So I got on the phone and I think we had every horse that the Forest Service owned in the five-state area trucked in overnight. And we had probably twenty members of the press, a dozen Secret Service, Susan and a couple of her friends and were going to do this trail ride the next day. Secretly, we were hoping that the horses would take the press out, which they didn’t do because none of them could ride. But the President got word from Susan that she had done this and he was a little irked. He calls and he says, “What the heck are you guys doing?” I said, “Mr. President, we are trying to have a good time and help Susan. She wanted to do that.” He says, “Well, is that right?” And I said, “Well, horses need exercise.” That’s as close as I ever saw him to ever being upset on anything.

Smith: But it also is very revealing about his sense of ethics.

Knebel: And then I said, “The rangers that trailered these horses in, they need a little rest so they are going to stay overnight and we’ll do this again tomorrow and then they’ll take them back.” He says, “Okay.” But that was a measure of the guy. You know, he was so decent.

Smith: And actually, he got along with the press very well.
Knebel: Oh, he was wonderful. Some of the photography, the skiing crap – pardon me – some of the photography, bumped his head on the airplane – I was with him out in Iowa with Bob Ray when he was dedicating the Iowa State Veterinary School and he spoke to the student body. This was in October, “I’m glad to be here at Iowa,” and of course, the crowd just went crazy because we were at Iowa State. He had a couple of those.

We had a whistle stop tour during the campaign of ’76. I don’t know if you ever got into that one. The train out of Chicago – it was he and Mrs. Ford’s thirty-fifth or fortieth anniversary, so Bob Michel who was on the train went out and bought a cake for the President and Mrs. Ford. We were going to have this cake, and of course, the Secret Service disheveled the cake before we could get it through to them. But he was a grand spirit in that regard.

Smith: He loved campaigning, didn’t he?

Knebel: He really did. We had Chuck Conner from the *Rifleman*. Tom Kleppe was on that train, I was on that train, Bob Michel, Bob Madigan who later also served as secretary of agriculture, a congressman from Springfield was also on that train. We had lunch in Springfield and then we went on to St. Louis and ended there. Kit Bond was the governor at the time, about to stand for re-election and he had his own problems and didn’t make it. That was quite a thing. He really did do that.

Then a couple weeks later we had a trip – actually it was on that trip to Iowa for the dedication – we picked up the editorial board of the *Des Moines Register* and they were going to have an interview with the President going back to Chicago. So we get on and sitting up in the presidential cabin on Air Force One, the President asked me to sit in for details, and I thought for sure we had the editorial board vote and that they would endorse the President, because that the only statewide paper in the country, the only single paper on a Sunday, in any state. And they came out for Carter the next day. He was crestfallen on that. The campaign, we went through tough times. Of course, Butz was gone and he’d been a very, very, very strong speaker and I picked up his schedule and mine as well, and it was pretty hectic.
Smith: How would you characterize Ford’s agricultural policies? I mean, market oriented?

Knebel: Absolutely.

Smith: And yet accepting…

Knebel: Well, you’ve got to remember that Michigan had been a very big dairy state. That was a very rigorous price support feature of the agriculture program. But as to grains, free market - big on export. We used to very much ballyhoo the agricultural trade surplus that we had. And it was very real.

Smith: And, difficult as it may be, describe what happened to Earl Butz.

Knebel: At the end of the convention in Kansas City he got on an airplane to fly to Los Angeles to visit his son Tom who was a divinity student. He was on an airplane – Earl worked an airplane like Hubert Humphrey did. He didn’t just go to the men’s room, he’d walk up and down the aisle and kind of glad handed everybody. He got about halfway up and Pat Boone stopped him. Pat Boone had been a delegate, a Republican delegate from California. Like Butz, pledged to Reagan on the first ballot. And Pat Boone, _________ in November. And Earl said, “I think we have a problem with the black vote.” And he said, and I must tell you, Pat Boone sitting on the aisle, John Dean was sitting by the window, and he had been at the convention as a Rolling Stones reporter. He didn’t say a word. He was not in the convention. Earl acknowledged John, “How are you, nice to see you,” sort of thing, but was speaking strictly to Pat Boone. And he said an old alderman in Chicago told me thirty years ago, and when John Dean did his story in Rolling Stones, he ascribed his thoughts on the forthcoming election that a very senior Republican, perhaps summarized it best when he said why the Republicans would lose the election and he spelled it out. And that story in Rolling Stones went unnoticed.

It came out in August and in late September I got a phone call, I was down in Mississippi from Ron Nessen, who was the press secretary. He said, “Jack, is this Earl?” and he read me the quote. I said, “I’ve been with Earl for five years and I’ve never heard him tell a racist story in my life. Barnyard humor?
He was the king of it. But never anything racial.” And I said, “I don’t know, but I put him on an airplane and he went to Los Angeles to visit Tom and I went to Tulsa and then I went on up to Vail.” He says, “You’d better get home.” So I caught the next plane back and sure enough, when they talked to Butz he confirmed the fact that that was his story, John Dean reported it correctly, albeit without identification, and he did not want to become a blemish on the Ford re-election campaign. So he wanted to get out. And that was an agonizing weekend we spent. Bryce Harlow was very much in counsel with the President on that. Bill Timmons, who you are going to see was in counsel on that. So Earl left and then as I recanted earlier, I told you that story when I was at Marysville, Ohio doing Earl’s speaking that day, and I got a call from the President and that was that. That was on October the 4th, my fortieth birthday.

Smith: How difficult was it for Ford to make the break with Butz? Presumably it was seen as a political necessity.

Knebel: Absolutely. He was very fond of Earl. As indeed, was Nixon. He and Nixon were very close. Earl went out and did very, very well on the speaking tour. You couldn’t have told that he wasn’t secretary. We had a party here for him, it was really pretty amusing. About two weeks after the election he was still in town and I got his chief of staff to edit all of his speeches, for what I call his ribald humor. And we made him sit in the middle of the floor down in our basement and listen to himself for forty minutes on the tape recorder. And it was just one of those great celebrations of a bad event that you ever have. And he left knowing that his staff was very close to him.

Smith: Was he dogged by that in later years?

Knebel: Not really. He was an academic. He went back to Perdue. We had a White House fellow named Jim Bostick, who was a black who had been student body president at Clemson, and he got up and he dispelled any notion that Earl Butz was a racist right off. I know the next morning I was up in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and the Today show came and interviewed and said, “What do you think of Earl Butz?” and I said, “I think he’s a patriot.” And that was the end of that. I don’t believe that ever haunted him. In fact, very
few people event recognized the source of the affliction and the fact that John Dean was in it and what a calamity it was that Dean is a *Rolling Stones* reporter, the holier than thou counsel to the President.

Smith: What are your memories of the convention in Kansas City?

Knebel: ’76 convention?

Smith: Was it a bitter convention?

Knebel: It was an interesting convention. It was contentious, but not bitter. Reagan’s troops were marshaled by John Sears, who was a very, very dear friend of ours, and John did a masterful job. They had beaten us two to one in North Carolina in early primaries. They beat us two to one in June in California, June 2nd. John was a great strategist and it was the first time I ever saw the religious right brought into politics. And they were very, very well marshaled and very effectively done. And very honestly, the Ford campaign was so new – we really didn’t have much more than some of those House Republicans that he had gone out to speak for and they had a local staff and we could use that. But what we were running into was the phenomenal organization that the Reagan people had done.

Smith: Going into that convention, was there a degree of uncertainty?

Knebel: That’s a question which could really best be answered by President Ford. I don’t know that he truly wanted to run; I think he felt he should run. I know that he was comfortable as a president, and I thought he was extraordinarily able to do that job, but I’m not sure that he was comfortable as a national campaigner because there were so many handlers. There was so much stuff going on that he didn’t have the day to day that he probably would have liked.

Smith: There is a wonderful story that Stu Spencer tells. And you can hear Stu saying it. It says volumes about Stu, but it says more about Ford. Early on, when things were really going badly, post-North Carolina, Stu had reluctantly agreed to come onboard to help with the campaign. And it was a very awkward position that they had these polls, the President would go out and campaign, and the numbers would go down. Stu had to find some kind of
euphemism to get him off the campaign trail. Well, the President loved to campaign.

Knebel: He did love to campaign.

Smith: So, it’s a Friday afternoon, wet, rainy, dismal afternoon. There are three people in the Oval Office; the President, Dick Cheney, and Stu Spencer. And Stu is not getting anywhere. The President is not getting it, or choosing not to get his message. So finally, Stu says, “You know Mr. President, you’re a great President, but you are a fucking lousy campaigner.” But it’s the sequel that makes the story. Because that story appeared in Witcover-Germond’s book about the ’76 campaign. And Stu was livid. He called Dick Cheney to chew him out and on and on and so on. And finally Dick sort of lets him run down and he says, “There was a third person in that room.” And the fact that: one, he could say it to Ford and keep his job, and two, that Ford would then tell it on himself to a reporter.

Knebel: Yeah, he was very self-effacing in that regard. And I don’t know that I had that many times that I was with him in such limited company that there was ever any stuff like that I saw. I remember Butz telling me when he went over to tell the President that Phil Campbell had had a heart attack and that he wanted to bring me back, that he was very animated in getting involved and got right on the phone.

Smith: Were you in Cabinet meetings?

Knebel: Oh yes.

Smith: How were they run? How did he use the Cabinet?

Knebel: Well, the first Cabinet meeting I went to, I never will forget John Warner was the Bicentennial chairman. Now Butz was out of town, I was undersecretary, and Ford looked at his watch and he said, “John, we’ve got a Bicentennial coming up in about eight months. Are we going to have to reset the clock? Are you going to get it done?” And John Warner kind of all blustering and all that, it was pretty funny. But there was some levity. Ed Levi, the attorney.
general, used to get into it with Bill Coleman, who thought he was the attorney general.

Smith: Two very impressive minds.

Knebel: Oh, absolutely, world class and really great guys. But it was interesting and then actually when I became secretary, which was October 4th, only a month before the election, there were very few Cabinet meetings between and the time we left. But we did have one on the last day of our office. Our chairs had already been removed and we just had coffee around the Cabinet table. President Ford was wishing everybody good luck and Godspeed and Betty came in that day. It was quite something.

Smith: Was it emotional?

Knebel: Yes, yes, but not tearful. Heartfelt. I remember Carla and Rod Hills were both there, even though Rod was at the SEC, I think, Carla was HUD secretary. It was interesting. Henry Kissinger, Nelson was in fine fettle that morning.

Smith: Really? What was he like?

Knebel: Nelson was a great big bear. I ran into him in November in ’77 in Tehran, I was over there on a case and he was there to bring his African art collection to lend it to the Shah. And of course, the embassy was overrun a few months later and the art collection and the Shah – all of it – were never seen again. A few months later, I guess a year later, Nelson was no longer with us. But I had dinner with him in Trahan and he was just living life.

Smith: Was he? Did he seem in good spirits?

Knebel: Oh, I never saw him when he wasn’t happy.

Smith: Really? Because there were times.

Knebel: I didn’t know him that well.

Smith: No, but clearly, being dumped from the ticket was a traumatic experience. But by all accounts, he was a good soldier.
Knebel: He was a marvelous soldier because this is eight months after we had left office, and he wasn’t philosophical, saying, “Well, we could have run if I was in it,” or anything like that. It never even came up. He was just talking about what he was going to do and all this stuff. I came away with the regard for him that I always had. Very nice guy.

Smith: There is a school that anyone who goes through the incredible emotional experience of a campaign and all your hopes are up and you close the gap and then just fall short – that it took a while for Ford to kind of regain his balance.

Knebel: First of all, the night of the election returns we were all at the White House and it was like a morgue. Nobody had a voice. I didn’t have a voice, I had given as many as ten-twelve speeches a day, and the guys who were scheduling me were on the Committee to Re-Elect, Manny Mopus and Dick Ling, they’d get on the phone and call me at four o’clock. “You’re going to Springfield, Illinois,” and give me three more stops. I’d say, “Wait, wait.” “And then you’re doing eleven o’clock news in Wheeling, West Virginia.” And this is how it was. “By the way, your plane is wheels up at six o’clock tomorrow at National.” So basically, you’d get home at midnight. You’d come in, take a shower, get a clean shirt, go back to the airport, and that was it. And this campaign was something that I’ll never forget.

Smith: Did you think at the end you might have actually pulled it out?

Knebel: You know, it was pretty interesting because, and Jimmy Carter fired me several times as secretary. He didn’t want no lawyer, he wanted a peanut farmer to be secretary. And this was big in the South. So I was doing a lot of speaking down there. I’ll tell you what it was - it was in Terra Haute, Indiana. I was campaigning for a new congressman named Dan Quayle, a guy who was running for Congress. And Miss Lillian, President Carter’s mother, she got into his speech about firing me and the press asked me about it. And I said, “Well, the last time I checked, she’s not running for anything, except to get him out of town.” I don’t know if they would have pulled it off. Another week, another ten days, I’ve heard a lot of conjecture both ways. Sometimes those things tend to close and they never quite get there. They are kind of like your belt after a big dinner.
Smith: Do you think the pardon in the end was the biggest factor? Or is that symbolic?

Knebel: Yeah, as I say, I think it was symptomatic that the body-politic had to cleanse itself of the last vestige of Watergate. And that’s how I’ve always attributed it. Was Carter ready for the presidency? Again, it takes the measure of the man. History will read what it is.

Smith: A couple of things and we’ll let you go. Tell us about Bob Hartmann.

Knebel: SOB.

Smith: Yeah.

Knebel: Same old Bob.

Smith: He was a polarizing figure, wasn’t he?

Knebel: I don’t know if anybody was at the other end of the pole. Bob wrote probably the greatest phrase, this national nightmare…but the interesting thing about Bob, and I always respected him for it, his total devotion to Jerry Ford. He was the perfect loyal person. Jack Marsh came along, Dick Cheney came along, Rummy had been in the House with the President, but Bob had been his staff and he was his staff. And he was an extension of the President. He was kind of the rough personality side that you never saw in Ford coming out. In some respects, I don’t know if Bob ever smiled at me and said, “Gee, thanks for all the stuff you’ve given me,” when I was doing stuff for him. (Hartmann clearing throat) “I’ll show it to the old man.” And I’d see Ford and he’d say, “Hey, thanks a lot; that was good stuff.”

Smith: Where does loyalty shade over into a kind of possessiveness that may not be healthy?

Knebel: I think you have to look at the flip side of that and ask yourself, if you saw something inherently wrong that your senior is doing, are you so blinded that you can’t either withdraw or speak to him in private, or do you just roll with it? And then that’s not loyalty, that’s subsuming your personality.
Smith: Right. And I take it to be implicit in what you say, that Hartmann did not hesitate to frankly confront his boss.

Knebel: Oh, he shut the door and ranted and raved and just the same way that he would – he treated the President with a great deal of deference and respect, but also knew his role, and his role was to counsel. And he did extraordinarily well.

Smith: You obviously saw the President in later years.

Knebel: Oh yes, in Colorado, in California a couple of times. And when he came back here for his dinners.

Smith: They loved Colorado, didn’t they?

Knebel: You know the interesting thing about that last Cabinet meeting I mentioned to you? In ’76 he told me, well, actually, it was before that, in ’74, when I came back in to be undersecretary, he said, “You know, I’ve got my eye on a piece of property at Beaver Creek.” And I said, “Let me see if I can get the environmental impact statement through the Forest Service so that we’ll have it for you.” And when we went to the last Cabinet meeting, I had a roll of papers under my arm and I gave him the environmental impact statement for Beaver Creek. And he said, “You are a man of your word.”

Smith: Clearly they loved it, and by all accounts, they were adored.

Knebel: They actually were.

Smith: They were more than the first citizens.

Knebel: Yeah, Marty Head, who is a very dear friend of ours from Aspen, has been on several different community boards where the President served. She would be a person who could speak to that directly. I haven’t spent enough time up there to be able to say.

Smith: Is she in Vail?

Knebel: Yes.

Smith: Great. We’ll make a note of that.
Knebel: Marty Head who was married to the fellow who – Head – Marty Head. Remember the Head tennis racquet?

Smith: Oh sure.

Knebel: Head skis. That’s Marty. She has a skiing house there on the slopes. So make sure you go in the winter.

Smith: And before I forget. Is John Sears still downtown? How would we get hold of him?

Knebel: I haven’t seen or heard from John. I know his wife, his former wife, is up in New Hampshire because he always speaks to her on her birthday. And their kids were contemporaries of our kids and everything.

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

Knebel: Yes, it was when he came in for his last dinner here, and told us, as he and Betty stood in the reception line, they had kind of bar-height chairs, that this was going to be his last trip.

Smith: Was that the dinner in Statuary Hall?

Knebel: Yes, it was. And they gave Rumsfeld and Cheney the Presidential Medals.

Smith: Was it gratifying to see, with the passage of time – I think of Senator Kennedy, the Profiles in Courage Award that the Kennedy Library bestowed on him was in some ways a transforming event. He used to say, “For twenty years, everywhere I go, people asked the same question. They don’t ask anymore.” It’s almost as if that crystallized this larger movement where American public opinion, if you can speak of such an enormous and diverse thing, accepted not only his rationale for the pardon, but the political courage that he displayed. Poor Lyndon Johnson, who died days before the Vietnam peace agreement. Gerald Ford lived long enough to see that shift.

Knebel: I like the theory, but in point of fact, I’m not sure that enough people understand the history to really make it viable. Here’s why: if you look at the people today, they are talking about having an education program for the kids who don’t even know what 9/11 was. What percentage of our electorate voted
for JFK in 1960? The country, and again, you eluded to it earlier, C-SPAN, 24 hour cable news, what is the story today? It’s not history. And I’m a person who doesn’t believe in reading these chronicles of today because there is so much kind of verbiage in them that’s just acrimonious and doesn’t really tell a story. I think your theory is going to be well accepted as historians really begin to write about the period that we were in. Jim Cannon got it right in his book. Of course, I would hope he would. But it’s going to take some more passage of time. I think passage of time will treat Ford well. I really do.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Knebel: Well, I’ve always characterized him as a good and decent human being. I supposed, who well served his country, both in the House and as president. He got us through a very tough time and he was a grateful man.
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Kratsas: I am here with former Grand Rapids Mayor John Logie. Mayor, why don’t you start out by giving us your personal history; where you were born, schooling, etc.

Logie: Thank you Jim, I am looking forward to this.

I will start back far enough but brief enough. Three of my great grandfathers showed up in Grand Rapids in the 19th Century so my roots are down here pretty hard. My grandpa Logie was born here in 1881, my father, Dr. Jim Logie, was born here in 1911 and he was teaching at the University of Michigan Medical School where he had finished his surgical residency in the 1930s. My brother Jimmy and I were born in Ann Arbor although we have always considered Grand Rapids our hometown because of that lengthy history. In 1942, my Dad, who had contracted tuberculosis and gotten drummed out of the Army Medical Corp, because this was before penicillin was developed during the war. After recovering, he came back here [Grand Rapids] to private practice as a doctor. I grew up here and went to East Grand Rapids High School, started at Williams College and then transferred to Ann Arbor, where I finished. This was in the Cold War Era and so if you were healthy and you got deferments to go to college but if you were single and healthy you were going to be a Buck Private in the Army. So, I elected to go to OCS and get a chance for a commission in the Navy. I did and served on two destroyers in the Pacific. Then the Navy invited me to go teach surface tactics to the senior mid-shipmen at Annapolis in 1964. My claim to fame is that I taught Roger Staubach everything that he ever knew about surface tactics. He won the Heisman Trophy in his junior year. After five years active duty, I left Annapolis and I went back to Ann Arbor. Under the
Soldiers and Sailors Relief Act I was able to go to Law School as an in-state student even though I hadn’t lived here for six years. So, it was an easy choice to go back to Ann Arbor. Along the way I picked up a Master’s Degree while I was teaching at Annapolis from George Washington University. I sat on their Board of Advisors for several years while I was Mayor [Grand Rapids]. I have two Honorary Degrees; one from Central Michigan University and the other from Ferris State University. So that’s my background. I discovered my wife in California. Her name was Susan Duerr and I should have met her long before. She had graduated from Michigan State University. She and three of her sorority sisters from the teaching program there went to San Diego to teach. So we met in California and will be celebrating our 50th Anniversary this August. We have three children. Our son John is a tenured professor at the University of Minnesota; we have a Korean daughter, Susannah, whom we adopted when she was four, she is now forty-four and lives here with her husband and two children; and our youngest daughter, Maggie, lives in Oakland, California. So that’s basically my background. I ran for Mayor in 1991 and was elected for three four-year terms, so I served twelve years, which at the moment, am the longest serving mayor in the city’s 164 year history. I joined Warner, Norcross, and Judd when I got out of law school. It was the biggest law firm in Grand Rapids. I was the 19th lawyer at work at that time, when I showed up in the late 1960s. We had one floor in the Old Kent, now 5/3 Bank Building, on the 9th floor. We were the only tenant with a whole floor. We couldn’t fill it up. It was only about half full. Now fast forward to today, it still has floor 9 but also 8, 7, 6, 5, and 4. It’s the second largest law firm in Michigan based on the number of Michigan lawyers. There are about 225 lawyers in 7 cities. Two and a half years ago I fully retired having been Of Counsel for a number of years. I successfully tried my last case in my early 70s; I am kind of proud of that! That’s my history.

Kratsas: Alright, with that being said, you were working for Warner, Norcross in 1974?

Logie: I was the newest partner; having been an Associate for 5 years.
Kratsas: Newest partner? Young for a partner!

Logie: Not really, because of the 5 years that I spent with the Navy. I think I was the 3rd or 4th oldest law student at the University of Michigan out of 375 or so students.

Kratsas: Did you know Gerald Ford before he became President?

Logie: I met Jerry Ford at my Grandma and Grandpa Logie’s house on Benjamin in Eastown [Grand Rapids]. She was serving Christmas Dinner. One of my connections to Ford is that my dad had one sister. She was Betty Logie. Betty Ford [Betty Bloomer] had an older brother named Bill Bloomer who was 8-9 years older than she. He married my Aunt Betty [Logie]. They used to bring young unmarried Betty [Bloomer] with them after they were married and moved to Grand Rapids. They spent most of their lives in Minneapolis. At that time they were all from Grand Rapids. They used to come see us because Grandma Logie was a great cook. They would bring young Betty [Bloomer] along and I met her when I was 10, and she was maybe 20, and I said to her “What should I call you?” She said “What do you call your dad’s sister who is married to my brother?” I said “I call her Aunt Betty”. She said “Well then you better call me Aunt Betty too”. So…I did, all her life, right up to the last time I saw her which was not that long ago. I called her Aunt Betty all her life. So, there were two Aunt Betty’s back then, it was confusing. People have asked me well, “what did you call him?” I said “well I started calling him Congressman, and then I called him Mr. Vice President, and then I called him Mr. President”. Not that he was a stuffed shirt, because he wasn’t, but because that’s the way I was brought up; if somebody has a title, you use it.

Before World War II, Jerry Ford began a law partnership with Phil Buchen, who was my Godfather. I called him “Uncle Phil.” He had polio as a child, and needed crutches to get around. Jerry went to war, and Uncle Phil joined another firm. They stayed friends the rest of their lives. When Ford became Vice President, he rated his own lawyer, and asked Uncle Phil to come to Washington as VP Counsel. So my godfather became his house lawyer in Washington.
Now let’s talk about the pardon. As a young partner, I was working on a Friday afternoon, not very long after Ford had been sworn in as President. Phil Buchen had called Hal Sawyer earlier that day. Hal was a senior partner at Warner, Norcross, and Judd. He went on to four terms in Congress, filling Jerry’s [Ford] seat. He was the Chairman and the lead trial lawyer in the firm. You will never know too many people anymore that have tried 100 cases to judgment, actually not settled, you either go to a jury or judge. I tried over a hundred of those. He was the best trial lawyer that I ever saw. But anyway, Phil Buchen called him and he said to Hal “I need some research done over this weekend and I need it now. I don’t need anything in writing; in fact I don’t want anything in writing”. This is Sawyer’s story to us. As best as I remember, there were 5 of us that got together on this project. We were all in the office on that late Friday morning. We met in the afternoon. Phil [Buchen] had said, “What I want from you on Monday is an oral report on what is the actual scope of the pardon power.

Kratsas: For the President?

Logie: Yes. Phil told Hal, “Now you understand why I am not going to talk to any of the big law firms here in Washington”. He had been there now for a while. And he said to Hal “that they are all leaky sieves”. He wanted to do this as quietly as it could be done. Which is one of the reasons why, unfortunately, we don’t have any paper records because we all worked over the weekend and we met Sunday afternoon. We kind of divided up the pie among us to do some research to try and find out what the judicial precedent was. Turns out that most of that judicial precedent had to do with federal judges who were accused of taking a bribe or something else like that. There is some case law there. And, we approached it this way and I think it’s probably one of the more important aspects of what we did. We decided to work backwards at that first meeting on Friday. What that meant was, we know that the President of the United States has the power to pardon almost anybody he wants to pardon and he doesn’t have to give the reason. So if you have got a heinous murderer, killing someone on federal territory, or whatever, who has been languishing for 60 years in prison and he’s 89 years old and if the
President wants to pardon him so he can go home to die, it’s clear he can do that.

So that’s what I mean by backwards: crime, tried, convicted, sentenced, and served a lengthy sentence. Could he exercise that act of clemency on that basis? Answer: Yes. Now we are going to start to move it forward in time. Now, maybe he’s just as heinous but he’s only served 3 years of a life mandatory without benefit of parole type sentence. Can the President step in and give him a full free pardon, walks out the door and doesn’t have to look back? Answer: Yes. Ok… what happens if he has been convicted but he has not been sentenced, can the President step in? The answer was yes. Alright…what if the trial is going on and it hasn’t even been decided that he’s guilty, Answer: yes. Now let me bring in Leon Jaworski.

Kratsas: Let me back up for one moment.

Logie: Sure.

Kratsas: You were going on judicial precedent?

Logie: Case law. We were lawyers; we were trained to go into the books and read established case results to guide what we were looking for - justification for issuing a pardon to Nixon now! We were assigned to find precedent so that if somebody wants to challenge President Ford once he has done what it sounds like he was going to do, or intending to do, based on our advice, that he has the full power to do it. That was the real heart of the question that we were being asked to answer.

Calvaruso: Before I forget, because it might be interesting for historical purposes, who were the five attorneys in the room?

Logie: I am quite sure they were Hal Sawyer and myself, plus Lew Engman, Joe Neath, and Tom McNamara. They are all dead now. I was the youngest, both from the point of service and in age, I believe. These are more experienced trial lawyers than I was although I had tried a lot of cases during my five years with the firm. We all did separate research. We really only met twice, I believe. Once on Friday afternoon when we took the assignment and then
once on Sunday afternoon when we sat down and decided what Hal was going to say to Uncle Phil [Buchen].

Ultimately, we had a third gathering when Guy Vander Jagt, who was then the shoreline Congressman and had been an Associate at Warner, Norcross, became President Ford’s messenger. He [Vander Jagt] was never going to be a good lawyer; he figured that out himself, but he was a good congressman, and good friend to all of us at the law firm, all of his life. His wife Carol was also a good friend. Anyway, he came, and this is really part of the story, but it is out of order. I like to tell people that we got paid for research that we did for the President of the United States. He [Ford] had been a member of the Peninsular Club, now defunct, in Grand Rapids, when he was a young lawyer, before the war, and after the war when he was at the firm. Remember he and Phil [Buchen] were lawyer partners before the war. And Phil was practicing law when I came back. He did a lot to get Grand Valley State University up and running, that was one of his personal projects; he was general counsel for the planning and implementing of that.

So, talking backwards, it was clear that the President had the power to pardon somebody even before he had been convicted of anything. But…Leon Jaworski who was the second Watergate counsel knew Nixon was smart. Nixon never met with Haldeman and Ehrlichman together, because if more than two people plot together, it’s a conspiracy. He knew that. He [Nixon] was a smart lawyer too. So he would meet with Haldeman or he would meet with Ehrlichman, but not together, because the tape machine was running under the desk and all of that stuff. What Jaworski did to get at Haldeman and Ehrlichman, and he got them, and he got them convicted, was he named Nixon as an “unindicted co-conspirator”. That’s a nice technical phrase but what that meant was that he could either force them to talk or suffer the penalties for refusing to talk because he had that lever, which I thought was brilliant.

The next point, I think, was one of the key points in this; Nixon had never been accused of anything. Even after the “smoking gun”, even after he resigned, nobody had even begun to prosecute him. Could a President step
in… and the answer to that question was Yes! As near as we could tell, the President’s power working backwards in time, and there’s only two people who know (the perpetrator and the President) that a crime had been committed, and the President wants to pardon him, he can. And that was the answer to Buchen’s question to Warner, Norcross, and Judd. How far back can you go because they didn’t want to give a pardon and then find out…No, we can still prosecute him over here. [President] Ford wanted to put Nixon on the sidelines.

In later years, he and I discussed this. He knew I was one of the guys that had participated in the project. When he came back to Grand Rapids, I would often see him. As Mayor, he and I cut the ribbon on the public museum together.

Anyway…that was our conclusion and Hal [Sawyer] did call Buchen on Monday morning and gave him that advice. But there is a little side story.

Uncle Phil [Buchen] was a long-time member and actually wrote a history of Fountain Street Church, which is an independent non-denominational church in downtown Grand Rapids. I didn’t even know this fact, because of my mother’s early demise, but my name is John Hoult Logie and there is a beautiful stained window in this church, as you are facing the pulpit that was given by the Hoult family there, given by my mother’s family. The then Head Minister, Duncan Littlefair, was in full flower at that time as the minister of Fountain Street Church, a very liberal non-denomination church, then and now. He ended up on the Today Show and going to New York. He had his own statue. Well, according to Littlefair, and I talked to Uncle Phil [Buchen] long after the fact. Buchen thought it might help Jerry [Ford] make the right decision to meet and talk with Duncan [Littlefair] because Duncan was very much in favor of a pardon. His reasoning, at the time, was get him [Nixon] off-stage. If we put him in the dock he’s going to be making nasty news for God knows how many years. It would look like a capital murder case…27 years on death row and they still wouldn’t be able to solve it. That was his thinking.
Littlefair snuck down to Washington and met with President Ford and Buchen, who was his long-time friend at the church. He came back and he delivered a sermon not too long after all had become public, but after it was over, from our pulpit and I was madder than hell at that point because I didn’t think he [Nixon] should have been pardoned. I was angry at him going back to 1962. It’s a little-known fact now, but I was a young officer in San Diego in 1962 when Nixon, having lost to Kennedy in 1960, ran for Governor of California against Pat Brown, the father of the current Governor, who is in his second time around. He was in his 40s and now he is in his 70s. The Democratic Party of California got so mad at the dirty tricks that Nixon’s people were playing that they sued them in State Court for breaking campaign rules. The Nixon team was good enough to prevent that coming to a head before the election. And everybody sort of assumed after that, that the Democrats having won, they’d just let it go. No! They got a judgment against Nixon personally and a guy named Haldeman personally that they ended up paying. I kept waiting through Watergate to see that come to life again. And I don’t believe it ever did and I don’t quite understand that because I was living in San Diego in the fall of ’62, and it never came to light, but I saw it happen. Anyway, you guys can tell me just how long after that conversation, it took Jerry, not very long, to issue a full and unconditional pardon. I remember talking to him [Ford] and Uncle Phil [Buchen] which was my actual nice name for him, my Godfather, and he, Buchen, told me that he had given orders to the guys that were going to go out and try to broker the deal with Nixon out in California that they had to get something in writing from him and not come home without it. The short answer is they came home without it, which opened the door for Nixon to try and rehabilitate his image for the rest of his life, which is what he actually did.

Kratsas: So, let me back up a little bit here. How soon after Ford was sworn in as President were you contacted at the firm, or was the firm contacted?

Logie: Somewhat educated guess…it wasn’t very long, I would say it would be less than a month, might have been a couple weeks.
Kratsas: The pardon was issued a month after he was sworn in, so it would have to be in that time frame.

Logie: Yes, I don’t think they waited long after they got our advice. It was on a Friday, that much I know, if I had to put a timeline on it, less than 2 weeks after he had become President.

Kratsas: And it would have been after his first press conference when Ford went to the press conference and all anybody wanted to ask was …What are you going to do with Nixon? Are you thinking of pardoning him? And President Ford wanted to talk about inflation, or the economy.

Logie: He didn’t want to answer that question. Well, it may have been that he didn’t have all those pieces in place. He didn’t have us at that point.

I think that was, after the fact Uncle Phil [Buchen] said that we were concerned that if we made this move this fast, he knew it would create a huge fallout, but Ford was hard-wired to get this thing done. And it wasn’t because he made any deal. Anybody who knew Jerry Ford knew he would never have made any “deal”. Nixon was a bad-enough guy to try to do that, and I have heard third-hand that Nixon did try through one of his henchmen.

Kratsas: I know Al Haig had brought it up to Ford.

Logie: It was Haig that I was thinking of. He’s dead now too isn’t he?

Kratsas: Yes. But it was President Ford’s speechwriter, Bob Hartmann. I know Hartmann told Ford to back away as soon as Haig would want to talk to him and so on about a possible deal.

Logie: Well, you know, I have to tell this story. When Ford was being vetted to be Vice President after Spiro T. Agnew, Agnew was the Baltimore County Executive when I was teaching at Annapolis. Everybody already knew he was on the take with the road builders. It was cash dealings. The reputation of Maryland’s state government was not great. His predecessor had a huge yacht that he spent most of his time on, called the J. Millard Tawes, (his own name) and all he did was bring parties and liquor on his big boat. I left the Navy in August 1966. Agnew was elected in November, 1966. By that time I
was a law student back at the University of Michigan. But Agnew’s taking payments from the Maryland road builders was an open secret. So the Baltimore County Executive was kind of like the guy in Oakland County, strong leader kind of thing. But then he became Governor and he had the road builders come right into his office with cash and then he became Vice President and they went right into the Vice President’s office with cash and the FBI caught them. Wired, sent them in to make the transaction and talk about it on the tape. The first thing the guy said as they were waiting for him… “I just bribed the Vice President of the United States right on the tape”. So they said to Agnew, you don’t get to go through impeachment; we can put you in the slammer. He quickly and quietly resigned.

Kratsas: You weren’t privy to what Hal Sawyer told Buchen?

Logie: No, it was one-on-one.

Kratsas: Can you recall anything that you stated orally to Hal Sawyer that actually got incorporated into the pardon itself.

Logie: No, but Hal knew that I thought a pardon was a bad idea. I wasn’t the only one that felt like that. And if he had been convicted it would have divided the country by people who didn’t think he did anything wrong and the people that did. Ford was smart enough to know that. I wasn’t, but time has proved that President Ford was right.

Kratsas: He was a lot smarter than the rest of us. It was only a shame that the White House, the Press, (and this might have been the problem of Jerry terHorst leaving right away) that they had not made it clear that when Nixon accepted the pardon that he confessed his guilt and that’s all I think the majority of the American people wanted -- was to find him guilty and him to say “I’m guilty” was good enough. The acceptance of the pardon is most often seen as an admission of guilt.

Logie: I thought it was bad for the country to let him off the hook. But as you say that was 40 years ago and I was only 35 years old.
Kratsas: You said that Phil Buchen did not contact any other law firms in Grand Rapids. Had you heard or did you know if Phil Buchen had called others outside of Grand Rapids?

Logie: There was another issue. I think it was about the Nixon records. Roger Clark from our firm told me, he was a couple years ahead of me, but he said, he was not on the team that I was on, but he was on a more publicized group of lawyers from three different firms that were all bunched together and Roger was part of that team. But that was a separate issue about the legalities dealing with Nixon’s papers.

I remember that and I think that issue went right up to the Supreme Court and I think the decision of the Supreme Court was unanimous that these are “our” records not yours. I think somebody has a copy of the newspaper article about that. I don’t but somebody does.

Calvaruso: Was Law Weathers, Buchen and Richardson ever involved in any of that?

Logie: I don’t think so.

Calvaruso: Was Law Weathers at that time a fairly small firm?

Logie: No…it was Law Buchen before it was Law Weathers. When Uncle Phil became White House Counsel, his name came off. The firm of Ford and Buchen was dissolved by the war and Phil Buchen went into what is now Law Weathers. After the war ended, Jerry [Ford] joined Phil’s [Buchen] firm. Julius Amberg was its leader. He was Jerry’s mentor in his race for Congress because he was well connected to Republican politics.

Calvaruso: Was it Dick VanderVeen?

Logie: Dick VanderVeen… no. Dick ran against Ford in 1958 and he also is the one Democrat to have been elected to our seat in 100 years. There was a bi-election to fill the remainder of the term and Sawyer and I both helped Dick VanderVeen, who was a friend to both of us, win that seat against the Republican and then 9 months later he won a full 2-year term. Then Hal Sawyer came to my office, because I helped people get elected to public office(s), and he said he wanted to run for the seat even though he also helped
support Dick. We were all angry about Nixon as a lawyer and a crook. I told Hal, I said “Why do you want to do that, you don’t even like to meet and greet people”. Most of the people I help win public office around here like to do that. He said, “Yeah you are right, you need people like that”. It was interesting because Ford won comfortably in the high 60s and maybe occasionally in the low 70s. Sawyer won all four of his elections, 51.2%, 52.1%. It wasn’t that he was a bad Congressman; he simply did not, could not put himself out to people. If you are going to be an elected politician you have to like shaking hands and talking to people. So, they were all skin-of-the-teeth wins, but he won four elections in a row. His health went to pot.

He [Sawyer] was on the second Warren Commission; he was the most experienced lawyer in Congress. He had more actual real law experience than any of the other 534 people in the Senate and in the House. They recognized him, finally, in his 3rd or 4th term. When Paul Henry (Sawyer’s successor) died, I was still a pretty new Mayor. Some of my Republican friends wanted me to run for that job. I said, I had just taken a contract here a couple of years ago to be the Mayor of this city for 4 years and I don’t think I should leave. I have been given an opportunity by the people to really help shape and mold this community and this was in the 90’s where you can look out some of these windows and see. I would love to take credit for it but I became Mayor in good economic times. Here is the problem, I helped Sawyer win that job and he was the most seasoned lawyer in the whole place and they walked in and because of the seniority system basically gave him toilets to clean the entire 8 years that he was there. He finally got to be the number-two guy in some subcommittee of the Judiciary Committee. I said I’ve got more muscle than that right here in Grand Rapids. It’s a bad trade for me. I respect Congress and the importance of the job, but I am staying home.

Calvaruso: When you split up the research duties on the pardon, what was your expertise, what part of the law?

Logie: It wasn’t about expertise; it was about experience in court. We made a list of the things that we thought we ought to have answers to. I honestly don’t remember at this point what my specific piece was. There were 5 of us
counting Sawyer. I don’t think he did much research, but the rest of us did. We cut it up into different bites and then we went to go find case law that supported outcomes on that issue so that we could find precedent, lawyers need to find precedents to hang their hats on, to reach a conclusion. Most often, I remember reading a couple of cases, where Federal Judges, not necessarily Supreme Court Justices, but lifetime appointee Federal Judges who were on the take, or something like that, or lied under oath or whatever and they could be gotten to. There were other cases too. I was working on the judge issue which is why I remember this and what could we do with these judges that had lifetime appointments.

Calvaruso: I know people weren’t happy that President Ford pardoned Nixon, but at the time was there any legal challenge to the pardon?

Kratsas: There was the attempt by Congress to hold hearings about it. That’s when President Ford went to Congress to discuss. He was the only President since, I believe, since Lincoln that went before Congress to testify and he went up there. The amazing part is Ford went up there, no notes, no advisor, nothing. He sat down and they said we want to know if there was a deal on this. He said there was no deal for the pardon, that’s it, next question. It was one of the shortest meetings of all time. But I know Buchen, Hartmann, and every one of them said to him “do not go up there alone” and some said not to even go. Ford said “No, I’m going”. And he did.

Logie: Yes. That’s a great story. You know, a couple of other Ford stories: When Ford was being vetted for Vice President, the steely-eyed guys with badges on their lapel were all over Grand Rapids trying to find dirt on Ford. And Lloyd Lievency was a tailor here in Grand Rapids, who made suits for gentlemen from scratch, and it was called Lloyd’s, very well-known, and civilians liked his suits. The steely-eyed guys got wind that Ford supposedly got two new suits every year he was in Congress made by Lloyd. I heard this story from Lloyd who is dead now, and they came calling. They said to him “We understand that you make two suits a year for Congressman Ford”. They said “Do you keep records of how they are paid for?”…looking to see if some booster was bank-rolling him or whatever they were looking for. Lloyd said
“Yes, I do.” They said, “Would you mind if we take a look”. And of course, they were all paid for by Ford, personally.

And my other story, which I eluded to earlier, a little more personal to what I got involved in. We got paid for our research. Our pay was a dinner at the Peninsular Club where Ford was now an honorary member after he went to Congress. With membership you get privileges. Guy Vander Jagt came and told us, called ahead, and was deputized by Ford to hold a dinner for the group of us that had worked on the pardon issue at the Peninsular Club and I found out after the fact that that dinner was paid for with a personal check from President Ford. He paid for our dinner. So trying to find dirt on…you look at all of the bad guys with the wife problems, Clinton, everybody else like that. Ford was there for 25 years and when the steely-eyed guys were done with their investigation to vet him as Vice President he was so clean they couldn’t believe there wasn’t some dirt there somewhere.

Kratsas: There was even the story that they talked to somebody he played football with, against in high school that Ford had tackled late and got a flag on the play. The gentleman was asked if he thought Ford was a dirty player and he said no, he didn’t hear the whistle, and I didn’t hear the whistle either.

Well, I have gone through all the questions that I have for you.

I did think of one last question for you. Did you know Benton Becker at this time?

Logie: I didn’t and I don’t know him now. He’s around my age and he was a young lawyer. I was very; very unhappy when it came out that whoever went out there got a verbal we’ll-take-care-of-that and they danced on him perfectly.

Kratsas: Thank you.
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Smith: First of all, I want to talk a little bit your life before your path ever crossed with Gerald Ford. It’s been extraordinarily colorful, eventful life. At the age of seven you met Amelia Earhart and Charles Lindbergh, about the same time?

Stevens: It was about the same time – a little later. Amelia Earhart was at the banquet of the opening of the Stevens Hotel. She was the principle speaker there. It was a weeknight and my folks took me to that event and introduced me to her after her talk. Her comment was, “You’re out awfully late on a school night, young man.” It was probably 7:30 – I don’t know.

Smith: You got a gift from Charles Lindbergh?

Stevens: Well, yes. I remember my dad taking me to the room during his tour of the country after he came back from Paris. He took me up to his room in the Stevens Hotel. The room – a suite – was just filled with gifts of one kind or another. He showed us this dove in a cage and I remember him saying to me, “What do I do with this?” I don’t know what the conversation was, but he ended up giving it to us. So we took it up to Michigan where my dad had a summer home and, unfortunately, it found its freedom up there. It only stayed with us for a couple of weeks.

Smith: You also, at a very young age – went to the 1932 Democratic convention.

Stevens: Right.

Smith: How did that come about?

Stevens: I don’t know just what he did, but even though my dad was a Republican, somehow or the other he had friends who gave him a couple of tickets to the afternoon session, as I remember it, when Franklin Roosevelt accepted the
nomination. I just remember being there, of course. I can’t remember much of what was being said, but the memory does stay with me.

Smith: Finally, you were also connected with Babe Ruth at Wrigley Field.

Stevens: I was one of several million people who claimed to be in the stands that day, but I actually was and he did indeed, point at the center field bleachers before he hit the ball out of the park in that event.

Smith: Your World War II experiences. It is interesting, obviously your part of a whole generation - Gerald Ford’s generation - and a number of people who have written about your career in the court suggest that it not only shaped your life, but in some ways, shaped your approach to the law. Do you think there is anything to that?

Stevens: Well, I’m sure there is. I don’t know that you could say it shaped it, exactly, but I’m sure it had a significant influence on everything that’s happened since. One can’t go through…

Smith: People, for example, have talked about the Greatest Generation’s sense of patriotism. They want to put a label on you – and either put you in the liberal wing or the civil libertarian wing. Then they run up against the flag burning decision...

Stevens: I think I was dead right in that case. I really think that there are people today who do not appreciate and understand the power that the symbol of the flag really can carry and did carry. It really was a symbol of a lot that’s very wonderful about our country. I think that every now and then there is sort of a – you get over-enthusiastic about the value of the first amendment – but prohibiting flag burning really didn’t prevent anybody from communicating any idea they wanted to communicate. I think that – and I’m not suggesting that we should change the law. It’s part of our law now, that’s well settled – but I think the only real significance and tangible events of the decisions was, nobody burns flags anymore.
Smith: It’s also been suggested, for example, that since you were awarded for your work as a cryptographer, perhaps your attitude about the death penalty has something to do with Admiral Yamamoto being targeted as he was.

Stevens: Well, in a very remote way, it does because I do remember the occasion very well. I was on duty when we got word that the operation had been successful. And the difference between having some unnamed person in some other location lose his life or be killed is quite different from the reaction you have to a particular individual who is singled out for that treatment. It is something I’ve often thought about. As I understand it, I think the decision to carry out the operation was only made after getting the approval of the president, of Franklin Roosevelt.

Smith: You had not originally intended to go into the law.

Stevens: That’s correct.

Smith: What did you envision after the war – what your career path might be?

Stevens: Well, my original expectation was to try and teach English. There was a lot of vacillation back and forth. But two or three things influenced me during the war, and one of the things was the GI Bill, very frankly. Being able to afford it. One of my older brothers, who was already a lawyer, was very influential in my decision.

Smith: Obviously, it was the right decision. You scored the highest gpa in the history of the law school.

Stevens: Well, I’ve been told that – as of that time in Northwestern Law School. I’ve been told that that was true at the time. I can’t verify it, though.

Smith: Then was that followed by your clerkship with Justice Rutledge?

Stevens: Yeah. I was down here for a year working for him.

Smith: It’s funny, I was trying to put myself in Gerald Ford’s shoes when he saw he had a vacancy in the court – you really have had a remarkably varied career, in the sense that you were in private practice, but you also had some Capitol Hill experience.
Stevens: Yes, I did and really, that was terribly important to me. I was the associate counsel appointed by the senior Republican, Chauncey Reed, on the sub-committee to study monopoly power of the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives. A long title. But actually, I was sort of co-counsel because the work was not of a very partisan nature, as it developed, although some of the preliminaries thought it might be. But we had some very interesting investigations, one of which was of organized baseball. I learned a lot about baseball during that tenure. And I met people like Branch Rickey, Ty Cobb, Mickey Mantle, Ford Frick, and that helped maintain my interest in the game.

Smith: I’m curious – I have to wonder – this is the early 1950’s, I think 1951 actually. At that point Gerald Ford was a young Congressman. Do ever remember whether your paths ever crossed?

Stevens: No, I’m quite sure they never did cross until shortly before I was appointed.

Smith: Then you came back to Chicago, you formed your own law firm.

Stevens: Yes

Smith: You taught and wrote very extensively, especially on anti-trust matters. You were a litigator, and then, were at least on the periphery Illinois politics with the Greenburg Commission. What was the Greenburg Commission?

Stevens: There was a gentleman by the name of Sherman Skolnick who had some kind of – today it would on the internet of some kind – but he communicated with the press and with people generally complaining about the integrity of the judiciary in all sorts of ways. And he brought litigation against the city of Chicago – against all sorts of defendants. And every now and then he came up with something that made a lot of sense. Most of what he did was regarded as irresponsible and off the reservation, and so forth. But he suspected that some members of the Illinois Supreme Court had improperly received some benefits from Ted Isaacs, who was the Director of Revenue of Illinois and who was indicted on a conflict of interest charge. Eventually he was exonerated by the Illinois Supreme Court, and there was a suspicion that his relationship with two or three members of the court might have affected the case.
And so, although most of Skolnick’s charges were often thought to be unfounded and so forth, there was enough smoke here so that the Illinois Supreme Court appointed the president of the Chicago Bar Association and the president of the Illinois Bar Association, Henry Pitts - the Pitts-Greenburg Commission. They were to form a commission to investigate the integrity of the judgment in the Isaacs case. They asked me to serve as General Counsel of the investigation, which I agreed to do in a brief telephone call, and found myself involved in a very interesting and difficult public inquiry for a matter of several weeks.

Smith: The outcome of that was?

Stevens: Well, the outcome of that was that we wrote a report which concluded that they had been guilty of an appearance of impropriety because one of two justices had been given an opportunity to buy stock in a bank that Isaacs had formed at a bargain rate, and the other one had received shares in the bank as what was described to be a campaign contribution, but then it turned out to be a gift to his grandchildren. There were equivocal facts there, but the net result was that they decided to resign after we published our report. We had public hearings – it was kind of a long story.

Smith: What I’m getting at – you had a lot of, for lack of a better cliche, what would be called “real world” experience…

Stevens: Well, I guess that’s true. Yes.

Smith: - long before you came to the Court. The popular notion of this as a cloister of people who move from one hushed chamber to a higher hushed chamber is not borne out in your case.

Stevens: No, I was fortunate to have a very diverse private practice. Our firm was diverse, we had a Catholic, a Jew and a Protestant. We had a Northsider, a Westsider and a Southsider, and we represented plaintiffs and defendants. We had small matters and we had important matters that we worked on.

Smith: Then in 1970 President Nixon appointed you to the Seventh Circuit. I don’t know how to ask you this – in Rome there are what are called papabili –
potential popes - and I think in the latter stages of the pontificate they all know who they are, or who they think they are. I’m not asking about you in particular, but is there a similar phenomenon on the bench? Where there are judges who, accurately or not, I’m not saying they’re campaigning for the court - but or perceive themselves as potential justices?

Stevens: Well, I don’t know, but my appointment really came out of the blue. Senator Percy, at that time, I’m not as familiar with what the process is today as compared to what was then, but, in 1970 the Senator pretty much controlled the appointment – judges are appointed with the advise and consent of the Senate – and that basically means that the Senator is given the right to veto – and at that time the Illinois Senator could veto the President’s appointment of the senator. So it was Senator Percy who was making judicial appointments in Illinois, and that, of course included the vacancy on the court of appeals.

I had known Senator Percy in college – we were classmates in college. I hadn’t seen him for a good many years, but one day he called me up – sort of out of the blue – and said he wanted to have a visit with me and could I meet him? I met him at the Ambassador Hotel on a Saturday or Sunday, I think, and he said he wanted to get my advice about the vacancies and we talked about some people and then he asked me whether I’d be interested. That’s the first suggestion that came up. I told him, I thought probably not because I had couple of rather important pieces of litigation that were very much alive then and my practice was just getting to the point where it was important to practice law rather than do something else. Anyway, our conversation developed into his suggestion that he would appoint me if I would accept the job. I thought it over and decided to accept it.

Smith: And then, of course, five years later comes the call. First of all, did you know Justice Douglas – did you have any kind of relationship with him?

Stevens: Well, yes and no. I had met him when I was a law clerk and he had a reputation as friendly Bill Douglas, and I guess he was very much liked by a large number of people, but among the law clerks he was regarded as a rather stern taskmaster, generally. As I said, I had met him and spoken to him, but I can’t say that we had a friendly relationship, by any means. And then I did
meet him after I was appointed. He retained his chambers and I spent some time talking to him then. But that’s about the extent of our connection.

Smith: There is story about one of the Douglas law clerks who was fired for going away on his honeymoon – I think he went for a weekend honeymoon. And then supposedly there was a corner of the law clerks’ library that was set aside for all of Justice Douglas’ fired clerks who were waiting to be rehired when the Justice’s mood lightened.

Stevens: I hadn’t heard that story but it is consistent with the stories that I have heard.

Smith: How was the first approach made with you that led eventually to your appointment? First, tell us about Ed Levi.

Stevens: Well, he was a contemporary of one of my older brothers and I had known him – just known him. I wouldn’t say we were close friends or anything of that nature – but when I was in practice, on two or three different occasions he had sent me business and for people who had called him and asked for recommendations and he had suggested my name and I got some very interesting work as a result of that. So we had contacts. And then shortly after we started our firm, he asked me take his anti-trust course at the University of Chicago Law School on a temporary basis because he had assumed additional responsibilities as Dean of the Law School. So I did that and I taught a course in competition and monopoly with Aaron Director, who was a very fine economist. I probably learned more in that course than in most of the courses I had during law school. Then he asked me also to teach another course in patents and anti-trust at the law school. I had seen him in professional occasions, and so forth and I would regard him definitely as a friend, but I was always a great fan of his. He had a great reputation as a scholar and everybody admired him. But we were not – we didn’t go out to lunch every day or anything like that.

Smith: Was he the person who recommended your name to President Ford?

Stevens: I think so. I know he participated in the process and I think also that he arranged the occasion when I first met President Ford and that was I think during the few days after Douglas resigned. They had a dinner at the White
House, at which they invited the chief federal judges from all the different circuits and several judges in Washington and a few other judges – it just seemed to be sort of a spontaneous entertainment of federal judges at the White House. But there were several people there, some of whom I then knew and have since learned were under consideration to fill the vacancy. It was at that dinner that I first met President Ford.

Smith: Was Justice Douglas attending?

Stevens: No, I’m quite sure he was not. But some members of the court were, and I just don’t remember for sure which ones were there – I think probably Potter Stewart was there, but I really don’t remember just exactly who all was there.

Smith: Did you have any other rivals – for lack of a better word – on the Seventh Circuit? Were there other judges being considered?

Stevens: Yes, my very good friend Phil Tone. He was a very fine judge and he clerked for Wiley Rutledge the year after I did. He was reading the newspapers, reading the Tribune when we learned that we were among the group that was being considered. Have I told you the story about our conversation about this? I did mention it in Grand Rapids, I think. But in any event, we met one afternoon, we were talking about the problems. It’s kind of a distraction from your regular work when you know that the lightning might strike.

We had agreed that if either of us heard anything from Washington, we’d tell the other one, so we would know what happened. When President Ford called me, he asked me - he said he wanted to be sure I’d accept the nomination, which of course, I was honored and delighted to do. He called me in the morning – it was the day after Thanksgiving, I think, and at the end of our conversation he said, “We’re not going to announce this until late this afternoon, so I would like you not to tell anybody until then.” I said, “Well, Mr. President, it puts me in an awkward position.” I explained our agreement, and of course he knew about Judge Tone. He said, “Well, I’m sure if you explained…” and I said, “I would like to tell him,” and he said, “Well, I’m sure if you explain later why you didn’t do it, he’ll understand.” And so I did not talk to Judge Tone, but at about 4:30 in the afternoon, if I remember
correctly, maybe 4:30 eastern time, I got a call from somebody in the White House. I don’t know for sure who it was. I think it may have been Phil Buchen in retrospect. He said that the President asked him to call me to tell me I could tell Judge Tone now. Which I thought kind of shows you what kind of a person the president was to be that thoughtful about a personal relationship. So I hung up the phone and I got up to go to see Phil and he walked in my door. He’d already heard the rumor. So the whole thing didn’t matter. But I remember that very well because I thought it gives you an insight about the kind of man that President Ford was.

Smith: Now in between those two events I assume you met with the President for a job interview?

Stevens: Only at the dinner that I described.

Smith: Really?

Stevens: And I did not meet, and I had no conversation whatsoever with Ed Levi or anybody else in the White House.

Smith: No one talked to you about your judicial philosophy?

Stevens: No. But the interesting thing I learned later is that, and the President said this, among others, that a lot of people read all of my opinions. I think he said he read either all or most of them. I know that the senator from Nebraska, who said we’ve got to appoint an average person once in a while…

Smith: Oh “mediocre”…Senator Hruska?

Stevens: He read a good many of my opinions. I don’t think he was quite as mediocre a man as people described him. He was really a very knowledgeable and intelligent senator. I had some conversations with him. He read my opinions. The judgment, as far as I can tell was made basically on the record that I had made in my opinions on the court of appeals.

Smith: That’s extraordinary – in light of how the process has evolved – some would say degenerated – or certainly been politicized since. First of all, you were confirmed 98-0.
Stevens: I was confirmed fairly promptly, yeah.

Smith: Yeah, by a vote 98-0. Were you the last justice to be confirmed unanimously?

Stevens: No, I think – I’m not positive – I think Stephen Breyer was confirmed – I think it may have been 100-0. Mine was only 98-0.

Smith: It seems like a turning point in the process. Obviously I don’t want to cast aspersions on your successors, but that a president would choose a justice with so little seeming regard for politics/ideology – as opposed to sheer judicial excellence – however that’s defined.

Stevens: Well, I’ve been told that part of the president’s motivation was to pick someone who would not be too controversial, because he was still in the process of getting the country back on track after Watergate. So I think that it was not totally apolitical in that sense. I think he thought about other factors.

Smith: Did anyone, at that time, ask your opinion on abortion, for example?

Stevens: No, and it is interesting. I’d like to just tell you – you might be interested in one side of it. That was not a controversial issue at the time – at least in terms of the nomination process. Nobody asked a question about it at the hearings. There was no discussion about it generally in the press, or anything. The big question was the death penalty, which was very controversial and the Court had decided Furman only two or three years earlier and held that the penalty – the then existing statutes unconstitutional – but that’s about the time that Justice Thomas was in law school, if I’m not mistaken. When he went through the process, a lot of people did not believe that he was not engaged in bull sessions about Roe against Wade over and over again. But in fact, at that time, it had not yet become the kind of controversial issue that it has since become. See, because the decision was 7-2 and was regarded as the substantive due process decision that kind of fell in line with the earlier decision in Griswold and it didn’t become the debatable question that it has since.

Smith: By the way, in my notes, I noticed Barry Goldwater urged Ford to appoint Robert Bork to the Court and Mrs. Ford wanted him to choose a woman.
Stevens: Yes, I think that’s right. I think the thing that worked against Bob Bork was the fact that he had done what the job required him to do during the Saturday Night Massacre – and he would have been a fine appointment – no doubt about it.

Smith: Ford himself wrote later – in terms of explaining your appointment, “I endorse his Constitutional views on the secular character of the establishment clause and the free exercise clause, while securing procedural safeguards in criminal cases and on the Constitution’s broad grant of regulatory authority to Congress.” And I know from conversations I had with him, he took – to the end of his life – great pride in your selection.

Stevens: That’s good to hear.

Smith: He was very proud of that appointment.

Stevens: Well, I’m proud to have been appointed by him, I can assure you.

Smith: There must have been stories around this place about the not-so-old days, when presidents had continuing relationships with members of this court. I mean, people like Abe Fortas and Lyndon Johnson and even, I guess, Frankfurter and Roosevelt and all that. Presumably that was a thing of the past by the time you got there.

Stevens: As far as I know. I’ve heard the same stories that others have – but can’t either confirm nor deny.

Smith: You’re a pilot, and you once said your secret ambition was to get Jerry Ford to take a ride in your airplane – “Any plane that contains the President becomes Air Force One, so I would be able to call the tower and say ‘This is Air Force One.’”

Stevens: That’s exactly right – I didn’t know I’d acknowledged that publicly, but it’s certainly a thought that went through my mind many, many times. I never had the guts to ask him. I think he would have had the sense to turn me down, too.

Smith: When did you take up piloting?
Stevens: I think in the 1960’s somewhere – when I was in my forties. I had a place, at that time, in southern Michigan, in Lakeside in Berrien County and I planned to learn to fly so I could fly to Meigs Field and back during the summer, when I had my family in Michigan. I was then able to get a small plane and go back and forth that way.

Smith: It’s customary in this town to put a label on people. At the time of your appointment you were described by many as a moderate-conservative. I’m not sure what that means – then or now – but you’ve said more recently that you still think of yourself, in many ways, as a judicial conservative.

Stevens: Oh definitely.

Smith: Explain that.

Stevens: Well, I believe the law is the law and a judge’s duty is to follow the law. And I really think that is what I do, and I think some of my colleagues are less conservative than I am. It’s not a matter of whether the case involves a political outcome that liberals or conservatives favor – that’s not what the law is all about. My good friend, Bill Bauer, was former chief judge on the Seventh Circuit and he showed me an article when I was in Chicago a couple of weeks ago that somebody had written about the fact that he described me as the only conservative on the court.

Smith: Really?

Stevens: Yeah. It was a case or cases about decisions involving the SEC and securities matters.

Smith: One reason why maybe people called you a moderate-conservative, I think you’d been quoted as saying that you had a judicial hero. Obviously you greatly admired Justice Rutledge – but you mentioned Potter Stewart’s name as someone you greatly admired.

Stevens: That’s exactly right.

Smith: And there’s your quintessential centrist – Eisenhower, Ford…
Stevens: That’s absolutely true. In fact, when I came down to the court, the papers sometimes described me as never having been reversed by the court of appeals - remember by the Supreme Court, in the opinions I’d written on the court of appeals. In a technical sense that was true, but there were several cases in which I’d taken a position that the court later disagreed with. And so, in a sense, I was wrong. But the Supreme Court decides what was right. But in all the cases on which I had written and which the Supreme Court also wrote later, I’d always agreed with Potter Stewart. I don’t argue with him, or he agreed with me. But it struck me when I came down here that he was the one who seemed most often to coincide with my own. And I still have extraordinary admiration for him. Of course the death penalty jurisprudence is always very controversial, but my views are pretty much, just almost identical with his on that whole issue.

Smith: What are the qualities that make a ‘judge’s judge”? If Potter Stewart is an example?

Stevens: I don’t know. It is just to try to do the best you can with the rules that are out there and not trying to decide everything yourself – but trying to recognize that there are a lot of other decision makers in society that have to be respected.

Smith: Let’s go back to the ’99 visit when you came to Grand Rapids. I remember asking President Ford – I think that morning I said, “Now when was the last time you talked with the Justice?” And he said, “When I appointed him.” Did you have contact at all in between those years?

Stevens: Well, it’s not quite accurate, because I did go to one or two White House dinners – and you have a very brief chance to talk with the President. I don’t remember any specifically, but I think we had that kind of contact. But it was always very brief.

Smith: Then in 1999, you were good enough to come to Grand Rapids. Correct me if I’m wrong, I’d heard through the grapevine that you’d always wanted to play golf with the man who appointed you. How did that come to pass?
Stevens: Well, there is a bankruptcy judge in Grand Rapids named Jim Gregg, whom I’d gotten to know and become friends with through the Sixth Circuit judicial conferences, and he is an avid golfer. Somehow or other he made the arrangement, I don’t know the details, but when he suggested it to me, I was delighted with the idea and the President was willing to do it and we did share a golf cart for a round of golf. It was one of the best days of my life. He was a very, very delightful companion, and that was a very special day. But I wish we would have been doing that for many years before, but, in fact, he hadn’t.

Smith: He came all the way from California to introduce you that day.

Stevens: I didn’t know that.

Smith: He did. He came all the way from California, which again is one more bit of evidence, needless to say, just how much he valued your service and prided himself on his good judgment. Do you remember – was that just kind of a social conversation on the golf course.

Stevens: Oh, for the most part, yes. I don’t remember the details other than we had a good time together. And I know that on the last hole I sank a long curling putt to tie the score in our match. We were opponents, actually. We rode together in the cart, but in the foursome we were opponents. We had a good time.

Smith: Was that the last time you had any real contact with him?

Stevens: I think so.

Smith: Let me ask you one other thing, because, again I trust you’ll let me know if I’m treading on thin ice here. I ask it in the context of his influence, real or imagined. I don’t know if you’ve read Jeffrey Toobin’s book on the Court, but Toobin has a chapter on affirmative action. The President wrote in 1999 an Op Ed piece that appeared in the New York Times.

Stevens: I think I read it.

Smith: Which described the Michigan situation in very personal terms. The fact that his best friend had been a black football player/teammate, so on and so on. And it caused a good deal of stir, and some criticism as you might imagine.
But anyway, the thing that struck me in the book, I think there was also some effort that grew out of it [the Op-Ed piece] to call attention to the service academies and how they dealt with these issues. Toobin cited this and attributed it as a factor, at least, in, for example, Justice O’Connor’s reconsideration of the issue. I’m not trying to pry, but I’m asking – do you take notice of things like that? Is something like that a factor?

Stevens: I think what you’re more directly referring to is the fact that I think that I’ve been told that President Ford was influential in having the amicus brief prepared on behalf of the Armed Services. A brief that was written by Carter Phillips, if I remember correctly. It was a very strong brief and I think, although it doesn’t often work this way, I think it was an amicus brief that was very influential in the consideration of the case. So, whether it affected Justice O’Connor’s vote or not, I really don’t know. But just my general recollection of the case is that it did highlight an important aspect of the whole issue that we all paid special attention to.

Smith: And your own views on affirmative action have evolved, haven’t they, over time? Or how would you describe it?

Stevens: That’s probably a longer story than we have time for, but there are some awfully important distinctions that are not often focused on in talking about affirmative action generally.

Smith: It’s a roving term, isn’t it?

Stevens: It’s a roving term and there’s a vast difference between action to create remedies for past wrongs, on the one hand, and actions that you think will benefit society on the other hand. I think I may have been the first member on the Court to emphasize that particular distinction in the case arising out of, I think Michigan, if I’m not mistaken, involving school teachers. There is also a vast difference between affirmative action in connection with building highways and concrete blocks, on the one hand, and educating people on the other hand. These cases are not fungible. And so, what seems, sometimes seems to be changes in one’s views, actually is application of the same basic view to a very different situation. And so I’ll just leave it at that.
Smith: That’s fine. Couple of quick things and I’ll let you go.

When the President died, I guess the whole Court was in attendance –at the State funeral up at the cathedral?

Stevens: Yes, indeed.

Smith: You must have felt a particular closeness on that day.

Stevens: I did. I flew up from Florida. I was in Florida then – to attend the services.

Smith: And then, of course, earlier this year you were honored at the annual meeting of the Ford Foundation.

Stevens: Yes.

Smith: What was the story of that?

Stevens: They asked me to attend and, of course, I was honored to do that. I actually attended that in preference to an affair here at the Court, I don’t remember what it was. It was very gratifying to be invited to that event.

Smith: Last thing. Apart from the unique and historic relationship that you had, just as someone who has been around this town a long time, how do you think people should remember Gerald Ford?

Stevens: Oh, I think they should remember he was a really great president. A man with really good judgment and with the courage of his convictions. One thing I’ll brag about – I’m kind of proud of it. When he pardoned President Nixon, I was on the Seventh Circuit. I remember going to lunch with my colleagues and, of course, that was the topic of conversation. And with two exceptions, my colleagues were dead set against what was done. Bill Bauer and I, I can still remember, said, no, it makes an awful lot of sense in the long run, think about…In fact, people have said that that’s what cost Ford the election. I think that may have actually improved his status in the election because it made the country better, so much better off, to put this all behind us. That he may actually have not directly recognized the causal connection, but I think it actually enhanced his strength in the country.
Smith: That’s fascinating because we’ll never know what the state of the country would have been if we’d spent two years with Richard Nixon on trial.

Stevens: That’s right.

Smith: You just can’t imagine.

Stevens: I think it was a very important decision and one that was dead right.

Smith: Well, on that note, I can’t thank you enough. This has been great.

Stevens: I’ve enjoyed it very much.
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Smith: You started the golf tournament here. How did that come about?

Purcell: I had a tournament before that called the Eagle County Scholarship Fund Tournament and I had met the President on the first tee probably in the early 70’s, ’71 or ’72, at the Vail course. And he filled in with us.

Smith: This was before he was president?

Purcell: Yes, before. I remember asking him what he did because he filled in our usual foursome when one didn’t show. He said, “I’m a congressman.” And I said, “Oh are you? Where?” “Michigan.” And I said, “That’s great. Come on, we’ve got a game here.” And then he started coming to my restaurant.

Smith: What’s the name of that?

Purcell: Purcell’s. Its Montauk’s now, but was Purcell’s.

Smith: And this is in Vail?

Purcell: Well, actually, it’s in Lion’s Head. But anyways, when he was president, he called me. I was running this tournament and he called and asked if he could come and bring somebody. I said, “Sure!” It was Lee Elder, the golf pro, and the African-American who became a friend of mine. And he came out and played. So, we’re sitting around, having a cocktail then and I came up with the idea that, “Next year, why don’t we call it the Gerald Ford?” “Go ahead, John. Do what you like.” And we did and the tournament it went through the roof. I’ve played in the Bob Hope. I’ve played in the Bing Crosby and all those tournaments and we had as many celebrities here in those days. So, that’s how we all got started and that’s how I met him.

Smith: What’d he talk about on the golf course?

Purcell: Oh, we didn’t talk too much about anything. Winning and gambling. It was golf, golf.
Smith: I guess golf is an opportunity to clear your head of all that other stuff.

Purcell: I think that’s a good way to put it. So, I’ve had some great times with the man and a lot of people don’t know that.

Smith: Well, we’ve been told from very good authority: a) he thought the world of you, and b) most of the time he really appreciated your sense of humor. That’s an important thing in getting a sense of anyone - what they will or won’t laugh at. Tell me about his sense of humor and how you took advantage of it.

Purcell: I think you know more than you’re coming off with here. Well, I’ll back up, if I may.

Smith: Absolutely.

Purcell: A few months before he passed on, he wanted to see me, so I flew down to Palm Springs. I was supposed to have fifteen minutes with him according to Penny Circle, just because he’s not feeling well and everything. So, I went in there.

Smith: Was this at the home?

Purcell: At the home. And, actually, it was at his home office.

Smith: The study in the house.

Purcell: Yeah. And I walked in and saluted him and he always kidded me about that. He said, “It was about time you saluted me. I was the Commander-in-Chief.” And then it started. We sat down and I kept an eye on my watch and all he wanted to talk about was the old times and things that I did to him or pulled on him as a joke. The fifteen minutes cut off and I got up and said, “Well, Mr. President, I guess I’ve got to leave. It was nice to—” “Where are you going?” “Well, you’ve got things to do.” “No, I don’t. Sit down. We’ve got to talk.” So, an hour and a half later, I’m still there with him laughing at me about some of the jokes I pulled and what happened. And, if I may, my favorite - and this one’s hard to believe - but fortunately I have a witness to the fact that this happened. Have you run into Major Bob Barrett?
Smith: Oh, I’ve known Bob for years. We did great of interview with Bob.

Purcell: He lives near me in Jupiter, Florida. In fact, I just talked to him last week. He was a Major then, a Major in the Army, and he was President Ford’s military aide. So, President Ford asked if I wanted to fly with him around. He was going to campaign at that time. And so I thought, “Wow, that’d be great.” So he picked me up in Air Force One somewhere. I think I met him somewhere in Chicago or something like that. Then we flew to Portland and we had some laughs there. And then, flying out of Portland, we went to Medford, Oregon. And then out of Medford, Oregon, we were going to fly to El Toro Marine Base.

I was sitting up with the pilots in the jump seat and the co-pilot got up to do something. The head guy, the pilot, said, “John, sit down,” so I sat down. I’m a private pilot, not with many hours, but I have my own little plane. He asked me if I wanted to fly it and I said, “Yeah, that’d be great.” That isn’t to say he was asleep. He had his hand on the controls and I was making turns and changed altitude. Then we got close to San Diego and he wrote down on papers and handed me these papers.

At that time, I was calling the approach control and Bob Barrett came into the cockpit. He looked, he was standing there and I’m like that and he leaves. Then he goes back in and tells the President, “You know, Purcell’s flying the plane.” “Okay.” So, I get out of the seat and the co-pilot gets in. We land and the co-pilot gets out and opens the door and I sit back in his seat. I’m sitting here like this and I put the Colonel’s hat on. I’ve got a pink and white golf shirt on and I’ve got this big helmet, a Colonel hat on. And I’m sitting and he’s shutting her down and all of a sudden, the cockpit door opens and it’s President Ford. He walks in and then looks at me and says, “John, great landing.” And the Colonel, the pilot, I look over at him and he goes like this, like ‘Oh, my God, what’s this guy know?’

So, he laughed about that one. Of course, people, when I tell this story, say, “Come on, you weren’t.” “I was, but if you don’t believe this, ask Bob Barrett.” But those things and other things the President let me get away with because I did a lot of stupid things and he laughed at them.
Again, if I can continue, fast forward. He ended up calling me one time when they came into Vail. I was down at my restaurant and he said, “John, how about dinner tonight? Betty is at a social event, so why don’t you and I have dinner?” “Oh, okay, I’ll pick you up at 6:30” or something. “Alright.” And so, I hung up and then I did my usual 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, – ring. It’s the Secret Service. “John.” “Yeah.” I don’t think it was Larry Buendorf, but it could’ve been Larry and those guys because he was there on his detail. He said, “Where are you taking him?” So, I thought a minute and I said, “Well, first of all, I think I’ll take him to Donovan’s Copper Bar,” which was not a bar. And he said, “You’re not going to take the President there.” “Oh, he’ll love it.” The President comes down and picks me up and we go right across from the Red Lion - a friend of mine owned it.

We walk in and it’s packed. It’s in the summer time where the good old boys with the cigarettes rolled up in their sleeves and the hard hats. He strolls up to the bar and he looks at the bartender and everything quiets down and it’s packed. And he goes, “Bartender, buy the house a round.” I’m behind him and right at the barstool, he’s wedged in between two guys. One of the guys right to his right keeps looking up at him, keeps looking at him, and I watch him. He’s going to, you know, and pretty soon, he’s wearing a yellow hard hat on his head and he touches the President and the President says, “Yes, can I help you, son?” “Would you sign my hard hat?” And he signed the hard hat and I would suggest today that hard hat is hanging somewhere. But it was funny the way he just went in there.

Smith: I tell you, it’s a real counter to his reputation as someone who was fiscally conservative.

Purcell: Yes.

Smith: Not a big tipper as a rule.

Purcell: Yeah, but he was a lot of laughs and we had a lot of fun together and it was just amazing. My biggest thrill, when we were there, was not the “I’m-with-the-President” type of attitude, but it was people that never had an opportunity, and I’d say, “You got a minute?” And, “Joe here’s Mr. President
Ford.” “Really?!!” And so that’s the thing I got out of it, but there was some others. He came to me one time and said, “John, it’s come to my attention that my daughter Susan has been drinking in your bar.” Well, I kind of knew it. She was 16 then and a friend would buy a margarita and then she’d take a drink. Well, the Secret Service were there and they probably said, “Well, hey, look.” And, I’ll never forget it. I was there and I was trying to keep from laughing, but I said, “You know, Mr. President, I’m going to check into that. I don’t know!” But I knew and then I go and said, “Susan, you’re getting my butt reamed.” And pretty soon, we stopped that.

I remember on my 45th birthday, he was involved in a surprise birthday party and it was at the Marriott and a friend of mine owned that, Kaiser Morcus. A friend was at my bar and said, “Gee, nobody’s here. Let’s go and have a drink at the Marriott.” And as I was walking down the corridor, there he was standing out in front. I go, “Hi, Mr. President. How are you doing?” “I’m doing okay. What are you doing?” “I’m over here with Dick.” “Well, you can’t come in here. This is a private party.” I go, “No, I’m not trying to do that.” He really got me because I was really taken. Then he looked at me and got me in a hold around the neck. He yanks me into the room and there’s 50, 60 people singing happy birthday. But he pulled it off. It was something stupid I would do, but he got me up on that one.

Smith: I also understand that you and Bob Barrett have experience in domestic service.

Purcell: Domestic service? Uh oh.

Smith: Dressing up, perhaps, as maids?

Purcell: Oh, God. Yes. I don’t really remember that too much. But yeah.

Smith: Was this at the White House?

Purcell: Uhm, yeah, we did that at the White House. We did some funny things at the White House. I tell you what was in my memory. I was in the Oval Office, sitting there. There was a coffee table and a big sofa and then his desk was up there. I remember being there and he was on the phone with Brent Scowcroft,
General Scowcroft, and Kissinger and, oh, I’ve forgotten the other name. In fact, he’s been in the news the last couple of years.

Smith: Rumsfeld?

Purcell: Rumsfeld, or as the President would call him, Rummy. And this is what was going down. I remember sitting there listening to him. He was saying about the Mayaguez incident, when the Cambodians captured the ship. He’s on the phone, they had a conference call, and I’m sitting there listening to it and he goes, “I want those B-52s in the air. And I ain’t coming back empty-handed, Rummy. And you guys-” He’s just really on them and he’s saying “I’m going in there and getting them.” I’m looking down on the coffee table now and I’m doing this trying not to look. It said ‘Top Secret.’ I’m going “Whoops”, so I was getting up and thinking, “I’d better get out of here.” And he took a break and said, “John, sit down.” So, I’m sitting down like this and the joke was “I got to get out to the press room.” “Okay, guys, give me a little dough and I’ll tell you what’s going on.” But it was exciting to be there. Just by accident, I’m sitting in the Oval Office and I remember being in there with my feet up on the desk and had a cigar. I don’t smoke. And to have my feet up in the Oval Office and sitting back and he came in.

But, you know, he let me get away with all that and most of it is somewhat unbelievable, I guess. Some people might say, “Come on.” There was one little episode that we had in Sun Valley. We played in a tournament there, I forget the name of it, but a baseball player, Ralph Harding, I think. No, Ralph Harding was a congressman. I was there with Tip O’Neill and Bob Barrett, President Ford. So, we’re sitting in the carts, our cart and the President with Tip O’Neill. And Tip O’Neill is from Boston. I’ve got to watch myself – I’m starting to talk like this is about me, but it just shows some of the funny things that he let me get away with. And I sat there and I was looking. I looked down in the golf cart - where they put these drinks was five or six cigars. I’m sitting there and I say, “Mr. President” and he said, “Oh, those are Tip’s.” “Oh, okay.” So, anyway, Tip is out there and Ford gets up to do it and I grab the cigars and take the cigars. We get further on the second hole and he’s talking to President Ford and he says, “God dang it, Jerry. God. I left my
cigars in the room. Aw damn.” I come in and I go, “Oh, Mr. Speaker, have one of mine.” Well, I did that for about three holes and Barrett tipped him off. And, on the last cigar, Tip O’Neill was telling about how great guys we are from Boston, Irish and everything. “Oh, yeah.” “Yeah, we stick together, kid.” And I look over and President Ford’s got his hand on his face and he’s shaking his head and he brought that up on my last meeting about that. The cigar trick, you know. “Oh, have one of mine,” and I’d stolen them.

Smith: He and Tip were clearly very close.

Purcell: Oh, as a matter of fact, Tip was sitting there talking like that and he was saying what kind of good friends they were and he said, “But, you know, when I get down in Congress, I’ll kick his ass just like anybody else. But he’s a good pal of mine, John.” And they were. It was a great relationship that they had.

Smith: Clearly, a relationship built on trust.

Purcell: Yeah.

Smith: Which is seemingly missing today. It’s not so much ideological differences as people just don’t trust each other.

Purcell: I know it. It seems that way, doesn’t it?

Smith: Let me ask you one thing because one of the banes of his existence - and I’m sure it’s true for any celebrity, certainly for former Presidents - was autograph seekers.

Purcell: Yes.

Smith: And my sense was he was very good about it most of the time, except when he saw the professionals, the collectors. And he could spot those, how did he handle his celebrity?

Purcell: Well, you know, I’m trying to think of any type of incident that happened when I was with him and the Secret Service were standing off. If I’d seen it and my relation grew to a point where I felt that I had the right to do it, “Excuse me, sir. Not now. He’s playing golf.” Or “No, sir, he’s having a
drink or having dinner.” He’d be in my restaurant and I made sure no one bothered him, but he was really a generous guy on that. I mean, I don’t see any incident that he sloughed people off.

Smith: We talked to people who said one of the wonderful things about Vail – generally, this area - was that the locals tended to leave him alone.

Purcell: That’s a true story. That is true. They did. But, you know, I’ll sit there trying to think of some of the other funny things that he did and I’m drawing a blank.

Smith: Over those years, among other things, you saw he became friends with Jimmy Carter. That was something that no one could’ve predicted in ’76. There’s the famous incident when Bill Clinton came out and golfed here. Did he talk about Richard Nixon?

Purcell: You know, I guess I’ve got to be careful here, but I would tell you this and everybody would say remember, “Oh God, he pardoned Richard Nixon. God, that was awful.” And his whole philosophy was it was good for the whole country. My opinion - I don’t think he liked Richard Nixon. That’s the way I perceived it. So, when people would start bad rapping him for it, he didn’t like Richard Nixon, so that was no sweetheart deal.

Smith: You’re not the first person to say that. I’m wondering, because President Ford has reputed to have said in later years that Richard Nixon never thanked him for the pardon. That’s a revealing comment and Ford was such an honest guy, he was genuinely shocked that Nixon lied to him.

Purcell: Yeah. I couldn’t comment on whether he said that, but I think you’re right on some of the part there.

Smith: I’ve often thought whether in a curious sort of way, maybe one of the things that brought him and Jimmy Carter together was they’d both run against Ronald Reagan.

Purcell: Yeah.

Smith: They had that in common.
Purcell: He had a nephew that used to come out and had some liaison between him named Hugh Carter. And I got to know him a little bit. You know, it was an interesting relationship because at the funeral, Jimmy Carter was there and he spoke. And I sat there and it was quite nice what he said, you know. I mean, to take the time, because a lot of other people didn’t show up, but he did. That was interesting.

Smith: I can’t let you go without at least asking about the maids story.

Purcell: I don’t recall too much about that.

Smith: Okay.

Purcell: I don’t.

Smith: Does Barrett have these brainstorms or was it mutual spontaneous combustion?

Purcell: Yes! It was Barrett’s fault! Yes, I think that occurred at Bass House. I don’t remember. Oh, God. But, if I could stray just a second, again, I want to apologize for talking about myself and Barrett, but just to show you how ridiculous some of the stuff was. Bill Gulley, did that name ever come up to you?

Smith: Yes.

Purcell: He was the head of all the Air Force One and he was a Sergeant Marine and had his office at the White House. So, Barrett and I were always kind of playing funny jokes on him and Ford was always laughing, you know, are we going to get Gulley? I said, “Yeah.” So, we went in. Now, people you didn’t want, we found a ladder and we got up into the ceiling of the White House. It was this big and they had a little ramp down there, a walkway, so we walked down and figured out where Gulley was sitting back with his feet up on the desk watching a Notre Dame game. So, the ceiling was about, I’m going to guess, twelve feet and we found where his office was and pulled out the tile. Bob had me by the feet and I was hanging down through. Now, President Ford’s version of this is a little different. So, I’m hanging down and I go, “What’s the score?” Gulley looks around like this, “Notre Dame’s getting
killed!” Looks up and goes, “Jesus! What are you doing?” And we pulled back.

Smith: Hi jinks.

Purcell: I mean, we acted like teenagers. You know, we’d just run around the place and then Ford invited me to a state dinner. Now, that’s the joke, you know. I mean, me at a state dinner? I remember him calling me and saying, “You want to come back for the Prime Minister of Ireland?” “Me? Okay!” So, I go back and I stayed with them, but the table he put me at - I’m sitting with the Kennedys.

Smith: Really?

Purcell: Yeah, I go, “How’d I get in here?” But, he took care of me like that. With Teddy and Caroline and a couple other guys, but it was a big thrill to say, “Well, I’ve been to a state dinner.” But it was only because of Ford. Why would he go out of his way to do it? But he was always trying to pull the wool over my eyes, too.

Smith: Really?

Purcell: Well, yeah, in a lot of things. I mean, it’s been so long that I forget some of them.

Smith: I guess, a better idea of his sense of humor, because his reputation was of someone who wasn’t a natural joke teller. But he would laugh at someone else’s joke.

Purcell: Yeah. Yeah, he would. It was just fun, the things we did. And we raised a lot of money for all those charities that we had and everything.

Smith: And then he decided after, I guess, twenty years to end it.

Purcell: Yes, I left after twelve and Bob Barrett took it over and he ran it. You know, it ran its course. It’s just a great time. I took a lot of my time and traveled talking to the pros and stuff. Jack Nicklaus was a big help to me.

Smith: They were really friends, weren’t they?
Purcell: Yeah, they became friends through the Ford tournament. Jack and I still play a little golf. He lives near me. In fact, I’m going July 24th to his 50th anniversary. Have you talked to Nicklaus?

Smith: We have not, no. That’s someone we should talk to.

Purcell: You should, because every time I call him, well, he moved here because of it. He had a home right here, a big log home. And I could call him on President Ford and he’d say, “Oh, yeah, I’m there.” In fact, to show you what kind of a good friend he is, he called, and with Ford, I had, I guess, the privilege of him calling me when I was going to the funeral and he said, “If you want, you can ride up with me.” I was making my reservations to fly up to the funeral and I rode up in Jack’s Gulfstream, which was nice. And he was a pall bearer. But he’s got some stories and I know if you’d call him, he’d be an interesting guy to talk to. If you have any trouble, I’ll talk to him. And if you have the time, he’s in Palm Beach, but he’s a very accommodating person.

Smith: That’s great.

Purcell: And it’d be some nice stuff to come out of there, I think.

Smith: Now, tell me, you must’ve gotten to know Mrs. Ford during this period as well.

Purcell: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Was there anything about her that surprised you as you first made her acquaintance?

Purcell: No, the great picture I sent back and the Secret Service went bonkers over it. She came down to the restaurant and I had a little motorcycle. I said, “Do you want to go ride the motorcycle?” She got on the back and I’m driving around on the motorcycle where they’re in the Secret Service. And she did that. But the one great statement that came out of Betty Ford was because of the Betty Ford Center and her knowing me, “You know, John, there’ll always be a bed for you at the Betty Ford Center.” So, I never took her up on it.

Smith: She had a great sense of humor.
Purcell: Oh, yeah. I mean, to hop on and she’s got a dress on and she’s riding on the back of my motorcycle and I’m going through Lion’s Head.

Smith: It’s funny because it’s a classic opposites attract. I mean, he was such a punctual guy, a stickler for it. And, of course, she was exactly the opposite.

Purcell: Yeah, I would say that seems to be a good analogy of them. I had some great times and, you know, when I come back to Vail now and naturally nothing ever stays the same. It’s got big buildings, big traffic problems. Then it was just a frontier town when we were here and we just did everything.

Smith: My sense is that they were very visible, very active, very much participants in the community.

Purcell: Oh yeah, there was never anything that “I can’t go there.” It was “We’re going to go to Pepe’s and sit on the porch and have a couple of drinks.” It was “Alright. I’ll meet you there.” And, a matter of fact, during the Ford tournament, I asked them if we could have one of the parties at his house, at the Bass House. “Sure!” So, we had 200 players. Here we go. And everybody’s at the Bass House and he’s hosting the thing. So, you know, it was just a great thrill.

Smith: Tell me about the house that they built, because we haven’t been there.

Purcell: Mitch Hoyt was the contractor. He built four homes there. Leonard Firestone’s, President Ford’s, Dee Keaton, and Kaiser Morcus, who I talked to last week. He lives in Palm Springs now.

Smith: Yes, we’ve talked to Kaiser.

Purcell: Did you? Yes, he’s a character and Ford had a lot of fun making fun of him. We put a little name on him. He’s about 5’4” and looks like Tattoo from Fantasy Island. You know, “The plane! The plane!” And even Ford was doing that to him, which was funny. But those four houses were built by Mitch Hoyt and they were big homes. They’re right here, as you know. It was neat to go there.

Smith: Did they do a lot of entertaining?
Purcell: You know, I can’t recall if they did.

Smith: For example, the World Forum, when that took place here, presumably there would be entertaining. And that’s another thing. You talk about opposites. I mean, politically, Jim Callaghan, who’s an old line from the Socialist Labor Party; Giscard, who’s kind of lofty and aristocratic and French; Helmut Schmidt who’s certainly far to the left of Ford politically and yet, they seemed to absolutely bond.

Purcell: You know, I couldn’t comment on that because, you know, I stayed away at certain events like that. That’s not me. “I’ll see you on the golf course.” I didn’t do that.

Smith: Was he sensitive to the whole caricature, the Chevy Chase thing? I mean, a guy who was such a natural athlete - did it bother him?

Purcell: I don’t think it did. You know, who was the Texan that was the vice president?

Smith: LBJ was the vice president under Kennedy.

Purcell: That’s right. He took a shot at him, too. I’ll never forget that, but here’s the fact of what kind of athlete he was. You couldn’t touch him off the tee when he was hitting it. It was always like as they kid ‘long and wrong’, but he could smack it. I mean, I got people that are good players that were going, “Sheesh.” His putter was his weak point.

Smith: Did he ever get a hole in one?

Purcell: I was with him when he did. He made a hole in one and I can’t recall, it might’ve been in Palm Springs. I can’t recall where it was, but it went left and hit a branch and kicked it right and it went in the hole. Needless to say, being the jerk I am, he had to buy the drinks. We didn’t let him off.

Smith: What was his reaction?

Purcell: Oh, God. At first he was kind of in shock. And then he started laughing. I go, “Thank God for that tree!” But I was with him. That was a lot of fun.
Smith: Did you see him around his kids?

Purcell: Yeah, he was a good dad. Susan and I became very good friends. In fact, I’ve seen her not too long ago and we talked. She moved from Albuquerque and now she’s living in, seems like, not Kentucky, but—

Smith: Oklahoma.

Purcell: Oklahoma. That’s right. And we talked about that, she had some health issues that were scary. But she was a lot of fun, too. I knew Mike and Jack, but Steve and I played a little golf. I remember we were down in Florida at Jupiter. And Barrett’s with me and Steve’s there and we’re in some bar right on the ocean and we decide to call his mother. And he calls and he says, “Mom, guess who I’m with?” and he hands me the phone. She says, “Oh, my God, my son’s with you and Barrett’s there?” “Yep.” “Oh, my God, not you two again!” That was one of the last things.

Smith: Have you had any contact with her since the President died?

Purcell: Nope.

Smith: Have you talked with her at all?

Purcell: I did at the funeral, but I was very standoffish. I came up and did my thing and backed off. I was more depressed than anybody at the thing. I just couldn’t handle it. I couldn’t handle it.

Smith: Were you surprised by the amount of public reaction that there was? You know, he’d been out of the public eye for awhile and yet, it almost seemed to build as the week went on.

Purcell: You know, I don’t know. I have to say because I was prejudiced and I’d expect that.

Smith: But it must’ve been nice to hear all the nice things that were said.

Purcell: Yes. You know, there was one thing I forgot to tell you about Jack Nicklaus on Gerald Ford. When Gerald Ford lost, you know, he’d lost Ohio by that much. And I’d seen Jack and he was visibly upset and he’s mad. And he
said, “John, all I had to do was throw those golf clubs aside for thirty days and we would’ve won Ohio.” He was upset about not doing that. That really caught me because you don’t see Jack mad too much and he was mad.

Smith: That’s a great story. That last meeting you had with him, did you know that was going to be your last meeting?

Purcell: I walked out the door and I started thinking and I think I stood there and my wife was with me and I was upset. I was upset and she drove. I couldn’t drive. So, it looked not good to me. I kept saying, “You know, you always look back at things and say, ‘This will be the last time I’ll ever see this place’ or ‘This is the last time I’ll see them.’” You know, when you walk out of, like, Dee Keaton, you never heard of him, but I’ll tell you this and I would challenge anybody that would say it. Dee Keaton was President Ford’s hero and mine. This guy was one of the four, but he ran the Ford tournament and there was a lot about this man that was unbelievable.

Smith: Tell us about him.

Purcell: He’s passed on.

Smith: Yeah. Who was he and why was he significant?

Purcell: He was a guy that Ford got to know and he helped President Ford on many things. Politically, I don’t know, but I know that Dee Keaton knew Richard Nixon and helped him on his campaign. He wasn’t a political guy, but he was a very close friend to Leonard Firestone. And then he was an oil guy, became an oil guy, and he won the AT&T, the Bing Crosby in 1974 with Hale Irwin and he was a golfer and everything. But he was one of the most influential guys of my life and I think I can say that about the President what he thought about him. If it’s a problem “Let’s call Dee.” “Let Dee do that.” “Call Dee” on anything and Dee was there.

Smith: That’s interesting. Who were his friends?

Purcell: Uhm, who was his friends? Gosh, I can just say Dee and Leonard Firestone. He liked Kaiser and, of course, Bob worked for him. God, I’m trying to think. The Bass boys, he knew them. He had a couple in town like the
Gramschammers, he liked Pepe and Shieka and Bill Hanlon and he just knew those guys.

Smith: Did you ever hear him disparage anyone? Obviously, he had contact with an awful lot of people, political folks and others. Were there people he really—

Purcell: He never talked to me about them. I mean, I might have heard a God damn, but, you know, I never talked like that.

Smith: He was basically a very positive person, wasn’t he?

Purcell: Yeah, he was. And, you know, what can I say? Look at me, I always say “Where did you live in Massachusetts?” when people ask me. And I said, “Well, my address was 101 Tobacco Road” because we were Tobacco Roaders and now very poor people. One other thing, he and Betty invited my mom to the White House. She came down and went through and everything. It was the biggest thrill of her life. She’d never been out of Boston and then to get what this guy did for me, I mean, I’m in Air Force One. I’m at the White House. I mean, “Excuse me. What are you doing here?” You know, it was just wild. Great experience. And, so, I walked down three or four days ago and I walked by and I know where his house at the lodge was and then, you know, where he stayed. It was just yesterday, I walked down the street and it was just memories. I don’t know a lot. I know the Gramshammers. I know a lot of people, but you think, “Oh God, remember what…?” And it was funny how it comes and gets me. Walk by the Bass House and I’d sit there and I’d think, “God dang it” and now everything’s gone. But nothing’s forever.

Smith: But think of the memories you have. That’s pretty precious.

Purcell: Oh, boy, you know, it’s that famous song by Tommy Edwards “It’s only the good times we remember.”

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Purcell: Oh, God, I mean, I’d have to say as a man that brought a lot of laughs, a lot of enjoyment to a lot of people. And he was not a cheapskate. He wouldn’t be running around. I can say and I worked for Clint Eastwood for twelve years,
he was a friend of mine, and there’s very few Hollywood guys that I haven’t met and politicians and athletes because of my Carmel connections and everything, I know them all, and here’s my one thing. If you like them on the screen, don’t meet them. But, with Gerald Ford, there was a guy that “John, you’re not picking up this tab. Step aside. I got the tab.” Where, the Hollywoodies in most cases, you pick up the tab for the right to hang out with me. And I learned that. So, him, no. And if he’d seen me doing something, he’d get a little testy with me if he thought I was spending money that I shouldn’t have been on him.

Smith: And how do you think she should be remembered?

Purcell: You know, I just think of her at the Betty Ford Center and how kind and sincere. She was sincere. It wasn’t, you know, like celebrities can get, “Hi, how you doing?” No, she would focus on people and “Now, what happened?” you know. And that’s what she was. And, to me, she always said, “Hi, John!” And she sent a great picture to my mom with her and Betty and my mother’s name was Betty. And she just was always concerned. “How’s your mom?” You know, so it wasn’t, “Me, me, me”. It was, “John…” I’ve seen it with other people. “How’s she?” and in town and everything. So, she was and is a nice lady now and long in her years and everything and stuff. I see one thing where I missed the boat. I was down at his house when I was down there and he asked me because he was a swimmer and I’m a swimmer, he said, “John, do you have—” and I had to go. And I said I should have stayed. “John, The doctors said I can’t swim without somebody. Would you swim with me?” And I was the last one to swim with him. He did the laps on the pool. I missed the boat.

Smith: This is perfect. Thank you so much.
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Smith: First thing, and most obvious, I guess, is, how and when did your paths, in a professional way first cross?

Nunn: Well, I was first involved in the Ford campaign in 1976. I worked for the Kent County Republican Committee then, and I was part of a group which has become known as Scatter Blitzers. We went out to Kansas City for the convention, but prior to the convention we flew or drove to four or five states, with upwards of sixty to a hundred people and campaigned on President Ford’s behalf. So when the opportunity became available, we went out to Kansas City and campaigned there for him as well.

Smith: When you went out, were you confident that he had the nomination, or was it still, in fact, somewhat up in the air?

Nunn: Oh, it was still very much up in the air, especially during convention with the Reagan delegates and the Reagans themselves. [I] remember the Reagans coming to the convention late, holding up the proceedings, with either the intentional or unintentional consequence of it not making prime time out on the East Coast. So, even as a young man, I was very aware of the politics being played at the national convention level.

Smith: Was there bitterness at that convention?

Nunn: I think there was bitterness on the part of his supporters. I can’t speak for President Ford and the rest of his staff – they always seemed upbeat. I worked in the administrative office there during the convention. But I think there was disappointment on the part, especially of young people – that this was their first engagement in a national political race, and for somebody that they felt very strongly about because of the relationship.

Smith: Have you always been interested in politics?
Nunn: Pretty much so.

Smith: And it survived Watergate?

Nunn: Yes. Certainly.

Smith: I suppose it helps when you have a hometown boy who is in the White House.

Nunn: And when you have somebody that’s as admirable and as respectable as he was. I think there was never any doubt within our community, those people that knew him even in his Congressional days, of what he really stood for and what he represented in terms of West Michigan values and in terms of our personal kinds of values. What was right, what was fair, what was good. That translated throughout his years in office, Congressional and presidential. But even after that, the way he looked at, as he’d say to me often, politics, in general - how much politics had changed because of the disrespect. That you can be disagreeable without being disrespectful.

Smith: Tell us something about him that might surprise people, generally.

Nunn: I’ll go back to Grand Rapids. Even after leaving the White House, even after moving to California and Vail, how much he still cared about knowing what was going on in Grand Rapids. He took the Grand Rapids Press. But every trip home here that he’d make when I was traveling with him, if I was upstairs in the suite with him, he’d be grilling me on, “What’s this new building over here?”, “What’s going on with so and so?”, “What have you heard about so and so?” So, to him, this was always home, even though he didn’t live here permanently after he retired, this was always home in his heart. Frequently we’d end up taking routes that weren’t planned. He drove the agents nuts. I’d be in the room and he’d say, “Let’s drive by the house that I grew up in,” or, “Let’s drive by South High School.” The agents were very accommodating, of course, but that was just his curiosity. That was his true interest in Grand Rapids.

Smith: It was almost like he was still a Congressman. That level of interest.

Nunn: And he followed politics here locally. He knew what was going on. He had a keen interest in his community.
Jon Nunn

August 7, 2008

Smith: So then, how did you become more formally associated?

Nunn: After losing the election and after moving to California, he started making periodic visits back to Grand Rapids.

Smith: By the way, let me interrupt for a second because we talked to a couple of people about this. I take it there were locals who resented the fact that he didn’t come back here – that he went to California.

Nunn: I think there were some comments, if I remember, letters to the editor, and there were comments in general. But, I think it’s very understandable why he did – a lot to do with Mrs. Ford’s health and it being easier for her. But if you look at the history, some of which I’ve provided you, of the number of trips he made back to Grand Rapids since I started being involved in those trips, about 1982, there’s well over, I think, eighty plus trips, if not more. It’s really interesting.

Smith: And was there a kind of a routine - a set routine to these trips? Were there things that you could, almost like clockwork, count on happening? Did he stay at the same place?

Nunn: Stayed at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel, always stayed up on the twelfth floor suite, which became known as the President and Mrs. Ford’s Suite. One thing that was always routine was there was always butter-pecan ice cream in the freezer for him. Unless Mrs. Ford was here, and even then sometimes, he’d always say, “I’ll bet there is a little ice cream in the fridge, isn’t there Jon?” And so before he would make his phone call, that was routine – every night, if I was the only person traveling with him, if Lee wasn’t here, or some other staff person, or Mrs. Ford, I’d usually be the first person to see him in the morning and the last person at night. And when we got back to the suite, I’d get his ice cream ready, and before I’d leave, I’d kind of review what we were going to do tomorrow, but he’d always say, “Get my bride on the phone. Get Mrs. Ford on the phone.” He’d refer to her as many different things, but always endearing, obviously a lot of affection. So that was very routine for him.
Smith: When she was here with him, did she frown upon ice cream, or did she watch his diet?

Nunn: Mrs. Ford watched his diet, yes. But he was very conscientious about his diet. President Ford was not somebody who snacked a lot between meals. He believed in having a big breakfast, a very hearty breakfast. He got up very early, he wouldn’t go to bed until quite late, considering his days. Rarely was he back in the suite before eleven o’clock at night and then he’d be making phone calls to her, watching the news. And then he’d ask for a wakeup call of like six-thirty the next morning. The papers were always requested to be outside his door, and I’d order his breakfast. He was conscientious about what he ate, and very healthy. He stopped eating eggs in the mid-80s and that was for health reasons, I think. He would eat oatmeal, fresh fruit, toast – buttered, prunes – so I think he was very conscientious. He didn’t snack between meals.

Smith: Multiple newspapers?

Nunn: Multiple newspapers – anything we could get our hands on.

Smith: He loved newspapers, didn’t he?

Nunn: He sure did. Well, I think he felt it was – he was obviously interested – but he felt it was kind of, in part, his responsibility as a leader to be aware of what issues were going on. And I think that was very admirable of him.

Smith: Were there friends that he would stop in – obviously, at the beginning there was still family around here – would he visit old friends, family members?

Nunn: He always wanted to see his brother – both brothers when the younger one was alive.

Smith: That would be Dick and Jim.

Nunn: Frequently, if there was time permitting, there would be a family dinner or family and friends out at Kent. He liked going out to Kent Country Club, where he had been a member. He’d always stop in to the bar area, and there is a gentleman that had been there for forty years, I can’t remember his name,
but he’d always stop and say hello to him. He was everyone’s friend. It was Jerry.

Smith: Was it difficult at all to be in public, to go to a restaurant, just because in the best sense of the word – what you just said – but then the autograph seekers and the celebrity hounds. Let’s face it, they follow in the wake.

Nunn: Sure. If I was making arrangements, and depending on the restaurant, the hotel staff or the restaurant staff were always very cooperative. I’d talk to them about that so that he would be able to enjoy himself when he was out. Periodically, somebody would come up and approach him, and I’d be watching from afar and if I thought it was going to be a problem or something, or an inappropriate time, what I would try to do usually, is just intercede in the situation and ask the person if they would give it to me and I would get it signed and get it back to them at an appropriate time. That’s usually how I tried to handle things.

Smith: Ann Arbor – tell us about the visits there, which were frequent.

Nunn: Which were frequent. Well, that was like going home for him again, also. We’d be riding in from the airport, and he’d be reminiscing about fraternity row, about working in the cafeteria, about his days on the football team there. He truly loved – Ann Arbor was his second home. Grand Rapids was his first, but Ann Arbor was truly his second. Regardless of what activity we were there for, whether it was on the schedule, free schedule or not, there would be a trip to see the football team. And that was usually, I’m sure for him, for me or for anybody, other staff that was traveling with him, the highlight of the whole trip.

Smith: Tell me, because I’ve been told by others who were there, when he got up to give a pep talk, he was eloquent, forceful, powerful, more so than in conventional speechmaking. It was almost like flipping a switch. There was something about that place and those players.

Nunn: Exactly. You could just see the inspiration that the players had. I was fortunate to be in those rooms or on the field with him, and there was a hush, there wasn’t one sound and every players eyes were glued on him and every
word he said. And he followed U of M football. He knew every game. He could reference the past three or four games and what this particular quarterback did. And he frequently asked Lloyd Carr, “Where’s so and so?”, and have the young man stand up and talk to him about his play. He always had to throw in a little history of himself about when they played football with no helmets, or pigskin helmets kind of thing, to get a chuckle. But it was a transformation when he went in. It was just different. And he would never leave the field or the room without personally greeting and shaking the hands of every player as they filed by.

Smith: It must have been a thrill for the kids.

Nunn: Oh, it was tremendous. And I remember once, I want to think it was Mike Ford or Steve Ford, was in town, and I suggested, not that they wouldn’t have done it already, but suggested, “You really need to see this,” and Penny came along and they were just in awe afterwards. It really brought tears to your eyes to see the charisma and his really heartfelt devotion to that institution and the game of football.

Smith: And by all accounts, he had a very special relationship with Bo Schembechler?

Nunn: Yes.

Smith: It’s interesting because when we interviewed Peter Pocklington earlier this year, [he said] the President did a pep talk every year for the Edmonton Oilers. Peter brought the whole team down to California once a year and the President would meet with them. He obviously could have been a motivational speaker – at least where athletes were concerned.

Nunn: Well, an interesting story, not University of Michigan, but Notre Dame. He was invited down there to receive their Sports Blazer Award. I don’t remember the particular title of it. Marty Allen went along. But it was a really big event. I believe they were playing Brown University and up to that point Notre Dame had not won a game, or maybe they’d only won one out of five, I can’t remember. President Ford addressed the team and I remember that morning there was a breakfast. He went back to the suite because Michigan,
Michigan State was playing and he watched that for a while before he headed over to the stadium. He sat up in the president’s box and I think it was with Father Malloy, and Notre Dame ended up winning the game and Father Malloy gave him great credit and asked if he’d come back on a periodic basis to just give that same pep talk to the team.

Smith: Well, as I recall, I think they went on to have a very successful season.

Nunn: Yes. But he was very particular when it came to football games and whether he was watching them at home, which I wasn’t present when he was doing that, but if I was with him when we were out of town, Notre Dame, or whatever, he’d always ask that I make sure that I surrounded him with people that would not talk to him during the game. And not even during the game, but in between plays. I mean, he was focused on that game and he wasn’t there to chit chat and to socialize. He was there for the game.

Smith: The retirement of his jersey – that must have been a very emotional moment for everyone.

Nunn: It was, it was obviously at the big house. He had talked to the team. I believe it was the day before. And I remember the retirement came at half-time. The whole family was there. We were on the far side of the stadium and had to come through the main tunnel where the players come in, and I’d only once before experienced being on the floor of a field – of a stadium when it was full, and that was in Notre Dame – but this is a much larger stadium. This is the stadium in the country as far as President Ford is concerned. And so we put President and Mrs. Ford on a golf cart because it was a very long way around the field and they couldn’t walk across the field. And the minute they entered, and the crowd saw them, all the way around the field, the cheers and roars and the applause was just thunderous. It was unbelievable. I think it probably was, of all the trips I was able to participate in, one of the highlights, and I know it was for him. It was just a great ceremony, very meaningful.

Smith: Speaking of meaningful ceremonies, I remember vividly the dedication of the staircase – the Saigon Embassy staircase. Which, to this day, I suspect Henry Kissinger is still scratching his head over why in the world would you want to
include that, or to remind people of that. And of course, I saw it from the
angle – there were 150 members of the Vietnamese community from West
Michigan. It was a very bitter-sweet occasion. What was it like for him?

Nunn: Well, I think it was very emotional. But I think it was very reinforcing for him
and the decision he made. If you remember, at that time, many in the
Congress and many in the military were advocating the withdrawal of our
troops and our troops only. President Ford was adamant that we do everything
we could, as a government, to help as many of our allies as possible escape
and not be left behind. And so when he issued that evacuation order for
eighteen hours, they continued to evacuate as many – all the American troops,
but as many of the Vietnamese allies of ours.

The day before, you and he had made a tour of the exhibit here, and the
History Channel wanted to do an interview of him about that time in history
and about that evacuation. I was in the room, in the back of the room with the
videographer and the interviewer, and the person interviewing President Ford
happened to be Vietnamese. He asked President Ford a series of questions and
to document the history on that. President Ford did, and told the pros and the
cons and that he felt strongly and still does to this day that that was the very
right decision. When he finished that statement, the gentleman said, “Mr.
Ford, I was one of those that you evacuated.” It was so emotional I had to
leave the room at that point. And I know it brought tears to President Ford’s
eye.

Smith: The ninetieth birthday celebration – both the White House and here in Grand
Rapids. Tell us about the White House event.

Nunn: Well, the White House event was just phenomenal. It was another highlight, I
think, for him, and it was a highlight for the family. The entire family
attended. I believe it was in the East Room. It was a beautiful event. We spent
a couple of days in D.C. The event in Grand Rapids, the homecoming – the
one in D.C., I believe was July 16th, his birthday is actually on July 14th. Two
weeks later, he came to Grand Rapids and Susan accompanied him. There
were between seven and eight thousand people on the lawn at the Ford
Museum to celebrate his birthday. Again, it was great homecoming for him.
Smith: Of course, the house he always regarded as home in D.C. was at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue. So in addition to the White House dinner, I think you said he had actually visited Capitol Hill that day or the day before.

Nunn: The day before. He wanted to make a visit up to the Hill, and the Hill wanted him to make a visit up there. So first he went to Speaker Hastert’s office. Then he walked clear across to Congress, which is quite a hike, over to the Senate for Senator Frist. And then our plan was that he make his way onto the floor of the Congress. Well, to do so, he wanted to go through the Congressional Cloakroom.

There happened to be an eighty-some year old woman who he wanted to greet, who started working in the cloakroom with her father when she was thirteen years old. So, again, I think it’s little things like that, that show a lot about the personality of this person who’s been with kings and queens and leaders and millionaires, and captains of industry. But he still remembered lesser known people in his life that were very, very important to him.

So, after he greeted her, our Congressman, the district congressman, was from President Ford’s district from Grand Rapids, Vern Ehlers, took him onto the floor of House, from the side, in the back, unannounced, and they slowly started making their way as members were making speeches and mingling around the floor. As more and more people started paying attention and noticing, all of a sudden the entire Congress started coming towards him, embracing him, many old friends. They broke into chorus singing, Happy Birthday, Mr. President. From what I understand, it was totally unprecedented and singing was forbidden in the House. Very emotional for him, very, very emotional.

Smith: Must have been. That must have been a homecoming, too.

Nunn: Oh, certainly. The House of Representatives and his years there – his many friendships there.

Smith: The Reagan funeral in 2004, that must have been doubly emotional in the sense that they were of a similar age. Obviously, they had been rivals and adversaries and all that, but that had been pretty much forgotten and relegated
to the past. But I wonder if he sat there in the midst of all this pageantry sort of as a preview of coming attractions.

Nunn: I know that Mrs. Ford was there with him and I did that trip with him. They commented a couple of times in the suite in Willard about some of the ironies of people they had recently lost, as friends or acquaintances. I think there was definitely a reflection between themselves on the immediacy in the sense of their mortality. They took everything in really good stride, but I think it was very hard, even though as you say, there were some rivalries and some past bitteresses there, possibly. But it was, I think, a very emotional thing for him to be there under those circumstances, in a sense to recognize that this was an actual mirror of what was going to happen for him and/or Mrs. Ford someday.

I remember the motorcade going up to the cathedral and I was just overwhelmed on the number of other motorcades. I guess I hadn’t really ever experienced that or anticipated it. But within like a thirteen or fifteen block radius, all the streets were shut off, and there were motorcades stacked on motorcades, stacked on motorcades. I remember we took a different entrance into the cathedral, because at the main entrance, there were at least thirty or forty steps, and at that point his knees were bothering a little bit. So we took a side entrance, and I referred to it, and I remember Mrs. Ford winked at me or something, and I said, “We’re just doing the side entrance, or ramp entrance.” I’d never refer to it (handicap) as anything other than we’re just taking the ramp entrance, because we had a holding room there. I explained to him that we’d go to hold until the others arrived and he and Mrs. Ford would then walk out.

Smith: Did you see him in the presence of his fellow presidents?

Nunn: Yes, I walked President and Mrs. Ford, along with the lead agent, up to the section where all the former presidents were seated high ranking officials. They were all very happy to see him and Mrs. Ford, especially the Carters. They always seemed to have a very good relationship, especially considering the ’76 campaign. It always amazed me, but again, it shouldn’t have because it’s a reflection of the kind of person that President Ford was. But, obviously, President Carter defeated him, but it didn’t take long for them to become, I
think, friends in a lesser capacity, but then over time, friends in a very close capacity.

Smith: They really enjoyed each other’s company, didn’t they?

Nunn: Yes. I think they had a lot of respect for each other – a great deal of respect. And then again, that goes back to President Ford. I mean, President Ford was all about respect. Another one that they were very close to was Lady Bird Johnson.

Smith: Which again, I think might surprise some people.

Nunn: But it doesn’t, again, when you reflect back on President Ford. Tip O’Neill was one of his and Mrs. Ford’s very, very best friends. They were challenging rivals in the Congress. But they would go out afterwards and play a game of golf and have dinner together. So there was always that mutual respect for the other person and the other person’s right to have a different opinion. That they – both he and Mrs. Ford – expressed on many occasions.

Smith: How much do you think she influenced his politics? And I say that in this sense: when he was in the White House, he was considered the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge, but long before he died, he was almost marooned. I mean, the party had gone over here, and he and Mrs. Ford were here, and I’m not sure how much he changed, or the party changed, or what, but he was certainly in a minority within his own party. How did he feel about that? And where did that come from?

Nunn: Well, I don’t know what influence she really had on his politics, especially during the White House period, because I wasn’t there, but they shared very similar opinions on politics. They expressed more privately than publicly, their disappointment with the Republican Party, with some of its candidates, especially some of the potential ultra conservative candidates and nominees. They were very, very much middle of the road. They were very, very much moderates. They were very, very much pro-choice, which was not popular with a lot of the conservatives in the party.
Smith: That was his viewpoint, that wasn’t something that he inherited from her? Do you think she influenced him at all? I realize it is speculative.

Nunn: Well, I think she, obviously, had some influence on him – on everything he did and thought, to some degree. But there was such mutual respect between them. But as long as I’ve known him, that has been their position. In fact, we were at a tribute dinner here for Rich DeVos and another community leader – boy, I think it may have been in memoriam, I can’t remember. It was a huge, huge dinner, and some of the media asked if President Ford would be available for an interview. I walked over and asked him and he said sure, so we walked over to this designated area, and I thought they were just general questions about the dinner and Rich DeVos and their relationships, and the next thing I hear is the word, “choice, abortion,” coming up and I thought, oh my gosh, what have we gotten ourselves into – this is going to be in Grand Rapids – the story of the night. Not his comments about the honorees… and that’s what it ended up being. But again, he was unabashed in not wavering about things that he felt strong about, but also at the same time respecting the right for opposing points of view.

Smith: They went to convention after convention, and you wonder, every four years he felt a little bit more out of touch with “mainstream” of the party as it was developing in the 80s and the 90s and beyond.

Nunn: I think part of that was his loyalty to people. His loyalty to the party, his loyalty to people. In his case, his loyalty to the Bushes.

Smith: That’s true. There was a very close relationship with that family, wasn’t there? Between the Fords and the Bushes.

Nunn: Right. And I think that, I’m not so sure had it not been for Herbert Walker, that he would have gone to the last convention. I don’t think he shared a lot of the views with the current Bushy – that’s just my speculation - of this administration.

Smith: It must have been somewhat awkward for him to have so many of his old alumni in really critical positions, and obviously their performance was
criticized and the subject of much controversy. One sensed that the personal relationships never suffered.

Nunn: Right.

Smith: Certainly with people like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, but you wonder whether some of the political judgments were called into question.

Nunn: Well, some of the Op-Ed pieces that he submitted, that were critical of certain administration policies, and one that he and Jimmy Carter jointly submitted, I believe, and I don’t remember the specific issues. But, again, he was not afraid to express his opinion and say what he thought was right.

Smith: Did you ever hear him talk about Nixon?

Nunn: Not really.

Smith: One sensed that he – if it was anyone else, we’d say, how could you be that naïve? – but in his case, I think it was very sincere. He was genuinely shocked that Nixon lied to him. That just wouldn’t occur to him.

Nunn: Well, I think that goes back again to his personality and his character traits, that because of his honesty, his straightforwardness, he expects that and expected that in everyone else. And I think he was truly shocked and hugely disappointed.

Smith: I only heard him, personally, criticize two people. And the worst thing he could say was “That’s a bad man.” One was Gordon Liddy, and one was John Dean. Were there others?

Nunn: There were others I know whose opinions he didn’t agree with, or the way they went about doing things. Mrs. Ford was equally expressive, I think, at times.

Smith: Tell me about her sense of humor.

Nunn: Oh, she had a great sense of humor, and she always liked poking fun at him. And he just took it in great stride. It was wonderful to see. One of the things – and I’m blessed in so many ways, opportunities I’ve had, events I’ve attended
— but was really having an inside glimpse of them and what they really stood for, and I think few people, most people assume, but few people really get a glimpse and know how truly in love they were every day of their life. Every day.

Smith: How did that manifest itself?

Nunn: Just in the way they would refer to each other, in their courtesies toward each other, and the fact that, to ask me to get his bride on the phone, well, she’s been his bride for many years ago. You could see it in the way they looked at each other — in the way they cared about each other. It was unbelievable.

Smith: Do you think he felt any degree of guilt that, in the early years, when he was climbing the ladder in the House, ambitious, on the road a lot, and really, the burden of raising the kids fell on her. Whether some of her problems were grounded — who knows? Do you think he sort of consciously made an effort to make up for that in the later years when they were together maybe more than they had been earlier? When he was with the kids more?

Nunn: I can’t really comment on that, again in the sense that I really did not know them that well then. But to see the affection they had for each other, even though he may have not been around as much, he was out doing speaking engagements and that. That’s nothing that was just manifested or re-manifested. I think it always was there.

Smith: And he loved to campaign.

Nunn: Loved to campaign.

Smith: When you start to think, in 1976, the Reagan challenge, and it can be argued both ways — there is a school of thought that it made him a better candidate. There is a school of thought that, yeah, maybe it made him a better candidate, but in the end, it undermined his position. And yet, by 1980, he was out there campaigning as hard for Ronald Reagan as he had for himself. And he just loved campaigning, didn’t he?
Nunn: Well, there were many that wished that Ronald Reagan had been out there campaigning as hard for him in ’76 as he did for Ronald Reagan. But, yes, he loved people.

Smith: Was he interested in people?

Nunn: He was truly interested in people. He came back to Grand Rapids several times campaigning. Appeared here a week before the election with Ronald Reagan. Appeared here a week before the election with George Bush – actually was a surprise guest at the rally with Lee Greenwood.

Smith: This is where Dole began his final hundred hours. Remember him, President Bush and David Brinkley were here?

Nunn: Yes. The big, final, hundred hour rally, the bus tour.

Smith: What did he enjoy about campaigning?

Nunn: I think it was just the opportunity to get out and be with people. And support a cause he believed in. I think he became very selective. I know he did as he got older in terms of which campaigns he would accept the invitation from and which ones he wouldn’t. Some of that may have been because of the politics, and some of it, I think, to some degree, as he was getting older, he was slowing down and the staff and Mrs. Ford were telling him he had to slow down.

Smith: My sense was, it seemed like his health was really almost phenomenal, right up until around his ninetieth birthday. Which was also right about the time when, in effect, he couldn’t travel. And I thought, when his doctors deprived him of travel, that it was like part of his life was over.

Nunn: I think that one of the biggest disappointments for him, and for anybody that had the opportunity to know him, to work for him, was the fact that he could not go back to Ann Arbor that final time, for the dedication of the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy. That meant a lot to him. That legacy, every time there was a trip that I was with him on to Ann Arbor, again, it was his second home, he loved to walk around campus. He’d say let’s not take the motorcade, let’s walk.
Smith: Would he be recognized?

Nunn: Well, when you’re traveling with a group of like six or eight people around you and they’re all in suits, it’s pretty hard to go unnoticed.

Smith: But what I’m thinking are the kids – the undergraduates…

Nunn: A lot of them, no. Or they’d pass and then you’d see their heads turn around or they would lean over to each other. But if someone said “Hi” or made eye contact he’d always say, “Hi, how are you?” “Back to the dedication of the School of Public Policy – I think it was a huge disappointment for him. That’s one thing I wish that he could have done. I think we all wish that he could have. That would have meant a lot to him.

Smith: Now, he was there for the ceremony announcing the name, and he was there for the groundbreaking. So he was very much a part of – and his good friend Sandy Weill – that was a very special relationship, wasn’t it?

Nunn: Yes. They were very, very close. He was there for the dedication of the building which has Mr. Weill’s name on it, as well. I believe that was one of the last times he was in Ann Arbor. But he was really looking forward to that building being built.

Smith: I’m just looking through this list, which is phenomenal, that you’ve prepared of all his trips that you have worked, and there is really a cluster, I notice, in ’98 and ’99, and I remember a lot of these. But we did some great conferences at the library and he would be very actively involved in those. I remember, we did the CIA conference, we did the Women in Politics conference, among others, and he always seemed to be – not only a participant – but very much a roll up his sleeves and learn. He was very much a part of the discussion that was going on. It wasn’t about him – it was about, even then, what he could learn, say about the CIA. In fact, he and George Tenet became friendly after that. So when we did the next big conference for the 25th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, we wanted to open a lot of papers. And, of course, the National Security apparatus didn’t want to open a lot of papers. So he wrote to George Tenant, went to the top, and Tenant, to his credit, leaned on those beneath him and we were able to open 25,000 pages that day. But I will never forget, what
other president would have a conference observing the low point of his presidency? Show up to share those memories? I’ll never forget as long as I live, him and Eugene McCarthy, sitting together – it was just a pretty incongruous sight. But my sense was, he really enjoyed those programs.

Nunn: I think it was part of his continual learning process. President Ford never stopped learning. As I mentioned earlier, he devoured newspapers, all day long, when there’d be downtime, in the motorcade if he hadn’t read this particular paper, and he’d read it from cover to cover. He was always very current on every issue, and he wanted to remain current. And I think that, in addition to his active schedule, it kept him as healthy and kept him as young and vibrant as he was, right up to the end. But believing you’re right, the inability in the last couple of years to travel, I think had an effect on his overall slowing down. But he was always mentally sharp; he was always interested in learning and being current.

Smith: I remember he came back here to light the Christmas tree, remember? I think he came to a couple, as long as he was physically up to it, he’d come here to light the Christmas tree.

Nunn: You have to like Grand Rapids to come back here in December, right?

Smith: Which is pretty impressive. But then that year, 1999, which was the 25th anniversary of the inauguration, were you on the trip where he got the Medal of Freedom at the White House?

Nunn: In the Congress? The Congressional… the Medal of Freedom? No.

Smith: That year was like the trifecta – he got the Congressional Gold Medal, he got the Medal of Freedom, and something else.

Nunn: I did the Congressional Gold Medal, not the other one.

Smith: That was the year we had Alan Greenspan and Justice Stevens and Billy Graham. And he came back for all three.

Nunn: And the Gifford’s. Kathy Lee and Frank Gifford.

Smith: Yes, his good friends from Vail. What do you remember about those events?
Nunn: You know, there are so many incredible events that I’ve been able to participate in, but that was a very special one because I had never met Reverend Billy Graham. Out of all the people I’ve met through President Ford, I’ve never been more impressed with anyone. It was just overwhelming. Probably one of the most personally emotional experiences I’ve ever had. What truly a wonderful, wonderful man.

Smith: What were the two of them like together?

Nunn: Oh – very close. Very respectful of each other. They’ve known each other, obviously, along with Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Graham, since the White House. Just great, great respect. And it was fun to see kind of the mixture to add Kathy Lee Gifford and her husband, who are also very good friends of Reverend Graham. Kathy Lee is a huge admirer of Rev. Graham and of President Ford, and they were both here in tribute to President Ford. It was an incredible ceremony, as you remember.

Smith: And I know there were people who thought, what an incongruous pairing, but in fact, as you know, they were all friends.

Nunn: Very, very close. And I did not know, I had never even watched the *Regis and Kathy Lee Show*, so I knew her by name, but she is a very, very spiritual person. She’s very devout in her religion and her respect for President Ford and Rev. Graham. That was nice to find out, and that then put the whole relationships together between the three of them.

Smith: And Justice Stevens – I remember asking the President, “When was the last time you saw Justice Stevens?” and he said, “When I appointed him.” And I guess all those years that it had been Justice Stevens’ dream of playing golf with the man who put him on the Court. And that day they got to do it.

Nunn: They got to play golf. Well, you hosted the conference here also with Madeleine Albright – and all the former secretaries of state. And a lot of that has to do with your genius, obviously, Richard. But it also has to do with the fact that when you are doing something on behalf of President Ford, or at the suggestion or the request of President Ford, again, partisan politics are just put aside. It’s out of respect for the man that they come together.
Smith: I found, to my astonishment, over and over again, when I would approach people, I would find out that he had never asked them for anything. This was the first time anyone ever asked them, and they were, in most cases, delighted to be asked. And the fact that he would be here himself, well, that was frosting on the cake.

Nunn: I don’t think he liked imposing on people. He felt he was imposing on people, when, in fact…

Smith: Is that because he got imposed on so often? Let’s face it, he got asked. I assume there were people, we don’t have to name names, I’m sure there were people in the community who presumed just a little bit on their real or imagined relationship to ask for favors.

Nunn: He had a lot of good friends in the community. [smile]

Smith: Did he get sick of signing autographs?

Nunn: Yes. He didn’t really mind, but the concern was, once he signed one going through a crowd, suddenly I would see people grabbing napkins or packs of matches, or whatever, and so, part of my responsibility was to try to see that in advance, see somebody coming and just politely walk over and say that he wasn’t going to sign any autographs today. I’d offer them a card with the address of the office out in Beaver Creek, or California, they could send it in. In some cases, even if it was somebody that was a good friend of his, it was just much easier for me to say, would you give it to me and I’ll take it upstairs, I’ll make sure he signs it, and I’ll get it back to you in an hour, or at the dinner tonight, or whatever. He always tried to be accommodating, especially to those people he knew were trying to take care of him – police officers, hotel staff.

I remember one time one of the agents asked if I would have him sign a baseball. He hated signing baseballs. The reason being, he said to me one time when I asked him the first time, he said, “I never played baseball. Why do they want me to sign a baseball?” So, he signed it. I told him it was for the agent, but that’s kind of a cute side story.
Smith: Were you in Philadelphia at the convention in 2000?

Nunn: Yes.

Smith: What do you remember about that, because it must have been frightening.

Nunn: I was actually working on the convention staff for Bush Family and Friends. I was working logistics for members of the immediate family, and Calvin McDowell was doing the advance on that trip for President and Mrs. Ford. Penny, of course, was there. As well as Norma, I believe with Mrs. Ford. The day the Fords were to attend convention I’d been invited to be their guest and to travel to convention with them. Penny had asked that I come along with the staff as part of the staff entourage.

The Fords were not aware I was traveling with them. When we arrived at the convention center the Fords saw me and came over. Mrs. Ford gave me a hug, and shook my hand and said what a nice surprise. And I said, “I’m your guest whether you knew it or not.” And they said, “Well, that’s great,” and they then thanked Penny for thinking to include me. We went into the Green Room with them and then we went out. I was assisting Calvin on some of the logistics. I went up in the presidential box to see where they were sitting. As the convention started, he came out with Mrs. Ford. He was doing a number of interviews, and finally those were cut off and he went up into the box.

I had the schedule with me, and he originally was scheduled to leave after a certain point in a certain speech. Well, typical President Ford, he didn’t want to be discourteous, I think, to anyone. I remember, Penny and I were in the tunnel and I walked out on the floor below him, trying to get his attention because I usually had pretty good eye language, or body language with him, I could tell, having been…

Smith: Did you have signals prearranged?

Nunn: I had some signals, even as far as if we were in a crowd, if I’d tap his elbow he’d know it was me. I would be like an opportunity either like, we’re ready to go, or do you want to get out of this situation? Also our eye communication was pretty good. Back to the convention, I was starting to get concerned
because it was really, really hot in the convention hall. I could see he was very, very uncomfortable. I kept thinking, I wanted to get his attention to see “Do you want to go?”, but it would have been awkward, to some degree, because he’s in the middle of the box, seated next to the Bushes.

So, finally convention broke and he came down the stairs with Mrs. Ford. He was noticeably shaking a little bit, and he was noticeably uncomfortable and hot. We took him right to the Green Room where Calvin had the unfortunate task of telling him that his motorcade wasn’t [ready]. He wanted to go right then and there. He knew he wasn’t feeling well, it was obvious, his color and everything. Calvin had the unenviable job of telling him that Mrs. Reagan’s motorcade was scheduled before his. Which I don’t think set too well at that point in time, especially just because he was not feeling well.

Calvin instructed the staff to immediately board the motorcade we would all go with him at once – we immediately went and got in our cars in position in the motorcade so that when the golf cart brought him out, we were immediately ready to depart. When we got back to the hotel, I remember going up to the floor where their suites and the staff offices were located. Sitting in the office there, I knew something was wrong. Then I remember Penny coming out of the room and coming down to the office. She said, “Jon, we’re going to have to take him to the hospital.” That was just - for the entire staff - just unbelievable. After they left for the hospital, I remember we went downstairs and sat in a bar. We were just waiting. Penny, of course, because of that very, very special relationship, was very visibly upset. I remember her pacing, and I remember the phone ringing, and her walking over to the door of the lounge and looking at us. I think I was with Norma. It was just an awful experience to go through thinking, he might die right at that point in time. Fortunately he didn’t and he survived, but it was a very, very dark period for all of us who knew him and loved him.

Smith: It must have thrown a bit of a pall over the convention, too.

Nunn: Yeah.
Smith: I know Governor Bush visited him in the hospital. I think Larry King would have if he could have gotten a camera into the room.

How was he with the media?

Nunn: Oh, I think he was very, very fair with the media.

Smith: Very accessible?

Nunn: Very, very accessible. Had a lot of respect for them, and I think, as a result, they had a lot of respect for him as well. I know locally here, Rick Albin, who is one of our locals reporters did a lengthy interview with President Ford. President Ford was very, very impressed. He had not known Rick before, but he said he could have been right up there with any of the nationals – he said he was very impressed with this local talent. So I made sure that Rick knew that, which was a huge compliment to him.

But it was funny, we were doing a press conference on one trip and Lee was here with him. Peter Secchia was involved in some way, and I knew what our schedule was and I said - normally, if you were the press person, you’d just say, “Ladies and gentlemen, one more question” – well, I knew President Ford well enough, so I think we told Peter that day, I said, “Peter, we really, really have to get going.” Peter stepped forward and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, one more question.” President Ford responded, “Come on, Peter, we can take a little more time.” It was like he pretty much knew when he wanted to conclude things.

Let me tell you about the Reagan funeral. Interesting thing is, Penny called me two days before the Reagan funeral. She and I had been talking about it and scheduling. I used to help with scheduling a lot, helped Judy. I think I was even doing some scheduling on that, and she calls me, actually the day before, I think it was, and said, “Jon, I don’t know what I’m thinking. President and Mrs. Ford can’t make this trip alone. Lee can’t help. You have to go to Washington with them and be there with them.” I said to her, “I mean this is a great honor, but it’s literally like tomorrow.” She said, “I know. Can you do it?” And I said, “Of course I can do it.”
So I got thrown into the thick of things. Got there the next morning. The agents picked me up and briefed me and then went out to the airport for the arrival. Later that afternoon I met up with a liaison from the White House.

The White House had assigned a liaison officer to each of the former presidents’ families, and traveling staff. Ours met with me and went over all the protocol and itinerary for the funeral I was reviewing the seating for the next day, and when he told me the seating arrangements, I thought, this is very, very strange, because they had President Ford and Mrs. Ford in the row behind President Clinton.

I called Penny and I said, “It’s my understanding, according to MDW protocol,” - and I actually got on the phone with Mike Wagner [MDW], who was in a awkward position. He knew either the Bush White House, or Mrs. Reagan, was making the call. If I remember the seating correctly, it was the president, the vice president, President and Mrs. Clinton in the first row. Second row was former President Bush, President and Mrs. Carter, President and Mrs. Ford. I knew that was not according to protocol, I didn’t know who was calling the shots. I wasn’t at a staff level to make that kind of decision, but I knew, at least myself and Penny, were totally aware that was not right, according to protocol and the MDW knew it wasn’t as well.

The next day before we left for the funeral, I briefed them about what we’re going to be doing. Who’s going to be there greeting them – things that they probably know, but just to refresh their memory. And I went over the seating, and I remember President Ford saying, “Why are we seated behind the Clintons?” I had to scramble to try to come up with some explanation. And Mrs. Ford just says, “It’s probably the order of presidencies.” She looked to get me off the hook, but she knew and he knew. Again, never being a presumptuous individual, but he knew – why would that be the order of seating?

Smith: It is implicit in everything we’ve been talking about, but give us a capsule description of what you did and the things you did, and was there anyone else doing it? My sense is that there was a very small…
It was a small group that worked together. I was never on paid staff. I was always reimbursed for my travel, and that’s the way I wanted it. I had my other full time job, and each of my jobs, when I was the executive director for eleven years of the Kent County Republican Committee, when I went to work for Dick and Betsy DeVos, when I went to work subsequently, for Grand Action, it’s always been with the understanding that I need the flexibility to be able to do things on behalf of the Fords. That was because of my great respect for them, and the joy of working with the staff.

So as an example: a trip to Grand Rapids is scheduled, or there’s something going on at the museum. I begin working on the initial schedule, sketching it out, time-wise, adding in events, dress codes, particulars for each event. Then I submit the initial schedule back to Judi Risk, who is the scheduler in California. Both of us work jointly and collaboratively. If it was a trip to Ann Arbor, then Judy and I worked via phone until I got there. Then, depending on the trip, Lee Simmons or Dick Garbarino might be traveling with President Ford.

My role was significantly different when nobody was traveling with him, because I was not only doing advance work, but was really also serving as personal assistant, making sure that he was taken care of, that his accommodations were correct, that those newspapers were there, that he had the assortment of soft drinks that he wanted. Make sure he has butter-pecan ice cream in the refrigerator. And then travel with him from event to event, and again, brief him before we leave, “we’re going to be doing this,” or if there is a schedule change, working in that capacity. There would be times when both he and Mrs. Ford traveled together, then it would be more likely that there would be a travel assistant with both of them. There was always a travel assistant with Mrs. Ford. I would serve just more as the liaison and advance capacity.

Tell me about his relationship with the Secret Service – both of them, for that matter – the relationship that exists.

They were very respectful of the Secret Service, and in the Service there is a lot of turnover. I don’t know what it is – eight years or something – and they
usually shift on eight or ten years, so he’d known a number of agent…I, over ten years have known at least four of his lead agents, if not five. But he’s always had a very good relationship with the agents. He’s never in any way been abusive to them and he’s never really taken advantage of them, in any way.

I remember there was a 60 Minutes article, they must have been following President Ford, and it was a trip to Grand Rapids that I was doing with him, and they were trying to make the case how former presidents have all this extra staff and Secret Service. And, in fact, the Secret Service does more than just protect them. That they assist in carrying their luggage and on and on. As an example of agents carrying bags, they showed a clip of, who else but me, walking next to President Ford, carrying his briefcase and his overcoat. So they had to do a retraction the following Sunday because Mike Wallace actually called and spoke with me and I had to explain to him that I was not a member of the Secret Service, that I was an advance person and a traveling staff.

Smith: Did that feel good?

Nunn: Yes. It was kind of a get back at them a little bit, because anyone that knows President Ford, knows that he would not do anything that was out of line – that was inappropriate. That’s just not him.

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

Nunn: I think the last time I saw him was a combination of a funeral planning meeting and a Ford Foundation dinner in Palm Springs with Vice President Cheney.

Smith: Was that the dinner where he announced that he was Deep Throat?

Nunn: Yes.

Smith: Tell the story.

Nunn: You can fill that in. I believe that was the last time that I ever saw President and Mrs. Ford. I remember there was a Foundation board meeting that next
morning, and it had been a long night due to the Ford Foundation Dinner. President Ford, even though he was always conscious of his health, he liked a good time, he liked a party. He liked people around him. He didn’t drink, he hasn’t drank since the mid-80s, the last I knew, but he liked people – and especially those Foundation dinners where there were so many people from his former administration, so many close friends that he truly cared about.

During the Foundation meeting I had stepped into the room. I was waiting for Mrs. Ford to arrive because she was arriving a little bit later, and Marty was speaking and Penny was in the back of the room, and I was standing with his lead agent. Marty, all of a sudden stopped the meeting and introduced the back of the room, indicating who we were – just for many of the board members that didn’t know us. They had seen me around, a lot of them, on many occasions. Marty welcomed Penny, the agent, and then Marty affectionately referred to me, and he said, “This is Jon Nunn, he takes care of President Ford, similar to Lee when Lee’s not around, but he’s also become like part of the family.” President Ford shook his head in acknowledgement. That was a great honor.

I remember then going out and Mrs. Ford had arrived, the agents told me, so I went out to escort her. I remember, especially, how particularly beautiful she looked that day. I mean, she always looked nice, but in my memory, I don’t think I’ve ever seen her look more beautiful. What she was wearing – it was just perfect for her. And she’s so gracious, she came in and then we went to a luncheon next door. Prior to that President Ford had, and you were there, Richard…

Smith: I wasn’t there.

Nunn: At that?

Smith: No.

Nunn: Oh, okay. Prior to the end of the meeting, President Ford had to stand up and sit down a couple of times. It was obviously challenging. There was a plaque that was presented to him, and he rose, started responding to the tribute, but it was apparent that he became disoriented. I remember looking over at Penny,
our eyes connected and just like in terror, “what is happening?” It was obvious to everybody on the board, and he then sat down. There was a rule that he was never supposed to stand up too quickly. Mrs. Ford would tell him, and this is kind of a point of humor: Mrs. Ford would say, “Now, what are you supposed to do?” And he would say, “Count to ten.” She would say, “Okay.” And he’d say, “Ten,” and stand right up.

But on this particular day, at that event, it was obvious that there was something going on. That he had become a little bit disoriented, there was dizziness involved, and so I remember staying behind with him in the room. Everybody went to the dining room and then he was pretty good. I took him over there, but it was just sometimes that, I think a blood pressure thing or something – getting up and getting down. But that was very difficult, I think, for everybody around that day.

Smith: Including, I suspect, himself. He was a proud man, immaculate, great natural athlete, really took care of himself, and the indignities of aging which eventually affect everyone, it must have been a trial.

Nunn: He was becoming aware of it. He’d make comments. I remember, I think it was one of the Press Club things, it was actually the last Press Club event that President Ford spoke at in D.C. And you and I were there, and Penny was there. He stumbled over a word, as I remember. He was such a perfectionist, and I know that bothered him the rest of the evening, because he brought it up to Penny and me when he got back to the suite. He said, “Gol durn it,” he said – he was just mad with himself. That was hard to see, because you know, who else, at his age, could not only accomplish everything he had, but was still accomplishing and going like he did.

Smith: And then there were the big events where I’d write something, and then Penny was my co-conspirator, and she would make sure that he would rehearse, sometimes for days. But it paid off.

Nunn: Wasn’t it the first time he had to say, megabytes, or gigabytes, or whatever? And I remember when he was giving that speech, and that was another Press Club event, I think. Penny was just like on the edge of her chair, and he got
through it and she says, “Great.” Because a lot of his computer vocabulary, and many mechanical things were totally unfamiliar to him. If we were in a hotel room and there was phone with push buttons on it, multiple lines, he had no comprehension, or to charge a credit card number to the phone — no idea how to do it.

Smith: He did learn solitaire on the computer. But that must have been about the level of his computer skills.

Nunn: I think so.

Smith: I’m sure his grandchildren were much more computer literate — but I’m sure that’s true of lots of folks of that generation.

Did he watch television?

Nunn: News and sports, that was pretty much it — and new shows. I remember Ann Cullen and I sitting up in the suite for some news program after President and Mrs. Ford got home one evening because she was highlighted. What a treat for somebody like me — here I’m sitting there eating butter-pecan ice cream with them, and they are sitting in their pajamas and Ann and I are sitting and watching TV with them — I mean, it doesn’t get much more special than that.

Smith: Were you surprised by the turnout at the funeral?

Nunn: No. This community, he always considered this community home and I think that was a reflection of how widely known that was in this community. And he maintained relationships over all the years. Again, he read the paper. I think one of the saddest responsibilities I and Marty and others had was every time a friend would pass away in Grand Rapids, having to send the obituary out to him or out to Penny.

And again, you mentioned the Reagan funeral and his recognizing his own mortality, I think that had gone on for a long time because they virtually, all of his and her contemporaries from Grand Rapids were gone. Then, with the passing of his younger brother, there were unpleasant things that we had to do just to keep him informed. But he wanted to be informed. These were people he had known from the past, and he’d always reminisce, he’d always talk
about the Red Flannel Days up in Cedar Springs. And he remembered the names, he was amazing with names.

Smith: He must have been very pleased with the impact that this museum had in terms of – as a catalyst for downtown and the whole renewal of downtown.

Nunn: He was very proud of it, and he was proud of, not only the dedication, but the re-dedication. That was a highlight, and you orchestrated that. That was a cold day, but…

Smith: Remember Mrs. Johnson sitting out there? And Caroline in here.

Nunn: And Caroline Kennedy sitting up here because she had that cold, strep throat or something.

Smith: Yeah, but what does it tell you about – you saw the people who came. Who would have expected Caroline – not many people would have expected Lady Bird.

Nunn: No. But it was the kind of respect and the Kennedy medal that he received, I wasn’t there but I know from comments he made and comments others made, that probably was one of the most significant recognitions that he’d ever received. Because it was a validation that he didn’t need, but it was validation that was needed – that history needed. When Ted Kennedy said, “Mr. President, you were right and I was wrong.”

Smith: He said after that, “You know, after that, people stopped asking the question.” Which must have been a nice – all those years, everywhere he went, people would ask him. And they stopped.

What have we left out? We’ve covered a lot of territory and a lot of trips.

Erik: Do you remember the time he had gotten in a day early, and he was putting on a suit and he had brought the wrong suit and [Mrs. Ford] noticed it and she said, “Well, you’re not wearing that.”

Nunn: No. Okay. Ann Cullen was with us on this trip and I don’t think Lee, in fact, I’m pretty sure Lee wasn’t on this trip. But he had put on a particular suit, and he put on some shirt that either had started fraying on the collar or something
like that. He had a separate activity, so I’m getting ready to leave the suite with him. Mrs. Ford and Ann are sitting there and Mrs. Ford says, “You’re not wearing that.” He says, “Well, what’s wrong with it?” “You’re not wearing that shirt or suit.” So a minor argument started and Ann and I, and I think Erik was up there, politely just walked around the corner and I went “Whew.” And I know one of the things that Mrs. Ford said to me afterward, “Just lose that suit, or I’m going to tell Lee to lose that suit the next time we pack.” It was just things like that.

Smith: What was his clothes sense? I assume he was pretty frugal, I assume he kept things.

Nunn: I’d say to Lee, “This suit looks like something that I saw in photographs – from his White House days.”

Smith: And he was probably proud.

Nunn: Yes, but he was always meticulous about the way he was dressed. And he meticulous about how his tie was tied. It was very – before going out in public, before going into an interview – he would always say, “How’s my tie look? Make sure it’s straight.”

Smith: Did he talk about his parents?

Nunn: Briefly, sometimes on a visit to his boyhood home. A couple of times that he made visits there. But not to any extent.

Smith: That’s great. Thank you.
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Smith: It’s interesting. Thirty or forty years ago, there was very little out at Rancho Mirage, I’m told.

Staufer: Hardly anything there. Then you go out to Indian Wells and there was nothing. Recently, I was out there just for a visit. I couldn’t believe it. It was just one solid Palm Springs all the way out to Bermuda Dunes.

Smith: And the whole Vail Valley is a relatively recent creation.

Staufer: It’s the same thing.

Smith: How did it come about?

Staufer: I have a picture in my office of Vail in 1964. There’s nothing. And then we came in ’62, I mean, there was nothing. Vail Village Inn had fifty rooms. A little highway motel and the lodge at Vail had sixty rooms.

Smith: Is that where he had a condo when he was congressman?

Staufer: He had a condo in the Village Inn Plaza. It’s a building I built and he bought the penthouse there.

Smith: Is that still standing?

Staufer: Oh, yeah, it’s still there. A Mexican owns it now. First a California man bought it from Ford and then a Mexican national bought it from that guy. And the penthouse is still there, a four bedroom, four and a half bath.

Smith: I want you to describe it, but, first of all, how did your paths first cross with Gerald Ford?

Staufer: Well, it was very simple, you know. He was President of the United States and he came out here. That was his summer White House. And I was mayor pro-tem of the Vail town council. We gave a cocktail party for the President
in the mayor’s house and that’s how we met. And we have been in touch all along.

Smith: So, you had not had any contact with him before he became president, though he was out here?

Staufer: No, I had not. Yes, we met out here and, of course, Betty and my wife, Annie, you may know she had a store over there called Annie’s and they became pretty good friends and saw each other, not frequently, but they had lunch once in awhile.

Smith: Tell me again about where, before they built the house, they had the condo. Where was that?

Staufer: They had a condo at the Village Inn Plaza, which was a development over at the Vail Village Inn. We had the hotel there and then we developed it. First we built the commercial building and then we built condominiums and then we had a penthouse there.

Smith: And how large was the penthouse?

Staufer: Four bedrooms, four and a half baths. But it’s funny, at the same time, they were already building the house in Beaver Creek, so they really never stayed. They gave it to the family and friends, but they never stayed at the Plaza. And he loaned it to King Hussein when King Hussein was here.

Smith: And what is the Bass House, because we’re told they stayed there?

Staufer: Well, the Bass House is right behind here. And they stayed there because he wanted to swim and the neighbor had a swimming pool. So, they would stay back at the Bass House. Dick Bass offered it to them for staying there in the winter.

Smith: And the whole family would come out here for Christmas.

Staufer: Oh, yes, they were all here.

Smith: Would local people leave them alone?
Staufer: Yes, I think. There were some autograph hunters, you know; they’re everywhere, but the local people - other than saying “Mr. President. Good morning” - they left them alone.

Smith: Were there places here that they particularly enjoyed going? Restaurants? Shops?

Staufer: They enjoyed going to The Left Bank, and, of course, he was a hell of a golfer. He just loved golf. And they came quite a bit here to Pepi’s, you know, the Gramshammers, for their meals.

Smith: Did you ever golf with him?

Staufer: I have only been on the golf course once in my life and that was when there was the first Jerry Ford Invitational Golf Tournament. It was a Pro-Am and I happened to be the treasurer of the Mountain School at that time, and that was organizing the mountain school kids to pick up trash. And that was it. That was my only performance on the golf course.

Smith: What was the Mountain School?

Staufer: Mountain School is a little private school in East Vail. It started originally in somebody’s home, in their living room, and now I think they have about 200 kids there, maybe more. I don’t know. It’s become quite a bit.

Smith: Did you see his sense of humor?

Staufer: Sense of humor? Yeah, I think, personally, he was such a kind man. And I’ll give you one example, which nobody believes but, it happened. We were having a cocktail party in the mayor’s house.

Smith: You were mayor?

Staufer: No, I was mayor pro-tem. So, next door on the golf course is my brother’s house. And my parents from Austria were here staying with my brother. And I said, “Mr. President, my parents are next door. Could I bring them over?” And he said, “Sure, bring them in!” And they told the Secret Service men, “Joe is going to bring his parents over. It’s okay.” And I went over to the house and they had gone for a walk, so I couldn’t find them. So I went back
to the cocktail party a little later. He had a memory like an elephant, he never forgot a name, and he never forgot anything. He said, “Joe, where are your parents? I was looking forward to meeting them.” I said, “So sorry, but they went out for a walk and I can’t find them anywhere.” He said, “Where are they staying?” I said, “Right next door here.”

Next morning, he was playing golf. He stopped the game. Had simply walked in, got my parents out, had pictures taken with them. He was just that kind of a guy. He was so kind to people. As far as I’m concerned, he was a true Republican, not like the Tea Baggers nowadays, he was a true Republican. And then, of course, now when people say “country first” that’s a political slogan. He meant country first because he knew damn well that pardoning Nixon would cost him the election, but it was good for the country and he did it.

Smith: Did he ever talk about the pardon?

Staufer: We talked about it and he said, “Joe, what do you think would’ve happened? A President of the United States being on trial and the whole world watching? What would’ve happened?” And he was right. It would’ve been very, very bad for the country. He really meant ‘country first’.

Smith: It’s interesting you talk about the Republicans of the Tea Party and all of that. Most of us, as we get older, tend to become a little more conservative. And with the Fords it was almost the opposite. I mean, one sensed that maybe the Party went so far to the right.

Staufer: Yeah, I think that he was feeling the fanatics are taking over the party. And that’s what happened. Rush Limbaugh, you know.

Smith: Yes, exactly. But you wonder how much she influenced his views, because it wasn’t just the abortion issue, but gay rights and other things that you don’t associate with a ‘conservative Republican’. But then, of course, he had children and grandchildren and they tend to sort of expose you to a youthful outlook

Staufer: They kept him young and changed his thinking.
Smith: And the other thing I wonder, having gone through the intervention with Mrs. Ford and then the creation of the Betty Ford Center; having had his eyes opened to the weaknesses that even good people experience – and the compassion that they showed. Whether all that might have affected him as well.

Staufer: Imperfection of the human species. I mean, we all have faults. And I think that he understood that. And that was another reason, I think, that he was sympathetic with Nixon. I mean, there’s a President of the United States that had done so many good things, you know, when you think about the contact with China and how things were coming along internationally. And then the things like that happened. You know, I think he was sympathetic to that kind of downfall that a man of that stature had.

Smith: Did he talk politics?

Staufer: Not very often and not very specifically. Sometimes, he gave his opinion on some issue, but I don’t think he’d like to go into big discussions about politics.

Smith: Did you ever see his temper?

Staufer: No, I’ve not.

Smith: Did you know it existed?

Staufer: I heard about it.

Smith: Who were some of his friends?

Staufer: In Vail here? Well, you had some locals that were just fun people, like John Purcell who had a restaurant here, who just made him laugh. And then he had other people like the Kendalls and the Hanlons and the Gramshammers. They had a lot of friends, yeah. Everybody just thought very highly of him and everybody loved the man.

Smith: We’ve been told that they probably did as much as anyone to put this place on the map as a summer destination. It had always been a winter resort.
Staufer: The first golf tournament, Jerry Ford’s first Invitational, put Vail on the map as a summer resort. You know, it would’ve taken us years to get there, but that put us on the map. In the winter, the first time we were really on the map, was the Championships, the International Skiing Championships back in ’89. I used to go to Austria and say, “I’m from Vail” and “Oh, is that near Aspen?” After the Championship, “Oh, Vail!”

Smith: To people who don’t know, what’s the difference between Vail and Aspen?

Staufer: I would say that Aspen is more of the glitzy, movie star crowd. And Vail is the more serious businessman crowd. You know, the captains of business are here.

Smith: Is it safe to say that Vail is more Republican and Aspen’s more Democratic?

Staufer: It’s fair to say. I would think that, if you say all the Democrats live in Aspen and all the Republicans live in Vail, it’s not quite that bad, but there’s more Republicans here than Democrats.

Smith: Are there names that would be recognizable in terms of business types who would be here when the Fords were here?

Staufer: Well, of the first people that came here, there was John Murchison, the Texan, who was involved in starting Vail. And then you had Watson, IBM.

Smith: Oh, Thomas Watson.

Staufer: Tom Watson was here from day one. And quite a few people.

Smith: You know, this is speculative, but in today’s climate - regulatory and otherwise could you create Vail today?

Staufer: I don’t think so. It’s a one-time happening. Look how many people tried to do it. You know, people had money to spend and they had longer vacations, so they went on a summer vacation and a winter vacation. And the economic climate was just right. And, mind you, we almost didn’t make it in the beginning.

Smith: Really?
Staufer: Oh God.

Smith: How tough was it?

Staufer: It was tough the first few years. I’ll give you one example. I was working for Vail Associates. They had somebody come out and Pete Seibert told me, “You really take good care of those people because they live a banker’s life.” And Vail Associates was $500,000 short. And John Murchison (?) offered them $500,000 for two percent of gross in perpetuity. And those people stayed at the lodge. I was running the lodge that summer, the summer of 1963, and we really took care of them. You know, we took them up on the mountain on a picnic with champagne and they made the loan. It was one of the senior vice presidents and his wife. So they made the loan and they didn’t have to borrow from John Murchison.

Many, many times, it was touch and go. Into the 70s and then, of course, they started Lion’s Head and they were back in problems again. And then they started Beaver Creek, hoping we would get the Olympics. And then the voters of Colorado voted it down. So they started Beaver Creek, hoping for all those funds from the state and federal government, and nothing was forthcoming. And that was another time when VA was very close to going broke again.

Smith: That’s fascinating, because within that context you can begin to understand how important it was to have the Fords up here.

Staufer: Oh yes. Yes.

Smith: Free advertising.

Staufer: Yeah, we’d be out everyday in the news. Vail, Colorado. You can’t buy that.

Smith: We were told there were Secret Service agents who almost competed to be on the detail to be out here, and reporters who loved to come out here.

Staufer: Yeah, it’s amazing. And then, of course, you started lots of other things like the international conference that he had.

Staufer: Yeah, he started that and that brought leaders from all over the world here. And, again, that’s when we were in the chips. And he put us there.

Smith: Tell me about Mrs. Ford, because you must’ve gotten to know her.

Staufer: Yeah, she was a very kind lady.

Smith: Did she ski?

Staufer: No. I don’t think so. I shouldn’t say no. The kids skied and he skied, but I don’t think she ever skied. But she loved the summer here.

Smith: And the Alpine Garden, she was obviously involved with that.

Staufer: Yeah, she was very much involved in getting that started. And, of course, Ford Park, when we originally got the property, we condemned the property to create the park. And the money to do something with the park was only because of Ford. I mean, the people gave money because it was Ford Park and they were close to Ford. That’s how the money came to build the stage.

Smith: And both the chapel here and the one at Beaver Creek.

Staufer: The chapel here I think he helped start, but that was way, way back. But the Beaver Creek chapel, definitely. So he was a great benefactor to this town and the whole valley, actually.

Smith: Were they very visible around town, even into their later years?

Staufer: They went out for dinner, they went out for lunch, and people saw them. But, you know, the family skied together, the kids skied, and other than that, you know, I guess he still kept pretty busy being involved in helping politically some people.

Smith: Do you know what kind of skier he was? Is there a consensus?

Staufer: I’ve never seen him ski, so I can’t say.

Smith: I’m interested, because you’re from Austria originally, right?

Staufer: I’m originally Austrian, yeah.
Smith: And Pepi is from Austria.

Staufer: And, Pepi, of course, is Austrian, yeah.

Smith: When did you come to this country?

Staufer: When did I come here? I came here the first winter.

Smith: Was that an accident? Why so many Austrians in Vail, Colorado?

Staufer: Well, I lived in Bermuda for seven years and we decided to leave Bermuda because you can’t get unlisted(?) Bermuda, you can’t own a business there. Even if you put all the money up and do all the work, a Bermudian has to have 51% of the interest in the business. So, we thought, “Okay, let’s go to the United States.” We had a shop lined up in California in Santa Barbara. And, about eleven o’clock at night, the next day I was leaving Bermuda, somebody told me about Vail, Colorado and I thought, “Well, why not look at it?” So we flew to Denver and rented a car to come to Vail. And I said to Hertz, you know, “I want to rent a car to come to Vail.” “There’s no Vail.” She pulled out a map to prove that there was Vail Pass and there was Frisco, Minturn, Avon, but no Vail. And I said, “Oh God, what did we do?”

So I started driving and it was bitter cold. In Bermuda, we left and it was in the 80s. We come up here and it was, I think, the first time it was 30 below zero. And my wife, you know, “Where does this road go?” “There was no interstate, there was just US 6. And she said, “Does that go to California?” and I said, “Yeah, I think it does.” “How long can we keep the car?” “As long as you want to pay for it.” She said, “Okay, let’s go tomorrow morning.” I still had the people that told me to come here, and then Pete Seibert took me up the mountain and I came back. My wife said, “Are we ready to go?” I said, “No, we’re going to stay.” I’d never seen a mountain like it.

Smith: What was special about it?

Staufer: The way it was laid out. I mean, there was as much of a mountain as there is now, but the bowls were there. The two big bowls and it was just an incredible mountain.
Smith: So, you saw enormous potential.

Staufer: Yeah, I thought, “If anything makes it, this is going to make it and I want to be part of it.”

Smith: That’s interesting. Someone has described Vail-Beaver Creek as “the last resort.” The last “from scratch development.”

Staufer: Right. And I don’t see anything coming up, either.

Smith: Were there other prototypes? I mean, for example, Sun Valley had been created almost out of nothing.

Staufer: Sun Valley had the train.

Smith: That’s right. Averill Harriman.

Staufer: And a lot of people from Sun Valley were partners here just at the start. They all skied in Sun Valley and they all came here to Vail. Yeah, that’s how they met and that’s how they decided to come here.

Smith: So, I guess, you’ve survived not getting the Olympics just fine.

Staufer: Oh yeah, we survived. As a matter of fact, in the long run, we were better off. Ford was better for us than the Olympics.

Smith: That’s very well put.

Staufer: It didn’t cost anything! We got paid for it!

Smith: That reminds me. He was a real fiscal conservative.

Staufer: Yeah, right.

Smith: And he had a reputation for not being the best tipper in the world. Did you ever see that?

Staufer: I never heard that.

Smith: You never heard that?
Staufer: No. I think that most of the time he went out, there were other people paying the bill anyway.

Smith: But they were clearly generous in their involvement with the community and various activities.

Staufer: Oh yes, they were.

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

Staufer: I think it was the Fourth of July here at Pepi’s terrace when Sheika gave a little lunch for him. That’s the last time I think I saw him.

Smith: Was that in the last couple of years of his life?

Staufer: Everything seems a couple years ago to me.

Smith: He passed away in December of 2006. They did come up here that summer, but went home early.

Staufer: Yeah, I think that it might have been that summer because he was helped by people walking. So it may have been that summer or the summer before. I think that’s the last time I saw him.

Smith: And the Fourth of July.

Staufer: It was the Fourth of July.

Smith: They reviewed the parade, is that right?

Staufer: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Tell me about the parade.

Staufer: We were standing on the balcony seeing the parade go by and then we went down on the terrace for lunch.

Smith: And it's just a classic sort of small town Fourth of July parade?

Staufer: Oh, yeah, Fourth of July parade. A few too many cars, everybody that has an antique wants to go in the parade and show off his car. But they normally get a pretty good parade together. Beats the old times when we had maybe half a
dozen and one was the fire truck and one was the police car and the sheriff’s car.

Smith: I’m told that every year, he would also turn on the lights on the Christmas tree.

Staufer: Yes, that was a happening. All the people came just to see the lights.

Smith: Where was the tree located?

Staufer: Right where the children’s fountain is now.

Smith: Anything else? Any other stories or anything that you can recall?

Staufer: Well, I’m sure after I leave I can think of all kinds of things and I’ll give you a call at three o’clock in the morning.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Staufer: I remember him as the most generous, honest man I’ve ever met in my life other than my father. He was generous in terms of spirit and I will say he wasn’t tipping very well, I don’t know that, but he was a generous man. And he was a politician whose word I would trust and I don’t trust too many politicians. You know, he was just the most honest man you could have.

Smith: Not a bad way to be remembered.

Thank you.
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Smith: First of all, thank you very much for doing this.

Morcus: It’s my pleasure.

Smith: I have to ask you what your reaction is on being back in this room.

Morcus: It’s completely in tears, actually, and really of joy that I’ve been here with the man, that I know him for so long and I just can’t believe it. It’s still the same. The only thing, that chair, I always sat right there and he sat over there.

Smith: When did you first meet?

Morcus: Probably ’68. He was a Congressman. In Vail, Colorado. He was staying at the Manor Vail, Manor Vail condominiums. You can stay there for the skiing. We had a grocery store in Vail, Colorado and he came there. I was an owner, not a working guy. He knew I was there and he came down to the meat counter and said, “What kind of meat shall I buy today?” And I showed him, because I’m a butcher by trade, and I did and that’s the first time I saw him.

Smith: So you were a butcher and he was a Congressman?

Morcus: I owned supermarkets. I had a chain of supermarkets going and I was in the store, just visiting to see because I had an operation manager partner. I wasn’t working, I didn’t work in the store, but I was there checking on them and he was there and he kind of knew that I was in there. And said, “What kind of piece of meat should I get?” I showed him the steaks and he got some meat, and they went. That’s the first time, so a couple times probably, until occasionally even socializing or whatever. Just not really much until he became vice president. When he became vice president – no, no – he bought a condominium in the lodge in Vail.

Smith: And what was that like?
Morcus: It was, I think, a two-bedroom condominium on the second floor. But across the street from it, in ’69, I built a lodge of about 75-80 rooms, with a penthouse on the top and a restaurant and shops on the bottom and underground parking. So, he bought the condominium across the street. So the only thing – he was on the second floor, I am on the fourth floor, I’m looking right into his living room – you could wave from the distance and whatever. And still, at the time, just “hello” and “how are you?” All of a sudden he became vice president. But in the meantime he was coming, I owned the Left Bank Restaurant, which is across the street, I’m sure you’ve been in it.

Smith: I’ve heard of it. I’ve never been to Vail.

Morcus: You’ve never been to Vail?

Smith: You’ll have to describe it for us.

Morcus: The Left Bank Restaurant was a restaurant – I got a Frenchman - his wife was British from South Africa – and I put him in business just to run a restaurant in the place that became vacant from people who went broke. I was looking for somebody and he didn’t have money to buy something, so I put him in business and gave him an interest in the business. So it was a very popular restaurant, so the Fords came there for dinner when they were in town.

Then, all of a sudden he became vice president, and he was across the street from me and they [Secret Service] came down and in front of my lodge they parked this god-awful, what do you call it – trailer? What is it – the one you drive instead of being a trailer? RV. And they put this huge big RV, and then the Secret Service were there and everybody was there and then I find out that’s when he became vice president. He’s driven there and that was the command post.

So we got to know the Secret Service people. There were some events that happened in his honor and we were there for the celebrations and whatever. One day, I remember talking to one of the Secret Service people and I said, “You guys are stupid.” They got to know me - they said, “What do you mean stupid?” I said, “Well, you know, here I am, he’s the vice president, and I’m up there in my room. I could just aim at him anytime I want to, and I could
see him and whatever, and you guys never even bother to check me – whatever it is.” He said, “What do you want to know about yourself? He said, “We know everything, all about you and we know every move you’re making” and so on and so forth. So, that’s the relationship.

So naturally when he became president, he was completely moved out of there and rented a place and they put him there – the Bass house, which was on the east side of Vail, right by – almost Manor Vail where he used to rent when he used to come to the Vail area. And the rest of it – when he became president – was history. And I got to know him really, really well.

Smith: Now how, when he became first vice president, and then president, how did that impact Vail?

Morus: Oh, tremendously. It was a tremendous, tremendous thing. It was the whole thing. When he became president I was building another lodge, which turned out to be a big resort 400-500 room resort-hotel. And they needed, the Secret Service, they became very much all of the entourage, I think when he became president – was it in ’74? And that fall, ’74, happened in the summer, and what’s his name – his detail guy that used to be there? Bald-headed guy, God love him. He said, “Kaiser, we need to book your hotel for the Secret Service.” I said, “Well, I am building it now. I just broke ground a couple or three months ago.” He said, “Well, I’m sure you are going to get it.” I said, “Well, okay, I’m going to get it done in December, for Christmas.” It was the biggest tool in my hands, ever for the general contractors and everybody to get the place ready for Jerry Ford, the President of the United States, the Secret Service coming to the town. I was able to deliver it on time, and have all of the Secret Service and we became the headquarters for them, all throughout the times.

So what happened with the president, as far as impact, when he became, when he went for re-election and he was campaigning with Bob Dole, I threw a benefit for him in the resort in Vail, Colorado. I probably raised $150,000 those days because everybody in Vail showed up and put money just to come to shake their hands and everything else. I still have all of the pictures and everything with Elizabeth Dole and Bob Dole and the president and all the
rest of them. So we became kind of a more and more – even when he was president – I had the great privilege and honor and the scared you-know-what about playing golf with him when he was the president of the United States.

Smith: And where did you play golf?

Morcus: We played at Eagle Vail golf course. There must have been several thousand people there and whatever, and helicopters hovering and every policeman in the county came over just to be there, and Secret Service galore. Here we are and I stand on the first tee and I’m trying to hit the ball and I’m shaking, shaking, like this. And I said to myself, “What will my mother say if she knew I was here – I’m an immigrant from Lebanon. I came from Lebanon in 1956 – and to be with the President of the United States.” To play golf with him and all of these people, it was phenomenal.

Then I am riding in the golf cart with him, with two other people. So we get to play golf, so I went there and I’m shaking and I hit the ball and I’ll be darned if it didn’t go over 225 yards – right down the middle of the straight – which I don’t usually do that. And it took the pressure off until we got to the fourth or fifth hole, and we are playing golf and the Secret Service is just kind of moving around, moving around the golf course with him as he rotates. They were all sheltering him, all a shield, and on the fourth hole I saw a golf cart coming with a canvas. I went to the Secret Service guy who I knew – I got to know them all because they are all staying in my resort, eating in my resort, spending money in my resort, and I came to know them.

So I said, “What’s in that cart?” He said, “You don’t want to know.” I went there about ten, fifteen minutes later and said, “You going to tell me what’s in that cart?” He said, “You don’t want to know.” I said, “Well, tell me.” He said, “Well, there is enough stuff in there to burn this area in two mile squares. You understand now? Get off my back.” And naturally, and I am riding with him, I was so scared the rest of the day the golf game went to hell. That was fun and that was a tough golf course. So, anyway, that’s the story and we finished playing golf and then it was later on that I gave him, I think, the campaigning and everything else, and unfortunately, it didn’t happen.
In the new year, for instance, I remember this one time – it was forty-five below zero – the chill factor in Vail, Colorado. New Year’s Day – Betty was out of town and we were all to be at his house at eight o’clock in the morning on New Year’s Day to go – no, no – at nine o’clock to go there and watch the football games and whatever. And it was he and I, Bob Barrett, John Purcell(?), a few of the gang from there – about four or five of us. I got down to the parking lot, couldn’t start my car – nobody could start a car – it froze. So we walked about the equivalent of two city blocks, and I remember stepping on that snow and it crunching and squeaking like a piece of music, rhythmic. Your nose froze, whatever. So we went over there and we watched the football game all the time and that evening we had dinner there at the house and after the football game – like seven-eight-nine o’clock, we decided to go on the town and he wanted to go with us. We went to the bar – a Mexican restaurant, Los Amigos, ordered drinks, and he says, “I want to buy for this.” You know, that’s the kind of a guy he was. I wouldn’t have paid for this, because nobody was going to pay for this, because the owner of the restaurant was with us walking over there. So we spent the night – we went to a couple of bars and those times he was having a drink or so, and we ended up going home. It was the New Year – I think ’75 or ’76, then the election was after that.

So we spent a lot of times in Vail, golf when he was president, I played golf with him that one time, which was an honor and fear at the same time. It was something else.

Smith: What was he like to watch a football game with? Very focused on the game?

Morus: Oh, very, very intense, especially if it was a Michigan. I watched the games many times with him later on, because the story comes later – we became next door neighbors in Beaver Creek and all of that stuff. So, he was very intense and he liked to bet five dollars on a game or something like that.

Smith: But I assume you didn’t chit chat during the game.

Morus: Oh, no – he was seriously involved with the game. He was really seriously involved with the game and, naturally, with commercials and stuff and we’d
talk or whatever. It was different because when we watched the games, Betty
wasn’t around so it was a freewheeling bunch of guys and it got loud.

Smith: Now, you got to know Mrs. Ford.

Morus: Oh, very well. Yeah.

Smith: Tell me about her in those days.

Morus: She was everything – she was the greatest for us, with us. We became
comfortable and got to know her really well when we all moved to Beaver
Creek. Before we really didn’t get to know her that much, other than “hi” and
“how are you?” and knew who we were. Until we moved to Beaver Creek,
my relationship was, all of that time, with the president. With Mrs. Ford at
several events, naturally she was there and we talked and just the normal
things would be, until we decided actually one day, he and I were talking and
he said, “Well, I’d like to go to Beaver Creek. I want to build a home in
Beaver Creek.” And I said, “Okay.”

Then we got with Leonard Firestone and Dee Keaton, Darius Keaton his name
was. Dee Keaton and myself and we just put the deal together and got four
lots. His lot was – the Vail Associates were very much receptive to the idea –
he had to get the lot just to get in there, and we got one architect and we got
one contractor and we got four interior designers, each one had their own
interior designer, and we started designing our homes. We found out the
wives were kind of talking with each other and all of a sudden, I have four
bathrooms, no I have five bathrooms, no I have six bathrooms, and the sizes
of the houses ended up being – his house was eleven or twelve thousand, my
house was eleven thousand square feet, Dee Keaton was at ten-five, and the
richest man of us all, Leonard Firestone, the smart-alec was at eight thousand
square feet because he had the common sense of controlling whatever, just to
show you.

So anyway, we got to know each other naturally, with my wife and her and
after we moved in. I had the privilege and the honor to host New Year’s Eve
in Vail, Colorado for a number of years – maybe fifteen, twenty years, and I
would say most New Year’s the president and Betty were there. Sometimes,
maybe once or twice, she wasn’t feeling good or something, but we had it all
done. Especially when we moved to Beaver Creek, every New Year they were
there and Christmases and kids and whatever. Just like next door neighbors.

Smith: One difference, most next door neighbors don’t have Secret Service agents
hanging around. I’m trying to visualize how remote or accessible this area
was. Did you have tourists or rubbernecking people?

Morus: There was a command post with an area where the Secret Service – there was
no gate – there was a cul-de-sac, there were four homes, before the cul-de-sac
ends on the left hand side, there was a house. On the other side there were two
or three empty lots, so there was no…there were the four homes, really, that
you consider next to each other. So the Secret Service would know who is
coming and whatever. The tourists would come in and circle and go. If
somebody stops, then the Secret Service…there was very, very much control.
It was very comfortable, and naturally for us, it was so safe for us that the
Secret Service…

Smith: Were there often tourists?

Morus: There was. It wasn’t really overly done. But, it was a lot of people came and
gone to his house. And whenever he had guests – that overflow from the
house ended up being in my house.

Smith: Really?

Morus: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Didn’t they entertain President Clinton at one point? Didn’t they play golf?

Morus: I wasn’t there. I was gone, I think, after that. I left Vail in 1989-90. The
Clintons were after that. My days were Macmillan.

Smith: Really? Harold Macmillan?

Morus: Macmillan used to come a couple, three times to the symposium that the
president sponsored.

Morus: The World Form, right. And it was always done at my resort because it had the biggest meeting facilities and all of that stuff. And then Macmillan was staying at the president’s house and he and his wife used to come for tea every afternoon to our house because my house manager was a very, very delightfully New Zealand-British kind of speaking girl - that kind of really with pizzazz and everything else - and she put the tea and all of that service which took us – she knew more about it than we did.

Smith: Now let me ask you – was that Macmillan or was that Callaghan?

Morus: Callaghan. I’m sorry. Callaghan and his wife and then Giscard d’Estaing was there, too. Frazier from Australia was our houseguest for a couple of times – stayed in the house for all the time. And many other people. All of them from Greenspan to Scowcroft, who were just like out partying every night, practically, they would end up. Because I had a lot of stuff happening in Vail, and I had one of the most famous nightclub and resort and dining rooms - complete resort – and everybody in town went there one way or another. We used to have a lot of parties over there.

Smith: Let me ask you because I’m trying to get the chronology: Mrs. Ford, of course, had her intervention in 1978, I believe it was.

Morus: Right. That was before we built the homes – after the intervention, I’m sorry to interrupt – in ’79 the planning of the houses was done. Around ’80 when we start construction, and we moved in ’81.

Smith: Okay. Were you aware of her problem?

Morus: Absolutely.

Smith: How apparent was it?

Morus: Well, not really too much apparent, but you know, like if she didn’t show up for a reason or another, we kind of…we never talked about it, never said anything about it. I was very close to Leonard Firestone, as well. Leonard Firestone was very – I spent a lot of months and days with him, with Leonard Firestone.
Smith: And he had a serious problem?

Morus: He had a serious problem, and I remember one day when he came over to the restaurant, we had a golf tournament and we were having dinner or something in one of my restaurants in there, and he took the glass of wine and he said, “Screw it,” more or less, and he takes a drink – a couple of sips out of it. But the man controlled it. After that he didn’t touch it. He said, “I’m not going to worry about it, I know how to ____________ it,” because we all looked at him – how could you do that? This is before Mrs. Ford was intervened with. And after that, after the intervention, it wasn’t something to talk about, other than to know what’s going on and hope and pray that things will work out, which it did work out.

Smith: But in later years, did they talk about it? She obviously, and Leonard Firestone…

Morus: Oh, she talked about it very openly. She even was very influential for one of my own children. I have my number three son who was having problems and unbeknown to me, he goes to her and asks to see her and talk to her at the house in Beaver Creek. And without her discussing it with me, or with my wife, or with anybody, she helped him arrange for, not here at the Betty Ford Center, but someplace in Aspen, Colorado, and she got him down in there and he’s been sober for twenty-one, twenty-two years, and he is still sober. She helped him with everything and she never said when I confronted her, not confronted, but she said, “That’s none of your business, this is the way we do business.” And she helped him out and that’s the way it was.

Smith: She saved a lot of lives.

Morus: A lot. And she was very open about it, and unashamed, and she saved a lot of lives and helped a lot of people. Maybe at times she was overly anxious to help people, too, sometimes. Some people say, well, maybe ____________, but very few people didn’t appreciate it.

Smith: I take it they were very visible around Vail.
Morcus: Oh, absolutely. Very visible around Vail. They were very visible around here. Many, many, many a time, we’d go out and play golf. I mean, golf was like once or twice a week, even after he retired. He is the reason I am in this area, because after he lost the election and I called here and talked to Bob Barrett, and he said, “Well, come on.” At that time I knew Penny fairly well and everything. No – that time Penny wasn’t around. Bob Barrett. Penny didn’t come until ’76.

I came here and we went out and played golf at Indian Wells Country Club, and I came here and I loved the area and across the street called the Springs Club. It was a brand new club, one of the best new country clubs in the area. I walked across the street, I picked up a lot that was under construction. I bought it sight unseen, signed for it and I bought a house across the street – only because I knew, even though I had a home in Newport Beach, I said, well, this is going to be less crowded because at that time there was nobody here. Nobody here.

Smith: Really? How was it different then?

Morcus: Well, it was just a small town. You go five miles to go find a restaurant. There was nothing. This, across street area, Morningside over here, was all sand. The Morning Springs was under construction. The hospital was one-third of what it is today, maybe one-fourth. All of the buildings – you want to go to a restaurant, probably go three or four miles to find a restaurant. It’s all vacant land and quiet and I used to have a second home because I got sick of the snow and cold weather and in the mud season I got out of town for a month or two and go enjoy myself. And Newport Beach got so crowded, and here was so pleasantly whatever.

I kept the house in Newport Beach, after ten years I go there only once or twice a year. I ended up selling and started living here completely. So I was here. He is the reason I came to visit, see and play golf with he and I and Bob and whatever, and I became a part-time resident here, and eventually a full time resident. It’s a very interesting story.
Smith: I know their names are attached to places at Vail. The amphitheater and the garden.

Morus: Oh, sure. I remember when we had the grand opening for the amphitheater. I was there. Was there when it was starting [to be] built. The amphitheater, as well. There is the Jerry Ford Street, the Jerry Ford Elementary School and on and on.

Smith: Since 1968, I assume Vail has exploded.

Morus: Maybe eight times more. I haven’t been in Vail since, when was it? Sometimes in the 90s, when they had their 85th birthday or whatever. There was a big party in Vail, Colorado, and we were invited and we flew from over in Carmel, because I had a home in Pebble Beach. We flew there to that event for about three or four days and it was held at the lodge in Vail.

That was the last time I was in Vail because that trip I was there for three days, four days and three nights, I think I slept two and half hours because of the high altitude, and I’d been gone for a long time. And without dropping any names, we flew with Clint Eastwood and his wife, and Dee Keaton and his wife and myself from Carmel. Clint got his jet and we flew over there with them, and then we came back to Carmel. When we arrived in Carmel I knew I’d never come back to Vail, so I went and bought a place in Pebble Beach. The same thing, I bought a place here because I knew I’d never go back to Vail because of the altitude.

Smith: That’s interesting you say that because, certainly the last summer of his life, and maybe before that…

Morus: And I have a couple of stories about that, go ahead, please.

Smith: I was going to say, all of their friends were urging them not to come back, for that exact reason. And, of course, Mrs. Ford would say, “At our point in life, we’ve had the quantity of life, we want the quality of life.” And they obviously loved Beaver Creek - to the point where they would be willing to risk their health to come back.

Morus: May I give you a couple of stories about that?
Smith: Yes.

Morus: Before that, I’m trying to put a parallel into people’s lives and how it works. I was having dinner one night with Dee Keaton, with the wife, with the neighborhood, and Firestone and myself. It was in June. Leonard Firestone was leaving for Vail, Colorado that following morning. The three of us sitting in a corner in one of my restaurants here in Palm Desert, having dinner and I said to Leonard Firestone, “Leonard, I wish you would come to your senses and not to go to Vail because that climate, that weather, is going to hurt you. Is going to kill you.” And he unloaded on me so bad. That really was hard. “Why don’t you mind your own business and telling people what to do,” and Leonard is a lot older than me. And I said, “Okay, I’m sorry. I am sorry. I should have minded my own business. Let’s enjoy our dinner. Have fun.”

That fall, actually in September, or maybe even in August, Leonard was forced to come back, because of his health. And he came here to Palm Springs. He called me and I came to see him. And then Leonard Firestone apologized, he said, “I am sorry that I jumped down your throat. You were right.” Leonard Firestone passed on that year. On December 23rd.

Now, two years ago I said the same thing to Jerry. I said, “Mr. President, you know, it’s getting…” and he said, “Mind your own business.” Because I lost a lot of friends. Another dear friend in Colorado Springs ended up the same thing with the high altitude, so I know how I felt when I went to Vail. I’m not a wise man, but you care about your friends and you start the conversation, but he put me in my place.” He said, “It’s none of your business.” I said, “Okay, Mr. President.” And he told that to everybody that told him, because I know a lot of people who told him. He didn’t want to hear it. I think the last couple of years, Mrs. Ford was on the oxygen when they went to Vail.

Smith: Don’t you think, in part, he didn’t want to hear it because he didn’t want to acknowledge to himself that he shouldn’t be there?

Morus: Probably.

Smith: That he’d gotten to the point physically that…
Morus: It could be that he doesn’t want to admit that, and it could be a part of his independent way of doing things. You don’t tell him anything, you don’t tell him anything.

Smith: He was a stubborn man.

Morus: Oh, tell me about it. Oh, yeah. Oh, how well I knew that, and, I went through, for some reason my life with him wasn’t a politician with politician. Someone that needed to accomplish anything – my relationship was together, whatever it is at the moment, and there was no demands on it whatsoever. There was no demands, whatsoever. I didn’t expect anything and I lived for the moment and whatever it is.

And that is why, like when he had his knee surgery, the first knee surgery. I came here to see him after he got out of the hospital. And then we went to Vail in the summer. He comes to Vail on July 4th, he calls me next door. He says, “I feel like I’m going to be able to play golf.” “Okay,” that’s wonderful. He said, “Well, we’ll pick you up, we’ll all go in my car. The Secret Service will drive us.” So we loaded the clubs and we go to the Country Club in the Rockies, which I’m a member there. And we go to the range and take the bags to the range, he lifts up the club and we go to hit balls. Instead of my going to hit balls, I was standing there - I want to watch him. I figure he might collapse, his knee is going to collapse. I just wanted to be there. I don’t want to be involved with my golf game. He pulls the four iron out of his bag and he hits it 225-250 yards right down the middle. And we go play nine holes of golf, just he and I.

Ironic enough, the second time, when he had the second surgery with his leg, a few years later was here in Palm Springs when he called me and said, “Let’s go play golf. Steve is here, my son.” I told him I’d bring my son, so his son and my son and he and I went to play golf because most of the golf courses were closed – it was in the fall. And we went to Mission Hills and we played a round of golf, his first round after his second knee surgery. And he and I took on the boys and we kicked their butts. That’s the competitive – he was so damn competitive.
Smith: Was he very competitive?

Morus: He wanted to beat the hell out of you, man. He wanted to win everything. He doesn’t want to lose, he hated to lose. And you know, this is the kind of relationship – and this is the simplicity of the man was so unbelievable – the simplicity and his being a commoner. One Christmas, Christmas morning about eight, nine o’clock, we’re still in pajamas and somebody at the door. So I come down to the door and it’s him. He, himself, coming in, “Here, we got you this one in here, for…” I looked at him and I said, “Mr. President,” it was almost a quart or a half of gallon of caviar, Beluga caviar. Beluga caviar – that’s a thousand dollars! “Mr. President…” “Oh, yeah, we have some more, but we thought you would enjoy it.”

We went and ate caviar. But that’s the way – to be honest with you – he didn’t even probably know the value. And if he did, it didn’t matter, because that’s the kind of a man he was. And we had all kinds of stories. We could go on and on and on. And my life was very fulfilled. I never asked him to do anything for me, nor did he ask me. We’d all go down for dinner, we’d go out, we’d entertained, we’d play golf.

Smith: You were probably one of the few people who didn’t ask him for things.

Morus: I would just have to say, probably, yes.

Smith: Let’s face it. He was surrounded by people who, often with good intentions, and I assume you must have seen, one of the things that probably drove him up the wall after a while were the autograph seekers. People who wanted autographs.

Morus: Oh, yeah. Oh my God. We used to kind of protect him. Like in the restaurants, keep people away and stuff when he’d come over to the restaurants. Just say, keep them away from him, whatever. Sometimes he was annoyed. Other times he was just whatever, he’ll do it. I had the same problems with Clint Eastwood. I spent a lot of years around him and he was one time stampeded at Indian Wells country club – and to the point that they probably would have run over him because the autograph seekers can take it and sell it for $25 a shot.
But yeah, we protected him without him knowing. Without him knowing as far as around the public, and naturally there was always the Secret Service. Especially when he was president, every time there was an event you had to submit your name and get a clearance, no matter whether you were cleared before or not. You got to get your clearance again. You go to the party, and there is fifty people or sixty people in the party, there is twenty Secret Service and everybody, no matter where he is, piercing you with their eyes. Watching every move you make. It was to the point of almost uncomfortable. But the Secret Service were to protect him.

Smith: And as someone who had been the target of two assassination attempts, he had to be conscious of security.

Morus: Oh, yes. Two assassinations that didn’t succeed. Did she get – she was going to be pardoned, Fromme, whatever, but I think they refused her.

Smith: That’s right. They have refused.

Morus: Just recently, a few months ago.

Morus: Oh, we talked politics for what’s happening in the day. The Republican Party – what’s going to happen, what’s happening in the Middle East, we shared a lot of conversation because he knew I was from Lebanon and all of that stuff. But not really deeply in politics. As I said, my relationship with him was purely – it didn’t matter – whatever is comfortable. You want to come for dinner? The office would call, the president is coming for dinner. Fine, we’ll make arrangements. And every time he came to the restaurant, I’d try to leave him alone and there is ninety-nine times out of a hundred, “Sit down and talk to us.” He wanted to sit down and catch up with all of the stuff. We talked a lot about other things. Politics – only when elections – opinions – what's happening, but never deeply enough that he…Maybe he’d tell some stories about certain things that happened that’s not secret or whatever at the White House. I miss him, really miss him.

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him?
Morcus: Yeah, I came to see him here in the office, probably nine months ago. Nine months before…

Smith: So he was still in the office?

Morcus: Could be a year I came here to see him – over a year. Maybe longer, I don’t know. When he took ill and I knew he was ill, I stayed away. I communicated stuff with Penny and with Richard Casenbach(?). When he became ill, no, I didn’t see him. I saw him before. I came down here to visit. He was sitting there and I was sitting here. No, I think I came once to the house, too, after that. I’m trying to remember. I don’t know. Probably.

Smith: But you never saw him ill?

Morcus: No, not really ill, no. I did not see him ill. And thank God I didn’t.

Smith: He was a workaholic, wasn’t he?

Morcus: Oh my God. Never stops. Never stops – always on the go. I told him one time, I said, “Mr. President, when you going to slow down?” This is a few years back. He said, “Why slow down? I’m feeling good, I’m enjoying myself and I’m making money.”

Smith: He took some grief about making money.

Morcus: He took a lot of grief, unfairly so. Unlike Clinton, he made hundreds of millions of dollars and they criticized him, but not to the extreme that they criticized him.

Smith: Because he did a lot of charity work – President Ford. And of course, he had to raise that money to build that library-museum back in Michigan, which seemed like an awful lot of money.

Morcus: I was there for the grand opening. I was there when they had the whole dignitaries. As a matter of fact, we were his personal guests. We went there and spent about three or four days. It was raining like – whatever.

Smith: What do you remember from the funeral? Because you were in Grand Rapids for the funeral?
Morus: No, no, no. I’m sorry. I wasn’t in Grand Rapids, I was in Washington. I didn’t go to Grand Rapids. I saw you speaking someplace else.

Smith: Were you surprised when you heard of his death?

Morus: Not really. We thought we knew it was coming. I was constantly communicating and knowing what’s happening all the time.

Smith: For someone who never knew him like you did – it’s a name in a textbook, or an old film clip – what should people know about Gerald Ford that maybe they don’t know?

Morus: That he was probably the truest human being that’s ever lived. The most honest man that ever lived. His honesty and integrity was so unbelievable that he was unwavering and he treated everybody the same. He was so phenomenally that way – at least this is my experience with him all along. He didn’t have to pretend. He didn’t have whatever – he was truly the man that he was. He was right there with the humility, with a really simplistic way of doing things – he wasn’t pretentious, he was all of the above. He was truly a great man because he was a great man.

Smith: Do you miss him?

Morus: Oh, yeah. Often times I think about it. We talk about it and I say many times, I’m the only one left out of the crowd. Seriously, because there was Jerry Ford, there was Leonard Firestone, Dee Keaton, the foursome. We were there all the time, we done a lot of things together, we used to bring a golf teacher together, the four of us and go play and take lessons for a couple, three days. And I say, all my friends are gone. I am the only one still.

Smith: But how lucky you are to have had those experiences.

Morus: How could you describe that? How could you describe that, especially a kid that came from the old country that was penniless and homeless and couldn’t even speak hardly any English? To come to this country and ended up being to that level, is beyond…and for me to be there and to continue to be there, is something that I cannot – I can’t describe the feeling about it. It was
unbelievable. How did I do that? Why did I do that? Why did it happen to me? Why did I have that experience? Lucky, I guess.

Smith: I don’t think it was just luck. That’s perfect, that’s a perfect rap. Thank you.
Smith: I guess the obvious place to begin is, how did you find yourself in the Ford White House?

Lazarus: At that time, most of the young Republican lawyers in the city were discredited, as you know.

Smith: By Watergate?

Lazarus: Yeah. So, I was approached by three fellows who were assigned the task of finding some lawyers to work with Phil Buchen. That was Jerry Morgan, who worked in the Eisenhower administration, Ed McCabe, who also worked there, and Bryce Harlow.

Smith: Legendary figure.

Lazarus: But I talked to McCabe and Jerry Morgan. Jerry Morgan was, I think, the first legal counsel to President Eisenhower and then after Sherman Adams, everybody got bumped up and then, I think, McCabe became legal counsel. So, they recruited me.

Smith: Do you know where they got their authority?

Lazarus: I believe they were on assignment from the president, basically. He had some sort of informal group put together to take care of staff and they were part of it.

Smith: It’s interesting that he would go back to Eisenhower people. Harlow was, as I say, a legendary figure. Ford has been described as Eisenhower without the medals. So, you came into the White House when?

Lazarus: Almost immediately after President Nixon’s resignation, which I think was August 9th.

Smith: That’s right.
Lazarus: Shortly after that. I was, at that time, chief counsel to Republicans on the Senate Judiciary Committee. And very shortly after that, I spoke with Ed McCabe and was then put in touch with Phil Buchen. I worked with him briefly before I went on to the White House staff. And I think I went on to the White House staff in September.

Smith: Tell me about Phil Buchen.

Lazarus: Phil was a fine man and a good lawyer, but he had no background in Washington. He was basically, I think, a trust lawyer transposed into Washington. So, he had good legal analytical skills, but he had no background or training experience in all the kinds of issues that come up here.

Smith: It’s interesting you characterize it that way, because there is this school of thought, maybe caricature, that Ford brought with him all of these Capitol Hill and Grand Rapids types - that was said with a certain degree of condescension - but clearly they were people he trusted and had worked with for some period of time. Buchen being at the top of the list. I detect, from what you say, Buchen had the skill, the raw talent, and he had the instincts or the character or whatever the job called for, but he didn’t have experience in this town that is uniquely valuable if you're going to be in the White House.

Lazarus: That’s right. And, also, Phil didn’t have any of the gangster about him. He was so close to the President at the outset that he could’ve preempted substantial segments of the White House operation, but never did so. He wasn’t interested in that. He was more interested in working with the President one on one in deciding matters, so he didn’t go out and do a lot of work, analytical work, or anything relevant to the questions that came up. Other people would tend to do that and then he would sit with the President and talk them through.

Smith: Was he a sounding board for the President?

Lazarus: I think the President trusted his instincts.

Smith: One of the recurring issues that we’ve encountered in the course of this project is that among the challenges Ford confronted was providing the right
mix of change and continuity. In terms of just administrating the White House, deciding what to do with the Nixon holdovers. Clearly most of them had nothing to do with Watergate. and our sense is that he wanted to be fair to them. Many of them were very talented and he needed that talent to keep the place running. At the same time, Rumsfeld has said, and others have confirmed, he was strongly urging Ford to clean house early for the symbolic value. Did you sense tension between, for lack of a better word, the holdovers and the newcomers?

Lazarus: I think you described it very well. I think, in terms of the tension that existed, the President, as you know, is a very fair man and went out of his way to be decent with people. I sensed the frustration on the part of Rumsfeld and other people with getting rid of the old people. Several of the Nixon people did stay over and became central to Ford’s White House operation. I’m thinking of Mike Duvall, Jerry Jones, they all stayed over.

Smith: Terry O’Donnell.

Lazarus: Well, I don’t know what he did in the Nixon administration, but the other people, certainly Mike Duvall, was an active member of the Nixon administration. He wasn’t the very top level, but he eventually became quite close to the President.

Smith: While Ford was vice president, clearly there were those in the White House who questioned whether he was up to the job. Was there any of that, again, for lack of a better word, condescension detectable in any of the holdovers, people whose loyalty to Richard Nixon was such that they questioned Gerald Ford’s capacity or even legitimacy?

Lazarus: I don’t think so. If it did exist, I think it was there in absolute minimum. Obviously, a lot of those people who felt an allegiance to President Nixon were upset by the circumstances and that might’ve been reflected in their thinking and their actions. But I don’t think that was any part of it. When you work up close with a person, you see the real person. When President Ford came into office, he looked more like a congressman from Michigan than a
President of the United States. He had not gone through the crucible of primaries and obtained that patina that presidents have. He obtained it later.

Smith: The trajectory of the Ford presidency is of someone coming into the office, in many ways unprepared, and learning how to be an executive as opposed to a congressman without ever jettisoning, totally, his congressional instincts. The first day that they’re actually living in the house, he’s walking up to the West Wing and – classic Congressman Ford – the Marine opens the door and the President walks over and sticks out his hand and says, “Hi. I’m Jerry Ford. I’m going to be living here. What’s your name?” Now, that’s a congressman speaking.

Lazarus: There’s also, in the beginning and throughout his term, that he suffered fools far too much.

Smith: What do you mean?

Lazarus: He would let people go on and discuss things after he had decided them, just because he was polite and he didn’t want to shut people off. So he would listen to them.

Smith: In what kind of context?

Lazarus: I can remember one example.

Smith: Sure.

Lazarus: Ford decided that he wanted a swimming pool at the White House and we had endless meetings on this topic. They were all trying to disabuse him of this pool because these were difficult economic times. But this was a very modest cost and I think it was being funded by minor contributions from children or some such. And Ford sat through three or four meetings where a number of people tried to talk him out of this, said this wasn’t anything more than a backyard pool. And before, he used more colorful language, but then he finally said, “Let’s go ahead and do this.”

Smith: Did you ever see his temper?
Ken Lazarus  
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Lazarus: That was the only time I ever saw him get angry with anybody. Mind you, I was a very young man at that point in time, so Ford was the same age as my father. So I wasn’t chummy with the President. I saw him frequently, but I wasn’t chummy with him.

Smith: Were you there when the pardon occurred?

Lazarus: No, I was there afterwards, but I wrote the President’s testimony, at least the drafts. And briefed him on the pardon power and did his testimony before the House Judiciary Committee and things related to that. So, I came to understand what had occurred, I think.

Smith: Was there an internal debate about the wisdom of breaking that historical precedent and going up on the Hill as he did to testify before the House?

Lazarus: I think there was, but I wasn’t privy to that. I know, myself, I commented to several people, probably Jack Marsh and Phil Buchen, that I thought that they allowed too much time up there for questioning. I thought it was too drawn out and they seemed to agree with that kind of stuff. And I wouldn’t have been surprised if people had tried to talk him out of that, but he felt very comfortable doing that.

Smith: Is that, again, part of the transition from the congressman to the President? I mean, that was his backyard.

Lazarus: I think it was just his open nature. He felt he had nothing to hide and he had done the honorable thing and he wasn’t afraid to go and talk about it.

Smith: Did you have a personal opinion about the pardon?

Lazarus: I thought it was the wise thing to do when it was done and I continue my view today. Mind you, I had worked on the Hill and I participated in the Saturday Night Massacre hearings and all that kind of stuff and I had seen some of the ugliness underlying the President’s resignation. So, I readily agreed that things had gone on too long.

Smith: It’s hard to make people today in this instant, 24/7 news cycle - can you imagine Watergate going on for, what, two years?
Lazarus: Right. No, I think a lot of it was a result of the personalities involved and a lot of other factors as well. I couldn’t see it occurring again.

Smith: When you went in there, how was the counsel’s office organized. Was it re-organized as a result of Ford’s becoming president?

Lazarus: When I was approached by McCabe and Morgan, they originally described to me an office that was different than what I saw. They advised me that Phil was going to be the counsel to the president and told me about his relationship with the president. Phil Areda was to be deputy counsel to the president and my understanding was that he had been given assurance that he would take over the Domestic Council in that capacity as deputy counsel to the president. I would be the associate counsel to the president and I would be relied upon to provide assistance relevant to Constitutional types of issues that I had worked on the Hill, legislative enactments, and all that sort of stuff. When I got in there, I don’t recall a lot of discussion about that. Events took over. Vice President Rockefeller, in effect, was given the domestic counselor’s staff and things changed. Phil Areda left. So, things changed in terms of what my original understanding was.

Smith: It’s our sense that Areda left, in effect, was driven away by Rockefeller. It’s not altogether clear whether that simply was musical chairs - that Rockefeller had been promised a role in domestic policy not dissimilar to what Henry Kissinger played in foreign policy, which also planted the seeds for all kinds of problems down the road. Again, is very much a congressman splitting the baby. Did you know Areda?

Lazarus: Yeah, I worked very closely with Phil when I was there. It wasn’t a long time. And then, periodically, throughout Ford’s presidency, on a regular, maybe bi-monthly basis, Phil would come through town and he usually would come to see me.

Smith: Tell us about him because I know very little about him aside from this apparent tug of war.

Lazarus: Areda, as I understand it, had the job that I had in the Ford White House in the Eisenhower White House. He was the young guy who was supposed to do the
paperwork and the analysis and that kind of stuff. He was very, very bright.
Rumor has it, I don’t know if it’s true or not, that Phil had the highest grade
point average ever at Harvard Law School and that remains the case to this
day, I’m told. He was very bright, a very good student. His expertise was in
economic areas and anti-trust, as you know, but he also had very high
standards. He was very likeable and decent. I thought he was absolutely first rate and I was sad to see a really first rate guy leave.

Smith: Did he make it clear that he was leaving because of the Domestic Council?

Lazarus: No sour grapes or anything like that. I think once his understanding of the
position changed, he just left in a very pleasant way.

Smith: We talked to Bobby Kilberg. How was the office organized at that point?
Who did what? And, did it evolve over the two and a half years?

Lazarus: Yeah, well, it evolved in terms of people leaving over a period of time.

Smith: Were some of those Nixon folks?

Lazarus: No, no. Well, when I came in, it was my understanding, as I’ve told you, that
it was going to be Phil Buchen, Phil Areda and myself and maybe a couple of
people who weren’t presidential appointees.

Smith: Would that be the typical size of the counsel’s office?

Lazarus: A half dozen or so?

Smith: Yeah.

Lazarus: It’s certainly not the case any longer, but that’s about what was needed, I
think. Half a dozen, maybe ten. And Bill Casselman had been the president’s
counsel when he was vice president and Bill was going to leave and go out
into private practice. He stayed on for a short period of time. So, he was
transitional, sort of.

Smith: Is he still around?

Lazarus: Bill Castleman is still around, I think. I think he’s out in Middleburg. I kept
in touch with him until about a year or two years ago. Bobby Kilberg came in
later. I don’t remember exactly when. And Bobby handled a number of
assignments but I didn’t see Bobby’s work as sort of day-in, day-out kind of
work. It was more project-oriented.

Smith: Was she the first woman in the Counsel’s office?

Lazarus: I don’t know. I don’t know of any other woman who worked there, but she
might well have been. There was another fellow there named Jim Wilderotter
who worked exclusively on the Watergate stuff. And then there were a whole
succession of people who went into the sort of number two slot after Phil left.
Not a whole succession, but Rod Hills and then Ed Schmultz.

Smith: So, there was a, for lack of a better word, Watergate hangover? I mean, a
continuing need to deal with Watergate related issues?

Lazarus: Well, dealing with the tapes was pretty much Wilderotter’s work. He
reported to Phil on it to the extent he needed guidance. But I don’t think it
was any hangover to speak of. Basically, the tapes were there and they
needed to be reviewed from time to time for various purposes.

Smith: Maybe this doesn’t fall under your domain, but I’m confused over the process
whereby ultimately the tapes became the property of the federal government.

Lazarus: Yeah, I don’t really know. I mean, there was some legal analysis that led to
that. I don’t recall what it was at the moment, if I knew at the time.

Smith: So, what kinds of things would you be working on?

Lazarus: The things that were the most fun that I worked on and those that stay with
me is the appearance before the House Judiciary Committee and everything
associated with that.

Smith: That was sort of high drama.

Lazarus: I think Ford did a bang up job on that. If you’ve looked at it or recall it, I
think Elizabeth Holtzman was the one who went after him the most. I don’t
think she succeeded. I think he did quite well. As a matter of fact, I
remember him bouncing in the polls at the time by about five or ten points
after his appearance. I liked that. I handled the nomination of John Stevens to the Supreme Court.

Smith: It’s funny because we talked to Justice Stevens, and there are so many things that are amazing in light of what we’re going through right now. The fact that the President never interviewed him.

Lazarus: I might say I wasn’t involved in his selection. I did have the lead in terms of handling his nomination. As I understand it, I remember Ed Levi saying that the President wanted to find the best person for the job. That’s what he told Levi. And Levi told the President that he had read all of Stevens’ opinions and that each of them was like an individual pearl in a necklace of excellence. That’s how he put it. I think he sold Ford with that idea. I know, originally, I’d heard when the vacancy first occurred, the President mentioned favorably that he thought Barbara Jordan would make a great Supreme Court Justice. He said that, but just said it in passing. I’m not aware of any further review of that as a possibility. But he mentioned that originally. As far as I know, it came down to Arlen Adams, who was a judge on the court of appeals in Philadelphia at the time, and Stevens. And Levi recommended Stevens and the President went with it.

Smith: It’s also fascinating that in his confirmation hearings, nobody asked him about *Roe v. Wade*.

Lazarus: I didn’t remember that.

Smith: No doubt that’s the last time that will happen.

Lazarus: I think he was approved unanimously and he had a fairly easy go of it.

Smith: In later years, people assumed – given the story line of Presidents being surprised by their appointees - that somehow the President was disappointed. To the contrary, he was very proud of that appointment.

Lazarus: Yeah, and I think rightly so.

Smith: It’s really one of the last appointments made for sheer talent, sheer ability, apart from ideological considerations.
Lazarus: Well, Stevens, I thought, was the best writer on the Supreme Court. He had superb analytical abilities and he was no doubt the most knowledgeable in terms of anti-trust and other economic and business areas. And, even in dissent, I think it was his dissent in Hallorby (?) case recently - I think Scalia wrote the majority - and you read his dissent, I don’t think it indicates that he’s a screaming liberal or anything like that. I mean, any good lawyer is a conservative lawyer in that he looks for a reason to put further gloss on the law if necessary and his analysis is solid, conservative analysis.

Smith: My sense is, he’s always felt a little bit surprised that people label him as a liberal, because he doesn’t think of himself as a liberal.

Lazarus: He doesn’t think he’s changed he thinks the rest of the world has and I tend to agree with that. Some of the other areas I enjoyed, I’ve been teaching for a number of years at Georgetown. The course I’ve been teaching in recent years is called Constitutional Aspects in Foreign Policy. It’s basically a separation of powers course. And Ford was, I think, a first rate defender of the presidency in terms of separation of powers. And, so, he often would stay the course with things like legislative vetoes. He laid the groundwork, really, for the Chada case that came later in the Supreme Court.

Smith: Which is…?

Lazarus: Legislative vetoes are a way in which Congress used to enact law where they would keep the string on the law afterwards. For example, what you would find is Congress would write a law and implore an agency to do good and avoid evil and give them some general guidance. But then they would say that regulations, for example, wouldn’t take effect until they were proposed, laid before the Congress. The Congress would have the chance to veto them and all that sort of things, where they would try to keep controls and extend their control over what was normally executive authority.

Smith: The administrative realm.

Lazarus: Yeah. And the Chada case in the Supreme Court changed that and knocked out legislative vetoes which had been in practice in thousands of pieces of legislation. Every time a legislative veto came up, Ford would speak against
it and indicate that he was fighting against it every chance he had. It wasn’t until sometime later, I think it was during Reagan’s presidency, that the Supreme Court held it. Another thing he did was in the area of foreign affairs. I think it was Congressman Dingle at the time and a number of other people on the Hill wanted to dictate to the President whether he should use treaties or executive agreements in certain situations. They wanted to prescribe which situations in which you’d use executive agreement and the other where you’d use treaties. By law, it’s the president’s choice. They’re fungible. You can use either one. And Ford fought against that. Whenever a principle basis of presidential power came up by my perception, he was Johnny on the spot.

Smith: It’s ironic because, here you have someone who was a child of the Hill, who suddenly finds himself pitch forked into this office that he never aspired to and forced to defend its prerogatives against his former colleagues. The War Powers Act - my sense is that he and those around him (and indeed, I suspect, other presidents as well), strongly questioned its constitutionality, but did not want to test the issue.

Lazarus: It’s funny. I have another little funny anecdote about the War Powers Act. You’re absolutely right in what you said. Phil Buchen could never remember how the War Powers Act worked. It required you to notify certain people in the leadership. Now, Ford, you’re absolutely right, questioned, challenged, the constitutionality of the War Powers Act, and he was right. The War Powers Act is and was unconstitutional. But Ford used to observe the notice requirements in the statute which required you, upon the shifting of substantial numbers of troops, to advise certain leadership people on the Hill. He would do that, but they couldn’t keep straight who you had to advise and what the nature of the thing was and the section number and that sort of thing. So, I could always tell when something was cooking. For example, Mayaguez and these other things. Phil Buchen would tell me to make sure to be around or by the phone at home or whatever. He put me on alert, so to speak. He wouldn’t say what was cooking, but he would let me know so I would guess that there was something going on that they might want to alert Congress about.
Smith: What was the mood around the White House that April when Saigon was falling?

Lazarus: Very sad.

Smith: Did it just permeate the place?

Lazarus: I think so, yeah. It was very sad. Now, I don’t mean everybody was in a funk for a long period of time, but from the President on down, everybody was very sad about that.

Smith: We’ve been told that when it came to budget issues, but others as well, he liked to have differing viewpoints, liked to hear people argue out an issue. Which is not something, for example, that one would associate with, say, Richard Nixon, who I think tended to be much more isolated. Did you see that or take part in that?

Lazarus: Again, I think the best way I can describe it is to give you an example. I remember one weekend day, I don’t remember if it was a Saturday or Sunday, but the subject of no-fault insurance came up. Secretary Coleman had to go to the Hill to testify on the subject the following Monday or Tuesday, so we’re meeting on the subject. Ford had never addressed his position on no-fault insurance. And there was a big legal aspect of the discussion because this would’ve compelled states to perform, to enact certain laws. Not the normal carrot and stick of ‘if you don’t enact this, you lose this subsidy’ or whatever, but to just compel them to try and force the states to do something by executive fiat. Secretary Coleman thought it was constitutional and there were a number of other people on the other side. I remember Levi being there, Don Baker from the anti-trust division, there were perhaps six or seven people there and it was a Saturday. The President, after half an hour or so of the discussion, was pretty clear that he didn’t want to support it. But we stayed there for another 2 or 3 hours giving everybody a chance to come back at him as many times as they wanted to. Eventually, Secretary Coleman ran out of arguments to make. He had a chance to make every single one and he wasn’t getting anyplace with the President. Finally, he said, “Well, Mr. President, I realize that I’ve lost this and maybe if you buy me a beer, we’ll
call it quits.” But he ended it. President Ford was willing to sit and talk with
him as long as he wanted to.

Smith: Did he ask questions?

Lazarus: Oh, yeah, he was involved. He wasn’t just sitting there. He was participating
in the discussion.

Smith: That’s wonderful. Secretary Coleman told us that he weighed in at the time of
the Boston bussing issue and as he recounted it the President’s position was,
“You know, Bill, I’m just opposed to bussing any kid further than they can
walk to school.” A view grounded in his own experience of the neighborhood
school. What kind of conservative was Gerald Ford?

Lazarus: I think he’s what we used to call a ‘country club conservative’. He was
basically moderate, perhaps somewhat liberal on social issues.

Smith: Including civil rights.

Lazarus: Yes. And his instincts all went in that direction. And very frugal in terms of
money. And strong national defense and very much an internationalist.

Smith: Pretty much a product of the war in that sense. It’s a double-consensus. You
have a consensus of the generation that fought in the war, and then found
itself in the Cold War.

Lazarus: Exactly.

Smith: Do you think the combination of those things contributed in any way to a kind
of maybe unnatural consensus? I mean, people look at politics today and it’s
ugly and divisive and yet there is a debate as to whether maybe it’s not more
typical of the broad sweep of American politics than the ‘50s and ‘60s
consensus that people remember fondly. I wonder whether looking back, the
‘50s and the ‘60s were not in some ways aberrational. You had these
preexisting conditions, both the common experience of fighting World War II
and before that, the Depression, and then the unifying reality of the Cold War.

Lazarus: I think you put your finger on something, but I think also that the fly in the
ointment as I see it is that today there is no incentive for politicians to appeal
to the reasonable nature of the population as a whole. And that the real fly in the ointment is the redistricting. People are more and more concerned about creating safe districts, so that you have districts that are 75% conservative or 75% liberal. And the only way people get beat is the conservative gets attacked from his right and the liberal gets attacked from his left. So, consequently, there’s no reason to pitch the reasonable man and that leads to all this exaggerated rhetoric.

Smith: Of course. And the media pouring kerosene on the fire because they need confrontation, and the 24/7 news cycle demands a new story line every day. When he was in office, Gerald Ford was described as the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge. Then in very short order, he became this liberal marooned in his own party because Reagan conservatism redefined the party. At the same time, Ford was the last president willing to use whatever political capital he had, plus the veto pen, to try to restrain federal spending.

Lazarus: That’s right. He certainly used it, didn’t he?

Smith: Frank Carlucci told us a wonderful story about going in to see the President. There was something he wanted to talk to him about, this bill. And Carlucci said, “It’s a terrible idea, but I guarantee you it’s politically popular and if you were to veto it, it would be overridden in a minute.” And Ford said, “Well, that’s alright, if it’s the right thing to do.” So he did veto it and, of course, it was overridden in a minute.

Lazarus: Yeah, as I say, he just had a very nice – he tried to do the right thing. I don’t think he gave a moment’s thought to what was political, necessarily.

Smith: Did that hurt him? There is a school of thought that the White House was very slow to anticipate the Reagan challenge. Either to believe that he would run, or to take him as seriously as he warranted. I realize you were presumably insulated from politics. But you were also in the middle of it. Did you ever sense that this was an apolitical White House long after it should’ve been if they wanted to get reelected?

Lazarus: Well, you know, the White House reflected the boss and he was the boss. I don’t think it was a-political, but I don’t think that they focused on the
election until they were in the midst of it. I don’t know if that would’ve changed anything in terms of the significant things that Ford decided.

Smith: Do you think that’s in part a reflection of what we talked about earlier? This learning process?

Lazarus: Yeah, I do.

Smith: Plus he had such an incredibly full plate.

Lazarus: Right. And I think when he came into office the furthest thing from his mind was election. I’m quite confident that that’s the case. As he grew in the job and he thought he was pretty good at it, figured he ought to stay around, it was in the country’s best interest to do that. And he went after it. But I don’t think he ever went in there with the idea of getting elected and continuing in office.

Smith: How would you describe/define his growth in office? You say ‘as he grew in office.’ What did you see that leads you to that?

Lazarus: Well, you could see it in all ways. I mean, if you just took pictures of him in the early days and then took pictures of him later on, you’d see the difference. Better turned out, better groomed.

Smith: More relaxed?

Lazarus: More polished presentation in all respects. His delivery improved considerably. And a lot of it was, just as I say, going through the crucible, combat. Political combat improves your situation and he went through that.

Smith: Do you think in the process, he discovered, “Hey, guess what? I can do this job.”

Lazarus: Right. “I’m pretty good at that.” And he was always interested in substance and he was pretty good at the substance and going through all of the combat that the President goes through, political combat. He became better at it.

Smith: I think the Hill would have given him, if he didn’t already have, a very thick skin. We were talking to someone who was not very politically sophisticated,
a young staffer who had gone into the White House. The President had just met with Tip O’Neill in the Oval Office and had had a great meeting. And then Tip went out and beat his brains out on the north lawn for the cameras. And this guy only saw the sequel. Anyway, he told the President, “Tip O’Neill’s saying all these horrible things about you.” The President was sort of rocking back and forth, pipe in hand. He said, “Oh, that just politics.”

Lazarus: Well, I always thought the President got a bum wrap in people trying to trivialize his abilities. I’ve been around a lot of big league politicians. Ford was a bright man. A brighter man than Tip O’Neill. And I don’t think that O’Neill ever saw anything political that Ford didn’t see coming either. Ford was a more generous spirit, I think, and just tended not to get down there. He was a very charitable man, you know, all those Midwestern values and everything else are true.

Smith: I spent a lot of time in the Midwest. And my sense is there is a bias against Midwesterners or a caricature, maybe, because some of them talk slow; the assumption is, they must think slow.

Lazarus: Exactly. I understand that on a personal level. I grew up in the New York area and when I came down to Washington, it took me a long time to transition in my speech and otherwise from the New York style to the D.C. style. Ford not only had it stylistically, but that reflected his essence, too. That’s who he was. A very decent, fair-minded person.

Smith: And yet, the least self-dramatizing.

Lazarus: Right.

Smith: Which, in some ways, is the part of the presidency that he never mastered. The theater of the job.

Lazarus: I think that’s right.

Smith: Which tells you more about us than it does about him.

Lazarus: I think that’s right.
Smith: A couple quick things. Deregulation. Were you involved at all in that? Because, clearly, that was a significant policy initiative of the administration.

Lazarus: I was involved in it to some extent, but I wasn’t at the core thing. If you’re talking about deregulation of the airline in particular, which took a substantial amount of time in our office, Ed Schmaltz did most of that and he was assisted by Dudley Chapman, who was another lawyer in the office.

Smith: Are they around?

Lazarus: I think Dudley’s deceased and I think Ed Schmaltz is retired and living in Maine, I think. Ed was deputy attorney general in the Reagan administration.

Smith: Oh, sure, that’s where I recognize the name. You went through more than one attorney general. Would Saxbe have been attorney general when you started?

Lazarus: Yeah, I also handled the nomination of Ed Levi.

Smith: Tell us about Levi because he is to some degree an unsung hero in all of this. Presumably, Ford had a very keen awareness of the need to restore confidence in the Justice Department. Where did Saxbe fit into all of that?

Lazarus: I don’t think Saxbe ever really fit into the office. When I first got out of law school, I went into the honors program at Justice for four years. I enjoyed it very much because it was like an extension of law school. You got to go out and talk with people about all kinds of legal matters that went on, a lot of the young fellows and some seasoned people and whatnot. Saxbe just didn’t fit, especially given the times after Watergate. Levi was perfect because what he was, the dean of this law school now at the Justice Department, (where) you don’t need to supervise people on every little task that goes on, but you need to set the tone and all that sort of thing. And Levi was just perfect at that time. Couldn’t have found anyone better.

Smith: Was he a Rumsfeld recommendation?

Lazarus: I never saw the selection process of Levi. I know that Buchen supported him. My guess is that Rumsfeld selected him and, if so, it was a very good selection.
Smith: Classy.

Lazarus: I worked on his nomination. I worked with him. He tried to recruit me to the department. And the fellow who was my assistant on the Hill became his chief of staff. So, I worked very closely with him. I really liked him and I admired him. He was a fine person.

Smith: We’ve been told initially he had some problems with Eastland and - would Hruska had been the ranking Republican?

Lazarus: Yeah.

Smith: Eastland referred to him as ‘The Bow Tie’. He thought a bow tie was a dangerous liberal affectation.

Lazarus: Well, what happened was, when his nomination went forth, normally you let people know a day or two in advance just so that they can feel like they’re part of the insiders group or whatnot. And that hadn’t been done properly with Eastland and Hruska and some of the older fellows on the committee at that time. Another part of the problem was, Levi in his youth had been a member of something called the Lawyers Guild. And that always raised a problem with the old guys because a lot of the people in the Lawyers Guild went on to become members of the Communist Party back in the early days, et cetera, et cetera. Although, a lot of very bright, young academicians also participated and never went in that direction. Nonetheless, it tar brushed them to some extent. So it was really a mismanagement of the nomination when it was first announced that led to that problem. He had no problems with people on the Hill after that. As a matter of fact, we had breakfast with Chairman Eastman. Do you know who Tom Korologos is?

Smith: Yes.

Lazarus: Tom and I went up there with Levi and I remember that Korologos did something that was really funny. We were having breakfast and Eastland served grits to everybody, including Levi. And Eastland went out to take a phone call during our breakfast and Levi had been pushing these grits around the plate and he turned to Korologos and said, “Do I have to eat these things?”
And Korologos said, “You want to be attorney general?” Levi ate a couple spoons of it.

Smith: My sense has always been this was not a job Levi particularly coveted. I mean, he had a very distinguished career going out at the University of Chicago. Did he have to be persuaded?

Lazarus: I don’t know. He was a very taciturn person. I don’t know if you know him at all, but he would never let on how he was feeling. He was just very much his own man.

Smith: Was he intimidating?

Lazarus: He was never intimidating to me. He had a first rate intellect, of course, but no, he wouldn’t push people around. He wouldn’t do that and didn’t work that way. He had a wry sense of humor and was a very laid back kind of person. I remember one time he criticized somebody at a meeting with the President and the way he criticized them was he said to the fellow, “I don’t understand how a person as obviously bright as you could reach a conclusion like that.” But that was as rough as he got. Ford assumed that Levi knew all law, almost, so at a cabinet meeting every once in awhile, he would say to Levi, “Ed, didn’t the Supreme Court of Michigan decide something on that issue?” And Levi was “Darn it. He got me again.” He liked the President and the President liked him, but they were very, very different types of personalities. Levi was a very private person and Ford was a very public man.

Smith: It tells you a lot about Ford, that he was comfortable with high-power intellects, high-power egos in some cases. He seemed to be completely comfortable.

Lazarus: And Levi was very comfortable with him, too. They communicated effectively.

Smith: I know he had enormous respect for Levi. What haven’t we covered?

Lazarus: I don’t know. I think you’ve pretty much covered everything.
Smith: Again, I realize you were not part of the campaign, but did you think at the end of the ’76 campaign that he’d caught up? Did you think that your lease might be renewed?

Lazarus: I didn’t think we were going to make it, but I was hopeful that we would. I remember being very disappointed when we lost. But, I was still always proud. There’s one other thing I’d like to say. I was always proud of being part of President Ford’s White House staff and I was so happy that he lived long enough, to understand that the American people took pride in him as well.

Smith: Time was good to him. He lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his way of thinking on the pardon and, in fact, honored him for the political courage that it took.

Lazarus: His whole life was outstanding. He was an Eagle Scout. Wouldn’t you have loved to have a son like that? You know?

Smith: Lots of people were saying I wish he was my next door neighbor.

Lazarus: Exactly.

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

Lazarus: I think the last time I saw him was at some golf tournament. I was in the audience. I think it was in Ohio. I went to some golf tournament and I was walking around and he was playing in this tournament and I went up to him and saw him at the tee and said ‘hi’ to him and he said ‘hi’ to me and asked me how I was doing and stuff like that. The last time I had any involvement with the presidency was when I went out to the University of Michigan a couple of years ago when they dedicated a building in his honor. And, earlier, his funeral here in town. As I say, I was never the President’s buddy. I was a young guy and I did legal work there. But I always admired him.

Smith: What a great experience to have, particularly early in your career.

Lazarus: Yeah, I remember the first time you go into the Oval Office. You know, he would let the legal staff use Camp David and took people on Air Force One
when he had a chance and stuff like that. He was really very generous to people.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Lazarus: I think as a very decent and honorable man who rose to the challenge.

Smith: That’s perfect.
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Smith: Thank you so much for doing this. How did your lives, professional, personal, intersect?

Buendorf: Well, I was a naval officer and when I got out of the Navy and was looking for a job somebody said, “You ought to go into the Secret Service or the FBI.”

Smith: And this was when?

Buendorf: This was back in the 70s. And I threw my hat in both rings; got accepted by both of them on the same day, and took the Secret Service job. I started out in Chicago in 1970.

Smith: And those were tumultuous times.

Buendorf: Pretty much.

Smith: With student radicals and campus unrest.

Buendorf: Well, yeah, there were a lot of demonstrations. So, my beat was in the Chicago office initially, but because I was a little bit older coming out of the military, they sent me to the president’s detail in D.C. So, I got the last part of Nixon.

Smith: Is that the most prestigious assignment in the Secret Service?

Buendorf: Naturally, I would think so.

Smith: But, to an outsider?

Buendorf: It is. For a career pattern, it’s really good to have the president’s detail behind you. When I went there, I had the last part of Nixon, all of Ford, and about half of Carter. From there I was transferred to Denver, back to criminal work. But because I’d headed up President Ford’s ski team, I was assigned to the
western slope area and so when any protectee came into Colorado, I would be assigned to go up and ski. I put a lot of miles on the skis my few years.

After a little over four years in Denver, I was promoted as the agent in charge of Nebraska and Iowa. I went to Omaha. They told me it was a promotion and I went along with it. So, I spent just one year in Omaha. I had a call from our assistant director who said, “President Ford’s having a little trouble with his detail out there. They’re not doing the job the way they should and we know that you had a good rapport with him. We’d like to have you take over that detail.” I said, “Well, I just got to the fields and I really kind of like the criminal work. I have my own office and it really feels good.” So they said, “Okay.” The next day, I got the call basically saying, “You know, you could leave Omaha and your next office could be the assistant agent in charge of New York.” I go, “You know, maybe it’s a good idea that I take over the Ford detail.” And it was the right move.

I went out to California in 1983, took over President and Mrs. Ford’s detail and just loved it. They were both special people in my heart and I managed to put the detail in good order.

Smith: Again, I don’t want to point fingers on this, but it’s interesting that there was some level of dissatisfaction.

Buendorf: Some of the things?

Smith: Yeah, what are the kinds of things that would lead a former president into express some dissatisfaction?

Buendorf: A former president’s detail can test everyone to really focus on what their job is all about, and if you get lackadaisical in really doing your job and you don’t pay due respect to the person that you are responsible for, it can become a vacation type detail. And when the detail, in President Ford’s case, was seven months in Palm Springs, five months in Vail, you begin to believe that you belong in the country club atmosphere. And you work hard at driving through the agents that, first of all, you’ve got to maintain what you’re trained to do. You have to keep our reputation within the Secret Service at the highest level. and you only do that by doing your job the right way and doing it without
thinking that you belong in that type of atmosphere. Maybe some could
afford it, maybe some couldn’t. But they didn’t want to leave, they wanted to
stay there because it was not a bad deal. So, there was some fine tuning that
had to be done. You had to remind them that, as I was reminded, your next
assignment could be New York City. So, you want to make sure that you’re
minding your Ps and Qs.

Smith: Let me ask you about that unique relationship. You’re omnipresent, you’re
responsible, ultimately, for their safety. I would think in some ways you’re
almost treated like members of the family. Yet I assume excessive familiarity
is also something you want to avoid. How do you strike that balance? And is
that something that is in some ways redefined with each presidential family?

Buendorf: Well, it is. You know, I got very close to the family after going through
Sacramento, both with President and Mrs. Ford. But at the same time, you
have a professional responsibility to maintain that fine line. There are times
that I went from Palm Springs to New York City in the limo, to L.A., from
L.A. to New York City, board meetings, back to the airport, fly back to L.A.
and drive back to Palm Springs and never say a word and I sat right next to
him all the time. It was just the matter of giving him the space. If he wanted
to talk to me, I would talk, but I wasn’t going to sit there and hold a
discussion about world events, because, first of all, I just wouldn’t do that.

But, at the same time, there’s a respect that he has for you and a respect that
you have for him. There are times when you need to be close. You know, on
a golf course, he had a bad set of knees before he had them operated on, and
sometimes he would get in the little bunker at the Bob Hope Classic or
something and a lot of people were around and you knew he was going to
have trouble. So that’s when I would ease up to him to “talk,” but really
basically letting him lean on me as we’re going up the hill and never create
any attention to the fact that he might have needed somebody to put a hand
on. Because he did not like someone to reach out and assist noticeably.

Smith: A proud man.
Buendorf: A very proud man, very proud, and rightfully so. He knows when the cameras are running and he doesn’t like to make an error. He wants every shot to be the best shot ever.

Smith: In regards to the Chevy Chase imitations and how the media fostered the image that it did - as that something that bothered him?

Buendorf: He went along with that, but I think deep down that he wanted people to understand what an athlete he really was. As I said, I headed up his ski team. The media were always on him because he paid attention to others around him. He’d be looking at the people yelling at him or waving ‘hi’ or whatever and not paying attention to what he’s doing. That was my job. My job was to make sure that he didn’t trip over his own skis or let the chair hit him, whatever. But the media would be all over it if they’d catch him falling down or something. I told him one day, “You know, you ought to bring the media up here on the mountain and let them see you ski.” And we did and there were an awful lot of media and snow and he never fell. So, we sent the message clearly.

Smith: That puts a whole new twist on it. He was obviously enough of a celebrity that, even while he was on the slopes he didn’t have the luxury of concentrating because there were so many people trying to get his attention.

Buendorf: It usually came at the lift lines. When he entered the lift line, he’d be looking and waving and everything. The line keeps moving and people are in front of you and on the side, so he’d get distracted. That’s when you are kind of doing the nudging and the “This way, Mr. President.” And always respectful, never make it noticeable, just a kind of guiding.

Smith: Is it something that every agent has to learn - that kind of virtual invisibility? Is it harder for some than it is for others?

Buendorf: I think probably some find it a little difficult because cameras seem to be attractive and they want to be seen by Mom and Dad back home and be on the front page. But 90% of the time - and probably higher than that - they’re out there working. They’re doing the job the way they should be doing it and you just can’t get distracted. You’ve got to be focused all the time.
Smith: We talked to Rex Scouten who told us one fascinating thing. Of course, Rex had been Vice President Nixon’s agent and became really close. In fact, the family in California had a room for him whenever he was out there. But he said, “One day on the plane, sort of out of the blue, but obviously something he had been thinking about, Nixon started pounding his fist and he said, ‘You know, I’m just not tough enough. I’ve got to make myself tougher.’” A fascinating window into this man who, by his own acknowledgment, once famously said, “I’m an introvert in an extrovert’s profession.” Tell us something about Richard Nixon that might surprise people.

Buendorf: Well, you know, Bebe Rebozo was a very good friend of his and I was a boot(?) agent. I went out to California several times when they flew out there and he liked to have that private time where he didn’t want anybody else in the limo with him. They’d go take a drive and we’d all follow along behind him. We’d stop at a sandwich place or something and he’d pick up a sandwich. You’ve probably heard of stories. But he’d take a swim in the ocean. I was one of the assigned swimmers that would go out as shark bait, go further out than the President and swim along.

Smith: Was he shy?

Buendorf: Very shy. He would greet you, he’d acknowledge that you were there, but you could see that he was pretty much focused on a lot of other things as a president probably should be. Some presidents acknowledge their agents all the time; others are tied up with other things. You find a former president tends to be quite close. He knows all of the agents’ names and he knows their families, a little bit about their families. That usually comes from staff. The staff fills him in. Penny was very good at keeping him apprised of who’s who and what they do and who their family is.

Smith: As Watergate began to unfold with all of this unprecedented history going on, and you’re in the middle of it, was there speculation? Were there discussions?

Buendorf: I was such a new agent at that time that I was pretty far removed from the day-to-day close in activities that the agent in charge and the assistant agent in
charge would do. They’d probably have a better feel for how he was reacting to everything and how it all began to come down. You’d hear a lot of rumors about who on the staff was a hard-nose and who wasn’t.

Smith: Did you have any contact with Gerald Ford while he was vice president?

Buendorf: Limited, just limited. I mean, I was not on his detail. I was strictly on the President’s detail and when he came over, then, of course, then we picked him up.

Smith: How did you learn that there was going to be a resignation?

Buendorf: That day. That day.

Smith: Were you told by your superiors?

Buendorf: Yeah, the agent in charge came out with a notice. It was quite a shocking thing. I don’t know if you talked to Steve Bull.

Smith: No.

Buendorf: Steve was the appointment secretary for President Nixon.

Smith: Right.

Buendorf: And subsequently came to the U.S. Olympic committee, worked in our D.C. area as a liaison, and is now retired. But he was right there putting people in and out of the Oval Office and had a pretty good idea of what was going on. You might want to talk to him.

Smith: Is he in the D.C. area?

Buendorf: He’s in the D.C. area. I’ll get that.

Smith: So, on the 9th of August, when you have President Nixon’s farewell in the East Room followed a couple hours by the swearing in. Were you present for both of those?

Buendorf: I wasn’t present then.

Smith: Okay.
When did you first encounter, then President Ford?

Buendorf: Probably the next day when he was sitting in the office and my shift came on. Business as usual; you protect the President. You don’t know what his last name is.

Smith: No introductions?

Buendorf: No, he knows you’re out there. He deals with the agent in charge and some of the shift leaders on occasion, but usually when you’re brand new, you’re not at that front. You’re outside, south grounds, Rose Garden, entrance to the Oval Office, and then back around again.

Smith: That said, though, there must have been kind of a palpable change of mood around the place.

Buendorf: Well, there was. I sensed a lot of turmoil and most of it was coming from the media side of the house, so there were a lot of requests for press conferences. The head of media was Ron—

Smith: Ron Nessen. Originally there was Jerry terHorst who resigned.

Buendorf: Right. And then Ron came over. So, it was a pretty busy time, but you had a lot of people coming and going. Again, I was not the agent in charge, so I could stand afar and watch it.

Smith: Did you ever have any contact with Bob Hartman?

Buendorf: No. You’d see him come and go, but no.

Smith: When the pardon came, was it a surprise?

Buendorf: Yeah, but, you know, the question had come up oftentimes for President Ford when he gave speeches and you could almost invariably hear “Why did you pardon him?” And he had a very good answer; he had other things on his desk. And at that time, a great deal of it all referred to Nixon, and he said it was time to get on with running the country and “I put that aside” and said, “Let’s get on with running the country.” So, he stands pretty firm that it was the right decision and I agree with him. Of course, when you’re with the
President as long as I was, from 1983 to 1993, he tends to influence your thinking in one way or another.

Smith: Gerald Ford lived long enough to know the country had basically come around. And then of course, the Kennedys gave him the Profile in Courage award. I heard him say, “For all these years, everyone asked the same question.” After that award was announced, he said, “They don’t ask the question anymore.”

Buendorf: He was so good at fielding these questions anyhow. The man was so well-read. We’d get in that limo to go to L.A. and there’d be a stack of newspapers beside him that was two feet high and he’d read those papers like a machine. The backseat of that car would be full of read papers.

Smith: He worked very hard at staying abreast of whatever was going on.

Buendorf: Oh, yes. Absolutely. He could pick that phone up and make calls and talk about any subject that was out there in the media and talk well about it.

Smith: Your great brush with history occurred in California in ’75. Was it an accident that you were where you were at that point, or was that a natural progression over the previous year?

Buendorf: Well, at that time, I had been moved as one of the leaders on the shift, so when he came out of the hotel in Sacramento and decided to walk instead of ride the limo which was right outside, my position was right at his shoulder.

Smith: Let’s back up. He was travelling quite a bit. Did the trip have a particular purpose?

Buendorf: He was addressing the state legislature in California in Sacramento. As I seem to recall, there was something about gun control. So, we arrived the night before and stayed in a hotel right by the park in view of the capitol building. That’s why when he got up and saw such a beautiful morning, he decided to walk instead of ride.

Smith: Now, would a president today have that latitude?
Buendorf: Oh, yeah, they do. If they decide they’re going to stop the motorcade and get out and greet somebody, you’ve got to adjust quickly. And sometimes those spontaneous things are less of a threat than something that’s well-planned.

Smith: So, how large would the detail physically accompanying him be?

Buendorf: There were probably ten of us right within close proximity.

Smith: And what’s your job?

Buendorf: Well, mine at that time was right at his shoulder and I would’ve been in what they called the “number one position” in the follow-up car, closest to the President other than the shift leader, which is the first one to be right next to him. So, walking, I’m right at his shoulder, you’ve got the shift leader that’s walking behind him. So, we’re at his back.

Smith: Was there a crowd?

Buendorf: Oh, yeah, the crowd was there because they knew he was at the hotel. So they were across the park and he just bolted across the street with the media hustling and bustling. I mean, it was just chaos.

Smith: To work the crowd?

Buendorf: Yeah, and so the agents that got out in front moved the people to the side of the sidewalk, so when he walked along, he was just shaking hands. And as he was shaking hands, obviously, I was right at his shoulder making sure people didn’t grab his watch or hold on too long, break a hold and whatever. So I’m looking down. Squeaky was back in the crowd, maybe one person back and she had an ankle holster on with a 45. That’s a big gun to have on your ankle. So, when it came up, it came up low and I happened to be looking in that direction. I see it coming and I step in front of him, not sure what it was other than that it was coming up pretty fast, and yelled out “Gun!” When I yelled out “Gun!” I popped that 45 out of her hand. Agents hear this, they covered the President and they’re gone. So now you’ve got this guy in a suit with this big 45 wrestling with this little girl. I got a hold of her fingers and she’s screaming, the crowd is screaming, and I’m thinking I don’t have a vest on, I don’t know where the next shot is coming from, and that I don’t think she’s
alone. All of this is going on while I’m trying to control her. She turns around and I pulled her arm back and dropped her to the ground and agents and police come from the back of the crowd.

Smith: Did she say anything intelligible?

Buendorf: Well, yeah. She’s screaming, “It didn’t go off!” You know, “It’s okay, don’t be rough!”

Smith: But you had no doubt what her intent was.

Buendorf: I had it in my hand. I knew what she was doing, she was pulling back on the slide, and I hit the slide before she could chamber a round. If she’d had a round chambered, I couldn’t have been there in time. It would’ve gone through me and the President. So, when I had her down and the agents came by, I handed the gun over to one of the agents, cuffed her and I went back to work because we were one down on the shift.

Smith: And the President went on to see Governor Brown?

Buendorf: Oh, yeah, and when he got back to the plane - you’ve probably heard this before - he starts getting on the plane and Mrs. Ford, who had been off doing her thing, - and he tells the story because I wasn’t there, I was being interviewed by the Bureau at that time - but he said he approached the plane and Mrs. Ford goes, “So, how was your day?”

Smith: Now, was that the San Francisco story or Sacramento?

Buendorf: Sacramento.

Smith: Okay. ‘How was your day?’ I assume he wanted to tell her very gently. I mean, how do you answer that?

Buendorf: By then it had hit the papers and it was all over the news, because from the incident to the time he finished his address to the legislature, it was out everywhere.

Smith: What I’ve always found fascinating about that is, by all accounts, he never told Governor Brown what happened. Brown found out later on.
Buendorf: Yeah, that’s what I heard, too.

Smith: That this had happened in his front yard and the President never mentioned it. And he was quoted somewhere as saying when someone asked him about this, “Well, I really didn’t think it’d be very polite to say someone tried to shoot me outside your capitol.”

Buendorf: Well, it came down so fast that she was not on our radar screen anywhere. The family, the Manson family, wasn’t part of an intelligence group, if you will, that was on the watch list. So I’m pretty sure it was a spontaneous thing on her part. She’s now been released. I guess a life term doesn’t mean you get life.

Smith: How do you feel about that?

Buendorf: Well, I think I’d be more interested in how President Ford felt about it.

Smith: When I saw The Today Show interview with Sarah Jane Moore, I thought it was bizarre that no one was asking about the Ford family. It was all about Sarah Jane Moore.

Buendorf: I agree. They had a lot of media at the time at the incident and they get a lot of media later in their life. It had a definite effect on the Ford family. The kids were happy, if you will, about the outcome, but you could tell there was a lot of concern. Susan, I think, was probably at the top of the list of being most concerned.

Smith: It’s personal, but how did he thank you?

Buendorf: It was personal. He took me aside.

Smith: I mean, how do you thank someone for saving your life?

Buendorf: He brought it up many times in his speech when he’d talk and he’d mention me by name. So, I mean, I got my thanks out of that. For me, it was about being confronted with something and doing the right thing. If I had missed, then I’d be the buffoon.
Smith: But think of it. You still hear about these agents in Dallas who all these years later, fairly or not, blame themselves or feel some kind of guilt. You were able to do what they couldn't do.

Buendorf: Well, it’s the right place at the right time. I mean, you go and look back at the Kennedy assassination and is there guilt with a lot of those agents? Yeah, I think so, because they weren’t in the right place at the right time. They reacted after the fact.

Smith: You said there were about ten people in that detail. Could anyone else have done what you did?

Buendorf: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

Smith: But, I mean, were they in the position to see it?

Buendorf: Oh, they were not in the position.

Smith: That’s what I mean.

Buendorf: Yeah, we would’ve been too late. I was the only one that close that could’ve reached her. The other one on the other side of him had already passed. The one behind him could only grab him and move him out of the way.

Smith: Did you see the gun before you saw her face?

Buendorf: Oh, yes. All I saw was the hand coming up, so it wasn’t until I broke through the crowd with her hand in mine that I realized who it was. I didn’t know if it was a kid or what.

Smith: With all of these happy, smiling people wanting to shake hands and so on - she wasn’t pretending to be, in effect, one of them? I mean, she didn’t have her hand out to shake hands?

Buendorf: She was hooded. She had a dress with a hood on and so if we’d had enough time to scan the crowd as we’re going through, an agent would’ve noticed that hood and would’ve had somebody take a look because that’s a little unusual - to be hooded.

Smith: And it was a fairly warm day.
Buendorf: Yeah, it was typical California, typical for Sacramento. But it was one of those things that, given time, someone might have spotted that earlier as a suspicious person in the park.

Smith: Then, of course, a month later, history almost repeats itself.

Buendorf: Yes. I had dropped off to testify in Sacramento or I would’ve been up in San Francisco.

Smith: Which of the two were the more serious?

Buendorf: Well, when you get rounds off, that obviously changes the whole scenario.

Smith: And it was someone in the crowd who deflected her?

Buendorf: It was a Marine that was out in the crowd that grabbed her and pulled the gun away from her.

Smith: In effect played the role that you had played in Sacramento.

Buendorf: Yeah.

Smith: What was his reaction? And, what was Mrs. Ford’s?

Buendorf: Well, you know, they’re a very unique couple. They were. And she was the one who could really pull his chain every now and then. And she’d get in the car sometimes and give him the business. I’d get up in the front and kind of see him and he’d always go, “Buendorf, what’re you laughing at?” “Oh, nothing. I was just talking to the driver.” “Yeah, yeah.” He knew.

Smith: She has a sharp sense of humor.

Buendorf: Oh, boy, she could. And he’d snort a little bit, but he knew he’d been had. So, they had a lot of fun together. He was really dedicated to his family, very much so.

Smith: Did security change as a result of those incidents?

Buendorf: Every time we had an incident within the Secret Service, you change your modus operandi. You had things you’d look at, your mistakes. You’d see what could’ve been done. What happened there was, there were no mistakes.
Everybody did what they were supposed to do. So, that particular scenario was added to the training out at Beltsdale. It changes how people think and how fast it happens and how they react.

Smith: He was quoted as saying that he was not going to let those incidents keep him from interacting with the American people.

Buendorf: And that’s when you go to your agents and you go, “Tune it up, boys, because we’ve got a job to do and we cannot fail.”

Smith: Did he wear a bulletproof vest?

Buendorf: There were occasions, yes. Now it’s pretty common. If he decides he doesn’t want to, and there were occasions when President Ford insisted on having things his way, then you could only advise and then move on with things.

Smith: Did you detect a certain Dutch willfulness at times?

Buendorf: Just a tad, but being from Minnesota and coming out of the Midwest, I’m a little bit familiar with that approach. Maybe that’s why we got along so well. But he could make it very clear when he needed something done and needed it done yesterday.

Smith: He was a very self-disciplined guy in all sorts of ways. Did you see his temper?

Buendorf: Oh, yeah. You could see it coming and that’s when you’d beat a retreat. Give him a little room.

Smith: What kinds of things would…

Buendorf: Well, there were a few things that he did not like. Not being on time was a big factor for him. I’ve heard him dress down campaigners that he’d gone out to campaign for and had them in the back seat of that limo and lectured them about timeliness, because he was a man that went by the clock.

Smith: Which, of course, is the great irony being married to a woman for whom the clock was her enemy.
Buendorf: Yeah. And that’s where you get to it all the time because he’d get in the limo in Vail and go, “Okay, go on to Denver. That’s an hour and ten minutes. Let’s see if we can break the record.” And I’d be going, “Who’s going to pay the ticket?” “Well, I know you can go 67 in a 60. Seven miles over.” And I’d go, “Who’s giving you this advice?” There’d be one of those exchanges in the car. “Ah, you always go by the book.” Then it’d be Buendorf, it wouldn’t be Larry. It’d be “Buendorf, you’re always going by the book.” “I’m keeping you out of trouble. I don’t want you getting a taxi cab.” But Mrs. Ford could put that on him, too. When he started that stuff, she’d do a little tuning on him, too. I never felt his anger against me. I could see when he was upset about something that was going on around him and to kind of defuse him at times was part of being able to recognize what was happening. But he was very careful about it. He didn’t blow up. He could blow up in his office at times.

Smith: He was such a workaholic. He would’ve been in there Sunday if he could get anyone else. I’ve heard wonderful stories from Penny and other folks - of course, you would’ve been gone by then, but you certainly would’ve recognized it after 9/11 and the anthrax scare, someone had to explain to him why he isn’t getting mail on Saturday. He literally had staffers putting on these anthrax suits to go through the mail.

Buendorf: I did not know that.

Smith: So he could have his mail.

Buendorf: Well, he spent that time in the office and he would go in there, except if Steve was on TV.

Smith: Really?

Buendorf: Oh, yes. Then you don’t bother him, you don’t call him, and you don’t go knock on his door, because he’s watching Steve on TV.

Smith: The soap opera.

Buendorf: Soap opera. That was one time you didn’t want to go in there.
Smith: And Mrs. Ford, too?

Buendorf: Yeah, I think she watched it at the house. She occasionally would come in to the office and watch. That was kind of always an interesting time.

Smith: That is funny. And I’ve been told when he was at the White House, Saturdays, he’d watch football if he could. On one hand, you didn’t interrupt him, but on the other, he’d get the butlers in and say, “Come on in. Sit down. Watch the game.” We’ve been told that the permanent staff was really very fond of the Fords. That they treated them very well.

Buendorf: There was nothing phony about them and still, to this day, Mrs. Ford was hands-on with Betty Ford Center. I mean, she’d go there daily and it wasn’t a distant show of face. She was in there helping, doing her thing.

Smith: He was so proud of her. They’d have their annual alumni event or whatever it was and there are stories of him cooking hot dogs as one of the troops - she was the general.

Buendorf: That was really him. And when she gave up drinking, he gave up drinking. And he didn’t cheat because we’d be on the road and they’d come out with a toast on something, he’d make sure that I’d made sure that that was not alcohol.

Smith: Really?

Buendorf: Yeah. And when he wanted Susan to give up smoking, he gave up smoking. I asked her every day, that pipe would light up because he couldn’t smoke at the house, so he’d get in that limo and light up that pipe and the inside of the limo would be full of smoke and I’d roll down the window a little bit up front and he’d go, “Uh, Larry, could you roll that window up?” And I’d go, “Could you put out that pipe?” But he sacrificed for his family. He loved them all dearly and Mrs. Ford was his angel. No doubt about it.

Smith: Let’s back up. He loved to travel, didn’t he? One sensed that when he was in Congress, that was part of the problem - that he was on the road as much as he was. Did he feel any guilt about that? Because, we hear stories, touching stories, a day wouldn’t begin or end without a call to her.
Buendorf: That’s a good question for Mrs. Ford or their family because I’m not really certain how they handled that, but they all seemed to accept it. I never heard any negative things about it.

Smith: He took heat, you know, after leaving office, for ‘commercializing the presidency.’ People didn’t pay attention to the charity work that he did and the college campuses that he visited. Plus, he had to raise the money to build the museum and library. For someone who never spent much money in his campaigns, that must have been pretty daunting.

Buendorf: Well, you take a look at other former presidents, they didn’t have to go through what he had to go. He didn’t come out a multi-millionaire. And he didn’t live in the fanciest house in Washington, D.C. prior to moving into the big house. So, I think he remembers his life in Michigan and how it was, you know, real Midwestern, small town.

Smith: He went back to Grand Rapids (office) often.

Buendorf: He did. Grass roots. I think that he remembers that life, what Michigan did, he was very proud of his college.

Smith: Yeah. Oh, yeah, that was his second home.

Buendorf: Yeah, absolutely.

Smith: Did he ever talk about his football days?

Buendorf: Oh, every now and then, but I never really heard him talk about how good he was. He just talked about the team and the successes of the team. He never talked about ‘me’ and ‘I did this’ and ‘I did that.’ It wasn’t his style.

Smith: This may be an awkward question. One senses, perhaps unavoidably, that after the pardon the relationship with Nixon could never be quite the same. Did you ever see him with Nixon?

Buendorf: I know that they talked and I think he had a concern about his health and how he was handling everything, because he’s a compassionate person. But, it was a discussion that I’m sure was only with his closest friends or within the house.
Smith: Who were his close friends? Leonard Firestone clearly was.

Buendorf: Right. Firestone was very close. Bob Hope was very close to him. Bob Hope could try those jokes on him so often and you’ve probably heard them all. We’d hear them, and President Ford would go give a speech and we could tell which joke was coming up. You know, “Here we go. This is going to be another Bob Hope joke.” Some of them he didn’t get straight for awhile, you know, he had to get a little help on them.

Smith: He wasn’t a natural joke teller.

Buendorf: He was not, which made it even funnier for us because we’re out biting our lips so that no one sees that we’re about to burst into laughter, but he stumbled a little bit about a joke or get two jokes mixed up.

Smith: It was also known that Mrs. Ford has a somewhat ribald sense of humor and that would usually go over his head.

Buendorf: That is a fact. Which, like I said, made it even more fun. It wasn’t laughing at him, it was a laughing about him, because it was so typical of him being focused on critical things that ‘this is not important,’ ‘this joke is not important,’ but he’d always kind of open up his speeches with something about, you know, that he was the only person that could play three golf courses simultaneously. So, it was always kind of fun to hear him over and over.

Smith: I thought that he got better as a speaker over time.

Buendorf: Well, he did, but you know some of the speech cards were getting a little dog-tailed after awhile. But he did extemporaneous - type speaking a lot better. The Q & A’s, he really performed quite well.

Smith: Did you see him with young people at college campuses and that sort of thing? Was he comfortable?

Buendorf: Yeah, he had three or four kids that were right there keeping him tuned up.

Smith: When the Squeaky Fromme incident took place, they briefed Nelson Rockefeller on what happened. And his question was, “What’s a ‘Manson
“gang’?” Which is just emblematic of the fact that most politicians are not particularly tuned in to the popular culture. I mean, they’ve got their own preoccupations.

Buendorf: Absolutely. They don’t get into that. They don’t know who the rock stars are.

Smith: But I assume in his case, having teenaged children probably addressed some of that.

Buendorf: Well, I think probably Mrs. Ford got it and tried to explain it to him. So, that’s the way I would picture it happening because I think that his reaction would be, being a good naval officer - I was a naval officer, so I understood some of his thinking about how certain things have got to be this way and then she probably explained, “Well, it doesn’t have to be that way.”

Smith: That brings up a big question. Most of us, as we get older, we tend to get a little more conservative. They were exceptions. Did he change? Did she influence that? Did the children have an impact?

Buendorf: I don’t think he changed a bit from what he was when he left office until the day that he passed away, because I think that he had the ability to analyze things that other people rush through. And he didn’t rush through these things.

Smith: That’s interesting.

Buendorf: He had a better grasp, I think, on what was happening economically and he recognized some of the mistakes that were being made by the various presidents at various times. He spoke, not often, but sometimes, he would send the message that maybe they could’ve done something a little differently.

Smith: Tell me about his intelligence. I lived in the Midwest long enough to conclude that there’s a bias against Midwesterners. It’s thought that because they talk slow, they think slow. How did his mind work?
Buendorf: He was a thinker. He absorbed a lot of information and stored it and could draw upon it at the damnedest times. I mean, out of somewhere, something he’d read years ago, he could pull that out someplace and present it in some type of dialogue with somebody or give it in a speech. But he was so up-to-date on current events that it’d be difficult to debate him because he was just so on top of stuff. I think that the young candidates that came running for office at various times that he’d go out to support…I just had to smile at because they couldn’t hold a candle to him when they got into a discussion. He had great retention and a great analytical mind, but you almost see him start thinking about how to express himself and do it in the right way to win the argument, if there was an argument, or to make his point.

Smith: Certainly those years, ’83 to ’93, coincided with the period of his unlikely friendship with Jimmy Carter. Were you surprised initially?

Buendorf: Yeah, because I think that I don’t know who swayed who over, but I have a feeling that President Ford swayed Jimmy to his way of thinking. And I think he won him over because Carter actually began to realize just how smart and how lucky he was to have won over this man. And I think that probably drew them together in discussions. I knew that they talked a lot on the telephone. He paid visits.

Smith: And they seemed to be perfectly comfortable together?

Buendorf: Yeah.

Smith: And the wives, too.

Buendorf: Yeah. Like I said, I think that Carter probably realized that he was pretty lucky.

Smith: It’s interesting. Two things come to mind. One is, I’ve often thought one of the things that may have brought them together was that they both ran against Ronald Reagan.

Buendorf: Probably.
Smith: I will never forget being on Air Force One, going back to Michigan, and the sight of President Carter walking up and down the aisle of the plane with Gerald Ford’s youngest great grandchild on his shoulder. I mean, if people could only see that image. You wonder why is it that we have to have elder statesmen. Why can’t we just have statesmen?

Buendorf: Well, when you become a former president, I think the pressure is off in a lot of ways and you do things differently, perhaps become more yourself, instead of having to be under the magnifying glass all the time. I think that changes.

Smith: Tell me about Vail. What it meant to them and what they meant to the place.

Buendorf: Well, you know, when I first came to the detail, headed up his ski team, we stayed at the Bass House, which is right in town, not too far from the lift. Again, I was on the clock and couldn’t ski at ten o’clock. At ten o’clock, you’d better be there because he was on the clock. But he really enjoyed getting on those skis and, by the time I took over his detail and they had moved to the big house in Beaver Creek, he was no longer skiing. But he had a routine up in Vail that was, again, predictable. We’d do the mail run every day at a specific time. He knew what time the mail was being delivered at the post office, so we made sure we were there. Loved to play golf; loved his golf. And he could play. He could hit that ball a long ways. Shank every now and then. Don’t we all? But that was his day. Get up in the morning, he’d swim. He’d go to his office and do his paperwork, whatever it was. He’d go get the mail. He’d have his lunch. He’d go play golf.

Smith: And he was pretty accessible to the press.

Buendorf: Oh, yeah. And I mean they were very social there. They had a lot of good friends in Vail that you’ll meet. So, he spent a lot of time with them.

Smith: One senses that they got in on from the ground floor.

Buendorf: Yeah, they really made Vail. They brought Vail from being just a little sleepy town like some that still exist in Colorado, to this raging resort. They both played a role in that. He’d be on the slopes. Mrs. Ford with her garden. They brought some culture to the city. They did a lot.
Smith: And, of course, there was the annual AEI event. The World Forum.

Buendorf: I forgot about that. First of all, they’d started out with the Jerry Ford Golf Tournament and that drew a lot of celebrities and a lot of people from the front range area up to Vail. Then you had the World Forum that he brought. I think Vail used them a bit to help them along and he was happy to do it because he felt he had a special relationship with Vail.

Smith: We talked about his daily routine in Vail. What did she do up there?

Buendorf: Well, you know, her days were kind of spent socializing with others. She didn’t play the golf, but she’d go to lunches and she loved to have the family up there. She spent time with the grandchildren, with her own children. So, she enjoyed the house. She liked being there, but she’d go out and do her own thing, go into Vail and visit her friends. But usually the evenings were together or with friends.

Smith: Where were their favorite restaurants that they’d go to?

Buendorf: Yeah, usually they’d go to Pepe’s. Gramshammers were very good friends and they usually went there several times. But they had other places that they like to go to.

Smith: One of the most poignant stories we were told came from Lorraine, the family cook. Talk about being treated like a member of the family – she’d never seen snow, she’d never been in an airplane. She was scared to death the first time she got in the plane and the President had the pilot explain everything to her and the engines, et cetera, all this. And when they got up to Vail he took her almost by the hand to the ski school and they got her clothes.

Buendorf: And they had those that were practically part of the family. At the White House, Benji was at the White House and he was a very big favorite of President Ford’s.

Smith: Now, who is he?

Buendorf: Benji Ramos.

Smith: Was he a steward?
Buendorf: Yeah. And I think Benji came out. Penny would have to verify that. I think, initially, when he left office, that Benji was with him. I just don’t recall. But they had their friends within the staff.

Smith: Were the kids there frequently?

Buendorf: Yeah, at Christmastime, of course, they’d all show up and then during the summer, they kind of did it in shifts. They’d come up at different times so they could each one have their individual personal time.

Smith: And how was he as a grandfather?

Buendorf: I think he was actually pretty good. He spent time with the kids. He couldn’t go skiing with them, but in the summertime, he’d take them to wherever they wanted to go. I don’t know what it was like inside the house, but it seemed to me that he was quite close.

Smith: I’m told that the Fords distinguished themselves by trying, for example, at Christmastime not to schedule events, so that the agents could have some kind of holiday of their own.

Buendorf: That’s true. Well, they knew that we liked Vail, so they would go to Vail at Christmastime because everybody would bring up their family, their friends, or whatever and make it a two week vacation. And I rotated the shifts so that everybody got their fair share of midnights and daytimes and four to twelves. So they were pretty thoughtful about that.

Smith: Another thing that might surprise some people was just how strong their faith was. Did you see that?

Buendorf: Yeah. It was not a false faith. They practiced good Christianity. That’s to say, that they were both compassionate, they cared about others, obviously. Take a look at the Betty Ford Center. I mean, she took this on because she saw a need and he supported her all the way. Firestone played a big role in that. And it became very successful. It was not for show. It was all work. Long hours for the agents that had to go to the Betty Ford Center and not go in because we gave her that; she did not want agents standing on top of her.
Smith: Does that change over time? For example, Susan, as a teenager, probably had an attitude about not wanting to be followed.

Buendorf: Probably.

Smith: As people get older, does that relationship evolve?

Buendorf: Yeah, you know, it becomes a convenience in a lot of ways and you walk into the house and the car is there and you get in the car and you go into the restaurant and you walk in and there’s a table there waiting for you and you get up and the car is waiting for you and you go back home. I don’t have that luxury here.

Smith: That’s interesting because there are two sides of the street here. On the one hand, you don’t want the agents taking for granted pretty nice digs. I suppose you don’t want to be taken for granted either.

Buendorf: And they were very careful about that. President Ford knew what we were required to do and what we were not required to do. When he had his bad knees and we flew commercial and he always wanted to carry his own hang-up baggage; carried everything in the house, so you could see that he’s having trouble with it and I told the agents, “Here’s the deal. We don’t carry bags. I will carry their bag and when I do, I’m out. The job is yours. I’m out of the play. I can’t do anything.” So, with that understanding, I’d get off and I’d go, “I’ll take that, Mr. President.” “Oh, okay. Give it to me.” I’d fall back. The agents would take over and we continued to do our job the way it should be done.

Smith: In later years, after you’d gone, the issue arose as their health began to decline…what’s the role? The Secret Service are not medical providers. How did he deal with aging?

Buendorf: I don’t think he ever felt that he was aging. I think he felt he was just as strong as ever, could keep up with anyone, and I think that he proved it. I mean, he’d get out there, could he walk the golf course? No. But he got in and out of that cart and he hit the ball a mile and he did his swimming. He recognized that his knees were not the best.
Smith: I assumed he always watched his diet.

Buendorf: Yeah, he did. They did. He loved his ice cream, though.

Smith: Especially butter pecan.

Buendorf: Yeah. Yeah, he did like his ice cream. He could pass up deserts all day long until you put that ice cream in front of him, disaster.

Erik: I remember seeing his arm in a sling. He hurt his rotator cuff or broke his arm at some point?

Buendorf: I think he had a rotator cuff problem, but I don’t know when that occurred.

Erik: They told him he couldn’t swim for six months or something and he was irritated.

Buendorf: Yeah, that would be putting it mildly. When he had his knees replaced, poor Penny, she was under the gun all the time. At that time, we moved our perimeter further out. We gave him all of the room he needed.

Smith: She didn’t have that option.

Buendorf: No, she didn’t have the option. She was in and out there all of the time. Poor her.

Smith: He doesn’t strike me as someone who would’ve been a very good invalid.

Buendorf: No, he didn’t like, you know, heaven forbid, you put him in a wheelchair. Oh, no, no way. No, that wasn’t going to happen. I gave him a lot of credit for trying to do. I think a lot of us males are that way, you know, we’re not sick. We can still climb ladders and leap over buildings and do all of those things. But there comes a time where maybe you ought to slow down a little bit. I never got the impression that he really wanted to slow down at all.

Smith: It’s funny you say that because I sense he was really in extraordinary health until right about his 90th birthday and right about then, I think, the doctors basically told him you really can’t travel anymore. And I think for him that was a little death of sorts. I mean, not to be able to do what he loved doing had to have been a disappointment.
Buendorf: Well, he was on a lot of boards and anyone who thought that they put him on a board for just using his name were in for a very rude awakening because when he went in, it was about knowing the business, knowing what to discuss, having input, and in a lot of cases, taking charge. I wasn’t in the board meeting, but I was close enough to know that he wasn’t going to be sitting back there waiting for them to say, “It’s good having you here.”

Smith: He was never a figurehead.

Buendorf: No. No. That was, again, his lifestyle, the way he was brought up.

Smith: They enjoyed New York, didn’t they? Before Christmas they’d go and see shows and she’d shop and that was something they looked forward to every year.

Buendorf: He had agreed with Mrs. Ford that this was a week or two week vacation and was good for all of us. I saw more shows than I probably ever would’ve seen if I’d gone by myself.

Smith: We heard that they saw *The Lion King* and they also saw *The Producers*.

Buendorf: And she did shop.

Smith: Was she an impulse buyer?

Buendorf: No. She usually went on a mission.

Smith: Was it clothes that she was shopping for?

Buendorf: Clothes and things for the grandchildren. When I first came to the detail, she cornered me pretty early on and said, “You know, Larry, we don’t have any women on our detail.” I go, “Well, what does that mean?” She goes, “I think that you could find some.” “Let me see what I can do, but I’ll tell you this. If we get women on the detail, they’re not going to be assigned to you.” I said, “They’re going to be assigned according to needs of the detail. So it might be with the President, some might be with you. It’s not going to be, you get the women, he gets the men.” “I agree.” So I went out and recruited and got women to come mainly because I said, “You come to my detail and give me
two years and I’ll get you to whatever office you want with the director, of course.”

Smith: There’s a famous story while she was in the White House, and her male agents gave her a flag for the car, the bloomer flag - because the President had a flag. Is that a true story?

Buendorf: Yeah. Well, I’d heard it, but I don’t know if they flew it or not. I think they might have presented it to her. But she’d get out there and go in shopping, I’d make sure that maybe one female agent and then the other two would be males.

Smith: New Yorkers are famously indifferent, but I assumed she’d be recognized.

Buendorf: Oh, yeah.

Smith: How did that work? How’d she handle it?

Buendorf: Well, of course you’d have enough people, you’d probably have four or five agents that were with her at any time and just gently asking people to give her a little space, she’s out shopping, too. Not hands-on. I said, “Don’t take anybody down because they want to get her autograph, but try to be polite and courteous.”

Smith: Did she handle it well?

Buendorf: Yeah.

Smith: People are nice most of the time.

Buendorf: Yeah, she’d usually be very busy, try to stay very busy and that way nobody would interrupt her because they’d have to wait until she wasn’t busy.

Smith: Did you go with him overseas?

Buendorf: Yes.

Smith: Was there a lot of business-related travel?
Buendorf: For the most part, it was all business-related, you know, some conference or something that he attended. But they’d take personal time, too. When we went to Paris and she’d go shopping and he’d go to his meetings.

Smith: We talk about opposites attracting - on the surface, the thought of Gerald Ford and James Callaghan who was an old-line Labor socialist, Helmut Schmidt, German socialist and Giscard who, for all of his fine qualities, has a certain top-lofty aspect to him. He’s not Grand Rapids. And yet they all seemed to hit it off famously.

Buendorf: You know, he had that affect on people. It’s the ability to change gears when you meet people. Meet their level, and he could click it up to the highest level or he can be the Michigan boy out there and talk to the boys about football. He was good in the international scene. He really was. I think he was well-respected. They acknowledged his expertise. He was effective.

Smith: I was in Rome in December for Christmas. Did he ever go to the Vatican?

Buendorf: Yes, he did.

Smith: Was John Paul II then the Pope?

Buendorf: I think, yes.

Smith: So, they had an audience?

Buendorf: Yeah. And I forget who went in there. I didn’t go in because I had some Catholic agents on the detail. One was a female and one was a male. I sent those two in. I figured it was safer for me to be on the outside rather than on the inside.

Smith: Are there places overseas that he enjoyed especially visiting?

Buendorf: I can’t think of any particular place. I think that he really enjoyed Paris the time we were there. He hit the weather right. It was nice.

Smith: You left the detail in ’93?

Buendorf: Yes.
Smith: What were the circumstances surrounding that?

Buendorf: Well, this job came up. They came up to interview me and said, “Would you be interested?” I was eligible to retire, so I thought, “Well, a bird in the hand,” and it sounded like something I would really enjoy. I had an opportunity to go to New York. One of the corporations where President Ford was a board member wanted me to come.

Smith: In a security role?

Buendorf: Yeah. So, New York City, Colorado Springs… It was Colorado Springs.

Smith: Did you discuss it with him?

Buendorf: Yeah, and he knew what I was going to do. He attended my retirement party from the detail.

Smith: Was it awkward at all?

Buendorf: No, he was very encouraging. He said, “There comes a time in our career when we move on to something else. I think that this would be good.” He said, “You’ve done a great job with the detail. You’ve brought it to the level I would like to have it remain at and I’m sure that he’s passed that word on to those that took over.”

Smith: You’d more than validated his phone call to you ten years earlier.

Buendorf: Yes.

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

Buendorf: It was up in Vail. I drove up specifically to say hello. It was maybe one year before he passed away. Had a half hour with him in his office and talked about times, a few laughs, told me I was looking a little bit older, my hair was turning gray. I said, “No, it’s pewter. It’s not gray.”

Smith: Did you sense that was going to be the last time you saw him?

Buendorf: I did. Penny was kind of keeping me apprised of what was happening, so I knew I wanted to make a trip to see him. As a matter of fact, it came up one
time after that and Penny said, “I don’t think you want to see him.” So, I didn’t.

Smith: Have you seen her (Mrs. Ford) at all since?

Buendorf: No, I haven’t. Not since the funeral. But I communicate with Susan every now and then just to see how she’s doing. Penny, of course, is right on top of it, so I talk to Penny all the time. Our friendship goes back.

Smith: Were you surprised at all at the extent of the public reaction when he died? I wonder whether part of it was there was a whole generation being introduced to him for the first time. They were seeing these old film clips and comparing that with the ugliness of the contemporary political scene. And he looked awfully good.

Buendorf: He did, didn’t he?

Smith: I know.

Buendorf: But it’s kind of surprising how years passed and you become a better statesman than you were when you were a statesman. I think that history will show and continue to show that he was a good President.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered historically? And how do you remember him?

Buendorf: I think given the way the world was at the time of the election dictated a loss for President Ford and a loss for the American public because they were not wise enough in my opinion to see what value he could’ve brought as a voted in president. So, I think we missed it. We missed it.

Smith: And on a personal level?

Buendorf: Well, he’s pretty special.
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Smith: Thanks, again, for doing this. A couple of things, if you could sort of sketch in the broader relationship as you saw it that President Ford had with the University. And then maybe zero in on the particular issue of Affirmative Action.

Bollinger: I started out as president of Michigan in ’97, and I think one of the things I felt about Michigan, and I said it in many different contexts, was that it was an institution like many public institutions that did not claim its history. And part of that was not recognizing that Robert Frost had been at Michigan in the early 1920s and had written some wonderful poems there. And so there are places other than the New England area that can make that claim. Well, I also felt the same about President Ford. And at that time, as you know, there was an odd sense about his presidency. A sense that it was a presidency, obviously, that did very important things, but also a sense that it wasn’t a presidency because of the ways it had happened and then the defeat. And my feeling was, he was President of the United States and a graduate of the University. A wonderful human being by everybody’s account and had done very admirable things in this world, and of course, beforehand. And so the University should really identify with him, and visa versa.

And I sort of set in motion the idea that the School of Public Policy, which had moved, I think, from a program to an institute to a school. But it really didn’t have the sort of trappings of a school – its own building and general faculty. I thought that should really be developed, and simultaneously, I thought that making the school identified with President Ford was a great combination of several things that were of enormous importance to the University. And so that idea, of course, bore fruit as the Ford School of Public Policy, and a wonderful building right on the entrance to the campus. And I’m very, very proud of that and pursued that idea with him and he was very, very eager to have that happen. I was moved by how much it meant to him.
Smith: When you met him and sort of worked with him, was there anything that surprised you?

Bollinger: Well, I like to think that I spent a fair amount of time with him on and off over those five years, but actually, if you added up the hours it probably was not that many. But the feeling of being with him was so powerful that I think it magnifies the time I spent. I think there was this wonderful formality and friendliness with him. He struck me as a person who out of World War II – I mean, there is something about the grownup qualities of people who went through that experience. I think of my father, the same kind of demeanor and rectitude, and decency. And a personable-ness that I was really quite…

Smith: That’s an interesting combination.

Bollinger: Yes, that’s right. And then I found it a wonderful personal education to listen to him talk about his time. I remember, and I know you know, Richard, all these stories so well, but to me they were significant because they were so fresh. But he would say something like, “I had no idea who Levi’s – I didn’t know what his party affiliation was, I just knew he was a really, really respected jurist, and I wanted a great person to head up the Justice Department.” And it was comments like that and then the loyalty of the people like yourself and others who had been with him in service, was a testament to – everybody likes to be associated with a President, that’s, I think, a given – but there was a real bond to every single relationship. And I think it was built around – my own sense was – it was built around character. He was a much smarter person than probably his general reputation. Highly intelligent. Highly astute, I think, very good reading of certain situations. But somehow the stereotype sort of played off of different edges.

Smith: Probably Chevy Chase. The stereotype, caricature.

Bollinger: That’s right. And so it’s always interesting how those things can stick.

Smith: Did he reminisce about the University? Did he talk at all about his memories of the University?
Bollinger: Yes, and certainly in the sense of the University being very important to him. That’s takes me to the Affirmative Action thing, which I think was probably – I can’t remember precisely – but I think that may have been my sort of opening encounters with him. When I started in January in ’97, I was told very quickly that Michigan was going to be the next target of the anti-Affirmative Action movement that had been building force in the United States.

Smith: And was that within the state – those that were targeting it? Or was it part of a national?

Bollinger: Nationally. And the Center for Individual Rights, I think it was called – it’s been a long time since I’ve uttered the name – had been very successful in challenging the University of Texas law school, and had won in the Fifth Circuit. And I had been an “expert witness” on behalf of the law school in that case. So I was somewhat familiar with it. Of course I knew the constitutional issues. So they’d won there, and then there was Prop 209 in California, and that had been quite successful. And now, obviously, this group and others who were of that viewpoint, really wanted to try to get to the Supreme Court to overturn Bakke. And so I was told, I can’t remember how I found out, but I was told, “They are going to come at you, they are going to come at Michigan,” and me personally. So I began really thinking about this as one of my central goals, defending Affirmative Action at Michigan, which was no different from every other university. I mean, the policies were no different. So it was really a matter of defending higher education’s policies of Affirmative Action. In order to do that, you had to get other universities to be allies with you. And that, actually, is very hard to do because there is nothing more isolating than being a defendant in a major law suit. Everybody wants to say we’re different from them, and so on. So that was the first thing. But the main thing was, it had to expand the support, because higher education is actually not that popular when it comes to its own policies. People would just say this is just the liberal sector of America doing some social engineering. And the key to that, I thought, was to get someone of enormous stature in the country, who was not Democrat, not Republican for these purposes. And I thought that was President Ford. And so I made contact with him and he
agreed right away to do this. And the idea was, he would make a public statement, he would make it in the form of an Op-Ed, and I thought this was a very, very good idea. I did not think he would agree to do it. And he agreed to do it with alacrity. And then when we gave him a draft, thinking that’s the way – change it – but we would do that service, he threw it out completely and I don’t know that he personally – you were probably involved in this so you know a good deal – but the story was personal. And the story – I can’t remember the name of his teammate…

Smith: Willis Ward.

Bollinger: Willis Ward, who played a tackle or a center or something, and there is just nothing more powerful than a Republican President of the United States saying, “When I was on a football team at this public university my teammate couldn’t play because we were playing a southern team…”

Smith: Georgia Tech.

Bollinger: Georgia Tech, “that would refuse to play us if we had a black player.” And then he didn’t play. And the game went ahead. And to say that was a mistake and it should never happen again, and we’re still not done with that problem, and I think this is a reasonable way to approach it, it was taking a position that was fulsome and personal and national and all those qualities. And I really, really was impressed by that. Of all the things I’ve encountered with people in life, that ranks right up there as a very – he didn’t have to do this. And that really led to several interactions as I said. That bolstered my feeling that naming the School of Public Policy after the President would be a great idea.

Smith: The interesting thing – several things – one, that game against Georgia Tech was the only game they won all year. The only game they won, it was 6-0, or something like that. Fast forward seventy years, and there is an effort underway, which is about to be approved to put a statue of President Ford in the Capitol Rotunda, which entails replacing Zachariah Chandler’s statue. When the initial effort was launched, there were two or three western Michigan strongly conservative Republican state senators, who threw sand in the works, and who managed to, at the very least, delay this and perhaps
defeat it. And the governor indicated she would sign it, but I don’t think she
was going to get very involved. So anyway, lo and behold, literally it’s a
Frank Capra movie – the last day of the session in the state senate this thing
comes up and a member of the Detroit delegation, African-American, gets up
– Willis Ward’s grandson – who proceeds to tell everyone the story. And to
shame these people who basically were Reaganites from ’76 and had never
forgiven Ford. But my sense is, he took a lot of heat for that from the right.
But the other side of the coin was, it coincided with, what appeared in the
New York Times, the day before the twenty-fifth anniversary of his swearing
in. And on that anniversary, the very next day he was in the East Room of the
White House receiving the Medal of Freedom. The Clinton administration had
a number of people, including him, but because of the story, he became the
center of it all. So in the Clinton White House he was surrounded by people
who were thrilled, but when he went outside a lot of Republicans…

Bollinger: That’s really interesting. And I have to say that I thought he was more
courageous and bolder than the Clinton administration. Because I think
President Clinton, he was in this sort of mend it, don’t end it, and it was
clearly a political strategy from my point of view, that this was a very
unpopular thing – Affirmative Action – and obviously we’re in favor of it, but
we can’t take the strong position. And so we’ll sort of play this middle road –
let’s change it, but let’s not end it. But the way that translated, I knew this
right from the start – this litigation, I knew was Supreme Court bound, as it,
of course, turned out to be. And its initial sort of playing – the way it played
out in the press, made the policy even more unpopular and made people who
supported Affirmative Action want even more to distance themselves from it.
I could not get the Clinton administration to support the University. So it was
mend it, don’t end it, but we’re not going to support you. Now, ultimately, the
Justice Department did support it. But the President wouldn’t speak out on it.
So for Ford to do this – in fact, he was the only political leader in the country.
Because I met with some other political leaders at the time – ultimately
Senator Kennedy was very strong, I think he brought along Tom Daschle, I
don’t know quite how Daschle got there. But it was amazing how difficult it
was to get a political person to support, not just Affirmative Action, but the
litigation. And this was where the action was going to be. So it made it all the more impressive to me.

Smith: Jeffrey Toobin’s book *The Nine* makes a passing reference to Ford’s intervention. Apparently, Justice O’Connor brought it up. Does that ring a bell at all?

Bollinger: It’s been some time since I read Toobin’s book, so it doesn’t. What does follow from this though, is that I really strongly believe that it was Ford, it was his Op-Ed and his public commitment that unlocked other – made it possible for other people to do it, and I met David Halberstam for a lunch on Nantucket that summer where he was staying. Of course, he had a house. And I wanted to try to get advice from people about who politically and so on we could get to support this. And he suggested, and now I am forgetting – a good friend of yours, good friend of Ford’s, wrote a book on Ford.

Smith: Jim Cannon.

Bollinger: Jim, suggested Jim. A dear, dear man. And so I had lunch with Jim at the President’s House at Michigan, and it was through that conversation that we ended up with the military brief. Because Jim was sitting on the board, I think, of the Naval Academy or something, and I felt that trying to widen the sectors – my idea was what higher education had done in Affirmative Action was simply one of many institutions in the society that had tried to take positive steps to implement *Brown v. Board of Education*’s ground goal of an integrated society. You go to corporations, you go to the churches, you go to cultural institutions, you go even to the military, the academies, and the military services. They knew that they had to have a diverse integrated armed forces. And Jim jumped on this and said that he could help establish contact with people and that led to the military brief. And many people would say that it was the military brief that really persuaded O’Connor.

Smith: That’s right. And I remember subsequently asking, Justice Stevens, who cited it as a significant factor. But you are right about the fact that the service academies, in particular, took the position that they did.
Bollinger: And I think it was President Ford that, again, made all that possible. And then the same made it possible for GM - I met with the head of General Motors and they were prepared to lead a brief of business interests and we ended up with multiple. So we had *amicus* briefs from the business sector and we had statements from President Ford and the military and lots of others. And it was that wider kind of consensus - look, if you throw out this and the military and higher education, you’re going to unravel several decades of efforts by the society in every sector to try to grapple with the fact of a couple hundred years of segregation and discrimination. And it was that case.

Smith: And how was affirmative action applied at Michigan? I mean, presumably there was not a uniform formula.

Bollinger: That’s right. Because the University of Michigan, like every university, is very decentralized, so the law school had its own policy and the medical school had its policy and the LSA, the Arts and Sciences of Michigan, had its own policy. And what happened in the litigation was, there were two law suits. One against the Arts and Sciences, both against the individuals, myself and some others, but also against the University. And they identified the policies in LSA, and the policy in the law school. The policy in the law school, I was significantly responsible for it because I was dean. It was the late ‘80s. I could see the world was changing in attitudes about this, and I could see some need for greater attention. We set up a committee, we developed a policy, etc. LSA did this independently of the law school and had its own, and they were very different in their structure – opposite actually.

So the law school was the gestalt. We take into account race is one of many factors…we want a diverse population, we want people from all backgrounds and experiences and capacities. And we kind of just put it together. And LSA policy was, we’re going to be much more specific and concrete. So if you are at this grade point average, you get these points; if you got this SAT score, you get these points; if you’ve got these kind of references, you get this point; and if you are African-American or in an under-represented minority, you get these points. So they actually gave points. Now, that was called a grid that listed these factors and points for them. And that was uncovered through
discover. And it was that, that was pasted on the front pages of the press and the *New York Times*, in particular, and made it seem scandalous that just because of your skin color you would get these points in an application process where the outcome was highly coveted. And my feeling, in all candor, was that this was not – you could defend this by saying, “Look, you say you want specificity, you don’t want this kind of hide the ball,” and here it is. On the other hand, it looked – the formulated quality of it resonated with the sense of invidious discrimination, even though the purpose was fine and noble.

And my feeling was, keep both cases going. Don’t give in on one, certainly don’t give in on both. And actually, you’d be better off in the courts and the courts can say, “This one, we really don’t like. This one is fine.” And of course, that’s the way it ended up in the Supreme Court. The grid – that form – was rejected as unconstitutional, and the law school policy was upheld. But I felt it was better to keep one that was likely to lose.

Smith: That’s interesting. At the time when that outcome emerged, did you hear from Ford? Did you have contact with him?

Bollinger: On the outcome of the case?

Smith: Yeah, once this was resolved.

Bollinger: Yes, I did talk with him. I can’t remember the details, but yes. And he was very happy about it.

Smith: It may be unfair to ask you to speculate, but I will. In my eulogy in Grand Rapids, I talked about the fact that most of us tend to get a little conservative as we get older. And in his case it seemed to be the opposite. My sense is on a number of issues - Affirmative Action being one, clearly abortion is another. He is, I believe, the only former president to put his name on a petition for gay rights.

Bollinger: Is that right?

Smith: Someone told us he said ten years before he died that gay marriage was coming and you might as well get used to it.
Bollinger: Isn’t that wonderful?

Smith: And I’m wondering, it is pure speculation, whether she [Mrs. Ford] was a factor in this. Whether having kids or grandkids factored in. It’s more than just the party went so far to the right and he stayed where he was. Because he was clearly more “liberal” and outspoken than he had been during his political career.

Bollinger: Well, that’s interesting, Richard. As you are talking – I’ll come back to that – but I want to say something going back to where we were just a moment ago, which again is revealing about him and the ways you are asking and talking about yourself. I am now recalling that I think the first time I actually saw him – this has to be checked because my memory may be flawed, and of course it would be highly embarrassing if what I’m going to say turns out not to be true, a figment of my imagination - but if you will recall, we had a reception at the White House, a dinner in honor of Ford, and I was in the receiving line, like everybody was, going through and Ford and George Bush were standing there and I think their wives were seated, if I remember correctly. What would have been the occasion?

Smith: Ford’s 90th birthday.

Bollinger: 90th birthday, yes.

Smith: And the Bushes had a dinner for him.

Bollinger: And the interesting thing here was this was the first time I had seen him after the Supreme Court victories, I believe. And I’m nothing in the world of George Bush, but when I left Michigan to come here, the case was in its final months before the Supreme Court, and George Bush had never said anything about the case. In January or February, I think it was, he suddenly came out and said, “This was a terrible policy at the University of Michigan. It was a quota and the Supreme Court should strike it down.” And I felt this was a Condoleezza Rice idea, because she comes from the university world and she told him. That was my interpretation. So I’d just returned, I think, from a trip to India and I’m suddenly confronted with this, that the case is just a quota, the policies. I had never felt the power of a presidential statement that’s
against you. And boy, was it something. And I went on a number of talk shows, interviews, and said it’s just not right, and I made some statements and they were quoted in the New York Times that the President is wrong, that it’s not a quota, and he doesn’t understand, and so on. And it was sometime, maybe you will remember the month perhaps, but I remember as I got there to where they were standing, President Ford said, “Lee, we won!” And George Bush is right by him, and I remember this kind of – I mean, he had lots of reasons not to want to be highly friendly to me, but I thought it was an unusually unfriendly shaking of hands. But it was Ford’s irrepressible, “We won!” That was great.

Now, on these other qualities that you said, I always interpreted him as having real personal – this goes back to the oddity of the formality of the man – I just feel like this Willis Ward, Betty, his children, these are the things that shaped his views. When you know people and you like them, or love them, and things happen to them, that’s where you get your political views from.

Smith: Plus, he had gone through the intervention with her, and he’d become in his own way as involved in the work of the Center as she was. And I think, as a spur to compassion - seeing people, including personal friends, people in his circle who were good people, decent people, who happened to have a weakness. You wonder - the cumulative impact of that.

Bollinger: I also wonder, and again, you’ll know more about this, I wonder if this is an example of somebody who in later life, rather than being more conservative, is actually more human. Because one of the things I remember him saying now that you’ve just said that is, didn’t they go on a campaign tour for their honeymoon, or something? And there was that sense that this was a very self-absorbed - somebody who is after his own career and wasn’t around the kids as much. And then maybe in the latter years, it was human beings that mattered most to him. And he felt that he had not done that before.

Smith: I think that’s very shrewd. How do you think he should be remembered?

Bollinger: For all these things, I think, we’re a nation who seems to be desperate for leaders who are authentic and rooted in human relationships and not taking
positions for some kind of ideological advantage. And, I mean, he just stands out, doesn’t he, in this kind of way? I think the kind of self-sacrificing public servant who realizes he is going to pay a price, but he’s doing this for other people.

Smith: Were you, at the time of the pardon, when you first heard about the pardon, were you opposed?

Bollinger: You know, that’s a good question. I can’t remember. I bet I thought it was the right thing to do. You just have to forgive and move on. I’m almost positive that’s what I would have thought.

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

Bollinger: I don’t remember exactly the last time. It may have been one of our meetings. I have a personal letter from him about the Ford School, accepting and thanking me for that. I keep that up in my study.

Smith: It was dedicated a month before he died.

Bollinger: Yeah.

Smith: And he really intended to be there. There was nothing that made him more upset than his inability to be there. If there was any way he could have, he would have.

Bollinger: As I said before, I was really impressed by how much it meant to him. And I don’t know what went through his mind about this sort of issue: am I a real president, or was I just a fill in for a while? Can I really act like I was a former President of the United States? I never got a sense of whether that was an issue for him or not.

Smith: When we were planning the funeral, the Military District of Washington tends to see this as their doing, and they are heavily involved. But the one thing he was adamant about, he did not want a caisson down the streets of Washington. And a very ill-advised representative of the military tried to change him by saying, “Now, Mr. President, you wouldn’t want people to think that you were a second rate president.” Needless to say, that argument did not carry. I
don’t think he harbored any doubts about his legitimacy. But the pomp was not his thing.

Bollinger: That’s really interesting. I also remember, and I used it in a graduation speech at Michigan, it was one of my better speeches at graduation, which are very hard to give, as you know, especially in a football stadium. But I remember walking from the President’s House over to the Union where the Regents were meeting. And this proposal of having the Ford School created – he would be there to accept applause and make a statement. And as we were walking from the President’s House over – of course, there’s State Street – and I remember being struck by the fact that we’re walking along, he’s talking to me, and I’ve got a picture of it upstairs, and he never looked this way or that way to cross the street. He just walked across the street, and I thought, boy, that’s one perk of having been a president. You never have to look as you cross streets.

Smith: Was there any opposition, even *sub rosa*, to the idea of putting his name on the school?

Bollinger: Yeah, there was.

Smith: Was it political or ideological?

Bollinger: It was both those things, it was also “this is not a real president.” And there was also a “didn’t do anything” kind of perspective. You’ve got the glorification of the Kennedy School, the Kennedys, and there’s always the feeling of well, it’s everybody just trying to latch on, this is as good as we can do. There’s always going to be reticence about identifying with a particular public figure and political figure, but in this case, there was this sort of residue. So, yes, I had to push very hard for it, actually. It was not easy.

Smith: And was that on the Board of Regents, or the faculty?

Bollinger: It was every place.

Smith: Okay.
Bollinger: It was in the Regents, it was every place. At the end of the day, everybody thinks it was a great idea. I don’t mean to say it was my great idea, but everybody thinks it’s really great to have. His reputation actually was going up, as I could sense it. And part of that was the dignity and the character issues and the lack of partisanship.

Smith: Well, you speak of the Kennedys. When they gave him the Profiles in Courage Award, it was the ultimate imprimatur. He said, for twenty years, everywhere he went people asked the same question. And after he received that award, he said they don’t ask the question anymore.

Bollinger: Isn’t that amazing.

Smith: The power of the Kennedys.

Bollinger: That’s very interesting. I remember, again, just a little tidbit, maybe many people felt this way, but I remember, as a Democrat, watching the debates, and after the debates I said to my wife, Jean, “Ford is a better person. I like him better, I admire him more, but I don’t think I can vote for him.” But that stuck with me.

Smith: In October of ’76, he went to visit Hubert Humphrey in the hospital. And Humphrey told him he was getting votes in the Humphrey family. And Bess Truman voted for him.

Bollinger: Is that right?

Smith: She wanted him to be sure to know. Listen, this is wonderful. Thank you so much.

Bollinger: It was a pleasure to remember all this.
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Hamilton: ‘65 was the year he took on Halleck, wasn’t it?

Smith: That’s right. Now, were you elected in the Johnson landslide?

Hamilton: Right.

Smith: Had it been a Republican district?

Hamilton: Yeah, for 24 years. That was really my first exposure to an internal fight, which are very common of course, but my first exposure in the House. Halleck was from Indiana. I knew him quite well even though there was quite a gap in our ages. Ford took him on. I remember that quite well. Charlie Goodell and Ford and Bob Griffin up in Michigan. Rumsfeld was in that group, wasn’t he?

Smith: And Bob Dole.

Hamilton: And Bob Dole was in that group, yeah. Well, fire away.

Smith: Well, let me ask you, did Halleck ever talk to you about that? Did he voice his unhappiness?

Hamilton: I think Charlie Halleck was deeply disappointed that Ford took him on as the Minority Leader. Halleck had quite a bit of national exposure. He and Ev Dirksen from the Senate were kind of shocked that a young upstart or a relatively young upstart like Jerry Ford would take him on and beat him. After that event, it was all downhill for Charlie Halleck. He was deeply disappointed.

Smith: The older I get, the more I begin to suspect that as important as ideological factors are, that politics is more generational than anything else.
Hamilton: Well, it’s a very large component of it. You remember Joe Martin had been the Speaker. A lot of the Republican younger members had taken him on and defeated him, I guess, as Minority Leader; and then they set their eye on Charlie Halleck. They wanted to take control on the Republican side. They won it eventually, of course, with Jerry Ford in as Speaker. Jerry Ford always said his ambition was to be Speaker of the House and he worked doggedly to achieve that, travelling all over the country, speaking at every chicken dinner in the country, and every Republican gathering in order to try to increase that Republican majority. Jerry Ford had a deceptively low-key approach to things. He was ambitious, no question about that, I think. But he cloaked it nicely. He was very popular in the House on both sides of the aisle. You couldn’t really dislike Jerry Ford. Straight arrow. Lack of pretention. Down-to-earth Midwestern values, from my point of view at least. And that personal popularity stood him in good stead, and in a sense, was why he was chosen by Nixon for Vice President.

Smith: Let me ask you, when you say ‘Midwestern values,’ what do you mean by that phrase?

Hamilton: Decent, honest, without ego, friendly, down-to-earth. Jerry Ford had core values that he believed in very deeply. I’m not just sure where they came from, I don’t know that much about his background. But he was a very stable person, very confident within his own skin, and a very appealing person overall.

Smith: It is an interesting thing when you talk about his ambition because that, in some ways, goes against the grain of the popular image. But I think it’s a shrewd observation. I’ve often wondered whether in some ways Ford used his reputation as a nice guy, maybe an unsophisticated guy, and put that to work for him.

Hamilton: Well, I think without a doubt, he did. It’s not uncommon in Washington, incidentally, to cloak ambition. People don’t like ambitious people who are blatantly obviously ambitious. Washington’s full of ambitious people, but the ones I think that are more likely to succeed are those who are able to hide it, cloak it. Ford had a very outgoing manner to him. He got along well with his
colleagues. He had a natural ability to deal well with people. It interested me that he was chosen as a leader of the Young Turks. He probably wasn’t the brightest guy in that group, the others were hard-driving, more obviously ambitious, I think; but they settled on Jerry Ford as their leader, the person most likely to be able to overcome Charlie Halleck.

Smith: And I assume a significant factor in that change was the Goldwater rout. That young members in particular thought, “We’re about as low as we can go. We’ve got to try something different.”

Hamilton: I think that’s correct. They saw a need to rebuild the party after the Goldwater defeat and they were determined to start in the House.

Smith: Did he ever campaign against you?

Hamilton: I don’t think so. In those days, it was fairly rare for a sitting member of Congress to go into the district of another sitting member of Congress and campaign against him. Indeed, it kind of ran against the ethics of the House. Nothing in writing, but it was understood. Now that’s very different today, of course.

Smith: Anything you can share with us that will give us a sense of how different the climate was in this town, on the Hill, and particularly in the House that Ford was so much a part of?

Hamilton: Well, I’ll give you a very personal story. As a very young member of Congress, I made a big parliamentary mistake on the floor; didn’t even know I’d made it. I knew so little about the rules. Ford was the Minority Leader. Either at his instigation or at least with his consent, I never knew which, he sent over an Indiana Republican member of Congress, Bill Bray, to me and Bill said, “Lee, you just made a mistake. Here’s the way you correct it.” And I did on a bill neither he nor Ford liked. Now, it wasn’t a major piece of legislation, pretty small, but an extraordinary act by the Minority Leader and by Congressman Bray to help this newcomer Democrat not make a fool of himself. And I cannot imagine that kind of thing happening in today’s climate.
Smith: Plus, going back to what you said earlier, it was also smart on his part.

Hamilton: I think so. He understood down the road he could block the bill if he wanted to. I understood it, too. But the important thing from my point of view is that he was sufficiently sympathetic towards a new member of Congress, so he didn’t want that new member of Congress pulling a bonehead play.

Smith: We’ve been told among other things that members of Congress in both houses socialized much more with each other in those days. That many more of them actually brought their families with them to town, which is an enormous factor in integrating yourself into the culture. Is that all true?

Hamilton: Very definitely true. The amenities are important in politics as, I guess, in the rest of life. It’s very hard to get mad at somebody if you know them well. And in those days, members knew each other pretty well. To meet a member in committee or on the floor, both of which are rather confrontational settings, did that back then, too, but the difference is that back then, in the mid-60’s, you socialized with them a lot. You knew their spouses. You knew their family. In Jerry Ford’s case, he lived only a few blocks from my wife and me and Betty Ford and my wife became quite good friends. She often had the use of the Minority Leader’s car, so she’d pick up my wife and take her to social events to which the spouses had been invited. And my wife and Betty Ford became good friends. My wife had an enormous admiration for Betty Ford. Those are the kinds of personal ties that make a big difference.

Smith: What did she admire about Mrs. Ford?

Hamilton: Well, she was very outspoken, very friendly. She had many of the Midwestern values that Jerry Ford had. She was quite unpretentious. Didn’t hesitate, incidentally, to disagree with her husband.

Smith: Did you see that?

Hamilton: Oh, yes. The big example, of course, I remember is on Roe vs. Wade, when she just came out and said that’s a wonderful decision or words to that effect and, of course, that was appalling to Jerry Ford and to the Republican Party. But Betty Ford had that spunkiness about her that was very, very attractive.
And she was a very gracious woman. She had been a model and obviously she and Jerry Ford were very devoted to one another. It was a strong marriage.

Smith: Did you or your wife sense any problems that Mrs. Ford might have been having in those early days, any unhappiness?

Hamilton: Well, I certainly did not and I don’t recall, because I didn’t have that much contact with Betty Ford, but I don’t recall my wife ever indicating that.

Smith: I just wonder, in the larger sense, she’s become almost a stand-in for the political wife who, 40 years ago had a tough road to hoe.

Hamilton: Well, I guess she did and she had, as I understand it, an alcohol problem that developed at some point. I never saw any evidence of that, but neither was I around her very much.

Smith: Sure.

Another thing about the parties. Forty years ago I remember talking to Walter Mondale about this - whether it was the Senate or the House, you came to Washington and you joined a party that had diversity. I mean, each party had wings. And so a northern liberal would have to take account of the fact that up to a point, there was a considerable number of southern conservatives within the party that you had to deal with. And presumably, learning to forge compromises and personal relationships within your party with people who were your ideological opposite must have had some impact in how you operated in the larger legislative arena. That, I assume, is largely gone today.

Hamilton: Well, I think it is. I think the political parties used to be part of the consensus building mechanism in America, as you were talking about. There was diversity in the Democratic Party. Howard Smith was head of the Rules Committee - was about as conservative guy as ever served in the Congress, and in one of the most powerful positions the Democratic Party could provide. So, in the party conventions and the party itself and the caucuses and the House, you could see the party making compromises to build a consensus. Today, that’s much less true because there’s a lot more ideological purity, if
you would. Democrats tend to be more uniformly liberal and Republicans more uniformly conservative. And so, we have lost, and this is the principle point, one of the principle consensus building mechanisms in America of the political party.

Smith: Indeed the very word consensus is seen as offensive to those on the extremes.

Hamilton: Unfortunately, that’s the case, but from my point of view, I think that the task of the Congress is to build consensus behind a solution to a problem.

Smith: And clearly Ford was very much a part of that.

Hamilton: He was indeed. Now, Ford was a very loyal Republican, extremely loyal. And he saw the world through Republican eyes. On the foreign policy side, he was an internationalist. He was what you’d call a hawk on Vietnam, even though later on in his presidency, he played a role in getting us out of Vietnam. He was on the military appropriations subcommittee. That’s a powerful position. He was a ranking member, I believe, and he was very strong on defense, national security matters. But one of the things I appreciated about Jerry Ford was he was not the least bit vindictive. I, for example, offered on the floor of the House, one of the early amendments to reduce our commitment in Vietnam and didn’t win the vote, but we got more votes than anybody anticipated and that began to change the dynamics in the House, I think, considerably. Ford argued vigorously against that amendment, but never took it out on me personally. He had that ability of friendship that went beyond the party lines.

Smith: It’s interesting. There are stories of him and Hale Boggs going down to the National Press Club. They would drive down together; decide what they were going to debate that day on the way to the club. They’d go down. They’d have their debate. Go have a drink and lunch, and go back to work. It sounds almost unbelievable contrasted with today’s climate.

Hamilton: Well, it was a very, very different approach. I’ve seen it so many times when the speakers of those days would sit down with Minority Leader Ford. The Speaker would say, McCormick or someone, Albert, “We’re going to bring up this bill” and Ford would say, “We don’t like that bill.” And Albert or
McCormick would say, “How many votes are you Republicans going to give us?” And Ford would give them an estimate, not an off the cuff estimate, one that he had been whipping. And, likewise, they’d talk about key amendments. Ford would not like the bill, the Speaker would like the bill, and they’d bring it to the floor. They both knew how it was going to come out, knew what the votes were. They would each go into the well and give a ringing speech for or against the bill and then forget about it. And they were friends. But the point is, the civility of when they were calculating the votes, it was an honest exchange. Ford would say, “You’re not going to get more than 15 votes from the Republicans on this bill.” And the Speaker would say, “Well, I need 20.” And then the Speaker would have to make up his mind whether or not to bring the bill forward, hoping he could pick up the 5 votes somewhere. But never vindictiveness, never anger, but both very passionate, very strong in their conviction about the bill. But they didn’t let that interfere with doing business.

Smith: A couple of things. He had a temper and it was very well concealed, but something he struggled with all his life to contain. I wondered if you ever saw that.

Hamilton: I did not.

Smith: Never did.

I’d be fascinated if you could tell us about the strengths of the speakers with whom you worked. I mean particularly John McCormick, Carl Albert, and Tip O’Neill. What did they each bring to the job?

Hamilton: Well, McCormick was a slashing debater. He really was more of a Majority Leader than he was Speaker and you could see John McCormick sitting up there in that chair when a debate was going on just chomping at the bit to get into the debate. He was a debater and a good one. And he found the Speaker’s role uncomfortable.

Smith: Constricting?
Hamilton: Sitting up there in that chair. He was an advocate. He was a very, very able
advocate.

Smith: And I assume a sort of a classic New Deal Democrat.

Hamilton: Roosevelt Democrat all the way, New Deal, liberal and social programs.
Internationalists supported going into the war, World War II. And a very fine
decent man. I never really knew him very well. He was too far above me.
As a matter of fact, one of my recollections is when Mo Udall challenged him
for Democratic Speaker in the Congress, I supported Mo. It’s that
generational gap you were talking about. The night before the vote, I got a
call from Speaker McCormick and Speaker McCormick said, “Lee, I’ve got a
contest tomorrow night. I hope I can have your support.” I don’t think he
knew who he was talking to. I doubt if he could identify me personally at that
point. I said, “Well, Mr. Speaker, I’m going to support Mr. Udall.”
Whammy! The phone went down. I kind of shook for a few minutes after
that, but John McCormick never held it against me and never held back. He
was a gentleman.

Carl Albert, a stem-winding speaker, a little giant from Oklahoma; likewise, a
New Deal liberal. A progressive, we’d say these days, and extremely able.
The curious thing about Carl Albert to me, I think, is he wanted to be Speaker
all his life and when he got there, he wasn’t quite sure what to do. He was
kind of an uncertain leader, uncertain trumpet, if you would.

Tip O’Neill was as popular as Jerry Ford. You just could not dislike Tip
O’Neill. He had that Irish Catholic warm friendly approach. I recall a lot of
people getting mad at Tip O’Neill, but never holding it. He would overcome
it. And I think a good Speaker over all, a strong Speaker. He was one of the
early people to oppose the Vietnam War against his party at the time. But Tip
was a committed Democrat and I think turned out to be quite a strong
Speaker.

Smith: Let me ask you one thing about the House and we’ll move on. Because Ford
clearly was very proud of his service in the House, I think he regarded it as his
real home in Washington. There’s no evidence that he ever wanted to go to
the Senate, although he’d been approached more than once. What is it about
the House, and I’m not putting down the Senate, but what is it about the
House that inspires such loyalty?

Hamilton: It’s a more collegial body. I didn’t know much about the Michigan politics of
the day, but Ford had I think fairly easy re-elections and he enjoyed travelling
the country, making the Republican case. He was quite good at it. He really
enjoyed his friends.

Smith: On both sides of the aisle?

Hamilton: Oh, no question about it. And I think he felt very much at home. He
described himself as a man of the House and there’s that great story about
him. After he stepped away from the presidency, he took a helicopter tour
and he asked them to swing around the Capitol. “This is my home.” He’d
been in the White House for however long it had been, a couple years, but he
very much considered himself a man of the House and I don’t think ever felt
otherwise, even as President.

Smith: Now, that raises a large question. Because you can also look at the two and a
half years of his presidency as learning the difference between a legislator’s
function and the executive function.

Hamilton: Yeah.

Smith: And he is said to have observed that the great frustration to losing in ’76 was
he’d just felt that he’d mastered the job and he lost it.

What would he bring from the Hill to the White House and what might he
have to unlearn?

Hamilton: Well, what he brought surely was personality. He knew the people. That’s
hugely important in politics and he had their respect. When Nixon asked him
to be vice president, a principle reason for that request was Nixon knew he
could be confirmed overwhelmingly. Nixon was not in a strong position at
that point and he had to have a good strong vice president who could work
with the House and the Senate. So, Jerry Ford knew the House, very, very
well; knew the legislative process intimately. That’s a big strength. On the
negative side, presidents instinctively expand the power of the presidency and I think Ford had to learn that a little bit. He was very much a legislative person, had deep respect for the separation of powers and the Constitution and I think it took him awhile to get accustomed to exercising the power of the presidency.

Smith: I heard him say, “If I had my life to do over again, probably the one thing I would’ve done was spend more time learning mass communications.” In the House and the Senate, the communication of leadership can often be one on one, often behind closed doors. Or it’s a kind of lingo that people don’t understand outside the beltway - you know, incomplete sentences, grunts… and a president’s communications are totally different.

Hamilton: But part of it is the period of time when Jerry Ford started in politics; television was a minor factor and you tended to meet in smaller groups. You didn’t very often address big groups. And as he served in the presidency, national media, not just television, but the print media, picked up in intensity and presence and coverage, so a politician of Ford’s age and generation had to learn media was changing.

Smith: On the job. I mean, literally, the rules were changing all around.

Hamilton: Now, you fast forward to Ronald Reagan who mastered television partly because of his background but that gave him kind of a leg up later on.

Smith: On balance, do you think television has been good for Congress?

Hamilton: I think good and bad. It’s marvelous that people can flip in and watch a debate. My constituents made me think at times that if I didn’t do it on television, I didn’t do it. There isn’t any doubt at all that television is where people get their information. The good part of that is it exposes them to a lot of things. The bad part of that is that it’s so terribly superficial. So, I have a kind of a love-hate attitude towards television. It’s a very mixed blessing and there’s nothing more frustrating for a legislator than to work six months on a bill and then go before the cameras and they get impatient once you run past 30 seconds in describing a very complicated piece of legislation. It’s maddening. It’s frustrating. And so many times I’ve sat for television
interviews beginning to launch on what I thought was a lot of wisdom and they’d be giving me this signal to wind it down, wind it down, you’re talking too long.

Smith: Was there a moment when you decided or your colleagues decided that the Nixon presidency was doomed? President Ford, who had something of the Boy Scout in him, he couldn’t believe that Nixon lied to him. I think he was shocked by the language that he heard on the tapes, which I think again goes to that sense of Midwestern decency that you referred to. For people who didn’t go through all of that, can you convey a time when the unthinkable seemed unavoidable?

Hamilton: Well, it built. It was a step-by-step process. Ford, of course, was very, very loyal to Nixon and he was very, very loyal to the Republican Party. He had a tough time thinking that John Mitchell would lie to him as he did, or Spiro Agnew would lie to him as he did, and Richard Nixon. That’s natural enough. I don’t know if there was a time. It just seemed to me that the case kept building and building and building and I guess the tapes became the crucial thing. But it was clearly moving in that direction.

Smith: It’s said that Nixon actually looked upon Ford as his insurance which seems like a total misreading of Congress’ attitude.

Hamilton: Nixon, I think, used Ford to his advantage, both prior to his resignation and maybe even long before that. Nixon had a respect for Ford and an appreciation of his friendship, but I think he used him. And I think one of the disappointing aspects of Ford’s career was the extraordinary energy he brought to the task of defending Nixon when he was Vice President, when the evidence was just stacking up strongly against him. I don’t know if this is fair to Ford or not, but from my point of view, Ford seemed to kind of close his mind to the activities of the Nixon White House and defended it all over the country over and over again.

Smith: Did you have any contact with him during his vice presidency?

Hamilton: Some, but not very much. I had more contact with him when he was President. I think he was a Nixon loyalist as vice president, as I guess you’re
expected to be as vice president, and he was in a terribly difficult situation, a really difficult situation. I kind of concluded that Jerry Ford just kind of closed his mind to the evidence and set his course.

Smith: You’re certainly not alone in saying that. The interesting thing is that there were people in the Nixon White House who thought he wasn’t loyal enough, who resented the fact that he was out of town as much as he was.

Hamilton: Is that right? Well, he went on the road and he was all over the country defending Nixon - every whipstitch town, he was there.

Smith: When he becomes president, it must have been a transforming moment in the mood of this town. Having lived through something that no one ever wanted to experience, the resignation of the President - but before the pardon - what was that first month like?

Hamilton: There was a varied sigh of relief. I think Ford’s great statement “The long national nightmare is over,” was a perfect pitch, exactly where the American people were. And everybody recognized Ford to be a very decent man. Everybody had that impression of him, and an honest man. So, I think my chief recollection of his taking the presidency was just a big sigh of relief that a good man was in the office the presidency.

Smith: It’s also interesting because in that first week he was in office, he brought in the Congressional Black Caucus and George Meany, and a whole bunch of people who hadn’t been in the White House for a long time.

Hamilton: Well, Ford’s presidency was marked by his evenhandedness. John Paul Stevens, he was very proud of that appointment to the Supreme Court. And his Attorney General-

Smith: Ed Levi.

Hamilton: Yeah, Ed Levi, he set the mark for Attorney General. Ford, in his appointments, showed an evenhandedness. He did not push a strong ideological line in his appointments. And that, too, sets that presidency quite apart because now, of course, presidents tend not to do that. But he had an
evenhandedness; a steadiness in his approach that I think is quite commendable.

Smith: Let me ask you. Mel Laird. He had a plan to take care of the pardon. And he’s still angry - I mean he loved Ford - but he’s still angry that Ford didn’t let him carry out his scheme. And his idea later is that he was going to get a bipartisan delegation from the Hill to go down to the White House to ask the President to pardon Nixon. Now, my question is, given the supercharged political climate of this town at that time, is it realistic to believe that you could’ve floated a trial balloon without it being shot down before it reached the tree level?

Hamilton: Oh, I don’t know that I know the answer to that. I didn’t know about Laird’s initiative. Ford had been in office how long before the pardon?

Smith: A month.

Hamilton: A month. I remember I was appalled by that decision. I guess in retrospect, most people think it was the right decision. I’m not sure I do, but I think he’s been widely praised for that decision.

Smith: We’d be interested in knowing why you still harbor some real reservations.

Hamilton: I’m sure it’s my partisan sensibilities in part; a very strong belief that presidents are not above the law. And, in this case, I thought it was an abuse of the pardon power because what Ford did, in effect, was pardon Nixon before he was convicted of anything, no matter what the evidence might have been. I thought, at the very least, it was a premature act. I don’t think I ever thought there was a deal, as he was widely accused of. I don’t think Ford would’ve done that. I really don’t. And I had no doubt at all that he was utterly sincere in his wish to put it all behind us. I think overall, the country has concluded it was a good judgment. I guess I have a hard time. I’m still wrestling with that.

Smith: Two points: not to defend him, but the context. They were being told as we understand it from Judge Sirica it would be two years before Nixon would be brought …
Hamilton: Yeah, it would drag out for a long time…I don’t think he ever regretted the decision. He was asked about it after he was president frequently. It had a dramatic adverse affect on his political standing. The country, I don’t know what the figures were, but they were very opposed to the pardon at the time. But that was partly just because Nixon had disgraced the presidency and people were really upset with Nixon.

Smith: Do you find it frustrating with the passage of time that now we have, not only Vietnam revisionists, but also Watergate revisionists who suggest that this wasn’t such a big deal after all? Why was it important for Richard Nixon to resign?

Hamilton: Well, I think that he lied may be the principle reason, but he supported a dastardly deed to burglarize the offices in Watergate. Had Nixon just said, “Look, I made a horrible mistake. I should never have done that. It was a period of bad judgment,” I think he would’ve survived his presidency. But it’s this long period of cover-up and denial that I think it was very clear to me despite, I guess, my partisan sensibilities on it, he simply could not function as president. He had lost the ability to have any credibility on anything.

Smith: Is it fair to say he basically squandered the moral authority of the office?

Hamilton: Sure, no question about it. He really did. And it took him awhile, I think, to understand that, but eventually, he did understand it and he did the right thing when he stepped aside.

Smith: And, of course, in November of 1974, in no small measure because of the pardon, Republicans are routed and this whole group of what became as the Watergate babies came in, I assume the House changed as a result of that.

Hamilton: I think it did. You had a lot of reformers come in, and beginning in 1974, you had quite a few changes in the internal procedures of the House, more open. I’m not sure when television came in, but that would’ve been consistent at least with the attitude then.

Smith: Also, wasn’t there much more aggressive legislative versus executive - the War Power Acts being a classic example.
Hamilton: The War Powers Act is a good illustration, a pretty ineffective piece of legislation, but certainly an illustration of what you’re saying. Too much power in the executive branch. So we had to do something about it, the critical question of war powers.

Smith: And, indeed, jumping ahead 35 years, there is this school of thought that the Dick Cheney evolution can be explained as someone whose views were shaped during the Ford presidency, Cheney came to believe that Congress posed a threat to the Executive.

Hamilton: Yeah, I think that’s right. Dick Cheney has been very consistent throughout his career in support of executive power. And he felt that Vietnam, Watergate, Iran-Contra were seminal events in the history of the country in which the presidency, the executive branch, lost power. Indeed, his dissenting views in Iran-Contra - I was involved in that myself - probably is as clear a statement of his fundamental philosophy a statement on executive power as you can find.

Smith: When we get to the fall of Saigon, and another Mel Laird scheme. Laird is still blaming Ford for not getting last minute aid to prop up Saigon. And again, I’m asking, as someone who was there, is that a realistic reading of the mood of Congress at that point? Was there anything in April of 1975 that a president could have said that would have persuaded Congress to appropriate those funds?

Hamilton: I think Ford accurately read the mood of the country. If we had pumped a lot more military effort at that point, we’d have tipped the needle our way for a period of time, but not permanently.

Smith: Do you think the South Vietnamese government was doomed?

Hamilton: I do. And I think, more importantly, from the American political standpoint, the American people had figured it out. Look, they strongly supported the war and then over a period of 5, maybe 7 years, they turned against the war. And they did not just turned against it, they turned against it strongly. And they’d had enough of the bombing. They’d had enough of the killing. They’d had enough of the incompetence of the South Vietnamese government. Sure,
we could’ have bombed more, we could’ have put more men in. We could’ have hit that and we could have hit this and we could have had a marginal impact. The big argument there was from the people who wanted victory in Vietnam and those that said, “Look, this nightmare has got to come to a stop.” The interesting thing here is Ford, by his history, you would think he would come down on the side of the hawks. He didn’t. And I think the reason he didn’t, defying Kissinger and a lot of other respected voices, he said, “Look, we’ve got to cut our losses here and get out of here, short of victory.” And I think personally he made the right judgment, but that’s not important. What is important I think, he accurately read the opinion of the American people at that point.

Smith: And then there’s this coda because after Saigon falls, there is a kind of recoil on Capitol Hill and in particular, money that was to have been spent to bring refugees is in effect pulled off the table. And Ford puts together this sort of crazy quilt coalition, the American-Jewish Congress and George Meany and others who argue that America has a responsibility, a moral responsibility.

Hamilton: And I think this is real leadership on his part. If I recall, he gave amnesty to American draft dodgers. He insisted that many Vietnamese come into this country. He recognized our responsibilities and he stood up for them and I don’t think those things were popular. And I think Ford deserves credit for that.

Smith: Was there a desire on the Hill at that point to just wash our hands of this whole misadventure?

Hamilton: I think so. You’ve got to remember that a member of Congress was voting time after time for pouring money and money and money in there. And our casualties - I don’t recall the exact figures, 50-55,000 dead. And a deep sense of discouragement on the side of the South Vietnamese government. And American officials over a period of time beginning with Johnson, McNamara, Rusk, that was back in ’64, and the Nixon period in ‘68, they had kept telling us how well things were going in Vietnam. And the people just turned it off. The people said, “Look, we’ve got problems here at home. We’ve got other
things to do. We did the best we could. We gave them an opportunity. It’s time to get out.” That feeling was very strong.

Smith: In retrospect, is it surprising how little lasting damage was done to American influence? I mean, literally within months, you had Kissinger talking to the Israelis and Egyptians. It’s almost as if everyone had assumed that when America loses a war, it would have had a crippling effect.

Hamilton: I never bought that argument. I didn’t think it was the alpha and omega of American prestige. I began to be very suspicious about the domino theory, and we got so focused on the domino theory that we lost all perspective and we kind of lost confidence in ourselves as a nation. We took it on the chin in Vietnam. It wasn’t an utter defeat, there were some good things that came out of it, but I did not think that the result there would influence our position elsewhere in the world. There were just too many things going for us in the economy and in the military power that we had, even though we suffered a setback there. No, I didn’t buy that.

Smith: You said you had some contact with him during the presidency. Can you describe that?

Hamilton: Well, Helsinki.

Smith: Tell us about that.

Hamilton: I think that, from my point of view, this would be the strongest achievement of the Ford presidency. You could argue, I guess that getting out of Vietnam in the way he did was a major accomplishment. I think it was. But in terms of long lasting impact, Helsinki was a major accomplishment.

Smith: And the fascinating thing is, at the time, it was highly unpopular.

Hamilton: Well, people didn’t understand it. It took me a while to understand it. I didn’t quite understand what the Soviets had signed on to there and I was being briefed on it every day. Ford was dead right about that.

Smith: Describe what Helsinki is.
Hamilton: With the Helsinki Accords, basically we were negotiating with the Soviets and others there, and what we did in effect was put human rights on the agenda among nations. And all of the leading nations agreed to conduct themselves in a way that was respectful of human rights. That became the Helsinki Accords. The Soviets signed on to it, a club for us to use against them. And we reminded the Soviets of their misbehavior hundreds of times after that, and began to swing world opinion against the Soviet Union. The Helsinki Accords were the beginning of the Soviet downfall and I did not recognize the potential of the Helsinki Accords initially, but I think Ford saw it much more clearly than I did.

Smith: His relationship with Secretary Schlesinger. I realize you weren’t in the room.

Hamilton: Schlesinger?

Smith: Jim Schlesinger. But I wonder, you mentioned, he’d been all those years on the military appropriations committee. He knew the feds. And I’m wondering if there just was a chemistry that --

Hamilton: I can’t help you there. I don’t know. He let Jim go as Defense Secretary. He shook up things, didn’t he? Put Rumsfeld in. Cheney came into the White House.

Smith: The same time Rockefeller was dumped.

Hamilton: Incidentally, I do have a clear recollection about that. Ford regretted that he did not defend Rockefeller more. I think he looked upon that as one of his major mistakes, if I’m not mistaken, because when he was gearing up to run in ’76, the Republicans didn’t like Rockefeller for a lot of different reasons, but Ford did. Most people would say, including me, that Rockefeller had been a very good vice president. But that didn’t matter. He ran against the core of the Republican Party and Ford kind of ran away from him and didn’t stick up for him and ended up appointing Bob Dole.

Smith: Did you have contact with him at all after he left the presidency?
Hamilton: I ran into him on a couple of occasions at meetings and found him always very, very cordial. He appreciated that House tie and the fact that Betty Ford and my wife Nancy were good friends added something to it. But the really good qualities, personal qualities, of President Ford came out again in his post-presidency years. And remarkable about that was his lack of bitterness. That was quite a crushing defeat with Jimmy Carter and he had that famous statement about Soviet domination in Eastern Europe that hurt him badly in the election. As I recall, he started way behind in that election. Is that right?

Smith: Yeah, 30 points.

Hamilton: 30 points, I knew he was behind. But it turned out to be a horse race – a close one. He was deeply, deeply disappointed that he lost the election, but he was never bitter. It was a good quality.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Hamilton: Oh, I think without any doubt as a healer. Look, he took a presidency that was in the pits and when he left office, he had elevated it. Even though people didn’t vote for him, they knew what he had done.

Smith: Well, with the Bicentennial, people actually celebrated the Bicentennial.

Hamilton: That’s right, in ’76. So his great overwhelming accomplishment was that he healed the nation at a time when it was deeply divided. I think he’ll be remembered for being just a very decent man in the presidency. He didn’t have to go through the ordeal of getting to the presidency, where you create great friends and great enemies. I think he’ll be remembered as a president who brought the nation together at a very critical time in its history. He wasn’t in long enough to have too much of a judgment about his presidency, but on the whole, he’ll be remembered very, very positively.
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Smith: Thank you for doing this. I have to ask you before we get into your story and then the larger story, how does it feel to be in this room again?

Simmons: How do I feel?

Smith: Obviously this is President Ford’s office here at Rancho Mirage.

Simmons: Now that you ask me about it, all of the sudden, I got chills. I think about the number of hours that I have been in here with President Ford preparing for a trip or just preparing for every day activities for him. Now that we think about it, it gives me...well, actually a tremendous amount of pleasure to know that I had the opportunity to work for such a great man. And he was, as far as I’m concerned, one of the greatest politicians that I’ve had the opportunity to work with.

Smith: Tell us something about him that might surprise people.

Simmons: He was a kind man. Very kind, very appreciative of everything you did for him. He would always say, thank you very much. Thank you. He never would not remember to do that if you did something for him. But what I liked about him was his high integrity. He was just one of the most outstanding moral men you’d ever want to meet. I was with him for thirty-three years, thirty-three and half years before he died, and I tell you, he was always above board in everything that he did as we traveled.

Smith: Give us an illustration of that.

Simmons: Okay. I’ll give you a real good one. President Ford used to drink. He and Mrs. Ford used to have a cocktail and as we traveled around the world, these people knew that. They knew that he liked to have a little Jack Daniels before going to bed, and a little martini, or whatever before dinner. And wherever we traveled, all of the bars would be already there prepared for him, as well as
butter-pecan ice cream. This will always be there and it would be for us to 
take home with us or leave it there, or do whatever we wanted to. And we 
used to bring it home. I’m happy to tell you that, we would bring it home.

Not only did they have it in his room, they would have it in my room, so I got 
an opportunity to bring some Jack Daniels home, or some good liquor home 
with us. Well, he stopped drinking and one day he told me, he said, “Lee, you 
know, I don’t drink anymore. Why don’t you just tell them not to put this in 
our rooms anymore.” This was at the Waldorf. Well, I thought that was very 
noble of him. I wasn’t drinking either, but I like bringing that home. But he 
told me not to have them put that in the room. That’s one of the things. I 
mean, we could have brought that home forever if we had wanted to, but he 
decided that since he did not drink anymore, then they should not put that in 
his room. That was one example.

And the other example was that when we would travel, and people would help 
us out with the baggage and that kind of stuff, and he would always ask me, 
“Lee, did you tip him? Did you take care of him? Here’s some money.” So he 
was very kind in that way.

Smith: But he was a fiscal conservative, wasn’t he?

Simmons: Absolutely. He’s not going to give them a fistful of money, but he did want 
them to know that he appreciated their help. The maids in the hotels, he would 
always give me some money – we’d put it in an envelope and leave it for 
them. He was a kind person and, regardless of what people think about him, I 
thought he was one of the most outstanding men in that regard.

I want to tell you this, Richard, I have fifty-five years of military and 
government service, and, as a matter of fact, I like to say that I’ve traveled the 
world over with these dignitaries from afar. Of course, I wasn’t one of their 
top staff people, I was there in support status, but I’ve met all the presidents 
from General Eisenhower - President Eisenhower, through the current 
presidents and I’ve had a kind of a support status – whether with them or with 
President Ford. So I’ve had opportunities to observe and be around these 
people, although I would say I was not as close as I was with President Ford
and President Nixon and President Johnson. Those were the three presidents that I was very close with. But my association with President Ford was beyond anything that you can imagine, because I thoroughly enjoyed the way he carried himself, and the way that we did things.

Smith: He must have been a very different personality from Lyndon Johnson.

Simmons: Absolutely. President Ford never was a bully, not that I’m saying that President Johnson was. I think his staff was. They wanted to make sure that he, President Johnson, was taken of wherever he went. Things that they anticipated he wanted or anticipated his move, it was always there. I remember when I was flying on the airplane with him as a flight attendant, they always anticipated that he might want this, he might want that, or he may want to go here or go there, so consequently, things were always in disarray. But President Ford was always on time – when you got his schedule, you knew where you were going to go, where you were going to be for the next three or four days. But that was not so in some of the other administrations. He was, by far, one of the presidents that kept on time and expected you to, as well.

Smith: It is interesting because it was no secret that he had temper, and he spent a lifetime – he wrote about as a boy and the efforts his mother made. The famous incident, I guess, where she gave him the Rudyard Kipling poem. And from my observations and talking to other people, he did a pretty good job of mastering that. Was it something that stayed with him?

Simmons: Absolutely, he had a temper. Absolutely, he was able to mask that. But President Ford didn’t belittle anyone around him. He had his shortcomings as far as mechanical things. He would get upset at things that really were not his doing. If the telephone didn’t work, or if the airplane wasn’t able to fly because of weather, he could not stand those kind of things. If he wanted to go, if he was ready to go, he wanted to go at that time. Sometimes those things would upset him the most, and I would be sitting beside him on the airplane when some of these things would happen and he would say, “Lee, what’s the hold up?” We’d be waiting to get to the gate or be waiting to take off because of weather. Those kind of things peeved him. Kind of upset him a
little bit because he could not control those things. But he wasn’t upset at you.
He might use a little profanity and everything and want to know what’s going here, but he never would let that hang over. He would get over that. Even if you made a mistake, he might tell me, he’d say, “Well, let’s not let that happen again.” But he would not bring that up again. I never have heard him to give me a hard time about anything. He would correct me, tell me, “Well, let’s do it this way, do it that way,” but never would he let that linger.

Smith: And is it true, did he late in life learn to use a computer?

Simmons: As a matter of fact, when I retired, President Ford told his audience – I had about a hundred and fifty people there when I retired full time from here – he told them how grateful he was that I was around because he was not too much mechanically inclined. He said, “Lee would always bail me out by coming over to the house and setting the clocks, or setting my watch or those kind of things.” He appreciated having me around because he knew his shortcomings there. As a matter of fact, when we were in hotels someplace and he wanted to call Mrs. Ford, he would always call me to come in and make the phone call for him, because he could not get all these numbers and things straight in his mind. He had other things on his mind. I can understand that, I appreciate that.

One day – this is a prime example of this – we were at the Waldorf, and all of a sudden I heard this tirade and I thought maybe he had cut himself or something, so I go running in there and he said, “This so and so telephone is not working. I can’t get out on it.” I said, “Okay, sir. I’ll take care of it.” But those are some of the things. But as far as being intelligent, I thought he was a very smart man, and he worked very hard at all times. A lot people didn’t know that about him. I hate to hear people say things about him that were not true - about his ability and all that, because he was a very smart man. He graduated tenth in his class in law school, I believe, or something like that. And he was a great football player. Gee whiz.

Smith: It’s interesting, one of the things we’ve heard from more than one person was, it’s a form of intelligence, actually, that he was much shrewder than some people assumed. And that, in fact, people thought of him as kind of an
innocent, and that he used that sometimes. That he sort of played that role as a means of getting more information. It’s a very interesting observation – that he was, not Machiavellian, but he was much shrewder. He understood how people saw him and he sometimes made that work for him.

Simmons: Oh, yes. Absolutely. I would say that as we traveled around the world, he made sure that his image was always up to par. A lot of people would say things that were strictly not true. But he had a way of dealing with those kinds of situations and I’ve never known him to ever get in a situation where he couldn’t explain them, or where he could not be presidential.

Smith: Did it hurt him – the whole Chevy Chase business? Here was a guy who was probably one of the best athletes who was ever president. And yet, television as a medium, an image can take hold. Publicly, I know, he sort of laughed it off. Do you think in private it hurt him?

Simmons: I think so. Yes, Richard, I think that bothered him a lot. But he was the kind of man that could roll with those punches. He understood the situations, the news, and the comedians did this as a way of making a living – although it was at his dispense. But he knew that he was above all of that so he let it roll right off his back and kept going.

Smith: There is a wonderful story - I think I got it from a photographer, Kennerly. The famous picture, I think it was in Vienna, when he stumbled on the steps. It was raining, they were rain slick. They had the umbrella for Mrs. Ford and he stumbled, and of course, the sycophants around him were all denouncing the photographers. And he said, “Well, of course they took the picture. If they hadn’t they would have been fired,” which is an extraordinarily generous reaction.

Simmons: Well, Richard, I was on that trip and I was with him. As a matter of fact, I had his briefcase walking down the steps behind him when that happened. And I think the first thing he said was, “Well, I just stumbled into you,” or something of that sort. He laughed it off. And, yeah, those things kind of bothered him. And when we were traveling on the airplane, sometimes because of his legs, his football injury, things like that, would buckle a little
bit and he may stumble just a little bit. But, believe you me, I agree with you, he was one of the top presidential athletes ever to be in this office. He could play golf, he swam, he was a boxer and he was very good at all those things. He knew that he was above all of those things that people were saying, so I don’t think it bothered him as much as it bothered me. I’m the one that really didn’t appreciate that.

I can tell you a little story. Once we were down in Memphis, Tennessee where he had his hole in one, and he played great golf. He could hit that ball as far as some of those pros, and much better than a lot of amateurs that he played with. I’m driving his golf cart, so I’m standing off to the side and here this lady said something like, “Look at him, look at him. He’s in this lie, he doesn’t even know where he’s at.” That bothered the heck out of me. I hate for someone to say that when they don’t know what they’re talking about. Those kind of things bothered me, but I don’t think it bothered him as much.

Smith: How was he when he got his hole in one?

Simmons: He was playing with Bob Hope, of course, at that time. Yeah, he was playing with Bob Hope. Bob Hope got a lot of mileage out of that hole in one. It was in Memphis, and Bob Hope, that night at one of the galas after the golf tournament, he said, “Well, the President hit a great shot on Number 13, and it hit a tree and bounced off the hole, bounced of the tree and rolled in the cup and President Ford walked up and reached down in the hole to pick the ball up and missed.”

Smith: Were they close?

Simmons: They were very close. Yeah. As a matter of fact, they could almost be a team – you know, him the straight man and Bob Hope. Yeah, we traveled a lot with Bob Hope to various golf tournaments and things like that.

Smith: It must have been rough, though, in the last years – I mean, Hope was really not in very good shape physically.

Simmons: No, he wasn’t.
Smith: And, I remember, maybe it was Penny who told me, the President – talk about friendship – the call would come and say, “Bob would like to play golf today.” And the President would go out and they would play maybe a hole or two.

Simmons: Two or three holes.

Smith: And then Hope would want to rest. That sort of thing. Is that true?

Simmons: Yeah, that’s quite true. They were good friends. They were great friends. We were in Florida once for a tournament, trying to think of the name of the tournament, but we stayed at the same villa in Jacksonville, Florida and Bob Hope was supposed to ride out with President Ford the next morning. We had breakfast, he was supposed to have breakfast with us but he didn’t show up. So finally President Ford said, “Lee, would you go check and see if Bob is going to ride out with us?” So I went and knocked on his door, and I heard him say, “Yeah?” I said, “Sir, President Ford would like to know if you are going to ride out with us this morning?” He said, “What time is it?” I said, “Well, it’s ten-fifteen.” He said, “My God, it’s in the middle of the night!” He said, “No, tell the President to go on ahead and I’ll join him.”

Smith: Was he funny?

Simmons: All the time. He was. But he was a great guy to be around. He always thought that I was a Secret Service agent.

Smith: How did you first come to have this extraordinary exposure to all of these presidents? How did you wind up on Air Force One?

Simmons: Well, I sort of was at the right place at the right time. First of all, I ended up in the presidential squadron at Washington National Airport in 1953, so that’s when I became a support person during the Eisenhower administration. And after being there for about eight years, I had met a lot of my friends that were traveling, going to different places overseas. I was single at the time so I thought it would be nice if I could travel to Paris or London and some of those places. They would come back and tell me about all those stories.
I inquired about it because I had been in the organization about ten years, knew a lot of the officers, I had worked with a lot of them and they knew who I was. I guess my reputation was pretty good. At that time there were no African Americans flying in the squadron at all – not on flying status. We had a lot of support people, but none flying on the airplanes. And, of course, that’s back in the Sixties. The segregation in various hotels and things like that were probably a problem. They were looking at that because we didn’t want to embarrass the dignitaries that we were traveling with. If you go to Little Rock, or someplace like that, and the crews couldn’t stay together, or whatever.

Some of those things were in people’s minds at that time. But I inquired about it, and he told me, he said, “Listen, do you think that you can deal with this kind of situation?” I said, “Absolutely.” And they said, “Well, what about if you’re traveling with the crew and maybe you would not be able to stay with the crew. Or maybe we would not assign you to a trip because of it?” I said, “I can understand that.” Anyway, a few days later, I was assigned directly to the flying squadron and I was in the administrative field. Normally, in order to become a crew member on one of those airplanes, you have to have so many hours in your crew duty. You have to be well-experienced.

Smith: Now, when we’re talking about airplanes, we’re talking about presidential aircraft.

Simmons: That’s the way I got in. Presidential squadron, where you fly other dignitaries. Not necessarily the president, but other dignitaries. But after being there for a while, I filled in for some of the crew members in the Kennedy administration when they needed an extra body to fly. I did support missions, and I did some trips with him before he was assassinated. And after he was assassinated, I flew a lot with President Johnson.

Smith: What was your sense of President Kennedy?

Simmons: President Kennedy? I didn’t get to know him very well. I was just like – I can remember myself feeling like, “Wow, this is like going to the movies,” to see the President and Mrs. Kennedy. Because they were like a king and queen, or movie stars or something like that. So the only thing I wanted to do was get to
see them, get to be around them. But, of course, because I was very new to flying at that time, I did not have the opportunity to serve them onboard the airplane. As a matter of fact, I served the crew and someone else served them. But I did get a chance to see them and be up with them and I was just like a starry-eyed kid.

Smith: At that point, were there other African Americans on those planes?

Simmons: No, none at all.

Smith: So you were unique?

Simmons: I was the first African American to be assigned as a crew member. There were other African Americans flying on the airplanes in other capacities – White House staff or whatever. Or even maintenance people – some African Americans were in the maintenance squadron, and security. But as a crew member, which are wings, I was the first one.

Smith: Were you welcomed?

Simmons: Absolutely.

Smith: Did you feel comfortable?

Simmons: I felt very welcome. I felt very comfortable. Of course, there were times when I knew that I should not be going to dinner with these guys in certain parts of the country – we’d go down in Texas. When they went to these hillbilly joints at night – I don’t want to say hillbilly, I’m sorry. Or go to the country and western restaurant to eat, I figured, ah, maybe I ought to skip that and stay at the hotel. But mostly the crews treated me nice. I was, for about ten years, the only African American on the crews whenever we flew overseas or stateside.

Smith: You weren’t in Dallas by any chance at the time of the assassination?

Simmons: Well, I was on the backup airplane, I was not on the primary airplane. I did assist then when we got back to Washington and offloading people – and assisting in any way I could on the ground after we arrived back in Andrews Air Force Base.
Smith: What do you remember of that day?

Simmons: Oh – well, it was unbelievable. People were crying and the crews were very upset – couldn’t believe it. Because this man was so popular at that time, especially with the military, and with the crews, it was unbelievable how popular he was. We were very hurt. As a matter of fact, you know that this whole country was very upset about what happened when he was assassinated.

Smith: Did you have any doubts about – now here’s this new president – he’s a Southerner – he’s from Texas. Just as an African American, did you have any reservations at first? The contrast between John F. Kennedy, who belatedly, but nevertheless embraced the civil rights movement – and now, all of a sudden, this unknown Southern commodity…

Simmons: Well, I will say this: yes, I was concerned about working with him on the airplane, but I kind of knew his reputation. I knew to stay out of his way, do what you’re supposed to do, and I made several trips with him when he was vice president. So I knew how to deal with him.

Smith: Was he mercurial?

Simmons: I think he was. There again, anticipating what he’d want – remember, I mentioned that earlier. He enjoyed getting on people, chewing them out, and that kind of stuff. I remember an incident on the airplane. He was president this time. We were coming back from Texas from his home. He had been down there for the week and I was working the front of the airplane – had gone in the back to pick up something to take up to the front to feed the crew and also, at that time, the press. The press was up front at that time. So we had to feed the press and the crew. So they sent me in the back to pick up something. Well, President Johnson was standing in the aisle, with his foot propped up on one of the seats, and I stood there with this tray in my hand for like ten minutes, and one of the Secret Service agents said to me, “Lee, tell him to move.” I said, “You tell him to move.” I wasn’t going to tell him to move. We knew how to deal with him. As a military person, you have training and you know how to treat dignitaries on a plane. Protocol was one of the
things that we were taught. You know how to handle those situations and you
deal with it because you were there to support them, not for them to support
you.

Smith: But the other side of mercurial is that people say he was also capable of great
acts of kindness and spontaneous generosity. Did you ever see that side of
Johnson?

Simmons: Well, I read about it. I know that he met with Martin Luther King, he met with
other African Americans and I know that he sent the troops down in Arkansas
to integrate the schools. He did some great things for African Americans, and
I was aware of that and very proud of it. Although when he got on the airplane
he didn’t act like that to me. But he did a lot of things for African Americans.

Smith: But everyone loved Mrs. Johnson.

Simmons: Oh, yes. She was a sweetheart. The family was, too. The first ladies seemed to
be a little bit more kind, a little bit more understanding than the presidents. I
guess because they had more dealings with us than the presidents because
they were always busy on the airplane. They were always writing or talking to
the staff and doing things like that. But I loved the first ladies. Mrs. Nixon
was one that I thoroughly enjoyed being around. She was a very kind lady.

Smith: The public never really knew that side of her, did they?

Simmons: Right. But I had the opportunity to travel a lot with her. As a matter of fact, I
was stationed in Germany when Nixon became president. I was asked to come
back to fly on his airplane by the presidential pilot, Colonel Ralph
Albertazzi. After coming back, of course, all of a sudden here is this little
African American guy’s going to be put on the airplane, and some of the crew
members didn’t know me, so it was a little strange with them that Colonel
Albertazzi brought me back.

Smith: What was different? You were now permanently assigned to Air Force One?

Simmons: Air Force One, right. But what was different was that we have three airplanes.
We had the two 707s and also we had the Jetstar, so a lot of the support
missions were on those two airplanes rather than primary airplane. So I flew
those backup airplanes. I flew with Mrs. Nixon – that’s where they made the mistake – they let me fly with Mrs. Nixon and the girls, so we got to be friends. And then occasionally I would get to fly on the main airplane, on Air Force One itself, instead of the backup – occasionally. Well, anyway, Mrs. Nixon saw me one day, she said, “Oh, there’s my friend, Lee.” From then on, later on, I was assigned as his personal steward on Air Force One – President Nixon. And he would tell me whenever there was a trip that Mrs. Nixon didn’t go with him, when she would represent the United States to inaugurations and to other functions for the government, he would tell me personally, he would say, “Lee, I want you to go with Mrs. Nixon. She’s going to Africa.” And I went to Africa with her.

Smith: It’s funny, we just did an interview with her social secretary, and one of the things that came through was, she had a marvelous sense of humor.

Simmons: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: That people didn’t see. And she was clearly much warmer.

Simmons: Oh, yeah. She was.

Smith: Tell us about that and was she uncomfortable doing this job? You sense, later on, she was glad to be out of the public eye.

Simmons: Yeah, well, I think the press made them nervous because the press had been pretty tough on them during the years. That’s my personal opinion. They said some things about her husband that she didn’t like. Even when we were flying on the airplane, she knew the press could be very, very tough on him. So if they would like to come up on board the airplane and interview her when we were on trips, she would make sure that everything was taken care of. Every once in a while she may have, some people didn’t notice, she may have a smoke every once in a while. She didn’t want any cigarettes or anything around when they came up there.

Smith: That’s right. People didn’t know that she smoked.

Simmons: No, no. But we had special cigarettes that we would keep on board for her – what she liked – drinks and that kind of stuff. Not a big one, but she would do
them occasionally. But she would make sure that everything was cleaned up before the press came up.

I’ll tell you a little story. I made a trip with her to Liberia – Monrovia, Liberia – President Nixon asked me to go with her on that trip. We were staying in a guest house, one on the palace there, and I went in with her – into the hotel to take of and to monitor her food requirements, because I knew what she liked and everything. So they asked me to do that. The airport was fifty or sixty miles from where the town was, so I got on the airplane with her – they had another airplane that would take us on in, or I stayed at the hotel with them. While there, they assigned me a white Mercedes, air conditioned Mercedes, where her staff was using embassy cars, which had no air conditioning in them. So, on our way home, some of the staff told Mrs. Nixon, “Lee was assigned a Mercedes with air conditioning and we had the old black staff cars from the embassy”. She said, “Boy, was he really treated nice.” And I said, “Well, what did you expect? That was my country.” This was in Africa. So that went over very well. She laughed about that and kind of patted me on the shoulder, and kind of said, “Good for you, Lee.”

And then, to follow that up, about a year or so later, Tolbert, President Tolbert who she went to his inauguration in Africa, we were on our way down to Key Biscayne and she said, “Lee, our old friend is coming to town for a state visit. I want you and your wife to come.” I thought that was the greatest thing that ever happened to me in my military career. So my wife and I went to a state dinner at the White House because Mrs. Nixon asked that Rosemary Woods send us an invitation to come and we went. So the next day after the dinner, it came out in the Washington Post society page that among the other dignitaries attending the dinner was Mr. and Mrs. Lee F. Simmons. So I got a big kick out of that. I thought that was great. But that was her kindness. That was the way she was. A lot of people didn’t see that part of her, but I did.

Smith: Was she shy?

Simmons: She was shy. Yes, indeed. I thought so. As a matter of fact, when we left and went to take them back to California for the last time when he resigned, I didn’t understand this trip because everybody was crying and carrying on. I
didn’t know how to handle this personally. I had been with them for seven and a half years, serving them, taking care of them on the airplane, and what was I going to say to them, or what were they going to say to me? I was very much concerned about that. I wanted to make sure that I had the opportunity to say something to her. But she was in her compartment just about all the time, she was with her daughter and her husband.

President Nixon was up front, and they didn’t really get together on that particular trip. She was served in her compartment and he was served in his and I was wondering what they were going to say to me, or what was I going to say to them. But, to make a long story short, when I went into there for the last time in President Nixon’s compartment – he had asked me early, before President Ford was sworn in, to bring him in a little cocktail and asked Ron Ziegler to come up, so they both had a little cocktail, and had lunch. He said, when I brought the cocktail in there, he said, “Lee, I’m going to miss you. You did a fine job and I want you to know how much I appreciate it.” And I said, “Sir, I am so sorry.” And he said, “Well, don’t worry about it, the world will continue. Everything is going to be fine. You take care of your family and you enjoy your life.” That’s what he said.

Mrs. Nixon had not said anything to me. She didn’t say anything to me until she was getting off the airplane and I was standing outside her door when she came out. She didn’t say very much. She just hugged me. And that was it. I didn’t see her again until later on at the dedication of the museum. But she was kind of shy, so she didn’t say a lot to me, but I knew she cared.

Smith: Was he shy?

Simmons: He was very much shy, yeah.

Smith: Because, he once said, very candidly, he said, “I’m an introvert in an extrovert’s profession.”

Simmons: Yeah, I agree with that. Now, I thought both of them were very loose and very accommodating around people they know. People that they had a confidence in, they’d been around them, they were very open, they were very kind, and they spoke to those people in great tones and everything. I think the press and
other people that they didn’t have much respect for, or that they thought were out to get them, so to speak – that’s my own personal opinion, I’m not saying that I heard that from anybody – I think they were shy about that.

Now President Ford, that’s a different story. He was always open, he was always kind. He enjoyed being around people. He was just a joy to be around. I think that anybody that got to meet him – because they all felt as I did – that he was just like your next door neighbor. He was a guy that you felt very comfortable around after you met him. And I’m sure a lot of other people felt the same way.

Smith: What was your first contact with him?

Simmons: My first contact with him was when he flew on Air Force One going to Miami to the convention. He was a keynote speaker at the convention in Miami?

Smith: I think he was the permanent chairman – in ’72 – the convention that re-nominated Nixon.

Simmons: I didn’t know much about him. I hadn’t heard much about – I hadn’t even seen him, as a matter of fact, I don’t think. But he was on the airplane and I’m so pleased to say that he remembered meeting me on that airplane on that trip. So that was my first encounter with him. And I didn’t see him anymore until he became president. I didn’t see him during the time he was vice president.

Smith: What did you expect? You obviously had become close to the Nixons.

Simmons: Absolutely.

Smith: And their departure represented a loss for you, as well as a historic event for the country. What did you expect the rest of your life was going to be on August 8th, 1974?

Simmons: It was August 9th, 1974.

Smith: But the resignation came on the 8th. You’re right, of course, on the 9th came the actual transfer.
Simmons: I was very sad. Very disappointed. I had heard these rumors that he might leave. But because of my relationship with him and his wife on board the airplane and I was their personal steward, I was not the chief steward on the airplane, but I was their chief steward, because wherever they went, I was there. Their requirements on the airplane, I managed all of that. So this was a great thing for me. I came from the woods, the sticks in Alabama and I end up on Air Force One, being requested by the President of the United States to be their personal steward on board the airplane. That was great.

Smith: Did you feel comfortable around them as an African American?

Simmons: Absolutely. I felt very comfortable. I felt very comfortable and very at ease. The thing is, Richard, you have to be there to serve them. You have to know what they want and be there to take care of them, just like if they were a guest in your home. So, I had that ability to do that, and my personnel that helped me to accomplish that. So I was very comfortable around them. And I think they were very comfortable around me. And if I hadn’t been, they would not have requested that I be there. Same thing with President Ford. If they didn’t enjoy my personality and had confidence in me that I could do the job, I would have never been there. I would have been gone many years ago.

Smith: Among other things, I would think a successful steward needs a little bit of a sixth sense. It’s almost a psychological intuition about particular individuals, almost knowing in advance what they might want and anticipating?

Simmons: Well, let me just say this about President and Mrs. Ford. Of course, I didn’t know them very well when he first became president. We were only there for two and a half years. So I didn’t get to know them very much in the two and half years when he was president, but they asked me to come to California with them.

Smith: How did that happen?

Simmons: I think maybe Bob Barrett had asked me if I would like to come on the transition team. And of course, he said, “I’ll get back with you – let me speak with the president about this.” I think he had a talk with President and Mrs. Ford, and mentioned asking me to come to California with them. I went down
to the White House and met them and talked to them and they said they were very pleased that I would be coming to California with them. And that’s what happened. I left – I was still assigned to Air Force One, and I came out here on January the 20th, 1977, and I was still in the Air Force for two months out here. I should have been back there flying with President Carter, but I was out here with him.

Smith: That’s interesting because you said, yourself, that you didn’t get to know them that well during the White House years, but obviously they, at least, thought they knew you well enough to make that very personal decision.

Simmons: Right, I think you’re right, there. And I would hope to credit that – because of the way that I held myself on board the airplane, and the way that I took care of them. But after we came out here and I started traveling with him on the airplane, taking care of him in hotels and being with him, we became much closer. As a matter of fact, President Ford would tell people, “This is my friend, Lee Simmons, who has been with me since the days I was in the White House.” And he would also tell them that Lee Simmons used to run Air Force One, “How many years, Lee? Twenty – twenty-five years?” I would not dispute him on that. I would just say, “Yes, sir.”

So, of course, we spent many, many hours together traveling. And in hotels across the country, and a lot of times, if he had no guests that he had to have dinner with, he would ask me to come in and have dinner with him. We would have breakfast together, we would have lunches, and whatever. He would say, “Lee, you got anything to do today or for dinner tonight?” And I would say, “No, sir.” I never had anything to do if the president wanted me to have dinner with him or lunch. I’m always available.

Smith: Does that suggest that he didn’t like to eat alone?

Simmons: Well, no. I think he didn’t mind. But he knew I was there. He and I – we left here together in the car – and so he’s just being kind. Asking me, “If you’re not doing anything, why don’t we just eat together.” Sometimes he would say, “Why don’t you find a restaurant – ask the Secret Service to find a restaurant close by someplace and let’s just go out and have dinner.” It would just be he
and I. Of course, I ate that up. I thought that was great. Here I am sitting in the corner with President Ford having dinner and I’m sure the public is looking there and seeing this African American guy over here saying, ummm, wonder who that is? Must be the ambassador from Africa or somewhere – some diplomat.

So, of course, I enjoyed that. But he was that kind. He always was very thoughtful. I’d have dinner with him, if we were at some function that he was going to make a speech, regardless of where it was at, he would always introduce me. He would tell people, “This is Lee Simmons, who has been on my staff for x number of years,” and that kind of thing.

Smith: I get the impression that he and Mrs. Ford really enjoyed New York.

Simmons: Yes, oh yes. Of course, Mrs. Ford had some experience in New York before they got married. So, yeah, they enjoyed New York. They liked to shop – Mrs. Ford did, and President Ford bought a few suits up there. They had a lot of friends there, of course – a lot of people from his Cabinet.

Smith: He never threw away a suit, though, did he?

Simmons: No, no. He kept a lot of them. Once in a while he would get rid of something. As a matter of fact, I just sent some suits out to the museum here recently. I don’t know if you are aware of that, that he had when he was still a congressman in Grand Rapids. That was made in Grand Rapids.

Smith: My impression was, on more than one occasion he would appear dressed for an event and Mrs. Ford would say, “You’re not going to wear that.”

Simmons: Yeah, she had an influence on him. He would like to go in and say, “Betty, how you like this tie? How you like this?” And she would nod – but, on the whole, though, he was a pretty good dresser. He knew how to put his things together. The only thing is, he was always presidential. He never knew how to dress down. I remember getting a call from Marty Allen and telling me, “Lee, make sure the president has some casual clothes on when he arrives, because we are going directly to a baseball game at the White Caps.” Anyway, he wanted him to have on a sports coat or no tie. So I told him that the day before
we left. I said, “Marty Allen would like for you to dress casual when you go in.” So the next morning I went over to pick him up and he had a suit on. I said, “Sir, they wanted you to wear a sports coat or some kind of casual, open collar.” He said, “Well, this is an old suit.” So that was his casual dress.

Smith: Probably made in Grand Rapids, too.

Simmons: He was that kind of guy. He was always presidential. When we flew on commercial airplanes, going to New York, arrive at the airport and go into the hotel and go to bed and the next day was going to get up and go to his function. I really wanted him to wear a coat, a sports coat and a tie because I always did – a sports coat and a tie, sweater. You always wore a sweater on the airplane to keep comfortable. But he always wore a suit and tie most of the time. Very seldom, occasionally when we were on a private airplane, he might wear something else.

Smith: I think people are surprised – and I’ll tell you very candidly because we’ll edit this out, because I was astonished, frankly, how long he flew commercial, long after he should have been flying commercial, and we pulled some strings and got that addressed. That said, how did people react on a commercial flight when Gerald Ford appeared? It must have been a shocker.

Simmons: Well, I tell you, I enjoyed that the most. I’d be sitting beside him, and then close to President Ford would tune them out when they got on board the airplane. He would be sitting there with his papers, of course, he was always busy on the airplane – reading the paper, or going over his speech, or whatever. He would just tune them out and people would get on board and then you could look at them punching one another and pointing to him. He would just continue to read his newspaper. Then occasionally they would ask Secret Service or someone if they could just shake his hand. Of course, they would always come up and ask me first. I had that privilege to say, “Sir, we have some people that would like to come up and shake up your hand. They know you from such and such a place.” He’d say, “Alright. Maybe one or two, I don’t want everybody on the airplane coming up.” Sometimes he’d say, “Well, I’m busy,” or whatever. And then he’d say, “Lee, tell that person to come on up.” He always wanted to be nice and kind to everyone.
But I enjoyed it the most, not him, that these people recognized him, and wanted to speak to him, and wanted to say hello to him. And then sometimes he didn’t want to be bothered. One thing he didn’t want them to do, he didn’t want them to be taking his picture, or disturbing other people on the airplane. He was concerned about the other people. Not so much that he didn’t want this to happen, but he didn’t want to disturb people on the airplane. He just wanted to read his newspaper and get to where he was going.

Smith: And one of the banes of the existence of former presidents is autograph seekers. I suspect they could spend a day a week doing nothing but signing their name.

Simmons: You know, I think that was one thing that bothered him the most. When he was in the public, that people would come up and ask for his autograph. He knew that if he’d give one person an autograph, then everybody and their brother would come up and ask for an autograph. And he would tell me when we were traveling, he would say, “Now, we will keep these autographs down to a minimum, if we can. We will try to.” But he would never hurt anybody’s feelings. He might try to stay away from it by being busy, but if it came down to whether or not he would disappoint a person, he would sign that autograph. But if he could stay out of it and not be involved in it, he would certainly do that.

Smith: Isn’t part of that because he knew there were also dealers? That this wasn’t just spontaneous – that in fact, there were people out there who were making money off of dealing his signature.

Simmons: Absolutely. And of course, that was one of my jobs. I handled autographs in books and things here in the office, and I had met autograph collectors and they told me how some people would get autographs out of them and take them and use them for something else – like, for instance, the signing of the pardon. He only did that once. But there are a lot of pardons out there for sale. People made a lot of money off of it. He knew about that because people told him about it. A lot of letters that he personally wrote to people ended up being sold. He was aware of them and that really upset him. He didn’t like that. So he had a thing about giving out autographs. It was okay if it was kids or
someone that he thought was really deserving of one. But some of these people, collectors were one, and he could spot them because they were there with a handful of stuff, wanting you to autograph them. He was aware of that.

Smith: Baseballs?

Simmons: Baseballs, books, oh, absolutely. Oh, he was aware of that. That kind of drove him up a wall sometimes.

Smith: I saw President Reagan, it was fascinating to watch what he did. It was sort of counterintuitive. But one way he had of getting around this was, he would insist on personalizing the autograph, which actually diminishes the value if you’re selling.

Simmons: That was one way that he got out of it, too. But, Richard, he enjoyed doing things for people. He would do it, but he was aware that a lot of people were making money off of these autographs and that is not what he had intended for this to happen. He was a little cautious about that.

Smith: We were talking about the weather. That must have been one of the things that attracted the Fords to come out here.

Simmons: Yes, you’re right on that, Richard. I was told that one reason that they liked this place here is because of the dryness, because Mrs. Ford had some problem with her arthritis or whatever. That’s just what I was told. They considered Carmel. They had friends living up there – the Firestones had a home up there and they had a home down here. But I think they decided on this place because of the dry heat here, the weather, and of course, the nice golf course out here. President Ford liked to play a little bit of golf, so it was a good thing that he did because I, myself, enjoy playing a little golf.

Smith: Let me ask you, because, obviously she’s written about it at great length – has been very candid about it. What was your perception of her health when they moved out here? It has been written about - that by then her kids were grown up – it’s not an unusual situation, particularly for political wives, and he was as busy as ever. He was on the road a lot. He never really retired. Which left her, and that’s a difficult situation. What was your sense of that period?
Simmons: You mentioned her health. I never knew she had a health problem when I was around her. I knew they had sociable drinks occasionally – I never knew that was a problem until they addressed it. I did know a couple of times when we were scheduled to leave, go on a trip maybe, she had a little bit of a problem being on time, but I never attributed that to any drinking or anything. As a matter of fact, I’ll tell you this: when finally she did go to the Center – the Navy place.

Smith: In Long Beach.

Simmons: Long Beach – for this problem. She was there for a while. I went with her. I went down there and President Ford also went, so we all went down and she was there for whatever length of time she was. And then after it was all over, she was so candid about talking about it. She’d be talking to me about it and she said that was the greatest thing that ever happened to her. She said she never thought she had a problem until the kids and her husband got together and had this intervention. And I told her, and this is a true story and my own personal opinion about her, I said, “Ma’am, I never thought you had a drinking problem.” I said, “If you had a drinking problem, then I’ve a whole lot of friends that need to go to the Betty Ford Center right now.”

I think President Ford, when he traveled was concerned about her health, concerned about that problem. That’s the reason why, whenever we had the opportunity to come back here, maybe with one day, one night, he would come back home. He would be here with Mrs. Ford, and we would have to turn right around and fly back to Grand Rapids. Say we were in New York and the next day, he had an event in Grand Rapids or wherever back east, he would come home and be home with Mrs. Ford, and then he would take off and go back.

They were very close and a loveable family. He never went to bed at night when we were traveling without calling and talking to Mrs. Ford. The only time that ever happened was if we could not catch up with her. But usually we’d know where she was at. We could, of course, find out where she was because she had Secret Service agents. Maybe she would not have been able to speak to him at that time. If she wasn’t available he would say, “Lee, wake
me up at such and such a time, because I want to call Mrs. Ford.” He would always call her, and in the conversation would say, how you been and whatever, and the last words he would say, “I love you, I can’t wait to get home.” Those kind of things. So they were very close. I think it had to do with probably he figured she needed him there, and he was gone for so much. He probably felt a little guilty about that and that’s the reason why he would fly home and turn around the next day and fly back east. But if he had the opportunity to spend it home with Mrs. Ford, he would certainly do that.

Smith: It’s interesting that you say that, because I wonder – the earlier years, when he was coming up the ladder and just becoming a national figure in Congress, Republican leader and that sort of thing – and he was on the road so much of the time. He was pretty candid about saying, in fact, he really left the raising of the kids to Mrs. Ford. And I wonder if he felt, not guilt necessarily, but obviously he was aware of that…one sensed that he spent more time and more quality time, with the kids than perhaps he had when they were growing up.

Simmons: Oh, yeah. I think that’s quite true. As a matter of fact, I think that was one reason why he didn’t want to be president or run for office, because he had planned to retire, as you probably know, rather than run for any other political office. He had planned to retire so he could spend his time with his wife and family. I remember Mrs. Ford telling me that there was a lot of times on weekends when he was a Congressman, in order to spend some time with him, she had to go down to the office and spend time with him because he was gone so much. I’m sure she was aware of that, and I’m sure he felt that it was his responsibility to spend as much time as he could with her.

We could be in Australia or in China, or wherever, if Mrs. Ford was not with us, he would always make that phone call, and be able to say, “Betty, how are you doing? I love you and I miss you and I can’t wait to get back home to you.” Those are some of the things I heard. Maybe I’m not supposed to say those things, but…

Smith: That’s exactly what we’re looking for. And with the kids, I knew by that time they all had lives of their own, but I’d heard in particular that he spent a lot of time with Steve. That they would play golf together.
Simmons: Yes.

Smith: Particularly in the later years. I’m sure that was true with each of the kids, but I’d heard that in particular.

Simmons: Well, I think Steve was available. He was single. He would be around the president more than the other kids. I don’t think there was any choice there that he was making because he cared for one more for the other. I don’t believe so, personally. But he did spend a lot of time with Steve. He played a lot of golf with Steve, where he didn’t have the opportunity to do that with Jack and Mike, because they were not around as much. Of course, Susan was the love of his life.

Smith: Tell me about that relationship.

Simmons: Susan was more like her mom, I think. I think they had a very close relationship. She loved her daddy, I could see that. I remember Susan when she was like sixteen years old in the airplane, throwing spitballs at Secret Service agents. But she was there with her dad, and she was Susan.

Smith: Plus, they’d all been through that ordeal of Mrs. Ford’s cancer surgery – in the White House. Do you remember anything from that period – when Mrs. Ford had her cancer surgery and the family had to decide, do we make this public?

Simmons: The only thing I know about it is what I read in the paper, because I was on the airplane, of course. I was not in the White House with them when this all went down. So the only knowledge I had about that is what I heard later in life. I’ve heard them make comments about that. But, no, I was not too privileged of that going on in the White House.

Smith: But it’s funny how quickly kids grow up, because it was right at that time that Susan, who before they moved into the White House had said, “I’m not going if I have to give up my blue jeans,” put on an evening dress and gloves, white gloves and stood in for her mother. Overnight – the transformation.

Simmons: Susan traveled with us a lot when he was President, on a lot of trips overseas. And she was a kid.
Smith: She met Chairman Mao.

Simmons: Yes. She sure did. It was interesting to see her – her father being president and she’s on the airplane traveling around with him. It was great to see that. I’ve known her ever since she was sixteen years old.

Smith: And as grandparents, how did they deal with that?

Simmons: Well, they talked about that a lot because, I have grandkids, and we often talked about their grandkids. They loved their grandkids. They enjoyed having them around. I think that was some of the greatest times they had, when they’d come visit – and still do at this time with Mrs. Ford. When her grandkids and her great-grandkids now come around – that’s all new. When I met them, there was only one of them who was married, and had no kids at that time – Mike. So the kids have been a very great, and I believe, one of the great things for them - they thoroughly enjoyed mostly - is having their kids around them when they could.

Of course, with them living here and the kids living elsewhere, it was kind of difficult, but that’s why they enjoyed going to Beaver Creek. Because they always made it a point to get together in Beaver Creek, to be together either at Christmas time, or during the summer time. They made time for those kids there. They didn’t spend too much time here with them, but in Beaver Creek, at Christmastime, and then during the summer months when they were up there for summer, all the kids were there as much as possible.

Smith: When he was here in the office, take us through a typical day.

Simmons: On a typical day, President Ford would come over to the office about nine, nine-thirty, ten o’clock. He would come in the office and go over his mail, whatever we put on his desk - he would go through that. Maybe he would have Penny come in. He would deal with her with certain things that had to be done – whatever her responsibility was to him. The appointment secretary, schedule person would come in and go over whatever the schedule is and whatever he is dealing with to make the arrangements when he arrived to a particular function that he had to go to. And then Shelley, who was his
personal secretary, to deal with personal stuff. She would come in and deal with him.

And then if he needed me for whatever – if he wanted me to run errands, or to deal with things that are going on at the museum, if I had to send stuff out there, or find out about the book count, or whatever – he would occasionally have me. I was in and out of here more than most of them because I had a lot of other little things to do, because we were traveling together all of the time.

He would be here until about one o’clock, and then he would go over and have lunch, and then about two o’clock he would come back over and stay here until we leave. As a matter of fact, sometimes he would be in the office here, still going over his papers, or reading his papers, and having a little smoke when he smoked. And then on Saturdays – he worked on Saturdays, boy – we had to have the office open on Saturdays, as well. Although no banks were open, but the mail probably was not going to go out because nobody was here but him. But one of us, or somebody had to come in and go over the mail and make sure he got his newspapers and his magazines. Maybe we didn’t have to spend all day here, but we would come in because he was always here. I understand, on Sundays, he would come back over and spend some time here between breakfast and lunch.

A typical day with him is, he’d spend at least six or seven hours here in the office and then he would go back home.

Smith: And he did that as long as he was physically able.

Simmons: Right. He certainly did. Holidays, he said to me once – I said, “You know, sir, tomorrow is a holiday.” He’d say, “Well, I didn’t vote for it.” So he wanted us here on holidays, too, as well. But we understood him. We were government workers, and government supposedly has the holidays off, but we were working not for the government, we were working for President Ford.

Smith: The taxpayer got their money’s worth in this office.

Simmons: That’s right! What a great guy – what a wonderful person to work for. I will always be grateful for that opportunity.
Smith: My sense is that, up until his ninetieth birthday, he was still traveling extensively. And that whenever – I don’t know if there was a time when the doctor said, you really have got to stop traveling – or whether it was less dramatic than that – that that really marked the turning point. He loved travel, didn’t he?

Simmons: He loved traveling. He enjoyed it. I don’t know when it tapered off. The last couple years of his life, there were only one or two trips. One of them was when his granddaughter got married down in Texas. We went to that. Other than that, he didn’t do much traveling any more after that. But, boy, we were gone a lot when he was able to travel.

Smith: Do you remember the ninetieth birthday party at the White House?

Simmons: Oh, yes.

Smith: Tell us about that.

Simmons: I wasn’t on that trip, as a matter of fact, because I was here and they left Beaver Creek and went to – so I’m not privileged on what happened on his ninetieth birthday party – although I was with him in most things we went to the White House. But that one escaped me.

Smith: Tell us about a typical day in Beaver Creek and how that would be different, or if it was different from a typical day here.

Simmons: It was the same routine as if he was here. The same thing. He had his schedule. His schedule was laid out from the time he got up in the morning until he went to bed at night, and the various little trips when he was in Beaver Creek to go to when there was no out of town trip. If he had to leave to go to New York to board meetings, or wherever, of course, those were still maintained as it was if he were here.

Smith: And where would you fly into? Where was the nearest airport for Beaver Creek?

Simmons: Beaver Creek? At Avon. They had an airport at Avon. Avon was closer. Then we had another airport. That’s something that’s escaping me at the moment, I
can’t think of the name of it. But sometimes if the weather was inclement, we would have to drive two and a half hours down to Denver to go out of Denver. But there was another airport there.

Smith: And I suspect he probably didn’t enjoy that.

Simmons: Well, President Ford entertained himself because he would have all those stacks of newspapers that he had to get rid of. So he’d sit in the back of the limo and read his newspapers. So it didn’t bother him.

Smith: He really was a newspaper junkie, wasn’t he?

Simmons: He was. He read about six newspapers, and then the thing about him: you saying a junkie, if we were in New York, and he had the *New York Times*, those papers would be here when he got back, he would keep a record of it. If we were in Washington, D.C., he would keep a record of the newspapers that he had read and he would give me that slip and tell me, when we would get back, I’d know what to do – go get those newspapers and throw them out so he wouldn’t have to deal with them. But he would read every newspaper, the *Grand Rapids Press*, of course we got the *Wall Street Journal* everywhere we went, he read all the newspapers.

Smith: And what about exercise? There is this pool out back here, he made use of that, didn’t he?

Simmons: Yeah, but the pool over at the house, not the one here at the office, but the one over at the house. He had a lap pool over there and he used to swim sometimes in the morning and sometimes in the evening when his health allowed him to do that. He had a couple of little exercise things in his dressing room that he would exercise. He stayed fit, and he watched his diet all the time.

Smith: He was very disciplined, wasn’t he?

Simmons: He certainly was. He loved butter-pecan ice cream and, as you probably know, and he loved chocolate ice cream. But he always watched his weight. As a matter of fact, I think he told me that his weight never varied too much
from his playing weight when he was in college – 198 pounds or something like that. He loved to brag about that – that he was still in shape.

Smith: You saw him around President Carter. They clearly developed a very good friendship. Can you describe that relationship?

Simmons: Oh yeah, I can. I think, personally – now this is my own personal opinion – at first, maybe there was some distance there between the two of them. I always felt President Carter was very friendly and very nice. I was wondering about President Ford. This is my own opinion now, I was wondering if he didn’t still, maybe have some kind of resentment because of the defeat and because of some of the things that were said. But they did, eventually, become close friends, and they did travel together occasionally and on the same airplane together. They had lunch together. They had dinner together. Of course, I was there. As a matter of fact, I made arrangements for both of them.

Smith: Were you there on the trip to the Sadat funeral?

Simmons: I didn’t go on that trip.

Smith: Supposedly that’s where they broke the ice.

Simmons: As a matter of fact, President Carter told me about a month ago, that’s when they became good friends. I had the opportunity to speak to President Carter’s Political Item Collectors. There is a group of people from twenty-one years that have called themselves President Carter’s Political Items Collectors, and they asked me to speak to that group about a month ago down in Plains, Georgia. And I had the opportunity to meet with President and Mrs. Carter while down there. As a matter of fact, they came to the event and sat at the head table with me and my wife, which was a great opportunity for me to get to see them again and say hello to them again. And he told me at that time, as a matter of fact, I had said in my speech that they became good friends and we traveled a lot together in my introduction to my speech.

I mentioned some of the places that we had gone – Tip O’Neill’s funeral, down to the Panama Canal Zone, and various other trips, to the Carter Center and also out at the Museum and Library. They were there on several
occasions. I just mentioned that and I said they became good friends. I said, as a matter of fact, I didn’t know – I wasn’t sure President Carter knew who I was. I’d been traveling around with him, so I went up to him one day, although I had met him and shook hands with him, but I wasn’t sure if he knew who I was. I was thinking maybe he thought I was a Secret Service agent. I wanted to make sure he knew I was President Ford’s assistant, so I went up and shook hands and said, “How you doing, President Carter? It’s good to see you again. I’m Lee Simmons, President Ford’s assistant.” And he said to me, “Lee, I know who you are.” And I said, from that day on he became my buddy, too.

He got up after I finished speaking and made comments, and he said that he and President Ford became very good friends at Anwar Sadat’s funeral trip – that’s when we really got to become good friends.

Smith: You stop to think about it, as unlikely as it seems in the abstract, they had a lot of shared values. They had a lot of what you would call traditional values, strong religious convictions, family men – they had a lot that would bond them once you get past that very large fact that they’d run against each other for president. And it tells you a lot about both of them that they were able to get past that.

Simmons: Absolutely. I think that is quite true. They both were family men, they loved their family and their kids. They were ordinary people. They came from ordinary backgrounds. As you know, President Carter was a peanut farmer, President Ford’s family was not well off. He worked for whatever he got. So, yeah, they were almost like your next door neighbor, so to speak.

Smith: Plus, they both ran against Ronald Reagan.

Simmons: Yes. That’s true, too.

Smith: That was something else that bonded them.

Simmons: That’s true. So, I think they became good friends and I think they had a lot in common, as well.

Smith: There clearly was a close relationship with the Bush family.
Simmons: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: That went back really to President Bush ‘41’s dad – who I guess had been in Congress when Gerald Ford was there.

Simmons: Yes, absolutely. And they played golf together at various places around. We played golf with him in Texas at a tournament there. They played here at the Annenberg estate – they played golf there together.

Smith: Tell me about that relationship with the Annenbergs, because that was a very close friendship, wasn’t it?

Simmons: It was. Maybe some other staff people might have more insight on that because when they visited the Annenberg estate, or the Annenberg’s came here, I was not too much involved in that. I didn’t have to be with him on those kind of occasions, so I didn’t get to know a lot about what was going on. I just know that they had a good, close relationship with the Annenberg’s. We made two or three trips with the Annenberg’s. President Ford went to the Annenberg School back in Pennsylvania. I was on that trip with him. And so I was around them, but not as much as when they were here.

Smith: And I remember, because I worked on the eulogy, one of President Ford’s last trips was to speak at Ambassador Annenberg’s memorial service. It must have been one of his last trips.

Simmons: Probably was. Close to it, I’m not sure, but I think it was. They were good friends and they liked one another very much. They often had lunch or dinner there when they had other dignitaries in, even when Ronald Reagan used to come out when he was president. He used to come here for a New Year’s dinner and the Fords were always invited and they were always there. So they were very close.

Smith: How did you sense, just from your observation, the relationship with the Reagans?

Simmons: The Reagans? I think they were friendly, but I don’t think they were as close as they were with other friends of theirs. They did not get together that much. Occasionally, for various functions when they were there, they were very
cordial towards one another and everything. I think the relationship was fine – was okay, but I, personally, would not say that it was on the top of their list for social functions.

Smith: Let me ask you something, and this may be totally speculative and you don’t have to answer this, but clearly an attempt was made when President Ford died - there were the stories that Bob Woodward and others who wrote, quoting or taking out of context, depending on however you see it - some of the things that he’d said, for example, about the Iraq war. Questions about some of his people who had been involved in the current administration. Did you have a sense of how he felt about all that? Particularly the current war and the role that some of his cabinet officers played in the current administration.

Simmons: I think he was very much aware of what was going on, and I think he was very proud of the former cabinet members who were on his cabinet were there. He supported them wholeheartedly. He always defended them. He thought they were good people and he thought they were doing a great job. He always supported them and I don’t think he was disappointed in what was going on. He thought they were making a great contribution. I heard him say that. Dick Cheney and all the other people who were on there. He thought they were doing a great job. He had utmost respect for all of those people and their capability in handling the situation. So he was very, very pleased about that situation.

Smith: Did he have much contact with Richard Nixon after leaving the White House?

Simmons: No, not a lot. We only saw Richard Nixon when we went to a couple functions that he was there. One of them was in Washington, D.C. and I don’t remember what the function was. And it was the first time that I had seen President Nixon after I had been working with him, and I was so pleased to be there – to be able to go up and say hello to him. I’ll never forget, President Nixon looked at me and said, “Where’d you get that thing from?” – talking about my mustache. When I worked with him I didn’t have a mustache on. I was very happy about that – that he recognized me and knew who I was.
They did call one another occasionally – birthdays and that kind of stuff. Occasionally, they did talk. I know they did have a personal relationship, but it wasn’t as outgoing as it probably could have been, if it hadn’t been for political reasons.

Smith: When Nixon died – what were your feelings? I think a lot of people were surprised that the country reacted the way that it did – that there was really such an outpouring of genuine emotional response.

Simmons: Yes, I was pleased to see that and I think President Ford was, too. He was happy to be able to go to the funeral and pay his respects. I know I was. I thought that it was overdue. I believed the man was trying to, when he did what he did, he did it because he thought that was the right thing to do for his staff. He may have made a mistake, and I think he eventually admitted that. And I know President Ford probably thought the same thing – that he’d made a mistake when he didn’t…whoever was responsible, he should have just went ahead and got rid of him and then he probably would have been fine.

Then again, if that would have happened, he probably would have never become president. And I would probably have never ended up out here in this good weather. I’m very happy to see the outpouring of love and affection for President Nixon as well as I was for President Ford when he died. I thought it was well overdue. I think when he died, and we went back to Washington and to Grand Rapids, all the people that showed up and showed their affection, “My Jerry,” and all of that. That was heartwarming, and I was so pleased to be a part of that.

Smith: It’s interesting because I was wearing two hats that week. The first half of the week I was with ABC and then, of course, was with the family the second half. I can tell you, from my observation inside the media cocoon, the media was surprised at the amount of public response. And one of the things in particular, in D.C., the number of young people who you would see in the crowds, and in many cases, African-Americans. A lot of people were being introduced to him for the first time. They weren’t even alive when he was in the White House, but they were seeing this man, these old clips, and they
were comparing him, contrasting him, with what had happened to politics, and they liked what they saw. I think that was part of the response, don’t you?

Simmons: Yeah, I do, too. And what I noticed a whole lot, and I’m sure it was due to the fact that he was a Boy Scout himself, as we traveled, all the Boy Scouts were there, all over the place. Everywhere you went, signs ups, troops, and that was gratifying to see because even after he left the White House and came out here, we got tons of letters – Boy Scouts that had become Eagle Scouts and President Ford was one – and he wrote letters to all these people and they were there. I bet you maybe a hundred thousand of them were Boy Scouts who had received a letter from President Ford from this office right here, congratulating them.

Smith: And another constituency he had, which very poignantly appeared out of nowhere at that point, were Vietnamese Americans. Vietnamese who had been rescued and their children. Operation Baby Lift, that was an extraordinary and very little known part of his story.

Simmons: Yes, that is true, Richard, but I think President Ford was aware of it. It was very gratifying to see this outpouring of love from even those people, too.

Smith: The last years – tough?

Simmons: Tough for all of us. Very tough, because we knew how active he had always been. It was tough for me to see him when he needed help to do anything, because he was such a private and such a gentleman that he wanted to be able to function on his own. Although I had been with him all these many years, it became a time when he couldn’t tie his necktie, when I would have to come over. He would say, “Lee, I hate to ask you to do this,” and I’d say, “Sir, don’t worry about it, anytime you need me, I’m here.” So I would go home – I wasn’t working full time, I was just part time, but whenever he needed me, I would be there. And grateful, very happy to do that. I’d go tie his necktie, or help him to get dressed. I was very pleased to do that because I think he was the nicest, kindest person that you’d ever want to meet.

Smith: It was just basically a heart problem, wasn’t it? A weakening heart contributed to a general…
Simmons: What I read in the paper, yes, I think that had something to do with it. He became weak where he couldn’t get around as much as he’d like. That was very sad for me to see, because I knew that he was always a man that wanted to go out and exercise, he wanted to go for a walk, and all of a sudden he couldn’t do those things. I know that he was miserable. I know if he had anything to do with it, it would not be that way. But, unfortunately, that’s the way life is. It’s going to happen to all of us one of these days.

Smith: Do you remember 9/11?

Simmons: Absolutely. Yes.

Smith: What was that like around here?

Simmons: We were in New York when that happened. President Ford and I were at the Waldorf. No, no, no. I’m sorry – back up. We were here. That was something else that happened in New York. I remember being in the Waldorf – I think it’s when the spaceship was blown up – that’s where we were. I’m sorry, we were here. I correct that.

Well, I remember coming in and talking to him about it and he asked me, “Did you see that?” We talked about it a little bit. I think he was very sad about it and he watched the news in here, in this office, and heard about it when it was going on. There were some phone calls made to him. He was involved in it.

Smith: I remember he did a – because we had an event in Grand Rapids and he did a phone call and spoke and compared it to Pearl Harbor. For his generation, it must have brought back painful, but ultimately triumphant memories. Pearl Harbor ushered in a war that nobody wanted, but in the end couldn’t be avoided.

Simmons: I agree with you there. That was a hard time for all of us – not only for President and Mrs. Ford, but for staff as well. We got a lot of calls, people were calling, trying to get in touch with him during that period of time.

Smith: He was very proud of his Navy service, wasn’t he?
Simmons: Oh yeah. Yes, proud of his military service. We often talked about the Navy and the Air Force. I was in the Air Force – that’s how we became good friends as well. Talk about my military career, he was proud of my military career. We would talk about that – about the boats and the ships and that kind of stuff. He was proud of it.

Smith: Another controversy that I know, because I was involved with him, of course, was the whole Clinton impeachment business. And I’m sure he got a lot of calls and a lot of angry messages when he wrote the OpEd piece in the Times that proposed, in effect, a formal rebuke in a joint session of Congress, nationally televised, which, when you stop to think now, I bet you both sides wished they’d had the smarts to take. Because it would have been a dignified end to this mess and the country could have gotten on with its business.

How did he feel about it? You must have seen him together with President Clinton.

Simmons: Oh, yeah, I had. On several occasions I was with him at the White House and other events. I think maybe one of the other staff persons could probably answer how his true feeling was better than I can at that time. I know that he was concerned about this and he made his comments, which I was not as privileged to them as some of the other staff people would probably be.

Smith: But in doing so, he was also willing, frankly, to take on the right wing of his own party. At that point everything had become so polarized, and he was the one person who was out there trying to sort of point out there was a moderate, dignified way to bring this to a conclusion. Not only that, but remember, he and Mrs. Ford were outspokenly pro-choice when it came to abortion. They were supportive of gay rights at a time when you didn’t hear a lot of that from conservative Republicans. Did they feel at all isolated within their own party – the party that he’d spent his whole lifetime in?

Simmons: I don’t think so. I think they spoke their mind, whatever they thought about it, they spoke up. He wrote about it, he talked about it. So, I don’t think they felt isolated. I think they did what they thought was right and they spoke their mind when it was necessary. Absolutely, I do believe that.
Smith: What was Christmas like? They would go up to Vail every year?

Simmons: Yes. They always went to Vail until the last two years of his life. They didn’t go the last couple of years. They always went to Vail. As I said earlier, that was a time that they got together for family. The whole family was able to get together and they skied together, when they were able to ski together. And now the grandkids were skiing. He made sure that they got lessons, because that was one of his passions. I understand Mrs. Ford used to ski, too. But in the later years neither one of them skied when we used to go up there. For the last thirty years they very seldom skied. But that was a great time for them. They used to have all those ski tournaments and he always participated in that because that was one of their passions. They thoroughly enjoyed that. That was a great time for them to get together as family members and enjoy one another. Because with his traveling and her doing her thing, they didn’t get together too much down here, but up there, they did have the opportunity.

Smith: He was very proud of her work with the Betty Ford Center, wasn’t he?

Simmons: Absolutely, very proud of her.

Smith: And he was involved with that, wasn’t he?

Simmons: That’s right. As a matter of fact, he would always come back and say, “Betty, all your fans were looking for you. They wanted to know why you weren’t there. They were more concerned about you than they were about me.” He loved to come back and tell her that. And I think that’s true. I think she was very popular as his wife, and she had her fans out there as well. People respected her for what she contributed, and even to this day.

Smith: I’ve heard stories – I guess every year they would have a sort of an alumni reunion and it would not be surprising to find the president cooking hot dogs and serving hot dogs. That sort of thing. That kind of hands-on involvement.

Simmons: Absolutely. I went through the program. As a matter of fact, a lot of our staff people went through the Betty Ford program – they had support for family members and that kind of stuff, not for who had a problem – drug or alcohol problem. But family support groups. They had a lot of those classes over there
and I went to two of them. I got a chance to go to those and those alumni association lunches and dinners and enjoyed the heck out of it. They did, too. They enjoyed being there. People enjoyed having them there. That’s my joy, seeing them being worshipped by these people, showing their appreciation for the things that they have done for this country.

Smith: That’s interesting because here and in Vail, one sensed that they were really first-citizens.

Simmons: I think that people realized that the Fords made a difference in Vail, and they made a difference here. Of course, President Ford was very active in support of the local communities here - Boys & Girls Club – because I was on the board, and still am on the board of Boys & Girls Club. He always supported the Boys & Girls Club, not only with funds, but also with items – auction items and card drawings and that kind of thing – he always participated in that. I’m happy to say that Mrs. Ford told me, “Oh, yeah, I know how you come in and bang on his door to help support the Boys & Girls Club. We will continue that trend. We will continue to support those groups.” And so she is still doing that to this day, the Boys & Girls Club.

I’m also in the Optimist Club in Palm Desert, and we support the high school students and some of the junior colleges around here with essays and oratoricals, and he was always willing to support those groups whenever I came in and talked to him. Sometimes he would even go out and meet some of these people for me. He was just a nice guy and a caring person for his community. And I guess he always has been. He told me he was on the Optimist Club back in Grand Rapids. I didn’t know that until I joined and he told me, “I was an Optimist.” So he was an all around general nice man. Beautiful person.

Smith: Let me ask you something, because I sort of hinted at it earlier. But in terms of, for lack of a better word, racial politics, you felt totally comfortable around the Fords as an African American.

Simmons: Oh, I never – unless I looked down and saw my skin, I wouldn’t have known I was black. I felt very comfortable and I know President Ford was very
comfortable around African Americans. Of course, you all know about his association and his affection for one of his football players.

Smith: Willis Ward.

Simmons: Willis Ward. He told me about him, many times. I got a sense that he had passion for African American people. I don’t know any other people that he was close with.

Smith: Pearl Bailey was a real friend.

Simmons: Pearl Bailey was, yeah. As a matter of fact, when we moved here the first time, Pearl Bailey came from Arizona and brought loads of food over here for the Fords and maintained her relationship with them until she died.

Yeah, he would always say nice things about some of the people that he knew who were African Americans. As a matter of fact, I’ll never forget the gentleman that became – the first African American to become the president and CEO of American Express – Chenault, I don’t know if you know him. I remember we were at a board meeting there. Henry Kissinger was there. And I saw this gentleman there, it was kind of strange for me to see an African American on the board there, and I was kind of surprised when I saw him. I asked President Ford who he was. Let me tell you, he went to great length to tell me about this gentleman, who he was, and what he thought of him. And let me tell you what he said. He said, “One day I think he will probably be the CEO of American Express.” Sure enough, it happened. So, I think President Ford was a very caring person when it came to racial relations. I think he contributed as much as any other president would have.

Smith: A couple of things and I’ll let you go. One is, he took some grief, particularly early on for “commercializing” the ex-presidency. And I’m not pointing fingers, or anything else, but he did, he took some grief.

Simmons: Absolutely.

Smith: How did he handle that? I don’t mean to answer my own question, but of course, what didn’t get the publicity, were all of the charity events and all the campus visits and everything else that he did. That said, how did handle that?
Simmons: I think he handled it very well. He knew what he was doing. He knew it was an honest job. Nobody was giving him anything. He was making a contribution to those companies that he spoke to, and those groups that he was on the boards with.

Smith: He took those board directorships very seriously.

Simmons: Very serious. And he went to every one of them. There was very few times where he didn’t make the board meeting when he was supposed to be there. He went, he contributed. I was there, I saw this. I think he was very comfortable with that. He knew that he was contributing to other areas, not only to the boards. As I mentioned, here in Coachella Valley, he was very visible, he did a lot of things for the library here, and also the post office was recently named after him. He was very comfortable. He knew he was making his contribution to mankind. There were a lot of people criticize him for doing a lot of things, but he didn’t feel he was doing anything wrong.

Smith: And the other thing – one of the things that I think brought Ford and Carter together was, neither one was prepared for that fact that as an ex-president they had to raise millions of dollars to build their presidential library. And I know President Ford was quoted as saying, “It’s the toughest thing I ever did.” And in those days it was like nine million dollars – you can imagine today. But a lot of those speaking fees went directly to the Foundation.

Simmons: Yeah. Oh, absolutely. He’d donate a lot of that. And he had a problem with – he knew that he had friends that made contributions to his Foundation, and a lot of people were after him to ask him to make contributions to theirs, and he didn’t feel like it was right for him to solicit them for his endeavor and then to ask them to go and go do things for other people. He felt a little uncomfortable in doing that. Of course, he did do that in some occasions, but I think that he had a problem with soliciting funds for other endeavors, for other people because he was very appreciative for what they had done for him and Mrs. Ford and the Betty Ford Center and the Foundation. And he just didn’t want to overdo it because he is a compassionate person, that’s why I think he had a problem with that.
Smith: Do you remember his last days? Were you around during his last days?

Simmons: I was there the day that he died, yes. Saw him, came in and looked at him. Of course, I was always around him.

Smith: Did he just fade away?

Simmons: Yes. He just went to sleep, peaceful.

Smith: Now, some of the family had been here for Christmas.

Simmons: Yes. Jack and his family were here. Steve was here. A couple of granddaughters were here that live out here – Mike’s two daughters that live here in California. They were here. Those are the ones that were here for Thanksgiving.

Smith: Was he aware that they were around?

Simmons: I think so, yeah. He was alert. I think so, yeah.

Smith: Because you’d heard, it’s speculated that, at some level, he knew it was Christmas and he didn’t want to die on Christmas. He wanted to postpone it.

Simmons: Oh, Christmas Day, I’m not so sure he was that alert, but I don’t know for sure. But, I don’t think he was too alert at that time.

Smith: Do you remember your last conversation with him?

Simmons: Yes, of course. I went in there and asked him, “How you doing, sir?” He looked up at me and said, “Very good,” in a very weak voice, “Doing pretty good.” I said, “Good,” and I told him about there was something that was in the newspaper concerning Michigan and I mentioned something to him about that. He just kind of nodded, not too much conversation about it. But those are the last things that I said to him.

Smith: How rough has it been for her?

Simmons: On my personal opinion, looking at her I think it has been very, very difficult for her. And the reason I say that is because, of course though, she is ninety years old, she doesn’t seem to be getting out as much as I think that she
probably could if she wanted to. She doesn’t see a lot of people. Very seldom
does she see anyone at this time. But I’m happy to say that I can go over there
and sit down and talk to her anytime. She will always say, “Hi, Lee,” and ask
me about my family and how you doing, or what’s going on for Christmas or
Thanksgiving – that kind of stuff. But I don’t think she really enjoys being
there by herself anymore.

Smith: I think a lot of people didn’t realize, they’d been married fifty-eight years, and
it was a great love match.

Simmons: It was, I think.

Smith: And, you don’t get over that.

Simmons: It doesn’t end. I have great respect for her to endure this. She held up so
wonderfully during the funeral. I thought she did a marvelous job of getting
through that.

Smith: It was extraordinary.

Simmons: Because she was sick herself.

Smith: We were told, and I assume the other networks, starting at St. Margaret’s, we
had been told, don’t be surprised if you see Mrs. Ford in a wheelchair. Well,
of course, we never saw her…

Simmons: She was determined not to do that. A lot of people wanted her to be in a
wheelchair because they thought she was just that sick. But she was such a
trooper, she decided she was going to walk to her husband’s funeral, and she
did so. And I’m so proud of that.

Smith: Someone said, afterwards, that they had remarked to her along those lines,
and her response was, “Well, that’s what my husband would have wanted.”

Simmons: Absolutely. They both would have been strong for one another. They would
have went the last mile for one another because they cared so much for one
another. I know that why she stuck it out. I know that she probably didn’t
want to be there, she would have rather been home in bed in her housecoat,
but this was a duty that’s she had to perform and, thank God, she was able to
do it. And I think she needs to be commended about that above anything –
that she did that for her husband, who had this great love affair.

Smith: She must be pleased to know – how many people found an institution and
know in their own lifetime that it’s been handed on to someone that they
really, obviously can trust. In her case, to Susan, with the Betty Ford Center.
That must be a source of some satisfaction, to know that it will not only
“endure after I’m gone,” but it will be in the hands of someone who will
cherish it as much she has.

Simmons: Oh, yeah. She’s very pleased about that, I think. This is my own opinion, I
never talked to her about that, but I can tell that she is very pleased that Susan
is doing an excellent job. And it’s been in the paper. A lot of stories about
what a great job she is doing. And I know she has got to be very, very proud.
We have not talked about this personally, but I think she is very pleased.

Smith: One last thing. When you look back at the funeral, in all the places that it took
place, the crowds and everything else – is there something that you can distill
out of that. Is there one scene, one incident, one story, or something that you
really take with you? Something that almost sums it all up?

Simmons: Well, I hate to say - that’s because I had the opportunity to be there with
them, that I was treated like part of the family, that was a great thing that I
will always remember. That I had the opportunity to fly with President Ford,
with his body on Air Force One, an airplane that I flew when he was
president, back to Washington, D.C., and all the way over to Grand Rapids.
That was a great pride of mine and to have my wife with me, as well. Now as
far as President Ford goes, I thought he was well deserving of all those
accolades, of those folks who turned out.

Smith: Think he would have been surprised?

Simmons: No, no. I think he knew that he was deserving of this. I don’t think he would
have been surprised. He would have expected those people to show up,
because he was a compassionate person. He was a dignified man.
Smith: But one of the real satisfactions must have been knowing, long before he died, that people would come around to his way of thinking on the pardon.

Simmons: Oh, absolutely. Yes. The Kennedys for one. That was a big, great relief for him, I think, when we went up there and he received that award at the museum in Massachusetts – the Kennedy Museum, when they gave him that award and put it around…he felt almost like he was vindicated – is that a good word? Because the Kennedys came out for him in support of the pardon. I think that was absolutely a thrill for him. Yes, sir! And I was there to witness it!

Smith: And the senator could not have been more gracious – Senator Kennedy. Basically, saying I was wrong and he was right. And Caroline – that was an amazing day.

Simmons: That was an amazing day and I’m pleased to say that I was there to witness it, yes, sir.

Smith: Lee, thank you. This has been wonderful.

Simmons: You’re welcome. It was my pleasure.
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Smith: Well, first of all, thank you for doing this. Tell us how your paths originally crossed with Gerald and Betty Ford.

Parma: In 1958 a very dear friend of mine, Bob Wilson, having been elected when Eisenhower was elected in ’52, as a member of Congress from San Diego, asked me if I would come back and be his chief of staff. I was on a fast track in management with a significant company in San Diego. I said, Bob, that’s going me to take me off this track. Ed Terrar been with him for five years and wanted to come home. Earlier Bob had actually hired me out of San Diego State to be the executive manager of the San Diego Junior Chamber of Commerce, of which he was president. We established a nice relationship during that time. I eventually said, Bob, I’ll go back for a year. And he said, fine. He said, I just think you ought to have this exposure – it’s a terrific experience. I ended up staying five years. It was so interesting. I would get on the red-eye right now and fly back do it again in a whisper. It was the most enjoyable five years I’ve ever spent. It affected my whole life in many ways.

Significantly, during that time, Bob Wilson became part of the leadership. He was chairman of the Republican National Congressional Committee, which was the elective side of the House –to elect members of Congress. Being in leadership, my path crossed with other leaders. The ’58 Congressional elections were a debacle for us. We lost a lot of seats. The Young Turks, Bob Wilson, Mel Laird, were members of a little group called SOS. Every class that goes into Washington, 10-15 members of each party may meet once a week, and they select from different committees and get a briefing on thousands of bills that are in, and try to find out what is happening on legislation. That’s the way they keep in touch. This was a responsible group of men and they got together. I’m just reading Mel Laird’s book *With Honor* now, and Mel spends considerable time on this, on how they had to change leadership.

In 1958, Joe Martin, the former speaker, the minority leader. Sam Rayburn and Joe had dinner together every night at the Occidental Hotel. You could always tell what they had for dinner because Joe had it on his tie. He always wore the same tie and it
was thick. Sam pretty well got what he wanted from Joe. The Republican members were concerned that they were being led around, and obviously, they weren’t winning back the House. So Bob Wilson had a meeting in our office, of probably five or six members. This was November, after the election. A lot of members had not returned to the capital. Everyone was deeply concerned so they said, let’s meet tomorrow and get more members in. They got more members in, and Bob said, better get over to the Congressional Hotel and get a room over there. The end result was that they settled on, first, that Jerry Ford should be the replacement for Joe Martin. And so there was a meeting in Jerry Ford’s office and he said I’m not going to seek the office, I’ll take it, if you offer it. If it’s available, but I’m not going to…

Smith: Let me interrupt you because I’m confused, because I know Charley Halleck...

Parma: That was later.

Smith: Okay.

Parma: What happened was that they went to Ford. He’d shown his skills. He was not quite the old-timer guy, and he was a little older than these Young Turks. He’d come in 1948. So at that meeting he said I’m not going to fight for it, I’ll take it if it is available. Les Arends and those fellows found out about it. So the old foxes got together, they controlled the committee placements, and they started to point out realities to these Young Turks. If you guys lose, hope you enjoy being on the district committee. And things like that. The result is that they switched from Ford, obviously they didn’t have the votes, and Halleck got the job. Then there was another revolution later. Halleck was replaced somebody else. But at any rate, in the course of that, I met Jerry Ford.

Our paths would cross the five years that we were there. As Bob’s leadership stature grew, so did the chief of staff’s. Being close friends, he took me to a lot of meetings that normally a staff guy wouldn’t be in. As an example, the first day on the job, he did two things. Number one, he had The New York Times, The Post, LA Times, and the San Diego paper, and he said, “Look at the bylines on all of these.” Washington, Washington, New York, something else, Washington. Washington dominated on almost every newspaper. He said, this is where it is happening. I said, yeah, okay, I follow you. And the other thing he did was to say I need to go down and see Jerry
Persons at the White House. I said, you want me to call General Jerry Persons, chief of staff to Dwight D. Eisenhower? And he says, yes, just call him up. He’s a nice guy.

So I called down there. “I’d like to speak to General Persons, please.” I identified myself as being with Bob. Persons got on the phone and said, “Hi, Leon. How are you? This is Jerry Persons. What can I do for you?”

“My boss wants to come down and see you.”

He said, “Fine, what time is convenient for you? You tell me when the Congressman wants to come down and I’ll be available.” And I said, “Okay,” and we agreed on a time. “You coming down, too?” and I said, no, I don’t think I’ll be down.

“Well, you ought to come down with him. Be nice to meet you.”

I didn’t go, but the end result was, no matter who the man was, you could talk to him. It held good throughout the time. But it was an interesting little byplay that Bob had. I often accused him of setting it up with Persons. No, I didn’t set it up, but he actually played the role very well.

Smith: Why do you think Ford didn’t go in ’58?

Parma: I think he saw that these fellows had the capability of organizing themselves and winning. And I don’t think he wanted to be a loser. He became the winner. He replaced Halleck, that’s how it happened.

Smith: Tell me about that combat, because there is some uncertainty as to how eager he was to jump into that fray.

Parma: I think that he wasn’t dragged kicking and screaming into it, but Charlie’s effectiveness waned, primarily because he was a heavy drinker, I think. There used to be Charlie’s Seminar’s – a meeting that he would have every day in the late afternoon. They would sit in there and he would bring young guys in and have a tutorial.

Smith: Was the alcohol more a part of the lifestyle then than in later years?
Parma: I would say that there was a lot of drinking. Every meeting he ever had, particularly in the evening. I didn’t see a lot of it at noon time, but if you went downtown, it was a martini, or two martini deal.

Smith: People tend to romanticize, Rayburn, the board of education and all that. From the days of Harry Truman on. You wonder if there is a little more to it.

Parma: They had a poker club. I’m using up my own time here, but I went with the President one time on a trip, I was never a part of anything, I was on the transition committee. Phil Buchen told me that Ford wanted me to be on the transition committee. So I was on that and I’d come back…

Smith: This was after he became president, or before he became president?

Parma: After he became president. I got the call a day before Nixon resigned. Bob Hartmann called me and he said, “The boss said you ought to get on an airplane and get back here, things are going to happen.” A sidebar to that, the vice president had been in San Diego to make a speech early August, first or second, a few days before all of this happened. We were in a Town and Country hotel, I’d gone down, that’s near my home. Whenever he was in town, we’d go down and get together. I was up in the suite with him and he said, I need to take a shower, so he went in the shower. The phone rang. It was Al Haig. He asked if the vice president was there and I said yes he is, he’s taking a shower. “I need to talk to him.” I said, “You want me to get him out of the shower?” He said, “No, when he gets out, please have him call me right away.” Ford got out of the shower and I told him Al had called and he said, okay, get him on the phone. So I picked up red phone and said, “Get Al Haig on the phone.” Al came on and I said, “Just a minute,” and I put Ford on. They talked briefly and all I heard was Ford’s side. “Well now,” he said, “I’m going back as soon as I finish this speech – I’m getting on the airplane and going back. I’ll be in my office at eight o’clock tomorrow.” He hung up and Ford looked at me and said, “I think this is it.” And it was. It was when the smoking gun story was told to him the next day, I think.

Smith: Was he surprised?

Parma: No.

Smith: Do he come to expect it?
Parma: Yes. There was no question in his mind that it probably would happen. There’s too much pressure going on. Barry Goldwater taking a group down to the White House. You need to resign – you can’t go through this. We don’t want you to go through it. We want you out of here, in effect.

Smith: Clearly from the day he became vice president there were people in this town who thought that that was the inevitable sequel. Tom DeFrank in his book makes a big deal out of this alleged slip of the tongue. Did you ever hear anything like that?

Parma: No. Not really. We would talk. I tried to be the non-political, non-government friend. We’d talk football. Not too many years ago we played golf and were sitting down talking afterwards and he said, “You know, we’ve played a lot of golf together.” I said, “Yes, we have.” He said, “How many rounds do you think we played?” So we went back and started pulling together something between 250-300 rounds of golf.

I started to tell you, he’d come out to San Diego to make this speech for Clare Borgener Afterwards we went over to the desert. Red Blake, the old Army coach, had asked him to come over and play golf. So Ford invited me to come over and play golf. My wife has deep roots in Palm Springs. Her great grandfather was, in effect, the first white man in Palm Springs. He later became the Indian agent. So we spent part of our lives down there. My dad had worked down there in the Thirties as a deputy sheriff, so I lived there for two years in the Thirties year ‘round. It was hotter than hell. Anyway, we went down and we played golf. Red’s regular golf partner was Frank Capra, the old movie director. The four of us played golf practically every day for a week. Ford said, “This was really fun. We ought to do this next year.” I said, “Fine, we’d love to do that.” He always called me around Christmas-New Year’s. “Do you have things set up on the desert?” he’d call. “Yeah, I’ll get a place for us to live.” And he said, “And we’ll pay half of it!” I said, “Okay, I’ll send you half the bill.” I went out and rented a house – we played at Eldorado, and I rented one of the bungalows. Betty and he would come out, and Barbara and I would share our house. That was around ’63-’64. We did it every spring. It was during the spring recess. He’d come out and we’d play golf for a week. Our partners were Frank and Red Blake. Bob Hope found out we were down there. And Ford being on the appropriations committee, Bob was always tuned into making sure that he got the
military planes and all for his trips. He needed friends like Ford on appropriations who wouldn’t complain about the money it was costing to send him out to these trips. Bob made it a business. He’d come back and he’d have a show of “My Visit to Wherever.” So, Bob started playing with us.

Smith: What was the chemistry between the two of them?

Parma: Very good. Absolutely perfect.

Smith: Was Hope funny?

Parma: Always. His mannerisms, his language, he played a good game of golf. He’d hum going up to hit the ball. But his relationship with Ford was extraordinary. All through the whole time they knew each other and Ford was his foil. He had a hundred stories. Ford used to collect the stories he’d tell on him, and he’d always open his speech with one or two of the Hope stories.

Smith: Similar to the role he played with Ev Dirksen, on the Ev and Jerry Show.

Parma: It had been the Charlie and Ev Show. And then Ford replaced him.

Smith: How did Dirksen feel about losing Halleck and having this new guy?

Parma: I don’t know, personally. But it seemed the transition was very good. Two guys from the Midwest and Charlie Halleck being from Indiana – there wasn’t much change.

Smith: Seemingly opposites. Dirksen was the most theatrical, satirizing ham.

Parma: Beautiful voice. But Ford credited us for being the reason he was on the desert.

Smith: What is your sense of Mrs. Ford at that time?

Parma: My responsibility when we came out was to fix up the rack on the bed. She would sleep in this collar that went back to this rack and had a weight on it. When she went to bed at night, she had this collar on, with this thing stretching her out because she had a terrible back pain. Now how the heck do you do this, Betty? Isn’t there some way to get around having to use this? She was obviously taking some medication to ease the pain. She had this back problem and actually slept with tension on her neck (pinches nerve in neck).
We always would have a martini or two before we’d go to dinner. She never schmoosed during the day, to my knowledge. Barbara didn’t drink at all.

Ford and I would leave in the morning and come back after we played eighteen, sometimes thirty-six holes. Barb and Betty would lay out by the pool, go shopping, do the girl things that they would find time to do. It wasn’t very noticeable to me. It became more so later, where she had difficulty getting to places on time. Early on there was not a lot of evidence of it.

They had a wonderful relationship. When they left White House and came out, he built a house on the thirteenth hole of Thunderbird. He kept telling me, you need to get a house down there. I said, I don’t need a house. When we come down, we can stay with Barbara’s Aunt Pearl. We don’t have a problem, we have a house. One day he called up and said, “I’m looking at the house you’ve got to buy.” And I said, “I don’t want to buy a house down there.” He said, “I’m looking at it right now, it’s over about the hundred and fifty yard mark of the 12th hole. I can see it. Think about it, if you are there I can call out and say, look, I’ve got an hour and a half, why don’t you come over and I’ll meet you at the thirteenth tee, we’ll play the backside.”

So I finally sent a guy over and told him to buy the house. It was in an estate sale in court.

Smith: Was there ever any doubt about where they would go after leaving the White House?

Parma: I think there was a lot of discussion that they should go back to Grand Rapids. They loved the desert and they were immediately accepted, obviously, within the desert community – what we call Down Desert. We were ten or fifteen miles away from Palm Springs, in the area recently developed – recent being the last thirty-forty years. Away from Palm Springs proper.

Smith: Which had its share of celebrities.

Parma: Oh, yeah. On Thunderbird Bing Crosby was member, Bob Hope, Randy Scott, Hogie Carmichael, Phil Harris, Desi Arnaz - some of them were members. He never interfaced with them. I remember we had a 90th birthday party for Phil Harris. It was the only golf course in town, early on, built in the early Fifties.
Smith: There are those who thought, when he lost the 1976 election, that it took a while for him to bounce back.

Parma: He came so close. He asked me to take care of California. He kept calling me, he’d say, “Are we all right?” I’d say, “You’re going to win California, don’t worry about it.” Not in the primary, but in the general election. In the primary we knew Reagan would take it, but we put an energized effort on just to keep Reagan coming back to California to make sure he wasn’t losing. I was able to get a couple of people out of his so-called kitchen cabinet, Henry Salvatori, principally, to come over for Ford. But, Reagan was strong in California. We weren’t going to beat the former governor of California. But we carried it in the general.

A couple of things that hurt him: the pardon was the key factor. People couldn’t forget and they couldn’t believe that there was no deal or something else. And obviously the opposition played on that. Another one was the debate in San Francisco. Which, I understood what he said, and it didn’t offend me. I think Henry understood, because Henry called him. There was a partner in a principle law firm in San Francisco, and we’d gone over there after the debate. Henry got him there and told him what a great debate it was and how well he’d done. The Polish reference, that they were not under the domination of the Soviets, he’d been there. From Helsinki he had gone over and they were a million people lined up throwing flowers and the rest of it. What he was saying was, “There might be there, but not up in their heads and hearts.” And I don’t know why they couldn’t get that message back to the press.

Smith: If only he’d said that. I went back and checked. In fact, on that trip he had visited Poland, he had visited Romania, and one other Communist bloc country. I think he mentioned all three in his response, but he just left out the key words, “I’ve been there, I’ve seen it myself.”

Parma: That’s right. “I had million people lining the streets watching me.”

Smith: That’s when he got stubborn.

Parma: We went down to USC from San Francisco. We flew down on Air Force One, to USC where he made a speech. The press was all over him. The first question was, “How can you say this?” And then he got really stubborn. I’ve never gone back to
see the transcripts of it, but he stiffened up good. He was not going to yield on it. They even had the head of the Polish Federation in America come out and visit him. Then later at Glendale or someplace, I remember he was standing in a parking lot doing a press conference and he kind of put it to bed then, I think. I’ve never seen that transcript.

Smith: I have. I think it was Stu Spencer or someone else, got to him.

Parma: Stu was beside himself, because they knew the impact of this thing. Carter was making a fool out of him with this statement. It was a terrible thing.

Smith: What about that stubbornness?

Parma: That was it.

Smith: That was part of his character:

Parma: I would see him on the golf course. He wouldn’t yield on something. “Don’t hit the wood. Maybe you ought to hit the wedge or something to get out of this thing.” No he’d go for the fairway wood. He did have a stubborn streak. I don’t know what caused it.

Smith: Was he able to move beyond that loss? Particularly in the first few months?

Parma: He did not dwell on it. I knew that he was hurt. Give me nine thousand votes election night and he’s president. That’s how close it was. Just selectively. And the other part of it was that, had Reagan helped him – Reagan refused to help – Reagan never mentioned the President by name, nor did he mention the President, per se, in any speech in 1976. Lyn Nofziger was a good friend of mine, we’d come to Washington on the same day and ended up at the same banquet – the California Society banquet with Bob Wilson. Lyn covered our office for the San Diego Evening Tribune. After the election, I told them, if you guys had worked a little bit, done a little bit for us in Louisiana and couple of other states, we would have won this thing. “Oh, I don’t know that you would have, that’s the luck.” I said, “I’ll give you a thousand bucks for anytime, over three times, including the third one, that Reagan mentioned Ford, if you’ll give me a thousand dollars for the first two that he did mention him.” He wouldn’t take the bet. But he never mentioned him by name. I could have said, with any time beginning with first two. He might have mentioned him once some place.
Smith: Do you think that led to a coolness in later years between the two?

Parma: It was. The convention in Kansas City was very contentious. It was very close, right down to Wyoming, just a couple of states before. Reagan was so disappointed, that he never got over losing that. During that convention William French Smith came to me and said, “The Governor would like to have an access to the President, other than through Sears or anybody else who is working on this campaign. Do you think President Ford would do that?” I said, “Well, I’ll ask him.” So I asked Ford, I said, “Reagan wants to have some way of contacting you, kind of through the back door, and I think Bill Smith will probably be his guy. What are you thinking?” He said, “I don’t know why we need that.” I said, “Well, I don’t either, but that’s what he’s asking. So tell me yes or no.” He said, “Okay, well, we’ll do it. You tell Smith to contact you.” So Smith and I would meet practically every day.

Smith: This is during the convention?

Parma: During the convention. I asked Evelle Younger, who was the attorney general of California, to join me in those meetings because I wanted to make sure that I wasn’t hoodwinked on some deal, and Evelle was an old political guy, so he sat in on the meetings. We’d generally meet in my room – sit on the bed and talk. Nothing substantive came from it until the last day when Bill said, “The Governor wants to be sure that the President doesn’t ask him to be the vice president.” He was very adamant about it. “He doesn’t want to say no to the President. And he’d rather not have that question posed to him.” At the same time Sears was telling that to Cheney, that when he comes over, we don’t ask him that question. So I relayed that to the President, and he said, “Tell him not to worry.” I said, okay. So I told Smith later in the day, the question won’t be asked. He said, well, that’s fine, he’ll probably go ahead with it.

Smith: Ironic, isn’t it, because in later years there was at least a kind of a wink and nod in an attempt to suggest that, ‘oh, well, if Ford had asked, Reagan wouldn’t have had any choice but to say yes.’

Parma: Absolutely. There are two instances that occurred. The President was making a speech in Sacramento. It was before the one that Squeaky Fromme tried to get him. Justin Dart was waiting for us to come in. Outside this hall in Sacramento he nailed
me. He said, “I need to talk to you,” and he pulled this letter out of his pocket and said, “I sent this letter to the President and I told him to ask Ronnie to be the vice president.” I said, “I never saw the letter, that was contrary to everything that we were told.” He said, “Well, I felt we had him primed to take it,” and I said, “Well, who was going to take care of Nancy?” Because she was very dominant, I think, in that decision. He said, “We were going to take care of Nancy.” I said, “Is she going to be out of the room? Is that it? What were you going to do?” He said, “Well, that’s it – it’s all over now of course, but I had to just make my point that the President should have asked him.”

During the campaign we had a meeting at one of the hotels near LAX on Century Blvd going down to the airport. We were waiting for Dole to come in. Ford wasn’t there. I was sitting with Holmes Tuttle and all of his entourage that were part of the Reagan cabinet. Margaret Brock was there and I forget who else. I was sitting next to Holmes Tuttle, who was Reagan’s key guy, supporter. Holmes said, “You guys really screwed it up when he didn’t ask Reagan to be the vice president.” I said, “Holmes, we were told, in no uncertain terms, that he was not to be the vice president.” And he said, “The other thing was, you didn’t make the call.” I said, “What call?” Holmes said, “Well, after the election, Ford never called Ronnie.”

**Smith:** After the nomination?

**Parma:** After the nomination leading up to the election. I said, “We were specifically told,” and this was another thing that Smith came to me and said, “You cannot let the President call Reagan, because he won’t take the call.” I said, “You’ve got to be kidding me. If the President calls Reagan, he won’t take the call?” “No,” he said, “I’ve never seen anybody so hurt in all my life as Reagan and Nancy, the disappointment that he lost this election in the convention. But, you absolutely can’t let him make the call.”

I said, “Do you know how extraordinary it is to say that?” He said, “Well, he’s not going to take the call.” I went to Ford and told him that, and he said, “Well, if that’s what he wants, that’s what he wants,” not thinking much about what’s to follow. I have notes on this. In fact, I asked Bill Smith if he would serve on this little select committee that we had with Rogers, Morton, Rockefeller’s guy, and couple of other people. We had about five or six guys. I asked Ford, “Just until we have some
continuity with Reagan, so he knows what we’re doing, let’s put Bill Smith on this

So he said fine. We’d meet at the Mayflower and Smith would come in, and
each time he came in, I’d say, “Time to call him?” Smith would say, “No.” I was
telling Holmes Tuttle this at that hotel near the airport, and Holmes says, “That didn’t
happen. You weren’t told that.” He actually said it was a lie. I said, “Don’t tell me
I’m telling you a lie, Holmes. This is what happened.” About that time Bill Smith
walked in the room. So I said, “Bill, come over here,” and I grabbed Holmes by the
arm and I said, “Now Holmes, don’t say a word. I’m just going to ask him one
question and you listen.” Margaret Brock and these other people were all listening to
this. Bill walked over and I said, “Bill, will you tell me, right now, will you tell
Holmes, what you told me with respect to Ford calling Ronald Reagan after the
convention.” Smith said, “Oh, yeah. He said not to call him, that he wouldn’t take the
call.” Holmes Tuttle jumped up, grabbed him by the arm and took him over in the
corner and was just lambasting him. We could all hear it. “Don’t you ever say that
again!” But Bill Smith confirmed that this was the word.

Finally, we’re at a meeting at the Mayflower and I said, “You know this has gone on
too far.” Smith said, “Well, maybe now’s the time.” I said, “Okay.” I called Cheney
up and I said, “We need to come over and see the President. I’ve got Bill Smith and
this is in respect to Ford calling Ronald Reagan after the

So we went over, waited around until the party was over. Ford gave us a sign and we
went up to the residence. Bill Smith said, “I think it’s time to call the Governor.”
Ford said, “Fine, I’ll give him a call tomorrow.” And that’s how it developed. But
this whole time, I don’t know if Reagan was sitting pouting, or what he was doing,
but it was a serious element in the whole effort.

Smith: And I assume the story behind the story as well, is that the families were involved. In
particular, the wives were not hastening a reproach more.

Parma: Nancy, in particular. I don’t know that Betty…things kind of rolled off of Betty a
little bit. I don’t know how much emphasis she put on it. He called me around
Christmas time, and he said, “Do you have a place for us for next spring?” I said,
“Mr. President I didn’t know you’d be coming out here.” This was in 1975. I said I’ll
find a place for us. So I ended up getting Fred Wilson’s house, which is above Thunderbird, a big house, and Fred had a big suite in his bedroom. I asked Fred, he said, “Fine, yeah, have him come.” It was over Easter. “Have him come and he can have that bedroom suite right next to me.” I said, “No, Fred. I’m doing this as a courtesy because you’re going to get him.” (Fred was the kind of guy that would say, “why didn’t you ask me.”) I said, “I’m just doing this as a courtesy so you won’t nail me later, ‘Why didn’t I ask you about it.’” I said, “You’re going to have to move out.”

“Oh, god, it’s over Easter,” he said. And I said, “I know that, but as I said, I’m doing you a favor, just let you know about it so you can’t nail me later that you would have done it.” He said, “Oh, I can’t do that.” Well Fred thought about it over night. Fred was an insurance salesman extraordinaire and had all the big clients, Teamsters, Kerkorian was his closest friend. Fred called me the next day and he said, “I’ve made arrangements with Vonnie (his wife). We’ll take another house and you and the President can stay in my house.” Barbara and I took a back bedroom in his guest quarters, and we set up the bedroom he wanted to assign him as his office. At that time word came through that Reagan wanted to meet with Ford. Ford, as he always does, said, “What do you think?” I said, “Well, he wants to try you on. I don’t think he wants to do anymore than find out what you’re made of,” because they hadn’t ever spent a whole lot of time together. So Reagan came over and Ford invited Rummy, and I think Joyce came too, for the reception. He said, you guys disappear and just Betty and I will have dinner with him and Nancy.

So during cocktails the men stood and made small talk, Ford, Reagan, Rumsfeld, and Parma, the girls were in the living room and the four men were standing up. I’ve got a great picture of this thing, Kennerly must have been there taking pictures. We were talking generally about things. Pretty soon Ford said, “Well, I guess it is time to sit down for dinner.” So we excused ourselves. Secret Service let Rummy know when the party was over, so Barbara and I went back up to the house. So I walked in and he was still up. I said, “Well, how did it go?” “Fine, we had a very nice dinner.” “Well, what did you talk about?” “Oh, a lot of football,” he said. I asked, “Didn’t you talk about any issues or anything?” He said, “No, no. He didn’t bring anything up. No, he wanted the meeting. It was his agenda, so I was waiting for him to bring something up, and he didn’t do it. We just had a small talk all through dinner, and that was it.” It
was a size up. I think Reagan went away from there saying, well, you know this is a big old guy from the Midwest, we can push him over, or something. I don’t know. But he became a candidate later. But it was an interesting little byplay.

Parma: I have something – I put down kind of memorable times.

Smith: Perfect. We’ll do it first to make sure we’ve got it.

Parma: There were some special times that occurred after we had these sojourns during spring break from the Congress. When he lost the election he came out and stayed in Leonard Firestone’s house, which was right next door to where he eventually built. Ginger Rogers’ house became the Secret Service command post and the office. Leonard owned the lot next to that. Leonard, somehow, was able to get Ginger into an escrow. I guess she had indicated she wanted to sell. So they bought the house, Leonard did. I think he gifted it to USC. So USC really owns that house and they’ve set up a contract, long term, obviously, with the government for it. Ford didn’t have anything to do with that because that the government doing it. But, then Ford subsequently had Ginger come to the party in Leonard’s house after the election, after Leonard had consummated the deal. To kind of atone for it all. At that dinner was Ginger and Cary Grant, which was interesting. Cary brought his little girl who was about twelve or thirteen years old. But it was an interesting byplay.

The point I was going to say is that we stopped going to the desert, we were already there. And so a year or so later he said, “You know, I miss the trips, we don’t have a trip.” I said, well, why don’t we go abroad? So we made three or four trips where we took cruises. There were a couple of instances that were memorable.

One time we were in Athens. We had just arrived, and the director of the government historic sites was escorting him around. We went to the Acropolis and we started walking up the broken cement and stone, and as we started into the area where the palace was that has the maidens on it, to the left, you could hear just a little clap. Not much. And as he ascended up to the Parthenon, it grew. In fact, my wife grabbed me by the arm and she said, “Do you hear that?” This small clapping was getting louder and louder. When we got up to the top all these hundreds of people were clapping that he had come up. It was a beautiful, beautiful thing. And he felt so good about that. He mentioned it later. “Can you believe all those people doing that?”
He always was humbled that people would recognize him and do things like that. That was a very touching thing. I think on that same trip, prior to that, we’d gone into a little town, or island, called Hvar, above Dubrovik. They had been taken up to see a church. When we went back to the motor launch that had taken us off the boat, to the shore, a lot of people gathered around. What happened was that some guy in shorts, probably sixty or seventy years old, started yelling at Ford, “You did this to me!” He was all scarred up. Later, I found out from the agents that he had been wounded by American bombs or something, and he was German, I believe. He was accusing us of his problem. I remember the President, later on, when the agents told us about it, said, “I wonder if he ever heard of Hitler. He started this thing, not us.” That was an insightful thing.

Smith: He loved to travel.

Parma: Oh, he did.

Smith: His health was so robust up until he was about ninety, I often thought that he only really began to age when it dawned on him that he really couldn’t travel the way he had. Did he talk about getting old?

Parma: Not really. I got a couple of other little vignettes. On another trip we were in Paris and he had gone in a day earlier so he could get together with Giscard d'Estaing. They had become fast friends. He’d come out to Vail.

Smith: Which is another case of opposites attract.

Parma: That’s all so true. So he had lunch with Betty and the President. Prior to going over, in trying to decide where to go, one of the options was to go to Normandy, or go to Rambouillet, where they’d had the group of six meeting. He said, “I’ve had enough war, I’d like to go to Rambouillet and renew that experience.” We went to Rambouillet, which was maybe twenty or thirty miles out of Paris and it was a tremendous experience for him and Betty. We went from room to room and he’d say, this happened here. His room was in a turret and it had a bed that was about the size large twin bed. It wasn’t as big as a double bed. Betty says, “My, that’s a small bed.” And he said, “My dear, there was only one of us sleeping in it.” She said, “I hope so!” It was a grand experience for him. He relived that time and it was so much better for him than going to Normandy. He was revitalized when he went through that.
We had another trip. We went to Rome. Peter Secchia was the ambassador then. Peter set a meeting up with the Pope.

Smith: This would be John Paul II?

Parma: John Paul II. When we got into the Vatican, they asked Ford to go in first. He went in and had a meeting with John Paul II. Then he came out and got us. Two things happened that were of interest. From the time that we all went in to see the Pope, Betty and Barbara and myself, and we had Patty and Frank Lynch with us, I saw two photographers taking pictures. We walked into the door to the Pope’s office, the reception area. Ford introduced each of us to the Pope as we walked in. Larry Buendorf was the lead agent, and he had told the two women agents, you’re the only Catholics, you go in, but leave your arms with us. So they took their guns out and left them in the car or something and they slipped into the door. The Pope saw it out of the corner of his eyes, “and them?” He hadn’t been introduced to them. And Ford said, “Yes, your Holiness, they’re my security.” “Security? Women?” and he’s shuffling along and with his white sweat socks on, and he says, “Women, security?” And Ford says, “Yes, your Holiness. They’re very, very good.” And the Pope said, “Women. Security.” He kept looking back at them. All of this we have on a tape. After the small talk and all, he poses for a picture. The waiter brings out medallions for the men and special rosaries for the women, and he sends the guy away and he comes back with a tray and he goes over to the two women and gives them both a rosary. It was a priceless thing when you see it on the tape. I gave a copy to Ford.

We later met with the leader of Italy. The guy sitting across from me was an Archbishop of some sort. His name was Foley. I said, “Where you from, Philly or Boston?” He said, “I’m from Philly.” I said, “There was one thing that happened in there, I saw a third guy doing something. I didn’t have any impression other than, I knew there was a third man in the room with the photographers. He might have been filming this in some way.” He said, “That could have been. They do that a lot.” I said, “If you can, can you get it for me?” Long story short, I ended up with this film of our whole meeting with the Pope. The sequence about the girls was significant.

Smith: That’s wonderful. I want to ask you, do you remember the last time you saw him?
Parma: Yeah. After Thanksgiving, during a Michigan-Ohio State game, I went over to the house and sat with him and Jim, an old friend of theirs that lives on the desert, and Betty. He was in the hospital bed in the den watching the game. We watched the game and he critiqued the game. He was obviously not well. A lot of coughing, calling for the nurse to come help him. But he did very well. But he was tired, you would tell. It was really sad for me, frankly. I felt it wasn’t going to be long. And he died a month later.

Smith: That trip to the Mayo Clinic which the public never knew about, didn’t turn out the way it was supposed to. He told someone before going that he didn’t want to die, but he didn’t want to live the way he was living. My sense was the Mayo Clinic led him to believe, I’m not saying they led him on, but they led him to believe that, notwithstanding his age, there were these new surgical techniques that made him a very good candidate. I think he went believing that he was going to get a new lease on life. It didn’t happen.

Parma: I think the operation would have been worse than not doing it. He was not much interested in doing it. I think what you said, he said to me in a way. If I can’t enjoy my life, it’s difficult. He never said he wanted to die.

Smith: It’s funny, something Peter said earlier today, that he really was the ultimate optimist.

Parma: Absolutely. He was very confident in himself and his ability. I never really experienced doubts about things. He was decisive, positive, he was always going to make the good shot. He was going to take the good shot, every time.

Smith: And Mrs. Ford? Obviously it’s been a tough period.

Parma: She’s had a time. She caught this cold, or whatever it was, at the funeral. Barbara did, too. Barbara got over it in four or five weeks. Never has left Betty. Right now she has a bronchial condition I think going back to that time. She just never has been able to lose it and she’s not strong right now.

Smith: If you were talking to young people who didn’t know him at all, or worse, only knew him through a textbook or whatever. Tell them something that would be surprising about Gerald Ford.
Parma: Probably the most enlightening thing would be that he was the same man the day he died that he was the day I met him. He was unaffected by the fact that he had gained high office, or operated as a leader of the world. He never changed his demeanor or the way he talked with you. He never lorded it. He was in the best sense, a common man who was humbled and straightforward and compassionate. I think that could be a lesson in life for all of us. Never over think how good you are, or how big you are. If you can stay on a level plane as he did, you’ll have a fulfilled life.

Smith: It is interesting that you used the word compassionate. The party moved so far to the right, particularly on social issues, and I don’t believe that he moved to the left, or whether he stayed where he was.

Parma: He stayed in place.

Smith: Obviously, he and Mrs. Ford were very outspokenly pro-choice, but beyond that, he’s the only president in the history of the United States to put his name on a petition for gay rights. That is not what you expect from a former Republican president. Was that always there?

Parma: We never talked about those issues. I think he just had a lot of compassion for people. He understood, to the depths of the complexity of the issue, that some people were different. As I say, we didn’t talk about it, but I know that his thought processes were to even things out. He didn’t categorize and departmentalize people.

Smith: Also, I think he is of a generation, particularly Midwestern conservative, who first of all, define their conservatism in economic terms, who had a very healthy skepticism about what the government could accomplish, particularly when it set to worry about Utopia, and who consistently wanted the government out of the boardroom, out of the classroom, out of the bedroom. There were a whole range of issues that were so intimate, so personal, you didn’t discuss them. It wasn’t the stuff of public policy. It was a decent reticence.

Parma: Real quick example: first time that I came back when he was President, he wanted to play golf at Burning Tree. I met him out there. We played, and then we were in the locker room getting ready to leave and he said, “How you getting home?” And I said, “I’m getting a cab to take me home.” He said, “Well, I’ll take you home,” and he said
to Dick Kaiser, who was his lead agent, “Any problem taking Leon home?” “No, Mr. President.”

We got in the limousine, I put the clubs in back of the car and I closed it up. We got in the car and drove into the Madison Hotel where I was staying. I got out of the car and went around and opened the trunk, I got my clubs out, went over and stood on the curb and said (we were playing the next day), “I’ll see you tomorrow,” and with that twenty cars drive by. He took the whole motorcade into the Madison Hotel, looped into town, and went back to the White House. The next day, the Washington Post has a little story. “President delivers golf partner (didn’t name me) to the hotel.” He called me up that night and said, “Tomorrow come over to the White House, we’ll go from here.” Obviously, he had sensed what he had done too late and Kaiser, god bless him, should have said, “you know we have the whole motorcade, Mr. President.” If he had said that, he would said, “Oh no, we can’t do that, I’ll see you in the morning. I’ll meet you out here.”

Smith: But to him it was the most natural thing in the world.

Parma: Yeah, “I’ll take you back.” That was it.

Smith: This is wonderful. The problem is, it whets your appetite. Where are you based now?

Parma: I’m in San Diego.

Smith: I suspect either sometime this summer or certainly this fall, we’re going to be scheduling a trip there because we know there’s a number of folks in the area. Thank you very much. This is great. And I suspect there is a lot more where this came from.
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Smith: There are a couple of years I’d like to go back because, specifically, we were talking about your early days with Congressman Wilson. And earlier than I’ve know, or most people have known, the desire on at least part of his colleagues to get Ford to run against Joe Martin for the Minority Leadership, which he didn’t do.

It wasn’t clear to me, did you stay in Washington?

Parma: Right. I went to Washington in 1958 with Congressman Bob Wilson – in January of ’58, and stayed five years. That year, that fall, the Republicans were handed the empty plate. They really took it bad. And so we were in Washington. Bob Wilson and I returned to Washington right after the November 1958 election. A day or so later, Bob said, “See if you can find Mel Laird and others in the SOS group” they belonged to. All SOS members were elected in ’52 with Eisenhower. As you probably know, every freshman class forms little clubs or groups in order to educate themselves, actually, with their respective committee assignments. They select members who are on key committees and that’s how they keep abreast of legislation. They meet once a week.

So Bob said, “See how many SOS members are here.” I called Laird and Lipscomb, and a few others and we got five into the office. They met in Bob’s office, they said, “We must do something. We can’t continue this way without better leadership from our side. Sam Rayburn is handing Joe Martin his lunch every day.” Martin and Rayburn were having breakfast together and they were having dinner together. They both lived at the Occidental Hotel in separate suites. Sam used him; Sam Rayburn just plain old used Joe Martin.
Smith: Tell us about it, because I know Rayburn is a legendary figure. Why? Tell us about Rayburn and what would someone like Ford watching someone like Rayburn learn?

Parma: I don’t know if he learned any of Sam’s devious habits, but Sam Rayburn ran that House with an iron hand. What he asked for, he got.

Smith: What allowed him to do that?

Parma: Well, he had a majority, which was primary. But he was a strong leader, and he was an effective leader. They rallied around him. He stayed there, they named a building after him, and the rest of it.

Smith: I assume the rules must have been different in those days that concentrated more power in the hands of the Speaker.

Parma: Oh, I think the Speaker had a lot of power then; much more than now, probably. Ford was on the periphery, having been elected in ’48. He was watching all this; he’d been there for ten years. Sam Rayburn was very effectively using Joe Martin to get people to support the issues he wanted to support. These were the days when I was there that Eisenhower was there, and I remember the Federal Aid to Education, the Common Situs picketing, all of these different things that the liberal element of the Democratic party wanted. Sam Rayburn, being from Texas, was willing to help them. I guess you could say he was one of them. I guess he fell into the program.

Smith: Was Joe Martin past his prime? Was that part of the problem?

Parma: Joe had become old. I want to be fair to him, he was older and obviously Sam Rayburn had great influence over Joe Martin. But the Young Turks – the class elected in ’52 wanted to do something about it. At the first meeting and on everybody was unanimous. “We must do something about the Minority Leader, let’s meet tomorrow. See who else is in town.”

Then at the next meeting we had about thirteen or fourteen in Bob’s office. So they said, “Okay, this is moving.” Then Bob said, “Get a room over in the Congressional Hotel and we’ll meet there tomorrow.” So they met the next
day and there were more in town. Everybody saying, we have to do something. Everybody wanted to protect Joe Martin. So they finally decided they should ask Joe to step aside and let new leadership come in. And so they talked to Joe and said, “You can keep your office, keep the limousine, hold all the emoluments of office, and the rest of it.” And he said, “No.”

So their first choice was Jerry Ford to be the new leader. And they went to Ford and he said, “I’ll take the job if it is there to be had, but I’m not going to campaign for it. I’ll accept the job, but I’m not going to campaign to throw Joe Martin out.”

Smith: That must have been frustrating.

Parma: Yeah, it was. Jerry Ford was right in between. He’d been there in the Congress four years before they arrived, and they said, “Well, let’s see what we can do.” They were rallying behind Ford and the hope was that they would come up with enough votes that it would be fait d’accompli. Les Arends found out about the meetings. Les Arends was the Whip, and he said, “You young whippersnappers, I’m going to take you apart.” And so they started rallying their side, the older group of members, and they came up with Charlie Halleck. So, they went to Ford and said, “We think we have the votes,” and the rest of it – and Ford said, “Well, I’m not asking for the job. If it is offered to me and if it’s there, I’ll take it.” That’s my recollection of it. I was fairly close and I was in some of the meetings.

Smith: Let me understand, though. You mentioned Arends’ name. So there seems to be a consensus that Martin needs to be replaced. It’s just a question of whether it’s one of his generation, or the older guard versus the Young Turks.

Parma: The older guard saw there was a revolution in play, absolute revolution. So their thought processes were, let’s get our guy in there. And Charlie was their guy. So, they came down on Charlie and it was no contest. Ford didn’t want his name put in, as I recall, and Charlie was elected the leader. I guess Joe – I don’t know if he kept his office and limousine and all that. But they took care
of Joe. He’d been there a long time, been out of Massachusetts, and he was replaced. And Charlie came in, and there was born the *Ev and Charlie Show*.

Smith: Is that when it started? There hadn’t been an *Ev and Joe Show*?

Parma: No, *Ev and Charlie* began when Halleck was the Minority Leader of the House and Dirksen was Minority Leader of the Senate. I thought, at the time, the press treated their press conference as a joke, thus the title *Ev and Charlie Show*.

Smith: And was that part of this feeling that we needed to do more in terms of projecting our message, post ’58?

Parma: And ’60 was right on top of them. Obviously, Nixon was going to run, and Kennedy was coming along with Johnson and other people. But ’60 was their year to try to do something.

Smith: You stop and think, it’s not that long ago, until you stop and think about the nature of the Republican Party in the late ‘50s – pre-Civil Rights Act ’64, there’s really no Southern party. It’s still a Northeastern/Midwestern party. Today people wouldn’t understand it. It’s almost the reverse of what we have today. Describe what kind of party it was in those days and where Ford fit into the spectrum.

Parma: My boss, Bob Wilson, about that time became the chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee - the committee that is supposed to go out and elect Republicans to the House. It was a constant battle. They had us outnumbered; they were able to get their legislation through and the rest of it. There was a lot of futility, they just were unhappy. This had built up, I guess, when Eisenhower went in and we had a Republican Congress. I think we lost it in ’54 - ’56. Eisenhower didn’t resolve a war, didn’t have a war, the economy was perking along pretty good, it was a very passive, non-exciting eight years, but went very well. When history is recorded it will show that those were eight great years as far as the United States was concerned. And then Nixon was probably going to be the next president. Everybody was
feeling good about Nixon. Kennedy came in and they did a good job. That was an interesting play, as well.

Smith: It was the “conservative party” but it seems not the conservative party in the sense that we would use the term today. In large part, because there really was not a Southern contingent. It was sort of economically conservative, but it was still Northeastern and Midwestern – obviously, you had strength in the West. It was a much more pragmatic – was that a fair word to use?

Parma: They wanted government out of their lives, at least federal government, to keep everything under control at the state level and rule accordingly.

Smith: And Ford fit very much within that context.

Parma: Yes, he was very comfortable with that.

Smith: And, needless to say, he was a real fiscal conservative.

Parma: Absolutely. No question about that.

Smith: Then along comes the Civil Rights revolution. And one senses he, at least, made peace with that. He was, again, what we used to say, of the fiscally conservative and socially liberal formula.

Parma: Yeah.

Smith: Which is, again, something that I don’t a lot of folks today recognize or appreciate.

Parma: He was a liberal when it came to social policy like that. I think even as president, he was criticized by Reagan as being too liberal. But, relative to black v white, he had a teammate who was black.

Smith: Willis Ward.

Parma: And he would always cite his teammate, what a great person he was and all that. These people were wrong that had these bad feelings down south. It bothered him. His teammate kept coming up a lot. Even when he became the Minority Leader, the teammate would come up.
Smith: So it was very personalized – the issue. But at the same time you also had – by the early Sixties and certainly with Goldwater – you’ve got this, almost overnight, this infusion of Southerners. Many of them frankly racist, into the party calling themselves conservative. How did you handle that?

Parma: Well, they were conservative on economic issues, [that] would be the rationale. When I worked in the Congress, the relationship we had with the other side of the aisle was non-adversarial. It was a very cooperative thing. We interfaced with the other side of the aisle.

Smith: What’s the difference between Joe Martin being snookered, and your non-adversarial relationship? Where do you draw the line? How do you define contention where necessary, unavoidable?

Parma: I found it just in the demeanor of people. Those were nice days; people were nice to each other. The press people that would come in to visit us, and we used to have Bob in and the leadership like it was, we’d see a lot of the press. They were there, helping you to write the story. Our local representative, Lyn Nofziger, in particular, and fellow by the name of Frank McCumber, we’d plot legislation. We’d say, “Okay, we’re going to introduce the bill today, Bob will give a speech tomorrow, he’ll talk to the chairman. Two weeks from now get it up – we planned the program on a key piece of legislation effecting dredging the harbor in San Diego, or something like that. Very friendly attitude.

If I had an issue – and when I was there the chairman was always a Democrat – I’d go to my friend who worked for the chairman on an issue that involved San Diego, and nine times out of ten, they would say, “Yeah, we can help you on that.” If they had an armed services issue and came to us, and generally those issues were non-partisan, we’d help them. And that was the way it was on the floor and the rest of it. The member interfaced with the others and it wasn’t like today where I see hate when I look at the floor of the House and the Senate. And the talk – Harry Reid says things that no one would have said in those days. Lyndon Johnson wouldn’t have said it. He might have said it in his office, but he didn’t say it in public.
Smith: Is it true that after six o’clock, basically, people called a truce and went out and had a drink together?

Parma: Oh yeah, everybody. It was a common story that Gerald Ford and Tip O’Neill would finish fighting like cats and dogs on the floor on some issue, and they’d adjourn the House, and they’d go arm in arm and have a drink someplace or go have dinner. It was common.

Smith: Now, what that raises is fascinating. I’m wondering how much of that really is less ideological and more generational. Because it seems to be, after a while, the next generation is always pointing a finger at those in power and saying, “You’re not confrontational enough.” You could almost trace this. And subsequently – Gingrich’s criticism of Bob Michel, was, “You’re rolling over. We need to be more confrontational.” And presumably, that went back to the Ford era; that you’ve accepted minority status. How do you deal with that? Presumably he had not accepted minority status.

Parma: No, they didn’t accept it and they were out fighting tooth and nail to raise money and organize districts that were vulnerable to Republican winning. I know Bob Wilson worked very hard, and I think he had that job for eight or ten years. He was there a long time, and put a lot of time into it. And Jerry Ford – I remember one year he said he traveled 267 days, or something like that. I would tell him, “I don’t know if you can keep this up.” This is after I’d come home and we’d play golf, and he was just so relaxed playing golf, and said, “Oh, I wish I could do this more often and be able to relax like this. I’ve got to go out there and win those seats so I can be the Speaker.” He was determined he was going to be the Speaker.

Smith: You also wonder what the consequences of that were at home.

Parma: Tough. Every morning he would make a call home and every evening would make a call home. “Mother, how’s everything? How are the kids doing?” And then he’d talk to the kids. I cannot remember a time that we were together that he didn’t place a call in the morning and the evening. That was as president,
vice president, Minority Leader, and before he became the Minority Leader. It was interesting.

Smith: How long were you in Washington?

Parma: I was there five years.

Smith: Until?

Parma: I came in January of ’58 and left the end of December ’62. The last three years of Eisenhower and just two years in the Kennedy administration. We had a little group we called the Inner Circle composed of 15 or so assistants to key Republicans on the Hill, House and Senate. Most of our members were in the leadership as well as VP Nixon’s assistant. A colleague by the name of Jack Caukins was our leader, you may have met him along the line. We would meet once a week, just like our members would, and discuss legislative matters. We always had a guest we’d bring up from downtown. Due to the stature of our bosses, we were able to get members of Ike’s Cabinet, Secretaries from the Cabinet to come up and visit with us. When Kennedy was elected in 1960, we said, “Well, what are we going to do now?” Well, Caukins said, “Well, let’s get Bobby. If we can get Bobby Kennedy, the attorney general, we can get them all.” And so we said, “Okay, Jack, that’s your job. Go get him.”

And I’ll be darned, he called there and he said, “We’d like to have the General.” He described our group and who our bosses were. “We’d really love to have the General come up and visit with us.” And his Chief of Staff said, “Well, we can probably arrange that. Let me talk to him.” He called back within a day and he said, “Yeah, we’ll do that.” Picked a date, and we set it up, and the day it was going to happen, the day before, I guess, the assistant to the AG calls up and tells Jack, “We want to meet down here in our office.” Jack says, “Oh, we can’t do that, we have drinks, bring food in.” He said, “We can handle that down here. Don’t worry about that. We’ll meet in the General’s office.”
So we went down and met with Bobby Kennedy. He was sitting at his desk, a big desk like this, and of course, they have those huge offices. That was the period of time when they were writing stories about Bobby having pictures his kids had painted or drawn in crayon and a football sitting on the mantel. He’s sitting back of this big desk with his sleeves rolled up and tie askance, and his feet up on the chair and holding his knees like this. And we went - for two hours we talked to him. He said, “You guys will never get into office. You’ll never get there again.” And we said, “Why?” And he said, “We’re going to organize this thing and you won’t be able to do it. What do you think the Peace Corps is for and all these other things? We’re just bringing them back…”

I mean, he was that frank and that cocky. He was absolutely positive that they were going to be so structured, so organized that we’d never get back into office. It was a wonderful talk – I’d loved to have taped it. You would have loved it, as a historian. And we asked him questions like, “Why did you put Ted Kennedy out to run California? And so and so to run in Illinois?” They digressed from the normal plan of getting the Republican leader or the Democratic leader of the state to be the chairman of the state. They put high powered guys in representing Kennedy. Ted Kennedy out in California. And he said, “We avoided a lot of fights. We put our guy in there and the others reported to him.” It was a wonderful strategy, and it paid off.

Smith: Do you remember – would Ford have been in on this meeting?

Parma: No, those meetings were of our staff members. Ford didn’t have a staff man in the group. Frank, I think was busy. He had a fellow named Frank – I can’t think of him now. But Mildred Leonard was a key player in his office.

Smith: Let me ask you, because much would later be made of the notion that he tried to reproduce the Congressional mindset, whatever that is, organizational structure – simply move it from Capitol Hill to the White House. And then it didn’t work, it couldn’t work. There are all sorts of things. What are the strengths and what are the weaknesses of the Congressional structure, if you will, or outlook – transplanted to an executive position?
Parma: Well, I guess primarily, when you get into the executive position, you have one man calling the shots. In the House, in particular, it’s like herding cats. You get all of these different views and different sectors of the country responding to leadership, but no dictatorial leadership, per se. I felt, looking back right now, that certainly on great issues they get together. They lose people along the way sometimes through pressures from home, labor unions, and other people that put pressure on our numbers. Members who are in marginal districts are always protecting themselves, trying to protect themselves.

Barry Goldwater made a profound statement one time. At the time that Bob was the chairman, Barry was also the chairman of the Senatorial Campaign Committee. We’d go over and sit down with Barry. Barry happened to be a fraternity brother of mine from Arizona. We were years apart in age, but we always passed the grip and called each other brother and things like that. I asked him one day, there was one seat where a Republican was running, and he was obviously a very liberal Republican, and I asked him, “Barry how can you support that man and put all this money into that race?” He said, “Leon, all I want is one vote. When we organize the Senate, that’s when I want his vote. I’ll worry about the rest of it later. Let’s organize the Senate and control the Senate. We’ll have the chairman and we’ll take care of his liberal bent as we come along.”

I’ll never forget that - that one vote was critical. No one appreciates it, even today, when they criticize a candidate for being a liberal or too conservative. One vote controls the Senate. He could have controlled the Senate with just one vote.

Smith: It’s interesting, and I ask, parenthetically, your opinion; as someone who was there then, of course the whole Kennedy aura – post-assassination – presumably is very different from while the president was alive.

Parma: Yeah. I think if Kennedy had gone on, that the ’64 election would have been then, a very interesting election. Because there were a lot of things that occurred that rankled the masses – the Bay of Pigs. I recall Admiral Burke,
Chief of Naval Operations. But when he retired, he paid his respects to Bob Wilson. Bob asked him (my office was actually situated in Bob Wilson’s office. He put a partition up and I was on the other side of that with a little desk. He and I had been friends for years. So he was very comfortable having an atypical office set up. So he invited me to sit down with them. Bob asked him, “Admiral, what happened at the Bay of Pigs?” And he said, “Well, I’ll tell you, those young men down there had never had to make a decision to commit another man’s life. And that was necessary. We had our ships offshore and we were all ready to do things, they did not commit because some Americans might get killed, and they went down.” Somebody wrote, a fine newspaperman wrote it, wrote a long essay in *Fortune* magazine that really documented all of it. The Bay of Pigs was a military fiasco. But there were issues like that, that would come to the fore.

Smith: You assume Goldwater would have been the nominee?

Parma: I don’t know. Rockefeller took a good run at him. And the conservative movement was coming up and it was all happening, a lot of it, because of the Kennedys. They were iron-handed. They were dictatorial downtown. They were tough.

Smith: But if you factor in the Civil Rights bill, and let’s face it, most of Goldwater’s support, certainly in the South, the old, solid South, was based on race. Almost overnight the Republican Party is redefining itself in ways that must have made some people uncomfortable.


Smith: Let me ask you one thing about staff, because I heard President Ford talk about – being the fiscal conservative that he was – he thought that it was really unfortunate, for a lot of reasons, that Congressional staffs had gotten as large as they had. Characteristically, a congressman like him, what would his staff have numbered in those days?
Parma: Minimal, actually, compared to today. He walked in his office and he had a lot of secretary-types who were doing all the casework. They still involved themselves – the leadership was involved in servicing his district. And this was their bent. Bob Hartmann was kind of the outside guy.

Smith: Where did he come from?

Parma: Bob came out of Los Angeles. He had been with the LA Times. Then they made him the Washington rep for the *Los Angeles Times*. I remember my first or second night in Washington going to a California State Society meeting. Bob and Jeannie Wilson picked Barb and me up and we went together to this dinner. And Hartmann came up and was lobbying Bob about the next chairman of the California State Society. I said, “You guys can’t get away from this stuff, can you?” But that’s the first time I met Bob Hartmann.

Smith: Hartmann was clearly a kind of lightning rod within the Ford office.

Parma: Yeah.

Smith: And at first blush, he seems like an unusual guy for Ford to repose so much trust in.

Parma: Bob Hartmann was just totally loyal to Ford. He had one interest, and that interest was what’s good for Jerry Ford. And he was that way right through the White House. His biggest concern in the White House, and I guess I was one of the few guys that we’d come into Washington, we’d have lunch together. And he let it all come out – these guys are leaking stuff and doing stuff – things they shouldn’t do. He was a strong advocate, in my mind, of cleaning out the Nixon people.

Smith: And that raises a question. Ford, everyone agrees that he was a nice guy; perhaps in some ways, too nice a guy. And I would imagine someone like Hartmann would take heat, out of his loyalty, for in a way compensating for Ford’s being so trusting and so reluctant to clean house.

Parma: Yeah. Bob would see things happening, and he would, as subtle as he could, try to explain to the President, “This guy is not doing what he should be
doing.” The good thing about Bob Hartmann, he told him just exactly what he felt. Ford would kind of shoo him off sometimes, and other times he’d listen to him.

Smith: Well, that’s got to be an invaluable trait, because presidents are surrounded by people who don’t do that.

Parma: I think he kept him on track and would get him off of things. There is more than one issue that Bob would say, “Maybe we’d better do it this way.” They criticized his speechwriting, but he had things that he put in there that was a Fordism – that became a Fordism-type of thing. But I was always pleased that Bob was there. There was a little power play initially – the little office that adjoins the Oval Office – Bob wanted to be in that office. And the President said, “Historically that office has been a kind of hideaway office.” - which Bill Clinton used effectively. And so Hartmann ended up in Henry’s office. He had the big office. Rummy had the corner office, which was traditionally the chief of staff’s.

Smith: And how did Rumsfeld’s appointment come about?

Parma: It just happened, I think. An interesting byplay here was that I received a call from Hartmann a day or two before the President became president. He said, “Your friend wants you and Barbara to be back here. That’s all I can say. Get here as fast as you can.” And we took the earliest plane out the next morning.

Smith: And I assume you interpreted that as…

Parma: Yeah – I’ll tell you what happened once, gave substance to it. The Vice President, at the time, was in San Diego. He was going to make a speech that night, and I forget where he’d been, but they’d flown in and I was up in the suite visiting with him. He said, “I’ve got to take a shower.” I said, “Okay.” He said, “Wait there and we’ll go down together.” And he goes in and takes a shower. The phone rings – the red phone. So I picked it up and it’s Al Haig. He said, “Where’s the Vice President - is he there?” And I said, “Yeah, Al, he is. He’s taking a shower.” He says, “I’ve got to talk to him.” I said, “You want
me to get him out of the shower?” He says, “No, don’t do that. But as soon as he gets out, have him call me.”

He came out of the shower within a couple of minutes and I said, “Al Haig just called.” He kind of looked at me and he said, “Okay, get him on the phone.” So I picked it up and said, “Get Haig on the phone.” He came right on and I said, “Just a minute,” and I handed it to him, and he says, “Yeah, I’m making a speech. I’m leaving as soon as I make the speech. We’re going to the airplane, I’m flying back. I’ll be in my office at eight o’clock. I’ll see you at eight o’clock. Thank you, Al.” That was it. And he looked at me and he said, “It’s getting close. Something is happening.” That was the first part of August and then it started rolling.

Smith: So you get the call, “Come to DC.”

Parma: Then I get the call to go to DC. I like to stay at the Hay-Adams, so I told them I want the suite that looks at the White House. Barb and I sat in that suite looking at the White House and the television was just to the right of the window when Nixon gave his speech that he was going to resign. Then I received a call from Hartmann. He said, “Be here at eleven o’clock tomorrow.” Eleven o’clock came and Barb and I took a cab over to the South Entrance, and walked in and there was Senator Bob Griffin and Marg, and Congressman John Rhodes and Elizabeth. And so we three couples went up the stairs and walked into the East Room. It was packed, absolutely packed.

What had happened was all the Nixon people who’d been there for the farewell speech for Nixon, appreciating that they were going to be, could be a part of history, when they said, “Clear out,” they didn’t clear out. So when the Ford entourage got there, there were no seats. Griffin was the Minority Leader of the Senate, and here was Johnny Rhodes who succeeded Ford as the Minority Leader. Jack Ford happened to turn around and he looked back and saw us. So he gets up and he’s telling his sister and brothers to get up. I said, “No, no, no.” Finally an usher comes up and I said, “Don’t bother about me, but these two are the leaders of the House and Senate Republicans. Find them a place to sit up front.” Well, he left and came back and he said, “I can’t find
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anything, but I’ve got six seats right over in front of the cameras.” So they put
us over there.

Smith: This is fascinating because in so many ways it seems emblematic of the
problems that would recur -the Nixon people refusing to leave.

Parma: Well, actually, following his being sworn in as president, a little reception line
formed and he and Betty were in the line, I don’t know if anybody else was
there. But I know the two of them were there. And then we passed over into
the State Dining Room where they had a little hors d'oeuvre table set up, and
most of the Nixon people just left. It was another aspect because there were
very few of us in the State Dining Room; enough that we were comfortable,
and didn’t have a lot of people pushing around. The whole East Room was
full, if you think about it. All the Nixon people left, and just the Ford people
went through the receiving line.

The leadership of the House and the Senate, Ford had asked them to come up,
and they met in the Red or Blue Room, one of those rooms, and then the rest
of us were over in the State Dining Room. Pretty soon Susan came in and
said, “Mother wants you.” So we walked with her over to the first room, the
Blue Room, right after the State Dining Room, and there’s Betty. Betty said,
“Just wait a minute. He’s going to be out here in a minute.” We didn’t know
why we were there. So we waited and pretty soon he comes out and he says,
“Let’s go.” And so we went to the elevator and got on the elevator and went
down and walked across and walked him into the Oval Office. Betty and the
President walked in and Barb and I were right in back of them. First time he’d
been President. I should have that picture on the wall here – the President and
Betty with the Bible sitting on the table.

And so we went over and stood by the fireplace and they were taking pictures
of Betty and the President and the kids and all that. He says, “Don’t you want
to get in the picture?” And I said, “Of course. We’d love to.” So Barb and I
went over and stood with Betty and the President and had a great picture
taken of us. Then we visited a little bit and then I said, “Well, you’ve got a
country to run, Mr. President. We’re going to leave you alone.” And he said,
“Now, you’re coming over to the house tonight.” I said, “Thank you, we will be there.” And he said, “Just wear your golf shirt, it’s going to be real informal, going to be another two or three couples. That’s all.” I said, “Okay.” I wore a suit to the house. He had on a golf shirt and just looked at me but didn’t say a word about my not wearing a golf shirt. He knew there was a new protocol in place.

Smith: Now, when he said “the house,” he meant the house in Alexandria.

Parma: They were still living in the Alexandria house – they’d taken the garage and made it a Secret Service command post and put bullet-proof glass all through the house. But, then he said, you come over to the house and wear the golf shirt and he says to an aide that was standing there, one of the Nixon staff, he said, “Do you think you could arrange for Mr. and Mrs. Parma to have a car take them over there?” The man says, “Yes, Mr. President, we’ll take care of that.” So, with that we went back to the hotel.

At five o’clock that afternoon, I met with the President’s old law school buddy, Phil Buchen. Phil Buchen and I had visited after the swearing in. I’d gone over to Phil to say hello to Phil and I had something to give him. And he said, “Come to the meeting in the Cabinet Room at five o’clock, it’s going to be the Transition Committee; all of us involved in the transition, and you’ve got to be involved in this thing. So be there at five o’clock.” Okay, so at five o’clock I’m at the west entrance and told the receptionist I was supposed to be at the five o’clock meeting with the President, thank you. And I sat down and waited, and nobody came. I said, “What about this meeting?” It was about five after five. About that time Bob Griffin comes in and I said, “Are you in the five o’clock meeting?” And he says, “Yeah, come on.” So we walked in the meeting.

The meeting had already started and we walked in and Bob, obviously, had a seat someplace, so I was going to go around and sit on the side there. The President said, “Sit there, sit right next to Al Haig.” It was at the big Cabinet table. So I sat down next to Al Haig. I have a piece of paper at home – the White House tablet – I wrote down all the names of the men who were in the
meeting. Rummy was there. He’d flown in. In the course of that meeting, the President said, “I don’t want a wholesale movement here of the Nixon people. We’ll take care of that in due time, if we need to do any changes. But, we don’t want the White House emptied.” Mind you, Obama is going through how many months – two months or plus of the transition – this was less than 24 hours that this thing was coming down.

Smith: I think it was Jack Marsh who said something also about that. He said he didn’t want to taint the vast majority of Nixon folks who had honorably done their jobs by tossing them out. By gradually, incrementally, replacing them, they could then go out into the job market, having worked in the Ford White House with all that that implied.

Parma: I think he thought the process was, you can’t move this functioning government out of the way, because we don’t have anybody in place, practically speaking. And he said, “I don’t want resignations coming out of any of the Nixon people.” And Rummy says, “I already sent you my letter of resignation.” And Ford says, “I didn’t get it. And you’re not going to resign.” So that was the first indication to me – and Rummy had already moved into place. Ford had told him to set this thing up. I felt that was a fait d’accompli there.

Smith: And what was it in their relationship that led Ford to repose such trust in Rumsfeld?

Parma: I think that through a long period of time that he worked at the White House and all, that he’d held good jobs and he was ambassador to NATO at the time. I remember there was a tie that I found someplace that had the seal, the eagle on it. It wasn’t really a good silk tie, but I purchased several of these things. And Ford saw it and said, “I’d like one of those.” So I bought him all the colors of that tie and sent them to him. And I saw Rummy one time, and he was still ambassador to NATO, and so he said, “I want one of those.” Okay, so I sent him six different colors of it. Rummy sent me a NATO tie, and I still have it in my drawer in the plastic.
Anyway, I think he saw in Rumsfeld a solid guy who had some background on the Hill at the time.

Smith: Also, a guy who could say no?

Parma: Yeah. And kind of steel. Grabbed onto things in a hurry. He and Hartmann were like this. And Rummy ran a tight shop.

Smith: I wonder if that’s why – as you know, I’m doing this Rockefeller book – my sense is that Hartmann formed an alliance with Rumsfeld. Bill Seidman was part of that group, too. And clearly, the one thing they all had in common was they all, in their own minds, had reason to see Rumsfeld as an adversary.

Parma: Possibly. I don’t know. I know that generally I thought that Nelson Rockefeller was well received, other than the Reagan people who dumped on him.

Smith: There’s a classic Ford story. It tells you so much about the man on multiple levels. All these people said Rockefeller moved to the right, tactically maybe, but it was never convincing, which was the problem. He saw the energy crisis, so he came up with this characteristically immense government program, the Energy Independence Corporation, $100 billion, which was going to be funded with bonds – New York State government on a larger scale. And there was a discussion in the Cabinet. It was very clear that Rockefeller was alone in supporting this. Bill Simon was particularly pointed in his criticisms, some of which bordered on the personal. And the president came down on Rockefeller’s side. When the meeting ended, Simon – and it just reveals so much about Ford and Simon – continued the argument. The President said, “You and I both know Congress is never going to pass that legislation, but I’m not going to humiliate Nelson in front of the Cabinet.” Now, that tells you so much about Ford’s, for lack of a better word, emotional intelligence – understanding better than a brainy guy like Bill Simon, how things work. But it also does raise questions about the Congressional mindset, as opposed to the more ruthless executive mindset.
Parma: I think that Jerry Ford always lamented the fact that he didn’t take Rockefeller as the vice president, it probably made a difference. Actually, he could have had – if he had taken Reagan, it would have made a difference. It would have been a slam dunk with Reagan, I think. An interesting byplay took place at the convention. I never had any formal standing any place, few people even knew who I was or why, other than he’s the guy who plays golf with the President. That’s about the size of it.

The first day we were there, Bill Smith, William French Smith, Reagan’s lawyer went out of his way to find me and visit. It was a nice conversation, nothing came out of it. About a day later, the next morning, Smith found me again and he said, “Reagan would like to have an interface with President Ford. I’m going to be Reagan’s guy, and he would like Ford to name somebody.” I said, “Okay, I’ll go to him and see if we can get a person for you.” So I went to Ford and Ford said, “I don’t know what that’s all about.” I said, “Well, I think they just want to be comfortable that they have some way that they can reach you, knowing that it’s not going through all your whole organization.”

He said, “Okay. You do it.” “Okay, I’ll do it.” And so the attorney general of California at the time, and had been our state co-chairman with me, was Evelle Younger. So I got hold of Evelle Younger and I said, “I don’t know what Bill Smith and these guys are up to, but…” I told him about it. I said, “I want you in the meeting whenever we have these meetings.” And we met a couple of times a day during the convention. Nothing extraordinary happened. When it came time for the vote, Bill got hold of me and he said, “If Ford wins, Reagan does not want to be the vice president. He’s very strong on it and he doesn’t want to have the meeting if he thinks he’s going to have to tell the President no. He doesn’t want to do that.” So I went to Ford and told him that. “It’s up to you.” In the meantime he’s talking to everybody, Bob Dole, and others. So he said, “You tell him that if I’m the nominee that would be the case.” If nominated, the President was going to have the meeting that night with Reagan. And so, when the time came, Sears got hold of Cheney, told him
the same thing – that this is the condition of the meeting - that he’s not to be asked. So Ford said to assure him that we won’t ask him. So that took place.

A little sidebar to that was in September, after the convention we had a meeting in Sacramento. There is a breakfast meeting in Sacramento. Justin Dart came up to me and he says, “I got a letter here you’ve got to give to the President. I don’t know why it never got to him at the convention.” And he said, “I laid it out here why Reagan should have been the vice president nominee. He didn’t take him.” And I said, “Well, I was told by William French Smith and Sears told Cheney, that this was the case. All these conditions were laid out.” He said, “I had it all set up.” I said, “And what were you going to do with Nancy?” He said, “We were going to get her out of the room.” And that was how it was going to work. But he wanted him to ask him to be vice president. And he was kind of the leader of the Reagan Kitchen Cabinet with Holmes Tuttle.

Smith: The Kitchen Cabinet.

Parma: Yeah, the famous Kitchen Cabinet, who were going to take over Blair House. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard that story. They will deny it to this day, but the plan was that the Kitchen Cabinet would have Blair House, and they would be there to help Ronnie. Some guy said, “You can’t have Blair House, that’s a government facility, you know. We use that for visiting dignitaries and the rest of it.” But that was the thought process that they had. It would have been a different election, probably.

Smith: Did Ford have a Kitchen Cabinet?

Parma: Closest he had was his Transition Committee, and I think – another part I wanted to tell you about. That five o’clock meeting, I think was the first realization that the President had that he was President of the United States. At the time of our meeting, the ambassador corps was coming to the White House and presenting their credentials. They had them set up in the Roosevelt Room, and so Terry would come in and whisper to the President, he said, “Okay.” And the President would stand up and we’d all stand up. “Sit down,
sit down. SIT DOWN.” We’d just remain standing and he’d leave the room. This happened twice. The third time – oh I guess he came back from the second one and we all stood up. He said, “Sit down! How many times do I have to tell you to sit down?” And Congressman Johnny Byrns of Wisconsin says, “Mr. President, we’re not standing up because you’re Jerry Ford; we’re standing up because you’re the President of the United States of America.” Ford kind of looked at him and kind of looked around at us, and sat down. And I think that moment was the exact time that he knew things were going to be different.

Smith: I want to go back, just briefly. That California primary in ’76 must have gotten pretty ugly, the Ford-Reagan contest.

Parma: It was and it wasn’t. That primary was very difficult. I had California – he told me, “You’ve got to deliver California.” And so I got Evelle Younger to be the state chairman and then right away had a problem with Evelle because he was putting all his people into key jobs. And so I had Stu Spencer come to the LA airport. Had Evelle fly into the LA airport and then I had a guy who worked for me by the name of Ron Fuller come in and we had a meeting. The meeting was to tell Evelle, “You’re not to set up your governor’s campaign on our account. We don’t want to get your race in the way of whoever the other candidate is going to be.” They had a good candidate that was getting ready to run against Evelle. Evelle didn’t get it.

Smith: Houston Flournoy.

Parma: Yeah, I guess it was Flournoy. And so he kind of challenged me. “How can you do this?” I said, “Well, I’m doing it. Do you want me to have somebody else tell you what I’ve just told you? Be happy to call him right now.” And Evelle said, “No, that’s fine.” You can ask Stu Spencer about this question. But at that point we settled it – it was going to be a Ford campaign not a Younger campaign.
Smith: Let me ask you, and this may be unfair, if you were in my position and you had six hours to ask Stu anything, at this point in history, is there anything you don’t know about that race that you would ask Stu?

Parma: About the…?

Smith: About the ’76 campaign?

Parma: The ’76 campaign? Well, I’d ask him, why couldn’t you get Reagan to say something about Ford?

Smith: In the fall?

Parma: In the fall. Now the other part of this – there are a whole series of things that happened. Following Reagan’s loss at the convention, Smith sought me out again and he said, “Please tell the President not to call Reagan.” I said, “You’ve got to be kidding me. You don’t want the President to call the Governor?” “I think it would be better that he didn’t.” And I said, “Why?” And he said, “I’m not sure he’d take the call.” That was not Reagan, to me. It just didn’t sound like Reagan.

Smith: But it also suggests that there was a real lingering bitterness.

Parma: Yes, there was. There was absolute bitterness.

Smith: And it probably wasn’t limited to the Governor.

Parma: And it was his staff as well. And so Ford had a little campaign committee – I think Dick Herman was on it, Rockefeller put a guy on it that was an executive vice president of one of his companies, or something – a lawyer. A nice guy, can’t think of his name. And Thurston Morton was there, Ford would attend meetings, I was there. So I asked Ford, in order to maintain some relationship with the Reagan people, why don’t we put William French Smith onto this thing? You’ve got Rockefeller’s guy – and he said, “That’s fine.” So I called Smith and asked him if he’d come to the next meeting.

In each one of those meetings – and I have notes about this – I’d say, “It’s time that these two talked.” “Nope, it’s not time, I will tell you when it’s
time.” So it was just a very, very bitter feeling that exists. It wasn’t until we were into the campaign six weeks or more we had a meeting at the Mayflower of the group, and he got me aside and he said, “It’s time.” I said, “Okay.” I called Cheney over at the White House and I said, “I’ve got Bill Smith with me and we need to talk to the President tonight about calling Reagan.” And he said, “Okay, he’s at a reception at the White House, over in the main floor of the White House. Why don’t you come over, I’ll clear you through, come to that reception. Then when he goes upstairs you and Smith follow him.” I said, okay. So we went up after he’d done his thing and we went upstairs into what was their living room at the time. I said, “Tell the President what you have to say.” And he said, “It’s time now. You can call Reagan.” He said, “Okay, I’ll do it tomorrow.” Was not going to do it right now – three hours difference – it was still early in California.

So he did it the next day and had a nice conversation, he said. But as a result of that, I think – I don’t know that Reagan ever knew this. I don’t know. The reason I say that, we were at a meeting later during the campaign at the Marriott Hotel at LAX, one of those big hotels going down to the airport. And we had all the Reagan people there. I was sitting next to Holmes Tuttle. Holmes Tuttle says to me, or he made the statement before Margaret Brock and all these people who were sitting there, “Ford didn’t even call Reagan after the campaign.” I said, “Holmes, we were directed not to call him.” “That’s a lie!” I said, “You’re telling me I’m lying to you?” And he said, “Yes.” I said, “No,” and I told him the story. Bill Smith told me this and we waited. About that time Bill Smith walks up. I put my hand on Holmes’ arm and I said, “Holmes, don’t you say a word, I’m going to ask Bill a question, and you wait for the answer.” And I turned to Bill and I said, “Bill, would you tell Holmes what you were telling and I was passing to the President about calling Reagan?” And he repeated verbatim what I’d just told him. Holmes shot out of his seat, grabbed Smith by the arm, took him over in the corner, and I could hear him, “Don’t you ever tell that story again.” I mean, it was a rant. But, that led me to believe, someplace communications had broken down.
In a way, Ford was the victim, because Reagan did not – I offered Lynn Nofziger a thousand dollars – I said, “I’ll give you a thousand dollars, Nofziger,” and he was a dear, dear, friend and covered us when I was working in the Congress. “I’ll give you a thousand dollars for every time Reagan mentions Ford over twice in a speech, if you’ll give me a thousand dollars if he doesn’t mention him in the speech.” He wouldn’t take the bet. And I’ve never gone back to check the speeches because I know they are all doctored. But I don’t think ever, I never heard it, that he ever mentioned President Ford, by name, or as president.

Smith: Were you in DC on election night?

Parma: Yes, I flew in. In fact, I took an airplane out of LAX election morning, flew to Logan, Utah, picked up Jack Ford, and we flew cross-country to the White House. Not a cloud in the sky. I said, “There’s got to be a cloud there, Jack. Someplace, it’s got to be raining!” Like Michigan or someplace.

Smith: Was Jack upbeat?

Parma: Yeah, he felt good about it. He’s a junior in college or something like that. Oh yeah, he’d had a fun campaign, and all that. We had a nice time. We flew into Washington and the little Learjet – I guess we refueled in Utah, we were able to make it from there right on in. But then we went right to the White House. Joe Garagiola did a great job during the campaign – everything Stu would ask for, I guess, Joe did. So the President asked Joe and his wife to come over. Well, Joe brought his wife and I don’t know how many kids were there, and it was an interesting group. Jake Javits was there. Pearl Bailey was there.

Smith: The Doles were there.

Parma: Dole? I don’t think Dole was there. It was an interesting group. Kennerly had a bunch of pictures. I was kind of the scorekeeper. I had a copy of Newsweek magazine that had an excellent layout on the states and the delegate votes. So I was keeping score. The President kept saying, “Leon, what is it?” So I’d show him. I’d circle the states that were still coming in. It was not good.
Smith: Were you watching TV?

Parma: We were watching the television, but it was difficult to keep the score sheet and knowing the states we had to win. And I guess it was like two o’clock in the morning, or something like that; Cheney came in and told us how dire it was. Once the President asked, “Where you staying? You staying here?” I said, “No, I don’t know where I’m staying, frankly.” “Well, why don’t you stay here?” And I think Betty overheard him or something, and somebody said, “Mr. President, there aren’t any bedrooms.” All of Joe’s kids were in the bedrooms. And so I said, “Oh, don’t worry about it. I’ll bunk out with somebody else downtown.” I said, “I want to be back here in the morning when you do your thing.” He’d lost his voice and I was concerned.

Smith: That night, was he able to speak?

Parma: Not much, he’d lost it in Grand Rapids. It was his last stop, I think, before he came into Washington, he’d gone to Grand Rapids. And that’s where it finally gave out. Next morning, he didn’t have a voice. And there was a debate amongst the family, who should read the statement. Have Jack read it, have Susan. He said, “Betty will read the statement.” Just the four kids and Betty and me, we were in the Oval Office. So, with that we walked into the press room. I walked into the press secretary’s room to watch the television. I wished I’d gone into the other room, I could have seen everything. I was more interested in how Betty was going to do.

Smith: And remember Ohio, which was so close. Did it take him a while to get over the loss?

Parma: Oh, I don’t know that he ever really got over it. Give me 9,000, he’d be president. I figured that out one time. It was that close. And the pardon thing took him down. The Polish thing was a big deal. I think that cost him votes.

Smith: People tend to forget about this, but the last weekend before the election, there was some new economic numbers, which, at the very least, suggested that the comeback that they were trumpeting had stalled out. It wasn’t as robust a recovery as it had appeared to be.
Parma: Well, the debate in San Francisco – after the debate we went out to this Suitros (?) home. This lawyer from one of the big law firms in San Francisco. And Henry got him there. Henry told him what a great debate it was and how well he’d done. Didn’t mention the Polish thing.

Smith: Was that characteristic of Kissinger?

Parma: Yeah. But the next day we flew down to USC, and there was a big meeting and was not in the meeting for some reason. Stu was in the meeting and can tell you what happened there. And Ford was very stubborn about it. “I didn’t make a mistake.” Ford had been, I think after Helsinki, had gone into Poland. A million people lined the place and were throwing roses at him and everything else. And he saw that, and he felt it. They were not minions of the Soviets, and this was what he was trying to say.

Smith: If he had put it in those personal terms, no one would have thought twice.

Parma: Oh, the next day or that night, or if anybody had said, “You didn’t look into the eyes of the Polish people when I was driven through their streets and they were throwing roses at us. They were not controlled by the Soviets. Yes, they were occupied, but they had not caved.” Even the head of the American Polish Society flew out to meet with him, saying how wrong he was. No one sensed this. And it never came out like I just said it, to my mind. It never came out.

Smith: What does it tell you about – frankly, it’s not up to the President to come up with a formulation like that? Were there people around him who could have?

Parma: Yeah, I don’t know why they didn’t feed it in. I said it. I didn’t say it to the press, they didn’t know who the hell I was. I asked somebody, I said, “Don’t they understand what he said? I mean, he saw the people.” He was standing in a parking lot, or something like that, and the press had him cornered and he tried to explain his way out of the deal. And Carter kept hammering away on it. It was an interesting time.

Smith: Did he ever talk about it in later years?
Parma: Yeah, a little bit. He said they didn’t understand what I was saying. It was a shame.

Smith: What’s it feel like to come back to this room?

Parma: I felt, from the first time we walked in the Oval Office, I couldn’t believe that this friend, this golfing partner, who we’d been on so many vacations with and all that, was, indeed, the President of the United States. If you go to that door, you can look out across and see a house on the 150 yard marker, of the 12th fairway, this is 13. He called me up one day and he said, “I found a house for you. You’ve got to come.” I said, “Mr. President, I don’t need a house in Palm Springs. Barbara’s aunt has a house, we’ll stay there whenever we go down.” “No, you’ve got to buy this house. I can see it right from here.” I bought the house.

He’d call me up – I’d let him know when I was in town – and his thing was, “We can tee off on 13, then we’d come around and play 12. You go home, then I’m right here.” And this was it. We’d play the nine holes. We wouldn’t play the eighteen. We did this quite often.

It was that kind of a warm relationship. And I’m always in awe. I never addressed him as anything but Mr. President. Very few times did I, when we were really alone, did I say Jerry. But it offended me whenever I heard anybody call him…he had a bunch of New York guys that were hanging around. Loved to be Jerry. I just couldn’t understand – it was Mr. President.

We talked a lot of football.

Smith: College and pro?

Parma: Well, he could have been a pro. I was a half-assed quarterback at San Diego State, so we knew the lingo and talked about it.

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

Parma: We just had a nice little chat. I sat there and we talked about something. He had some pictures he was showing me. The last time I saw him was the day of
the – I guess it was the Ohio State-Michigan game – and he was in his hospital bed sitting in the study. He was right there. Right to the end, he thought he’d win the game. They lost. He thought that they’d win the game. We had a coach down at my University of San Diego State, Steve Fisher, who had been the assistant coach the year that they were going to the Final Four. Fish took them to the Final Four. I think they won. The Fab Five, I think they called it. Ford knew him and he was always telling me, “Say hello to Fish.”

We went to Ann Arbor one time for something. It was after he was President. They’d always take him down to the locker room. In ’77, we had the major league all star game at San Diego. And Bowie Kuhn, Baseball Commission, had invited him to the game, so he invited me to go with him. He loved to go into the locker rooms. We went into both locker rooms. Bowie had his box right on the first base – right opposite the first baseman and we sat there and watched the game. But he loved that; he just absolutely loved those things. He was a good jock.

Barbara and I accompanied Betty aboard Air Force One from Palm Springs to Washington, Grand Rapids and back to Palm Springs. It was a great moment for me during the funeral services, flying from Washington to Grand Rapids aboard Air Force One. And when we passed over Detroit, we were told the pilot was going to do something over Michigan stadium, it was going to be on the left side, so I was sitting on the left side and I sat, going to Washington with Betty and going from Grand Rapids with him. Just had the feeling that he shouldn’t be there by himself. Whenever I saw no one was there, I sat down. When we went over Detroit, the pilot started letting that airplane down, and he took it down, had the full flaps down, he had the wheels down. Everything was down in that airplane, I swear, and there was an Air Force officer came to me and says, “I’ve never seen one of these airplanes go this slow.” But he brought that airplane down, a thousand feet or so, he was low. He dipped the wings in salute and just throttled slowly back up to altitude towards Grand Rapids. When we were over the stadium I was hitting the casket, and I said, “We’re over the stadium!” I just totally lost it. And Marty Allen had walked in about that time, I know he thought I was going crazy. And I had this heavy
ring on so I was hitting the top of the casket. I had restrained myself the whole time. That did it. The old jock received the ultimate accolade on his trip home – he was given a low level flyover Michigan Stadium where he had so many fond memories. I know this would be one of the most special events of all that were held that week.

Smith: That’s perfect.
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Smith: Several people told me you’re Mrs. Ford’s closest and oldest friend.

Fisher: 82 years.

Smith: 82 years. I think that qualifies on both counts. Where did you first meet?

Fisher: We met in dancing school. I think I’ve told this story before, but we met in Calla Travis’ School of Dance a Thursday afternoon and started dancing classes.

Smith: Was that in Grand Rapids?

Fisher: In Grand Rapids on Fulton Street. The building’s still there.

Smith: Really?

Fisher: And my mother sent me because I was a tomboy with three brothers and she wanted me to be graceful and lower my voice. So, I was sent to aesthetic dancing class and there I met my friend. She was very, very graceful.

Smith: Was she?

Fisher: Yes. She could kick much higher and she was in the right place to carry on.

Smith: She was Betty Bloomer.

Fisher: She was Betty Bloomer, yes. And she lived in town. We lived out in the country, so we used to come in town to do all kinds of things. It was three miles one way.

Smith: What was Grand Rapids like then?

Fisher: Well, there were streetcars and there was the main street, Monroe Avenue. There were some nice stores and a big hotel.

Smith: The Pantlind?
Lilian Fisher

Fisher: The Pantlind. The Pantlind family were part of our group; some of their children were our contemporaries. And, what else? Well, my grandmother and grandfather lived on Fulton Street and this is near where some of my friends lived. Out in the country, I really felt very lonely. I didn’t have any sidewalks to skate on. I had animals to play with and dolls and a brook and a lot of country things that my parents thought were great for a family of six children. And we had a wonderful life out there. But as soon as we were teenagers and all, we spent more time in town. Although, we started early, as I say, eight years old in the dancing class.

Smith: What was she like as a child?

Fisher: What was she like?

Smith: Yeah.

Fisher: She was pretty. She had a Dutch cut. That’s what we had with bangs. Pretty, just pretty. I always thought, “Oh my, she’s pretty and she’s not too tall and she can kick.” She could pirouette and do all these crazy things.

Smith: Did she have personality?

Fisher: Yes, you just sort of knew she was there in a quiet way. You were always aware that she was part of the group. She was more mature, I think, than some of the rest of us.

Smith: What about her family?

Fisher: Well, she had two older brothers, Bill and Bob. And they were quite a lot older. They were even older than my older brothers, so I didn’t really know them well at all. I met them over the years, but never really knew them. They weren’t in Grand Rapids for lots of time as I recall, but her mother was a lovely lady and I had met her father a couple of times. He was always away during the week because he traveled.

Smith: What did he do? Was he a salesman?

Fisher: I’m not just sure. I think I read about it. But he just wasn’t there. He was a salesman or a factory representative or some such. I don’t think he was in the
furniture business. Many people were. But we spent from that time together, and then as time went on there were birthday parties and things that our paths crossed. We were always aware of each other as friends. When we began to be closer was when I came in to go to Central High School.

Smith: Now what was the difference between Central High School and South High?

Fisher: Location.

Smith: Okay. Was that the only difference? Because traditionally, you know, they’re portrayed as being was sort of the upper crust school and one was the more diverse or down scale in some ways.

Fisher: I would say that perhaps more of the young people who went to Central went away to boy’s school or went east to college. That pretty much tells the tale. Their parents were in a position and that was important for them. South was very wholesome. It would’ve been much closer for me to go to South, but my brothers went to Central, my father had graduated from Central in the class with Arthur Vandenberg. That was his claim to fame. So, we drove in. My brothers could drive when they were fourteen in Grand Rapids. They wanted all the children to be able to drive tractors to help on the farms. I came in seventh grade and that was junior high, Central. And we got to know each other and we were sort of in the same gang and the same group or in the same bunch. And had many of the same friends - we talk about them today. And then we went and started high school together and were in a sorority that they had then. There’s a picture.

Smith: What was the name of it?

Fisher: It was called Gamma Delta Tau, but it was affectionately known as the Good Cheers. And Betty, just mentioned this when I was talking to her over the weekend. She said, “I love that picture of the Good Cheers.” I think the original I have I sent to the museum. She’s sitting down in the front row and I’m standing in the back row. She was very, very popular with the girls and the boys. We were always telling the girls to wait and see what boys were going to ask Betty for dates on Friday and Saturday to see who’s going to be left over for the rest of us, if we got anybody. And then we went to boy-girl
dancing school, ballroom dancing school, together. Now, overnights and just a lot of good times. I think we would think about just about everything that these kids today can think about, but there was Prohibition and there was a Depression – that made a big impact on our lives.

Smith: How so?

Fisher: I mean, the furniture business collapsed and fathers didn’t have jobs and fathers were committing suicide after the crash.

Smith: Really? Did you know any of them?

Fisher: Oh, yes, I can think of two. My father’s friends. And those were serious times. None of us will ever forget those. And we went on, of course, to the war times, but even today this extravagance and the children who have everything, it bothers me a lot about where values are. But that’s the way it was and it was a wonderful, wonderful place to grow up because there were great winter sports, sledding and skiing and when I was little, we had a pony with a little sleigh. In the summertime, we were near Lake Michigan and we went to Cape Cod as children. As we grew older and the time of the Depression started, we started going back to the Cape in the summer and stay at the house where my grandfather was born. But, before that, we went out on the beach where my father had gone when he was young. Betty told me that’s where she first saw Jerry. She didn’t meet him, but she saw him out on the beach. The name of this little colony on Lake Michigan near Holland, Michigan, you know. [Ottawa Beach]

Smith: Sure, sure. She apparently liked what she saw.

Fisher: Yeah, I won’t tell you what she said.

Smith: Why?

Fisher: But she didn’t meet him then, you know, and they were young. He was five years older.

Smith: Did that take place when you were still quite young?

Okay. From what you said, it sounds like she had a number of boyfriends.

Yes, everybody loved her. To this day and I’ve said this before, of all the times I’ve spent with her over the years and all the places we’ve been, I’ve never heard one person say an unkind thing about Betty. I think I said that to Geoff Mason when he was questioning me about our friendship. But that’s the way it was and it stayed that way.

When did the idea of becoming a professional dancer - how did that evolve?

Well, then there was this period when I went away to school when I was sixteen. When I came back “I was a teenage college dropout,” and I wasn’t in Grand Rapids for some of those later teen years when she was graduating. I remember she was a Herpolsheimer's Personal Shopper.

What was that?

Herpolsheimer's was a department store a lovely, lovely fine department store. Sort of a Grand Rapids substitute for Marshall Field’s. And she had a job there. She was a model and she was also a personal shopper to help them select.

So, all this was someone who had taste from a very early age.

Oh, yes, a very graceful womanly figure, well-turned out, everything like that. She went on with her dancing Calla Travis had this advanced program. One went through certain steps and you graduated just like you did in any school. I didn’t. I wasn’t eligible for that. I went away to school and I got to be the goalie on the soccer team. Anyway, during that period, she stayed there and she danced and she taught dance. My younger sister – eleven years younger – went to one of Betty’s dancing classes.

The Martha Graham period.

By then I was married and lived in Pittsburg.

Okay.

I was married in 1939 and Betty married Bill Warren sometime after that.
Smith: Now, who was Bill Warren?

Fisher: Well, he was a nice guy. Very handsome and very quiet. He sort of scared me. Older and handsome and well turned out. I never got to know him very well, but I certainly knew who he was and saw him around a lot. He was a couple of years older than she was and at that time, you see, when Betty and I got together, we were sticking pretty much with our own age. It makes a big difference when you’re a teen. So, I never really knew him very well.

Smith: He was from Grand Rapids?

Fisher: He was from Grand Rapids. She’s written about him in her books, so I won’t get into that. But they were married for about five years and then she stayed on and soon met Jerry after the war.

Smith: That’s right. And, I guess, was still in the process of getting the divorce when he first asked her out and so she was kind of reluctant to say yes.

Fisher: Yes, he is five years older and he was a football star. We used to go to our football games on Saturday afternoons, our group, the Good Cheers, and a whole bunch of others and sit there and cheer for Central. And the greatest rival was South. The last year, when Jerry was a senior in high school, we saw him play, but I don’t remember who won.

Smith: Who did you cheer for?

Fisher: Oh, we cheered for Central. Then it was shortly after that she saw him as I remember it. She said she heard he was going to the University of Michigan.

Smith: Well, he was sort of a big man on campus.

Fisher: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. He had a presence, you know. He had posture and commanded respect and he was very warm and friendly.

Smith: And yet, it’s well known that he had a temper.

Fisher: When we’d get together, just he, Betty and I, up until the time he became very ill, we’d talk about Grand Rapids. We’d talk about all these things there was nobody else to talk to about. I remember sitting in Vail and Rancho Mirage
and we’d laugh and carry on about the old days. My brother was two years younger than he was and they didn’t know each other closely, but they got to know each other later when Jerry was at Yale in the law school when my brother was a Yale undergraduate. Then, my brother [“Marc” – Rev. Marcus B. Hall, Jr.] went into the ministry and had a church in Stowe, Vermont. He loved to ski. And he built an ecumenical mountain chapel halfway up Mt. Mansfield. He asked Jerry to be on the board with him.

Smith: Really?

Fisher: Yes.

Smith: That’s great.

Fisher: Jerry’s son Mike was in the clergy by then. He lived in (inaudible) and Pittsburgh for a couple of years. His oldest child was born in Pittsburgh.

Smith: That’s right. Religious faith was a significant part of the Ford family.

Fisher: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I mean, have you ever seen a brave man who didn’t have some religious faith?

Smith: Did you know his parents?

Fisher: No, I didn’t. He has a brother who lives in Naples.

Smith: Yes, I’m going to see him tomorrow.

Fisher: I haven’t seen him for a long, long time. I saw him at a distance at the funeral, but I know when Betty was here visiting me when I lived down on Gin Lane, I had some people for dinner and he came with his wife. I haven’t seen him since.

Smith: After the war, when they began seriously dating, were you still in touch with her during that period?

Fisher: No, by then I went to Pittsburgh and then she went to Washington. And she had four children and I had four children and we really didn’t stay in touch. But when she had breast cancer, I had had breast cancer four years before her
and I had kept it a secret. And I thought, “I’ve got to get some words to my friend and tell her everything will be alright.”

Smith: How did you do that?

Fisher: I knew she was at the naval hospital. Since then, well, I think she thought she had fifty thousand letters, but I had a friend who was a retired navy admiral, a good close friend, their son is my godchild, so I asked him if I wrote a letter to Betty if he would deliver it by hand to her. So, she got it. His name was Lawson P. Ramage and had won a Congressional medal. But, anyway, then I heard from her, and one thing lead to another and it just drew us right close together as if we were magnetized.

Smith: Now, you heard from her, was that a thank you for your letter?

Fisher: Yes. And then after that, I became active in the Cancer Society as a Reach to Recovery volunteer. It’s a support group for people who have had mastectomies. And we visited only at the doctor’s request to help others who had it. We were trained to do this. I remember how much help I received when a volunteer came. The first question is, “How long ago did you have it?” She said, “Five years.” I thought, “Yay, I have five years.” So, I went into that. I felt that I’d recovered enough that maybe I could help somebody else.

Smith: Did she have questions for you?

Fisher: No, she didn’t. She didn’t. By then, we didn’t really get back together until she was through with her chemo and things settled down for her. Because, after all, it takes awhile to just get over the shock.

Smith: Did she talk about that period?

Fisher: We talked about it, yes, because then she had asked me to go with her several times and several places year after year after year which were breast cancer related. The Susan Komen Foundation. We went to that annual lunch until they stopped having it, it got to be so big. And she sent me a couple of letters that she’d received and said, “Maybe you can help these people and try to get in touch with them.”
It’s hard to imagine. I mean, one of the worst elements is feeling alone and not knowing what’s next. Is it that informational vacuum that you find yourself in? Do you feel particularly bereft?

Well, you see it was different then. Of course, we’re talking about 42 years ago. Total shock and then I think we were blessed in a way not to have to wait and have to make all these decisions and make these choices of this or that or the other and my cancer was discovered by a mammogram. One of the first five in Pittsburgh by this new machine. The doctor said, “At your age, we have this new test.” And there it was. So, that was on a Monday. By Tuesday, I’d been to a surgeon and he’d reconfirmed it. By Thursday they said, “If it's malignant, you’re going to have a mastectomy and if it’s not, you’re going to go home tomorrow.” So, I woke up and I knew. So, that was Monday to Thursday. I was numb.

And it was better that way. Like I said, when you have to discuss it with your family and your friends and you have to wait and have the tests – oh my goodness. It just (inaudible) there.

Imagine then about the First Lady of the United States going through this horror and waking up and the whole world wanting to know.

She woke up and she told the world what happened to her. Now, I didn’t have any compunction about talking about it because people asked her, “Well, can you tell us how it was?” When I woke up, I was surrounded in my bed by helpers and dear friends and a couple of nurses and everybody looked so downcast that I thought, “Wait, I’d better smile because they’re waiting to see what I’m going to do.” So, I smiled and they all smiled back at me. A good smile is your best weapon. So, when my friends wanted to talk about it, I would say, “Oh, I didn’t like, but it’s over. Let’s talk about something else.” And they couldn’t tell which side it was on. I was told nobody’s going to know unless you tell them.

She said, it was at the first event at the White House, she was coming downstairs, and they were wondering which side it was on.
Fisher: They look for it, they don’t look in your eyes. They look right at you. Oh, dear, well this is something we never even would’ve talked about. But it’s everywhere and it’s facing the way life is.

Smith: Again, you’re absolutely right. People who weren’t around then probably find it hard to imagine. How much of a difference did she make by going public?

Fisher: Oh, a world of difference. I mean, she just brought it right out in the open. Well, I’ve had that, too! I’m just like Betty Ford, God love her!

Smith: And then there’s Happy Rockefeller.

Fisher: Yes. Shortly after. And then also Nancy Reagan. One of the Susan G. Komen luncheons brought Nancy Reagan out in Dallas and there was Nancy Reagan and there was Lady Bird Johnson. But Nancy Brinker had a brilliant idea when she started this foundation in memory of her sister and she gave her Betty Ford award. Every year she asked Betty if she’d be there to present it. And that’s when people just came like flies on sugar. It just got bigger and bigger and bigger.

Smith: Did you visit the White House?

Fisher: No, I didn’t visit the White House and I have a great regret that I didn’t. The time I was invited to go there was at the time of decorating the Christmas tree and my stepfather’s funeral was that very same day. And as I look back on it now, I thought, “Golly, my mother would’ve probably understood.” “Oh, mother, I have to be at the White House!” But I didn’t. I didn’t.

Smith: Of course, we know now from what Mrs. Ford herself has written, you know, that long before that, she had some real problems, which I think frankly a lot of women had at that time. Here’s someone who was going to have a career of her own and who was very happily married and very successful mother, but who was sort of losing herself in all of this.

Fisher: Yes. I think the first time that I ever was really aware of it was when I went out with a friend from Grand Rapids to visit her in Vail and it was early on, it was right after they’d left the White House and they were renting the Bass House. They hadn’t built their house yet. We knew that she was in a lot of
pain and that her neck was bothering her. I had watched her broadcast from the Russian ballet and that’s the first time I thought, “Oh, dear, what’s the matter?” She must be terrified or something is the matter.” But I didn’t realize what it was.

Smith: Was her it voice or her manner?

Fisher: It was her speech. Probably that’s on record. Somewhere they have films of it and within a minute or two you can tell by her speech.

Smith: Yeah.

Fisher: Then just being there with her, she had to take a lot of pills to be out of pain. By the same token, she was entertaining us, having her friends for lunch, we were going out for dinner, and we were just having a lovely time. Susan was there. I remember Susan, she was staying a month with her mother’s friend. But she wasn’t around much at the time.

Smith: Did they seem happy? I mean, the Fords obviously would’ve liked to have won the election, but did they seem happy to be back there?

Fisher: All the things I saw, she has written about in her book - about how Jerry said she was always late and these little things. I mean, she’s come right out and thrown it right out there for everybody to read.

Smith: Right.

Fisher: Not for one instant ever did I see anything but the most loving relationship between those two.

Smith: They were in their new life outside of politics. Of course, she was kind of nudging him to leave politics anyway.

Fisher: It was mixed emotions, you know. She really wanted him to leave, but when she saw how hard it was for him, how close he’d come to winning, she didn’t anticipate the hurt of it all.

Smith: Did it take awhile to get over that?
Fisher: You know, time is a great healer and he found another life for himself, speaking, teaching, very much in demand to run on boards – busy, busy, busy. I remember a couple of times being out there with them and he was off to New York from California at four in the morning with agents.

Smith: Did you ever see anyone who liked to travel more or who had more energy? I mean, it was phenomenal really up until very late in life.

Fisher: He didn’t slow down. He loved to swim. He took good care of himself, very good care of himself. He was in good shape.

Smith: What was it that they loved about Vail? I know that they loved to ski. Did she ski?

Fisher: She did, but not for very long. I think when they went out there from Washington with their children for Christmastime, I think I didn’t see her standing up dressed for the part swearing how to put the skis on her feet. I don’t have any recollection.

Smith: So, what was it about Vail that they enjoyed so much?

Fisher: Well, they chose that place, I think, while he was a congressman and they had some very dear friends from Grand Rapids who’d sort of discovered Vail. The skiing was bigger and better than it was in northern Michigan at that time. The Stiles, I think were the ones, Jack Stiles, if I remember. They were the ones that maybe started them going to Vail.

Smith: Yeah.

Fisher: But it became a big part of their life with the Betty Ford Garden and everything else.

Smith: I’m told they were loved in Vail. The people in Vail really took them to their hearts.

Fisher: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And they thought a lot of the people and their interests. Betty had sponsored a summer ballet school.

Smith: Really?
Lilian Fisher

Fisher: Some little Russian girls came over. We went to see them one year I was out there in the summertime. They stayed out there and studied. It was reciprocal, maybe some American children went over to Russia. I remember them definitely flying to this recital for this ballet.

Smith: Describe their house in Beaver Creek [Vail].

Fisher: Well, it was spacious and it was contemporary. I was just right. It was sort of backed up against the mountain and there was the tram or the t-bar that ran behind their house. You went in on the ground level and there wasn’t much of any living space. I think the agents had their command post there. So, they were there on the ground floor, but then there’s an elevator up to the main floor. A lovely living room. Very comfortable. Very tasteful. Very low-key. It was nice. Very welcoming feeling.

Smith: Did she like to decorate?

Fisher: I think she knew what she liked. She had some good help.

Smith: How would you characterize her style?

Fisher: Tailored. She’s casual. She and I liked the same kind of dress. I mean, she was kind of country, chintzy. That’s the way it was.

Smith: There’s a story about them when they were at the White House. There’s a family dining room on the second floor and Mrs. Kennedy had found some 19th century French wallpaper that showed scenes from the American Revolution and Mrs. Ford had it removed because, she said, “It’s really very difficult to sit there eating and watching all these people shooting each other and bleeding.” So, she had it scaled down.

Fisher: Exactly. Unappetizing wallpaper for a dining room. I’m surprised Mrs. Kennedy didn’t know better. Somebody sold her a bill of goods. She did a beautiful job at the White House, but she had a different feel than Betty Ford. Let’s face it. Lovely lady, but different feel.

Smith: And were the kids there much in Vail?
The kids were all sort of scattered around when I would be with them. Maybe one or two of them would be coming and going, but, by then, when Mike and Gail were married or about to be married and the boys were in California and Susan was at home. She lived at home.

Was there a sort of special relationship between Susan and her mother?

Yes. Yes. It was so wonderful. It is a wonderful relationship. She just told me recently how thankful she was that she’d given this responsibility of running the Center to Susan when she did. Because, you know, we know all of a sudden I can’t do what I used to do. This is a hard thing to accept as you grow older. Stay the age you are.

So few people who create something that really is an expression of themselves have the satisfaction of knowing that it can be entrusted to somebody.

Yes, I feel that way about my children. How are they going to know if they don’t have the experience of doing things the way I hoped they would do? It’s interesting to watch, but, you know, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. They came with certain characteristics that they just came with.

Did they [the Fords] enjoy grandparenting?

Yes. Yes. They did. They did. And they had all those little girls first. Five little girls when finally the two little boys – remember at that funeral? Who would ever forget them? I was sitting right smack besides them. The littlest one was sitting on his mother’s lap and he let go of her and then he’d go to sleep. And then his brother got up and read. Yes. It was beautiful. When we came from the library, we came all the way out Fulton and Lake Drive. We went right past Calla Travis Studio of Dance. She taught my father ballroom dancing. She had dyed hair, brown hair. The first person that I ever knew who had dyed hair. My mother said, “Yes, she dyes her hair.”

That’s not very Dutch.

No. Travis is English, isn’t it?
Smith: I think so. When did you know about Mrs. Ford’s intervention and all that flowed out of that?

Fisher: I will tell you, it was very dramatic because I had asked her – I was active, as I say, on the Cancer Society and they ran their big fundraiser for the Society in Pittsburgh with a ball. A Cancer Ball at the William Penn Hotel. My cronies asked me if I would be on the committee and if I would help. I said, “Oh, I’d be glad to.” And I said, “Maybe Betty Ford would like to come.” And they said, “What did you say?!” Well, I mean, she’s had cancer and she goes everywhere and this is a beautiful place and it would be wonderful to have her. She could only say ‘no’.” So, I asked her and she said yes, she’d love to come. Well, as soon as we worked that out, the publicity started for the party (tickets were being sold). A week before the party, she sent me a telegram and she said, “I am very sorry to say” – practically the day I read about it in the paper was when the telegram came saying could she come back next year? And she didn’t come and they got me to stand up at this crowd of a thousand people or whatever to read the telegram. And the next year, she came back. I have some pictures of us from the next year when she came back for the next cancer ball. It was wonderful.

Smith: And, obviously, her life had turned around during the interim. This was a year after the intervention?

Fisher: Yes, and she had been to Long Beach and she had a face lift and she was a new Betty!

Smith: Did she talk about the face lift?

Fisher: Well, she sent me some pictures right away, yeah. I have a great big picture of her that I don’t have hanging. I had my file drawer. You know, I lost two of our children – but the oldest and the youngest are thirteen years apart and they’re girls. So, they didn’t know each other really when they were growing up because Peggy went away to school and college. Two years they were home together. But they’re very, very close now. I lost my train of thought.

Smith: Well, you mentioned the facelift and the photo of Mrs. Ford.
Lilian Fisher

Fisher: Oh, I said to my girls within the past year or so, “I’m getting all these things – these letters and all of these things to do with the Fords. I saved them and I just wonder how to handle it or what to do with them.” And Peggy, the oldest one said, “Just have them all in one place.” So, I have this metal file drawer and they’re all in one place. They’re not in any order.

Smith: That’s great.

Fisher: But, from time to time, when somebody wants something like a picture of the Good Cheers. What’s-her-name, Green, who just called, she had said when I met her out in November at the birthday celebration in California, she said she’d like to have some pictures of me with Betty. And she typed a note where some of these places were in Grand Rapids and nobody seemed to know where this one or that one had been. So, I said, “Well, send me a map, send me a list and I’ll mark on the map.”

Smith: That’s great.

Fisher: So that’s what I did. And I said, “You be sure and send these pictures back because they’re very precious.” And she did.

Smith: Did she talk to you or did you ever talk about that part of her life which is obviously a whole new beginning in many ways - but it had to have been pretty dark before the dawn.

Fisher: Oh, yes, she talked about it and she said, so indebted to the Firestone’s. I mean, when I was with her and I was out there at the Center with her, she was so happy and so proud of it all. She wanted me to see what she was doing and how she was doing it. And John Schwarzlose, I’ve known him from day one, I think.

Smith: She was very hand’s on, wasn’t she?

Fisher: Oh, absolutely, she was very much hands on. Very much. She went every week over there. She signed autographs. Every Big Book for every person when they left. I mean, she was right in it all with her whole heart and soul. She came later to Pittsburgh – she came several times to Pittsburgh. She came on the anniversary of a youth program for drugs. She raised a lot of money by
Lilian Fisher speaking and coming to these events. Of course it was all given to the Center, every penny.

Smith: There used to be a sort of a gag; supposedly they had a deal. The president could raise money east of the Mississippi and she raised money west of the Mississippi.

Fisher: That would figure.

Smith: Clearly she always had a sense of humor.

Fisher: Yes, she did. She’s lots of fun. Still is. We were together out there the anniversary of the Center - the people with us were watching, listening, because we were comparing our canes. Her cane is much prettier than my cane. And, these people, I don’t know, the nurses or whoever, were laughing at us.

Smith: She can laugh about growing older?

Fisher: Oh, yes, because we have so many of the same things happen to each other at the same time. It’s a support group.

Smith: My sense was it was very difficult for her to accept his illness or aging. I know friends of theirs the last several years urged them not to go to Vail and she said, “You know, at this point in life, we’ve had the quantity of life. Now we want the quality of life.” Obviously they loved Vail, and they were showing that they could still go to Vail.

Fisher: Well, the last year, I remembers he said, “We’re going and I know the altitude is not the place for us, but if we can’t stay, we’ll come home. But, we’re going.”

Smith: And I know, towards the end, again there were friends who were sort of suggesting, “You need some nursing help.”

Fisher: Let me tell you this as an old person to a young person: we just have to be ready to make these decisions. We have to be ready and it’s a matter of control, no matter what you say or do. We’re not stubborn, we just want to feel comfortable about it.
Smith: I sense that she really wanted almost up until the end she wanted to be the one nursing him.

Fisher: Yes, she said that.

Smith: To you?

Fisher: Yes, she wanted to live to be 90 years old. She would admit to that. So, she did. But she’s a gutsy lady. She always did what she said she was going to do. That doesn’t come as a surprise to me.

Smith: I think he felt a little bit of guilt for all those years when he was out traveling and so on. And in the later years, he was able to spend more time with the children…

Fisher: And he was so affectionate with her. He always called her Mother. He always called her Mother.

Smith: I heard a story that at one point they were sitting around, a small group at dinner, and he was reminiscing and at one point he was dating, was it Mary Pew of the Steelcase family?

Fisher: Oh, yes, Mary Itema.

Smith: And was going on and on about how he’d dated her and she listened to him and then she said, “Well now, Jerry, just think, if you’d married Mary Pew, you could’ve been the president of Steelcase instead of president of the United States.” Touché.

Fisher: That’s the way she was. She had a great wit, a great sense of humor and, believe me, you have to have that to go through some of the things.

Smith: He appreciated it, obviously.

Fisher: Yes. She wouldn’t let him get too stale. Oh, my goodness, yes.

Smith: There’s the story of the time when the Pantlind was renovated. Of course, it was built the year the president was born and they were going on about how it had just been. And she turned to him and said, “Maybe you could use a little
renovation, too.” And he laughed. I mean, he genuinely laughed. He didn’t have a pretentious bone in his body.

Fisher: She softened him. She didn’t let him take himself too seriously.

Smith: That’s interesting you say that. How she softened him, you say.

Fisher: Yes.

Smith: It sounds like maybe every politician should have a wife like Betty Ford.

Fisher: Yes. I’m just finishing reading a book called Alice about Alice Roosevelt Longworth. Have you read that book?

Smith: I have it, but I haven’t read it yet.

Fisher: Oh, my goodness, it is something else.

Smith: She was a character.

Fisher: She was something.

Smith: And had a difficult life.

Fisher: And the people she “hung out” with [associated], I mean, think of Washington today and think about Washington then. But, anyway, she knew where she was going and so did Betty, bless her heart, and she had a really strong faith, a fighting faith.

Smith: Let me ask you, is faith a significant part of her life?

Fisher: Of course, how could it not be?

Smith: She expects to be reunited with him?

Fisher: Well, we haven’t talked about that, but I expect to be reunited with my beloved of 48 years. I hope to.

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

Fisher: Jerry?
Lilian Fisher

Smith: Yes.

Fisher: Yes, it was the year before he died. I went out there with my friend Elsie Hillman from Pittsburgh. Elsie was a very active person in politics.

Smith: Right. I know the name.

Fisher: You know the name?

Smith: I know the name.

Fisher: A close, close friend of mine. What did we go out for? Well, we had been out to the twentieth anniversary together, but then we went this later time. In fact, she was going to California to see her doctor and I was going out to see the Fords and I said, “Let’s go and not postpone it.” She had said, “I’d like to go with you the next time you go.” So we went. We stayed there at the Marriott and we had lunch with them and Betty’s very dear friend Lee Annenberg.

Smith: Yes.

Fisher: He was so sick now. But we had the nicest kind of a time. But then he was unsteady. He had a nurse with him and I remember their saying, “Now, when you stand up, just wait a minute.” But clear, oh yeah. Sat at the front of the table and carried on conversation all during lunch. But that was the year before. Elsie said, “I have a ball cap that’s been signed by four presidents and I’d like to get the fifth president’s signature on it. Do you think I could send it to Jerry?” This was after that. I said, “Try it.” And so he signed it and she got it back.

Smith: I assume you talked to Mrs. Ford after that. I mean, did you keep in touch during that last year?

Fisher: Oh, we talk about every two weeks.

Smith: Yeah.

Fisher: We talk often, yes.

Smith: I mean, during that last year?
Lilian Fisher

Fisher: Yes, and she called me that Tuesday morning and she said, “Jerry doesn’t know me anymore. He’s very, very sick.” And before the day was over, he was gone. So that’s how I heard about it. And the children have been just very dear and considerate and Susan and Vaden - what a nice guy – and all of her children, so nice and dear. They’re like my own children.

Smith: Has it been hard for her?

Fisher: Very hard for her. I know she’s grieving deeply, God love her. I understand that part of it, too. I’ve been there.

Smith: It must be frustrating. I mean, it must add to your frustration if you think there are people out there who wonder, “Well, six months have gone by or a year has gone by, why haven’t you bounced back?” Unless you’ve gone through that, you can’t explain it.

Fisher: I think now she has her physical situation to cope with. Whereas when I lost my husband, I was only 68 years old and I was very healthy and active and I didn’t bounce back, but there again it was like coming out in the recovery room after the cancer. I thought, “I’ve got to smile at people. They’re waiting to see what I’m going to do before they know what to do.” And I felt I have to make the effort to get out there and do things and I’m a single parent. So, it’s a different situation because there’s many years difference makes a great deal of difference.

Smith: Obviously there are lots of people who would love to see her out in public.

Fisher: Oh, yes. At that twenty-fifth anniversary that Friday night, they were so glad to see her. And she was shaking hands with everybody and finally the nurse came up and said, “Here, let me spray your hands. You’ve been shaking hands with everyone.” Her immune system, I think. Yes, I wish I could be closer to her because I think maybe we could get out and around.

Smith: Let’s be frank. At her age, there’s probably a finite number of her contemporaries who are still around who are able to get out.

Fisher: That’s right. Her friend Lee Annenberg, she’s at Mayo’s and Delores Hope is about 96 and her other friends – some of them are mutual friends – she has a
very close friend in Denver who was a classmate of mine at school. And, I
don’t know. I guess it’s true. If she had some girlfriends. That’s one of the
things about being here. Somebody once told me the most important thing
you could do for yourself is to make younger friends.

Smith: It’s funny you say that because my sense was and I think one reason why we
became so close – the times I was out there, I noticed they liked to surround
themselves with younger people. They were very comfortable around
younger people and I think in some ways maybe it did exactly what you said.

Fisher: it’s a defense mechanism. But here in Naples, my goodness, there’s all ages.
They’re from all over. They come down, they go back, they come down, they
go back. It’s a very dynamic place to be.

Smith: Has she ever visited you here?

Fisher: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. She’s never been to the apartment, but she visited me in
my house. She came one time to speak over in Ft. Lauderdale at a secondary
school and it so happened that the daughter of my next door neighbor, this
little girl I saw grow up and got her graduate degree in marine biology and she
married the admissions director of the school over there. Anyway, they
wanted Betty to come and speak about her use and the drug problem, so of
course Betty came. And I said, “Go ahead and write her. She would love to
come.” So, I went over to hear her and she came back with me. Actually, I
came back. She had to come with the agents. And she spent the whole day
here. And that’s when we saw Dick Ford. And she and Jerry came to the
Cape and visited.

Smith: Really?

Fisher: Yeah. That was funny because the agents called several days ahead and said,
“You know, we’re going to come over and we’re going to put in a phone line
and when the Fords arrive, we’ll have to hitch this up so everything will be
there.” I said, “Fine.” They looked the place over. So, the day that they were
to arrive, I heard my neighbors next door, they were having the trees pruned.
Anyhow, the agents arrive and they plug in their phone. It was dead! So, the
agent said, “I will call and get a repair service man.” And I could hear
him say, “Oh no, you won’t wait five days. I’m very sorry.” The tree people cut the phone wire!

_Fisher – additional comment added after interview: The Fords stayed with me while Jerry placed in a golf tournament with Tip O’Neil, his dear friend._

Smith: Did you ever sense what their relationship was with the agents? Because they really did become part of the family almost.

Fisher: But, you know, you weren’t conscious of their being there.

Smith: Really?

Fisher: No, no, no, no. I mean, when they were at my house – two times at my house – my house down here, they stayed in the garage. And we had beverages and snacks and things, but that’s where their command post was. That was the best we could do. And they came in the house once and looked around to see where she was going to be sleeping. Then, at the Cape, they came inside, but at the Cape, the house is on three levels and built on the side of a hill. And the beach level was sort of an independent little unit of it’s own with a little galley and bedrooms and a sitting room and we used it out of season, but the shutters were on the top part. So the agents were down there and we were up above and we never knew that they were there. I mean, unless it was time to go someplace, we’d step out the front door and there’d be the car to go. It’s not hard to adjust to. It’s not my usual treatment. But these are the things that really - our friendship has been such a blessing to me and it’s given me experiences and taken me places that I never otherwise could’ve been. You just can’t believe it.

Smith: Do you think she’s doing better now? I mean, is she – I hate to use the word ‘adjusted’ – but do you think she’s adjusting?

Fisher: Well, I hope so. She’s going to get her hair done and I think it’s when she’s ready. When she feels like it, she’d going to do it. Aren’t we all that way? I mean, have you ever told somebody to do something and sat there and watched them do it? They don’t do it.
Smith: I’ll tell you a story someone told me who was out there recently visiting with her. There’s an olive tree out in front of the house and she had white lights in it for Christmas and they’re still there. She turns them on every night so he knows that she’s okay.

Fisher: That’s good.

Smith: That says a lot, doesn’t it?

Fisher: Well, now, tell me about your plans. Why did you come to see me?

Smith: Okay, well, we’re putting together for the Ford Library/Museum an oral history collection.

Fisher: History.

Smith: Yeah, and we’re talking to friends of both the Fords and people who were in the administration and some of the few people who are still around from Grand Rapids and basically these will all be typed up and transcribed and you’ll have a chance to look at the transcription. Eventually, they’ll be housed at the library and will be available to scholars and researchers and people who are doing research. You know, this day and age, people don’t write letters, they don’t keep diaries, Lord knows, and people in the White House don’t keep a lot of the documents that they used to in part because of special prosecutors and all that. So, oral history is absolutely invaluable at filling a lot of the gaps.

Fisher: This is the side about these libraries that’s new to me and it’s so true. So true.

Smith: I mean, the irony and the paradox is that there’s more paper than ever before, but people don’t put their thoughts on paper in the way that they were accustomed to, so oral history is a way, imperfect, like any science, but oral history is a way of getting particularly the warmer, you know, the kinds of things that don’t get put on paper - the personal stories, the observations, the insights. So, you know, it’s just invaluable.

Fisher: It’s history.

Smith: It is history.
And it’s important for those who follow us.

Absolutely.

Yeah, I was thinking about that when I was reading about Alice. I mean, my goodness. What a gal.

What a life. Mrs. Ford is often described as a free spirit. Do you think that’s true or does it not go far enough in describing her?

Well, it’s true but it’s overused.

How so?

Something fresher. A lot of people, I mean, movie stars are called free spirits.

What adjective would be more appropriate?

That’s a good question.

She doesn’t wear any obvious label.

She was a perfect First Lady.

Did she enjoy her time in the White House?

Oh, I’m sure she did.

Imagine, though, being sort of tossed into that.

And with such suddenness and the children, they say their lives were just thrown in turmoil overnight. But, you know, when we were young, we would go down to this tea room on Monroe Street and have our tea leaves read. This is in her book about how she had the tea leaves read and was told she was going to dine with kings and queens. You just never know. Well, I certainly didn’t know when she was my friend that our lives were going to become so entwined and for what reasons – whoever would’ve told us when we were little girls that we were both going to have life-threatening disease and you’re going to have this friendship no matter where you are.

I can’t thank you enough. This is fun. I mean, it’s very fun.
Lilian Fisher

Fisher: I hope it’s been helpful.

Smith: Oh, it has been.

Fisher: You know, I feel that perhaps I’m going to be repeating myself because I have been asked a couple of times.

Smith: I’m not surprised you were asked.

Fisher: I’m very complimented that you would trust what I have to say.

Smith: You clearly have a very special place in her story and in her life and you’ll probably talk to her before I do.

Fisher: She has a prettier cane than mine.

Smith: Describe her cane. What makes it prettier than yours?

Fisher: It has a silver handle. Mine just came from the medical supply store.

Smith: She always sees joy in art, doesn’t she?

Fisher: Well, she had a style, yes. She liked clothes. She liked decorating. She liked art. She was creative, I would say. I don’t know that she ever put a brush in some paint, but lots of creativity.

Smith: Before I forget and I think she’s written about this, too, as we know now, alcoholism is a disease and it’s often genetic. Was her dad an alcoholic?

Fisher: Well, I’ve seen it printed. I think she’s said that. She didn’t realize it at the time, but I think she said that, yeah. Her mother was a very dignified lady.

Smith: Regal?

Fisher: Oh, yes. I mean, regal, that’s the word I wanted. Regal. I mean, you stood up when she walked into the room.

Smith: Really?

Fisher: Yes, a lovely lady. I can just see their house. I used to go there and spend the night Friday nights.
Smith: What was the house like?
Fisher: It’s still there.
Smith: On what street?
Fisher: Fountain Street. 717 Fountain Street. If I remember, it had a little front porch. Very Dutch. You know Grand Rapids. It’s further up Fountain from Central High. Is Central High still there? It’s not on the map.
Smith: I don’t think so.
Fisher: But Fountain Street School where she went to grade school is still there. I was amazed at that. It’s on the map that Kay Uptemaim sent me. She got a road map. But it was very detailed. It had Kent Country Club and it had all the places. Grace Church. I hadn’t realized when I went out to that funeral until my younger sister told me that there was a new Grace Church. I wasn’t going down to Lafayette Street.
Smith: I know they were married in Grace Church, but was it the old Grace Church they were married at?
Fisher: Yes. We were married at St. Mark’s Church.
Smith: An amazing story, it was the new church, remember President Ford’s mother, when she died in church one Sunday morning.
Fisher: In Grand Rapids.
Smith: Yes, and they went back to her house and characteristically they found her appointment books were filled for the next month. Now you know where the president gets his energy and his work ethic. I mean, I think he seemed to always want to be busy.
Fisher: He had a lot of energy. He was an athlete and if you take that energy off the football field, it has to go some place. Yes.
Smith: He loved campaigning.
Fisher: Yes, was very good at it. What would he be thinking about today? Well, I thought that book that was written *After I Die* was revealing. He wouldn’t be so surprised today because he thought that that was the path we’re on.

Smith: Yeah. This is perfect. Thank you.

Fisher: You're very welcome.
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this.

Burba: It’s my pleasure.

Smith: When I talked to your dad, I was struck by a number of things. But I guess maybe, most of all, by the fact that he said, “You may find this strange, Richard, but I really made a point when I was around Jerry not to talk politics.”

Burba: Absolutely true.

Smith: Because everyone around Jerry wanted to talk politics. Most of them wanted something. He said he’d seen people follow him into the water at the lake. And so he almost created a politics-free zone.

Burba: Absolutely. To add to that, and to emphasize that, when Jerry was president, two weeks after he pardoned Nixon, we had already been invited to spend the weekend at the White House; my mother, my father, my husband, myself, and my sister and my brother. The pardon was so fresh, and I had a lot of questions. I didn’t understand it because he’d enjoyed such great popularity, and we were so thrilled, and then suddenly he was being lambasted. I so distinctly remember as if it were yesterday, Dad saying to us on the way out to the airport, “Nobody is to ask your uncle about the pardon.” And I remember saying, “But, Dad, you know, why can’t we do that? It’s just family.” And he said, “Because that is his house, and you don’t walk into somebody’s house and ask them about something that has to do with their business, anymore than I would expect somebody to walk into my house and inquire about a business decision I made.”

I can remember sitting in the family quarters dining room, and to the right of my Uncle Jerry. Uncle Jerry was at the head and Aunt Betty was at the head, and Dad was right across from me. Somehow, somebody, at the table, very
innocently brought up politics in a general sense. And I can remember my father just glaring at me, unspoken, “Don’t say a word.” And we never did, but that stuck with me.

I know that they talked golf. I was present when Dad would be in Florida and Jerry would be in Vail, or whatever, and they would talk on the phone and never, ever, was there any discussion about politics. It was golf. And when Dad was still running Ford Paint and Varnish, Jerry never asked him how business was going.

Smith: Really?

Burba: They talked about things that they had in common, be it friends, golf certainly was a passion, family, but that is very, very clear in my mind.

Smith: Am I correct in assuming that that applied to the other brothers as well?

Burba: I don’t know.

Smith: Okay.

Burba: I truly don’t know. I believe in my heart that my dad and my Uncle Jerry were the closest of the four. Even though, for a period of time Tom lived in town and Jim lived in town, certainly until his death. It’s not to say that Dad didn’t love all of his brothers, but the similarities between the two, the facial expressions, their sense of moral compass, they just were very, very close. And I don’t know if that closeness existed throughout their lives, I don’t know. But certainly I saw that after Tom died, I saw the closeness more; and then even more so after Jim died. But I always saw the similarities between the two.

Smith: Let me go back. Did you know your grandparents?

Burba: Oh, yes. I live two houses away from the house.

Smith: Tell me about them.
Burba: I just adored my Grandfather Ford, I absolutely adored him. My Grandmother Ford was a very stern, stoic woman. She was not as approachable as my grandfather, so I think therein lies my feeling of being closer to him.

Smith: Was she driven? You hear the stories about when she died they found the calendar book was full for however many…

Burba: She did an incredible amount of volunteer work. Now, I wasn’t necessarily cognizant of that at the time growing up. I certainly learned about that later. And as I read more about her - it wasn’t discussed that she had left her first husband because he beat her. We didn’t know about that. You didn’t talk about that.

Smith: How did you find out about that?

Burba: Oh, I think reading it in a book. I certainly was never told. I do remember that she made holidays, Christmas, especially, fabulous. And she took great pride in making sure that the family was altogether for Christmas. Always setting the table beautifully, and making sure that everybody – the girls, especially, not the boys because I didn’t really pay attention to the boy cousins, but the girls always had something that they had requested from Santa underneath the tree. So, it’s her approachability to me that was a little bit standoffish, and that could be through a child’s eyes. If I met her as an adult I might not have had that same impression.

Smith: And when I say driven, I guess that’s a poor choice of words…

Burba: Very strong.

Smith: …but you get a sense of someone who was incredibly organized, and always active.

Burba: Very. Absolutely, no question about that.

Smith: And you wonder whether some of that was passed onto…
Burba: Absolutely. I think she was the stronger of the two in the family sense. I think my grandfather deferred to her, that’s the impression I had. He was just this warm, fuzzy person.

Smith: Almost a role reversal.

Burba: Exactly. Now, when he spoke, and if he was upset, one listened immediately, and one never repeated, perhaps, something that they had done wrong. They had a little parakeet, and if you accidently, without thought, opened a door and the parakeet had been flying around, you were told never, in no uncertain terms, to ever do that again. And you listened and you remembered, and you didn’t do it again. So, it wasn’t as if he was a Casper Milquetoast, but he left the running of the house to her. But I do have a cute story about him. It’s just a personal story.

To this day, I hate rhubarb. And I can thank him for that because I can remember the house on San Lucia, walking into the backdoor, which is by the driveway. You’d walk into the laundry area, then you’d walk straight into the kitchen-breakfast area. I walked in one day, I was probably nine or ten, and my Grandfather Ford was sitting in a chair and he was munching on what I thought looked like a stalk of celery. So I walked over to him and I said, “Grandpa, can I have a taste?” And he said, “Oh, you don’t want this.” I said, “Well, yes, I do.” “No, you don’t.” “Yes, I do.” So he said, “Okay, fine. Here, but if you take it, if you take a bite, you’re going to have to swallow it and eat it. You cannot spit it out.” Well, I did, and I later learned that it was uncooked rhubarb. And to this day, I don’t…I mean, somebody will say, “Well, it’s a really sweet pie,” and I’ll go, “No, no, no. I don’t care to have any rhubarb at all.” So that is as if it were yesterday, I remember that about him. I always remember him smiling.

Smith: Happy man?

Burba: Oh, yes. That’s my recollection of him, absolutely.

Smith: Now, were they both active in church?
Burba: You know, I don’t know that.

Smith: One senses that she was.

Burba: I think that she was involved in guilds, I think he was involved as far as being present on Sunday, with the collection plate – that kind of thing.

Smith: But they were both churchgoers.

Burba: And certainly very involved in Grace Episcopal Church. That’s my recollection because that’s where I was baptized, that’s where I grew up, that’s where my parents were married, etc., etc. The roots ran deep.

Smith: The influence of the Calvinist tradition in West Michigan – clearly, your family was raised with a lot of conservative tenets, individual responsibility, fiscal conservatism, just a whole lot of [unintelligible]. How did that compare with the values or the enforcement, if you will, of the values from the Dutch Reformed? I’m trying to get a sense of – are there two sort of streams here, flowing along next to each other – or are they really one and the same? The Sabbath, for example, the very strict Sabbatarian elements of Dutch Reformed…

Burba: I was going to say that I can’t relate to that because we didn’t have those types of restrictions. We were allowed to go to movies, we learned how to dance, we could do what we wanted on Sunday. You certainly went to church on Sunday. But, you know, there weren’t those kinds of restrictions. I would say that the similarity was the Ten Commandments. That, to me, that was how I was raised. The fact that some of those involved churchgoing, that the parallel to me between those who were raised in Hudsonville, for example, and those of us who were raised in East Grand Rapids, the parallel is the Ten Commandments.

Smith: Okay, that’s perfect.

And the old line about: work hard, tell the truth, and come to dinner on time, is absolutely valid?
Burba: Standard. That’s how I was raised. Yes. The consequences for not telling the truth, and also accountability – accountability, giving back if you were lucky enough to be blessed with - whether it was a talent or financial blessings – that you gave back to the community in some manner.

Smith: How was this communicated? Verbally, by precept, by example, by some combination?

Burba: All. All of the above. For my father, he was very involved in Kiwanis Club, Boys Club, Lions - I think it was the Lions Club - I think that’s what it was called. But all of us at Christmas time, my sister, my brother, myself, at different times in our lives, at Christmas time we had to accompany my father when he would go out and deliver things to people who were underprivileged, so that we could gain a sense of, not everybody is as fortunate.

My first job: there was a store, at that time a very expensive, elitist store in East Grand Rapids, and it was two doors down from the high school. Everybody shopped there – everybody shopped there – and there was a sweater there that I coveted. At that time it was forty dollars. This was back in the Sixties, and I said to Dad, “I’d really like that sweater,” and he said, “Well, do you have forty dollars?” I said, “No.” He said, “Well, then you go find a way to earn it.” I said, “Dad, there’s nothing – I’m not sixteen yet, I can’t drive…” He said, “Well, I’ll tell you what I’ll do. Every Saturday morning I’ll take you over to the plant and we’ll find something for you to do and you can earn the money for the sweater.” I said, “Okay.”

And I’m thinking, oh well, what can I do at the plant, this will be a piece of cake – I’ll do bookwork or something. He had me clean the toilets at Ford Paint and Varnish to recognize how hard people have to work for their money, and then, by the time I got the forty dollars, I still wanted the sweater, but it meant more. So he led by example, and I know that that’s how my uncle, I know that’s how my cousins were raised, too. So that message was obviously set either verbally or by example, or both, to all the brothers.
Smith: Great story. Tell me, I’m confused because I was talking to your dad and I was trying to piece together the sequence of events, and it’s always been a little bit fuzzy to me in terms of when the Depression came along, and the business was just opening and struggling, obviously.

Burba: Oh, very much so.

Smith: Did they lose their house and move to another, more modest house? I’m trying to get a sense of the sequence.

Burba: I don’t know whether they lost the house that they were living in at that time. Dad would have been so young, too.

Smith: That’s right.

Burba: He really would have been.

Smith: Were they in East Grand Rapids and then moved?

Burba: No. I know that they were in the city of Grand Rapids. I don’t know which house at that time. My first recollection of knowing how that all transpired, was in reading about it. Specifically in conjunction when Jerry found out he was adopted. That Leslie King drove in from Detroit in the big Cadillac and where Jerry was working at the time was the little restaurant that we used to go down to for breakfast. So, suddenly it all was like, click, click, click.

Smith: It had not been discussed in the family?

Burba: No. Never, never. I think, and I’ve never asked Dad why, I don’t think it was discussed with them. I truly don’t. I’m assuming that, but to us finding out…he had my grandfather’s name. He looked like my grandparents. So there would be no reason to tell any children growing up, “Well, he’s our stepbrother.” I don’t think any of the brothers ever considered Jerry anything but a full brother. I really don’t. He had their father’s name and I think my grandfather adopted my uncle when he was around two years old, he was quite young. He never really knew his biological father. And the times were such, very little was ever discussed in front of children.
Smith: I’m sure.

Burba: But I never grew up knowing, knowing that he was not their brother.

Smith: And the conditions surrounding Dorothy’s decision to leave Omaha, I’m sure would have been kept under wraps.

Burba: Exactly. Very much so. Because at the time, that would have been shameful, as opposed to being courageous.

Smith: So you never heard her discuss any of that?

Burba: Never. It would have been fascinating. I truly wish the times would have allowed for that, for all of us to have known, because I would have loved to have asked her about it. I think that is a fascinating story in the sense of the amount of courage that it took for her to do that at that time. There are women today that don’t do it. She was ahead of her time in many ways.

Smith: I always thought it gave the president – most people never knew it – and in today’s political climate, frankly, it could have been exploited. But, I think it did give him some kind of insight into other people who have had problems in their early lives, often through no fault of their own. An empathy.

Burba: Absolutely.

Smith: It is always associated with the kind of conservative that he was.

Burba: Exactly, and I always thought of him as a conservative as far as spending, but a moderate otherwise. I think the empathy factor probably – the insight as to what his mother had gone through, probably he, as a male and that generation, that probably gave him more empathy.

Smith: You know, that’s interesting, because he clearly had, and part of it found expression in, I think, a lifelong contempt for his birth father.

Burba: Yes.
Smith: And the fact that - and some of it was legalistic - the fact that Leslie King didn’t pay what the court told him to pay. But behind that was a burning resentment.

Burba: Oh, yes. And as with my father, you were taught, truly, if you didn’t have something nice to say about anybody, you were better served to say nothing.

Smith: It’s interesting that you say that, because that’s one of the things that set Ford apart. Politicians, as a class, love to gossip.

Burba: Mean-spirited, too.

Smith: And it’s not just political gossip, they just will gossip. And he stood out. It took a while, but I noticed he had a very deft way of changing the subject if people started talking about personalities, and it often could get mean or ugly. He would find a way to veer off in another direction. I’ve had this confirmed from Penny and other people who made it clear that, particularly in an office full of women, he just didn’t want it.

Burba: I can remember when the museum was dedicated and the entire city of Washington was here. It was a security nightmare because you had the president, the vice president, you had the secretary of state, you had the head of the Senate. At the time, I wasn’t really thinking about it, until you looked around and saw them all there, in one spot, at one point, in hindsight, it’s frightening. And I can remember going to some restaurant downtown here that has since gone out of business, I can’t even remember the name of it. Tip O’Neill was sitting at a table by himself and I said to my cousins - I had this program from the ceremony - I said, “You know, I really want his autograph.” And they said, “You can’t go over there and bother him.” And I said, “You know what? I’m going to go over and introduce myself. I’m not going to ask for his autograph, and I’m going to thank him for coming. And depending upon how I’m received, if he wants to be alone, then I’ll leave.”

So they all sat there and I kind of discretely put my program behind me and I walked over and introduced myself. He was one of the most gracious men – he stood up and thanked me for introducing myself, and proceeded to tell me
how fond he was of my uncle, etc., etc. At that time there wasn’t, besides Ted Kennedy, there wasn’t a more liberal Democrat. He was Speaker of the House at the time, I believe, and I’ll never forget this. He had all these accolades to say about my uncle, and he said, “Your uncle and I may be adversaries Monday through Friday, but we have never been enemies, and on Saturday morning at nine o’clock, we’re at the first tee at Burning Tree for golf.” And I’ve never forgotten it.

I’ve looked back on that and thought, so many times, that’s the two party system. That’s how they work together. It was just more insight. I knew the good things about him. I knew the things he tried to do. I knew his moral compass, I knew where he came from. But to hear that from the Speaker of the House who was so highly respected, was just very enlightening to me.

Smith: And it’s a bygone culture.

Burba: Yes.

Smith: He used to, when he was in the House, he and Hale Boggs would debate each other at the National Press Club. They’d get in the car, they’d drive down together to the Press Club and decide along the way what they were going to debate that day. And they’d have their debate and then they’d go have a drink and lunch and go back to lunch. It was just a much more civilized culture.

Burba: Absolutely. When I went to Washington in 1965 with a girlfriend of mine, and of course, we didn’t go alone; Dad took us. We didn’t stay at Betty and Jerry’s house. At that time he was Minority Leader of the House, and he had arranged for us to have a tour of the Senate while it was in session, which at that time, it was very, very special. Then we took a tour of Mt. Vernon, etc., etc. And he, as House Minority Leader, had a car that was provided to him. Now I didn’t know that. I thought he’d just arranged for this limo and this driver to take us around. Well, he did, but it was his. I can remember thinking, well, this is really special, this is really nice. But I do remember it being just so civil there.
And then going to their house in Alexandria for dinner one night, and it’s a faint recollection, that we were talking about our day and what we had seen and what we had done, da da. And, of course, it was old hat to my cousins, and we were pointing out things that we had done, etc., and he had this huge grin on his face because we were seeing it for the first time, and we were old enough, we were fifteen, sixteen years old, so we were old enough to really get a grasp of what we were experiencing. And I remember him saying that, at that time, that all he aspired to – it was the first time I’d ever heard it stated – all I ever want to be is Speaker of the House. That’s the only time I think I ever heard him mention politics. And I don’t remember in what context, just in general conversation.

Smith: Can you describe the house in Alexandria?

Burba: I remember walking in the front door and there being what I would call a great room today. It was a living room, but not a formal living room. It was a family room, if you will. But there was an eating area over at the end and a fireplace on the right. Very cozy, very comfortable. Not huge in comparison to the home I lived in here, just a different style. Warm, comfortable. I never went upstairs, I don’t think we went upstairs. I remember the dining room. That was formal, but then we had a formal dining room, so…A pretty backyard. But we spent most of the time in the family room, sitting and talking.

Smith: Tell me about your aunt at that point. What was she like?

Burba: Oh, golly. Gracious, very gracious. She was gracious when we visited the White House, she was always very gracious anytime, anytime that we were around her alone, or when she was with my uncle. They never forgot names. I was always impressed by that, with the hundreds and thousands of people, I never, ever saw either one of them forget names. I have to honestly say that every time I saw her I never, ever knew that she had a problem. Which was extremely surprising to me, especially spending three days at the White House. I would have thought I would have picked up on it, I was in my twenties then. I never picked up on it. I was surprised.
Smith: When her breast cancer surgery took place, and again, it’s hard to convey to
this generation or future generations who will see this stuff, the extent to
which in those days, that was kept under wraps.

Burba: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: Treated almost as a shameful thing.

Burba: Oh, yes. She’s an extremely courageous woman. And I wonder if that’s what
attracted her to my uncle, in hindsight. Maybe he saw that courage in her, that
was exemplified later for all of us to see. I mean, she thought nothing of
disagreeing with my uncle on ERA – publicly. Well, with all due respect, he
has his opinions, and I also have mine. She was admired for that. I don’t know
about everybody, or if there is a segment that thought she should just be quiet.

Smith: Did she take any heat back here for being so outspoken on some issues that
were seen as liberal?

Burba: Probably, but I’m unaware of them. But I’m sure she did. There would have
to be ultraconservative groups in the early 70s, even though the country was
changing, that certainly would have frowned on her stand, number one. And
secondly, that she would have even expressed it.

Smith: Right.

Burba: But I wasn’t cognizant of that.

Smith: The famous *Sixty Minutes* interview brought a fascinating reaction, because
initially there was a ton of mail, much of it very hostile.

Burba: Oh, yes.

Smith: But in short order, the polls showed, her popularity soared.

Burba: And her comments about Susan. I watched the interview. I remember her
comments about Susan.

Smith: Were you surprised about what you were seeing?
Burba: No. No, I really wasn’t. I was scared of the reaction. I thought, oh, is the country ready for this? Is the world ready for this? But, no. Again, I think of her as a very strong, courageous, forthright, truthful woman.

Smith: And clearly, with a sense of humor.

Burba: Oh, absolutely with a sense of humor; and a sense of grace, elegance. Truly the whole package.

Smith: She loved clothes.

Burba: Oh, yes.

Smith: And looked great in whatever she wore.

Burba: But I never put her – and I hesitate to say this – it wasn’t important to her who the designer was, as it has been so important to other first ladies.

Smith: Understood. Yeah.

Burba: She looked good, regardless.

Smith: But there are wonderful stories about – some of them after the White House days – some during – where she would not hesitate to sort of deflate him a little bit with humor. The story about when they were at the re-dedication of the Pantlind, and they were going on about this hotel and it was built in 1913, which was the year the president was born, and how it had gone through all of this renovation and so on. And she turns to him and said, “You could use a little renovation yourself.” That sort of thing. And he laughed.

Burba: See, yes, he shared a wonderful sense of humor. Now, I always thought he was born in 1914. Thirteen – you’re right, because my second son was born on the day that he turned 70. And that was 7/14/73, so, yes. I remember. I had to stop and think for a second.

When we would go out to Vail for the charity golf tournaments, none of us – that was their tournament – they were being very generous in having us out there, including us in things that we would not otherwise have had the
opportunity to have participated in, been exposed to. And they always made a
point of making sure that all the family was invited, and some things – tickets,
etc., for events were already taken care of by donors or whatever – so they
were both very generous in that respect. We would never have assumed by
going out there that we should go to their house, and yet, that house – I have
pictures I was just looking at last night before I came down here – wonderful
pictures of the house in Vail where we were all together. It was when Jim was
still alive. Barb was gone, but Jim was remarried and it was just…

Smith: The house that they built in Vail?


Smith: Was it?

Burba: It was beautiful, absolutely beautiful. But he worked hard for it, you know?

Smith: By all accounts, they were beloved in Vail.

Burba: I’m sure that’s true. I think their loyalty to that city, they embraced that city as
– it was never Grand Rapids – it would never be Grand Rapids – but it was
their summer home, eventually. He used to go out there and ski all the time,
but obviously as his health became an issue…

Smith: It’s so funny, you talk about the work ethic, and of course, they all worked on
Saturdays, because for the old Congressman the day was defined by
answering the mail. And in Vail, he would walk to the post office.

Burba: Oh, I could see him doing that. Absolutely.

Smith: If he didn’t have the mail, he was reading the six newspapers every morning.
It’s funny, after 9/11 and the anthrax scare, the postal service stopped making
Saturday deliveries and no one could make him understand why they didn’t
have mail on Saturday. So they actually had members of the staff who put on
these spaceman outfits, literally, and went through the mail.

Burba: Oh, that’s hysterical.
Smith: Isn’t that something?

Burba: I had no idea about that.

Smith: And that’s obviously very late in life.

Burba: Yes, exactly.

Smith: But that’s an almost ferocious work ethic.

Burba: I just thought of another story and it was when we were at the White House, but it had followed – no – it was preceding, I believe…I can’t remember if it preceded or followed the assassination attempts, or it could have been another visit. But I do remember standing in the Oval Office with him, and being so surprised at the thickness of the glass in the Oval Office. Because you’d need an armored tank and five thousand other pieces of equipment before you’d even get to the front door, and to stand there in that Oval Office and see that thickness, and I can remember remarking on it, “Why is this glass so thick?” Because it just seemed like this is part of the house and nobody is going to get up here. And I think this was preceding the assassination attempts, he made the comment, “You know, I don’t know why they have this, because if somebody really wants to get you, they will. And there’s nothing anybody can do about it.”

Smith: Of course, he’d been on the Warren Commission.

Burba: His feeling was, that the Secret Service does a wonderful job, he thought so highly of them…

Smith: They seemed to have a very special relationship.

Burba: Oh, he really did. He absolutely did. And I can also remember the staff at the White House when we were visiting. We were sitting in the solarium, my husband and I, which was called the solarium at the time. I don’t know what it is called now – this big room that was decorated in yellow.

Smith: Mrs. Coolidge called it her sky parlor.
Burba: Beautiful view. And somebody came in and asked us if we wanted something to drink. I said, “Oh, yeah. I’d love a Coke,” and I don’t remember what my husband said. The next thing we know, somebody came up and they had this elaborate silver tray and the Coke and the flower. Both of us were so embarrassed, we just wanted to shrink into a chair. Well, when we got done, we took the tray back to the kitchen and the people downstairs said, “Ah! You don’t have to do that.” And I just looked at them and said, “You know, I am so embarrassed that you brought this to us. We’re perfectly capable of coming down. If you tell us where – we’ll just go get.” “Oh, well…”

And see, I think that was the relationship – they didn’t think of them as staff. They didn’t think of the Secret Service, my impression is, they didn’t think of the Secret Service – it was an extended part of their family.

Smith: Unlike some other presidents who shall remain nameless…at Christmas time, they made absolutely certain not to have events going on, so the agents could spend…

Burba: Could be with their families.

Smith: Exactly.

Burba: It goes right back to their roots, goes back to family, and I think that truly was the most important thing.

Smith: Can you describe, briefly, the dynamic with the four brothers?

Burba: Oh, golly. I think all three brothers, idolized their older brother. But there was eleven years difference between my father and my Uncle Jerry. There had to have been close to sixteen or fifteen years difference between my Uncle Jim and my Uncle Jerry. And I don’t know about my Uncle Tom – maybe six, but I’m guessing. So their growing up years, by the time they were growing up, certainly my father and my Uncle Jim grew up in a house directly across the street from where I live. That’s where they grew up. Jerry was already at law school, he might have even been in the Navy at that time. So he was only coming home – quick visits coming home. So as far as growing up, I don’t
know. I know that they were a close family, and I know that they idolized their older brother. But there was a real sense – as I got older and long after Jerry left the White House – I had a real sense that each one of those brothers respected the profession that each of them had chosen. And it wouldn’t occur to any of them to question the other’s decisions relating to their business or chosen field.

Smith: Mrs. Eisenhower was asked a perfectly understandable question – you must be very proud of your son – and she said, “Which one? All of my sons I’m proud of.”

Burba: I really think there certainly would be a little bit more sense of pride if your son managed to be president of the United States, but I think that would have been a comment made by both my grandparents. There was no separation there. I don’t think Jerry was ever treated differently – ever.

Smith: Was it Tom who went into politics?

Burba: For a short time. I believe he was a lobbyist in Lansing. My world was, what’s happening this weekend, where’s the dance? That kind of thing. But certainly I recall him being in Lansing, as a lobbyist, I remember when he was defeated when he ran again for something, but I couldn’t tell you what it was.

Smith: And then what was his career path?

Burba: After that, I don’t know what my Uncle Tom did because they moved soon after that, from EGR and they moved to South Carolina – an island – I’m trying to think of the name of it and I can’t now. And I think he was retired, basically. I think he still did, I believe I’m correct, that he still did reserve duty with the Navy, to some extent. But then he retired.

Smith: And your Uncle Jim?

Burba: Well, Uncle Jim was the optometrist, and he really worked until the Parkinson’s didn’t allow him to work anymore. But certainly that was what he did. And I think about this, when Jerry was running, it’s interesting because Jerry asked all three of his brothers to campaign for him, and they’d always
remained in the background. When the whole thing was going on with Nixon, …no comment, no comment, no comment…I can remember phone calls coming into the house from reporters offering my father money and he turned it down. And I remember the amount, and I remember thinking, “Are you crazy?” Because it was a lot of money back then. Absolutely no comment. Just nothing.

Smith: What were they after?

Burba: Any information. Any stories, anything. Back then they were relentless. When Jerry was president, my dad used to have to fly a lot for business, and he, at that time, you could do this, he would fly under an assumed name.

Smith: Really?

Burba: Yes, because he didn’t want anybody making the connection. He didn’t want to be asked, and yet when Jerry ran for the office, he asked every single one of his brothers to campaign for him – outside this state – to go to other states, individually, and with him. And they all – they did it in a second. So that showed me, or illustrates to me how much respect they had for him, how much they believed in him, and how much they wanted him to win.

Smith: Were they at the convention?

Burba: My father was at Kansas City – that was ’76. My mother and dad, Barb and Jim, I believe they all were there. I’m not sure – I think maybe Barb was still alive then, so I think they were all there.

Smith: Was there resentment, locally, over their decision to move to California?

Burba: Well, again, none that I would hear. Was it said behind our backs? Perhaps, probably. I certainly didn’t blame him, for health reasons. For his health, for her health, anymore than I blame my father for leaving for six months. As he said, “I didn’t work for sixty years to spend another miserable winter in Michigan.” And they are miserable, and they’ve always been miserable. They are just getting longer. So, I’m sure there were some people, but nobody would ever say that to me, directly.
Smith: He certainly came back often.

Burba: This was his home.

Smith: Yeah.

Burba: Truly.

Smith: And putting this place here - obviously your dad had a huge role in the creation of this institution.

Burba: Yeah, he turned to my dad a lot during that time, as far as ideas. I have correspondence that Dad’s given me. It was when Jordan Shepherd was very involved in designing and before the ground was even broken. Jerry was busy, and so if there were things that needed taken care of here, he would ask Dad. To me, there would have been greater resentment had this not been here. No question. But I don’t think it ever would have occurred to him for it to be anywhere else. Again, I just go back to – I’m being repetitive, but it’s nothing you probably haven’t heard before – his roots went so deep to this city and to the people. I think it was also to his parents. I just don’t think it ever occurred to him to have it anywhere else.

Smith: Remember, on election morning, ’76, when they dedicated that mural out at the airport, clearly it was the memory of his parents that caused him to choke up.

Burba: Absolutely. I have one of those in my dining room, and because the picture of the four brothers with the pony – I have that as a photo. So the first time I saw that in that mural was – wow. And then, selfishly, I thought, someday my children, my grandchildren, are going to come through this airport and they’re not only going to see their grandfather, they are going to see their grandfather’s brother. It was surreal.

Smith: When he came back, I understand if there was time, he would get together with the family.
Burba: Absolutely. He and dad would go play golf at Kent. Often times it was usually an in and out trip. A day and a night and then gone. But we’d have dinner together when he came in, even in the later years, and there was always one of the kids traveling with him when he would come. That was the one condition that Betty had set up. It was after Philadelphia – if you are going to be traveling now, one of the kids is going to go with you. We would still see them. We would see them for dinner and it was great – it was wonderful. I appreciated the fact that we would do that because a lot of those trips earlier on, every single minute of his day was spoken for. You didn’t want to intrude, so if something was arranged, it was because he wanted it. Again, it was at his request, then we were all grateful.

Smith: It must have been very special – the ninetieth birthday celebration.

Burba: Oh yes. That was very, very emotional.

Smith: Did you have a sense that this might be his last trip back?

Burba: Oh, absolutely, health-wise. Primarily because the family, my father, we were privy to more information that Jerry and Betty’s children were sharing with my dad, than anybody else. Maybe some close people later on, but I knew the Thanksgiving before he died. That Thanksgiving I can remember my cousin calling my father down in Florida and saying, “You know, Uncle Dick, I don’t think he’s going to make it until Christmas, and I want you to be able to talk to him.” So, when he was here for his ninetieth, his health was starting to fail a little, I didn’t think he’d be back for his ninety-fifth, which is what he talked about.

Smith: Did he?

Burba: Yeah. I really didn’t think so. But, having said that, ninety was good.

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

Burba: It had to have been – he died December 26 – I want to say probably, I’d have to go back and look on my calendars – if not the preceding summer, the summer before that, when he came into town. Whenever the last time was he
came into town, was when I saw him. Because when he came into town for museum business or something, to meet with Marty, to see Dad, and then we would have dinner out at Kent. In fact, definitely that was the last time.

Smith: Do you wonder if he ever – I know that she did at one point say to Marty…she wanted to see where they were going to buried. She said, “I want to see where people are going to dance on my grave.” But you wonder whether he ever walked out there.

Burba: If I had to guess, I’d say yes. A guess, purely a guess. Yes, I think his eye for detail – okay I just want to make sure that this is all taken care of – it looks good – and that would have been enough.

Smith: It’s such a beautiful spot.

Burba: It’s gorgeous.

Smith: It’s interesting – you may have heard this. When Presidents Clinton and Bush ’43 came by, each had the same reaction, which was: this is Jerry Ford. Calm in the middle of the city.

Burba: Absolutely. It’s extraordinary. I’ve been down there many times. Even during the winter time, I’ll drive down because it’s so close. And that’s the only place I go. I don’t necessarily come in here, into the museum, but I’ll go there. It’s almost – I’m here, they’re not – my cousins are not. So if it is a special time, I feel like it is something I can do. Nobody knows who I am when I’m down there.

Smith: Do you remember how you learned of his death?

Burba: Oh, yes, very distinctly. I was in Atlanta, at our son’s house for Christmas and my husband drove down, and I flew down. My husband left, early, early, early, like 3:00 a.m. on December 26th to drive back. I slept in because I wasn’t leaving until the 27th. I came out of the bedroom and I have two little granddaughters - at that time, four and two, three and one? I can’t remember. But I came out of the bedroom and they had all of these gates up. Adults had to go over the gates. But I noticed right away that the TV was on, and my son
never had that particular TV on. This was eight o’clock in the morning. I came around the corner and I didn’t look at it, I just saw that it was on, but the girls were right there, so there was my attention. And he said, “Mom,” and I said, “Yes?” And he said, “There was a message on my cell phone last night from Grandma.” He said, “Uncle Jerry died this morning.”

I was not surprised, but I just felt such a sense of loss. It was just staggering and I couldn’t really wrap my head around it at the time, and I didn’t want the girls to see my cry. So I turned to my son and I said, “I’m just going into the bedroom for a minute. Just tell the girls I have to wash my hands or something.” And as I went to put my leg over gate, and they have hardwood floors, I wasn’t paying close enough attention, and I fell and broke the bone in my arm. And so, at the funeral, nobody could see that I had my arm in a sling, I had a big black furry thing strung over it because I didn’t want anybody to ask and I didn’t want to draw attention to it, and it was a hairline fracture.

But flying home the next day was not easy because Scott said, “Mom, do you want to go to the hospital here?” I said, “No, I can’t do that. I’ve just got to get ready, my flight leaves tomorrow.” He said, “Well, do you want to go home now?” I said, “Nothing that I can do now,” but then I started checking my cell phone and there were things that I had to do here, working with Chip Emery, as soon as I got back.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction, local and beyond?

Burba: The numbers were staggering to me. And the calmness, the quiet, the orderliness without being told. I expected this city to show its respects, but when people who were interviewed who had driven from out east, or from Ohio, I was stunned. Absolutely stunned. And I thought what comfort to the family - my aunt and my cousins.

Smith: I was with ABC early in the week and we’d been told don’t be surprised if you see Mrs. Ford in a wheelchair. And, of course, we never did until the very end, and even then, she insisted on walking all that way and later on someone
remarked on that to her. And she said, “Well, that’s what my husband would have wanted.”

Burba: I worried about my father, too, because it was very difficult for him because he had just had surgery at Thanksgiving. And the cane, and standing out in that cold, cold air – and yet the day of the funeral here in Grand Rapids, in January, to have those temperatures and no snow – somebody was talking to somebody, because there could have been accidents and cars ending up in snow drifts and older people slipping on steps. It would have been a nightmare traffic-wise. Truly, I don’t remember a day in January before or since, where we haven’t been knee high to a tall Indian in snow.

Smith: Perfect.
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Smith: What were you doing before the Fords came into your lives? That’s also part of the story of the creation and evolution of Vail, which is an interesting story in and of itself.

Luc Meyer: Well, in 1970 at Thanksgiving, we came and opened a restaurant called the Left Bank Restaurant, which became the favorite restaurant of President Ford. And that’s how we started in Vail.

Smith: This is before he’s president?

Luc Meyer: Yes.

Smith: He was Minority Leader and then vice president. So he was coming to your restaurant…

Luc Meyer: As Minority Leader, as vice president, and as president.

Liz Meyer: When he was a congressman, he would come to the restaurant because he lived in Vail right across the street at The Lodge and it was very convenient for him. I don’t know how he heard about us. I didn’t know who he was. I was running the dining room. I remember specifically one occasion - and it was probably the occasion when – oh my gosh, this man is in American government. He’s quite important. And that was the first knowledge. He used to come with one or two of the children who were probably teenagers at that time, and that was before we remodeled the restaurant. And then things changed after that when we remodeled in 1978.

Smith: So now, they had a condo at The Lodge. Is that right? And what else was there in Vail at that point? It was much, much smaller than it is today.

Luc Meyer: Sure. Vail was basically Gore Creek Drive and Bridge Street, which went up to the gondola and Chair I.
Smith: One lift?

Luc Meyer: No, but that was the main lift. And the river was pretty much a border. Across from the river there was very little when we came. We came in 1970, so Vail was a fraction, of course there was no Lion’s Head. There was very little in Vail. We lived in Sandstone 70, which was across the highway. The highway was already a highway at that time. But when you looked across, there was nothing.

Smith: Was it harder to get to Vail then, as well?

Luc Meyer: Well, yeah. Because you had to go over the Pass on US 6. You didn’t have the highway. So it was only a two-lane road and that could be very tricky. In the summer it was alright, but in the winter with snow and the ice and trucks and everything, it was quite a dangerous road.

Liz Meyer: See, between Denver and here, the highway started at East Vail, i.e I70, and ended at the Minturn exit. So it was only a small stretch, and it was probably four or five miles or something. And then you went over Vail Pass. We lived in a house right on U.S. 6, and I’ll tell you, every time a truck came by I thought he was going to hit the house. And then all the way to Denver, it used to take us two and a half hours to Denver and three hours to the airport.

Smith: I would think that one of the things that you would have to take into consideration is the possibility of forest fires. Has that ever been a problem?

Luc Meyer: No, only recently with the pine beetle. The danger of forest fire now has only been a recent occurrence because of the pine beetle. Before this, our forest was green; plus, don’t forget, when you are thirty years or thirty-five years old, you don’t think of these things – you have your business, family, children, you have other priorities.

Smith: I’m thinking of their condo at The Lodge. That must have been awfully small. If the whole family came out, for example, for Christmas, it must have been pretty congested.

Luc Meyer: Well, I don’t know. We never actually saw the condominium physically.
Smith: And is that building still there?

Luc Meyer: Oh, yeah.

Liz Meyer: Exactly the same as it was. I’m sure it’s been remodeled by each owner.

Smith: Tell me, at your restaurant, what were his preferences? What did he like?

Luc Meyer: Liver and trout. In 1970, being a Frenchman and a chef, and coming to Vail, I was kind of an entrepreneur in many, many things as far as food is concerned. You have to realize, in 1970, in Colorado, you couldn’t find anything fresh. People didn’t know what a leek was. People didn’t know what tarragon and chervil were fresh herbs in general. You couldn’t find a fresh chicken. For me, having been trained in some of the finest restaurants in France, when I came here, I had to fight and finally get, these things for me. You had to have fresh fish, you have to start getting us access to fresh herbs to cook. There were a lot of things.

But we came here; we were immigrants – first generation – we were legal, by the way. And we came here; we knew very few people in Vail, but we just had a child. We were living before in the Virgin Islands, and we didn’t want to stay there because of the future for our children’s education and everything. We felt it was not what we wanted. We always loved the mountains because of our backgrounds. And we came to Vail, and it was the place where we wanted to be.

I had never any doubt that I would be successful. I had to start with little, we didn’t have very much money, you know? As long as we are living in Vail, the kids – we had this vision that that’s where we wanted to be. That’s where we felt happy.

Smith: Did you feel you were in on the ground floor of something that would, over time, become much more than it was?

Luc Meyer: Oh yes. Well, of course. But we never realized how far we would go. When we started working in the first four years, we worked seven days a week. That’s how hard it was just to survive. But we loved Vail, we loved the customers. In the early days there was another spirit in Vail. We met a lot
very famous people – one of them, of course, was President Ford. And it was different. Now, it’s not the same. The valley has grown so much, you have Beaver Creek, you have “down valley.”

Smith: President Ford was a workaholic. He had an incredible work ethic and he also had great, great respect for self-made people. Having been through the Depression himself. I’m sure he loved your food, but I suspect he also admired your example as well. What you had created and the spirit that you brought with you to this place.

Liz Meyer: Well, I think at the beginning, suddenly this man, this congressman, became vice president. We were at a friend’s house in Denver when that whole business happened, and I was saying, “Oh my gosh, this is one of our customers,” because I really didn’t know him. Being an old-fashioned European, I called everybody by their title. I never called them by their first name until I was told to. And so, he was just this customer. And then he became vice president, and then suddenly he became president. Wow. That was a big thing in our lives. I think that was about 1975?

Smith: August of ’74.

Liz Meyer: ’74, okay. And then ’76 I believe, he started the golf tournament.

Smith: In ’76 the golf tournament.

Luc Meyer: In ’75 he came as president in the summer to Vail.

Liz Meyer: That’s right.

Luc Meyer: And then the first time he came to our restaurant as president, at that time Bob Barrett was his assistant.

Liz Meyer: His ADC.

Luc Meyer: ADC.

Smith: And a bit of a character.

Luc Meyer: That’s right. I believe it was in July and I was in my kitchen preparing for the night. I was alone and it was about maybe one o’clock, the phone rang. On the
house phone this voice said, “I’m Bob Barrett, can you open up, we’d like to
talk to you?” So I went in the front and opened and later Bob became a friend.
He said, “Well, the President would like to have dinner tonight at your
restaurant.” So, “Oh, yes.” I asked questions and everything, and then left. I
called Liz and said, “Guess what? The President is coming tonight!” So it was
very, very exciting, of course.

Liz Meyer: So I went into the garden and picked flowers. Our restaurant was very
personal. I was there all the time in front and Luc was always there in the
back, and he would come into the dining room. So I always had flowers on
the table from the garden, not bought flowers. And also, I always placed him
in the room, and this was with the guidance of the Secret Service of which we
got to know Joel Glenn and Dale Wunderlich became personal friends as well.
And they were in charge of things with him there. And so with their guidance,
I put him on a certain table in a curtained part of the room which was often by
the window because I’m not sure if they checked - if they had people outside
across the stream looking there or what. He would have to walk all the way
through the room, but they felt that a corner place would be better for him.
Then, what I did, I put only customers I knew in the vicinity of his table.

Luc Meyer: Without telling them.

Liz Meyer: Oh, yeah.

Luc Meyer: Privacy was very important.

Liz Meyer: Because I felt they would be discrete, which, of course, they were.

Luc Meyer: It was our life, don’t forget. We came as immigrants, I couldn’t speak any
English. In 1975, we were five years in business, we had two small children.
At that time Vail was struggling. President Ford put Vail on the map,
especially for the summer.

Smith: Because at that point, I assume, everyone thought of it exclusively as a winter
resort.

Luc Meyer: That’s right. The summers were very hard. We were working for very, very
little. President Ford came in 1975 as president, and then in ’76 there was the
golf tournament and all that exploded. The whole experience, not only because of financial said of the benefit from it, but just the whole exchange for me - as a person who came to this country, couldn’t speak English, brought a wife with me, had two children who are Americans.

And now I’m an American myself because of President Ford, because when he needed to be re-elected he told me every vote would count. And I went to Pepi Gramshammer, who is a person you are probably going to meet, or you’ve met, and he said, “Everybody counts.” And we ran and got our citizenships so we could vote. And yet the President didn’t make it. So that was part of the history of our relationship with President Ford. And then you know, of course, he came with Kissinger.

A little funny story you might want to know: in 1970 we opened the restaurant; we were a young couple, we had a child, we had no money. I worked for somebody else, and we made good money. We had saved a little money, but we did not have credit cards. We came from the Virgin Islands. We didn’t have credit cards, we didn’t have a bank account. So we came here and when I wanted to open the Left Bank, of course, I went to the bank, to the credit card company to try to get the credit card. Who was I? I didn’t have credit and they wouldn’t allow me to take a credit card.

So in 1975, when President Ford came, I was on national TV and all this, suddenly American Express, MasterCard, Visa came, and said, well, you should take credit cards. And I said, “Well, for the five years I survived without you. Now I will never take credit cards.” And in the thirty-six years we have been in business, we’ve never took credit cards because of that.

Smith: That’s a great story.

Luc Meyer: And President Ford, he had a charge account at the left Bank. We always felt, again, because of values coming from Europe, you know, we always felt the most elegant way to come to a restaurant is to be able to sit down and bring your guests, and never see a bill on your table. You don’t have to pull out the credit card or cash or check – nothing.
Smith: That brings to mind - when the World Forums were here. And this kind of motley group of people. Politically you wouldn’t think of them as being kindred spirits. Jim Callaghan, who was a kind of an old line Socialist, and Helmut Schmidt who was certainly to the left of Ford, but then of course, Giscard, who for all his many fine qualities, is not exactly a hail fellow, well met. He’s rather a lofty figure. And yet they clearly all hit it off. And I’m wondering – did he ever bring Giscard to your restaurant?

Liz Meyer: Yes.

Luc Meyer: Of course. We had all these people.

Liz Meyer: We have a wonderful guestbook, which we started. Gerald Ford was one of the early ones. That’s about the time when we started it. He brought Jackie Gleason and Bob Hope and those people, because of the Ford Tournament. And I remember Jackie Gleason didn’t even turn a page of the book, he just opened the cover and just signed it right on the inside cover.

Smith: He was the Great One.

Liz Meyer: It’s amazing, his signature. But then he brought the World Forum leaders into the restaurant and I have a page in our guest book with Callaghan and Giscard and Pierre Trudeau, and Schmidt. Who else was there? But I have their signatures. Of, yes, Frazier, he was there. And I remember, because I was raised in Zimbabwe, and Mr. Callaghan was joking with me saying, “Hello, Miss Zimbabwe.” I don’t know how he found out.

Smith: Did they surprise you at all – any of them? Their personalities or temperaments?

Luc Meyer: I, as a Frenchman, with other French people in the valley organized a party for Giscard d’Estaing. So I provided the food and it was at Fitzhugh Scott’s house, who was an old time Vailite. The house was right on Mill Creek Circle, next to the house where President Ford used to stay when he was President. And the interesting story about Giscard d’Estaing is this: I was born in 1942 in the town of Clermont Ferrand. Below us lived a family which was Giscard’s parents. Now he must have been about fifteen years older than me, I
would guess. My older brother, just by coincidence, was here that summer when we had this party. I told my brother Christian, who was here with his wife and children that they had to come. So he came, and we, as a family, came to Giscard and introduced ourselves and said, “Do you remember the Alsatian family (because we were refugees) who lived above you in Clermont Ferrand?” He said, “Sure.” We said, “That was us.” The funny story is that Giscard d’Estaing has a bald head, he has no hair. Well, when I was a tiny little boy, in the summer, because we lived there until 1945, my mother would put me on the balcony – there was a tiny little balcony. And one day I was doing what was natural for a little boy to do, but Giscard was walking under the balcony. And my mother, of course, was terribly apologetic. But this story stayed in the family. So we reminded him of that and he was wonderful.

Smith: Was he?

Luc Meyer: Yeah, he had a good day. His wife is not that approachable. He has a sense of humor and he’s open.

Smith: By all accounts, he really enjoyed himself here.

Luc Meyer: Yes, he loved it.

Liz Meyer: And Callaghan, he was very, very relaxed with me, I suppose both being English.

Luc Meyer: So Giscard used to come after, and used to come privately to the Left Bank, because when the Ford Forum moved here, then it got diluted. Well, less people from the community were asked to host one night this, so we need to do catering. But then they had the night off and I remember Giscard used to come to the Left Bank.

Smith: And you obviously got to know Mrs. Ford.

Luc Meyer: Oh, of course.

Liz Meyer: Oh, yes.

Smith: Tell us about her.
Liz Meyer: Well, you know, she started the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens with Helen Fritch. And I don’t know if you are interviewing them as well, they own the Sitzmark Lodge, in which the restaurant is located. And they are still there. Helen was an avid gardener, and I would go to her for advice all the time. I don’t know how the two of them met, but Betty Ford and Helen were the founders of this garden. And I’ve always believed in it because it is such a unique thing at this altitude. And of course, it’s taken a long time to take flight. But what Betty has done also, in her own little way for the community here is tremendous. And she is so loved, and she’s not a walkover, I mean, I knew where my place was, but in a gentle way, as far as running the restaurant. He was a little more relaxed, I think, and I think that’s normal because of his position in life. And she’s the wife and she always has to sort of be in the background.

Smith: Interesting observation.

Liz Meyer: Yeah, but I felt she was – I have a lot of respect for her.

Luc Meyer: You see, don’t forget: we knew her when she had her problem with drinking.

Liz Meyer: About food: Luc mentioned about the liver and the trout – he [Ford] loved desserts, as well.

Smith: He did have a sweet tooth.

Liz Meyer: He had a sweet tooth – most definitely. And being from Michigan, and we being foreigners here, we are learning as we go along about American stuff. And then we learned that the blueberries come from Michigan. So Luc would get blueberries and he would make a blueberry tart for him. He would make this torte tart for him that day and present it to him at the table and Luc would serve it up. And we did some other desserts.

Luc used to bicycle to work in the summer, and he was bicycling and he was thinking – he thinks so much about food, he thinks about food and wine just about all the time. And he’s thinking there must be a dessert I can do. I love to eat sour cream. He just eats it by the spoonful. So he figured out a recipe, which is unique. Most chefs, they never invent anything. They get an idea from someone and they change it around. In this case – I give him credit for
really inventing something. He made this ice cream with sour cream and
cream and lemon zest. And then he decided that with the lemon zest it was
very nice, it wasn’t sweet, but it wasn’t sour, but then to put a sauce. So he did
a raspberry sauce, a fresh raspberry sauce on top. Then we couldn’t get a
name for it. We had to call it something. The Left Bank Special didn’t make
it. So President Ford came to dinner and Mrs. Ford was not there because I
think it was Susan who was having her first baby. No, the first child was from
one of the sons – I think it was Sara. And the second child was Tyne.

Smith: That’s right.

Liz Meyer: So, Mrs. Ford was away, and we presented him with this ice cream and we
said, “Mr. President, we have a new creation of Luc’s, we’d love you to try it.
You’re the first to try this ice cream. But we don’t have a name for it. We
thought of maybe Red and White Mountain.” And he said, “You know,
Betty’s not here because Susan has just had her baby, Tyne.” He said, “You
know, I have two granddaughters – Sarah and Tyne.” And I said, “That’s it.
We’re going to call the ice cream Sarah Tyne ice cream.” And, until this day,
people come to the restaurant and ask – Jean Michel, our chef who has now
taken over the restaurant since we sold it to him has to make Sarah Tyne ice
cream.

Smith: That’s a wonderful story.

Liz Meyer: And it’s a wonderful ice cream.

Luc Meyer: Going back to Mrs. Ford, I would really like to say this: we have known that
she had a problem with alcohol. And at that time, of course, she would drink.
But she would hardly eat. It was a little frustrating for me. I was always trying
to find out what she liked to present her. And she would have literally one
bite, and not eat the rest. And I was always feeling, oh maybe I didn’t do it
right, maybe she didn’t enjoy it. And it was nothing to do with it.

Smith: Is that a function of the drinking, that it dulls the appetite?

Luc Meyer: Well, not only dulls it, you don’t have any appetite. I remember one day she
wanted sole – she thought she would eat sole. So I ordered some fresh sole
and I made the fillet – she liked it with the cream sauce, with the grapes and everything. Again, she ate just one. And then we saw the evolution of her going off and then her coming back, because, you know, President Ford did come every year for his birthday, which was the 14th of July, that I remember because it’s Bastille Day in France. Until the year before he died, he was still in the restaurant, coming on the 14th of July. And many years we were invited to his party, but running a restaurant, sometimes we couldn’t go there. But anyway, we saw the evolution and then later on, when Mrs. Ford got over her problem, she became a regular eater again. She would eat normally, and it was wonderful because President Ford enjoyed his cocktail, and his wine with dinner. But after this he quit drinking just to support Mrs. Ford. I as a wine lover I think this is a tremendous achievement, to have this kind of discipline to stop something you like to do.

Smith: And I imagine they probably were a good influence on other people’s lives. Clearly, she had an enormous impact.

Liz Meyer: Oh, yes, because she has the Betty Ford Center in California. I mean, it is tremendous what that place is doing for people. It’s like the garden, which is a happy thing, it’s a whole different thing.

Luc Meyer: You should see the garden.

Smith: We saw it yesterday.

Luc Meyer: Oh you did?

Smith: Yeah, it’s beautiful, and larger than I had pictured it. And of course, the proximity to the Amphitheater, which is very impressive.

Luc Meyer: We’re going tonight, for Yo Yo Ma

Smith: Oh wonderful. He was a classmate of mine at Harvard. Class of 1975.

Liz Meyer: I just read that yesterday.

Luc Meyer: Yeah, you told me. You said he went to Harvard.

Smith: Yeah, same year. We just had our 35th reunion.
Luc Meyer: You talk about the Fords. We have so many wonderful souvenirs, because first he came with a lot of very important people to the restaurant. He created an energy in this town. When he came people would line up. And we were very discrete. We never were the kind of restaurateur who wanted to have their picture taken. All the pictures we had, he had them taken of us.

And then when he came at Christmas, of course, it was a gathering of old friends and we would do a lot of the catering. So at the Kindel’s house at Christmas, we would do his Christmas party. So here I had a restaurant – you can believe how busy we are – 24th of December. And here a house in Vail I would say ten minutes away, there would be his dinner party. Well, I had to cook the goose for Christmas. Because I would do a traditional French Christmas dinner with the goose and the chestnuts, and all this. And I will have to go (because we will have two seatings) in between the seatings at The Left Bank and take the goose and everything to the house. Then the Secret Service were there saying, “Hey, where you going?” I would say, “Don’t wait – the goose is getting cold.” And I remember once this guy blocking the steps going up to the back door to this kitchen, and I handed him a goose and I said, “Here, do something.” And the guy grabbed the goose and said, “Wait a moment” and I said “Don’t worry about it.” So it wasn’t Washington – Vail is Vail.

Smith: Now, had they built the house?

Luc Meyer: Oh no.

Liz Meyer: They were in Dick Bass’s house on Mill Creek Circle. And the reason that the Secret Service chose that house – there was only one way in and one way out. It was a circle.

Luc Meyer: Where we did the Christmas party was not at that house. That was at Ted Kindel’s house at the time. So anyway, I would go in the kitchen. I had my staff already there. I had the goose and I would put it on a nice silver tray and prepare it. Then I would open the door and I would come and present it to Mr. President and Mrs. Ford. Go back in the kitchen and start slicing. And in the meantime, (because I’m a working chef, I’m not a celebrity chef) in the
restaurant dining room, while losing the chef at the second seating, she (Liz) had to go and say to the people, “Excuse me, can there be a little delay in your food, Luc had to deliver the goose to the President.” And everybody was just so happy.

Smith: My sense was that they were very visible in this community and very hands on in their involvement.

Luc Meyer: Of course, they would do the lights at Christmas. They would do so many things, you know? They would be involved in so many charity events, the golfing.

Smith: I have to ask you, because we know he was a real fiscal conservative. And there is something of a debate over what kind of tipper he was.

Liz Meyer: I think he was nothing extraordinary that I would say, “Oh what a cheap president we have.” No, not at all.

Luc Meyer: He was twenty percent, but he was not a big spender. He loved liver. Well, liver was not an expensive item on the menu. Or trout.

Liz Meyer: He didn’t have expensive wines or anything like that. He was very fair on that.

Smith: I wonder, as he got older, whether the diet changed at all I had just a couple of occasions to eat with him, and there was a lot of fish – the kinds of healthy things that you would associate with an older person.

Liz Meyer: He had a sweet tooth. Let me add a little story. Well, the President of the United States comes to my restaurant; I’m not going to buy him a drink, right? I mean, we have a little more class than this. You cannot buy him something – if I presented him a new dessert, I could make it complimentary. But, one thing I did was, years ago before he became president, my mother used to make the most wonderful jam in the summer. Now, when you are in Europe, in France, and in the summer when it is the season of the blueberry, we would go collect this fruit in the wild and Mother would make jam. Well, when my mother got too old to make jam, one day she sent me a beautiful copper pot in
which she made jam. So here I got this copper pot and I said, “Well, that’s my memory of my youth, making jam. So I’m going to make jam.”

Now, Colorado is famous for apricots this week, in two weeks from now, it’s going to start peaches. These are the two fruits that Colorado is very famous for. So what I did was to start making apricot and peach jam with the local fruit that I bought from the local market and from local people. Well, when President Ford came, what I would do is take a little pack and put two little jars of my jam as a little present. That’s personal to give, something that I made that I sent to him. Well, first time I did, the next time he came for dinner he said, “Hum, may I have these wonderful jams of yours.” So I gave him one and of course, it became a custom.

And then one day he came, and I don’t know why, I was joking and I said, “Mr. President, I will make you all the jam, but you will have to bring back the jars because I recycle them.” And do you know that from that day, every time he would come for dinner, Secret Service would bring me the empty jar of jam. And the 14th of July when I did not have time to see him I would make a box of jam and I would drive it all the way from here to Beaver Creek, and stop by, “For the President.” So I would provide him with his jam for the rest of his life, so I’m very proud of that.

Liz Meyer: I have another little story about him, too. We met a man, who is a book publisher, and he used to publish cookbooks – *Dining Out in Los Angeles, Dining Out...*, and he was doing a cookbook for a chef in Aspen and this was in about ’79-’80, somewhere around then – the late ‘70s. So Elliott came here and he told us about these things, and he said, “I think you should write a cookbook.” And Luc was saying, “I don’t know – my English is so bad I can’t do anything like that.” He said, “No, I can’t possibly do something like that.”

Luc Meyer: My reaction was more that so many cookbooks were being published. He said, “You have the most important person in this world in your restaurant who comes on a regular basis. What about if President Ford would write a foreword to your cookbook?” And I looked at him and I said, “What a presumption to think that I can ask the President of the United States to write a foreword!” He said, “Have you thought about it? Look, it would cost you
just a stamp.” So he came that night for dinner and he said, “Just think about what a stamp would cost you, just write a letter.” So, I wrote a letter and less than a month later I had the foreword of my cookbook, but I hadn’t written the cookbook. So here I had the foreword and had to write the book. So I called this Elliott guy who is the publisher and I said, “I have a foreword.” He said, “I will help you.” Because he has special people who can help. So we went through the process in the off season, writing recipes and everything. That was the worst time we had together because it…

Liz Meyer: Our marriage was very fragile.

Luc Meyer: It was so hard because I can cook, I can make you a hollandaise in five minutes, but to put it down on paper and in the right order and in ounces – when I’m used to grams and everything.

Liz Meyer: Then we had to think of a title. And so with the collaboration of this man, Elliott, he said you get so many famous people in this restaurant – and we had showed him that time our guestbook – he said, “Let’s call it the Left Bank Celebrity Cookbook.” And so we took a page of a celebrity…

Luc Meyer: Like President Ford.

Liz Meyer: Like Ford.

Luc Meyer: And what I served him – so it was a cookbook of recipes, but all with menus. So we would make a menu for every celebrity who came. But there was always a story of what happened when this celebrity came, when Robert Redford came, what happened with him, President Ford or Bob Hope.

Liz Meyer: Andy Warhol.

Luc Meyer: Andy Warhol.

Liz Meyer: That was first published in ’82. We had three printings. Then, the second one, we added another chapter. And, you see, a chapter consisted of a menu. So it might be six courses or something, just to make it a little different. Instead of doing a cookbook where you have all appetizers here and all fish here – so it was all jumbled up and you could find everything. And then he did a
Christmas in Vail, for the Christmas that he did for President Ford at the private house where he was staying.

Luc Meyer: And the profit of this book we gave to the Betty Ford Alpine Garden.

Smith: That’s wonderful.

Luc Meyer: It was so wonderful to do it. It was not for the purpose of making money. It was more something for me a challenge, of course, publishing a book. And it was just something new, something exciting. In the old time we did so much, without us thinking of the bottom line, you know. That was the wonderful spirit of cooking, of wanting to grow, my herbs in my back garden so I could bring zucchini flowers, all the chive flowers and fresh chives and this kind of thing. Every morning you would see me on my bike – with my taragon and chives and some basil and thyme and everything in my basket that I just picked from the garden to cook. Because I’m an artist. Cooking is my life, I’ve been cooking for fifty years.

When President Ford died, we went to Rancho Mirage. We were invited to his private wake. We knew a lot of people from Vail, so we went there with a lot of different people. But when we got the invitation to go to the official funeral in Washington, I said, “What do I belong with these thousands of people who have come from around the country, the world. What have we done? Yes, he’s been a customer. He has never eaten for free in my restaurant because that’s one thing that President Ford would have never accepted.” He had his free jam, he never had a free meal in my restaurant.

Smith: What was the reaction in Vail, generally when he passed away?

Luc Meyer: Well, you know, President Ford was so close to all of us. He had done so much, but in a fatherly way, that for us, missing him, not seeing him, not seeing Mrs. Ford, and remembering all that he did for us – now our generation remembers this. A lot of the younger people you see today in Vail don’t realize what President Ford has done for us. It was all about his position as president. That’s why I think he liked Vail so much, because he mixed with people like us. We never talked politics. We never asked for any favors from President Ford.
Smith: And I’m told one of the things that they both really enjoyed about this place was that basically, people would leave them alone. People did not bother them for autographs and pictures – you know, the whole celebrity thing.

Luc Meyer: That’s right. Not at all.

Liz Meyer: Well, you know, he would have to walk through the restaurant, and this was even after he was no longer the president. And I would see them get up with a pen and so on, and I’d say, “Excuse me, do you want President Ford’s signature? I will get it for you.” And so when he walked by in the restaurant – of course, everybody clapped.

Luc Meyer: You have to see like Christmas, now. You figure out our restaurant – a hundred people seated, it’s full. And suddenly you are eating there and we wouldn’t tell anybody – now, people knew that President Ford was in town, of course. But suddenly you look and you see the President of the United States walking in. He would come in, people would stop eating. And he would go, and very graciously say hello because he knew so many people, you know. And then he would sit down and have his dinner. But it was so elegant. Today I open the *New York Times* and I saw President Obama having a hamburger with the president of Russia. I think this is wonderful. This could not happen in Russia. See what I mean? So that was the spirit that President Ford just loved.

Smith: Did you ever see them with the grandchildren?

Luc Meyer: Oh, yeah. At his birthday.

Liz Meyer: At his house. But you know, when they would come here, I think it was much more of a private time. I think Sheika is the only one that’s really that close. I mean, she was just out in California for Betty’s birthday and so on. I’ve never called her Betty. I’ve always called her Mrs. Ford. And just getting back to the reaction of when he died. For me, personally, it was an emptiness in the future. There was a sort of void. Even though he was in California and he didn’t come here quite so much in the last year maybe, we always think about him, because Vail is what it is because of him. And I think if he saw Vail
now, with those big buildings back there which you have not seen, he would probably be a little sad. Because when he started off in the Lodge at Vail, which is still the same. But, I mean, all these other places that have changed.

Luc Meyer:  Main Street is still the same.

Smith:  But you mean some of these over the top mansions that are a little bit garish?

Liz Meyer:  Yes. It’s sort of changing the…

Luc Meyer:  It was a very comfortable relationship because I don’t think that many of the people in Vail wanted to really be involved or asking for special favors. And I think that is what the wonderful thing was.

Smith:  Did you see his sense of humor?

Liz Meyer:  He was always very gentle, warm.

Smith:  Upbeat?

Liz Meyer:  I couldn’t joke with him; but on the other hand, it’s not my position to joke with the president.

Smith:  Understood.

Liz Meyer:  Yes, he would laugh – like with the Sarah-Tyne, naming the Sarah-Tyne ice cream. Now, that tickled him. He thought, wow, that’s a great idea.

Luc Meyer:  And after we had to serve it and I had to make it for the grandchildren. Talking about the grandchildren once he called me and he said, “You know the grandchildren are coming, I would love you to make some ice cream for them.” I make a bucket of ice cream, the Sarah-Tyne. We were invited to the White House. We never saw him when he was in there because they were busy, but we were invited to _________ with Bob Barrett to the White House. He was a very thoughtful man.

I’ll give you an example. I remember this dinner for Christmas. Of course there was a person taking pictures there. And President Ford would always, when I gave him jam, write me a little note, by hand, never typed, and sign it. And I have so many of these notes that I keep and I cherish. And Liz says,
“Do we have to keep all these notes?” And I say, “Of course, everyone is important to me.” It was incredible, the President of the United States has the time to say thank you for two little jars of jam. You know this, a lot of people, you do a lot more and you never get a thank you. But anyway, we didn’t do it for the thank you, we did it because we appreciated it. And that was where President Ford was so special. And we did this dinner and they took pictures. And then after President Ford asked us for the name of each of our waiters because he had a picture taken with them, and he sent us a picture to give to each waiter that he had personally signed. And I thought that was so thoughtful. We are doing our job, but that was President Ford – the detail. And I think, unfortunately, that that’s why he wasn’t re-elected president – he was too much of a human being, and not enough, maybe, politician. For us, we never got involved in politics.

Smith: That’s probably one reason he enjoyed it because he could switch off, and just be himself.

Luc Meyer: Well, you have to realize when you come as an immigrant your priorities are your family, your children, running a business, making some money to pay for the education of your children. And politics, Republicans or Democrats, were nothing. I didn’t even know what President Ford was, kind of until later on. And now, of course, having lived in America for so long it’s a little different.

Smith: He did come up here that last summer before he passed away. There were lots of folks who were almost begging him not to for reasons of health. But they were determined. He was stubborn, And they loved this place. Did you see them at all during that time?

Luc Meyer: He came for the 14th of July.

Smith: He did? On his last birthday?

Luc Meyer: Next to last.

Smith: Which would be 2005.

Luc Meyer: Right.
Liz Meyer: We got out of the restaurant 2006.

Luc Meyer: He didn’t come anymore.

Smith: And frankly, by that point, he might not have been able to come down here.

Luc Meyer: Yes.

Smith: And he was enjoying himself?

Liz Meyer: It will be in my diary. I write a diary every day and it will be in there. He didn’t come for his 90\textsuperscript{th} – it was his 92\textsuperscript{nd}. And he died?

Smith: He was 93.

Luc Meyer: And he came for his 92\textsuperscript{nd} birthday.

Liz Meyer: His 92\textsuperscript{nd} was his last one.

Smith: And he had the trout?

Luc Meyer: And he had the trout. Well, plus the liver – I always get it fresh, so it’s not an item we keep that long – we don’t have it all the time. If I know the President is coming, I would order it. If he did not have the liver, then he would have the trout. By the time you get to his age, you don’t eat big meals anymore.

Liz Meyer: I remember his 60\textsuperscript{th} birthday specifically on the 14\textsuperscript{th} of July. They had a surprise birthday party for him at the golf course because he was playing golf. And so they arranged for the guests – did you go? (asking me) I went because it was during the day and we were at the golf course and there was a wall and everybody had to hide behind the wall. And when he came to the eighteenth hole, we all leapt up and shouted “Happy Birthday!” to him and he was like a little boy. It was so wonderful – the surprise of the whole thing, and, of course, he knew everybody. And of course we felt so honored to be invited to that. That must have been in the late ’70s?

Smith: That would be ’73. He was born in 1913, so his 60\textsuperscript{th} birthday would be 1973. Maybe 65?

Liz Meyer: It must have been a little later.
Smith: Let me ask you because we’re about out of tape. How do you think, from your own experiences, how do you think he should be remembered?

Luc Meyer: As a politician or as a man?

Smith: Both.

Luc Meyer: Well, as a politician, I would say he was a very, very decent man. When you see today, politics - let me say this as an immigrant - I sometimes feel I am more American than the Americans, because we love this country a different way. Because we weren’t born here, but we are Americans by choice – you are an American by birth. You didn’t have this choice. So I take this very seriously – I wanted to become an American. I wanted my wife to become American, and I’m glad that my children are Americans. So that’s one thing – as an immigrant, it was very important. He was a man of great decency. Today, when you see politicians – let’s not go into that.

Smith: I know what you mean.

Luc Meyer: As a man, as far as a man, he was a family man, he was just a wonderful, warm individual who never abused his power or his stature. He always tried to bring people up. He gave you this wonderful, wonderful feeling. We have met a lot of very important people, but you know, President Ford is certainly up there with one of the most…and I don’t think it’s because of the camera. This is very personal, we are sincere people. We have nothing to gain. Do you have something to add?

Liz Meyer: He was always so kind to us when he used to come into the restaurant. He seemed to have such a warmth about him. He really enjoyed it.

Smith: He had a good life. And Vail was a large part of that. Growing up in the Depression in Michigan, he could never have imagined the life that he would lead. Not just the offices that he held, but the opportunities and the friends that were made.

Liz Meyer: And I think that when he probably thought back on his life, that he was adopted, that he came from the most humble of beginnings, and where he got, he still kept that humbleness about him which was so wonderful. Because I
couldn’t imagine meeting ever meeting any of the other presidents if we
would have had the same repartee. I doubt it.

Smith: Well put.

Luc Meyer: And as I said, at the time we met him we were humble people trying to make
a living, bring up a family in a wonderful place called Vail. And thanks to
him.

Smith: Perfect.
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Smith: Thank you so much for doing this. Have you been in this office before?

Carr: I have not.

Smith: I have to ask, just because I regret never having seen it for myself, but having heard about it from others, and you would know much better because you were there. He loved his school and he loved his team, and frequently he would make a point of being here before the Ohio game delivering a pep talk to the team. Were you present for any of those?

Carr: Yes, I was. I was there. Coach Schembechler hired me in 1980, so I was there through a couple of years ago. I can remember during Bo’s tenure during the ‘80s and Gary Moeller, the first five years of the ‘90s, that every time President Ford came to Ann Arbor it was pretty much understood that some way, somehow, he was going to get over to meet with the team and talk with the team. So I was there for all of those.

The Ohio State game that I remember, and really, I think my greatest memory of the President was in the 1997 season. We’d won our first ten games and we were going into the Ohio State game undefeated and ranked number one in the nation. Ohio State was coming to Ann Arbor with a great team. And what I had tried to do during the course of the week, particularly Sunday and Monday, was to convince our team that this game was not only of importance, but our preparation had to be the same. I tried to relieve some of the pressure that I knew everybody felt. So on Monday I got a call from the President’s office and they said President Ford was going to be in town on Wednesday and he wanted to come over for practice that afternoon. And, of course, Wednesday is probably the most important day of the week.

Smith: And why is that?
Carr: Well, because you put your game plan in on Tuesday, and Tuesday night you decide if there is anything you are going to take out, or if there is anything you might occasionally add at that part of the week. And what you really want is you want to feel confident coming off the field on Wednesday that everybody knows exactly what the plan is and what is expected.

So, of course, when the President comes, he doesn’t come by himself. He’s got an entourage of assistants and Secret Service agents. But I also knew that this would be a tremendous thing for our team and for our players, and a tremendous experience - something they would never forget for the rest of their lives.

So I got a call and the President arrived part way through practice. It was a cold November day, and finally I was talking with him and I said, “Now, you let me know when you are ready to speak to the team.” So finally we interrupt our practice and get everybody together.

Smith: Did the team know that this was…?

Carr: Yeah. Before practice we always have a meeting and I told them that he was going to be there and I was sure he would have something important to say to them. When I had talked to the President as we stood watching practice, I said to him, “What I’ve tried to do, I’ve tried to relieve the pressure because there aren’t many times you are number one in the nation going into this game with a chance to win a national championship.” So when we got everybody together, all the coaches and players took a knee and he told them how glad he was to be in Ann Arbor and to see them. And that he had come to wish them luck this week.

Then he said, “You know, I saw a lot of your games. I saw that great comeback win against Notre Dame early in the season. And I saw that great win over Iowa in the middle of the season when you were down ______ to 7 at the half. I watched that magnificent game, one of the finest performances I’ve ever seen a Michigan team, have against Penn State down in Happy Valley.” He said, “But you know, this Saturday you are going to play the most important game in the history of Michigan football.”
So much for relieving the pressure. Every time I think about that speech, I think, he knew exactly what he was doing, because he wanted them to know how much this game meant and how much it would mean to Michigan and all those people who supported the university for this team to win a national championship. So, I’ll certainly never forget that afternoon.

Smith: Just to get it on the record, who won the game?

Carr: Well, and of course, it was a great football game. It went right down to the last few minutes and we won the game. And of course, that gave us the opportunity to go to Rose Bowl and play in a game that if we won, which we did, to become the first team to win a national championship at Michigan since 1948 – it was fifty years. I think he certainly made his contribution, and certainly that memory for all of us was really special.

Smith: He knew everyone on the roster. He knew the team, he watched the game. But then he basically knew who did what.

Carr: What I remember most vividly is the meetings. Most of the meetings we had, some of them were on the field, but for the most part, as coaches we wanted to have him speak to our team in our whole team meeting room. It’s an auditorium style room and we just felt they could hear better. And what always struck me is when he talked to these kids, he’d talk about his own experiences in Michigan - how he had to work in the student union to help pay his tuition, and the people who helped him come to Michigan; who gave him the kind of support that helped him make it through Michigan. He always talked about how appreciative he was, because the opportunity to go to school and to play football at Michigan, was one of the greatest opportunities he ever had. And he would talk about how it prepared him for all the things that he was going to face in his life and ultimately to be the President of the United States.

But in those meetings, he would never fail to call out a number or call out a guy by name, say, “Where are you?” And he’d say, “You know, I really like the way you play.” And he always wanted to know any of the guys from Grand Rapids. I can remember David Brandt, a great center on one of our
teams, a guard, he played both. But he always knew the guys from that part of the state, so it was always a special time.

Smith: And what was the effect on the kids?

Carr: Well, I think if you asked them, the thing they would most remember was that he never failed to talk about his love for the University of Michigan and his emphasis that, “Look, every guy in this room – I can’t emphasize to you enough – the importance of finishing your degree. And finishing your education, because the game – we only can play for a limited time - but that education, especially an education here at Michigan, is going to serve you the rest of your life.”

Smith: Did he ever mention the story – which is relatively well-known – the story of Willis Ward, the African-American teammate that he had? Did he ever talk about that?

Carr: I’ve read the comments a great deal about it, some of the articles that were written at the time, but I know that – and I can’t honestly remember whether he told this to the team or he told it to me – how much that experience focused him on what Willis Ward went through. And I think he had great regret for the decision that was made not to play Willis. Of course, recently, the other player from Georgia Tech – it ended up being a horrible experience for him as well because the deal they agreed upon was that Willis wouldn’t be allowed to play and the Georgia Tech player who played the same position wouldn’t be able to play either. And I think President Ford down through the years spoke out about that incident and it certainly was not the best of Michigan football.

Smith: And that was the one game they won that year?

Carr: Yeah, it was the only game they won, 1934, I think it was. And, of course, he was All-American, selected as All-American after that season. But I think it was an experience that he took with him that he learned from.

Smith: Let me ask you something because that raises the broader question - because the people who haven’t played sports at that level don’t understand it, or can’t imagine it. What is it about the game that, for lack of a better cliché, builds
character? What is it about the game that prepares one for whatever comes next?

Carr: I think it’s a game that requires so many things if you’re going to win and if you’re going to try to be the best, and that has always been the tradition at Michigan. I think the coaches job is to convince his players that you cannot be the best, you cannot be the best that you are capable of being, you cannot be a team that all of these Michigan people are going to be proud of, unless you work together. It all begins with – obviously you have to have talented people – but if you don’t have people who will work together, who are willing to play their role to do their job, regardless of what it might be…

A lot of times that entails being the guy who practices hard, but never gets to play the game. All those things. The guy who is the backup; if he’s not ready, then somebody gets hurt; then your chances to win are out the window. So, I think it all begins with an understanding that it is the ultimate team game. And it’s also a game that no matter who you are, you’re going to get knocked down and you’re going to, at times, want to stay down. You’re not always going to feel like you want to get up, because sometimes it’s awfully hard to. And the game will humble every man who plays it. It is a game that, regardless of how skilled you are, some plays the other guy is going to win. He’s going to knock you down. And so it takes a toughness, you know, a mental attitude that “I understand that I’m going to get knocked down, but I’m always going to get up. Nothing will keep me down. I’m going to fight like hell. I’m going to get off the ground and I’m going to beat you next play. I’m going to win the next play.”

And I think the other thing the game teaches is to never give up. Regardless of what the score is, you always have a chance. Or, in those few situations where maybe you don’t, you learn that it’s about how you finish, it’s about understanding that if you respect the game, you’re never going to give anything but your best effort. And if you can do those things, in my judgment, you’re going to learn a lot of valuable lessons as you go forward. And certainly, understanding the term that it’s a team game means that in that huddle, and in that locker room, and as you travel across the country and you
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get a chance to play in the greatest of all stadiums – the _______ Stadium – that there’s all kinds of differences amongst you and your teammates. And the game teaches you to respect the man for his differences; that if you can learn to understand that people believe differently, look at the world differently, they see things differently from you, I think that’s the single greatest thing you can get from the game.

I think if you look at American sports, in so many instances down through our history, sports have led to reconciliation and changing of barriers, of knocking down barriers. So, that’s why I think a coach and the guys who play the game, I think so many people feel a real love for. Not just for the fun of playing the game, but for all the things you learn from it.

Smith: One of the things that comes to mind - President Ford said that he learned things on the football field that stood him in good stead later on, and one of which is to let unjust criticism slide off your back. Being booed by a 100,000 fans in a football stadium is a lot worse than reading a negative editorial or seeing a cartoon - that it gave him a sense of perspective. As long as you know you’ve done your best, it doesn’t matter what 100,000 rabid football fans in the heat of the moment might say.

Carr: I was reading a quote the other day from Coach Yost who coached at Michigan from 1901 to 1926, and I guess most people would consider him the father of Michigan football. He said, “One of the things you learn playing football at Michigan is that even when you win the big game, there’s a lot of people unhappy because they don’t like the way the team performed.” And he said, “There is such a high expectation here,” and that kind of surprised me because I know that’s the case today and it’s been the case since I’ve been at Michigan. But it surprised me a little bit that that early in the century, coaches and players felt that same reserve about, unless you play absolutely outstanding football.

Smith: Is there something unique or defining or distinctive about the position of center? Is there something that you need to be a great center?
Carr: Well, I think ______________ view is if you just take the degree of difficulty – I, after spending most of my life in the game, think the toughest position to play in today’s game is quarterback. I think the second most difficult is center. Imagine a guy that may weigh 25 or 30, 40 pounds more than you are, is every bit as strong as you are, and is lined up about that far from the football that you have your hand on, and now you have to know that there’s a certain cadence that the quarterback is going to call and you must snap that ball exactly when he has told you in the huddle that he’s going to snap it. If you snap it too soon, then your line is not ready to go and the quarterback is not ready to get the ball, so you have a bad offensive play. If you’re late, your team is off sides and they are going to penalize. That’s before the ball is snapped. Now, when the ball is snapped, you have got to take that ball and pass it back through your legs and still block a man who may be bigger, every bit as strong as you are. And to do that takes an outstanding athlete, the agility that’s required and the intelligence that’s required, because imagine this: your back is to the man who is calling the plays, you’re bent over, and there’s often all kinds of crowd noise where you can hardly hear the quarterback cadence. So it takes great poise, great concentration, I think great intelligence and great athletic ability. And I think if you look back at the great teams, the centers are all pretty extraordinary people.

Smith: Do you think he got a bum rap? The stereotype of Chevy Chase about stumbling and hitting – the irony is that he is probably one of the most athletically gifted presidents we ever had, but the media had this image of a klutz.

Carr: I think we all know there’s nothing further from the truth. But that, again, was the world that they live in, in politics. Unfortunately, as president, there’s never a moment of the day, except maybe when you’re in bed, that you’re out of the scrutiny of other people. And I think it was unfair, absolutely, but he always handled it so well. I mean, I don’t ever remember seeing him show anger when a lot of people would, because he knew he was a great athlete. He handled it like he handled everything else, in my opinion.

Smith: Were he and Bo Schembechler very close?
Carr: Very close. Bo talked to him rather frequently, and especially, I think, as Bo got out of coaching and came back to Michigan because the President such a great ambassador for the university and I know we don’t know half of what he did for this university. But I think they really enjoyed each other’s company. And Bo, of course, was a staunch Republican, and had a great interest. One of the things that made Bo so much fun to coach for was our staff meetings. He’d read the paper and he’d come in there and he’d be ranting and raving about this and that. So, he had a great interest in politics and of course, President Ford had a great interest in football.

Smith: A match made in heaven. What was the year that Nebraska sort of nosed you out at the very tail end of the season?

Carr: They didn’t nose us out.

Smith: Or was it a tie? It was a tie.

Carr: There are two polls, and we won the Associated Press poll, and Nebraska won the Coaching poll. That was 1997. And that’s when really the writers proved that they were a lot smarter than coaches.

Smith: Well, I’ll tell you a story. I was director of the Library at the time, and we’d become pretty close, and I was a Nebraska fan. And I was careful how far to go, because I know he and Marty Allen every year had a bet on the Notre Dame game and it was five dollars and you’d better pay up if you lost. But to show you how thoughtful he was, that year for Christmas, which is what all this is building up to, he called the Nebraska coach.

Carr: Tom Osborne

Smith: He called Tom Osborne and said, “I’ve got this young friend, he’s a big Nebraska fan.” So Coach Osborne sent me a Nebraska sweater, which I cherish, as you can imagine, to this day. Now, besides thanking for him for that, I didn’t bring up the subject after Christmas. But that’s generous.

Do you remember the last time you saw him?
Carr: Yes I did. The last time I saw him, one of his great friends, a couple of them, Bob Brown and Howard Wykle(?), and I and my wife, Lori, flew to Palm Springs to play golf for a couple of days and we had a dinner and he came down even though he was not feeling well at all. But he had told us he would be there and he did come down and you could tell that he was not feeling well. But he still was – what a presence, and what a gentleman – and he got up and spoke and said how glad he was to see everybody. That’s the last time I saw him.

Smith: People were often surprised when they saw him that he was bigger than expected.

Carr: The first time I met him, he was very, very fit, at least. You looked at him and said, “My goodness, he really takes good care of himself.”

Smith: Very disciplined. Swam twice a day.

Carr: I didn’t know that.

Smith: Yeah, swam twice a day. And, talk about self-discipline, one day long after he was out of the White House, he was needling Susan about cigarettes, telling her she really ought to quit because he had quit years before. And so she said some smart assed thing about his pipes. So he gathered up every pipe in the office and the house, every pipe, and dumped them in a box and never smoked a pipe again.

Carr: He wanted to set the right example.

Smith: Exactly. And basically he made a deal with her, I’ll quit if you quit. That’s discipline.

Carr: Yes, it is.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered? Let me ask you first of all: how is he remembered around here?

Carr: Well, with great reverence. Anybody who knew him – there was a special reverence not only for the fact that he was the President of the United States. I think it was as much as anything else for the kind of man he was. I can
remember reading a book by Gergen on presidential leadership, and what I remember that he wrote was, he wrote about this man’s character and that he would be remembered for making a decision that he was willing to make, even though he knew that politically he would pay a price for pardoning President Nixon. The truth is, at least what I’ve read in recent years, is that everybody, I shouldn’t say everybody, but the great majority of people certainly believe that he made the right decision. And to me, that’s what leadership is. He was willing to do what he thought was best for our country in spite of the fact that it was not the popular thing to do at the time.

Smith: And do you think football in its own way, contributed to some of that character?

Carr: You know, I believe this: I don’t think football builds character, I think it reveals character. And you have an opportunity in a game to show what you’re made of in a lot of different ways. And so I think there are some lessons, certainly, but the character issue I think was there.

Smith: Last question, we’ve sort of come full circle because I never had the opportunity to see one of these. He himself said if he could do things over, he would have spent more time studying communications. He wasn’t a natural orator. But, I’m told that in this setting – here and around those kids - that on those occasions, it is almost as if he had a silver tongue. He spoke with a passion, and even an eloquence that wasn’t always there in conventional speechmaking.

Carr: You know, I agree with him based on the times that I saw him speak publicly in relation to seeing him up close in front of 150 players and coaches. I think, first of all, he was very relaxed because he had something in common with every guy in that room, and he had a great love for the game and values, and the university. And so I think it came from his heart, and he didn’t have to worry about nuance and all the things that a leader has to worry about when he gives a speech that is going to be seen by everybody in the world. And so, yeah, I found him to be very sincere and able to communicate his love for Michigan and Michigan football.
Smith: Last question. We all know famously Richard Nixon would send in plays to Coach Allen. Did President Ford ever suggest a play?

Carr: Not to my knowledge. He did not with me. I think he had too much respect for the game. I just think that was him.
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Smith: How did your paths cross?

Ornelas: I was working at the Marriott Desert Springs. I was a chef there and they came in a couple of times to have a dinner. Prior to that I knew a mutual friend, Rosalee, who happened to be the cook, or the chef at the Betty Ford Center. You know how chefs all know each other in the Valley and kind of help each other out – that’s kind of how it was. She gave Mrs. Ford my name and number when they were looking for a chef or cook, and they had had my food at Tuscany’s, which I worked at, at that time at the Marriott. That’s how she knew who I was and it was a funny story because Mrs. Ford called me and my roommate said, “It’s Betty Ford for you on the phone,” and I said, “Shut up, you know, quit messing around.” And he goes, “No, it’s really Betty Ford.” And I said, “Why would she be calling me?” and that’s how – she wanted to know if I’d be interested in a job, or interviewing for a job for them as a personal chef. That’s how it all started.

Smith: And that would have been about when?

Ornelas: This was maybe twelve years ago? Maybe longer.

Smith: Yeah. I’m thinking…

Ornelas: Twelve or thirteen years ago, I didn’t really do the math, but it was a while back.

Smith: I’m wondering because I remember…

Ornelas: Maybe longer.

Smith: And you were with them for how long?

Ornelas: Almost seven years, and I was twenty-eight or twenty-nine when I went to work for them.
Smith: We must have met because I remember before I took the job at the library, and this would have been the end of '95 – I came out here and had lunch with him at the house. What was that like – the interview with her?

Ornelas: Well, when she asked if I would be interested in the interview I said, sure. And I didn’t think anything of it – not that I didn’t know who Betty and Gerald Ford were, but I mostly knew about her because I went to the Betty Ford Center – but she did not know it at the time. So, of course, you know who Betty Ford is – anyone in the desert knows who Betty Ford is. So I didn’t think much of it and maybe my arrogance, or being young, I was twenty-something years old, I was like, “Okay, sure, I’ll go on an interview.”

And then as I told people about it and when I went to work and told them that I was going to interview for this job, everybody got so excited about it. People at work, other chefs were jealous of it, and it started to – I started to realize what a big deal this was. And then I started to get nervous, so I had some friends of mine kind of coach me. I’d never really went on an interview this important before. I went out and bought a whole new suit, because I knew Mrs. Ford is into fashion, so I wanted to look presentable. I bought a briefcase and I remember walking into the office and just the feel of it, I knew this was going to be something different.

Smith: How so – something different?

Ornelas: Well, I had only worked in restaurants since I was like seventeen years old. The hustle and bustle, it’s the night life. I’d recently went to the Betty Ford Center, so I was only nine months sober when I got the interview.

Smith: And you’d not met her while you were there?

Ornelas: When you go to the Center, you see her because she does a lecture. I remember everyone going up to her and thanking her and I didn’t. Let’s say, getting sober for me wasn’t what I wanted to do. An intervention is how I got there. So I didn’t do it by choice, I did it by force. The Marriott where I worked did an intervention on me and that saved my job, to go to the Betty Ford Center. So, against my will, if you can imagine, I went there. So I wasn’t very happy to be there and I really didn’t care who Mrs. Ford was at that time,
and this is why this is such an amazing story, I think that I have, because what
in turn happened, was amazing - the fact that I ended up working for them and
being part of their family. At that time in my life I was pretty much lost and
broken, I had a broken spirit. When I walked into this interview I felt that I
had hope. When she walked into the interview room, she just has this graceful
stride to her and she introduced herself, we sat down, and she was very kind,
and formal at the same time.

Smith: Business-like?

Ornelas: Yeah, business-like, but charming and I found myself at ease with her. And
then she talked to me most of the time. Then she said, “You’ll be meeting my
husband after the interview.” So, that’s what we did. We got up, walked into
this office where I shook Mr. Ford’s hand for the first time. I liked him from
the minute I met him. Something about him - just his whole demeanor to me.
He shook my hand, he’s polite, asked me a couple of questions and then that
was it and went out. I said goodbye and I didn’t hear from her for like two
weeks. I thought, oh I didn’t get the job, so I just went on. Then two weeks
later she called and said, “Would you like to work for us?” And I said, “Sure.”
I didn’t hesitate. And that’s how it all started.

Smith: A couple of things: in this initial inter-
view, presumably she talked about their
tastes, their preferences, in food? What sorts
of things…

Ornelas: Yeah, I just remember she saying they had a big family and she kind of gave
me the lowdown on the traveling – that they did go to Beaver Creek, Colorado
– their kids, they named them all. I didn’t remember at the interview hardly
any of this because as we went along, I was like, I don’t remember her saying
this, but I think I was kind of – there was a lot to absorb, I guess.

Smith: Yeah.

Ornelas: The kind of food they like – the first thing I remember is her telling me that
they didn’t like Mexican food, spicy food, and that they like simple meals,
and they liked to eat healthy. And that’s my specialty, so it worked.
Smith: And he was – and of course, she, too, but he was very self-disciplined, wasn’t he? They both really took care of themselves.

Ornelas: That’s one of the biggest things I learned from him. I was thinking when I was on my way over here, about that and the discipline. I learned a lot about discipline from Mr. Ford. I think he had a lot of discipline and I think that’s why I felt secure. There was a sense of security for me because he had such discipline and he was a great example to me – somebody who was so undisciplined. The only discipline I ever had was to go to [the Betty Ford] Center and get sober, and I didn’t have a clue. I fell into this job by word-of-mouth from someone who knew someone, who gave her a number and she contacted me.

There are no coincidences – I believe that very much. From the first time I came into the family, they told me the things they liked and didn’t like – it was kind of a short list, but nothing major. They seemed very friendly and easy going. Ann Cullen was Mrs. Ford’s secretary at the time, who kind of gave me the bigger picture of how they liked the service and when they ate, the times and the schedules and things like that.

Smith: Was he a workaholic?

Ornelas: He enjoyed working – I believe he was, yes.

Smith: Borderline.

Ornelas: But I understand that. When you have a passion for something – like I cook, bake and do stuff 24/7.

Smith: Now is that something you’ve always loved?

Ornelas: I think I’ve had a natural talent since I was young. It was just something that comes natural to me. And to this day, I have a restaurant, I am hands-on in there. They can’t keep me out. And then if I’m not there, I’m somewhere baking because I love to bake. They loved my desserts.

Smith: Really? Did he have a sweet tooth?

Ornelas: Yeah.
Smith: What desserts in particular?

Ornelas: Anything, but I think cookies and pies – just the good stuff – the down home, homemade things, were probably the favorite. He loved ice cream. I was trying to think of his favorite food – he loved sea bass. She liked desserts, too, but Mrs. Ford watched her figure more than he did. But he had great discipline. If he would gain a pound, he would cut back and he would tell me, only serve me half, or he would only eat – I don’t know too many people who could have a big, juicy piece of pie with ice cream and stop themselves at half. Mrs. Ford could do that also.

Smith: Plus, of course, he swam a couple of times a day.

Ornelas: Yes, he was very active.

Smith: You were in the house – what was your daily schedule like?

Ornelas: Well, I’ll just tell you when I first started working for them, it was very different – the whole pace – everything from the restaurant world I was used to. Also, my own thing with being sober – just getting sober and being…I told Mrs. Ford, I think after she offered the job, I had to let her know that I was newly sober, and she had no hesitation to hire me. It’s not easy getting sober and it’s not easy having someone newly sober in your life, so I wasn’t sure if they were going to be…but in retrospect, when I think about it, the Betty Ford Center is the reason why – it exists because of her.

Smith: He had cut out his drinking, too, when she did.

Ornelas: Yes, that’s when he would tell me stories. He would tell me stories and I would be in awe of his discipline, or his ability to just say something and do it. He said they used to have Jack Daniels Silver – I don’t know what that is – every night and he used to smoke a pipe, and they would have cocktails. When she got sober he said he just stopped. I said, “Just like that?” and he said, “Just like that, I stopped.” Because their cocktail I used to serve them – they would have a cocktail and then I would serve them an appetizer, and at 7:30 they ate their dinner. The cocktail was just club soda with a lime, and he would come in the kitchen every day, every evening and I would have it ready
there for him and he would pour it and then he would take it out to the living room, where I would take them their meals.

But those are the times when he and I had our time alone together. Or if Mrs. Ford was out on a trip or something, which was rare, but she would be out doing something with the Betty Ford Center or something. I just remember he used to call me Pal a lot. He would walk in and say, “How you doing, Pal, this evening?” and then we would have a small conversation – talk about something and then he’d go off and then I would bring them their meal. Breakfast – they would do their own breakfast, I would just leave grapefruits and everything ready for them and they would do it themselves. They were very self-sufficient and on the nights that I wasn’t cooking, I would leave them things and they would fix dinner for each other. I always thought that was very unique, because I know other people who would always go out or have people come in. Mrs. Ford wanted to do it. I would leave them something.

Smith: They were incredibly close, weren’t they?

Ornelas: Yes, they were partners. Whenever I would ask them something, if I had a request or something, he would say, “I’ll talk to Mrs. Ford about it,” and she would always say, “I’ll talk to Mr. Ford about it.” And then, I believe that they would. They would have a discussion and then they would tell me the outcome.

That’s another thing they showed me. I really have to say this when I first came to them and worked for them, I thought it was just going to be another job. They invited me into their family. They told me, “You’re going to be part of this family. You’re going to work for us, but you’re going to be part of this family.” And I thought to myself, well that’s a nice gesture to say, but I will be your employee. The first time we ever went to Vail, Colorado – I don’t like to fly, and I’d never flown in a Lear jet before – and that’s the way they used to travel. It’s small and confined and Lear jets go kind of fast, I mean, they go straight up. And Mrs. Ford would be so kind and nice and reassuring that nothing is going to happen. Mr. Ford went and got the pilot. This is what I loved about him – whenever I had doubts or fears, he took me to talk to the
pilot so that they could explain to me how and what was going to happen, and how the plane worked, and that there was nothing that could happen, and that they have extra special cargo - meaning Mr. and Mrs. Ford - and they weren’t going to let anything happen to them, so that I didn’t have to worry.

Get in the plane, we take off, this thing goes straight up in the air and I would be sitting facing Mrs. Ford, and Mr. Ford would be in the seat there, and then the two Secret Service, and the two pilots. I would bring the lunch on and we would fly from Palm Springs to Eagle Creek, which is Colorado, to go to Beaver Creek.

Smith: How long a flight was that?

Ornelas: I believe it was like an hour and half – maybe not even that long. But I remember being so scared my very first time, and she just kept talking and reassuring me all the way, never got irritated and he just kept talking conversation. He even fell asleep, and I thought for a minute that if he took a nap he must be obviously really comfortable and feel safe if he’s sleeping. It was dark when we got to Colorado. I had no idea where I was. I’ve only flown one other time in my whole life. We were driving, we had to drive from Eagle to Beaver Creek – it was about 45 minutes to an hour, and I’ve never seen and never felt so much snow in my life. When I got off that plane I was like in shock. Mrs. Ford kept reassuring me, make sure I buttoned up, make sure I had a thing around my neck.

Smith: You’d always lived in the desert?

Ornelas: Yes – no, I’m from San Francisco, but I had lived in the desert for like, five years or so. I’m accustomed to it – the warm weather – I love it. So there I am, not having a clue, and this place is magnificently beautiful. I think they had the most snow they had in Colorado in ten years that time that we went; it was for Christmas.

Smith: What was their house like?
Ornelas: When I first saw it, I thought it was gigantic. I’ve never seen anything like it. But it was a nice, I think it was a three-story house in the mountains in Beaver Creek. Did you ever go?

Smith: No, never saw it.

Ornelas: It was in a circle in a cul de sac on the top of the mountain, which was very nice, and there were other houses around it. It was beautiful.

Smith: I’ve been told there is a deck where sometimes they’d have parties, I guess during the warm weather. With a view.

Ornelas: Yeah, the kitchen, the deck, the view was beautiful. Mrs. Ford, in her bathroom, her big tub, there was a view out to the mountains which was magnificent. It was just beautiful. That was my first time ever seeing anything like that. I just went along and I didn’t really know what to expect. I knew I was going to work. The whole family was going to be there. I think that’s the first time I met all the kids and the grandkids.

Also, I remember a story and I’m going to tell it. It is Mr. Ford and skiing and being part of the Ford family. He said, “You need to learn to ski.” And I never skied. Those mountains are big. He said to me, “You’ve never skied?” And I said, “No, I’ve never skied.” “Have you ever drove in snow?” “No, I never drove in snow.” “Okay.” They called Dick Garbarino, who looked after their house – called him up, “Teach her how to drive in the snow.” So I had the house car which was like a Jeep Cherokee or something. So Dick teaches me how to drive in ice and the snow, by Mr. Ford’s wishes.

Then Mr. Ford said, “Tomorrow morning you and I are going to go down to the ski school.” I had no idea what ski school was. “And we’re going to enroll you.” I’m like, okay, I’ve never skied before, I don’t have – Ann Cullen had loaned me a bunch of sweaters because I’m from the desert. I had flip flops and tank t-shirts and jeans. She lent me a pile of sweaters, she gave them to me and said, “Here, take jeans, take warm socks and hats.” So that’s what I did. I didn’t have anything to ski in – what do you ski in? Mrs. Ford’s like, “You need a ski outfit.” I’m like, “I don’t have a ski outfit.” She goes, “Well, you use mine.” I’m like, I couldn’t believe that she would lend me her – Betty
Ford’s going to lend me her ski outfit to learn to ski and Mr. Ford’s going to drive me down to ski school. I was like, “Okay, this is great.” I’m always up for an adventure. So we get up the next morning, we have breakfast, I go down to meet him in the hallway, get Mrs. Ford’s – she geared me up – she gave me goggles, she gave me everything – head to toe.

Me and Mr. Ford go, with the Secret Service in the car, sitting side by side, driving down to ski school, which is right down the mountain like a quarter mile. Drives me in. I thought he was just going to open the door – you know – he walks me all the way to ski school. Here I am walking with Gerald Ford, people are looking because, of course, he’s a big deal in Beaver Creek, Colorado, and Secret Service, and we’re walking to go to the ski school. We go in there, he wants to see the ski instructor. They run up, “Yes, Mr. Ford, what can I do for you?” “This is Lorraine, she works for us now. She needs to learn how to ski, make sure she doesn’t get hurt.” He leaves me and I go to ski school. And I’m not really one for the cold. I liked the snow as long as I’m somewhere warm with a fireplace.

Smith: It’s nice to look at, rather than be in.

Ornelas: Yeah. I learned to ski, though. I learned to ski pretty good actually. I surprised myself and it’s one thing I’m grateful for – I don’t know if I would have ever done it. Who could say Gerald Ford took them to ski school, dropped them off – and that’s how I learned to ski. All the kids, Susan and Michael, Steven and Jack are all tremendous skiers. They took me out skiing once, and this is another story.

Mrs. Ford, I remember after the fact, told Susan, “Why did you take her with you?” Because I was just a new skier and they were sixteen years into skiing. Well, I had a fall because, not because I was trying to keep up, but I just was inexperienced. Thank God I didn’t break anything, but with Mr. and Mrs. Ford, I always felt like they were, of course they don’t want me to get hurt, but they were always looking out for me. I remember Mrs. Ford saying to Susan, “How could you take her with you guys? You guys are so much better skiers.” She was keeping up until I had that little fall but I remember Mr. Ford always telling me I needed to continue. I think I went up to all these levels, I
think I went up to level five, because he didn’t want me to stop. Didn’t want me to get hurt – he wanted me to go have fun and learn how to do it right. And I did and I’m grateful for that, because I see people out there skiing now and I can tell the ones that went to ski school and the ones who didn’t. I’m grateful for that experience.

Smith: I take it that they were as visible around Vail as they were here in the desert, and beloved up there. There is celebrity, and then there is something much deeper than that.

Ornelas: I think in Vail, because it was smaller than Beaver Creek, it seemed like they could get closer or it was closer knit. So wherever I would go people would know that I worked for the Fords in Beaver Creek. I remember they took me – I did a lot of things – I look back – did a lot of things with them. They took me to a show, we went to see Apollo 13. The whole family went because it was Christmas time. Mr. Ford, Mrs. Ford, the kids – I think it was Susan and the girls – myself, and I felt like a celebrity because they roped off the whole thing and they waited for us to come in and the Secret Service – they have to go ahead and a car comes and we all go and we watched the movie. It was a great movie to see with him. He really liked it a lot.

Smith: He was really interested in the space program.

Ornelas: Very much so. They took me out to dinner from time to time. I think we did a lot of things in Colorado, when we were in Beaver Creek, because it was mostly at Christmas time. They cooked for me from time to time. I remember two times during the Christmas season they all turned the tables and cooked for me.

Smith: So Mrs. Ford could cook?

Ornelas: Mrs. Ford could cook, yeah. She cooked before she became the First Lady and he became the President.

Smith: There is a wonderful story. The night that he was sworn in. Of course the Nixon’s left so quickly that it took a week to pack all their things. So every night the Fords stayed at their house in Alexandria, and he would commute to
work for that first week. So on the night of August 9th, the night he was sworn in, they are back at the house in Alexandria and she’s in the kitchen with a pan of lasagna and she says, “Jerry, there is something wrong with this picture. You’re President of the United States and I’m still cooking.”

(chuckle)

Ornelas: Yeah. Well, she still cooked. Like I said, she would cook on my nights off and Susan – what I loved about them – they were just like normal people. I don’t know what you’d classify as normal, but they were regular people, genuine people. He just happened to be President, she just happened to be the founder of the Betty Ford Center. I learned so much. Like I said, I was in my late twenties when I went to work for them. I left when 35 or 36, so I had that kind of important growing up time, especially for me, because I had just gotten sober and it’s like starting over.

I learned about family through the Fords, I guess that I learned about discipline, because Mr. Ford was very disciplined, and very goal-oriented and I have that now and I have that because of him. Mrs. Ford, she had spunk. I have to tell you, it wasn’t always smooth sailing, let’s say. Like I said, I was young and arrogant sometimes, and I would just blurt out things and I remember her always coming with a comeback. I remember one day they went out and the next day they were in the paper on the front page of the Desert Sun. And I don’t know what got into me, but she said, “Oh, look Lorraine,” and I said – because they seemed to be in the paper a lot – and I would say crazy stuff, and I said, “Oh, wow, it must have not had anything else to put in the front page of the paper?” And she looked at me and she elbowed me so hard, which I deserved, and she said, “You know, there was a time when I was young and I learned eventually to think before I speak.”

Which, to this day, I think about that and I think about it because she helped me a lot to not be so abrupt. You know, when you’re young and you don’t think, but I think about that situation all the time now, when I want to say something of whatever, and I now know a different way to say things.

But, because of their kindness, I never remember their saying they didn’t like anything I ever cooked. A couple of times I know they didn’t like it, but how
they would put it would be in such a delicate way, in a nice way, that I got the message, so we wouldn’t ever have that again. But it taught me that there are different ways to treat people, there are different ways to be treated. There’s a finesse to Mrs. Ford – she had this finesse about her. She could make her point very strongly, but tactfully, and you learned something.

Smith: Did she ever talk about entertaining in the White House?

Ornelas: She told me a few stories.

Smith: Did she tell you the story about Queen Elizabeth’s visit? The famous thing was the screw up with the Marine Band. The visit went beautifully and it came time – they were all in the East Room – and they were going to dance. So the President takes Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip was with Mrs. Ford, and the Marine Band breaks into The Lady is a Tramp. To this day, the Marine Band’s playlist is checked very carefully before they perform.

Ornelas: Oh my God, that’s great. She loved to entertain – Mrs. Ford, I think. She liked to keep things also simple, but it was very important to her. She had these plates she loved to use, the Rothschild pattern. I didn’t know anything about patterns and silver and plates until I met Mrs. Ford. She taught me a lot about that.

Actually, people are still impressed about what I know about service because of her. Linens and chargers and all these things. I used to think, “This is a lot of stuff…” but she loved it. It was the art of entertaining that she loved and she was a very classy lady. Like I said, I learned a lot. Mr. Ford, every morning and every evening would swim in Vail and in Palm Springs.

Smith: So he had a pool in Vail as well?

Ornelas: Yeah, in Vail it was enclosed because it’s cold out and snowy and he would go out there and I was welcome to use the pool. I was welcome to use – they had a little workout room, there too, where everybody used it – the kids, myself.

Smith: You know, its one thing about her…we all want to put a label – look at Washington, everyone wants to put somebody in a pigeonhole. And she
doesn’t fit in a pigeonhole. On some levels she is the most feminine, and 
traditionalist of figures. And yet she is a revolutionary figure in a whole lot of 
ways. Transformed how women see themselves, shattered all these old taboos and barriers. So she doesn’t fit into any convenient pigeonhole.

Ornelas: What I liked about Mrs. Ford is that you could tell her anything, and we had some intimate, private conversations, and she was never shocked. She was very open-minded about everything. I relapsed while I was working for them and she sat me down, I remember, on the couch in the room in the house, and I expected her to fire me. I had been having a little bit of a difficult time in the beginning, and I think it was because I couldn’t really believe that they were as good people as they seemed to be and I was waiting for the bomb to drop or something.

The first two weeks I took Mrs. Ford aside and said because I felt like I wasn’t getting it, “I don’t think this is the job for me.” And she said, “Let’s just wait two more weeks and see.” Two more weeks turned into about six and half, maybe seven years. And then I relapsed and that’s a hard thing. I told her I relapsed and if she wanted to fire me, then she could do so. She said she wasn’t going to do that. She sat me down and talked and we talked about the program and she talked about meetings, she talked about her own addiction – I mean, one on one with Betty Ford.

Smith: Pretty powerful.

Ornelas: Very powerful. The fact that she didn’t fire me and was going to give me another chance and told me to hang on – I just never could imagine that. I’m sure Mr. and Mrs. Ford had the discussion about that, but I still was employed and we continued on from there and I could always discuss things as I got to know them.

I’m very dyslexic, so whenever I would want to write, like if I wanted certain days off, or a week off, or a vacation or something, I’d write Mr. Ford a note. And I loved that – the first time he did it, I was kind of like – I wasn’t annoyed, but I was kind of like – I wrote something – I wanted to go to I think Santa Fe, New Mexico, I was going to go for a week, I had a vacation coming
to me. And I wrote him this little note about it, telling him the days and all this. I submitted it to him and then he brought it back to me and he had corrected in red ink, my phonetically and my misspellings. I’m very dyslexic so I do everything phonetically. And he didn’t do it – after I thought about it – he didn’t do it for any other reason than to help me. And that’s just the way he was.

He would tell me time and time, if I ever needed help with something, his doors were always open in his office. And he would always tell me stories about his friends who never graduated from high school, because I never graduated from high school, and they became these big lawyers or famous people. He told me a story about Charles Schwab, who is very dyslexic. So he would constantly be reaffirming and telling me that you can do anything because this person did it and he has dyslexia and this person never graduated from high school and he’s now famous, or he’s successful.

Smith: He was the consummate optimist, wasn’t he?

Ornelas: Exactly. He was very much so. And I learned about being impartial from him also. He was the fairest person. He never took sides that I saw, and even sometimes Mrs. Ford and I would be on disagreements, he would always assess both sides, and then he would make a decision. But I always felt like it was a fair deal if he said that no, you can’t have this because we made this deal, I was okay with that because he was very fair about it.

Smith: Everyone talks about his judgment. He took this rap about his intelligence – his IQ, because he wasn’t as glib, I think, as a lot of folks, but his was a special kind of intelligence. An emotional intelligence, among other things, and an integrity that goes into judgment. Pretty clearly, he had those.

Ornelas: Very much. I learned that from both of them. He, especially. I just remember him being so fair, and always, if I had a problem, first I’d run it by Penny and then Penny would make me an appointment.

Smith: Tell me about Penny’s role in this whole operation.
Ornelas: Penny was great. They had a closeness – you could tell she knew him very, very well. And so Penny was the one I always ran things by because she was always running around here, taking care of things. I liked Penny a lot. That’s a reflection of them. They all had great staff people, also – every one of them was wonderful. I think Penny just knew him so well, she was perfect for him and he respected her. He respected everybody, but he respected Penny. I think they had a trust and a mutual thing for one another.

Smith: It is interesting, too, because clearly his mother was a very significant part of his life, but he was sort of on that cusp, but unusually for so “conservative Republican” from West Michigan. He was very comfortable with the women’s movement. I’m sure being married to Betty Ford indoctrinated him to some degree. But, in the Republican Party they were increasingly isolated in their support for a woman’s right to choose and they were supportive of gay rights, and a whole host of things that didn’t make a lot of friends in the party as it was evolving. And yet they seemed perfectly comfortable in their positions.

Ornelas: They were very comfortable, and that’s why I’m blessed and grateful I got to see this first hand. People always ask me, what were they like? And it’s almost hard for me to articulate it because it comes a lot from my heart how I felt about them, how they accepted me into their family. I didn’t graduate from high school, I’m a very talented chef, but I didn’t have, but I do have a high school diploma now, and a big part of it is because he showed me that you set a goal and you do it day after day, in and out. I just saw such discipline from him and how he did it was, he just did it and he did it with integrity and he did everything.

Smith: There must have been some celebrated people who came through this house and dined here. I know Bob Hope – they were friends. Did you see folks?

Ornelas: My favorite, and the one I was closest with, was Leonard Firestone. He was a little buddy of mine – we would meet at Pavilions Market and have Danish and coffee. I’d be shopping for the Fords. Mrs. Ford, of course, introduced me to him.
Smith: I’m told she saved his life.

Ornelas: Yeah, and he was the nicest guy – we had a little bond because we were both Gemini’s and he once told me, “Everything you touch will turn to gold.” And I remember that and people tease me because I’ve had a lot of success with businesses and business ventures since I left the Fords. Leonard Firestone and I would run into each other. He was like already in his nineties, I think. He was still driving around, but he would just drive to Pavilions – he loved sweets, so we had this sweet – he would say we had a love-sweet affair, but we were talking about desserts. I would be shopping and he would run into me at Pavilions and we would sit down and have a Danish and coffee and just talk a little bit. He was also their neighbor here and in Beaver Creek. That’s like the only one – but I’ve met people through the Fords who, of course, came to dinner a lot. Bob Hope, Delores Hope, there’s numerous ones.

Smith: Sure. Now, they were aging – you left around 2003? You worked for seven years, around then.

Ornelas: Probably earlier than that, actually, because I opened my first restaurant 2002-2003.

Smith: But he’d be in his late 80s at that point, and he was still very active. Still traveling. How did they deal with getting older? And I’ll preface that – I sensed that they liked to have younger people around them. That they actually made an effort to sort of keep in touch with…

Ornelas: Mrs. Ford is probably going to probably elbow me for saying this, but when I came to them I thought they were old already. I mean they were in their 80s and late 70s and I was like 29 or something. I would always call my mom and tell her that, “Man, you’re not going to believe how active they are.” And my mom would always say, “Well, of course. They are Betty Ford and Gerald Ford.” But I would always tell my friends also that they are so active - him especially - and she walked a lot, too. But mentally – sharp – she had one over on me most of the time because she was always on it. She was the chairman of the board still then when I worked for them. And he was on all kinds of boards and he would fly here and there, and he’d have a schedule. I’d get their
schedules, and they would do more things than I would do, and I was so much younger.

Smith: How did it come to pass that you left?

Ornelas: My family lives up north towards the Bay area, that’s where I’m from, and he [grandfather] had colon cancer, so I wanted to be freer to go and visit and be there for my family. I think I needed to be where I was with the Fords and this job to teach me discipline, to help me grow, and it was time for me to leave. Of course, they hated to see me leave, but they didn’t fight it and they were totally understanding. And I think that’s part of who they are. That when it’s time to move on, they actually were happy that I could go do that.

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him? Did you have contact after?

Ornelas: Yeah. I can’t remember if it was the Betty Ford reunion, I saw him last – the whole family. I saw her recently at the last year’s one, of course. I had come to visit them a couple of times after – from time to time I would come and just say hi. I think it was a few years back, last time I saw him – in ‘05, probably.

Smith: When he passed away, were you surprised by the reaction? I was working for ABC, part of the week and then I was with the family the rest of the week. I can tell you, in the media, people were surprised at how much reaction there was because he’d been out of the public eye for quite a while, in terms of the country.

Ornelas: I wasn’t surprised, but I tell you, I felt so good inside because I felt like he got what he deserved and finally everybody could see what a wonderful man that I know he was and I used to talk about. They got to feel that. I had a friend come up to me, my chiropractor, actually. After the funeral, they ran a Gerald Ford biography over and over again on A&E. And he came up to me – a couple people in my restaurant – I have a picture of him in my restaurant and people would often ask me, “Why do you have that picture of Jerry Ford in here? He was a good guy and all, but…” and I said, “Because he was a wonderful person and I loved him. I worked for them.” But my chiropractor came up to me and said, “I saw the biography of Gerald Ford,” and he also saw part of the service on TV and he was like, he couldn’t believe it. All this
time he didn’t know what a wonderful person he was. I said to him, “I’ve always known what a wonderful person he was, I was just waiting for everyone else to catch up with it.”

People would say only things that they saw in the media, which I used to get very defensive about sometimes, because it was very unfair. And Mrs. Ford, also – I saw this program about her. It was about women who are heroes, she was one of them. And I always feel so proud, like I’m beaming when I see things about them on TV because I actually got to be a part of this, and they are part of my life – a huge part of my life. I think about it – 28 years old – being in their presence and learning things just by watching them and seeing how they do things with family and problems – we didn’t always have easy times. Just the way they handled themselves. I was telling Mrs. Ford when I went to see her at the service they had at St. Margaret’s - that Mr. Ford was a hero to me.

I really looked up to him and we had a bond, a special bond and we would have conversations. I would ask him stuff and he would always answer. It’s funny, a couple of things I asked him, was one of the all-time – probably he’s been asked this a million times, like why did he pardon Nixon? And he took me in his office and we had this long conversation about it and I thought, “He’s brilliant.” He was really a brilliant man and nobody knew it, really, got to know it until after he was gone. I also asked him another question about UFOs and the space program. When he was president I think I was twelve or ten or something and I heard that he knew about UFOs and he was hiding it. I asked him about it and he answered me that it was military propaganda and we had a discussion about that. I would ask him about all sorts of little things and I was always surprised that he would just take the time to answer and talk to me about it. I felt very special.

Mrs. Ford would always take the time also, if I ever needed anything to talk about she was always there. It was like one big family and I felt really a part of that because I spent most of my holidays for six and a half years with them – Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, all of them and they always would take
me out to dinner, have a present or whatever. It was nice, I really loved the
way they celebrated with the whole family and the tree and just everything.

Smith: It made it kind of rough for him to pass the day after Christmas.

Ornelas: I think Mrs. Ford said to me that it was just like him to do that. He knew how
much they all loved Christmas and he waited until the day after, because he
was always thinking of others.

Smith: That’s perfect. Listen, this is wonderful.
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this. You mentioned that you were covering Congress in the late Sixties and early Seventies. Lots of people in this town are pretty nostalgic about then, compared to now. Is that justified?

Cannon: I think so. You have to say it’s justified and put this big asterisk up there, because there were a lot of congressmen who got investigated. There were a few that went to jail. There were arguably a few who didn’t go to jail that should have. But if you are looking at it, as one of my editors at *The Washington Post* used to say, “with a lot of altitude,” from high up, you have to say that the Congress of that period was not only collegial – it was at times, and it wasn’t – but it did get things done.

Smith: It was constructive.

Cannon: It was constructive and worked across the aisle. You just look at the bills, everything from civil rights to tax reform and Medicare, all these things that got passed. Sure, the presidents deserved a lot of credit or blame if you don’t like what they did, but Congress was a functioning organism. It was a vital part of government. It both initiated and it reacted. Now some things Congress couldn’t do. I used to say that if I had a dollar for every speech I’d heard opposing the Vietnam War, I would be rich and retired. But no Congress in any period of time has been very good in stopping wars. That’s really not a congressional function. So if you are going to say, is the Congress of a particular epic good, or not good, or functional or not functional, what are you talking about? I think what you’re talking about is partly their investigative role, but mostly the legislative role. And I think the legislative role of Congress in the Sixties and the Seventies was pretty impressive.

Smith: I remember hearing President Ford talk about the prevailing rules of engagement: you fought for your side, but at the end of the day the political incentives were that you produced something. Forty years later it’s the exact
opposite. The political incentives are to keep things from happening. Then you can go home and you can tell your base that you’ve prevented disaster. But consensus was not a dirty word. The notion of finding a medium that a critical mass of people could accept, if not rally around enthusiastically, was a guiding principle. That’s how you measured the democratic process.

Cannon: I agreed with that and I think that one of the ways to look at it is the way the parties dealt with what we would now call their base, although that wasn’t part of the terminology. I knew of various people in Congress who were pretty liberal and pretty conservative. Wiggins, the guy who was the smoking gun guy from California, Don Edwards, on the same committee, very liberal. Phil Burton – people like that. A lot of the liberals, people who were definable liberals in Congress, figured out ways to get their base to accept something that didn’t sound so liberal. And a lot of the conservatives did the same thing.

One of the things about Jerry Ford that is interesting on this, is that it made him vulnerable to Reagan. He could not accept the notion – Ford just couldn’t get it through his head and I don’t think he did until the day he died – that anybody could consider him not conservative enough. In the House context, he was the guy – you know the history of him better than I do – he was this Young Turk who had rebelled against the old guard. He’d been an internationalist. He’d supported Vandenberg, his hero. They did the Marshall Plan and a lot of other things. He really did sort of believe that politics stopped at the water’s edge. And the notion that he could be portrayed as being out of step with conservative Republicans, he just couldn’t get it through his head.

And that was because he was a creature of a Congress in which the words conservative and liberal didn’t have that kind of power. They described something, but they were not the most important – the most important thing about Gerald Ford or Tip O’Neill or Mike Mansfield, or any of these people of this era – I want to say great, I don’t want to romanticize them, but they seemed pretty neat to me in retrospect – was accomplishment, getting things done, achievement.
Smith: Wasn’t it also true that they were part of a Cold War consensus. The older I get, the more I suspect that the most important thing in politics is not ideology, but generational change. And you’re right, Ford was a Young Turk who not only took on an isolationist incumbent in the Forties, but then takes on Charlie Halleck after Goldwater.

Cannon: Well, most of these guys were not only part of a consensus that came out of World War II, they were veterans. Ford was a veteran, but most of these guys, most of the people at one time – was it like two-thirds of the members of Congress or something that served?

Smith: Do you think that gave them a shared background – almost like a shared language in some ways?

Cannon: Adlai Stevenson had a good thing about patriotism – it was something about not the showy display, but the ingrained moments, habits of a lifetime. This is what they were. They were patriots in that sense. Now, I don’t want to get too carried away, because one of the things that happened in the Cold War was the demonization of people as Communist or Crypto-Communist or something. And it’s also true of that Congress in which Joe McCarthy served – all of these people knew he was a bad man and they didn’t stop him. It was really Robert Welch and Dwight Eisenhower who stopped him.

Smith: And Ed Murrow.

Cannon: And some help from Ed Murrow. But Eisenhower had a clear view of – we know this now from the memoirs and all the things – Eisenhower had a clear view from the beginning that McCarthy was a know-nothing at best, and dangerous at worst. And you can argue that he should have stepped in when he attacked Marshall. I take Eisenhower’s side on that. But what one is criticizing if one takes that view is his tactics, not his principles.

I was seventeen years old in 1950. I came here as a member of Boys’ Nation in Nevada. You cannot imagine the thrill of this and I remember two things. I remember meeting Robert Taft who was a big deal to me. And Taft introduced me to McCarthy. And I thought afterward, I thought, well this is
like being introduced to a member of the mob by the most respected citizen in town.

I remember the name of only one other boy, other than the one from Nevada, and this is the reason I remember him. We all got to meet the president of the United States – you cannot imagine what it was like for a seventeen year old to meet the president of the United States and the guy behind me – because we filed in alphabetical order – was named Bill Capitan. He was from Michigan. He was rotund, he was a wrestler, and he said, “I’m going to say something to the president of the United States.” And I remember we all said, “You’re going to speak to…?” Everybody else is sort of mechanically shaking hands, and Bill was right behind me. So he says, “Hello, Mr. President. I’m from Owosso, Michigan, Tom Dewey’s hometown.” And Truman, who is mechanically shaking hands, looks up and gives the biggest grin I’ve ever seen in my life and shakes his hand and says, “You’ve got a good start, boy.”

But we all held Bill in awe because he had spoken to the president of the United States. Now, this is 1950. Truman isn’t that popular. In our household, which was New Deal Democrat, Truman couldn’t compare to FDR. Who could? But meeting the president of the United States… I told one thing in a speech to the National Council of Legislators, legislative leaders, I told one story which deals about civil discourse. We had a wonderful civics teacher and we had free rein and there was, in this class – I was a senior that year in high school – and this one boy who criticizes Truman for a number of things and did it in a fashion that we wouldn’t have considered tempered for the time, the teacher didn’t say anything. She didn’t have to because another boy, who had the same political views said, “That’s not the right way to talk about the president of the United States. You have to have respect for the office, even if you don’t value the man.” I remembered that. I was in the Army and that was often said in the Army, because Truman’s war was not popular. But that was a different time. We thought differently about institutions. We thought differently about the leaders of these institutions. If you were Catholic, you didn’t take the pope’s name in vain, either.

Smith: And you ate fish on Friday.
Cannon: You certainly didn’t denigrate the institution. That wasn’t all good. If there had been less veneration perhaps they would have removed MacArthur before he got so many people killed. But I don’t know that. But Ford was a part of this. He was a big part of that generation. He thought like that generation. He thought in terms of public service. And I think in Ford’s case, I’ve always had the theory, it’s the gratitude of adopted children, that he had a lot of that anyway. As an adopted kid he’d been treated very well. He had this great gratitude towards the person who was his stepfather. So he had a lot of that in him, plus I think that Midwestern culture just breeds that.

Smith: He said, as a fairly young man and later – I can hear him saying it – he decided early on that most people were mostly good, and he was going to find the good in everyone. That’s what he was going to focus on. It’s a great formula for life. You wonder if, at times, it breeds a kind of naïveté at the presidential level.

Cannon: I think Ford was naïve as a president. I think it was an advantage in some ways. I think that Ford – the most controversial decision, the decision I think that prevented him from being elected in his own right – was the pardon. And Ford gave a lot of different reasons for that pardon. When I pressed him on it he said, “Well I was reading in your writing what shape Nixon was in,” and stuff and that was a fair point. And I certainly probably overwrote that. But I overwrote it because Nixon was over a little bit mad. But I think that what Ford really did – the basic reason why – we don’t want to drag the nation through a trial – is that he saw some good in it. He saw some good in Nixon, he saw some redemptive value in what he was doing.

Ford would never talk about himself in religious terms, but Ford believed in the gospel of redemption. Ford really did. If Ford had been on the bench, he would not have been a hanging judge. He did believe in the goodness – now I think it really hurt him on a number of things. I think it hurt him on being tough enough, particularly on the economic issues. You know, that Whip Inflation Now. A person who had a little more sophistication would have realized that that sounded pretty silly. And there is a story – have you interviewed Don Rumsfeld, or you will.
Smith: We have.

Cannon: Did Don Rumsfeld tell you this story about Ford? If he didn’t – because it’s his story and he’ll tell it better – but Rumsfeld told me this story when I was covering the White House and he was chief of staff. And the story was this: He was tired of hearing from all of his fellow businessmen in Illinois and stuff about how the president was screwing up this and screwing up that, and Rumsfeld scheduled an hour. “Well, here, you’ve got an hour with him. Don’t tell me. Tell the president of the United States. You’ve got this hour this afternoon.” These guys go in and talk to Ford. Afterwards Rumsfeld asked Ford, what did they say? He said, “They told me what a wonderful job I’m doing.” And, of course, the thing is that Ford believed them. And a guy who was tougher and who was more skeptical – Lyndon Johnson as an example – would have asked in a very crude way, what do you really think?

Smith: Two things specifically: when I talk about naïve, for example. It’s hard to get your arms around this. A guy who has been in Washington for twenty-five years. I’ve always believed the pardon was triggered by the first press conference, which was the 28th of August. We talked to people who prepared him and they had a debate beforehand. Ford believed that people were going to want to talk about Cyprus and Turkey and inflation. He literally did believe that.

Cannon: Yes, I know that.

Smith: And people wanted to talk about Nixon. And he came out angry at himself, I think on multiple levels. First, because he hadn’t handled it very well. When he saw the transcript he got angrier. Secondly, because he had been naïve enough to believe all of that. But I also think that that’s what triggered - in some ways it was an emotional decision – that okay, I’ve just been through this evidence that people are obsessed with this man, and it’s not going to go away unless I make it go away. But it raises the question: how could you spend twenty-five years in this town and be around reporters as much as he had, and make such a fundamental misjudgment as to what is news value?
Cannon: Well, I wouldn’t be that hard on Ford on that first press conference. I know what you’re saying is right. I had a discussion with him about, too. But I think it was pretty overwhelming – no matter how long you’ve been in this town – to go from being good old Jerry Ford to being the president of the United States in such a relatively short period. I thought Ford showed a lot of balance. We were talking about Ben Bradlee before. One of the things that happened to me, because I was the White House correspondent for the Washington Post, and we were just shut out by Nixon, so one of the ways in which Ford, very literally figured, I had more access than I needed really. You could see that The Washington Post had been shut out so we’re going to talk to The Washington Post all the time.

And at one of the first interviews I did with Ford – I did several interviews in his short presidency - the fall of Richard Nixon coincided for no reason other than coincidence with an advertising campaign that The Washington Post was running about how I got my job through The Washington Post. And so Ben had one of these mock-ups of this campaign in the office and he wanted me to get Ford to sign it. I was mortified. This was the president of the United States and I shouldn’t be taking this over. I tried to talk Ben out of it, but if Ben got something in his head you couldn’t talk him out of it. So okay, I’ll do it. And I was very embarrassed. And Ford loved it. Ford just loved it. He signed it, he wrote some note to Ben. Ben framed it. I thought these guys were both a little carried away, to put it mildly. But I was just happy that he wasn’t angry at me.

But I think that Ford suffered from something – I don’t think naiveté quite captures it. Lyndon Johnson suffered this in a way, too. And Lyndon Johnson campaigned for the presidency and wanted to be president, that this mode of working to get things done, legislatively - and Tip and Reagan after six, you know, it’s always after six for Tip - and all that stuff, does not lend itself to – there is a congressional mindset: to be successful as a leader in Congress requires a different skill set than to be successful as a president. As a president, you have to be ruthless in a way that if you were that way in Congress, you couldn’t function, you couldn’t exist. And we all knew, those of us in the press corps, when Ford brought some of his own people over, and
it was like a coalition government there for a while because you had Nixon people and Ford people.

I hate to say this, I didn’t like to say it then, and since I value Ford so much more than I do Richard Nixon in any way than you can possibly imagine, I hate to say it now, but some of the Nixon people were better than some of the Ford people. Because, first of all, the Nixon people who were there were not part of the criminal conspiracy, but secondly, they were part of the White House and the staff and the presidency and they were used to getting things done. And the Congress – they just simply weren’t. You had people like Hartmann and Rumsfeld could barely tolerate one another, but Ford just simply wasn’t, in my view, an effective executive, but he also didn’t have an executive staff because the people who came over with him had worked in Congress all their lives.

Smith: It’s fascinating you say that because there is a story line, and we’re not trying to write one narrative or another, but a number of people have suggested that the story line of the Ford presidency is that effort to morph, over time, from someone who was clearly of congressional mindset, into an executive. And it has been suggested that Don Rumsfeld, whatever his other shortcomings, was a very good coach. That said, Rumsfeld said, and others have confirmed it, going back to this notion of all the Nixon people, Rumsfeld wanted Ford sooner, rather than later, to clean house. Ford wouldn’t do it.

Cannon: That’s exactly right.

Smith: And Ford wouldn’t do it, in part, because he thought it was unfair to the majority of Nixon people who had nothing to do with Watergate. He, in effect, didn’t want to tar them all with this stigma. And Rumsfeld tried, un成功fully, to suggest to him that you have to look beyond the decent thing to do.

Cannon: It wasn’t just Rumsfeld. Rumsfeld was replaced – it was Rummy’s doing – by Dick Cheney. Dick Cheney, the people who see this, if this clip survives, had better put out of their minds everything they think they know about Dick Cheney. Because Dick Cheney was, I thought he was very good to me,
personally, but he was a very good chief of staff. And he was very effective, and he was very effective with the press, and he was very rational and moderate, and soft-spoken, and just think the opposite of what all those things you’ve been thinking about Cheney recently. And Cheney also saw that.

Cheney was somewhat less abrasive than Rumsfeld and more low-key. But he saw many of the same things that Rumsfeld did and he wasn’t any more successful than Rumsfeld was in getting Ford to make changes. Ford simply did not want to – it was more than just not wanting to fire people. I always hate when they say President X doesn’t like to fire people. I’ve never met anybody who liked to fire people, and if I meet him I would hope that he wouldn’t be in a high office anywhere in this land, or any other. But it was more that he didn’t conceive the executive nature of the office. He didn’t conceive of the notion that if you embarrass the office of the presidency, you’ve got to get out of there because there is more at stake than your feelings or this guy’s feelings. What’s at stake is I’m running the country. I don’t think he ever saw himself as really running the country.

Smith: A kind of constructive ruthlessness.

Cannon: Yeah. Well, what it is that Marty Anderson wrote about Reagan: he’s warmly ruthless? I think that that’s what he lacked.

Smith: Although Stockman didn’t get fired.

Cannon: No. But if you look at the way all of the Ford people, and this includes Cheney, I had gone away on a short leave to write a book that came out a long time later. I was in Aspen; I came back and this is in the fall of ’75, and I guess it was from the summer to the fall. And I came back and I remember Dick Cheney asking me, “Do you think Reagan is going to run?” I said, “Dick, this guy has been running, he’s been running for months. He’s got a campaign committee and he’s probably ready to appoint his Cabinet. What do you mean is he running? Of course, he’s running.” And that whole attitude – in a way Ford suffered from the worst of both worlds. He wasn’t the commanding executive president, but he also believed in the notion that you can’t run against a sitting president of the United States. Ronald Reagan –
now I’m talking about the content of his message, I’m talking about - he was very radical in the sense that he saw you could run against a president of the United States.

Smith: How did he reconcile that with the Eleventh Commandment?

Cannon: He didn’t. I’ve always said that he simply ignored it. He found faults in Ford that he’d never found in any other leader, because deep down, and he not only didn’t wear his ambition on his sleeve, he’d hid it from everybody, including himself, but he was ambitious to become president. I think it made him a better president than he would have been if he hadn’t been. Ford was not ambitious to become president. Ford’s ambition was to become Majority Leader of the House.

The interesting question about Ford, and I wonder about this and I don’t have the answer, but the question is: Lyndon Johnson, who was a more effective president than Ford – yes Lyndon was undone by the Vietnam War, but he got a lot of things done domestically, and I think the longer we are away from that presidency, the more we see. Lyndon Johnson was Majority Leader. Ford was a Minority Leader. And I’ve always wondered what would have been different if Ford had been Tip O’Neill. If the Republicans had somehow won the House…He had not realized his ambition. He was put on the ticket – he was vice president because the Democrats were afraid of John Connally. They wanted somebody they weren’t afraid of. Jerry Ford was somebody they weren’t afraid of. But the truth was, nobody was afraid of him. And he became president and he accepted what was sort of the prevailing, conventional wisdom.

One of the parts of the conventional wisdom at the time was you couldn’t run against a sitting president. It wasn’t just Reagan, it wasn’t just the notion that they underestimated Reagan. Of course, they did, but everybody underestimated him. Pat Brown did and Jimmy Carter did after Ford, and so Ford is hardly alone in that. Conceptually, they didn’t understand that a person who had been in every state in the country and campaigned for Republicans could certainly be an effective candidate against a person who
had represented a single congressional district for all those years. And Ford just did not see that.

**Smith:** Let me ask you, because there is this sense that Reagan also – consistent with what you say – the Republican Party has traditionally been a more hierarchical party, and that Reagan had convinced himself that after Nixon, he was the natural successor.

**Cannon:** Well, he’d also convinced himself that Ford wasn’t up to the job. And you needed both of those things in place. And I think Ford was up to job, despite my criticisms of what he did. I think that Ford, as he showed in the *Mayaguez.* Ford was certainly not a guy you’d have to ask, “Would he do the right thing at three o’clock in the morning?” And I think Ford was learning, and who knows what would have happened if he’d been elected? He would have been elected if he hadn’t pardoned Nixon. I think it was quite clear. He was very, very close to being elected, anyway.

**Smith:** But counterintuitive history – had you spent those intervening two years with Nixon facing a trial, and Nixon remaining at the center of the American discussion.

**Cannon:** Well, you don’t really know, but I think – because there are too many variables in that. You don’t know when Nixon would have been tried. What kind of a judge he would have had. Whether he would have… I would have found it hard to think that he would have gone to prison, but who knows?

**Smith:** Stu Spencer said something really interesting. Very interesting. Stu is convinced in February of ’76, on the eve of the New Hampshire primary, with Ford fighting for his life, Nixon lets it be known that he’s going to China. And Stu, who I don’t think of as a bitter person…

**Cannon:** He’s not.

**Smith:** Nevertheless [he] is utterly convinced that Nixon knew exactly what he was doing and that he let the chips fall where they may as far as his successor goes.

**Cannon:** Well, he went to China in ’74.
Smith: Nixon went in ’76. Right about the time of the New Hampshire primary. Nixon is out of office and he goes back to China and he chooses, literally, the week of the New Hampshire primary to do it.

Cannon: Yeah, I’ve talked to Stu about that. I don’t know. I think Nixon never cared for anybody but himself. The question is: was Nixon trying to hurt Ford? My guess is that he didn’t give a damn. Nixon didn’t have the emotion of gratitude. He should have been so grateful for that pardon that he would have done anything – that he could have found out through an intermediary – he couldn’t have talked to Ford directly, but it would have been easy for Nixon to have found out “Do you want me to go to China?”

Smith: And my sense is from Stu and other people that Nixon didn’t only didn’t feel gratitude, that part of Nixon really resented Ford.

Cannon: Of course you would. Think about it. Here you’ve overcome all these demons and you’ve won the presidency, and you’re Nixon and you always feel – Nixon always felt uncomfortable with athletic people, who everybody liked. You can’t imagine two people that are more opposite than Nixon and Ford. They say Reagan was comfortable in his own skin, he certainly was. Nobody that I’ve ever known in politics was more comfortable with who he was than Gerald Ford. Did he ever have a doubt, was he up nights thinking should I do this or not? I doubt it. He knew who he was and he liked who he was and I liked who he was, and almost everybody who met him did. Nixon didn’t like himself, and most people didn’t like him. And all of a sudden this big lug is in the White House and I’m one step from the penitentiary. How could he possibly have liked him?

Smith: Did you ever talk then or in later years – did you get a feel of how Ford felt toward Nixon?

Cannon: I talked to him about it. I did obits for him/with him and I don’t remember the exact language to be truthful, but I felt that he felt sorry for Nixon. That’s what I think. He felt sorry that it had come to this; that anybody had done what he did. Ford had no doubt that Nixon had done everything that he was accused of and probably more beside, but I think it’s probably the right
attitude to have. He had a better attitude about it than I do. His attitude was not that this crook has got his comeuppance; his attitude was: it’s really pretty sad that the president of the United States would – and I know he expressed this to me about Agnew, and what I remember was sort of in the same sentence. We went from Agnew to Nixon – these two guys, they’re in power, why would you do that? I don’t think that Ford understood quite why Nixon had done what he did, and there is a certain mystery to it that we don’t like to admit to ourselves because it’s easy to say…the thing that I’ve always felt that is most convincing to me about Nixon, and the view that I came to about why he kept those tapes, was that he really didn’t believe that anybody else could write history about his own history but him. And I’m quite convinced of that. But I don’t think Ford really – I think he felt it was sort of terrible that somebody that he knew and worked with, and a Republican, and had become president and he just…

Smith: Naïve is such a pejorative, but he sure as hell did a convincing imitation. When we talked he said he was genuinely taken aback that Nixon lied to him.

Cannon: Yes. Oh there is no question about that. He felt there was a sense of betrayal in that, that he felt Nixon had lied to him. But beyond it, we’re talking second thoughts. I noticed that the last time that I – what year was it that Gerald Ford died?

Smith: 2006.

Cannon: So the last time I interviewed him would have been, I think it was 2004. I went up to Beaver Creek, and I had co-written an obituary in The Washington Post on him that didn’t turn out particularly well, but I had done an earlier interview when he was in California when I was a bureau chief for the Post out there and I seen him several times and I thought it was really out of date and I thought that I needed to edit. And I felt in 2004, where the earlier one was twenty years removed, that he had become more magnanimous toward Nixon. That the sense of betrayal wasn’t fresh and he felt more sorry for him as the years went by. I think, if you know Ford as you do, that that would be what you would expect. Right? Because Gerald Ford was not one to hold grudges.
By the way, you’re going to ask me this, so I’m going to say it here, because there was one thing I had resolved to say to you, and I think we have it in the obituary, but it’s the part of the obituary that ran down somewhere among the truss ads and it’s way buried in the thing and I would have made a bigger deal of it if I were kind. And that is, I asked about the Vietnam War, and about his decision and he said that if he had known more, he would have pulled the plug earlier. And I thought that we should have withdrawn before…because at the time, and this is 2004, it’s sort of been building up ever since – there’s this theory how we – even Newsweek did it – how we could have won the Vietnam War. Sure. And I could have climbed Mt. Everest if I was taller and stronger and had more oxygen.

But at the time it was just sort of beginning what I guess would be the conservative, although it isn’t all conservative, second guessing on the war. Had we, instead of pulling the plug, had we sent troops back in, had we done a whole number of things that were impossible. Ford, as he reflected on it, thought what we should have done was get out sooner. And he said something about how he wasn’t politically able to do that. And he knew, by the way, by that time that he had been weakened by the Nixon pardon.

You can get a hundred opinions, of a hundred people in Washington of that day as to whether Ford would have been a good president if he’d been elected in his own right. But I think the strongest argument that I would make in favor that he might have been is that he kept thinking about what it was it had done. He was not a boob, he was a much brighter person than most people realized. He mastered things and I think he would have mastered the office of the presidency, given a chance. But it’s interesting to me that when he thought about the Vietnam War he had reached almost exactly the opposite conclusion of most of the revisionist thinking that was then beginning to take place.

I happen to think he was right. I agreed with Ford’s revisionism that we would have saved lives, and angst and a lot of other things, and maybe even honor if we had withdrawn sooner. Now Mel Laird, who was his closest friend, and Mel Laird takes the exact opposite view of that.
Smith: We talked to Laird. Talk about revisionism. Mel Laird, who loves Ford, but still blames him. Mel Laird has got it in his head that Ford should have gotten that money out of Congress in April, 1975. Laird also has it in his head that he had the solution to the pardon problem. If his friend Jerry hadn’t been so bull-headed, Mel was going to bring members of Congress from both parties to the White House and petition the president to pardon Nixon. The problem with that is, I once spent two and a half hours in a Grand Rapids hotel room war gaming the pardon with Ford. And I went in a skeptic, not about the pardon itself, but about the timing – there must have been a more adroit way to do it. And I came away pretty well convinced that given the poisonous climate of the time, I don’t know how you could have had a trial balloon. It would have been shot down before it reached the trees. Maybe there were alternative ways to do it, maybe Laird’s right, but I don’t know in that climate that rational action was possible.

Cannon: Here’s the thing. Think of the pardon as the equivalent of a wartime decision. Lots of decisions made in war turn out to be the kinds of decisions – you would have gone up this hill, or would you have invaded on this day, or would you have dropped those bombs – and in rational hindsight you can say, yeah, there was a lot better way to do that and we could have lost a hell of a lot fewer people than we lost in Normandy. But that’s imposing hindsight and I think, with all due respect to Mel Laird, who I respect, if he thought that at the time, if he proposed it to Ford at the time, then it seems to me he has a right to make that argument. But I think the whole Nixon thing was so traumatic for the country and everybody involved.

I remember this. I was a White House correspondent and I remember in the last few days I hated going over to the White House. I just hated it. I just felt being a White House correspondent and also being an American and was so damn depressing. I never felt that way any other time in all the years that I worked as a reporter and I’ve been to some terrible catastrophes, plane crashes, the Oakland fires, where people were killed and everything – I never felt – I was in Vietnam briefly – I never felt this except about the White House at that time, that this is a hell of thing.
People like to think – one review of the book that we did after the fall of
Nixon compared the people at the Post to a bunch of Indians going around
doing a war dance around the fire. That was not the attitude at all at the Post. I
don’t recall anybody happy about – yeah, we were happy that we’d been
proven right and that Kay Graham, particularly, had been vindicated but I
don’t think we were – we weren’t happy that the president of the United
States was forced to resign. And I think that it was a sort of national trauma.
And I think that Ford, if you go beyond the “he said, she said,” we could’ve
done this, we could’ve done that, that Ford was seeking to heal that trauma.
He did perceive that this was a traumatic event for America. He was the
president of the United States. He thought he could heal it in a moment.

Smith: By the way, I’ve always believed that the VFW speech and the Vietnam
amnesty, which came two weeks before the pardon, was part of the same plan.
That they are almost inseparable.

Cannon: That’s exactly right. You’re exactly right in thinking that. He was trying to
say: “Let’s heal America.” That was what he was trying to do. Now, here’s the
argument for why he shouldn’t be elected. I think that Ford did heal America.
You see, I think that Gerald Ford did this so effortlessly that people don’t
realize even today – and didn’t at the time realize at all what an achievement
it was. Within a few months, we were talking about what we should have
been talking about. Yeah, maybe we shouldn’t have been wearing stupid WIN
buttons, but we were talking about inflation.

Smith: And you were also writing stories about how dull this presidency was.

Cannon: And yeah, and we were talking about Vietnam, which had to be lanced. We
had to withdraw from Vietnam. There was no other way to do it. Whether that
was the right time to do, we had to do it. And we were talking about the next
president of the United States and it wasn’t too long and we were talking
about Reagan and Carter. And I think that Ford brought us back to normalcy.
That he, more than any other person, did that. And I’m not sure that anybody
else could have done it that well.
So, yeah, Ford could have done this, he could have done that, we could have done differently. I should have covered him better than I did, but I think that Ford was quite genuine in what he saw. And I think what he saw – he’s not a skilled president, and he’s not a particularly good executive - but there’s a larger part of being president than being an executive. The larger part of president is that you have to be what Harold Laski saw in the presidency. The many sidedness. You’re the tribune of the nation, is I think, Laski’s phrase. And I think he was the tribune of the nation. The nation wanted this healed and those of us who didn’t care for Nixon wanted to heal just as much as the diminishing number of people who really adored Nixon, if there were such – I’m sure there were.

Smith: Broder said he was the most normal person to be president in his lifetime. But he also said something later on, many years after. He said, looking back, Ford, in many ways, at least embodied many of the qualities that people say they want in a president, but perhaps don’t appreciate at the time.

Cannon: Ford is the good American. He’s not only what we say we want in a president, it’s what we say we want in each other. We want people who are responsible, we want people who are honest, we want people who are prepared to make hard decisions and stick by them. We want people who are loyal to their friends. Ford is all of these things and more. Ford is: who do you want for your neighbor? I always used to say the person in the Senate that I most wanted for my neighbor was Scoop Jackson. And I actually got to talk to Scoop Jackson’s neighbor, and it turned out I was right. I think that the guy that I want for my neighbor, if it wasn’t Scoop Jackson, would be Gerald Ford. And this is a guy who did a big thing and he did it in a Ford way, which means it was a clumsy way, but it was authentic. He was the authentic – that was the authentic representative of the people. And I think that history is going to remember Gerald Ford very kindly. I know I do.

Smith: He liked reporters.

Cannon: I think so. I liked him and he liked me. You know, Ford liked people.

Smith: Is that what set him apart from Nixon?
Cannon: Yeah, it set it apart from Nixon. But the thing that set Ford apart from other Republicans, particularly, but also a lot of Democrats, with reporters, is that Ford really didn’t – yeah, he knew what we did for a living – but Ford didn’t make a distinction. It was “reporters are people, too.” Reporters were people. I mean, he treated us the same way he treated you or anybody else. He didn’t have a standard for treating kings and commoners and reporters and non-reporters in different ways. And I think that’s another way in which he was this genuine American.

Smith: In planning his funeral, we wanted to send a couple of messages. One was that one of the eulogists would be a journalist at the cathedral. And, of course, originally it was going to be Hugh Sidey until Hugh passed away, and then it was going to be Tom Brokaw. But we deliberately wanted to send that signal that there was a time, not so very long ago in town, while respecting the adversarial relationship, presidents also respected reporters. And actually enjoyed their company. And the other was, of course, in Grand Rapids, that one of the eulogists would be Jimmy Carter. Which would send its own signal. I’ve often thought that one thing that brought Ford and Carter together was a shared antipathy toward Reagan.

Cannon: Well, that may be. But I remember asking Ford – it was still a most amazing thing to me, campaigning in Michigan in ’80, near the end of the campaign. I remember Bob Hope was on the plane, and I asked Ford, “How can you campaign so enthusiastically for this guy after what he did to you?” And Ford said, “Well, he’s better than Carter.” Don’t forget, Carter – later in life we all hug and kiss and make up – but that misery index of Carter’s, which was really absurd, and then Carter, to this day hasn’t acknowledged the fact that his own misery index was much worse than this thing he invented for Ford. [The “misery index” was a combination of the inflation and unemployment rates.]

But I think that ex-presidents are such an exclusive club, that it’s rare that they don’t find some common ground. I have friends who dislike Carter who say that if the fact that Ford came to like Carter just proves to you that he can like anybody. But I don’t know that that’s true.
I think that the single thing about Ford, and we’ve used this word, and you’ve used this word, is the authenticity of the guy. He’s an authentic American. We’re supposed to forgive grudges, right? And a lot of us don’t, but Ford did. Here’s one other thing about Ford, I hope there is a minute more on this – Ford was willing to do something that most American politicians never do, admit mistakes.

I mean, Ford told me, and I’m sure he told you this, that he made a mistake in dumping Nelson Rockefeller from the ticket, which he certainly did, in my view. And Ford admitted mistakes. He admitted even saying things like we should have gotten out of Vietnam earlier. I can’t imagine – talk about all these other presidents, Carter, Reagan, any Bush – the number of times all of them cubed admitted a mistake is less than Gerald Ford would do in two sentences.

Smith: Was Rumsfeld the architect? Rockefeller went to his grave believing that Rumsfeld was the architect of his departure. Certainly Bush being deep-sixed, in effect, at the CIA and…

Cannon: I think that Rumsfeld was – it depends in the sense in which you say architect. If you say architect – would it have happened without Rumsfeld? Yes. If Rumsfeld had been removed from the ticket because of the conservative movement and the great underestimation of Reagan by Ford. You can’t say he’s so wonderful and then pawn off all of his mistakes on his subordinate. It was Ford’s mistake. First they underestimated Reagan, and then when they got around to it, they panicked, and sacrificing Rockefeller was the result of the panic. Yeah, Rumsfeld wanted to get him off the ticket, but I blame Gerald Ford for that.

Smith: Yeah. Was he more unhappy than the average vice president, from your observation?

Cannon: Oh, I don’t know. I don’t know how to answer that. I think that that office was designed cleverly by the framers to be worthless, as you know. It’s in one of your books, and boy, they succeeded in making it worthless beyond their wildest expectations.
Smith: One of the things that surprised us is how many people close to Ford during that period volunteered the observation of how unhappy he was as vice president, and suggest that that initially fed some of the promises that were made to Rockefeller. That he was, first of all, put in an impossible position of defending Nixon, and at the same time, keeping his own integrity. But even quite apart from that, he was really wasn’t – he didn’t enjoy the vice presidency.

Cannon: How could you? If you look at the people who get to be vice president, if they’ve done anything important, and being minority leader was an important job. If you’ve done something – everyday in the House there was a semi-important decision to make, and in the vice presidency there’s not any important decision to make. You inquire solicitously on the health of the president and preside over the Senate, or in reverse order, but that’s what that job was. And I can’t imagine, even if he didn’t have to dodge the “be loyal to the party and defend Nixon,” but not go overboard, even if he didn’t have that problem, which would drive anybody mad. That office – there’s just nothing there for a man like Gerald Ford, or for any person.

Smith: He and Mrs. Ford would come back to the convention every four years, and they were pro-choice. He is, to this day, I think the only president to actually sign his name to a pro-gay rights petition. The question is: did he change? Did he consciously move left in some way, particularly on social issues, maybe under her influence? I don’t know. Or, did he just stay where he was and the party went so far to the right? Or a combination of the two?

Cannon: I don’t think left/right does it. The Republican Party was, for most of the twentieth century, a libertarian party. We didn’t have the term pro-choice and pro-right, but Barry Goldwater was pro-choice. The bromide that the government should stay out of the bedroom and boardroom was believed as an article of faith by most Republicans and by a lot of people who weren’t Republicans. The greatest agony that Ronald Reagan ever had in office, which he told me and which I described in a lot of detail, was the 1967 abortion rights bill which he signed. And he was being tugged different ways by Stu Spencer and Bill Roberts, and Nancy Reagan and his own Cabinet. His
Cabinet – imagine this – you’re the governor of the state of California and you’ve got this abortion rights bill and the Cabinet – your Cabinet – splits on religious lines. So the people who are Catholic are arguing with you to veto the bill and the people who aren’t….you know, thanks a lot guys. Give me some help.

Smith: Where did Mrs. Reagan come down?

Cannon: She lobbied people on stem cell.

Smith: Well, as a matter of fact, one of the people she lobbied was Gerald Ford. And he did a piece. He did an op-ed piece very sympathetic to her position.

Cannon: Deaver had the last word on that, as far as I’m concerned. A conservative said to him, “She said, ‘Ronald Reagan wouldn’t have done that,’” and Dever said, “Well, Ronald Reagan didn’t have to care for Ronald Reagan.”

Nancy Reagan was the daughter of a doctor. Look – all the Republican view, it’s useful to look at the 1967 abortion rights bill that was passed in California because that really is, still at a time when the Republican Party was a permissive party. The Republicans are much more overwhelming in favor of that bill than the Democrats are.

Smith: Because of the Catholic Church?

Cannon: Because it’s split on religious lines, and there are many more Catholic Democrats. And the head of the Judiciary Committee, a very smart man named Donald Grunsky, he said, “Let’s do this now so we can get this over with.” What changed the Republican Party on this issue was Roe v Wade. I’m one of those people who, while being sympathetic to the pro-choice point of view, always felt that Roe v Wade was wrong, and that the right thing was for this thing to have found itself through the legislature so we could have solved, and we could have come to some view. Instead, we cut the people out of it. Roe v Wade just becomes – from then on, the people who want to argue the case are arguing for the courts. And they are arguing for this very elite minority. But if you looked at Ford, he is a product of this same period.
When Goldwater and Reagan and everybody else was a libertarian, and that your differences – and the differences that you had – I think it was better actually - the difference tended to be on religion. You were not saying to a Republican candidate that you’ve got to take this particular view on abortion, or on any issue in order to get the Republican nomination. It was more like the – what’s the parliamentary equivalent – a free vote, where you can vote your conscience in parliament. On abortion and those issues you vote on your conscience. I think that was a much healthier situation. It certainly was a healthier situation for the Republican and Democratic parties. Today we are trying to weed people out of the Democratic Party because they are pro-life. And the Republican Party, we’re making a litmus test in the nominating process.

Smith: John Paul Stevens told us no one asked him at his confirmation hearings…

Cannon: No, he wouldn’t have been asked. But we’re getting this sea-change going on in American politics where social issues that have not previously been a part of party platforms, which were largely a matter of conscience and choice, and so you could have Democrats and Republicans – you had differences that went across party lines – are becoming part of a political catechism, and Ford is caught up in this. Ford is a sort of an early victim.

Now, the other thing, to give the guy I write about, Ronald Reagan, some credit and to give Ford a little more credit, is Ronald Reagan was not a garden variety, Orange County, conservative. Ronald Reagan was the most effective political communicator, arguably, of the twentieth century. So Ford wasn’t up against chopped liver. And the truth is, if some other conservative like John Ashbrook or somebody had been the guy who challenged Ford, Ford would have demolished him. So it’s important to keep in perspective the fact that the guy that almost beat Ford was Reagan, and if you’ve read my books, you know I argue that he made Ford a better candidate.

Smith: I’d like to hear you expound on that.

Cannon: Ford was an utterly inarticulate candidate when he started in ’76. I remember a thing, I think it was somewhere in the Midwest, I think it was in Wisconsin,
might have been Minnesota. And they had written in Ford’s speech, because he was giving these very dull, terrible speeches, and they had started to write this in the speech and the sentence was: “and I say to you, this is nonsense.” And it said in the speech “with emphasis” and Ford read it, “And I say to you, this is nonsense with emphasis.” He’s standing next to Cheney and Cheney says, “Well, that’s another thing we can’t do – write instructions in the speech text.”

Ford was a really bad candidate. He’d have gotten clobbered. He’d have gotten clobbered by Carter or anybody else. And at the end of the race, by the time – Reagan really sharpens this guy – and I think if you hear Ford, this inarticulate, dull, in parenthesis, Gerald Ford – in the later stages of the ’76 campaign, he clobbered Carter in the first debate. It was only his damn stubbornness that he refused to admit he’d made a mistake about the Soviet domination of Poland. Scowcroft after the debate gave a briefing, and I asked the first quest. I asked, “How many divisions does the Soviet Union have in Poland?” And stud and Cheney tried for three or four days to get Ford to back down and he wouldn’t.” Ford knew what he meant – that you haven’t conquered the spirit of the Polish people. And in later years, he joked that the had liberated Poland prematurely.

Smith: And he’d been to Poland.

Cannon: He’d been to Poland. And unlike Carter, he didn’t say he had lust for the Polish people because the translation was so bad. Ford really was a completely better campaigner in October in ’76 than he would have been. I just don’t see how he could have – now in an ideal world, he’d have disposed of the Reagan challenge sooner than he did. I think that by the time of the convention, when I think we all knew in Kansas City that if there had been a secret ballot, Reagan would have won and been the nominee. By that time it had begun to hurt him. And I think Reagan hurt him. But he carried California.

Smith: Yes he did.
Cannon: He carried California, so how much more was Reagan…Reagan wasn’t going to win Mississippi for him.


Cannon: I don’t want to say it here, because I think I looked at the number and I think in my revised *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, I have the exact number. As you know as a historian, it’s one of these unsatisfying resolutions. He campaigned more than Ford and his people remembered, and less than Reagan and his people remembered. The question is, I think, would Ford have won the election if Reagan had campaigned more for him? I think that’s very hard to argue. The one state that he might have carried if Reagan had gone in tooth and nail, but Reagan didn’t campaign tooth and nail for anybody, even for himself, arguably, was Mississippi.

But I think that the bigger thing working in Mississippi was Carter. Carter was, for some Southerners, what John F. Kennedy was to me. John F. Kennedy proved that a Catholic could win the White House. And Carter proved that a Southerner could win the White House, and in ’76, was a fresh face. We didn’t know what a disastrous president he was going to be, and certainly the good people of Mississippi didn’t have a clue. And I think that Carter won Mississippi. I don’t think Ford lost it. And I don’t think Reagan could have carried it for him.

Smith: Two last things. One thing, Mrs. Ford. What was her impact? One senses, this is a town where everyone likes to fight the last war, and so when the famous *Sixty Minutes* interview came out there were lots of people in the White House who reflexively said, “Oh my God, what has she done?” And then it took a while, for some polling data to come in, and probably she didn’t help where Reagan was appealing, but that the country had changed, and that in a country that was looking for authenticity, plain speaking candor, that she struck a chord.

Cannon: I think that’s exactly right. And I think something else is important to add. Gerald Ford was known for truthfulness. She went on *Sixty Minutes* and she
knew what she was going to say, but she was also being asked questions. If Betty Ford had lied instead of telling the truth, which she did, I don’t think that would have helped her husband. I don’t think it would have helped the Ford image. The Ford image was one of this guy is an honest guy, she’s an honest woman. I don’t even think that’s a close question. I think that there’s no question that she touched a chord. I don’t know of anybody, even people who didn’t like Ford, or didn’t like him either because they preferred Reagan or because they preferred a Democrat, who was critical of Betty Ford. Everybody that I knew of said she was honest and she was open about it. It seemed to me that it was a plus, but it wasn’t a plus because it was a calculated plus. It was a plus because she was telling the truth.

Smith: Did you know, did other people in the press know that she had a problem?

Cannon: I don’t know what others knew. I had heard that she had had a problem. I’d heard that she had a drinking problem. But in those days, that was off limits to report what spouses or children did. And it still is as far as I’m concerned. I don’t write about a president’s children, or about their spouse. That’s a very old-fashioned virtue, and I know there are people who will hear this among my colleagues who don’t consider it a virtue at all, but I would never dream of it. It’s one thing if you get drunk and fall down in public; it’s another thing if your spouse does.

Smith: Last thing: how do you think he should be remembered? To people who see his name in a textbook, or maybe some grainy film – what is it about Ford that people ought to know?

Cannon: Our country has a way – what is it my father used to say: God looks after drunks, little children, and the United States of America – our country has had a way of thrusting up people who were the right people for the moment. Abraham Lincoln being the supreme example of this, but also I would argue in their own ways, Teddy and Woodrow Wilson and certainly Franklin Roosevelt, and I would say Dwight Eisenhower, who to me is the most underrated president in history. Well, I think that Ford was one of those people. I don’t think you’re going to see very many history books that are going to put Ford in the same paragraph, let alone sentence, of the people I
just named, but I think that Ford deserves to be for one reason. And that is
that he healed the country at a time that it was desperately in need of healing
and was really at a loss. Because our president is so much more important to
us because he is always a many-sided person, we’re not prepared for…you
know, Truman made this notation that nobody has dishonored this house.
Well, Nixon had dishonored the house. And he dishonored the nation, and we
had no clue, really, any of us, no matter what our view was of Mr. Nixon, of
how to deal with this. And I think Ford did. And he didn’t do it in a way that
was particularly deft, or exhilarating, but he did it in an honest and
straightforward way, and I think he’s going to be remembered as a honest
man who rescued the United States of America in a moment of need.

Smith: That’s great. Thank you.
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Smith: Around the time of the President’s death, what do you think people learned that they maybe should of known, but that they didn’t know?

Downs: Oh, my.

Smith: If you think they learned anything.

Downs: Oh, yes, yes, yes. And it just all happened so naturally, I think it was just a combination of seeing the family and how they conducted themselves, even at the Capitol; having the family there to receive people. That was all pure Mrs. Ford – thinking of doing things like that. I think, though, it happened gradually, Richard. I don’t think it just happened because of the funeral, although that was a great part of it. But it happened gradually as people had time to think. History doesn’t happen, as you know better than anyone, in a short period. And I think enough time had passed for this to happen. The sad part of it is that he’s not here to participate or to see what people are thinking of him now.

Smith: On the other hand, you stop and think – poor Lyndon Johnson, who only lived four years after leaving office. By contrast, President Ford lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his viewpoint on the pardon. Particularly, if you want to pick a moment in time, when the Kennedy Library gave him the Profiles in Courage Award.

Downs: Right.

Smith: He said, for twenty-five years, everywhere he went, people asked the same question, and after that event, he said, “They stopped asking questions.” So he had that satisfaction.

Downs: One time, I forget where it was, I was carping at him about something, and he said, “Maria, Maria, the longer it goes, the better we look.” The better we look
is what he meant. So, in his own mind, he was beginning to understand that people had completely changed in their views.

Smith: The fascinating thing – because you mentioned about Mrs. Ford – I got dragged in – just on the sideline – I got a call. Originally, he wasn’t going to go to the Kennedy Library. I think in part because he didn’t have the usual politician’s ego, it didn’t hit him how important it was. And I remember getting a call from Ken Duberstein saying what can we do to change his mind? Well, I think in the end it was Mrs. Ford who explained to him what a big deal this was. And, of course, once they went, they had the time of their lives and spoke about it many, many times thereafter.

It’s almost as if she had to be the one looking out for his reputation and vindication and all those sorts of things. He didn’t spend much time worrying about that.

Downs: Well, he never did worry about it – about anything along those lines. I guess I shouldn’t say this, but I will. This was one of the things I carped at him about a few times. I would become so unhappy when I would see how great he was concerning President Carter, and yet you would see President Carter step forward, hold a press conference, take all the credit for whatever they were working on together and not even include President Ford in the press conference. Now that galled me, Richard, for many years. And one night at one of the foundation dinners, I complained to him about this. I said, “You know, President Ford, I have to tell you,” and he said, “Maria, Maria, the important thing is that it gets done. It doesn’t matter who gets the credit for it.” And I thought, oh my lord, you’re a saint. I’m sorry, but I continue to feel strongly that in many instances he was not given the credit deserved.

Smith: Let me ask you about that, because there is a quality in him – there’s the Eagle Scout, which was always there, and the desire to think well of people, which was lifelong. Which are wonderful qualities, hugely admirable qualities. You wonder, though, whether you can be too nice to be president. The historic example of this is, in August of ’74, right after he becomes president, his first press conference at the end of the month, which we now know was a real milestone on the way to the pardon. Because he went into
there believing, I think naively believing, that everyone would want to talk about Cyprus and Turkey and inflation and unemployment and the economy, all the things that he was immersed in. And of course, the only thing they wanted to talk about was Richard Nixon – his tapes and his papers and his legal prospects. And Ford didn’t handle it very well. He left angry, mostly at himself, but I think also at the press. And we now know that that was a milestone, as I say, in his decision that if everyone is going to be obsessed with this - plus the Jaworski office was telling the White House that it would be two years before there could be any trial.

Well, the rest is history. How do you explain that quality? How do you describe it as other than naiveté? For someone who had been in this town as long as he had, to go into a roomful of reporters and think what he thought.

Downs: I’m not sure what his relationship was with the media when he was a Congressman. I think he had a fairly decent relationship with them.

Smith: I know he had a reputation for being very accessible.

Downs: Yes. So he probably was shocked to have them turn on him like vipers, really. They took out a lot of their hatred of Richard Nixon on him.

Smith: He had grown accustomed to the press corps that he knew on Capitol Hill, and with whom he had very good personal and professional relations. It’s not surprising that maybe he transferred that…

Downs: To his thinking of what it was going to be like at the White House. In his mind, he felt, “I’m straight with them. I’m a straight shooter. I’ve made myself accessible.” What’s good for the goose is good for the gander. It just wasn’t that way. I don’t think there was any naiveté there at all. There was a gentleman who may have been very calm and cool and collected, but he always knew what was going on – knew more about what was going on than most people.

Smith: It’s interesting that you say that because there is also a school of thought, from more than one person that we’ve talked to, who thought that he sort of made his innocence work for him. In other words, he understood how some
people looked upon him, and he actually put it to work – leaving the impression that maybe he didn’t know as much as he actually knew. Which can be a very useful device in some circumstances.

Downs: Well, don’t you learn that up on Capitol Hill, Richard? Going back to when he and Ev Dirksen were so close, you go back to some of those little duets that they had. He was a showman in a very nice, low key way. He knew what was going on.

Smith: Where were you in the summer of ’74?

Downs: Summer of ’74? When the Watergate took place?

Smith: As we approach the transition.

Downs: I was still in the West Wing. Anne Armstrong was President Nixon’s counselor. Anne had decided to return to Texas and I was wrapping up some details in our offices. But we were there during the entire period - when President Nixon resigned and had the farewell in the East Room

Smith: What was the mood like in the West Wing during those days? Can you think of a moment when you thought, “He’s not going to make it?” Try to take people back in time – people who weren’t around this town at that point, and give us a sense. Was it a surreal atmosphere in the White House, or was it business as usual – or what was it? And I would imagine when the tapes came out, that must have been a very significant milestone in terms of survivability.

Downs: We were in the West Wing, our offices were in the West Wing, and our neighbors were Dean Burel, Mel Laird, George Schultz, and Bryce Harlow were there.

Smith: Tell us about Bryce Harlow, because he’s a legendary figure.

Downs: He was just a magnificent person. An anchor for everyone.

Smith: Wise Man?
Downs: Very, very wise. And a lovely person. I know Ann and he became close friends, and I recall a couple of tragedies that happened when she was in the West Wing – personal ones – and I remember the first person I would run to would be Bryce, to get his advice as to what to do and how to handle things. He was probably one of the shrewdest people around. But if you were his friend, that was it. He was just marvelous. I think they completely lost the mold after him.

Dean Burch was always there for us. When you asked about what was the mood like? I don’t know. I think a lot of those people realized when the tapes came out, what was ahead.

Smith: Were people surprised by the language on the tapes? That’s what we keep hearing. It’s almost less the content, but that people were surprised by the language that the President used.

Downs: I don’t think that group up there was. I don’t think he ever used language like that around Anne, or any time I was around. He was very charming, he really was.

Smith: Really? Now tell us about that. That’s interesting.

Downs: Many times when he was headed over to his office in the EOB, he used a little staircase going between the second floor and down to the first floor and over to the EOB. For some reason I kept running into him on that staircase, and I’d back off to let him pass and he’d say, “After you, ladies first.” He was very considerate. Every time I was around and something happened – I think I mentioned this to you before, Richard, that we were with him in New Orleans when there was an assassination attempt, and I don’t think it was ever publicized.

Smith: No. What?

Downs: I was there with Anne, I don’t recall the event, and she was giving a press briefing and the Secret Service came to the briefing and said, “Maria, you and Anne have to get out of here.” The agent said, “Come on down to the car.” And I said, “But we’ve got our things at the hotel.” And he said, “No, no,
you’re going out to the plane.” We were scheduled to go to San Clemente from New Orleans with the President. And he said, “We’ll take care of your things. We’ll get your luggage and other things for you.” And they whisked us out to the airport. Everybody was out there. We got on the plane and left for San Clemente. So apparently, it was a very serious threat. If there was something reported about it, I didn’t know. I was out in San Clemente then and maybe they didn’t cover it, or who knows what.

When we got on the airplane, there was a door between the President’s cabin and the first part of the staff cabin, and the press section was behind us. And the door kept opening. I didn’t see one of the stewards so I remember putting my foot out so the door wouldn’t open and the press could look into his cabin. Someone kept trying to open the door, and I kept putting my foot up again and again. And all of a sudden I thought, “Maybe it’s somebody who wants in here.” And it was President Nixon. And he said, “They’ve got to fix that door.” And then he said, “How is everybody? Is everybody alright?” And he walked around, just around the staff cabin, and he asked again, “Is everybody okay?” Then he turned and went back into his cabin and I think he just kind of waved at the press a little, but he turned around and went back into his cabin.

Smith: Do you think he was a shy man?

Downs: In some ways, yes, I believe so. I’m sorry that I never did get to know him a lot better. But what I did know of him was very kind and very considerate.

Smith: Now on the morning of August 9th, his departure and the President’s swearing in – were you in the East Room for those events?

Downs: Yes.

Smith: What was the mood like when the Nixon’s came in?

Downs: It was awful. It was just so sad, Richard, it really was almost unbearable. I remember looking a couple of rows ahead of me, and I saw Dean Burch sitting there - Bryce was there in the same row. I was with the counselors. I don’t remember Anne being there, to be honest with you. I think she was back...
in Texas. But I remember Dean Burch had his hands up and his head down. It was too much to bear. And Rog Morton, all of his senior people, were numb.

Smith: The tension must have been like the cliché “thick enough to cut with a knife.” Nothing like this had ever happened before. You were an eyewitness to a unique event in American history, and hopefully something that will never be repeated. Was it a real palpable sense of history in that, was it more at a personal level?

Downs: More at the personal level, as far as I was concerned. I think many of the people in that room felt that way. I remember when we left the East Room and walked out towards the helicopter, and Rog Morton, I remember him racing towards the helicopter as it took off, with tears streaming down his face. It was just extremely sad. We weren’t thinking of anything historic or what had happened before.

Smith: You can understand in that very personal context, why Mrs. Ford would say later that it was the worst day of her life.

Downs: Yes, I believe it was.

Smith: Something else though. We’ve heard from several people, and it’s perfectly understandable. People who were in the East Room for the swearing in, and I think afterwards there was a receiving line and a reception in the State Dining Room. People were invited to that. And some have indicated, more than one, that you could see the Nixon people sort of peel off and go back to their offices. Which, again, under the circumstances, is understandable.

But it raises the larger question: how much a challenge was it for the new president and his people to be integrated with the existing staff? And to decide, okay, how do we provide change and continuity? The President apparently made it clear that the vast majority of these people had nothing to do with Watergate. They shouldn’t be tarred with guilt by association. Which, again, is a generous response on his part. But it might not be necessarily the politically and most advantageous. What was your sense of the different camps, for lack of a better word? As someone who traversed that divide –
were there tensions between some of the Nixon people and the incoming Ford people.

Downs: Yes, that’s human nature. But I guess it was later because it was when I was social secretary, one of the things that Mrs. Ford insisted that I do was to attend the senior staff meetings every morning. She said, “You’re my representative.” I don’t think, at that time, there were many of the old Nixon people left. There were a few – not many. The emotions at the time you’re talking of, were just so raw. And I’m sure that they – the very senior staff – probably got directives to be a little more cooperative. That was just understood.

Smith: Was there any sense – we talked to Al Haig, which was a fascinating experience in itself. Talk about friction. He and Hartmann, from day one, it was almost as if they were put on the planet to annoy each other. And they succeeded. Was that something that you were aware of?

Downs: You mean as far as Haig was concerned?

Smith: Yeah. Was that kind of in the air around the West Wing at that point? That there was this tension surrounding Haig and the newcomers. And Haig’s desire to stay on.

Downs: I was much more involved with General Haig just prior to that time, and it was such a different atmosphere. Everybody knew we were in trouble, but everybody still hadn’t given up. And you were more or less cooperating with everybody, and working together. And that went for General Haig, too. But afterwards you get into a competitive mode and the survival thing, and Anne had left by then, so I wasn’t privy to a lot of that. I came back into the picture with Mrs. Ford.

Smith: Now, how did that happen? Anne leaves, did you have something set when she left?

Downs: No, one of our responsibilities had been the Bicentennial, and I’d done a great deal of work on the various programs comprising the celebration. I was working with Milt Mitler to acquaint him of those programs. American’s
birthday was around the corner and Americans and people worldwide wanted to come to our country and wish us a happy birthday. During that time one of the senior people called me and said, “Oh, Maria, you know, Mrs. Ford is looking for a social secretary.” I said, “No, but okay,” I knew Lucy Winchester stayed over to assist Mrs. Ford when she first came to the White House. Afterwards I heard that it wasn’t working out with Nancy Rowe, so it didn’t surprise me that they were making a change. I said, “Okay, if you’ll let me think about it, I’ll give you a call back with recommendations.” And this person said, “No, no, I’m talking about you.” And I said, “Oh, no, not me.” As you know, Richard, none of us think we’re capable of doing the job. And he said, “Oh, that’s too bad. Your name is in the hopper, so you have no choice.” So that’s how it started.

Smith: Do you know who put your name in the hopper?

Downs: Yes, a couple of people.

Smith: Okay. Without your knowledge?

Downs: Yes.

Smith: So is this the first meeting with Mrs. Ford, when you sat down and talked about the job? Had you ever met her before?

Downs: I had met her when I was at the Republican National Committee (RNC) working with Anne Armstrong, you might remember, Richard. She was very interested in the programs that we were involved with. I knew her, but did not have a very close relationship. But enough so that she knew my name and always came to visit and talk about our programs.

Smith: So, then, how did you land the job?

Downs: Three interviews and nine hours of interviewing later.

Smith: Three interviews?

Downs: Three different interviews. Mrs. Ford knew exactly what she was looking for, and the last interview she asked if I would map out a State Dinner. She said, “Choose whomever you would like, but give me all of the details. Go into the
Smith: It is an interesting request. It suggests a certain sophistication and experience. Of course, she’d been around town for a long time, and presumably been to a lot of these affairs. It takes someone who had really thought about the internals.

Downs: I think she enjoyed that part of it. She told me once that she thought that I had the best job in the White House. And I said, “I think the President does, Mrs. Ford.” And she laughed and she said, “No, you do.”

Smith: Do you think maybe she was a frustrated social secretary herself?

Downs: Not frustrated, just interested. She got involved in every little detail about the House.

Smith: What was the standard, the interest that she…

Downs: Well, you must remember, between the time that her social secretary left and I came onboard, she had a little State Dinner take place. It was for the Emperor and Empress of Japan. If you talk about really having a trial by fire, this was it. We usually used round dinner tables at State Dinners, but this dinner had the very formal e table, and everything that went with it. And she just ate it up.

Smith: Really?

Downs: She really did. We talked a lot about it during the interviews. She had told me that this dinner was coming up and said, “I don’t think that there’s going to be any way that you’ll be onboard on time,” but we discussed it. She called me the day of the dinner and said, “Be sure you go down to the State Dining Room and look at everything and let me know if you see anything that not’s right, or whatever.” And when I went on the State floor, nobody knew she had chosen me, and Rex came out of his office – Rex Scouten, the chief usher –
and kind of looked at me strangely – a ‘what are you doing here?’ type thing. And when I told him Mrs. Ford had asked me to look in, Rex gave me free rein. I went around and looked at everything but said and did nothing. Mrs. Ford had done this dinner completely by herself.

Smith: Really?

Downs: Yes.

Smith: That’s very interesting. Do you know whether there were any other candidates for the job?

Downs: For my job?

Smith: Yeah.

Downs: Yes, quite a few.

Smith: She was interviewing other people?

Downs: She interviewed other people. I said quite a few, but maybe three or four others.

Smith: Did she ever tell you why she chose you? What it was about you or your experience in the interviews that did the trick?

Downs: Not really. I guess we just hit it off together.

Smith: I’m sure it’s a job where chemistry is critical, personal chemistry.

Downs: Very much so, because there she is, all by herself in this tower, and after being burned a few times by things she had said to friends in confidence. I think she learned it was a different ballgame. She had a lot of friends and a lot of things going when he was in Congress. And I think she talked and did things there with other Congressional wives, and other administration wives. But it’s different when you’re a First Lady. Particularly when she found out a few times, that it comes back and bites you. So she was very careful, and at times she needed a confidant, and she needed somebody that could turn to her and say, “Well, that’s not right. That’s not the way it should be done,” but do it with a little finesse – do it with friendship.
Smith: It’s interesting that you say that because Rex said, of course, he was a great admirer of Mrs. Ford, he just really likes her a lot. He said that – obviously she saw more of the President because his office was a few hundred feet away – it wasn’t like during those Congressional years when he was on the road so much - but even then, Rex said that many times she just wanted someone to talk to. And she’d get him down there for something and then just want to talk.

Downs: Yes.

Smith: And he sensed someone who was lonely.

Downs: Yes that’s true. I remember one day when she was quite angry and I said, “What’s wrong?” There was the Washington Star on the table and she said, “Look, they are even picking on Liberty!” They had a picture of Liberty and her five pups and the story was that they were selling the pups. Well, that was nothing further from the truth. They gave one of the pups to the Seeing-eye Dog Foundation and the others went to friends. But she was really incensed because they were picking on Liberty. And the President was the same way about Liberty. You can mess with me but not my dog.

Smith: Or my kids…

Downs: Yes, but the dog was really off bounds…the kids, too.

Smith: Was it difficult for any of the kids? Susan had her prom there. For a family that was in so many ways normal, and is suddenly tossed into this very abnormal environment, with constant scrutiny and the Secret Service and everything else. Did you see kind a transition? Did they ever get completely used to it? Was it difficult, challenging, fun? How would you assess it?

Downs: Well, I think the kids, after a while, got accustomed to it. Susan, maybe enjoyed…that isn’t the right word, but she took to the responsibility. And as she has done throughout life, has made the best of it. She was great, particularly when Mrs. Ford became ill and she had to represent her.

Smith: That’s a great story, isn’t it? Susan said, before they went in, she didn’t want to move into the White House. And one reason was, she thought she couldn’t
wear jeans anymore. The irony of this girl who says, “I’ll go, but I’m going to keep my jeans,” putting on this evening gown and gloves…

Downs: I always will remember Susan fondly – the exuberant one, I called her and the most helpful and willing to do whatever needed doing.

Smith: Now, were you in the job when that happened?

Downs: No. Given that we were in that proximity there, you always would see them. There’s just one thing about the Fords as a couple that came across strongly all during the time I was serving them – I know that Mrs. Ford had some very lonely times there, but she also had some grand times particularly when she was working on the social events. I remember she and the President used to take a guest list for a State Dinner, and would go over it together and when it was returned to me their personal notations were priceless.

Let me walk you through the routine. First, we compiled the guest lists from input from various senior staff and State Department. I’d go over it with Mrs. Ford in great detail, and she’d ask, “Why is this person on the list, and why is this one on the list?” They were that much into the detail of it, and then Dick would go over it with the President before, and then the two of them would get together and add, delete, do whatever they chose. But the President always kept his little notebook with a list of people he would like included. They were never pushy about “this person has to be included.” They would recommend the people that they thought would be the best match to whoever was coming to dinner. I remember a couple of times thinking that the people who were picked out as being the stars of the dinner, not because they were celebrities, but were people of interest were the ones that they had suggested.

Smith: Really? It’s interesting, the stories early on, the symbolism of making sure the White House was once again open to everyone. Inviting George McGovern to a stag dinner, and bringing the Congressional Black Caucus into the Oval Office, and George Meany, people like that. Did that continue on into the administration?

Downs: Oh yes, they were very aware and were very involved – we silently had our categories of people. Not the obvious Congressional, etc., just the little niches
of people. During the primaries, elections and other campaigns, the President always wanted to make sure that the Democrats were represented.

Smith: I assume Tip O'Neill was a frequent [visitor].

Downs: Oh, yes. But we also had fun with the guest lists. Once I said to the President, “You had a corner on baseball catchers.” I looked back over my guest lists and he had suggested Joe Garagiola, Johnny Bench, Yogi Barra, about four or five baseball catchers. I said, “You must have a thing about catchers.” He said, “They are very important, Maria.” He would take out his little lists every once in a while and feed me these treats.

Smith: Did he like athletes, especially? As a category, making sure they were invited to events?

Downs: Yes. Not make sure, he would just say it would be nice…and you wanted to make these events as pleasant for him – and her – as you possibly could, so you tried to surround them with people they enjoyed.

Smith: We know about her interests in the arts, how did that express itself? Particularly, for example, in the selection of entertainers and the like?

Downs: I kidded her once, saying, “Everybody else here reads the Nation or The Economist. You and I read Variety and Billboard.” And she said, “Well, it’s the best way to stay on top of what all these celebrity-types are doing.” She was very attuned to being ahead of what was happened, as far as that segment of society.

Smith: She knew that politicians got so wrapped up in their lives that they often are totally cut off from what you and I would call popular culture. My sense was that she was much more attuned to everyday life.

Downs: Yes, she very, very much was. And she also knew who was the right admixture. She wouldn’t go overboard. One time – who was it that I asked her if it would be alright to propose for the guest list? I mentioned Jack Nicholson and she said, “I don’t think so, Maria.” But he was the only one that she ever hesitated over.
Smith: Was Chevy Chase ever invited?

Downs: I think he was, Richard. I’m not sure, but I think he was. But there were a lot of people that were surprised to receive invitations, let’s say.

Smith: You talked about her and the paper and the dog, did she ever say anything regarding, not exactly Chevy Chase, but the comics and their lampooning of the President and his athletic abilities? That must have been a sore point.

Downs: I would imagine it was a sore point to the President.

Smith: The dichotomy between this extraordinarily gifted athlete, and the caricature that some in the press and the pop culture put out, that must have been a source of frustration or anger for the Fords – Mrs. Ford, the kids.

Downs: Yes, well, particularly – obviously the President – I’m sure that really cut him more than anybody will ever know. Betty Ford would take everything in stride, and I’m sure she would kid him about it a lot, herself. But deep down, it hurt, the kids and everybody. But you go with the flow, Richard.

Smith: We were talking about the pop culture. You think of the Ford presidency and you think of – in part because of Jack – but George Harrison was here, Andy Warhol was here. Do you remember any of those?

Downs: Yes, and Bianca Jagger. That was one of the most famous, Richard.

Smith: What was that like? Did the President know who those people were?

Downs: I imagine he did. That’s the way they were. That’s family life.

Smith: What did Mrs. Ford enjoy the most about living in the White House?

Downs: I think she got to enjoy almost everything after a while. The unfortunate thing about her White House years were that she was in so much pain during so much of the time she was there.

Smith: Tell us about that.

Downs: I got to see quite a bit of that whenever we had an event on the State Floor, which was often – she used to appear at all receptions and events. I would
usually go up to the family quarters brief her before the event and ride down in the elevator with her. Many times she would be in the bathroom putting on her makeup and I’d sit on the edge of the tub there and we’d talk. And when, we’d get in the elevator to go downstairs, you knew she was hurting, sometimes she’s even put a pack on her neck. But the minute the door of the elevator would open, she’d throw her shoulders back and she’d smile and it was like nothing hurt. It had to take its toll on you.

Smith: Willpower.

Downs: Willpower, exactly. She was on stage, really, at that point. But I don’t think people realized. And the other thing was that we had so much going on all the time, Richard, she couldn’t – I don’t think she had a chance to sit back and really enjoy a lot of the things she should have. Just that last year in the White House, as you’ll remember, we had the primaries, she was so involved with the ERA, we had the convention, we had the Bicentennial, and then we had the election. And if you had one or two of those, it would have been more than enough. And if you were in 100% condition, it would have been fine. But she kept going on and on. She never missed anything that I know of, and she just always was on top of things. It was tough. It was a very, very difficult time for her, let’s say, physically.

Smith: It’s interesting you say they weren’t pushy about guests for dinners, which is not to say that people outside the White House weren’t pushy. I think particularly of the famous dinner for the Queen in 1976. Tell us about that event – the preparations and the event itself. Was that the most memorable Bicentennial event?

Downs: Of the Bicentennial dinners? We had so many. I think it started with Emperor Hirohito. He was at the very, very early part of the celebration. And then Anwar Sadat was a big deal because we had not had an Egyptian leader since Nassar.

Smith: And clearly, Sadat and Ford just hit it off. Everyone associates Sadat with Jimmy Carter, but before that, there clearly was a very special relationship between Presidents Sadat and Ford.
Downs: And it opened up the door to a lot of what happened, I think. Mrs. Ford would drop hints that they were really getting into some discussions that would just be wonderful for the country and the world if they come to fruition.

Smith: And wasn’t that the event where Pearl Bailey got the President to dance?

Downs: Yes. She did.

Smith: Which, I guess, is politically sensitive where he comes from.

Downs: I would say it was. We got our briefing from the State Department and, of course, it had no for religious reasons, no this, no that or the other.

Smith: Including alcohol?

Downs: Yes, there was wine served, but not to them. They didn’t drink. But I remember saying to Pearl - I knew her fairly well – and I said, “Pearly, you know President Sadat isn’t supposed to dance.” And she said, “Oh, okay,” and smiled. The entire evening was really very spontaneous, Pearl got Omar Sharif up on stage and I think she planned to twirl him around a few times. Sharif wouldn’t dance. He stood there and let her sing Lara’s Theme from Zhivago to him, but when she tried to maneuver him into the dancing, and that didn’t work. And he was kind of shy in his own way, and got off the stage quickly. In fact he wasn’t actually on the stage – just the peripheral of it.

I saw Pearl kind of look around and get that mischievous look on her face and she walked over and began singing to President Sadat. She knew him from Egypt. She had been awarded the highest honor given by the Egyptian government by him. It had been presented to her the year before. So she knew him, and she knew all the customs. But anyway, she sashayed around and just kind of wrapped an arm around him and before he knew it he was up on his feet, and it wasn’t actually dancing, it was more going around and around. Of course President Ford was sitting there and he said, “Well, here’s Mrs. Sadat sitting here,” so he thought the gentlemanly thing to do was to get her up on the dance floor. And he went a few twirls around the floor with her.

I remember looking at Henry Catto, our chief of patrol, and when he was ready to escort them back to Blair House, I said, “Oh, Henry, please test the
waters and let me know what kind of apology we need to send or what we need to do. I’ll wait to hear from you.” He returned with this big smile of his face and he said, “Not to worry, Maria. I mentioned to President Sadat that we hadn’t planned to have you dance.” And he said, “I never learned to dance when I was a young man. I never had the opportunity or the money. So I’m really not comfortable dancing.” But he said this was amongst friends. Henry was happy. No apologies necessary.

Smith: And what was it about Pearl Bailey? Where did that relationship come from? Because it lasted as long as she was alive, I take it.

Downs: Oh, yes. Oh they had been friends, they apparently knew each other from the Congressional days. They became very close friends. In fact, they called each other sister. Mrs. Ford spoke with her often on the phone, and when Pearl moved to Washington, to return to school at one point, they saw more of each other. She loved Pearl like a sister. Pearl was a very unusual woman, a very deep woman. And I remember that Mrs. Ford felt very close to her and to Louie, her husband. In those days, interracial marriage was not a common thing. But it just never entered into the picture with them, although I know Mrs. Ford mentioned several times, that you could tell when Pearl was not happy – not that she complained or anything, but she just wasn’t Pearl. I asked, “What’s happening with Pearl?” And she would say, “It’s her children. She’s having some problems with them.” I say that because that’s how close the relationship was.

Smith: And it extended to President Ford as well.

Downs: Very much so, yes. They were friends.

Smith: She actually was on the election eve broadcast they taped, I think, on Air Force One - Joe Garagiola and Pearl Bailey.

Downs: Mrs. Ford said that after they realized that they had lost the election and everybody was just beside themselves, Joe started to cry. She said, “But, Maria, I mean he was crying uncontrollably. “We thought they were there to console us, Jerry and me, and we were the ones that had to in turn, help
them.” I thought that was the story of their life, actually. She was always helping somebody else – an omen of whether life was to be.

But getting back to the Queen’s dinner; that was a dinner and a half, as they say. There was a terrible storm shortly before the dinner was to start that caused the loss of four or five trees on the grounds. We planned dinner in a tent in the Rose Garden, primarily because Mrs. Ford didn’t want to close the House down to public tours during all the Bicentennial for dinner preparations. When the storm hit and I had visions of ending up on grounds of the monument. Dear Dick Cheney, realized what was happening he sent the troops down. He said, “Go out and see if Maria needs some help out there in the tent.” So people came out from the West Wing and we literally battened down the hatches.

The storm subsided as the Fords were waiting to greet the Queen and Phillip. They got into the elevator to go up to the Yellow Oval Room for an aperitif. The elevator door opened and there stood Jack Ford: bare feet, and bare chest in search of studs for his dress shirt. Mrs. Ford said to me later, “I wanted to die. Here’s the Queen with her tiara and Jerry and I and everybody, white tie, and here’s Jack standing there big as life.” And she said, “Your Majesty, I am so sorry, I’m so embarrassed.” And the Queen laughed and said, “Don’t worry about it, I have one just like it at home.”

But all through those state dinners President Ford had the primaries going on and lot of them and he was very close – he may have been there physically, but mentally his mind was on what was happening in the political arena. Fortunately, he had won quite a few of them at that point. I don’t remember which primary was going on at the Queen’s dinner, but he excused himself at one point to go upstairs and find out what was happening, to get briefed on what was happening.

Smith: Maybe it’s an urban legend, but the story has grown over the years, that there was a disproportionate number of uncommitted Republican delegates who were invited to the Queen’s dinner.

Erik: Could Maria tell us about the gift exchange?
Downs: Well, part of the day of the Queen’s dinner was a private luncheon for the Queen, Phillip and the President and Mrs. Ford. No other staff, just them and that was the time that they took to exchange gifts. Mrs. Ford had been very thoughtful and very careful in the selection of gifts for the Queen. The official gift was a beautiful bronze equestrian statue, I forget the name of the artist now, a very well-known western artist.

Smith: Remington?

Downs: No, it wasn’t a Remington. We had Remingtons all around the house that were lent to us, but this was more contemporary. He is a very fine artist, I’ll think of it later. But when it arrived they had it on a turnstile going round and round. When we placed it upstairs for the presentation at the luncheon, we looked at it and felt it was kind of hokey going round and round while they are having lunch, so I asked the butler to unplug it. Well, in the briefing that Mrs. Ford had, it was stated that it was supposed to rotate.

So when the President and Phillip looked at the gift the President said, “That’s supposed to go around and around,” and they are standing there looking at it, and then the two of them got down on their hands and knees looking for the place to plug in the statue.

The butler came running downstairs saying, “Boy are you in for it now.” “You know that unplugging?” he said. “They plugged it back in finally. But, it took a while for them to find it.” But all gifts Mrs. Ford chose for the children were really magnificent, but they were not expensive. She chose American Indian silver jewelry that we had the Interior Department find for us from the different reservations and one of Susan’s photographs was framed and Princess Anne was given a silver belt buckle for her riding pants. Mrs. Ford put a lot time and effort into the gifts.

Smith: Tell me about the Fords relations with their staff – the people who were there administration after administration.

Downs: Very good, very, very nice. After they left the White House I remember asking Mrs. Ford what she missed the most, and she said Rex and his people. Rex and his people were the butlers and the maids and the domestic staff. I
remember a gentleman that helped me on my staff, Fred Jefferson, who came to the White House with President Eisenhower. He had been with him overseas when he was the Supreme Commander. When Mrs. Eisenhower was First Lady, Jeff would take the mail upstairs to her and she would sit with her coffee, and tell Jeff how she wanted letters answered, and he’d go on down to the secretaries and said, “Mrs. Eisenhower wants to tell these ….”

Jeff was like family with us. He drove for us, but he’d also get things ready for parties. He helped me with whatever came up. He was kind of a man for all seasons. One of the nights that Jeff was butlering a private party, I forget what the occasion was, but it was also during the World Series, and President Ford wanted to get away to go watch the game. Jeff looked in on him to see if there was anything he wanted before he left and the President said, “Yes, sit down and watch the game with me.” And Jeff said he felt kind of funny and tried to leave several times. The President would say, “Sit down, you’re finished,” he said, “Sit down and enjoy the game.” So Jeff stayed as long as he felt he could. But that was the way that they were with the staff.

I remember Mrs. Ford telling the seamstress how she wanted something fixed - she’d always remember, go back and check, and she’d say, “This is better than when it was new.” Mrs. Ford was that way about many of her personal things. I guess when you grow up without a lot of money, it’s very difficult to change. I know that from a personal background. You don’t all of a sudden start casting things aside because you’re the First Lady. She was quite frugal.

Smith: And clothes mattered to her, didn’t they?

Downs: Yes, very much so. One of the maids was an excellent seamstress and she would help her with things. But they just liked those people. I think someone told me that during the Nixon years the staff - I think it was Rex - that the staff had been told to be very low key and not to get into it too much with the family. It was just their way. It’s not to say it was right or wrong. The Fords were completely the opposite, they would talk with them and have them sit down. But it was this way with all the staff.
Mrs. Ford was her own chief of staff. She didn’t choose to have a chief of staff. So many times I would see staff go to her with personal problems and I just felt that we were here to serve her and besides she had enough on her plate, and here they are telling about this and the other. One time I made a very flippant remark to Mrs. Ford about it. I said, “We’re here to take care of you, it’s not supposed to be visa versa sometimes.” And she said, “Oh, Maria, there’s room and there’s time for everything.” That was from the very early days. But look what it led to, Richard, with the Betty Ford Center.

Smith: Well, that’s true. How did people in the White House first view the famous *Sixty Minutes* interview? The conventional narrative is that the political types are always fighting the last war – they saw the down side. They didn’t anticipate the polls coming in, or the second wave of mail as a lot of people found it very refreshing. What was your sense? Did she ever regret it?

Downs: She did so to me.

Smith: She did?

Downs: Yes. She didn’t make a big thing out of it, saying it was awful - but she said, “I really wish many times that I had not done that interview.” But she was put in a very awkward position by her press secretary. In those days, you could lay ground rules, particularly about a President and First Lady, with the press. And either they agree with you or you didn’t do the interview. I used to do that with Anne Armstrong during the Nixon administration. In those days some things were just off limits and if they wanted the interview badly enough, they would go along.

But you protected them, which wasn’t done in her case by her press secretary. But I think that Mrs. Ford being put in that position wouldn’t sit there and lie about it. It was a very natural thing for her to respond in the way she did. I think that she and the President felt that way, perhaps the people the President had around him saw the dark side of it more than the other. But it was bound to turn out well because she was very sincere in what she said, and very honest.
Smith: Well, in retrospect it became the personification of his attempt as President to clean the place up and restore trust and be candid with people. She had her own agenda of openness.

Downs: Yes, she did, very much so.

Smith: I assume she took some heat for it though, too.

Downs: It’s an unknown fact there that some of the people in the West Wing were a bit afraid of Mrs. Ford. And I saw that with respect. In one of the long interviews we had before she chose me, she went into depth about the West Wing and how we would work with them. She was very cognizant of the situation and how it had been under most administrations. She said, “I realize that you know all these people because you and Anne worked in the West Wing. And she asked questions like, “Could you go to bat against them?” And I thought isn’t that strange that she should focus so on the West Wing. She later said, “Well, I have to tell you the reason that I’m asking you all these questions is that during the time when I was without a social secretary, certain people felt that they should have control of the guest lists and moved very actively to gain it and had made inroads. And in my mind I could see what our State Dinners would turn into, Maria,” and she said, “They wouldn’t be what the President wants or I want. It’s very important to me that we continue to hold our own in that area.”

Smith: That’s fascinating.

Downs: She never told me who the players were. During one of the conventions and I suggested to Bill Timmons who was ____________ Mrs. Ford could and would help him. “Why don’t you just talk to Mrs. Ford about it? She likes you.” She did like Bill very much. And I said, “Just level with her and we’ll get it solved.” And he said, “Oh, no. Oh, no.” He wouldn’t touch it with ten foot pole. Several other people in the West Wing, high up in the administration, always kind of pussyfooted around up there. And that may be, it may just have been feeling that she is the First Lady.

Smith: The bosses’ wife.
Downs: Exactly.

Smith: But, also there were those unfortunate stories about how badly in some ways, Mrs. Nixon had been treated. And obviously that must have been out - it was known to people around and…

Downs: And Mrs. Ford was cognizant of Mrs. Nixon’s treatment. There was a couple of times I think she was talking about some of the State Department people, and she said, “They’re not going to lead me around like they did Pat.” So, that harkens back to the time when she was a congressional wife and the wives all talked about it.

Smith: Do you know about the Ford-Nixon relationship after August of ’74? - did she try to maintain any kind of friendship or relationship with Mrs. Nixon? Any kind of back and forth?

Downs: I don’t know. I imagine knowing Mrs. Ford, there probably was. But I just never heard of it – not that I didn’t think of it, but I just felt that was private.

Smith: We know that she and Mrs. Johnson were very good friends.

Downs: Very close friends. Yes. But it was just a bond, most of them do. Very few First Ladies don’t fall into that mold.

Smith: Was Mamie ever around the White House during the Ford years? She was around until ’79, and I think was in reasonably good health.

Downs: I don’t recall seeing her. Now the Eisenhowers were. The elder son, David, with Julie. But I think with the Nixons after he stepped down, it was just still too close and too raw.

Smith: Perfectly understandable. We also know that Mrs. Ford befriended Bess Truman.

Downs: Yes.

Smith: In fact, I believe they were told, I think Bess indicated that she was voting for President Ford in 1976.
Downs: There were buttons that we were given saying: Vote for Betty’s Husband for President. I remember her in the elevator one day when her polls were just skyrocketing, and his were down, her saying, “Oh, Maria, what I would give to change polls with Jerry.”

Smith: Were you at the convention?

Downs: Yes.

Smith: How bitter?

Downs: It was very bitter. It was a tug of war and the two ladies added to it immeasurably. But I think Mrs. Ford, she enjoyed the convention. I really do.

Smith: It’s easier to enjoy it if you’re winning.

Downs: If you’re winning and if you’ve got Cary Grant there.

Smith: Now tell me about that. Now where did that come from?

Downs: That was all her own doing. She never would say how that came about, but, oh how she loved it.

Smith: They became friends.

Downs: They became very good friends. I think probably what was underlying that too was that Cary Grant was going through a very difficult divorce. I believe he ended up with custody of their daughter in the divorce. It had to be a very bad situation. Next to Fred Astaire, I think Cary Grant was her biggest coup. And she did just enjoyed both.

Smith: She was friends with Fred Astaire, too?

Downs: Yes. I think she had the opportunity to become closer to Cary Grant.

Smith: Right. Do you think it had anything to do with her background as a dancer?

Downs: I think so.

Smith: Now, that leads to Vicki Carr. With whom she didn’t become friends.

Downs: You’ve forgotten about Tony Orlando.
Smith: Well, I’ll get to Tony Orlando. Tell us about Vicki Carr.

Downs: Fortunately, I wasn’t there that night. Well, I mean, the President is an all-American male.

Smith: He complimented her.

Downs: Yes.

Smith: And that was within earshot of Mrs. Ford? Or did it just get back to her? Because Vicki Carr was not invited back.

Downs: She probably would have been invited back, if they were in the White House longer.

Smith: And you mentioned Tony Orlando.

Downs: They both liked Tony. I don’t know whether it was the chemistry, and remember, he was flying very high at that time. He had his own TV show and he was just the epitome of whatever. And a very, very nice person. It’s just too bad about the narcotics – now people don’t think that much of it, but in those days it was a big deal. But they just hit it off. He came to me one day and he said, “You know, Maria, what I’d like to do and I don’t know if I’m speaking out of turn now or not, but you know, I can spend a couple of hours with the President and teach him how to use his body language so that he will come across in a different way. Not a better way, he comes across fine. He just needs some tricks like that.” I remember telling Mrs. Ford. But telling, “Tony, I don’t think that’s going to fly.” When I did go to Mrs. Ford and tell her about him. And she said, “Oh, Maria, he’d kill us both.”

Smith: She was perfectly satisfied with his body language.

Downs: Very much so. No problem there.

Smith: What do you remember about election night of ’76?

Downs: Not too much because I was not upstairs personal guests and I considered it personal. I tried to keep it as limited to the people they were told to be with.
They had their ideas who they wanted. I don’t think you saw much staff in the private quarters.

Smith: Before I forget, we’ve heard from a number of people that the mood of the place was different when Rumsfeld was in charge than when Cheney was in charge. Dorothy Dowton told us that Rumsfeld actually tried to get her fired - he had someone to replace her. It’s not so much people criticizing Rumsfeld, but contrasting what they think about Cheney and his current image.

Downs: Well, to go back to what you asked earlier, about having people in all positions of importance, then settling in and helping him get the job done. That was probably part of it, too. But apparently Don didn’t know the closeness to the president. But he [Cheney] was the youngest chief of staff ever, I guess at the time. And he was so accessible and so nice and so down to earth, I think that’s one of the – and I’m not speaking out of turn now about Dick, because that’s one of the very sad things about this past administration and how they martyred him. I mean, the man was trying to do what he was brought in there to do. It may be naïve, but I think – I just feel badly about the way most people consider Dick now. He was kind of the glue that held everybody together. And didn’t do it in a dictatorial was at all.

Smith: And we are told he didn’t have an agenda of his own. Wanted to make sure that different viewpoints were presented.

Downs: He was very, very above board with everything. I remember getting back a guest list – from the President and First Lady with names scratched off. But there was one in particular who was a very, very, heavyweight business type executive with a lot of support in the West Wing. I was surprised when the name was off, but I didn’t think anything of it.

But when the invitations went out, it was a different story. I remember Dick calling and saying, “You know, Maria, I know you’ve gotten quite a few calls about this. Fill me in on it.” So I told him exactly what happened, and he said, “Okay, let me talk to the President about it.” And that’s the only time he’s ever questioned me about the guest lists. It ended up the businessman was put back on the list but was never invited after that to another White House event.
When I thanked Dick for getting everybody off my neck and it was the first time I’d been through the experience, he said, “Look,” we had this conversation afterwards, “you did a good job. That’s what you were hired to do, and you were within your realm to question it and take him off.”

Smith: Were you surprised by the lengths some people would go to try to get into White House events?

Downs: It was awful. It really was terrible.

Smith: Were the Fords surprised?

Downs: No, Mrs. Ford wasn’t. Neither was the President. She called me just before she made the announcement of my appointment, and said I would be the first social secretary that was a commissioned person, a presidential appointment. I did not use the term “The Honorable Maria Downs” often. But that was, in essence, a way to bring the position up to the level that Mrs. Ford wanted the women in the Ford administration to be considered. The President probably knew more about the extent to which some people went to get on the guest list. As I said, he knew what was going on more than most people gave him credit for.

Smith: Two things and we’ll be done. One is this large issue which you just raised about the significance that Mrs. Ford attached to raising and expanding opportunities for women. Particularly in the administration.

Downs: Very important.

Smith: Did you talk about that?

Downs: Oh, yes, all the time. I was looking for an image for our website the other day and came across a picture of Mrs. Ford with the President in the Oval Office, signing the International Year of the Woman legislation that was enacted on his watch. And Pat Hutar was his representative to the U.N. and in charge of the conference that year. In addition to the ERA, there was a lot of other commissions and opportunities enacted during the Ford year.

Smith: Well, Title IX was enacted, I believe, on the Ford watch.
Downs: Yes, there were a lot of things other than legislation that helped, too. For example, we invited many women to the dinners and events at the White House. They were invited because of who they were and the positions they held, rather than their husband’s positions. I remember so clearly, Sally Quinn was still the terror of the Washington Post at that time, she called me shortly after I had taken office, and started asking questions about how did I put the guest lists together and how do we do the seating of a dinner. Well, I loved to do the seating because it was like musical chairs. My staff marveled when I did all the seating just prior to the dinner. I would close the doors and I had my charts and I would put different people together. I knew many of these people, and I would go the extra mile to make it interesting for them at the dinner. Make the tables such that the people would enjoy it and get to know new people. I had a little secret weapon. Whenever I had a difficult table, I would seat General Scowcroft right in the midst of all of the trouble.

Smith: Did he ever catch on?

Downs: Oh, yes. We had a couple of women at the dinner for the French president, that engaged in a battle royal. The jewels that the woman from Paris was wearing rivaled the Queen’s, quite honestly. The other woman was with somebody with Washington Post connections who called me wanting to know why her rival had been included in the guest list. Of course I wasn’t about to tell.

That night at the dinner, I seated General Scowcroft between, the Washington Post person and the bejeweled American from Paris and watched the sparks fly. The General came up after the dinner and he said, “Thanks, buddy.” Those were his only words. I said, “General, it was interesting, wasn’t it?” And he said, “Yes, it was. Very interesting.” “Well, she usually sits next to Dr. Kissinger,” I said.

Smith: We were talking to David Broder yesterday, who said that Mrs. Graham liked the Fords very much. There was apparently a real relationship there.
Downs: Yes, very much so. They were very above board with all of these people, even if they abhorred some of the things that were going on politically at the papers. That was just their nature.

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

Downs: Yes, very well. It was at the dinner that the Ford Foundation gave during their annual meeting. They would always invite their former senior staff. It was the last dinner that the President and Mrs. Ford attended. The President was half-seated and she was standing next to him. Anne Armstrong was at that dinner and Anne and I arrived together, waiting to be received. When he looked up and saw us his face lit up and he said, “There are my girls! There are my girls!” And he put his arms out and when we got close enough, he put his arms around both of us and it was very poignant. Very, very nice. And I think that dinner will always stay with me because it was the last time that they were together at a dinner like that.

Smith: They were probably aware that that might, in fact, be the last time.

Downs: Yes, probably so. It was a very special night.

Smith: I thought one of the most poignant things when he died; of course he insisted no caissons in the streets of Washington, and yet – I was up at the cathedral with ABC on the morning of the service so I didn’t get to ride with the family until later – but by all accounts, there were large crowds of people that turned out on the streets of Washington, even though there wasn’t a caisson to say goodbye.

Downs: Yes.

Smith: And I thought one of the most poignant moments involved the White House staff – in front of the White House – the domestic staff, which must have included some people who were there when they were there…

Downs: I’m sure there were still quite a few.

Smith: I mean, that was very, very touching.
Downs: That and the World War II Memorial stop. That just stays in your mind forever. That was just very special, too.

Smith: Were you surprised by the amount of public reaction? Because he’d been out of the public eye for quite a while. Yet it seemed to build as the week went by.

Downs: I think that the number of people who really didn’t know that much about him were finally realizing what he was, who he was, what he’d done. And I believe it was their way of showing their respect. I don’t think it was to be at a president’s farewell. I live near the Washington Cathedral – and I remember a lot of people just walking down the street towards the Cathedral at that time and waiting in front of the cathedral, just to see the family and to watch the President arrive. It wasn’t a media event. It was very solemn and very respectful for all these people.

Smith: And Mrs. Ford really did herself proud that week.

Downs: Yes. It was unbelievable how she held up through it all. The entire family was very special.

Smith: How do you think each one of them should be remembered?

Downs: We were very fortunate to have had those two very loving, decent people in the White House. And I think as the years go by the President’s legacy will speak for itself. Mrs. Ford is always going to be loved. There is just something about her that everybody – I have yet to meet a person when you mention Mrs. Ford, who just doesn’t have something positive to say about her. She is very beloved and that didn’t happen by accident. I think that inner beauty and goodness come though. People are not stupid, they can see through the façade that many people in public office put on. The Fords were different.

Smith: Someone said, maybe it was David Broder, because he’d known them in the congressional days and how much he went out of his way to emphasize how important she was to his success even then. He emphasized their partnership. I said, “What was it about her that connected?” Now this was long before they
were in the White House. And he mentioned two things, and one of them was: “Well, there was a hint of vulnerability about her which I think people responded to and almost wanted to protect her.”

Downs: Both of them continued to be friends through the years, even after the White House days. I still keep in touch with Mrs. Ford.

Smith: Clearly, they both had a relationship with the press that is virtually unique among modern presidents.

Downs: I think so. It’s telling - she just didn’t have contact with the press that much before she became First Lady. She participated in public events and all that. But it was a transformation in the White House. She just likes people, to begin with, so that was a good thing and it came through.

Smith: You can’t fake that.

Downs: No. And she had a genuine interest, it wasn’t like she turned it on and off.

Smith: Do you think she was proud of the role that she had played in alerting women to the dangers of breast cancer?

Downs: Oh, yes. Very much so although she rarely tooted her own horn. In a strange way, I think she took pride in everything she did as a First Lady. I believe she holds that in her heart as having succeeded in helping a lot of people in many ways.

Smith: Were you surprised by the intervention?

Downs: Very surprised. Maybe I lived in a sheltered world, but I just didn’t know about interventions. And so between that and not knowing her dependency had progressed to that level…yes, I was surprised. But we were talking about the press earlier – some of the press was just God-awful at that time. There’s a thing about the media – they are so competitive, obviously. And a few just thought they deserved – had the right to know she’d had this problem, and this coming out being sprung on them. Really hit a raw nerve. It was awful. Here everybody was concerned about her, and they were concerned about being scooped.
Smith: Here is a First Lady whose greatest historical impact may very well have been after she was First Lady. And who affected millions of people in ways that presidents don’t always manage to do.

Downs: Yes. That’s very true. As I said earlier about President Ford’s legacy – Mrs. Ford’s legacy will continue to speak for itself, and will be ongoing.

Smith: Perfect.
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It’s hard to know where to begin. Before we get into the chronology, tell us something about Gerald Ford that might surprise people.

Well, I think it’s probably not necessarily so surprising, but if you had the experience with him, things like humility and all those type of things based on encounters that I had with him on things really comes to be true. I’ve always said, and I don’t how many times he said it to me, he used this phrase, “What’s the fuss all about?” I think one time I kidded him - I said, “Would you like that on your epitaph?” because he cherished the office of the presidency. But because of the way it came to him, he never quite put himself of as elected president. And for that reason he was surprised, And I’ll give you a couple of examples.

When we had the first or second annual dinner, he was surprised that all the administration came back, and other people he’d asked. He said it to me. He got up and he got a little teary-eyed as we went up the elevator and saw everybody in the room. He said, “My gosh, I can’t believe it.” That was the first time I said to him out of many times, “Well, you have to remember you’re the 38th President of the United States and these are your best friends and they’re extremely loyal to you.”

To the point where we had the funeral here and it was an extension of it. He would have said, “What’s the fuss all about?” But this time the whole community came out and did the same thing as friends, for the same reason. He was the 38th President of the United States, and they had a sense of feelings about him, but he never showed it. He never was comfortable using the presidential seal or Hail to the Chief, or anything like that in his post presidency.
We were sitting here in his office and there are two presidential seals in here. One of them is on the door behind me, which I thought he was almost going to have us remove, which were part of the original museum. But the chair behind the desk is a great story of the man. He had this chair in his office out in California that you’d swear when he sat down, he was going to go right to the floor. The springs had to be broken, probably came out of Washington, one of those chairs – I don’t know. Jim Hackett, who was the head of Steelcase, saw it and said, “We’ve got to get him a chair.” So Jim called me and he said, “I just did a chair for the governor of Michigan with the State of Michigan seal on it, I’ll put the presidential seal on it.” I said, “Naw, you’ve got to let me call him, I’d hate to have you go through all that.”

So I called him. I said, “They’re going to build a beautiful chair,” and he said, “I really appreciate that.” I said, “Now, there’s one little thing. Discretely, there is going be the presidential seal.” He hesitated and he said, “Oh, I don’t think I can do that.” I said, “Well, let’s do it this way. Let’s have them make it. If it doesn’t work out for you, it would be something nice that could be utilized in the museum one way or the other.” He said, “Fine, okay go ahead.”

After the chair arrived a few weeks later, he calls and he says, “You know, I kind of like that chair with the seal on it, do you think they could do one for Colorado and Michigan?” But he was so hesitant and that sort of typifies what I found out about the man that was a confirmation, really. But not all people probably hear how humble he was and probably never had the opportunity to see that. That stands out to me.

The other thing is, as a part of the character, all the people that he’s met in his lifetime, and I was kind of with him twenty-one years. And out of the twenty-one years, how he just didn’t hold things against people. He would show his temper once in a while, but he had a couple of things he would say. He would say, “Now, Marty, that’s a bad guy.” That’s as far as he’d go, and it started with G. Gordon Liddy out in the museum. Every time he passed that picture he’d point at it, “Now, Marty, that’s a bad guy.” But he said that about some other people, some here in Grand Rapids. That’s as far as he’d go with that. He wouldn’t go any further.
Smith: You mentioned his temper because he famously, like Dwight Eisenhower, had a temper, particularly as a young man. One gets the impression he spent a lifetime pretty successfully controlling it.

Allen: But he still had it.

Smith: Yeah.

Allen: Probably never to the degree, but he did have a temper. You know the great story about how his mother controlled that by having him memorize the poem *If*. But I would encounter that in a couple different ways. I would encounter it in frustration, for example, not being able to use a telephone and that made him just go ballistic. He didn’t know how to place a telephone call. And if he had to, he couldn’t do it right, and he wouldn’t realize that he really had made a call and I was on the other end. So it was the little things. On the golf course, his competitive nature took over a little on occasions and he would get extremely angry. He was known on a few occasions to throw a golf club. I played golf with him – the last time I played golf with him, which was with Justice Stevens, and we played nine holes. He got in a sand trap once and all of a sudden the ball didn’t come out, but the club came out. So he controlled it to the extent that I’m sure a lot of things really irritated him more publicly, but he wouldn’t show it. But behind the scene, you could just see the sense of that…

Smith: That’s interesting, because two things I want to explore: one of the Stevens’ visit, and the other about the phone. There is this famous story about Ike the day he left office. In those days there was no Secret Service protection, so as a special courtesy, Kennedy had let these Secret Service agents drive them back to Gettysburg. He gets out of the car, he’s excited to be home, and runs into to the barn to see his cattle and then goes into the house and picks up the phone. Now he hasn’t made a phone call in twenty years. He waits for the operator and he hears this buzzing sound and says, “What in the hell is wrong with this?” Someone has to explain to him, “Mr. President, that’s…” So I’m wonder if part of it was: you get in this cocoon, almost unknowingly and - you’re right about the modesty - but you’re still in this cocoon. I wonder
whether part of it was technology had moved on and he just wasn’t part of that.

Allen: Oh, it was. There’s two great stories about technology, beyond the telephone, but not in our lives, it’s just a normal part of our lives. One of them was, the night before they were retiring his jersey at University of Michigan – his football jersey – the president of the university had a small dinner at his house, including Bo Schembechler and a few athletic people and the president of the university, who was an engineer, and got into his wine a little bit too much and at the end he stood up and gave a little dissertation about the technology in his office and how he could communicate with various parts of the campus offices. Whatever he wanted, he could do through technology – videos and a variety of things. He got up and I was looking down the table and I saw Schembechler was practically asleep and President Ford was looking at his watch.

The next thing I knew the president of the university said, “Now, Mr. President, tell me about the technology in your office.” He said, “Well, I use a legal pad and a pen. And I think Betty and I have to go home now.” The rest of them were just totally trying to control themselves. It sobered up the university’s president quite quickly.

The other classic was with his great assistant, Penny Circle. He did an interview with students via internet. They would ask the questions and he started answering them like they were there. He was animated; he was faster than poor Penny could type the answers back to them. He didn’t quite get it that they weren’t getting it directly. The technology had completely passed him by.

Smith: Is it true, I think Penny told me, I guess he taught himself, or she taught him, to play solitaire on the computer.

Allen: Yes. I think that’s true. I heard the same story. That was about all he could do on it was play solitaire on it. So he did have technology pass him by. I’m sure some people would say it shows a lack of intelligence, but it wasn’t. He did live in a cocoon – in the biggest cocoon in the world. It has to be hard, at
times, to operate in a vacuum, and therefore he had great reliance on people. More than most would.

Kissinger told me once, he said, he didn’t worry about how bright his Cabinet was or his vice president because he wanted to learn and listen to them very carefully. Not all people are that way. So he at least broke through to the point where at that level he had some people that he really did trust. The last time I was with Paul O’Neill, Paul was telling me that last time they did the budget – and Paul knew it inside and out – but he knew the president knew it inside and out, they had a public press conference on it. He said President Ford asked him a question and Paul said he [Ford] knew the answer to the question he asked, but as a courtesy to one of the senior staff people, he wanted them to feel he was a part of it. An amazing story.

Smith: The courtesy aspect – when Rockefeller had come up with this Energy Independence Corporation and Bill Simon, very literal, incredibly bright, but without all the people skills or the diplomacy that you’d associate with a real pol. There was a very heated debate in the Cabinet. It got fairly nasty and Simon could be cutting. He said something to the effect that, Mr. President, don’t let him do to the country what he did to New York. Before the meeting ended – it was very clear, there was virtual unanimity opposing this idea – but the president made it clear that he was going to support it. Simon, of course, wouldn’t let it drop, so he got the president, waylaid him, because Simon goes back over all the intellectual arguments. And Ford said, “Bill, I know, I know, but look, you and I both know Congress is never going to enact this, and I’m not going to embarrass Nelson.”

Allen: Not going to offend him, no. You know what’s funny about that story, and this is on such a much smaller scale. The first time I chaired the Foundation, I think the Foundation became for him just a little bit of the presidency on a far lesser scale, but it had the same sense, because a lot of the same people were involved, a lot of the Cabinet. One of the first meetings I was conducting, Bill Simon – we were on investments – made some very profound statements on how terrible our investments were and if he were on it we’d get sixteen percent. Well, then Bill Seidman got into it, and Paul O’Neill and Frank Zarb, and they were having a debate at the board meeting. I leaned over to the
president and I asked, “Should I break this up.” He said, “No, don’t break it up. This is just like the Cabinet. We would have these intellectual arguments, but by the time they were finished, they realized they’d used up their ego, and they were all in agreement with each other, and it was a done thing. I’d listened and accepted it and that’s the way they operate.”

Smith: In many ways, shrewd, generous, and easily overlooked by the public. It’s not the stuff of swashbuckling, presidential leadership. It is a very congressional kind of insight.

Allen: Yeah, it was really his congressional experience that came out so much in that. I agree.

Smith: You mentioned Justice Stevens, and I’d love to talk about that because I know, obviously that was part of that twenty-fifth anniversary lecture series that we did, and it was remarkable that the president would come all the way from California, basically to introduce Justice Stevens. I remember asking him, you may very well have been present, when the last time was that he saw the justice or talked to him or had any contact with him. He said, “When I appointed him.”

Justice Stevens is considerably to the left in terms of his jurisprudence, and yet there was a real, not only bond, but one sensed a real pride on the part of the president. It may have been the last time a Supreme Court nominee was chosen with almost no regard for ideology, for simple intellectual brilliance. I assume that was similar to the Levy nomination - trying to restore faith in the judicial system. And you wonder if it had been a different political culture whether Ford would have had more latitude to go in pursuit of a more conservative – who knows?

Allen: The only comment that he ever made to me on that subject, and we didn’t talk a lot of politics, he did because we were going to play golf and he did it with a smile on his face, which was a little unusual. He smiles, “Well, you know, he didn’t come out quite the way I expected him to, but I really liked my choice.” Some people would be angered by it, or defensive about it. But he wasn’t, he just said, “He’s a great justice.” That’s all, that’s the way he operated. So we
went out and played golf and they were like old friends for nine holes. They just had a marvelous time together, the two of them did.

Smith: What did they talk about?

Allen: They were in one golf cart, I was with Dick Ford in the other, so I didn’t hear a lot, but I could tell they were very animated, very talkative and enjoying themselves. It was kind of quick and over with, so I didn’t have a chance to really…

Smith: Remember, I think the purpose of that was Justice Stevens had always wanted to play?

Allen: He did, you are absolutely right. He always wanted to play golf with him. He had the opportunity and the president, obviously, was just delighted to do it. He used sports an awful lot to his good. He liked to do that. He got people very comfortable with him that way. But that was a nice session with Justice Stevens. I didn’t hear that much of the conversation, but he did say to me, made that statement that didn’t quite, maybe come out the way exactly he thought, but he was a great justice.

Smith: He made a lot appointments that people have forgotten today, but that were prestigious choices. I remember him saying once about Dan Borstein, Daniel Borstein, very distinguished historian, named him librarian of Congress… “That was one of the best appointments I ever made.” You look at some of the people that Ford appointed, and he obviously was very proud of the quality.

Allen: He was. He was really proud of his appointments. I go back to Kissinger again. Kissinger told me, he said, he just surrounded himself with such good people and it didn’t make any difference to him whether they might upstage him with their egos and everything – he just picked the right people. He did enjoy it. I think Roger Porter wrote one of the best articles about that Cabinet and some of the senior people. You see where those people have gone and where they are and how history has looked at them – they were all really great choices. There was a couple of them he had to remove, but other than that he
stayed with those people and it would have been amazing to see how that Cabinet would have operated for another four years.

Smith: Did you ever hear him talk about Jim Schlesinger?

Allen: Never did. Never did hear him talk Schlesinger, and I knew the circumstances, but he never said anything about it.

Smith: Let’s go back to the beginning. Fill us in on how you became acquainted, what you were doing at the time?

Allen: It’s a question that’s asked of me all the time because I sort of, particularly with the funeral, got an awful lot of visibility. And people just are curious. I have to say, I was a typical Grand Rapids person as it relates to Gerald R. Ford. He was the ultimate congressman, knew his district well, was in his district a lot, did more things than more congressman do, including the annual Red Cedar Flannel Parade which he was in, or the Hollyhock July 4th little parade in an alley over in the south side of town. So everybody got to know him and so people weren’t name dropping later on when he became president. They’d say, “Did you know him?” and everybody said, “Yeah, I knew him,” and they did know.

They knew him because he was around, and that’s how I knew him. I knew him because of the activities that were going around the community. I was with a bank that was very active in the community, I got to know him that way. I got to know him a little bit more for a short period of time because he asked to become a director of Old Kent Bank. Now the reasoning behind that in his mind was that was the largest bank in town. Most of the directors of that bank were leaders in the community. He felt once a month it would be a good thing for him to be on it. Well, he lasted about a month. A congressman from Texas – Gonzalez would it be?

Smith: Henry Gonzalez.

Allen: He must have been turned down for a loan at a bank some time in his life. Because he was literally almost waiting for Ford to get back to Washington when he had been elected as a director of Old Kent Bank, and told him, “If you don’t get off that board, you’re going to have real difficulty getting
passage of some things you like.” Jerry Ford said, “Gee, that’s why I did it.” That didn’t do any good, he said he just weighed the two and said I’ve got to get off the board.

Smith: This is speculative. Do you think in the back of his mind, presumably even then, he assumed that when his career in Congress was over, he was going to come back here and practice law? And presumably, it would be a very useful thing to have been on the board.

Allen: It would be. I think, though, his motive primarily was to learn about his district from a business standpoint. But there’s no question that these are people who really did know him at the time. Knew him better, probably, than I did. What happened after that is, I would run into him, we were on a first-name basis. That was it. But that was true of almost anybody in the community that was active.

But when I got appointed, I should get the letter out and the date – I got appointed to something called the National Alliance of Businesses. I think it was created by Nixon and it was in August and it had to be awfully close to the time that he resigned that I got this appointment, or whatever you call it, a commission or whatever. And then all of a sudden within days he was no longer the president and this National Alliance of Businesses continued and the next time I was there was in the White House when Ford was president and we were in the state dining room, just for a reception. I looked around and there were heads of industry and everything I could recognize from the automotive – I was sort of standing off, I didn’t really know anybody, so I was standing off to the side.

All of a sudden he walked in the room and he didn’t go to a mic or anything, he just was kind of talking and looking around, all of a sudden his voice booms out and he says, “Where’s Marty Allen?” Everybody was like, who’s Marty Allen? He said, “He’s one of my constituents in Grand Rapids. I want him to come up here and have a martini with me.” You know, that was just typical of him. From that point, then nothing happened until he lost the election. I was with him election day when the mural at the airport was dedicated, when he broke down a little bit about his parents and I remember
leaning over to a friend of mine and said, “It’s just too bad that that didn’t happen sooner.”

I was later to find out, because his staff would not allow them to put anything about his mother and father in because they knew he would get emotional. I walked out, I was responsible as the greeting party and the exit party, so I walked out to Air Force One with him and the best picture I’ve got, the one I treasure the most, is standing with him, shaking his hands as he going to get on Air Force One and head back to Washington. He looked at me, and he was quite hoarse at that time, he said, “Marty, I’ve done everything I can. I did it the best I could.” I almost felt he was giving me a message that down deep he might have known how close it might have been. But then, to kind of catch it up…

Smith: By the way, wasn’t there an event out in front of the Pantland as well?

Allen: There was. There was a big rally, a big outdoor rally. I was in the distance, but I was there. It was a big outdoor, typical old-fashioned rally that took place that night. It was really, again, Grand Rapids responding to their favorite son and their favorite son at the airport, kind of the way they knew him. They knew he had a sensitivity about his mother and father and how important that was to him. Unfortunately, it was all just within twenty-four hours of the loss of the election.

Smith: Let me diverge. Did you know his parents?

Allen: I did not. Never met his parents at all. I got to start knowing his brothers because I played golf with Dick and Jim, and I knew Tom because he was in the Michigan legislature – so I knew them pretty well. Never met the parents.

Smith: Tom was in the legislature?

Allen: Yes, he was.

Smith: So there was more than one politician in the family?

Allen: There was more than one politician. Tom was a politician. He passed away. He was very active in the legislature here in Michigan.
Smith: How would you characterize the brothers?

Allen: A great deal of similarity to President Ford. Not overbearing, not outlandish, not standoutish in a crowd type people. When he became president, that’s the way they preferred it. They stayed in the background as opposed to some other presidents who had problems – they were always in the background. So they had a lot of the same tendencies. You could tell they were brought up pretty much the same by their parents. But I never had the pleasure to meet the parents. I certainly heard many stories from him and from the brothers about their parents and how much they treasured them.

Smith: I feel like I know more about his mother than I do about his father in some ways, and yet he’s been quoted as saying - the president said - that he thought the person who was the biggest influence in his life was his stepfather.

Allen: Yeah, I think he was. I think when you go back in history and the Depression and even before that, I think he was highly influenced and respected him so much. I’ve sat in this office so many times with him and watched him look over at the picture of his parents and he never talked about referred to him as his stepfather, he always talked about him as his father. That was his father, that’s the way felt about it and that’s the way it was. You could tell he had tremendous respect for him. He must have been quite a man, the way he handled the Depression – putting personal things aside to keep his business going. It’s kind of like President Ford, take care of the country before I take care of myself. The type of thing that he must have learned at an early age.

Let me just go back to when I did meet him. When they started the museum plan, I was not part of the planning committee.

Smith: So, he comes out of office – were there people here in town miffed or surprised, or whatever, that they decided to go to Rancho Mirage?

Allen: Yeah, there was a lot of that. There was a lot of misunderstanding and I think there is still some of it – not nearly – I think the funeral probably took care of it. But over a period of time, there’s just no question about it. There were letters to the editor and various things, that he gave up his hometown, which
he didn’t, but they thought he had. There were good reasons he went out
there, and a lot of it had to do with Mrs. Ford’s health.

Smith: And one senses that decision was not made on the spur of the moment.

Allen: No, because they had planned to come back to Grand Rapids, that was their
original plan, and it got changed during the course of events. A lot of people
just didn’t accept whatever the reason was – they just didn’t want to listen to
it. They just said, “Hey, he abandoned us to be with other kinds of people,
other than Grand Rapids.” Well, he didn’t ever fuss about that. I don’t know
that he was ever offended by that, but he just kept coming home. And he kept
calling it home. That’s all he could do.

Smith: There’s a story, it’s in this issue of Grand Rapids Press, where I think Maury
DeJonge is the source. He was out there visiting him. It was almost sunset; the
sun was setting over the mountains, and they came off the golf course or
something and the president just said, “Now do you see why we decided to
live out here?” If anyone had that experience, then they would understand.

Allen: Really it was the right environment for him at that time. But you are
absolutely right, there was a lot of discontent about the fact that he had gone
from here.

Smith: Did that affect the decision about putting a museum here? Was there ever any
debate about a single facility? Was it a fete accompli that the library was
going to be in Ann Arbor because he’d been sending papers there? And the
whole decision of where to put the museum in the context of revitalization
and so on.

Allen: As to the split, the museum and library being split geographically, there was a
meeting in Ann Arbor at the president of the university’s house and he and a
couple of the senior vice presidents from the university were to meet with Bob
Barrett, who was his military aide that had come in and was his chief of staff
here. Bill Seidman was supposed to be there to represent the Grand Rapids
side. I got a call from Bill Seidman in desperation. He missed a flight or
couldn’t get out, asked me if I’d get in the car and drive to Ann Arbor and just
represent. I’d no background on what had transpired, so I went into this
meeting and it was very clear to me, despite some things that have been written since by the university, it was very clear to me that it was the wish, which is almost understandable, that the University of Michigan have both the library and museum as one unit.

I spoke, I don’t think eloquently, but I just spoke to the fact that I knew that there was a great deal of interest in Grand Rapids, his home, to have his museum here, if not his library, but at least the museum. President Ford seemed, as I was watching him, he seemed to be nodding his approval and the meeting was over. And the next thing I knew that decision had been made to split them. Now, I’m not saying that because I presented something. I just think that he was torn. He had two great loves here. He had hometown and he had his university, and he saw it as the absolute best solution.

Years went by and we would bring the same subject up again over time, and he’d look at me and said, “Marty, at the time, we made the right decision.” I said, “I’m not questioning that, but times have changed, and I don’t know that you’d make that same decision now.” He never responded. So it happened and it happened, probably, so easily, I can just visualize him after that meeting saying, “Hey, here’s the solution. We’re going to have the museum in Grand Rapids, we’ll have the library….

Smith: Isn’t that exactly what a congressman would do?

Allen: Absolutely.

Smith: Solomon, you split the baby and come up with a perfect straddle. You resolve the problem without contemplating what the needs might be twenty years from now.

Allen: He was a decisive man. He was a great listener on a variety of subjects and he would, at the conclusion, have a very comfortable time making a decision.

Smith: He’s been quoted as say, “Raising the money was the toughest thing.” In fact, I think it is one of the things that brought he and Jimmy Carter together, because they were both presidents who were not re-elected, who suddenly found themselves saddled with an obligation to raise millions of dollars to build a library. People talk about all the perks of the ex-presidency, and no
one focuses on the fact that the first thing they have to do, whether they want to or not, is to raise all this money. And I think then, even more than now, it was not something you thought about. First of all, you didn’t think you were going to lose. No one wanted to contemplate that, and I’m sure, given his frugality, and given what he was accustomed to spending in campaigns, when someone came to him and said we need nine million dollars or twelve million dollars to build this facility, it must have been an absolute shock.

Allen: To him, it was. He wasn’t quite used to have that kind of money spent on him per se. Dick Ford can really fill you in on an awful lot of the story. But there was a very wealthy man from the east that was sort of head of the fundraising, who apparently did nothing. It was the local people here and the people at the university that, together, really did put that together. Some of it was foreign money, too. There was some money from Taiwan and other places that were fairly significant - that were, in a sense, probably as far as he would ever go to use his self.

You think back, he had time after he lost the election. It wasn’t the best of times, but he still had time to utilize the resources he had, but he’d never do that. LBJ, on the other hand, although he’d resigned, or said he wasn’t going to run again, they told me the next day, he was raising money from the White House. Well, Ford would have never done that. But he was always surprised at the magnitude of money. He never personally had money, he knew how to appropriate money if he had it, he did that in Congress, he did that well. But he never really had to raise money. His campaigns here for Congress were minimal.

He always told me about how little they’d raise and how little staff he had and all that. It was a shock to him, but went really well. I think Dick Ford can fill you in. He was really close to the local head, which was Carl Morgenstern, who has passed away, who really did raise the money. He coordinated with the University of Michigan. Michigan was the accounting side of all the funds, but it was smoother than he even thought. His thoughts were, “My gosh, this is a lot of money

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When I did get involved with them it was just on the dedication event. Not the planning of the building, but the dedication. We were in this office, he had an alphabetic list that he brought with him of who he wanted to invite. The first name, I still remember, is Carl Albert, alphabetically, the first person on the list. We sat here, this committee, and he said, “Now I want to explain to you, there are people on there that will not come, but I owe them an invitation,” and Carl Albert was the first on the list.

When the invitations were out, he said Carl’s not well. When invitations went out, the first call (they just had to send a card back), but a telephone call came from Carl Albert. He said, “I have already had a plane provided to me, I will be there.” And that whole thing mushroomed from that. This small list that he had just kept growing and growing. But again, he never saw the magnitude of his impact. He never understood the magnitude of dollars, but because of his appropriations, [committee experience] when I was running the foundation, John Baab and I would, as soon as he would get the statement, he could go through that thing like – he could understand the utilization. So, big money, lots of people, it’s back to that phrase, “What’s the fuss all about?” He never comprehended what the fuss was really about.

Smith: Tell me about his frugality.

Allen: Well, he was pretty tight. I experienced it directly. He and I had an annual bet on the Notre Dame–Michigan football game, and he would initiate the call to me. I just knew it was going to come the week before the game and he would say, “We’ve got to make a bet on game.” I said, “Yeah, we do.” It used to be rather simple, we’d just bet the game. But then it got more complicated because he wasn’t, at that time, winning very many bets. So he upped the ante a little bit. For a gambler, absolutely the wrong thing to do is double your bet. But he thought maybe he could make up what he’d lost and then he decided that we had to look at the odds and we would discuss that. And it wasn’t just one conversation, this would take two or three conversations. We’d finally make the bet. If he lost, I didn’t see my money very fast, so I would write him a letter and said, “I think it probably slipped your mind, but you owe me ten dollars.” And then it would finally come.
There were a couple of other bets he’d make – one was with Max Fisher for the Ohio State game and one was with Pete Secchia for the Michigan State game. Those were the three games he’d bet on, and they all experienced quite the same thing. So we had to remind him of it. It got to the point where when he would win, and I wouldn’t send the money, he’d call me and say, “You know, I haven’t gotten the money.” And I’d say, “I’ll tell you what, I decided to take the ten dollars and put it in the church basket in your name.” He said, “Send me the money.” And then one time I had to tell him, “Listen, you know, we’re doing this betting over – you’ve probably got a government phone – I’ve got a government phone here – and we’re betting over the public lines, I don’t know that I’d want to pay you off.” And he said, “Send me the money.”

When he would play golf, and Dick probably could share golf stories, but he was known not to be able to pay his bets off quite as quickly as he should, and he never carried any money with him. That was another part of his cocoon. What would he ever carry money for? He just wouldn’t do it. I played golf with him, he and two of his really good friends out in Palm Springs once, and they were awfully nice guys. Obviously, very wealthy, just delightful people, and I asked President Ford a question, we were waiting to tee off on a hole, and I said, I’d heard about a club in Palm Springs which they said was the most expensive club in the country or something. I mentioned it to him and I said, “How much would it cost to become a member of that club?” He looked at me quite quizzically and the other two started laughing. They said, why would you ask him that question? I said, I just figured – they said, he has no comprehension of the cost of being a member of any club, any place in the United States, because as far as he’s concerned, he’s a member of them all. It’s free. So there’s a lot of stories. He was pretty frugal.

Smith: Do you think that was the product of his upbringing and what he went through to go to college, which people don’t realize?

Allen: Oh, yeah, I don’t think there is any question. Plus the Depression, the combination. But what he had to do at the University of Michigan to get
through college, to do dishes in sororities or fraternities, wherever he did it, but he just…

Smith: Sell blood.

Allen: Yeah, and I bet he hitchhiked back and forth a little bit from Grand Rapids here. There was a train that went by because he told me he’d take the train once in a while. But he didn’t have any money at that time at all. If you really think about his life, and the time he was living, the things he appreciated most was his family and sports. It was almost like his reward because he didn’t have any money. The day his father, his real father, arrived in Grand Rapids, he was working in a restaurant. Here was a high school kid working in a restaurant. So he goes through that stage of his life. He didn’t make a lot of money in those days as a congressman, and he was going to come out of that with a nice pension, but he had to go back to work. We used to kid him a little bit that he then ended up with a congressional pension of the vice president, president, and military, which added up. But he’d just smile at that.

Smith: That raises a delicate subject, but it’s an important subject. He took some heat, particularly in those early days after leaving the White House, for “commercializing” the office. Now, it was going to happen. The reason Nixon didn’t take speaking fees was because Nixon was in the business of rehabilitating himself and he wasn’t giving many speeches. I always say, we have this civic religion in this country, we like to think that the office makes the man and people go into the presidency a mere human being and they inevitably grow and they become this kind of icon. The fact of the matter is, they come out pretty much what they were when they went in. You can predict what kind of ex-president they are going to be.

You knew that Richard Nixon, as long as he drew breath, was going to be rehabilitating himself – whatever that took. You could have predicted Jimmy Carter would spend the rest of his life pursuing humanitarian and other causes that were important to him. And you knew that Gerald Ford would go to chicken dinners and speak for Republican candidates, the things he loved to do, and play golf when he could, and so on. But he did take some heat for it.
Did he ever talk about it? Do you think there was ever any - I don’t want to say guilt - because he could be stubborn?

Allen: He could be very stubborn. I remember having a couple of discussions with him about it when a lot of that was going on and he seemed to be very comfortable with the decision. He used to say that he never had the opportunity to do for his family what he might have done, and a lot of that was family-oriented. He said he wanted to put himself in a position to help other people and he was very generous with charities and various things.

So I think he looked at it as an opportunity, not to take care of himself so much, as the family and other things that he might be able to do and he did them well.

Smith: Plus, isn’t it also true that he was one of, if not the biggest single donor to the Foundation?

Allen: He was. After he passed away there was a large amount that came our way that way, and there is still probably more to come later on. So he was very generous with his money, very generous with his time. He was funny about it. He kept raising money, also, for the Foundation. When he would do these things, sometimes he would speak, he would send part of his money. But he always used to tell me that we couldn’t cross the Mississippi, that Mrs. Ford – that was her side of the Mississippi to raise money for the Betty Ford Center, which he was so proud of. The other side was ours, so we had to be real careful about where we raised money. I can see why people are that way, I guess, but knowing him, I don’t think he was looking for a lot of personal things for himself.

He lived a very good life. He had beautiful homes with help from Leonard Firestone. He lived a very nice life, which he enjoyed. But I still think his motivation was primarily to take good care of his family – that he didn’t think he could do based on what he had.

Smith: Now I think there would be much less criticism. He took the brunt because, in some ways, he was the first.

Allen: He was.
Smith: That said, I don’t think even then people would have criticized speaking fees, per se. I think there were a couple of things, and again my sense is, and we can always edit this out if you want, but that Bob Barrett, as his first chief of staff, was on the lookout for commercial ventures. And it was some of those. I think there was a hook up with the Franklin Mint, or something – there were a couple of those things that were very easy to go after and that was…

Allen: Yeah, and I’m sure there were certain things that he did like the Franklin Mint and a few others that, in retrospect, he might have not done, that he didn’t, at the time, see that as a wrong thing. He was being given advice, which he accepted, and did it. But I’m sure there are a few of those things that he wouldn’t have done over again.

Smith: I also wonder how much of that - at that point, because that’s ’77, ’78, ’79, against the background of, “Gee, I’ve got to raise ten millions dollars to build this museum.” How much of that is factored into it?

Allen: I think that was part of it, but I don’t really know because I didn’t have an awful lot of conversations. I really just had the feeling that it wasn’t so much he knew that he was a different person than he was before in terms of where he was as a former president, versus a former congressman. He just saw it as an opportunity without offending anybody – he didn’t think he was going to offend anybody – that he had some goals in mind that he wanted to take of. Whether it was money for the museum, his family, or some other things he wanted to do. He was very generous. He did it in other ways – he did it with his golf tournament in Vail, and all the money that was raised out of that went to the Vail Valley Foundation. So he did a lot of those kind of things.

Smith: One thing that people don’t realize is the extent to which he spoke on college campuses. Usually for free. He would go into classrooms, talking to and listening to kids.

Allen: If you look historically, he had really a great interest in the youth. When he built this museum, when he said he didn’t want it to be a memorial. When he talked about a growing history – he was really talking about the young people. I’m always impressed by the fact that Father Hesburgh, who was then president of Notre Dame - there had not been a sitting president that went to a
college campus since the Vietnam war. They didn’t want to go on campuses. Father Hesburgh called President Ford to come on campus, And it still was an issue. He didn’t hesitate. He said, “When do you want me there? I’ll be there.” Father Hesburgh was surprised and knew that at Notre Dame or any other place, the students were going to probably take exception.

But he came and he did his thing and he enjoyed that – he enjoyed talking to students. He was always disturbed, I think, about things like Oliver Stone providing education his way and not the right way. I went back and read as many of his speeches to colleges, whether it be commencement addresses or other. And they are fascinating to read. You could really sense that he really had his heart into talking to those students, and he just enjoyed it.

Smith: Let me go back to the Hesburgh relationship. Was this after Hesburgh had agreed to be on the — the clemency board? Because that was pretty early in the administration.

Allen: Yes. I think that it was. In fact, Father Hesburgh is somebody you should talk to. He talks a lot about the amnesty, the pardon, about the courage of Ford. He always was very impressed, but he was most impressed with the fact that he came back, he was the first president to come back to a college campus, after Vietnam regardless of where it was.

Smith: Had they had any relationship before he went on the clemency board?

Allen: I don’t know whether he had any in the civil rights issues or not when Nixon appointed him to the civil rights [commission], and eventually fired him from that commission. I don’t know. I don’t think so. That was probably the first time they had any kind of — he certainly didn’t as a congressman, I know that. But they did afterwards and it was an interesting experience to be with the two of them, which I had the privilege to do that one time here at a small dinner. Father Hesburgh would get up and give this five minute dissertation on President Ford in such a way that I looked over to President Ford and he was a bit teary eyed at that, too.

If you remember when Billy Graham came here, we had Father Hesburgh on video here because of his feelings. He just had a liking for students. I would
often call him after different groups had been into the museum and he was always fascinated, but he was always most interested in school children and up through college. That age group. If you look at the amnesty, his comment after the amnesty was that these were young people and they had to pay a little bit, but they needed to be brought back, because they had value. That’s the way he saw it. That was a terrible political decision, but it was absolutely a great decision and he based it on the fact that they were young people that had made a mistake, that they had a right to come back.

Smith: You almost wonder, how much of that was grounded in his own upbringing – going back to the Ford household and the rules and the values.

Allen: Forgiveness, a lot of things, I’m sure.

Smith: But you pay a price, you’re forgiven, you move on.

Allen: You pay a price. I agree. There is so much that goes back to his childhood. It’s just amazing. This little prayer that we have from the Proverbs out on the burial site, he learned that on his mother’s knee. He used that the night that he met his real father and he cried himself to sleep with that. When he was going over the side of the Monterey, in a typhoon he said that prayer, the night before he became president. That all goes back to this mother and father who must have been absolutely marvelous with those kids.

When the real relationship started I was named the trustee of the Foundation, but five years later, I get a telephone call from President Ford. Bob Griffin, Senator Griffin, was the chairman and President Ford called me and asked me if I’d be chairman and I hesitated for a minute and I said, “Now, I have to remind you of something.” He said, “Yes, what’s that?” I said, “Well, I did my undergraduate work at Notre Dame, did my graduate work at Michigan State, and I’m replacing a University of Michigan man and I don’t know how that’s going be perceived.” And just like that, he said to me, “I knew all that. But I also knew you got wiser in life and married Sue, who was a University of Michigan graduate.” And that, I think, was the beginning of a long, personal relationship that I had with him.
Smith: That’s a great place to break because there are a couple of big things I want to get into.

Smith: Let me ask you a large question about Ford and religion. Some people have asked me, was the president religious? My sense is that it was something very important to both of them, but there was a kind of Midwest reticence that characterizes them in a lot of ways. They weren’t about to parade it, much less risk even appearing to exploit it.

Allen: I have to tell you, as well as I knew him, I was surprised. I really didn’t become aware of how really deep their religion was until they got into the tail end of the funeral planning, not even the front end. The front end was a lot of military, and, as you and I know, we went and talked more about the “coming home” aspect of it. I was really surprised how deep their religion was. He certainly didn’t wear it on his sleeve. In private conversations with him he said all the right things that might have been relative to religion, but he never talked about his religion.

Then come to find out how deep it really was, even now more associated with some of the children, one gets the sense that there was so much of it there. Just like the proverbs that I mentioned in some of the parts of the funeral that were used. But, boy, you go back and read and study and there was one commencement that he did, I think, for Mike when he was practicing to become a minister. There was some really strong religious tones in that, that I just couldn’t find in any personal things that I had with him, or things he wrote or he said. But later it became very obvious he was very deeply religious. I didn’t realize it. It was a surprise to me.

Smith: What are your memories about the Billy Graham visit?

Allen: I was trying to remember a couple of years ago when I was thinking of Father Hesburgh, and I always sort of had this feeling. I really, really respect Billy Graham, but I really had this feeling with presidents, he sort of became the presidential chaplain, if you will. So I didn’t see, in my mind, anything distinguishing again about Billy Graham being here for that. I really didn’t. I thought he had this relationship with him. But I just never saw evidence of it. He lived a life that was exemplary, but not necessarily showed the religious
side of him. I don’t remember, it might very well be that he didn’t like to be
away on weekends, but I don’t remember being in Grand Rapids on a Sunday
and going to church – I don’t know how much he went to church at Grace
Episcopal when he was growing up – I just don’t know.

Smith: It’s interesting because I sense on the one hand a kind of live and let live
attitude. When you get him talking about Congress in the old days, it was very
clear there was a certain amount of misbehavior going on. There was a lot of
drinking going on. There was more than a little womanizing going on. And
you have this sense that Ford had kind of chuckled at the frailties of his fellow
men. But at the same time, he’d never preach. It goes back again to this
Midwestern, and that generation, too. It found expression in his politics – the
fact that he was conservative. He was an economic conservative, he was in the
traditional sense, a social conservative in that there were things that were
personal, that were intimate, that were left to the individual, that were not part
of the political process and certainly not something for government to
intervene on. And his career straddles this period when all that changed.

Allen: I think you’re right. He just lived this exemplary life that, however he was
brought up, he would look at those misdoings of different people and didn’t
accept them - to the point that he wouldn’t feel that he had to call them the
bad guys and him the good guy - but that he would continue to live his life.
But he liked to observe all that, and he didn’t like what he saw, but he liked to
observe. It’s not that he was the gossipy type, but that he kind of liked to
know what was going on. And yet, he just wouldn’t become part of it. Those
guys would go out to have a drink practically every day after they were in
Congress – Democrats and Republicans together – and he would be a party to
that, he went out with them. But I doubt that he ever came home late, or…

Smith: A lot of this, in my observation, was evident in his attitude about Clinton.

Allen: Yeah.

Smith: Which was a complicated…

Allen: Yeah, that’s the first time he really kind of openly came out, and I guess he
didn’t directly say anything about the kinds of things he was doing, but he just
felt that in that office he had to pay the price and he felt obligated to do that. In conversations I had with him, the only thing he would say to me about Clinton was, “You know, since Truman, when I became active in Washington, I’ve never seen anybody that can communicate like Bill Clinton. And he can do it regardless of who the audience is. But his management style in his management of his life was very, very poor.”

The other thing he told me was that when he had dinner with Hillary and Bill Clinton out in Colorado, he said, “I couldn’t believe how smart she was. She is one smart person.” So I don’t know whether he was meaning like Bill might not have been as smart, but he had all that street knowledge that he needed. But he was intrigued with them. When they went out and played golf with Jack Nicklaus in Colorado, in a sense Bill Clinton cheated at golf. He [Ford] was just beyond himself, as was Jack Nicklaus, to the point that they didn’t want to play with him anymore. The guy was cheating, and cheating to him was not a good thing.

Smith: Did he talk about Nixon?

Allen: Never heard him talk about Nixon at all – other than the only thing I ever did was, he and Betty both talked about their close, personal relationship with him and what a disaster it was that happened. That’s the only thing he ever talked to me about as far as Nixon.

Smith: We were talking about his judgment about people. Obviously anyone in that position is going to have a lot of friends and a lot of would-be friends, and some people with mixed motives. Let’s face it, it just goes with the territory. Celebrity-hood. How did he cope with that?

Allen: I know that he knew the kind of degrees you just went through. People were just good friends, people that were friends, but also had favors, and those that just wanted favors. He had a difficult time saying no to anybody, regardless how they fit into those categories, other than when they got in that bottom tier and they irritated him. Then he didn’t want anything to do with them. I can’t imagine there were a lot of people like that. He just hid his feelings about people trying to use him. It is interesting, later in life, as he learned how autograph seekers were liable to put something on to make some money off of
– but it was interesting, you’d walk with him and somebody would want an autograph. He’d see a little kid and autograph and he’d see somebody and he’d would just avoid them. I’d say later, “I noticed you avoided him,” and he’d say, “I just knew what he was up to. I knew what he was going do and I don’t want to favor them with any of that.” So, probably throughout his lifetime he probably had some of those kind of people.

Smith: One thing that no one knows is how much time he and the other former presidents spend signing their name.

Allen: Oh, Lord, yes. They got pretty wise as a group when they would sign something when they were together. They would make an agreement that they would only do fifty, and then they would use those for personal friends. But a tremendous amount of that came across their desks at times. We had enough of it here where we’d make some judgments and send them out to him. He’d always say yes, but they were coming from all over and how much time they’d do that.

This is a little bit different subject, but it’s similar. What really concerned me in his latter years – he needed a literary doorkeeper. He was saying yes to things, he was not taking his usual care that he had used all through his life – how careful he was – just almost by his own nature he was that way. He had lost that near the end, and it was hard to see some of the things that came out - the guy who wrote the foreword to the Warren Commission. That whole incident never should have happened. There were just a lot of things going on that I was just amazed. He went outside of his own boundaries, he didn’t even put any restrictions on it. He didn’t say, “Hey, talk about this five years after I’m gone” or anything and right afterwards stuff just started spilling out that I felt was really unfortunate.

I never could figure out how big the impact was, comments that came out from Mike Lloyd or DeFrank, or Woodward. I never bump into those people on the street that say, jeez, how could he ever do that kind of thing?

Smith: But I wonder if some of that is, and it’s the other side of this Boy Scout quality, there was a kind of almost naiveté about him. On the one hand, you’re right, he could sense when people were obviously using him. On the other
hand, part of it you also wonder – here you are, you’re out of Washington, you’re out of the picture. Bob Woodward wants to come spend time with you, which is flattering. He wants to talk to you about all these things, and he just didn’t put any restrictions on it.

Allen: You’re right. Particularly in those later years when he wasn’t traveling anymore. He was very alert at that time, but he just wasn’t traveling, wasn’t giving speeches. But he missed that life. So anybody, I didn’t talk to media people, but it is amazing to me that people, be it Don Rumsfeld or Bo Schembechler would say to me, how’s he doing? I miss him, I would really like to talk – I’d say, “Call him.” He loved that. But people would feel they were imposing, so I can see him doing that and I can see him just having a enjoyable conversation. But he didn’t put any restrictions on it. Writers are writers.

Smith: Now, that raises an interesting thing, because one senses that Mrs. Ford, in particular, was upset, not that some of these things appeared, but they appeared as soon as they did. Would she have known that this was an ongoing thing – or would she have anticipated– or would anyone have anticipated? Frankly someone should have.

Allen: That’s my point. There was no doorkeeper there. I respected Penny, his chief of staff, an awful lot, but she wasn’t the right person to do that. If you’re going to have a Woodward, DeFrank and a Mike Lloyd there, you’d think somebody would be sitting there with him…

Smith: Almost protecting him from himself.

Allen: Yeah, right. We see that in other people all the time, but he didn’t. He had nobody to protect him, so I don’t think the family, until it came in print, knew what he had said. I mean, my understanding with the Mike Lloyd and the, I think, Maury DeJonge preceded Mike in those meetings out there, maybe I was naive, too, but it was about the obituary. The official obituary, which I was pleased was coming out of the Grand Rapids paper. What I didn’t know, and maybe it started out to be that, and maybe President Ford started getting it – it went way beyond an obituary. It became what he thought about former
presidents and everything – had nothing to do with his obituary. And I can see him sitting there talking about it.

Smith: Everyone brings their own outlook. I remember reading the series in the *Grand Rapids Press* and I thought, “Is this what you came up with after twenty years of visits.”

Allen: It was terrible. It was awful.

Smith: It was really very thin.

Allen: Especially the first Mike Lloyd article, which was the main article. I think it was just a reaction to Woodward. It was poorly written and Mike’s not that bad a writer, but it was done in a hurry and it just didn’t flow very well, it just wasn’t good writing. It was almost like, “I’ve got to get something in the paper right away.” It was very poorly done. I’ve often wondered when he had those kind of meetings, whether it was his naïve sense of value, that he trusted people, that they would use good judgment. I wonder if he sat there said, “I’ll say anything I want, but these people, I’m giving the privilege to these people to sit with me…” I wonder if he sat there and said, “Well, they’ll never put this in,” and therefore never said don’t write anything about it for five years or something. I just never could figure that out, other than his age. He had that loneliness that he was missing a part of life that had been – his whole life he was sitting out there and he just loved to talk to people.

Smith: This is purely speculative, but you wonder how he would have reacted to the DeFrank book.

Allen: Oh, I think he’d have been upset. I really do. Tom was a friend he respected…there again, I don’t know whether because of that and because that’s what he would think of him, that he would just write a different kind of book. That part did hurt Mrs. Ford, and I can see, because she became a little bit of a doorkeeper there in the house at the very end. Although she wasn’t in the room all the time with Tom and I would guess she’d said, “Boy, I wish I’d never” – you know – it was too personal.

Smith: I have to believe she played some role – remember when the Profiles in Courage Award was announced and I know because I got a call from Ken
Duberstein saying, “Can you help?” I said, “What do you mean?” Because President Ford wasn’t going to go. And what makes me think about this is, I remember the *Newsweek* story, and I saw Jon Meacham not long ago, and I said, “I thought that was a really good story, but there was one thing in it that really kind of jumped off the page at me, and I thought was kind of inaccurate. It was more than a hint that Ford had consciously, deliberately, met with these historians and reporters in an effort to shape his historical legacy.”

I said, “I can’t think of anyone who spent less time plotting and scheming about how history would see him than Gerald Ford.” The classic evidence of that is if you were making a movie about Gerald Ford’s life, you’d end it with the Profiles in Courage Award, because that really was – it had come full circle and it was just – you couldn’t have scripted it. But he had so little sense of self-dramatization. That’s what was totally missing. To some people it was naïveté, some people thought it was innocence. He simply wasn’t the sort of person - it goes back to what you said, “What’s the fuss all about?” He wasn’t going to go to Boston.

Allen: I didn’t know that, but that doesn’t surprise me.

Smith: He wasn’t going to go! Initially, and I have to believe that Mrs. Ford was part of the process that brought him around. Clearly she understood, instinctively, the meaning of this event. This wasn’t just another award.

Allen: I don’t think he did. I really don’t think he did. You may be right, somebody influenced him. Whether you did or somebody else, but after the fact he would talk to me a lot about that. He’d say, “You know, that was the best thing I ever did. I never worked so hard at practicing,” I know you had written it – “I’d never worked so hard practicing my delivery for that. I am just stunned at the impact…that the question is over with about the pardon. It’s done!” I don’t think he saw that from the front end.

Smith: He didn’t see it in advance. Which raises this larger issue…

Allen: I saw some things, some awards, there were some really neat athletic awards – big time that they wanted to give him, and they wanted him to be there. One
of them was in LA or something, and he just wouldn’t go. I’d try and convince him and say, “It really is worth it to you.” But he never perceived that. The NCAA made a wonderful award in his name, but by that time it may have been questionable about whether he could have gone. He had one of his sons go, but even then he struggled with, why are they doing this, what’s the fuss? I’m just the guy that was put into a position. I wasn’t elected, I was put in a position, I loved what I was doing, I wish I could have continued, but I didn’t and that’s the way it is. I think that’s classic and I didn’t know that, but it doesn’t surprise me.

Smith: It was an amazing day. Part of it was, Ted Kennedy got up and said - he can be the most charming, almost deferential, and it was a remarkable day. One sensed that it was left to his friends to think about things like vindication. I don’t think he thought in those terms.

Allen: No, absolutely not. He’d just get angry about it. He’d get angry – he’d say, “I’ve told them that so many times.” But the questions never stopped. He couldn’t stop it, they were going to ask those same questions every time, until something like this happened to stop the questions. It’s over. And it was amazing to him. It was really a highlight of his life. I’ve got to tell you, that was one of the major highlights of his life – he talked about it so often. That and the Congressional Medal of Freedom were two awards that – he joked about the Medal of Freedom – that meant a lot to him – but he always joked because Betty got it before him.

Smith: You wonder why he didn’t get it at the same time. And it was a Republican president. The story about the Clinton thing… I was working with Skip Rutherford, behind the scenes. It was ten months after the op-ed piece which the White House seized upon at the time, understandably. There was no quid pro quo, but I think Skip was the guy who went and said, “You know, you really ought to do this.” It was the twenty-fifth anniversary. Then, I’ll never forget, the day before was another op-ed piece in the *Times* about affirmative action. And the Willis Ward story. I was a little bit miffed, Clinton should have done just Ford. But you know how that White House works, they get eight or nine people and something for every political group. Ford became the center of attention, not so much because he was getting the award, but
because all these people wanted to thank him for the piece on affirmative action.

Allen: Isn’t that interesting – I didn’t know that…But even that, he used to joke about the fact, and he wasn’t offended at all, he’d joke about the fact that his wife got a Medal of Freedom and he didn’t. But he never saw himself getting the Medal of Freedom, even. He just didn’t. And the Congressional Gold Medal became such a delight to him because they did it jointly – it was the first time it was ever done for a husband and wife and I think he was prouder of the fact that she was getting it than he was getting it himself. But it was home to him again – Congress. But did he ever have any expectations for that? No way.

The conversation that I had with Congressman Vern Ehlers about was it a possibility and then the discussion got around, well, you know, they both have achieved so much. But do you think he’d ever even, ever, ever, on any kind of award, named after him or whatever, say, “Wonder why they haven’t done that for me?” He wouldn’t think about that. He just wouldn’t think that about that. When it was done, then he really appreciated it. Something as small as that presidential seal – when it was done – he thought, well that is pretty nice.

Smith: Tell me about ‘them.’ I know that’s a huge subject, but he clearly was so proud of her.

Allen: Oh, yeah.

Smith: And what she had done. And what she was accomplishing. The stories about him at their annual event or whatever, cooking hot dogs. Taking this sort of back of the house role.

Allen: It was a great love story to start out with, but it was a love story that was based on what she had achieved versus what he did. It meant so much to him, whatever she was into. Small things like, we were at the hotel and they dedicated that room, the Ford Room downstairs, which is an elegant room. And right at the dedication he said it would do him a big favor if it was the Jerry and Betty Ford Room.
When I’d travel with him or when he was here, he was just on the telephone to her all the time. This whole thing with what she achieved with her overcoming her problems was – it was so big to him. I can tell you in a very private discussion with him, when I had a problem in my family, I was in a hotel room with him in Ann Arbor having breakfast and he said to me, “You’re not yourself, Marty. Something’s bothering you.” And I kind of let it out. I’d never seen it before, but Secret Service came to tell me it was time to go and he said, “No, I’m not going any place. I’ve got to take care of this.” But then it was immediately transferred to Betty. Betty called me and he was so proud of those kind of things, so proud of the Center, he would do anything for that Center. He would do anything for her.

I tell you, it was just one of the marvelous love stories. And it was a two way story. I will, for this purpose, tell one story that I haven’t made public. I went to see her about three or four months ago and we had a great afternoon. The two of us sat and talked about a variety of things and she said how hard it is, and I said that I had not lost a spouse, so I don’t know, but I assume it’s very hard. I said, “It’s harder, I think, for you because you both lived a long time together and spent good years together for longer than most people, so then when the parting comes it’s got to be even tougher.” She said, “You’re absolutely right.” And that’s when she smiled at me and then got a stern look without saying, and said, “You know, if I’d known I was going to live this long, I would behaved myself a little better in my earlier life.” But she said, “Marty,” and she had this great grin, and she said, “but I had so much fun.”

When we left she was going to get up and I said, “No, I know where the door is, you sit and relax and I’ll go on.” She said, “No, I want to go to the door with you.” So we went to the door and there was an olive tree outside their door. It’s a pretty good sized tree, and she said, “You know, I never took the Christmas lights off that tree, they’re white lights, not colored. All white, beautiful tree. And I turn it on every night so he knows I’m okay.” This was after he passed away. Well you just know, she’s always worrying about him. She knows how he just took care of her and he was with her all the time. It was so sincere, it was just amazing.

Smith: It’s been tough for her, hasn’t it?
Allen: Very tough. I think that, as I said to her that day, I said, “One of the hard things is…” she said, “I don’t get out.” I said, “Well you should get out.” She said, “Well, I’ll get out with my friends.” I said, “I know the difficulty because you are outliving your friends like the President did. You don’t have the people to go with that you had in the past.” She said, “That’s part of it,” but she’s never really wanted to go back out, I don’t think. She used some excuses, I think, and people accept them. Why not? I tell you, it’s a love story that I really observed, it was just a classical love story. The decisions he would make, he said, “I like to stay in the hotel, rather than a private home because I can order butter pecan ice cream from the kitchen and she doesn’t know it.” But that kind of stuff – like early romantic stuff that was going on when he was ninety.

Smith: One thing I sensed about them, and I think maybe a lot of older people do it, one sensed that they particularly liked to be around younger people. That they made an effort to sort of cultivate younger people. Maybe it was just lucky timing or something, I was just one example of that. But I think it was almost a kind of renewal that went on.

Allen: I think they did and she was, you take a look at her kind of culture and her spirit, it’s really quite different than his. He was, as we’ve described him, quite quiet, and just very unassuming. But she was just kind of the opposite. She was a dancer. She liked excitement and I think as they grew older, I think they just would go back mentally to all the things they did as young people and enjoyed it so much. It’s just like you’re saying that to me. And I know what she was saying, but she said, “I really had fun.” She had the whimsical part of her that I loved.

Smith: Do you think he felt any degree of guilt about those early years when his political career really took off in the House and as Minority Leader, and he was on the road all the time, and really left her to raise the kids? Some of her problems, which may not have been directly related to that…if I were going to write a book about Ford, I’d write a book about the Fords, because I think the two of them, the two stories cover so much more territory. She really is representative of a whole generation of women who struggled to find their identity and their role, who certainly didn’t reject their traditional role, but
who in many ways were prevented by cultural norms from doing more. Whatever price, psychological or other that she paid for that – did he understand that?

Allen: I think he did. I don’t know that for sure. I really think he understood that he had – he thought he was doing the right thing, and he was doing the right thing, politically and in his job, if you will. But I think he probably didn’t realize that he was really putting her under the almost total role of raising a family. She had other talents, but she could never use them, and I don’t think he realized that until later in life and realized what had happened to her. I’m sure he had to look back and say, gee - because he always would talk about taking care of the children, afterwards.

I didn’t see the relationship with the children in my position with him at all until late in life. They would tell me stories about how he began to realize that he had not been there for her. I think he did, he never said that to me, but I just think he did. He realized that in doing the things that he was – and that happens to people – happens to business leaders, they get so obsessed with running a company they forget about their families and it causes problems.

Smith: I think maybe more of that generation than later generations.

Allen: Oh, absolutely. But at the same time, you saw the spirit of her. The Sixty Minutes interview, can you imagine being in the White House after that, people turned upside down, “What do we do?” and everything. He’s sitting there saying, “That’s Betty. May have lost a few votes, but that’s the way it is.”

Smith: One senses that she blossomed in the White House.

Allen: I think she did.

Smith: It’s as if she had this stage and she could explore a lot of her interests. I was telling someone for this PBS special the other day, her interest in culture and clothes matched Jackie Kennedy’s.

Allen: Yeah, very much so. I never thought of it in that comparison, but she did. And that was her life; that was how she grew up. She was a dancer and I guess you
know the great photograph Kennerly took of her on the last day in the White House is on top of the Cabinet table, just to me told the whole story. It took her right back in her dancing pose – this beautiful lady. And she did in the White House - she had an opportunity. But you think about it in terms of Congress, yes, she was in some of the aid-type things with the wives, but that wasn’t her. She watched him closely, by the way. Not the Nancy Reagan type with the President, but she watched him closely.

Smith: Remember the famous Vikki Carr story?

Allen: Well, I don’t know the story. You probably know the story well, but I mean, referring to her as a Hot Tamale, he got lectured about that.

Smith: What was your favorite Mexican dish? He said, “You.”

Allen: Yeah. I’ll tell you a great story about that. I think Dick Ford was there. We were at, we being my wife and I and the Ford brothers and their wives, and I think there was one other couple there, at dinner out in Colorado around the golf tournament. We were talking and somehow the subject of Steelcase came up. Well, he jumped on it and said, “Well, you know, I dated Mary Idema,” who was in the Steelcase family. And he kept going on quite extensively about it. All of a sudden she interrupted, she said, “Well, Jerry, did you ever think that if you’d married her you would have been president of Steelcase?” And that was the end of the conversation. She had her way of kind of stopping…it was so funny to watch her do that.

Smith: I think you told me the story at the rededication of Pantland.

Allen: Oh, yeah. That’s on tape - that reference to the 1913 Room that they had to redo.

Smith: The renovation.

Allen: Renovation and she said something to the effect that, “You could go through a bit of a renovation yourself.” I forget the lines, but I was there, and we have it on tape someplace, I think. She had a tremendous wit about her. She was a strong person, a very strong person. In some ways, probably, stronger than him in certain characteristics. If she had been a gatekeeper, I think he might
not have done some things, and some of them might not have even been outlandish. But she watched him very carefully. He didn’t resent it, he appreciated it.

Smith: I know, at the time, she told him that dropping Rockefeller was a dumb thing to do.

Allen: Oh, I didn’t know that.

Smith: That’s not after the fact, that’s at the time, she told him.

Allen: See that’s the point I make, in a way, in saying that she brought him back to his own strength, because he didn’t do those kind of things, he didn’t do things for the best interest of politics. He would have never, probably, done that, and from that day forward he knew he’d made the worst mistake that he ever made and he was very open about that.

Smith: I wonder - the old line about men marrying their mothers - but the fact is, he clearly was accustomed to strong women. One gathers that Dorothy Ford, just by what she went through and what she did in life, had to have been a pretty impressive figure in her own right.

Allen: And in particularly as it got later in life, he never openly talked about the abuse of his mother, but it was almost like saying, Betty stepped forward after her abuse of herself, and I’ve been through it this way – there’s some parallels in that life, that he saw his mother and his wife go through some real severe problems. It had to affect him. I bet he did compare himself a lot to her.

Smith: Tell me the story about the merry-go-round on one of his visits back home.

Allen: Well, at the public museum when they dedicated that, again, he was very good when he was healthy, to come back for events like he used to come back as a congressman. And that was one of them, the dedication. It was a black tie affair and it was very late and they had rebuilt this merry-go-round. It was a very ornate type of room overlooking the river that the merry-go-round was in, and so they took the major guests in the room to ride the horses on the merry-go-round. They put him on a horse and I’ve never seen such a disgusted look on his face. And he’d look at the Secret Service men and say,
“Tell them to stop this thing. I want to get off this horse.” The great photograph is, again, it shows her whimsical and his kind of ‘keep things straight.’

She had a picture taken for their Christmas card on a Harley Davidson motorcycle. A big red motorcycle. She sitting on the motorcycle, he’s there in a black leather jacket and you could almost tell he’s like “What am I doing?” and “Betty asked me to do it, so I’d better do it.” So they get the picture and it’s the only time I heard him refer to himself in a presidential manner. He said, “This isn’t very presidential, me standing in a black leather jacket next to a Harley Davidson with my wife on it. With ho-ho-ho written on the bottom of it.” She negotiated with him. She said, “Can I have sixty of them to send to my sixty best friends?” So they did and it’s my favorite picture of the two of them. It is just a marvelous picture because it tells so much about both of them.

Smith: It’s a perfect microcosm of what was attractive about each of them, and what attracted each of them to each other. The classic opposites attracting, in many ways, and it was greater than the sum of its parts. It’s almost like – you think of Burns and Allen – two people with very fixed personae and part of the charm was that kind of creative friction between this free spirit and this traditionalist. Some of that came out in the White House, but it was so politicized. Is the First Lady overstepping her bounds and all of this. You almost wish, if there had been some skilled presentational people, you could have taken that relationship and…

Allen: …that relationship and the relationship with his mother and stepfather. Not a sob story, but a sincere story of a man who was so influenced by his mother and stepfather. And so influenced by his wife.

Smith: The more people knew about Ford, the more impressed they were. But, for lots of reasons, they didn’t get to know them. In a curious sort of way, it’s almost as though they got to know him more when he died than when he was in the White House.

Allen: Oh, I think they did. I don’t think there is any question about that. I do think that the funeral was thought out the way you wished that people on the staff’
would have thought about when he was living in the presidency. Because there was so many aspects of that funeral that stood out in people’s minds. The stop at the World War II thing was just so meaningful to veterans, and the use of the Capitol Building.

Smith: And validate, so I’m not a liar here, when we went out there and talked about, the one thing he was adamant about, remember?

Allen: “I’m not going to have that damn riderless horse going down Constitution Avenue.” He just didn’t want to do it. I went back, as you remember - well that’s his choice. But at the same time, I think there was some history behind us, so I went to the Military District of Washington and they wrote a letter about the history of the horse and everything. That didn’t make any difference to him at all. “I don’t want the horse.” He wanted it simple, he wanted it focused on his second home, which was the Capitol Building and his home in Grand Rapids when he came back. We had to bring that out of him.

The military had set the plan for burying a Commander in Chief, which is rightfully so, but it was lacking in some of the real personal things to him, because he had a hard time addressing it himself. He just didn’t want to address it. So we had that day with him and I think that turned his thought process around and he seemed to – and I’m sure she probably had some very good conversations with him afterwards. They were a little upset because – the family was – he kind of let the military go with it. He probably thought that’s the way they do it, and the family hardly had any input whatsoever, until quite a bit later, then they had input into it. It became more him than it did the military.

Smith: Let me ask you something – in our next conversation I want to get into detail about all that, but let me ask you, because that raises something. And it is difficult to phrase. I always sensed, maybe passivity is the wrong word, but it’s almost an offshoot of modesty. He could be very stubborn, he could be assertive, but he could also yield, defer is maybe a better word. I wonder if part of the problem in the early phase in the presidency especially was, coming out of the congressional experience. Learning to be president, is, in fact, a very different thing. That quality of inviting input from a lot of people,
and then making a decision…I’ll give you an example. Letting the re-election campaign go as long as it did. It slid for a long time.

Allen: The campaign?

Smith: Yeah. Assuming that Reagan wouldn’t run, assuming that Reagan could be bought off, in effect. Lyndon Johnson is the other extreme, but somewhere there is a happy medium of having all these fine qualities, but at the same time looking out for his own interests and being a little more anticipatory and assertive.

Allen: You’ve used the phrase quite often about it, how he acted in Congress and he really didn’t have to do all that when he was in Congress. But when he became president, he was a chief executive officer versus a congressman and a chief executive officer has a balance of being a good manager and being a micro manager. And the idea is to fall someplace in the middle, but he tended, as I watched him, he became a sort of after the fact. He would listen a lot and then take a position. But if he took positions himself early and then listened - he probably did - but it wasn’t noticeable. He tended more, as he had said to me that day, when I was running that meeting. He said when I was there I would listen to him and know that they would come to a conclusion that was acceptable to me or I would do something about it. It wasn’t that he was leading that and I think when they opened the papers on Vietnam, at the conclusion of that, you saw some of his assertiveness. He made some very firm decisions, but it was made, and never noticeable publicly that he ever did that. LBJ wouldn’t have let that get away.

Smith: It put a greater burden on key staff around him to compensate for that. I don’t mean to pick on Barrett or anyone in particular, but when some of these offers came along, that you just kind of uncritically accepted. Where, if there had been in place a process that asked really tough questions, I wonder whether he would have been better served – because he was such a trusting guy himself – he was someone who needed a Haldeman. That’s the irony. The irony is that Nixon needed the opposite.

Allen: Yeah, if you had a leader that was that trustworthy, almost with a Boy Scout attitude, that he just trusted everybody, that’s almost when you’ve got to kind
of guard him and protect him because he has so much faith that it works most of the time. But when it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work well. That’s why I always wondered whether when he talked openly to people, he just had faith in them. They were people that he trusted; that’s why he had them in front of him. And I never could quite get a handle myself on how that staff operated within the White House, other than I was disappointed at the end when I found out that they kept personal things out of his speeches and things like that, that were not good decisions. I don’t know who made that decision, I have no idea, but you wonder whether that kind of thing was happening in the White House. And he, rather than be assertive, he would listen and trust them and then do something. It’s a tough one.

Smith: That’s a great one on which to end. We’ve had two solid hours, and we’ll have no trouble filling the next two.

August 6

Allen: Let me go back to the question you posed to me about some of the unique things about the man that may not be known to the public. One of the things that is really amazing is the loyalty both ways about the man: his loyalty to other people, and the loyalty of other people. I often am again reminded, Kissinger told me two things. He told me that what distinguished him was his Cabinet, for one thing, because he selected people that he wasn’t afraid of their egos. He said, “Look at me, I’m the perfect example, but there were many others.” But he enjoyed that part of it and he enjoyed it a great deal to have those intellectual people talk to him and he listened carefully, but made his own decisions, and he earned that respect. But he said the other thing that is unique to Ford was his long standing relationship after he got out of office with heads of states. Particularly three: d’Estaing, Schmidt, and Lord Callaghan. I thought about that after we’d started the interview, and all three of those came to Grand Rapids.

Smith: And all three are at the other end of the spectrum, either politically or temperamentally. Giscard is not exactly a homegrown Midwestern type, and both Callaghan and Schmidt, Callaghan an Old Labor socialist in the British tradition, and Schmidt is a socialist from Germany.
Allen: That added to it. But they came here, of course they met every year in Colorado at the AEI World Affairs meeting, but when Lord Callaghan came here, Lord Callaghan came by himself for one occasion. And he said to me, “The reason I really wanted to come so badly was that I wanted to find out why we trusted him so much. The only way I was ever going to find out, and I needed to find out, was, I had to talk to the people he talked to. I had to go and walk the ways he walked.” In fact, in his suit, he asked to be driven out to Lake Michigan because he’d heard the president talk about it. Took his shoes and socks off, rolled his pants up and waded into Lake Michigan. But he gave a talk that, unfortunately, it was never transcribed here that night. A small dinner group. He said, “Now I know why I’ve trusted him. I know more about his background. I know that he was a Boy Scout, but more importantly, I just talked to the people that he did and I have a sense about the man.”

I think that’s really quite a unique trait of his, and he, President Ford, was just the same way to other people. He, for example, would not let Kissinger come to Grand Rapids unless he was here. And there were others, too. There were people like that, he said, “Marty, if those kind of people come to my hometown, I’ve got to be there.” The last time Kissinger came was the fall before the president passed away, and he didn’t come, and he wrote a letter for me to read, and I had a terrible time reading it. It was a very personal letter about the fact that he wanted to be there. Kissinger gave his talk and we went out to the airport and he started getting on the private plane, started going up the steps and turned around and came back down. He was crying, he said, “I know I’m not going to see him in Grand Rapids again under the circumstances.” And he turned around and went back up to the plane.

I had a lot of unusual experiences for somebody who never, ever expected to with a lot of people of the caliber of Bill Simon, Paul O’Neill - all those people had the same feeling about him. Carla Hill, you heard Carla’s comments when she got the Ford medal, you could just tell it was coming from her heart. This cross loyalty among them is just amazing and he always, as I think I mentioned, he was always amazed that people came back for that annual dinner. He always was surprised. He didn’t understand why they would all come back and that’s when we’d always have to tell him why. But
it’s just a side of him that I remember Kissinger and others bringing up that I thought was worth talking about. He has this amazing personality.

I’ll tell you the other thing. He made people so comfortable. People ask me how in the world did he get up and talk at the White House, at a dinner, or how do you get up and do these things. I said, “You know, it’s not normal for me to do that. I can’t talk about my own family without getting moved someplace about them, but because he made you so comfortable, you kind of did things you wouldn’t have even expected that you could do.”

Smith: Tell us about the ninetieth birthday, both at the White House and here in Grand Rapids.

Allen: Well, it was very thoughtful of the incumbent President Bush to offer the White House and it was fun planning it because they both had a lot of similarities. They didn’t like formality and it was going to be in the State Dining Room. First of all, they didn’t want tux, they wanted business suits. Bush was known for not liking any kind of parties in the White House of any kind, it was a struggle for him. But that night turned out to be a fun night. It was a fun night for a lot of reasons. As you know, the remark was made by the president that we had one thing in common, and that was our lack of vocabulary. I happened to be sitting at the table with President Bush’s mother. I thought his mother was going to just roll off the chair laughing about it.

So it took on that tenor, and the other rule they set ahead of time – let’s not make this a late evening, which of course, both of them loved that. It was a wonderful night, it was a night where the two of them, an incumbent president, whoever it would be, but in this case was President Bush was very down to earth and President Ford said it was a fun night – the entertainment was fun.

Smith: Was there interaction between, for example, Betty Ford and Laura Bush?

Allen: No, because they were at separate tables. I’m not sure, I could be wrong about that, they may have been at the table with President Ford. You know how they split everybody up. I happened to be at the table with President Bush and his mother. The exchange between them was absolutely – she was on him
something terrible – this was shortly after he was playing his western role in
going over to get them dead or alive and she was saying, don’t ever say that
again. She was punching him and he’d kind of wink at you. It was an
interesting table because Happy Rockefeller was at that table, Jim Cannon
was at that table. It was a very interesting table. I think all the tables were. My
wife ended up sitting next to Tobin Armstrong and that was interesting. Anne
Armstrong was there, too.

Smith: I saw where she just died.

Allen: Yeah. He really had serious feelings about her playing a very active role
either as Cabinet or vice president. She was always a very generous lady to
us. So it was just a wonderful evening and at the stroke of about nine-thirty, it
was funny to watch because you could tell that the staff was working against
time to get the food – it was moving in and out – if you didn’t eat your main
course pretty quick it was gone. The birthday cake was wheeled out as a
whole cake, wheeled back in, but then another cake, all cut, came out. And the
two of them disappeared, but they left the bar open in one of the rooms and
we had a very nice night.

The party in Grand Rapids was incredible. The estimates were that ten or
fifteen thousand people were here with a lot of children. He was very moved
by it. Here again, it took a light note because Governor Granholm was active
in his campaign in ’76 as one of the young Republican “Scatter Blitzers.” So
she was relating that and Vern Ehlers, who has a sense of humor but he
doesn’t know how to express it - had a clever way of trying to invite her back
into the party at that particular time. The music was great. He was terribly
moved by it and they did a great thing. I don’t remember whose idea, I think it
was Ambassador Secchia’s, but they got all the children together with just
him. They’re on that hill out there and there is just a sea of children’s faces.
And he was just absolutely delighted. He many times expressed that. That was
the last time he came to Grand Rapids, of course.

Smith: Do you think he knew it was going to be the last time?

Allen: I think so. Let me tell you why I think so. He had a way about him to
anticipate what might be coming. Let me give you a couple of examples. His
golf tournament. He loved that golf tournament in Vail. It went on for twenty years or so, but three years before the last year it was going to be, he announced the last time would be three years. And he said privately to some of us, “I just don’t want to be wheeled out in a cart like Bob Hope does his tournament. I want to be playing golf, I want to be with the people.”

I heard him say that to me in the back of the car after a National Press Club speech he had just given. The content was great, but he was having a little trouble delivering it. He knew it though. He got in the car and not necessarily in his temper-type thing, he said to me, “That’s the last time I’ll speak at the Press Club. I’ve got to begin to look at not speaking anymore.” And the last time, I think – I could be wrong on this, you may know – but the last time I think he might have really given a public speech was when he gave the Ford Medal to Rumsfeld and Cheney. It was memorable because he had a difficult time physically – we had the podium really bolted down so that just in case he leaned against it or something, it didn’t end up in Cheney’s lap. But he struggled in his delivery and you could tell he was really struggling. But at the end, he stood between Rumsfeld and Cheney, and like a referee at a boxing match was holding their hands, because they were helping him. But he raised their hands and he said, “These are my boys.” He was great until he got off stage – he went into a room in the Capitol and he did lose his temper. He said, “Don’t ever allow me, ever, ever to do that again. Ever. I don’t want to ever put myself in the position to make a fool out of myself.” He sort of had that sense about him.

Smith: The only time I ever saw him display temper, it was really directed at himself.

Allen: Yes, and this was.

Smith: It was probably a couple years – well, I was still here, and I don’t remember what the event was. I’d written some remarks and he spoke in the auditorium, and it wasn’t bad. But part of the thing was, the lighting, or the angle of the podium – and, of course, he never put on glasses.

Allen: No.
Smith: So, the result was – he probably hadn’t practiced as he did for really major events - Penny was a co-conspirator in making sure…obviously the Kennedy – but a number of these things. The one where he really practiced the most was the White House dinner.

Allen: Oh really? I thought you were going to say the Kennedy Profile in Courage.

Smith: The Kennedy was a big deal, but in some ways that was easier because it came after the White House dinner. You remember in November of 2000, it was three days after the disputed election, no one knew who was going to be president. They had all the former presidents and first ladies back to the White House for the 200th anniversary of the White House. He had, if I do say so myself, really good remarks, and Penny made sure he really practiced. When I say this, you know what I’m saying, he benefited from low expectations.

Allen: Yes.

Smith: Because he wasn’t an orator. And a lot of these folks, they were just glad to see him. They hadn’t seen him in twenty or twenty-five years. Well, anyway, he got up there and he really delivered it well, and the jokes and everything. There’s this appeal to unity which didn’t specifically refer, but was in the back of everyone’s mind. The history recurred. This is the man who, in times of national crisis, brings us together. That was the subtext for the event. Hugh Sidey wrote afterwards that he hit it out of the park, so on and so on. That was a great evening.

Allen: This isn’t a praise Richard type thing, but let me tell you something about what a lot of people have said over time. I remember you telling me years ago, because I was just curious and it really had to do with the Dole speech at the Nixon funeral – how you don’t try and write for yourself, you try and understand the person and write for them.

What you really did for President Ford in so many occasions was not create a different Gerald Ford, you just created a way for him to express himself that nobody had ever helped him do before. It was so noticeable to many of us, not that he was a different man, but he was saying things – and we all said to ourselves – he needed somebody like that during the campaign and he would
have probably won. But he had this anticipation that, just something about that he knew. The last conversation that I had with him was about the ship, the *USS Gerald R. Ford* (CUN-76). I had just been at some kind of meeting about it. Maybe it was the ship naming, I don’t know, but it was getting close to the end. I called him and I said, “Lt. Commander Ford, this is Lt. Commander Allen calling.” And he kind of stopped for a second, and I said, “Well, I just wanted you to know they named a ship after a Lt. Commander, I was a Lt. Commander, too.” And he hesitated, and then he said, “Commander, let me ask you a question.” I said, “Yes, sir.” He said, “Tell me about your wartime duty.” And of course, I didn’t even have one battle ribbon, I was a peace time lt. commander. But he had that wit about him. But then he said something, he said “Would you like to come aboard my ship, Commander?” I said, “Yes, sir.” He said, “Will you be there for my ship?” I said, “Yes, sir.” “Then you have my permission to go on board.” That was the last conversation I had and I cried.

Smith: He was very proud of his naval service, wasn’t he?

Allen: Oh, was he! Yes, he really was. He was proud, very proud of his naval service, talked a lot about it, we’d walk by the model of the *Monterey* out there and he’d stop me every time. It wasn’t that he’d forgot that he told me, he just wanted to talk about it again. He’d show me on the ship where, when the typhoon hit, he slid across the deck, where he grabbed the guy line. He did, he had a tremendous pride in his military and I think he used that a lot to his advantage when he was in office. I really do, both as a congressman and as a president. He used his pride in the military extensively. But he was that way about football. He just had a tremendous pride in having been on that Michigan football team, and he talked about it so many times.

Smith: That brings up, and here’s a classic instance where there was no speechwriter involved - tell us about the pep talks.

Allen: I went to one of the pep talks. I think I was there most often when he was there, but I didn’t go into the pep talks. You’ve never seen somebody so completely relaxed and articulate talking to a football team. He just had a sense about him, and the interesting thing – he would always call me, he knew
about my football relationship at Notre Dame, we had a mutual relationship with Lou Holtz, so we just had this football thing.

He’d always call me and he would say, “I need your advice.” I’d say, “What would you like my advice about?” He said, “Do you think I’ll impose, when I go to Ann Arbor, if I would impose by asking Coach Schembechler or Coach Carr if I could talk to the team?” I said, “Mr. President, you’ve got to be kidding me.” “No, I’m not kidding you. I could impose on people, I don’t want to disrupt…” and of course they loved him. He would always go and do it. He loved it. He would almost schedule events in the fall in Ann Arbor so he could get there to be at football.

Smith: And it was often before the Ohio game?

Allen: Not necessarily. But I will tell you about a very unusual pep talk he gave. The University of Notre Dame decided to give him an honorary varsity letter. He had done so much for intercollegiate football and supported it and been a spokesman about it, just as he was about the Navy. That’s the way he was. So they wanted to give him a letter. He was honored, delighted, and he went to Notre Dame on a weekend, it was a Boston College game and he talked to the Notre Dame team the night before the game. Now the ones at Michigan were practice sessions, this was the night before the game. This was Friday night. The full football team is assembled there, all in coat and ties, he walks into the locker room, he kind of looks around, and he says, “I’ve got to tell you guys something. This is the first time I've been back in a locker room the night before a college game. I almost have the same feeling I used to have and I want to talk to you about it.”

Notre Dame had only won one game up to that time. They were like one and five, a terrible start. He said, “You know something? I want to tell you guys something. When I was a junior we won the national championship, when I was a senior, we won one game. That’s it.” He said, “I could hear the boos, I couldn’t make out the remarks, but I said to myself at that time, ‘How do those people know anything about it? How do those eighty thousand – hundred thousand people know what it’s like to play a football game and to be tackled or to break up a pass or be in a critical situation – every play of the
game.’” And he said, “That lasted my lifetime. Politically, as I went through politics and I knew I was going to be criticized, I always went back mentally to that – they don’t know what they’re talking about – I do. And I’ve got to live with it.”

So he made this speech to the team, which I thought was great, and at the end he said, “I’ll bet you guys would like to have a picture taken with me.” And individually he went through every one of them and had a picture taken with them. The next day is the game, he walks out with me to present the flag to the Irish Guard, and as we were walking around the band was playing America the Beautiful, and he sees these six guys, who were over six feet tall coming in kilts, he says to me, “This has got to be one of the neatest things I’ve ever done in my life!”

And he did it. Notre Dame won. Notre Dame won the rest of the games that year. Notre Dame went to a bowl game. Notre Dame opens with Michigan the next year. He calls me, he said, “You don’t think that will come up, do you? That I gave them this pep talk and now they’ve got this string of victories and they’re playing my alma mater.” I said, “No, I don’t think that will come up.” But he just loved the things he did.

Smith: He could have been a motivational speaker. I had no idea: Peter Pocklington told us that every year he’d give a pep talk to the Edmonton Oilers. Peter would bring the team down to Rancho Mirage. And every year he’d spend time with them, and he’d give them a pep talk.

Allen: As I’ve said, I saw it twice and he was as good as anybody I ever heard do that. In fact, when he’d go out to practice in Michigan, he’d go out there and he’d stand next to Bo while they were practicing and he would say, “Hey, Coach, would you mind getting your center?” The center was like six-five, 300 pounds, and he’d get up next to him and he’d talk to this guy and he’d say, now, I don’t know how to ever handle him, and yet he played in all star games.

Smith: It’s implicit in what you’ve said, but the relationship with Schemblecher was pretty special.
Allen: Very special. Extremely special. They just had a good sense, feeling about him. Bo was a tough guy. President Ford just kind of respected his toughness and his discipline. He just liked it. And of course, the results always were good, but again, late again in life, I sat with Bo – we were on the advisory board of the Ford School of Public Policy, and he said to me, “I miss talking to him.” I said, “Why don’t you talk to him?” and he said, “I’d be imposing on him.” I said, “No, you won’t.” I knew the number by heart. I said, “I’m going to write it on a piece of paper – call him.” I later found out that he called and Penny said they must have talked for an hour. I said, you can call him every day and he’ll be happy. This was when he wasn’t traveling and he just loved it. And Bo just loved that relationship with him.

Now Woody Hayes is probably even the greater story. Here is the greatest nemesis of the University of Michigan. Woody Hayes was the icon of that hatred, and he expressed it, he never referred to the state of Michigan. But President Ford, particularly when he was campaigning, he just liked football, it didn’t make any difference. It’s just like politics, it didn’t make any difference who he was talking with – Democrat or whoever it was, if it was Lord Callaghan who was a Labor person, that didn’t make any difference. He just respected – he respected Woody because of his knowledge of history – he was a great historian.

So when the dedication of the Ford Museum came in 1981, he was on the invitation list. I can remember it like it happened yesterday. As people were sort of – not parading, but there was only one route because of security – when Woody came, people saw him and there was some booing and some of that, and Woody was just smiling and everything – he was used to that, too. But afterwards, after the dedication, there was a small reception, mostly for out of town people, mostly for Cabinet level people, and I walked in and President Ford looked at me and he said, “Where’s Woody?” I said, “I don’t know, I don’t think he was invited.” He said, “See if he’s still in the hotel.” I went and got a phone, he was in the hotel. I said to Woody, “I’m calling for President Ford, he’d like you to come down.” Woody said, “You’ve got to be kidding me.” I said, “No, he wants you to come down.” He came down. Ford
gave him a big bear hug, and Woody was crying. It’s that unusual relationship that he had that was so special.

Smith: And which the public never saw.

Allen: Never saw, never saw that. The public never saw very much, the relationship with three heads of state.

Smith: Right. It’s just unfortunate that in the White House, he never became a vivid personality.

Allen: No, he didn’t.

Smith: In some ways, she became more so.

Allen: She sure did, yeah.

Smith: Talk about Mrs. Ford a little bit, how she adapted to life after the White House. Obviously there’s a before and after intervention.

Allen: The before is, obviously, she came out and she had the chemical dependency, and they had an intervention session and that’s well-known. It was a typical intervention where she was very bitter and angry about it, but the family…

Smith: Was that something – I’ve heard over the years – was that something anyone in particular spearheaded? I’ve heard Susan’s name mentioned.

Allen: If I had to guess, I would guess Susan. I could almost see a conversation going on where Susan…and they were all very active in the intervention, but I think Susan more than any of them. So they got through that ordeal and it was very difficult and she went and she’s very proud to tell me, every time she talks to me she remembers exactly how many years she’s been sober – that’s what she’ll say. “You know, Marty, I’ve been sober now for thirty-some years.” She knows when it is and she goes to the AA meetings, and she was up until maybe just recently, her health maybe not allowed it, and the loss of her husband. But she went to it.

Smith: Tell us about Leonard Firestone and his role in the whole story.
Allen: Leonard had a worse problem almost, than she did, in terms of dependency. As I understand it, it was really close to reaching the point where he was going to lose his life. She interceded on his behalf and he became a recovering alcoholic and then they became extremely close friends, not only because he was generous with the Betty Ford Center, but he resided next to them both in Ranch Mirage and in Vail.

Smith: And didn’t he have something to do with their being there?

Allen: Yes, I think there was some land that he had and he was in that compound in Rancho Mirage before they ever got there, and the same way in Vail. He was so close to them that he helped arrange for that. He was a perfect neighbor for them. They loved him.

Smith: Did they build that house?

Allen: They built both houses. They were not in existence – the house in Rancho Mirage, the compound was made up of three houses. Leonard Firestones’, the house that the Fords built, and the Ginger Rogers’ house that really had been donated, I believe, to the University of Southern California, in some kind of a leasing arrangement. That became the office and the Secret Service headquarters. At Vail, Leonard had the house and they built their house next to Leonard’s out there. And, again, I think it was on land that Leonard had secured. In fact, Leonard was such a great guy, I said to him once, I was walking in the compound and there were all kinds of cars there all the time, and I said, “Leonard, does this drive you kind of crazy – all this traffic and all this security?” He said, “No, this is the greatest thing in the world. I’ve got Secret Service guarding me, I can’t have it any better than this. They’re at the gate, and I come into my gate and there they are to let me in.” They were very close.

But she went through that part of her life where – and I had one experience with her – it was the Easter Sunday after the loss of the election. I think it was that first Easter Sunday after that. They came to Grand Rapids and stayed in a private home, Bob Browne’s home. They came for the purpose – there was some preliminary discussion about the museum, some kind of slides they wanted to show them, and she showed the effects of the problem that she had.
In fact, when they turned the lights down to show the slides, when the lights were up, she was asleep. As gently as he could – with twenty or thirty people there, he got up and very gently woke her up and escorted her out of the room and never said another word about it. So I think that was the peak time, maybe, right around there. Then after that it took place.

So my next exposure to her, really was as we got into the dedication of the museum and then, quite frequently after that. She wasn’t kept abreast of all the things like the burial site and the funeral plans that came to light – it kind of came to me because I think they thought I had created the plan. Up to that point, as you know, they had been created by the military and then we interceded a little bit at that time. But I do remember walking across this bridge out here, the Gillett Bridge, walking with Mrs. Ford across to the hotel and she stopped me in the middle of the bridge, she looked back at the museum, she said, “Now, tell me, where am I going to be buried? Because I know there’ll be dancing on my grave,” with this big smile. I said, “Nobody’s told you yet?” “Nope, nobody’s told me yet.” So I said, “When we go back I’ll show you.” At that time, the wonderful fence that you were responsible for that just made the site – it wasn’t there yet, so it was kind of out there, and now it’s well-defined by this beautiful fencing and the children’s tree that’s out there. But we took her and showed her where she’s going to be buried.

She’s a grand lady. She’s looks so fragile – and maybe she is on the outside – but she isn’t on the inside. She’s a strong, strong lady.

Smith: Was she ill the week of the funeral?

Allen: Well, I found out during that time that she had a bad cold, which eventually was diagnosed when she got back as pneumonia, but she didn’t want to take any antibiotics because she felt that she would miss the sense of what she was to be there for. So she struggled through that week. And a lot of people commented very politely about it, that this poor lady was grieving – which she was, but she also was not healthy. I’ll tell you something, she wouldn’t get in that wheelchair. We had it at all the places for her and the last place was when they were going to do the procession down the walk to the internment site, and she just waved it off. I heard her say one time, “I just want to be as close to the casket as I can be.” The next morning the family came over to pay
their last respects before they got on the plane to fly back to California, and then she got in the wheelchair. She got to the gate of the fence – got out of the wheelchair and walked into that site and the family sat together out there. When she came out she said to me, “I forgot how beautiful this site is.” And that was the last thing she said before she went back. From that time on we’ve had a number of reasons to talk, and we’ve talked a lot.

Smith: Tell me about the bet.

Allen: Oh, the bet? Well, I think I mentioned to you that President Ford and I always had this bet and it was just not one telephone call. It was a highly negotiable thing – to the point where she had come to the conclusion, despite his being quite frugal, that we were betting for quite a bit of money. That we wouldn’t go through this process that we were going through and she said something to him about it. She said how much money, and she eventually told me. She said, “I always believed it wasn’t over five dollars.” And I said, “You know your husband well enough, you should have known we were going to negotiate over five dollars as well as five thousand. It didn’t make any difference – he wouldn’t have bet five thousand.”

When he passed away, that Michigan-Notre Dame game, afterwards, I called her and I told her I missed him – that I’d always planned to get that call and it didn’t come. But she and I then started laughing. She said, “Marty, I thought about this. Can you imagine that he’s up in heaven with Bo Schembechler, and they’re watching the Michigan-Appalachian State game, and do you think there’s any language that’s ever been used in heaven like that?” We just started laughing.

The great end to the story was, the next morning I get a call from Jan Hart, her chief of staff. “Mrs. Ford would like to bet you five dollars on the Notre Dame game,” which meant a lot to me. It meant almost more to me that Notre Dame lost so that I could send her the five dollars. But I hope sometime it gets reversed so she’s got to send me the five, ‘cause I can really use that on her. “Now, come on. Your husband was that way, I never knew you were that way.” That kind of stuff makes it all worth while.

Smith: She, obviously, didn’t come back as often as he did.
Allen: No. She really didn’t. The type of events that he would do, quite often he would be going to New York for a board meeting and pick up an event. So it was a lot of traffic and it wasn’t any dislike. In fact, when she really wanted to start coming, her health wouldn’t permit it. Quite often then, Susan would participate for her – like the ninetieth birthday – she was very, very disappointed in that. She was all set to come, but her health – she had this bronchial problem that would just pop up, and so when she really wanted to travel – it was like this ninety-fifth birthday this year, she really wanted to be here. I think she will come back. I think when she does, I don’t think it will be for any event, though. I think she needs to make her first visit back pretty much on the QT, understandably. It’s been difficult for the children when they’ve come back for the first time, and more than the first time. But it’s tough enough that he’s gone, this soon, and the difference in the geography also creates a problem for them.

Smith: You saw him around his grandkids, and then eventually great-grandchildren. Talk about that.

Allen: He was more fatherly than I would have thought he would be. I didn’t see him as much I did see him in that situation. I talked to him, I talked to the kids about him. It was very, very clear that he really did treasure his children and grandchildren. And I say children because, I never could quite figure out how close the relationship…I knew they were…but because he was traveling and because he wasn’t at home much and they were in the growing up age, just how much contact he really had with them. And even afterwards, and this is not being critical of the children, but they weren’t active in the Foundation. They would sometimes come to meetings, sometimes not. It was really when they knew that their father was not as visible that they began to play a more active role. But he did talk to his children a lot. I think he treasured those moments. I think he treasured the moments even more so with his children at the end.

I think of Steve. Steve’s the bachelor. Steve really gave up pretty much the last six months of the president’s time. He gave up his life to be with him. Steve got so bonded to him, the last time President Ford ever played golf was with Steve. Steve had to really convince him to do it again because he didn’t
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want to go out and embarrass himself. Steve said, “Let’s just go out and get out on the course, play three holes and come home.” And that’s what they did. He came home and he looked at Steve and - I think Steve struggled more during the funeral – they all struggled – but not as much as Steve did. If you look at any of the photographs, I think that last six months, the closeness that he was with his father really had a big impact. But I think the children, the grandchildren, the great grandchildren were just that – those of us who have got grandchildren – they give you a great fix when you need it. You can have the worst problems in the world and you just sit around with your grandchildren and just chat with them. You don’t visualize him doing it, but he did it, he did it a lot. He wanted to be near them.

Smith: One of the banes that we talked about a little bit the other day, even here you’d see it – is autograph seekers. Everyone wants something. I don’t mean to be cynical, but let’s face it. There’s a lot of people who are drawn toward celebrity, and there are lots of people who want things. I assume that if word got out that he was in town, or was going to be in town, there must have been a deluge of – some with the best of intentions, and others with their own agenda. How did you deal with that, how did you filter it?

Allen: He was very accommodating when a request would come into the office and some judgment was made – he was very accommodating. He loved to write personal notes to friends, but I think he had a reluctance to do it just in general – because he sensed that there were people out there that were not doing it in their own personal best interest. He got to the point where he could see somebody he knew, didn’t have to be in a Boy Scout uniform, but it could be a young person that he just knew, but he’d look at another person, and he’d say something like, “I think I saw that same person.” He was pretty astute at that. I didn’t notice it, but he’d just say, “No, I don’t do that.” He’d be very abrupt about it. He did like writing the notes.

The most personal he got was when he had a death in the family. To my knowledge, he only attended two funerals where he actually participated, as you know. One was Secretary Levi and the other was Bill Simon. Again, those eulogies that he was assisted with by you, but still was him talking. Those two families have told me many times that it was the most special – not
because, necessarily who he was, but what he said about their father or husband. Because he told me, he said, “You know, I hope people aren’t offended because I don’t go to funerals, but there’s a reason for that. I don’t want to take anything away from the family.” Now that’s the way he thought.

Now, there are other people who would probably like to be seen – but he just didn’t do it. But he would personally, he would call people. He would, right away when I would let him know about deaths, or Penny would, his mind would start working – who can I talk to? And he did it. He did it frequently.

Mike Lloyd, who is head editor of the Grand Rapids Press, his wife was killed tragically in an automobile accident, and when I went to the wake and I got up to Mike and I was standing in line, and I expressed my sympathy and he looked at me and he had tears in his eyes, and he said, “I don’t know what you had to do with it, but I got a call that I’ll never forget from the President.” I said, “If I had anything to do with it, it simply was to inform him that you’d lost Judy.” That’s about as far as I’d ever…I would never suggest anything to him. He just did it. He had these different sides to him. Autographing was not one of his favorite things to do. He would get a little grumpy about it.

Smith: You wish someone would put together a manual for ex-presidents, because they have no idea of what actually goes with the territory. From having to raise all this money to build these buildings, to putting up with the autograph seekers.

Allen: The only thing the former presidents did with any kind of discipline was when they were photographed together, they would agree to sign a certain number of them and that’s all, they wouldn’t do any more. He didn’t know how to use a computer, but somehow he found out that one of the ones he gave, and I think he knew who it was, had put it on eBay. That just killed him to think he had done that – it would kill me, too, to think of somebody doing that. They had that agreement. But like I told you about a literary gatekeeper, they needed an autograph gatekeeper.

Smith: Penny tells this story, and I’m sure they probably told it among themselves. That fraternity didn’t meet very often. It tended to be at funerals and library dedications, or somber events of state – which didn’t prevent people, who
weren’t very bright, from trying to go to one office and claim that, “Well, President Carter’s going to do this,” not even realizing that there were people in President Ford’s office that talked to people in President Carter’s office and checked it out.

Allen: I think Penny was pretty good at that kind of gate keeping, she was pretty good. I’ll tell you my classic story on myself. I have a picture from the Ronald Reagan Museum dedication that he did send me. I was very fortunate – he sent a very nice letter. He [Ford] one time said, we’ve got to start paying you, and I said, “Listen, I get too many rewards, I don’t need to be paid. This is beyond my scope of things.” Even these photographs of me are more valuable than money, but I get this one and it’s signed by all the presidents, and I have it properly framed and the right kind of glass put in it, and I put it, not in a very public room in the house, but a nice hallway where it’s a little dark, and it’s up there for a year or two, and one of the kids walked by and said, “Why didn’t President Nixon sign this?” I said, “What do you mean? He signed it.” I looked and it was gone – I mean, there wasn’t a trace of it.

I took it to the Secret Service here in town. I said, “Can you look at this and see if there is a residue of any ink on here?” And they took all their gear and they said it looks like something was there. So I called Penny. I said, “I’m just sick, the signature is gone. I’d even be willing to go to the Nixon people and use the machine to put it back on there – at least to have it on there and have four written on it.” Well, the machine gets destroyed the day he died. The Secret Service told me, and they were smiling when they said it, I think he knew exactly what he was doing. I think he knew – those particular pictures - he said he didn’t want to join the group in signing, and he did it reluctantly. He said, I think he knew what he was doing. He probably absolutely just delighted…

Smith: Used disappearing ink. What a metaphor for Nixon’s controlling personality.

Allen: And mine wasn’t the only one. Some of them that have been kept really in isolation still have it, but that’s always tickled me.
Smith: We talked the other day a little bit about Nixon, but one thing that would surprise people was to know about the relationship that he had with the Johnson family.

Allen: Yeah, he had a great relationship with them. I don’t know – I’m sure it started in Congress, because I’m sure they had a lot… But there was just no question that when he was out of office, even early on when we had conferences here, if Lady Bird herself wasn’t here with Harry Middleton, the children were here for something. And that turned around out at the LBJ, too. They had President Ford out there, and there was a tremendously strong, very fond relationship beyond the normal first family. It was very close, you could tell that. I can remember Mrs. Johnson being here with Harry when they came back from the re-dedication of the permanent exhibits. She, along with the others created quite a stir because they were so impressed with the new exhibits. I can remember Mrs. Johnson, “Get Harry in here. Get Harry in here. Come look at this. It’s so different than what we have.” But they really were close.

Smith: Talk about a trouper. Remember her sitting out there in her fur coat, with Barbara Bush mothering her. She wasn’t going to miss it.

Allen: No, and the funny thing was, Caroline Kennedy stayed in. She stayed right in this office and she looked and she said, “I feel terrible. They’re out there but I’m going to freeze out there.” Oh, yeah. She was a trouper.

Smith: It surprised people that Caroline Kennedy would come to the Ford Library.

Allen: I will tell you that there was a close relationship between Caroline and President Ford. She knew about the relationship they had as congressmen, and having offices across, so she knew he knew her father. They had a lot in common. They were both naval officers and they had a lot in common and they had a lot not in common - but they had a tremendous and close relationship. So I had encouraged President Ford, she had talked to me, she was on the advisory committee for the presidential libraries, and I had a chance to meet her. She was very quiet and very guarded which is understandable, and she would talk about President Ford, how much she would like to talk to him. So I think they did have a conversation, at least one, if not more.
Smith: And her brother interviewed him for _George_ magazine.

Allen: That’s right. He just felt very strongly about Kennedy, he didn’t want to accept LBJ’s request that he be on the Warren Commission because of his friendship with him. It was just more than he thought he could handle. Of course then you get right back to the Profile in Courage Award and how much it meant to her, and she was there. But I’ve kept in contact with her and when the President passed away. I wrote her when her brother was killed in the plane accident. She wrote a very nice note. There was just something about those two, and so she came back here on occasions and I think they saw each other. I would have loved to have heard those conversations.

Smith: The dinner the night before the re-dedication. Were you at the table with the presidents and first ladies?

Allen: I don’t think I was.

Smith: Because we had the Fords, the Carters, the Bushes, and Caroline. And Lady Bird. So that would fill up the table.

Allen: They were in kind of a center, more rectangular shape so that they all could be together. That had to be a great thing. Whenever they get together that way, I gather there is something about the comfort level, because they took a group picture of them, and there’s Bush ’41 behind Barbara with his fingers like rabbit ears behind her. I saw so much of that. Now, I wasn’t with them that much, but when I was it just seemed to be a lightness about them, and maybe it’s the reunion of them. I don’t know what it is.

Smith: I think, just the chemistry of those people. And I think here they were made to feel completely at home.

Allen: Yeah, they were very comfortable. It was a very elegant night. It was beautiful. It was as close to a White House dinner as you could make it. The furniture, the music and everything, was just marvelous.

Smith: And Alvie Powell.

Allen: Alvie Powell has become a member of the family. Alvie Powell, Master Sergeant, I believe, who has been with the Army Chorus, left the Army
Chorus for a while, and went on his own singing and came back. The Army Chorus itself is like President and Mrs. Ford’s chorus. For so many events, on every event in Washington, out at Vail for every golf tournament they were there. We’ve had them here at least a half a dozen times, and they have this tremendous respect for him. They feel part of the family and he makes them feel that way. There was always a couple of requests that he made. One was *What I Did for Love* from *Chorus Line*. Until he got tired of it, that became their song. Then after a while they suggested to me and others that maybe there was some other music they could play. But he always liked *Old Man River* from *Showboat*. It got to a point where we wondered whether, in this day and age, there might be some sensitivity about it, but he wanted *Old Man River* and he’d get the biggest smile. He [Alvie] loved to sing it for him.

Smith: As long as their health permitted, they would go to New York and do a lot of shows. They loved the theater, would she shop?

Allen: I don’t know that part.

Smith: Stay at the Waldorf.

Allen: I think they probably, they weren’t long trips, I would expect they just got together with some of their friends and go to the show.

Smith: I remember they loved the *Lion King*.

Allen: Oh, yeah, loved that.

Smith: And *Chorus Line*.

Allen: Loved *Chorus Line*. That’s where that song, just kind of…and if you listen to the words of it, it fits the tune – *What I Did for Love*.

Smith: And it’s also such a product of the Seventies.

Allen: He enjoyed going to shows. I think that was something, even back in California with the McCarter Theatre and everything. I think he really did enjoy going out and seeing that type of entertainment. He enjoyed entertainment very much, he really did. And Alvie sang at the funeral. I adlibbed when I did my arrival remarks, with the Army Chorus behind me.
and I was looking down at the family and I said, “You know, I can almost feel Alvie Powell behind me because he’s part of the family.” It just came out because that’s the way he always was. He’s now invited to all the Foundation annual dinners, he’s a guest at the dinners, his wife is a delightful person. It’s again one of those things that happens.

Smith: What about their lives in Vail? Because that last summer, when everyone told them they shouldn’t go, they were adamant.

Allen: They enjoyed the life in Vail. I think they enjoyed it in a different social context. It was more relaxed, it was more outdoorish. They obviously escaped the desert heat and they enjoyed that. It was dry heat, so that was very helpful to her, and yet they were very informal and very casual out there. He loved to go to the post office himself. And I’d sometimes get these things that would come back to me and the envelope would be torn and the pages inside would be scotch taped together. I’d say, what kind of a post office do they have out there? She’d say, “That’s him opening up the mail, he doesn’t do that very often.” But he liked that out there. He just loved to walk to the post office – can you imagine that? You go to the post office to mail a letter and you look and there’s the president standing in line to get his mail. But that was the kind of thing he liked out there. He liked the golf, he liked the golf tournament, he liked the annual conference out there, the AEI conferences, he just loved that kind of stuff.

Smith: And there was an amphitheater named for him?

Allen: There was a great amphitheater, the garden was named for her, they unveiled a beautiful statue in there – I can’t remember of what in that place, but it was basically their place. And when he had the golf tournament, the big night was, all the entertainers, and a lot of entertainers played in the golf tournament, would entertain that night. People like – I have to think of the western singers – Vince Gill – is that right? He would get up there and get Mrs. Ford up there to dance on stage because he was a recovering through her. So there is just this great atmosphere. Bob Hope would come out and entertain. The last year was just such a sad thing, but they’d come out – he got out there and somebody was trying to lead him. And he’s cussing, “What the hell, I can find
a place to sit.” And he’s on the stage – you know, that’s the part that was sad. But President Ford told me he would go to dinner with he and Dolores as many times as he could, even though it was a terribly uncomfortable thing to do because he wasn’t well. But he just felt that he needed to be with Bob Hope.

Smith: I remember the story – talk about putting yourself out – toward the end when, where Bob wants to play golf, he was almost blind, and could hardly move, but they’d play two holes. And then Bob would want to take a nap, so the President would come back to the office, and then, “His nap’s over, he wants you to come back and play some more golf.”

Allen: I’d forgotten that story. That’s true.

Smith: Then he’d go back – talk about friendship.

Allen: He just felt so badly…

Smith: But it must also have been, as you’ve suggested, a cautionary lesson seeing what happens when…

Allen: And he related to Bob Hope. He thought it was just too bad that they did that. Literally, when he’d go out and play his golf tournament, even before he reached the two-hole stage, the guy would go out and put the tee in the ground, put the ball on it – and he’d take a swat at it and the tournament would start. But I saw him at those tournaments when he was healthy, and he was a lot of fun. When Bob Hope came here for the dedication and did one of his NBC shows, we had a parade and he was the grand marshal of the parade. He liked it so much, when the lead car finished he got in the car and went to ride the back end of the parade – typical of Bob Hope for a repeat performance. And he was that way through most of the tournaments that I saw up there. There was a lot of great entertainment and the Army Chorus was always there for it.

Smith: What was the charity that was benefitted?

Allen: It was the Vail Valley Charities. It was a group of charities that they did out there and he was responsible for a lot of it, because when you think about
when he started going to Vail as a young congressman in his condo out there, there was hardly anything there. So he was involved very much in the development and was very supportive of the development. There was the chapel there, which he was very much involved in. A variety of things. So it was really a second home to him, but a more casual home. At the times I was out there, it was just entirely different than Rancho Mirage.

Smith: Penny would say the office facilities were not the best.

Allen: The office facilities were not good. They were in the house, sort of a triple-decker, and they were down at the bottom, which wasn’t a full floor, it was very close.

Smith: I think it was likened to the Black Hole of Calcutta.

Allen: It was. There was not privacy among the people that were there, and it was tough. I think she enjoyed the activity outside, but she was anxious to get back to her office in California.

Smith: People think of this notion of the imperial ex-presidency – they make all this money and they have all these staff. In fact, it was a very small staff.

Allen: It was. He had a small staff.

Smith: He supplemented their salaries.

Allen: He supplemented their salaries. The Foundation helped with one salary because we got a lot of help out of Penny and so we supplemented that. He had a very small staff. I don’t think he was demanding, in the sense that he wanted things done when he wanted them done. But I don’t think there was a lot that he wanted done. I think he was that kind of a person. He wasn’t out selling things, he wasn’t out like Carter or somebody is constantly on the move or Clinton now. He was pretty well in there and he did not do a lot of outside speaking – so he didn’t have as great a need for the staff. He liked the quarters, they were kind of close out there. They were nice quarters. I know you’ve told the story, and I have a very similar story, when we were out there one time planning the funeral and we used the conference room next to his office and one of the staff had stuck their head in the door and said, “The
President wants to see you.” I went in, and I don’t know how long we met, and said to me, “Well, tell me, have you buried me yet?” And I said, “Yeah, we’re even thinking about talking about burying your wife.” And he laughed. Boy, he had taken a bad fall that day before. A really bad fall. He showed me the stitches and that was some of the first signs that his age was really affecting him.

Smith: Was it a circulatory problem in part?

Allen: Whatever you get with old age. I think it was partly that, certainly part of it. Eventually it was required by his doctors, when he got on his feet to count to ten before he’d walk. Well, you can imagine telling him to count to ten. He’d go: one, five, ten, and start moving. He wasn’t going to do that. But I think they were doing it so he’d get his bearings before he moved. He’d taken a couple of falls.

Smith: And I know Mrs. Ford was resistant to the idea of bringing in outside help.

Allen: Yeah, she really was. She just didn’t want to do it. She wanted to be the caretaker and it’s part of the love story. That’s part of the deal.

Smith: Also, I think part of it was a reluctance to acknowledge that it was necessary.

Allen: Yeah, I’m sure it was that, too. I’m sure that’s part of it, but she did have a great deal of reluctance. Finally, she gave in. As I was telling you about the last visit I had out there, I always, as I was walking through the living room there was a very attractive card table – it was really more of a game table that was in that window overlooking the golf course, where I think they played a little cards or whatever they did there. And I looked over at it because I knew they liked it, and there on the table was the casket flag, folded, in a case, sitting in the middle of the table. She wasn’t going to let that be far away from her.

Smith: Did they watch much television?

Allen: I think they watched quite a bit of television. I really do. I think they liked game shows and things like that – I think they really did. And of course, he loved sports, so he had sports on all the time. Of course, he watched the soap
opers when Steve was in the soap operas. I understand he would close the
door, almost so nobody would see him, and turn the TV on so he could watch
Steve in the soap operas.

Smith: I think he watched C-Span a fair amount, too.

Allen: I think he did, too. He liked that type of show, so I expect they would watch it
quite a bit. Contrary to the current president, who apparently doesn’t read
papers or like television.

Smith: Did you know that President Bush was going to stop for a visit there that last
year – remember, when he was out in California?

Allen: I did not know. I had heard that maybe he was, and that somebody said it was
a wise thing. And it was, it was a good thing. I think the president appreciated
it. He was going through some really difficult times, but it meant a lot to him.
He was lonely, in a sense, because he had had such an active life and traveled
so much. And then people always had the feeling they would be imposing on
him. Either telephone calls or visits were very important. I think when
Secretary Rumsfeld went out there on Thanksgiving Day and presented him
his Navy hat for his carrier, it was just huge to him. He just missed that – so
visitors were really important to him. Very important to him.

Smith: In terms of the development of this place, this first draft – back in ’81, how
was that put together – the content? Did he have any input on that?

Allen: As I said, I was not a member of the planning committee, I became involved
in the dedication. It was my understanding that he had a lot of involvement
originally and I don’t think they saw what this was going to come to be. It
really was a museum, quiet, sedate, and there was an attitude of the committee
that if we build it, they will come. Three million dollars is an awful lot of
money to have in the kitty to do what you’ve got to do. And, for doing
nothing, that was a lot of money. But he was proud of it and it was attractive,
it served its purpose very well for a good time, but it changed dramatically
after that. I think he had a lot of input, he certainly had a lot of input into the
selection of the location. He was always so pleased…it was Dick Gillett who
was so close to him. Dick was the chairman of Old Kent and he was

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recognized as sort a visionary in the community and a lot of what happened in
Grand Rapids over time. Dick told me there was only one place for the
museum, it’s right downtown.

Smith: What had been on this site?

Allen: Old factories and parking lots. There was an old schoolhouse. It created
probably one of the worst relationships he ever had with one of the property
owners here. Bob Sullivan owned a good chunk of the property – he had a
furniture store and a bar and he held them up pretty good financially. He
never forgot that. He’d bring that up to me. There were certain things he’d
bring up quite frequently to me and that was one of them.

Smith: Such as?

Allen: Well, there were people, as I mentioned that he thought were too aggressive
or who were bad guys and he would not let me forget who they were, just in
case I had forgotten. He would let me know that. There weren’t a lot of them
and he was so guarded in doing it, he didn’t want to call them really nasty
names, but he just…

Smith: I remember when we took him the first time through the revamped museum. I
think he was a little uncomfortable with the disco. It was Mrs. Ford who came
to our rescue, and she said, “It’s so fresh and original.” Which may have been
a euphemism, but she ‘got it.’ And because she got it, eventually he probably
got it.

Allen: He was on the verge of that – Is this presidential or not? – in his own mind,
and she took him back. Although, if you remember, there was one thing that
she said we could not have. We discussed a hologram of the president in his
office – and he didn’t know what a hologram was when we were sitting at this
table, and they were going over some of the changes that you had made, and
she was there, too. There was the beginning of something really different for
him. So we talked to him about that, and I could tell he didn’t know. I knew
he’d been to Disneyland several times – he liked it. I said, “Did you ever go
to the Haunted House?” That was the worst mistake I ever made. I said, “Oh,
yeah. Remember those ghosts that were floating around?” “That’s a hologram.” “Oh, that’s kind of neat.”

All of a sudden I looked over at Mrs. Ford, she said, “No ghosts of President Ford in the museum.” I said, “Okay.” But that was the only thing she didn’t authorize. But I think she knew she was going to be responsible to get him comfortable.

Smith: Put it this way – she would be the interpreter of popular culture.

Allen: She’d know about a discotheque. He may not quite know what a discotheque was.

Smith: She has a marvelous sense of humor. Sometimes salty.

The following section in italics is closed until the death of Mrs. Ford:

Allen: Sometimes salty – she does. I heard some of that, I might have already mentioned – on the last visit when we were talking about being that old and she said, “If I’d known I was going to be this old, I’d have behaved better.” She said it quite seriously, and then she broke into that big smile and said, “But boy, I had fun.” The dancing on the table in the Cabinet Room, and the motorcycle thing, and the conversation at that – “If you’d married her you might have been the president of Steelcase.” She just had that way about her. She had a way about kind of poking it to him at dinner settings and everything – “Oh, Jerry, come on.” You could see him respond to her right away.

Smith: The famous line was - remember at the dedication at Pantland?

Allen: The renovation of the 1913 Room, she said, “You could use a little renovation yourself.” And he used that line a lot after that. It was a great line. You wonder how many lines she might have had over the course of time that the kids probably know, too, that have just got to be classics. She does have a tremendous spark to her.

Smith: That’s well put.

Allen: She’s never lost that. Even at this stage in her life – even in her mourning, she’ll pop up with some pretty Betty Ford-type statements.
Smith: It must have been terribly frustrating to outlive their friends.

Allen: Well, that was a discussion that I had with her. I know, personally, that quite often there would be events that President Ford would ask me to put together an invitation list. I’d put together this list and he would look at it and say, “Gosh, Marty, there’s got to be a lot of names missing.” I said, “Well, I feel badly if there was.” And he’d start – then all of a sudden he look and he’d say, “They’re all gone.” I said, “Yes, sir, you’ve outlived them.” And I think the difficulty that Betty’s having is the same thing. She’s ninety years old and she’s in the desert and some of the people who are her friends in the desert don’t stay in the desert. But even the ones that do, it was very difficult – difficult enough for her to break out and to be with friends. But there aren’t that many. Mrs. Annenberg’s not well – and I think it’s very difficult.

I think that’s why they were so close at the end. This romance kind of got relit, if you will. I just read something in, I don’t know if it was Time or, I don’t know, but it’s a great article by Kirk Douglas growing old. He said, “I really got romantic when I got ninety.” In a way, their closeness, they just have each other so much and they are so close together, then to lose one is terribly difficult. He always told me he was going to go first. She would survive him. He talked that way in different conversations we had, planning things. He’d always say, “Make sure the Foundation takes care of her, she’ll be the person there and she won’t be that active, but just make sure she’s taken care of.” I said, “Don’t worry, she’ll be well taken care of.”

Smith: Do you think part of that was because he couldn’t contemplate the reverse? He could not have imagined having her gone?

Allen: Yeah, it would have been even harder for him. As so often happens in relationships like that, when somebody passes, the other passes away. I always thought to myself, I wonder if he really would have been able to survive. He got so close and so dependent on her and that happens in marriages. It is quite often the wife who becomes the strength of it. It’s not unique. When you’re watching a football game and they put a camera on a guy, he always says, “Hi, Mom.” He never says, “Hi, Dad.” He always says, “Hi, Mom.” It’s that motherhood strength that’s there.
Smith: Were there things about the funeral that surprised you?

Allen: The biggest surprise to me and the most emotional part for me…not giving arrival remarks. It was what I call ‘going home.’ When we got on Air Force One at Andrews and the music struck up *Going Home*, my first reaction - my God, I’ve got to give a little talk here pretty quick. But it disappeared kind of quick. And then we had that kind of University of Michigan drop, and we came down to the ground and saw the Michigan band.

But I rode with Dick Ford in the car, and I was absolutely amazed at the turnout. And I’ve lived here all my life. It moved Dick who had lived here all his life and myself, it really just moved us how many – we knew there’d be crowds – we’d planned on crowds – we planned right down to how many people we could get in the front door of this place per hour, because we knew how many hours it was going to be, and we exceeded it by twenty thousand people. And I know there would have been even more, but the word kind of got out that this is the end. So that, more than anything, was probably the most moving part of it.

The other parts were, again, the reaction of those people in his Cabinet. People at that level, how they suffered the loss, visibly. Kissinger had a little reception for them in Washington, and they all came. It was kind of their wake, if you will. I went to that and I just really kind of stood off to the side and watched them. You could feel the closeness of them, and that was a very strong part in my estimation.

Smith: Were you in Blair House at all during those days when she…tell us about it.

Allen: Well, she was in Blair House. The family was there and she had different groups that would come in – the diplomatic corps, of course – and then President Bush came in, I think – Clinton maybe came in. Then some of the close friends who were really the honorary pallbearers and a few of the people giving tribute. She was certainly alert, but she was certainly struggling. There just was no question about it. Susan was close by. The other kids were. It was a very tough time.

Smith: The Nixon family came, the Johnson girls came.
Allen: All the presidents’ families came, yeah. So that was quite an occasion to see that. To be in the heart of an event like that. I always remember Rich DeVos. Here’s Rich DeVos, one of the richest people in the country. He’s an honorary pallbearer, we’re standing outside the Capitol steps, waiting for the remains to come and then march up the steps. Rich leaned to me and he said, “I never thought, ever in my lifetime, I would be standing doing what I am today.” Now here’s a man who is everything. But he was just extremely moved by it, and he was a little bit physically shaken, but the military is amazing. Somebody spotted that and all of a sudden there was a full uniformed Army guy saying, “Mr. DeVos, we’ll take you in another way.” “No, I want you to take me up the steps, I want to go up the steps.” So a lot of those things that just stick with you. Then of course, the crowds that night.

I went out and walked the crowds for a long time. The police chief came to me afterwards, the chief of police asked to see me. He came to thank me, and thank the Ford family for his officers participating. I said, “Wait a minute. We’ve got to turn that around, you did a magnificent…” They didn’t have anything to do. He said, “I got very concerned with this huge line curling around down here. It’s night and it’s cold. These people don’t know each other. I called the squad.” I said, “You’d better go out and check the line.” They went and they got to the end of the line and called him back. “They’re singing Christmas carols, they’re singing patriotic songs. They’re just greeting each other.” So the chief said, “Do one other thing, stay at the end of the line, just so people that are coming know that they’ve got five hours wait, but you’ll be there to protect them.” Those kind of things are just…you could tell a hundred stories, I guess. We probably should have written a book about it, it’s such an amazing story.

Smith: A couple of things. Subsequent to that, you greeted a couple of presidents.

Allen: Yes. President Bush came here. There’s an acronym, OTR, Off The Record visit. He came, I met him at the back, we came around the front. He had a military person with a bouquet of flowers. He was quite conversant. Went into the site, spent some time there, came out and he was very quiet. I think it had moved him that he was standing at the site of the president. He came out and he said to me, “I just marvel at this site and this location – here in the middle
of a city, on a river, what a marvelous place. It is just so much Jerry Ford.” Then he said his goodbye’s and walked to the car.

Clinton came. Clinton didn’t come quite as prepared. He was giving a speech across the river, but then his staff said, “Can you get him something?” I said, “What?” “A nice bouquet of flowers.” And he started talking to me out of the car. It’s kind of the same mood as Bush was. He spent a long time at the site, a long time. Came out, made the same, similar remark, “This is Jerry Ford.” It’s just peaceful in a busy setting, it’s just peaceful. He started asking me, “Did you have to get state and city approval to bury him?” I said, “No, it’s a federal site.” It’s not a city or state site, so they didn’t have to get approval. He was talking about the river again, he said, “You know, we’re on the river…”

The end of that story is kind of interesting. He didn’t go back and get in his car. I was reminded of President Ford saying to me, “This guy is an amazing communicator, a terrible manager of his life and other things, but he’s just an amazing communicator.” He looked at me and he said, “Why don’t you and I take a walk?” I’ve never met the guy in my life. He kind of looked at his staff guy and he said, “How much time do we have?” He said, “You’ve got time.” So, instead of getting in his car, we walked in the front. He asked me a lot of questions about the museum, which I answered, and then we started walking across the bridge and there were people on the bridge that didn’t realize that they were going to see Bill Clinton here in a second.

His Secret Service were leading him and there was an elderly African-American man coming across and they kind of politely asked, and he spotted him and he told the Secret Service, “Radio that guy and tell him to leave that man alone. I want to talk to him.” So he goes over and talks – typical of Clinton. Gets up to the top of the bridge and there’s a family sitting there, just looking at the river, and he goes over to them. They don’t even see him coming and all of a sudden he’s there and he’s talking to them.

In the meantime, across the windows over at the building where he was supposed to speak, there’s a reception he’s supposed to be at and all these people have got their noses against the window and he’s talking to these
people as he’s going across. He gets on the other side and he thanks me and he starts walking to the building. Then he turns around and comes back. “Oh, there’s something I want to tell you. I want to tell you without even knowing how valuable you are to President Ford and have been to President Ford through his lifetime. I need that now, I need to have somebody that I can trust.”

My wheels are turning, I think, “I can hear President Ford say, ‘He’s conning you Marty, he’s saying all the right things to you.’” And I think he was half sincere, but it was vintage Clinton. He took advantage of every situation he could to make himself – and he gave a marvelous speech. Here’s he in one of the most conservative cities in Grand Rapids, got a packed house and he spoke to them like he was a conservative.

Smith: You saw a pro at work.

Allen: Yeah, he’s a pro. He’s absolutely a pro. And they wrote a little article in the paper about him, because they were so amazed he came over and talked to me. I didn’t tell them everything I told here, but he is a pro.

Smith: I also think, as much as he can be, I think Clinton was grateful for the lifeline that Ford threw him at a time when there were no other Republicans who were willing to…

Allen: That had to mean a lot to him. This cool character, he had to be desperate at that time and to have somebody give him that lifeline had to be extremely valuable. But he spoke very highly of him, as you’d expect, but it was a very interesting experience. It was interesting how long he stayed there. I guess he is a religious man, and you could tell he was pretty serious in there.

We’ve had other guests, the one that was most awkward was the Attorney General [Gonzalez], just before he was fired. He was here and we treated him the same way. He went in and paid his respects. But he had a little extra time so he wanted to go into the exhibit and so we skipped the discotheque and went right to Watergate. Of course, the part came on about the attorney general, and I thought, my God this guy is about ready to be canned and he’s
sitting here looking…thinking what kind of a guy is this that’s showing me this exhibit.

Yeah, we’ve had a lot of interesting guests here and the public, I guess it’s more surprising to me than to you because you’ve studied burial sites and tombs and graves of presidents, but I’m just really amazed at the number of people that go there, in a very dignified way. I’ve gone out there on a number of occasions just to talk to them. It is very moving for people to go to a site like this.

Smith: It transforms the site.

Allen: Oh, yeah, it does. And I have to tell you, I’ve not been to all the sites. You have, but there is something about that site – the wrought iron fence around it and the children’s tree that they gave their parents on their 45th wedding anniversary, and how we now decorate that, and always had planned to because they loved Christmas and I told Mrs. Ford we would do that. We would decorate that tree, which meant a lot to her. And she added a dimension to the site – she called me the first time she’d gone there - she told me it needed more flowers, and we took care of that. But after she’d gotten back after the funeral, she said, “We need a couple of benches out there where people can sit down for meditation.”

That was a great move, not only for the public, but for the kids when they go in there. They sit there a long time. And I’m always glad that I suggested to her, for her consideration to put their favorite prayer, Proverbs, in between those two benches, which a lot of people ask about, because it’s a great thing to tell them the meaning of those proverbs to the president and Mrs. Ford.

Smith: That’s a good note on which to end.
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this. Being in this room must bring back a lot of memories.

DeWinter: Yes.

Smith: How did it all start?

DeWinter: It started by me getting a call from Paul Newhof, (who was a structural engineer), at 12:30 one Friday afternoon. I had a small architectural office of four people, and he asked if I was going to try to get the Ford Museum project. I said that it will probably go to some New York architect. To which he replied, President Ford stated they are going to select an architect from his district. I knew all the architects in his district so I thought that I would throw my hat in the ring and see what happens. So from 12:30 on that Friday (it was due at five o’clock that day), I threw things together showing some of the work that I’d done in the past, and said I’d like to be the architect. From that they narrowed down to seven architects who were invited to be interviewed by a committee of three. From that they narrowed it down to three architects to be interviewed by the full committee – a committee of about twenty-five people.

Smith: Now, this site had already been selected?

DeWinter: This site on the River had been selected, thanks to Mary Ann Keeler. Fred Meijer had a site where the Meijer Gardens are now, and he wanted to have the site out there. Mary Ann said, “It’s got to be downtown.” Later Fred said to me, “Mary Ann was right. It had to be downtown. It’s a stunning place.” I think what really helped get the job was showing them some examples of work that were never built. Based upon the presentation, they selected me as the architect, and then said, “What do we do next?”
I said, “First of all, I’d like you to give me about three people to talk to instead of trying to talk to twenty-five people.” Subsequently Jordan Sheperd was appointed as the chairman together with Dave LaClaire and Fred Meijer. That’s how I got acquainted with Fred. I’d known David and Jordan for a long time. Also, I stated that I would like to talk to President Ford if we’re going to design a building to commemorate his Presidency.

Smith: Let me back up for just a moment. Presumably, was he involved? He obviously had to be notified, but was he involved at all in the selection process?

DeWinter: No. President Ford was not involved at all in the selection process. Arrangements were made for me to meet President Ford in Vail in the summer of 1977. I met with him in his condo at Vail and he was the consummate gentleman. Betty was there at the time, but she was not well.

Smith: Was that discernable?

DeWinter: Oh, very much so. She came from one room into our room. It was just President Ford and me, and he very graciously got up and introduced me to her and escorted her back into the private quarters and we went on with our discussion. I said, “President Ford, what would you like this museum to say?” He responded that there were three things: “I’d like to memorialize some of my quotes.” Statements that he made, and these quotes are now reflected engraved in the marble wall at the building’s entrance. Another thing he wanted was to have a part of the museum which celebrated the First Lady. Because the First Lady received many gifts or memorabilia so we established a part of the museum for their display. The third thing that President Ford wanted was a full-size Oval Office. I say full-size because the Truman Library has an abbreviated size. So that was kind of fun. I went to Washington to visit the Oval Office. There were no drawings of it, so we had to measure and create our own drawings for an exact replica which we have here. I then made some trips around – I don’t know if you want me to tell you how I conceived of the design.
Smith: Sure. Let me step back a minute because you talk about the message that he wanted the museum to send and that is obviously critical. But then there is the whole other issue of what he wanted the building to look like. Or what message he wanted the building to send.

DeWinter: He never spoke to me about what the building should look like. He was an ideal client, meaning he didn’t have preconceived ideas about the design. He said he’d like those quotation remarks, a place for Betty, and the Oval Office. Those three things were his only stipulation.

I traveled to Abilene for the Eisenhower Museum, and Independence for Truman’s library. I also went to Washington. At that time the Kennedy Museum was not under construction, but all the drawings were finished and I had the opportunity to look at what they were doing, etc. One of my earliest memories was going through the process of visiting the Eisenhower Museum. There was a windowless room, in which you sat on folding chairs, waiting for the show to start. All I could see was the bald head of the guy right in front of me. It was kind of a depressing entry into the Museum. In talking about the concept, the site that was chosen consisted of three city blocks and if you recall, this site was full of factories.

Smith: And the little red schoolhouse.

DeWinter: Oh, yes, the little red schoolhouse is a story in itself, isn’t it? It mysteriously burned down one night. But getting back to the Design, the chosen site had a beautiful view of the the skyline of the city with an elevated expressway behind us. Would you like me to talk about the concept?

Smith: Absolutely.

DeWinter: Okay, we established that the building was going to be around 40,000 square feet. The Eisenhower Museum was all on one floor. A one story building would have had no presence at all competing against the elevated expressway behind the site. I felt it had to be at least two stories, so we put about 20,000 square feet on the floor, roughly. I started with this idea and then I wanted to expand the riverfront elevation, and shrink the exposure to the expressway. Finally we arrived at the minimal exposure to the expressway as a point, and
we radiated out and so it kind of evolved into a triangular expression and the second thing that I wanted was to have a glass wall exposed to the river. This was never done before and I had all kinds of opposition from Will Jones who was appointed as a consultant to the museum committee. We talked about it. He said we couldn’t do that because we have all these presidential exhibits and the solar radiation, of ultra violet light.

Smith: Yes, the light issues with the artifacts and documents.

DeWinter: I said, “Okay, one way to do that is to have a big overhang.” First of all that’s east, not west, so we have an eastern sun, and the production facility and so on is down below. All the exhibits are up here. And so I picked this corner for administrative offices to block out the sun. And the wall adjacent to the stairway was designed as a non-bearing wall. There is only one bearing point at the end of it. Again, it was to shield the exhibits, and I did everything I could to finally satisfied him that we could have a wall of glass on the river.

Smith: Is the point of the glass wall to, in effect, reflect the city? Which Jerry Ford reflects so many ways?

DeWinter: Oh because it’s mirror glass, yes. And from across the river, it reflects the city. That was by design, as is the fountain and the pool, Would you like to hear about this?

Smith: Yes, we’d love to hear the origins.

DeWinter: See all the serpentine steps walking up to the pool – I wanted to have a reflecting pool in front of the Museum and originally I had a grass bank on the east side of the reflecting pool. We were under construction and one of the committee members, Mary Ann Keeler was walking on the sidewalk and she couldn’t see the pool. She talks to Fred, Fred said, “Mary Ann can’t see that pool, we have to take that pool out.” We already had half the pool built. “I said, “Wait a minute, maybe if I tried something else.” And I did some abstract sketching, and I said, “You know, we’re centered on that little patio out there which is used as a band [stand].” And so I created this, sort of, as bleacher seats for special events when we’re having a concert and, in effect, to give Mary Ann a way to walk up and see the pool. She said she was satisfied,
everybody was satisfied, and that’s a little serendipity because it adds to the design.

Smith: It’s become a real community gathering space. And the fountain – was it your initiative? Did other people want a fountain?

DeWinter: Originally, it was my initiative, the fountain came about because at the time there were factories over the west side of the River. The university wasn’t here. And even that bridge that spans the river had only a dirt floor. I reasoned that everybody is attracted to fountains, so let’s put a fountain on the west side of the river. I wanted it to go as high as the building (about forty feet high) as an attraction for people over on the east side of the river to come to the west side. The sort of stepped rapids is kind of an echo of the Grand Rapids, so I wanted to create this pool and rapids. It worked out very well. [The original design did not include that spaceman out there. That came later.]

Smith: Well, it’s become such a signature piece, attraction. It’s almost the equivalent on this side of the river of the Calder on the other side of the river.

DeWinter: Yes, it is!

Smith: It's a real landmark. Clearly, it’s a defining landmark for Grand Rapids. And, by the way, isn’t it ironic that Gerald Ford, who was not – as attentive as he was as a congressman to his local district – he was never really known as the ‘bring home the bacon’ kind of guy. You don’t have military bases in this district; and yet, the one obvious thing for which he secured funding was the Calder, which you don’t automatically think of as a Gerald Ford kind of piece.

DeWinter: I did not know that. Did President Ford secure the funding when he was our Representative?

Smith: National Endowment for the Arts.

DeWinter: I didn’t know that.

Smith: And you mentioned the spaceman. Because, of course, he didn’t want a statue of himself, and the only advice he gave them – he was delighted with the spaceman – but he said, “Whatever you do, make sure it’s representational
art.” He would get the money for the Calder, but he didn’t really want one of his own.

And that brings us to this building, which is fascinating in so many ways because this is a pretty conservative town and I can imagine people at first blush looking at what you had in mind - it’s not avant garde, but it is pushing the envelope in some ways.

DeWinter: Yes.

Smith: What was the initial reaction? What was the reaction within the group, the planning group, and did it evolve or was pretty much your original vision as you sketched it out, built?

DeWinter: Oh, yes, exactly. I don’t think I had any compromises. I didn’t feel I had to make any compromises. Jordon Sheperd was a very – did you know Jordon?

Smith: I did not as well as I wish I had.

DeWinter: He was a delightful gentleman. And Fred Meijer, of course you know him, and Dave LaClaire, just perfect. David is always interested in the arts and Fred was the businessman. And I’ll tell you a little anecdote about Fred. The fact that we read presidential museums now cost $80 million or $100 million, something like that. We had hardly any money. President Ford had his library in Ann Arbor, he wanted to have a museum in his home district – the first one that split the library and museum.

Smith: And it will never happen again.

DeWinter: I’m glad we have the museum over here. But anyway, raising the money was something. We were just starting construction and the money was not coming in. Fred said to the committee, “Look, if we don’t start, we’re not going to finish. So we’ve got to get started and if we don’t have enough money to finish, well, we’ll just have to truck it out.” He said, “I remember the first time I built a warehouse in Lansing. I had enough money to buy the steel and put it up and I didn’t have enough money to finish the building. We put plywood panels on the thing until I got more money to finish it. And there were big articles in the paper about Meijer’s going broke. But he found more
money and finished construction. His point was if we don’t start construction, we’re never going to finish it.” That’s Fred’s philosophy, you know.

Smith: Well, it sounds like Fred was a very significant factor in this.

DeWinter: Oh, he was. For example, when they narrowed it down to three architects, there were three firms, I had the smallest firm – only a four-man firm. There was a medium sized firm about twenty people. And then a large firm, Daverman, which had a hundred people. And so we met at Fred’s office over on Walker Avenue. He said, “Well, now we’ve got you three architects, how do we select one of you? Do we have you come around with ideas that we can look at?” I said, “I have a suggestion, why don’t you set aside an afternoon, give each of the three of us, an hour to tell you why you should hire us to be your architect? We don’t even know what the problems are, how can we propose a solution?” So Fred said, “It seems like a reasonable idea.” A few weeks later at an appointed time we went in and put on our dog and pony show and I was fortunate enough to be the selected architect.

Smith: When you came up with the building design, at some point obviously the group reacted, approved it. At that point, was the President involved?

DeWinter: I don’t recall the President being involved until I was selected and then Fred said, “Well, what do we do now?” I said, “I’d like to have a meeting with President Ford.” (I’d met him years before, just in passing, when he was a representative.) So arrangements were made a few months later to meet with President Ford. To my knowledge, President Ford did not try to manage the design process.

Smith: Right. Do you remember – at some point he saw your model, your design for the first time. He obviously approved of what you’d done.

DeWinter: Yeah, very diplomatically. He didn’t say, “Oh, that’s too modernistic, or that’s…” I can’t say enough about this person as a man. He made a significant move by getting us out of the war, Vietnam, and letting Nixon go free. That’s all part of the history.
Smith: Then, I assume you found yourself working with the exhibit designers. How was the original storyline, for lack of a better word, and the exhibits themselves developed? Was there input from the committee? Was there kind of a give and take, were you consulted? How did that develop? Because obviously there is a symbiotic relationship between the architect and the storytellers.

DeWinter: We worked very well. Staples and Charles were the interior exhibit designers. We worked closely together. When I designed the building I had, thanks to Will Jones, a program that quantified how much space should be used on exhibits and how much space should be allocated for production facilities. I had identified that and, included the grand stairway leading to the second floor. This was an intentional design. I did not want to bring all the people upstairs by way of an elevator. I didn’t feel that it was really necessary because people in a wheelchair had an elevator to take care of them. There is nothing wrong with walking up one flight, if there is an elevator available.

Smith: In terms of the story itself, how that was developed, the exhibits - was it in part from members of the committee?

DeWinter: Jerry Ford ran for Congress in the late 40s and his first office was a Quonset hut. Will Jones was quite instrumental, having a background in exhibits in presidential museums and I don’t think that the committee, Jordan Sheperd, LaClaire and Fred, really got involved in the exhibit design. I know, for example, Will Jones said, he wanted to have all lighting no higher than twelve feet above the floor.

If we have a space frame we can put the lighting at the lower cord of the structure which is twelve feet above the floor. That’s where we have all the lighting. I didn’t want to have a ceiling at that level because it would be only twelve foot high. Consequently, I put the space frame in there which is eight feet deep so we have essentially a twenty foot ceiling but with a lighting grid twelve feet high.

These are some of the things that came about in my interaction with Will Jones and the exhibit. I mentioned the theater on the first floor and the outside
glass wall was intentionally designed with an operational curtain. When people are seated waiting for the video to come on, they can enjoy the river and surroundings. Then when the show starts, a motorized track goes back, covering the glass wall with a lightproof curtain. All that was designed with the exhibit designer and me.

Smith: And, in fact, it’s kind of a theatrical element with the curtain.

DeWinter: Yes.

Smith: The Grand Rapids skyline is almost part of the exhibit.

DeWinter: Exactly. All part of the building and exhibit design.

Smith: When the building, the model, was unveiled and drawings appeared, what kind of local reaction did you get?

DeWinter: I don’t know, but President Ford came during the construction process. He came quite often, every few months. I would greet him and we would walk through the construction project wearing hard hats. Even before we broke ground, however, we had a meeting with the three committee members and President Ford. We had built a model of the building which incidentally, is from this corner to the other corner, 300 feet long.

Smith: Really?

DeWinter: This façade. Symbolism. Football field is 300 feet long.

Smith: Perfect.

DeWinter: It’s a right triangle with the hypotenuse glass wall facing the river.

Smith: This office space, which is clearly an office for him - but was this always intended as Foundation space?

DeWinter: No. The Foundation had nothing to do with this office. This office was for the administrative offices for the museum. And the Foundation, I think, was born out of the need to raise money for the museum.

Smith: But you always intended to have an office for him in the building?
DeWinter: Absolutely. The committee wanted to have an office for him in the building. I think this is about the most spectacular setting for a presidential office anywhere. I’m looking at the picture of President Ford, on the desk, of him beneath the presidential seal. That seal was not part of the program. I built a model of the stairway and that solid corduroy wall needed a focal point. I decided that a ten foot diameter circle of the presidential seal was appropriate and proposed it to the committee. It was carved in place. The seal consists of four five-foot square limestone blocks put together and that represents the ten-foot diameter circle. A marvelous carver was up there on scaffolding – I think it took him the better part of a month with a chisel, laying it out and carving it in place.

Smith: I had no idea. Well, and it turned out to be the perfect and moving backdrop for the lying in state.

DeWinter: Yes. Oh, that reminds me of the memorial garden I visited of the Eisenhower Museum.

Smith: Yeah, what do you think of the chapel, the Place of Meditation? What was your opinion of the little chapel where he is buried?

DeWinter: At Eisenhower? Well, it was okay, but it just didn’t seem to tie into the museum at all.

Smith: Yeah.

DeWinter: That was interesting and I said to the Ford committee, “Should I design a memorial gardens or a burial site for the President and his wife?” “Why?” “Well, because Eisenhower has it, Truman has it, there at the museum. They said, “Yes, but how do you talk to the President about something like that?” I said, “It’s part of my job. I’ll talk to him.” So I asked the President the next time I had a meeting with him and he said, “Well, let me talk to Betty about that and I’ll get back to you.” He did talk to Betty and then said, “Yes, that’ll be fine.” I thought that was a good location for the memorial gardens. You probably know that when President Ford died, all they had to do was lift this slab up – the crypt had already been in place for thirty years, all set, ready to go. I was very pleased with how this came out.
Smith: Was that hill always there? Or was that created?

DeWinter: It was created. It was a flat site and we constructed a concrete wall like a portion of an orange peel, and created the mound behind it and planted pine trees on that. That was all part of the design concept. And it worked out fine for him.

How is Betty’s health?

Smith: Physically, she’s doing okay.

DeWinter: She’s okay?

Smith: Yeah, she’s okay. I think she is pretty reclusive, she tells people she’s retired. But I think she’s never gotten over his loss. I think that that weighs pretty heavily.

DeWinter: Yes, I can appreciate that.

Smith: And of course Marty tells the story about them being on the bridge one day and she’d never seen the burial site. And she said something to him about, “Don’t you think I ought to see where people are going to dance on my grave?”

DeWinter: She was a dancer, wasn’t she?

Smith: She was. So she was very impressed. Well, Bill Clinton – I don’t know if you’ve heard this or not – but when Bill Clinton dropped by, he stopped by the gravesite and just looked around and said, “This is so Jerry Ford. This is perfect Jerry Ford.” Calm, peaceful, understated.

DeWinter: That was it.

Smith: Yeah. They got the place built. Do you have memories about the opening, the dedication?

DeWinter: Oh yes, that was a show, wasn’t it? Were you here?

Smith: I wasn’t here for the original, no.
DeWinter: You’ve probably seen the photograph of all of the dignitaries who attended the dedication.

Smith: Yeah.

DeWinter: And everybody who was anybody came to that dedication. It was incredible! I remember coming across over here and Teddy Kennedy – (thirty years younger then) – was trying to catch a ride from here over to the hotel. The Pantlind was done at the time, and so Bob Hope along with other celebrities was present at the opening. I guess that kind of reflected how he was loved by so many people.

Smith: Was it difficult for you – it’s your baby – when they felt the need for additional space?

DeWinter: The answer is yes.

Smith: But I have to tell you it’s invisible to the vast majority of people. It doesn’t do violence to the original design

DeWinter: I was disappointed that I wasn’t asked to be involved in the addition. The only thing I questioned about it was, “Does that outdoor table and chairs ever get used?”

Smith: I don’t think so.

DeWinter: I wouldn’t think so either, and would have handled it differently.

Smith: What would you have done differently?

DeWinter: It’s a logical place for an addition, but I wouldn’t have tried to compete with the main design and would have made it more subordinate to the original structure.

Smith: Still, this has got to be a source of real pride.

DeWinter: Of course, I think back thirty years ago and the two icons of my architectural practice are right here – the hotel across the river and this Museum. That thirty story hotel across the river was quite a monument to a couple of local boys.
Smith: And a risk.

DeWinter: Oh, yeah.

Smith: It had to have been a leap of faith when it was built.

DeWinter: They didn’t know they wanted to get in the hotel business. Actually, I went to them with an idea.

Smith: Actually the two are in some ways inseparable, because one senses that collectively, they are a catalyst for what’s followed.

DeWinter: No question about that. When the hotel was built, to my knowledge, there was only one restaurant outside of the hotel in downtown. It was across the street, called Churchhill’s. That, together with the renovation of the Pantlind Hotel, really stemmed the tide of decay which did surround an awful lot of Midwestern cities at the time. The genesis of that was that the city decided they needed a convention hall. Dick Gillette, chairman of the board of Old Kent Bank, and Rich DeVos, president of Amway were asked to raise the funds to build a symphony hall and exhibit hall. I was talking to another architect one day and said, “Isn’t that something? The city’s going to build a symphony hall and an exhibit hall, and all we have is a tired old rundown Pantlind Hotel to support it.” So I came up with an idea of a hotel, the tower, and I shared it with Rich DeVos, who was a friend of mine, and kind of convinced him that they ought to come into the city from the little town of Ada east of here. Consequently, Rich DeVos and Jay Van Andel have made an enormous impact in Grand Rapids.

Smith: And was that really the time when the city sort of rediscovered the river? One senses that the river was an afterthought before.

DeWinter: Industrial buildings occupied most of the west side of the River. Front Street ran alongside of the river in the location which is now the reflecting pool. There was a major city sewer under a street that originally was where the museum has been built. The original site for the museum was 150 feet to the south; however, that site was behind Indian Mounds and an abandoned street car bridge. Even though the cost of moving city utilities was about $150,000,
it was the right thing to do; that is, centering the building on a park that was already there and out from behind the Indian Mounds and the bridge.

Smith: That raises a cultural question, because we all know the stories about the Dutch influence in this area – the Dutch thrift and all of that. That prevailing culture - what challenges did that present, and how do you deal with that?

DeWinter: My parents and grandparents are Dutch.

Smith: So you had your bona fides in terms of cost-consciousness?

DeWinter: My father and mother never went to college, or even finished high school. He was a farmer, truck farm – raised vegetables, all that sort of thing. And I didn’t want to get dirt under my fingernails and continue to work on the farm so I decided to go to college. I am kind of an accidental architect. After I graduated from high school I started to work in construction. A few months later I decided that maybe there is more to life than just doing this grunt work so I went to the local junior college and enrolled in an engineering course. During my first year I met a couple of guys who were in pre-architecture. That sounded more interesting than an engineering career. So I switched to that and then went to the University of Michigan and became an architect.

Smith: And I assume the “Dutch influence” is less today than fifty years ago?

DeWinter: Oh, very much so.

Smith: People didn’t read Sunday papers?

DeWinter: Oh, no, no. My parents were quite liberal. I could play ball and ride a bike on Sunday. My wife’s parents would not allow her to ride a bicycle or even ride in a car. The family walked to church for services two times every Sunday.

Smith: I used to say the litmus test of how Grand Rapids had changed – remember when the arena was new? – can you imagine Elton John performing in Grand Rapids? Selling out eleven thousand seats! That just wouldn’t happen. That encapsulates it.

DeWinter: I know that Rich and Jay, when they decided to get into the hotel business, were confronted with the issue of being open on Sundays. At that time, the
Dutch Calvinistic tradition felt that Sunday was a day of rest and worship, and people should not be engaged in commercial activities on that day. Well, people get over it. The right fringe of thirty years ago is no longer in Grand Rapids. It’s much more of a cosmopolitan city today.

What a beautiful setting, isn’t it? Look at all those people out there.

Smith: He was so proud of this place.

DeWinter: President Ford?

Smith: President Ford. He obviously felt very good about what you had done. Do you remember the last time you saw him?

DeWinter: No, I don’t. I saw him many times during the construction and the dedication. I don’t remember the last time I saw him.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction when he died?

DeWinter: No. One of the things I do remember is I was across the river when those twenty-one jets came racing down the river. And the last one went right straight up. Remember that? Were you there?

Smith: Yeah.

DeWinter: That was incredible.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

DeWinter: Well, I’d say he was a great man. I wish we had a Congress which had more of the Jerry Fords in it today. He had enormous principles – I guess because he was born in this community and grew up here. He had firm convictions, including one to pardon Nixon for the benefit of the country, not for his benefit. He knew that it would go against him personally for doing that; nevertheless, it didn’t matter. It was the right thing to do for the country. And I think that historians have subsequently stated that.

Smith: I think he had the satisfaction of knowing before he died that most people had come around to that viewpoint.
DeWinter: I visited him on one occasion in his home in Palm Springs and was very fond of him and had a nice talk with Susan about a year ago. She was in Grand Rapids giving a talk and I told her some little anecdotes that she didn’t know about her father.

Smith: Is there anything about this place in retrospect that you wish you’d done differently?

DeWinter: Oh sure. For example, like one of the things that bothers me is – not the conceptual design – but the material of the floor downstairs. It’s a fabricated, manufactured marble floor. I originally specified granite because it will never wear out. I had an inch and an eighth granite specified, but it would have cost an extra few hundred thousand dollars, so we put this in, which is thin – about a half inch thick instead of an inch and an eighth thick of granite. That always bothered me a little bit. I like the way the glass has functioned. All the exterior around the glass is stainless steel and it’s just a bright finish. It looks good today. I’m happy with it. I’m not happy with those little lights along the top and not happy with the huge eight foot high Ford Presidential Museum letters across the fascia – that offends me a little bit.

Smith: I understand. But the building, your concept has certainly been more than vindicated. The whole package – it seems natural. It seems like, “Of course,” and that’s the ultimate measure of success in some ways.

DeWinter: When Amway built the elliptical Marriott across the river - they selected a number of architects. I no longer had an architectural office at the time, but I was a consultant to it. They interviewed a lot of architects, including Venoly. He looked at Grand Rapids and said he thought that the Ford Museum was one of the most outstanding pieces of architecture in town. I thought that was kind of a nice complement.

Smith: That’s a very nice complement, and it’s the perfect note on which to end. Thank you.
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Smith: First of all, tell us about your dad and then the relationship that he had with President Ford.

Fisher: Well, I actually met President Ford because of my father, and it’s amazing. They are both Michigan people. Dad was born in Ohio, and went to Ohio State. But they had a very special relationship and I supposed it’s because of their Midwestern upbringing and their ability to be honest with each other. I think that Dad was a person who would always tell the truth. If you really didn’t want to know the truth, you wouldn’t want to ask him because he would tell it to you. But he didn’t talk a lot. He listened better than he spoke. He always spoke well, but I mean he was a good listener and he would let you sort of hang yourself before he would answer a question.

Smith: I’ve thought of this about President Ford – that there is a bit of cultural and geographical condescension toward Midwesterners. And in particular now because I’ve lived in a number of places and the way I phrase it is, people think because you talk slow, that means you think slow. And there is not necessarily a correlation between the two.

Fisher: No, I agree with you. I think of it as being someone who is very thoughtful, and who is thinking while they are talking. And they want to hold their ability to make a judgment.

Smith: No rush to judgment.

Fisher: Exactly. I believe that my father was very much like that, too. I know that he was there for the president all the time. Just for example, and I’m not going to be able to remember all the names, but he would come to Washington and meet with the president. I wouldn’t even know he was here. I’d run into him – my father. It was like we were totally separate people. This was his thing, but then my relationship with the president was different. But my father was
always a behind the scenes person. He was very intent on energy issues, and
Israel, of course, but always energy issues. He used to say that a lot of what is
happening now was going to happen. That’s interesting to me.

I think my father was very much a Republican, but I think he was a Jerry Ford
Republican.

Smith: How would you define that?

Fisher: A Jerry Ford Republican would be a more moderate Republican - a fiscally
conservative Republican. Values. But not the way it’s gone to the right with
the family value kind of stuff. It’s more about the human being and not about
the rhetoric.

Smith: When the president died there was a use of the word decency, in an almost
condescending way. He was “incredibly decent” – as if that’s a substitute for
bright, sophisticated - fill in the blank. And I think that probably also happens
sometimes to Midwesterners. They get branded.

Fisher: That’s probably right. Many of the ones that I respect are not quick to talk.
They are not quick to jump in. They want to hear what you have to say and
then they’ll tear it apart. But I don’t think decency and integrity and all of
those things are bad things to have. When the president died, I was, besides
being overwhelmed with emotion, I was grateful that people finally knew
what I knew.

Smith: I wore two hats that week because I was with ABC the first half of the week
and then with the family the second half. It was fascinating to watch inside the
media bubble, the degree to which they were surprised by the response and
how it grew day by day. And I think part of it was a reaction to the current
political climate. But I also think there was a whole generation of people who
were being introduced to him for the first time through those old grainy clips.
And it looked awfully good compared to what we have today.
Fisher: Right. Exactly. I exactly agree with you. And I also think that they saw a regular person. I think they saw somebody, not just because he was from the Midwest, he’d been in Washington – but it had never kind of corrupted him.

Smith: Would you say authenticity?

Fisher: Authenticity, absolutely. But sincerity along with it. Just getting back to this one little story that was always fun because Dad went to Ohio State, and the president went to Michigan and I went to Michigan. So we always had this kind of thing. But they always had a bet and every time Dad would introduce him, he would talk about this. It’s in my book that they had this bet - that he’d become the president, but Dad would become rich on the bet that they had between Ohio State and Michigan football. And when Daddy died, the president had given him $5 – it was always $5 – and he’d signed it, which is defacing the money and all of that sort of stuff. But Dad had framed it and put it in his office, and when Dad died and then I went to see Betty and the President out in Beaver Creek, I took it to him. I took that back to him, and I think he was really very touched by that.

So they had a very special relationship - the kind of thing where he would say, “Max, call me Jerry,” and he would say, “No, not as long as you are sitting in that chair. When you’re gone from there, we’ll go back.” They very much respected each other, and they talked all the time.

Smith: How did your paths cross with the Fords?

Fisher: I was living in New York and this was all at the change of the administration. There was a huge event, Michigan Salutes Milliken – Bill Milliken was our governor – and Nixon was supposed to be the keynote speaker. And then, of course, everything happened with Nixon, and so they didn’t have their keynote speaker and they had five thousand people coming to Colball(?) Hall. So my father called me and said, “Would you come?” And I just read this again in the book. I’m going to give you the book so you’ll have it so you can see some of the stuff. But he said, “Would you come and organize this because we’ve sold tickets.” I said, because I had told him I’m not good at
selling the tickets, I haven’t been living in Michigan, don’t ask me to do that part. He said, “No, no, no. We just need to organize the event.” Well, that was like a piece of cake for me and I had a great time. I was the key contact for the White House, and so the advance team came, but they weren’t a cohesive advance team, obviously. There were some leftover Nixon people and there were some people that were just there to help. But there was Secret Service – all the different communications things.

So I rallied the troops kind of thing in Michigan to get the table settings and do this and put the walls up and I think Ray Bolger was the musical entertainment. It was right after Betty had had her breast cancer surgery, and so they weren’t sure then that he was going to come. But he had agreed to this and I met him afterwards – because Dad introduced – all of my siblings were there – so Dad introduced us and I had told the White House people that I worked with, “This is great. Anytime you need me…”

If there had been a job description in those days for this, I think organizational – trying to put things together like events – they didn’t have event planners then and all these other little jobs that they talk about now. So that was perfect for me because I was good at that. And I loved doing it. So I volunteered for a while and helped him, and then sort of – I lobbied – but I was offered the job. My father was intent on not helping me. I remember because Len Garment was still at the White House and people that I knew were still here [Washington, D.C.] I knew through my father. Because Dad had been involved with Nixon, as well.

So I was offered the job and I was the first woman, really in the history of the United States, to be an advance man for a president. Did you know that?

Smith: No.

Fisher: I was the first one. It’s interesting because since then if I’ve run into presidents and the advance people come up to me, the women will come and say, “Thanks.” You know, I didn’t do it for that reason. But there were bunches of hurdles to get over because I was a woman. It was tough, it was
really tough. They didn’t pay me the same, they didn’t do anything…but my thing was, I think, I wanted the president to be happy. That was the only reason I was there. Now, others are there for – and I understand this – the career movement and all of that, but I was doing what I loved to do and I was making him happy.

Smith: Let me ask you – back up a bit, because one of the recurring themes of this project – Leon Parma sort of encapsulates this, because he was shoehorned into the East Room on the morning of August 9th for the swearing in. And afterwards there was a receiving line and then a reception in the dining room. He said, and this has led to this conversation with a number of people, he said you could see the Nixon people just peel off, go back to their offices. Which under the circumstances you can understand. My question is: did you detect tension between them and us? The Nixon people and the Ford people?

Fisher: Absolutely. Well, for me, watching it was – how to explain this – Nixon ran his White House differently than Ford ran his White House. Two totally different men. That advance group had to deal with a lot of demonstrators. If they wanted to be in a hotel, they would call the hotel and they would say get them out, get people out of there. Jerry Ford would never want to do that. We would go to a different hotel. So there was some of that tension there because some said, “but you’re working for the president, you can do whatever you want.” No, that’s not the way he wanted us to act. So there was a difference, and that’s the tension that I felt.

Smith: There is a wonderful story in a book I remember. They went to some hotel and of course they put him up in the best suite. It was literally called the Emperor’s Suite. And [he] felt distinctly uncomfortable about that. And someone wrote a handwritten sign that said, “Jerry Ford’s Room,” and put it on the door. And he thought that was fine. But that goes to what you say.

Fisher: Absolutely. Unless he was upset about something, unless he was having a moment, which we all have.

Smith: Now tell us, because it’s not a secret that he had a temper.
Fisher: Yes, he did. Two times I can tell you that I encountered his temper. It was my first trip out of town for him, and it was to Atlanta at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, and it was a mess of a trip. All the advance men, every one of them, they were all the chiefs and I was the Indian and they kept me up all night. I think they were trying to kill me. It was a pretty awful experience and at the end of the trip, I was just like, please let them go out of town, let them leave, let them leave, let the motorcade go, please.

They are all in the cars and I’m standing there with the agent who did the hotel, who should never have done hotels. His name is Smitty, Dick Smith. I mean, he had pulled a gun on me during this trip. It was an awful trip. So, I was standing there with him and we were both going, “Please leave. Please leave.” And the cars wouldn’t move. Dick Kaiser got out of the car and said there were no newspapers, and the president was really angry. Now, normally, if there hadn’t been something else going on – there was probably something else going on – he would have just driven off and he would have gotten his papers.

I know that he had the papers in the room in the morning, because I did that. But he didn’t have them in the car, and I didn’t know that was my responsibility. So Smitty is looking at me and Kaiser is looking at Smitty, and they all of us take off to try and find papers. Now, I know he’s fuming, he’s fuming, and the motorcade’s not moving. This was one of those times when it was just awful. Went into the gift shop, and I said, “I don’t have any money.” I didn’t carry any money because I didn’t carry my purse, and said, “I need a paper, it’s for the president.” She said, “Someone was just in here and tried that,” because Smitty had been in there before me. So he had gone, apparently, into the men’s room and found a paper and put it back together again and…oh God.

Smith: In those days there were afternoon papers.

Fisher: Right. But this was morning, and there was nothing. It was awful. He was very upset.
Smith: Plus, he was a newspaper junkie.

Fisher: Yes, and he was very upset. I learned my lesson. That was a silly situation, but…and the other time I saw him have anger was when I told him I was HIV positive. And that’s a whole other story, but he was furious.

Smith: What happened?

Fisher: When I was diagnosed with HIV, it was in 1991, and at that point in my life, the President and Mrs. Ford were godparents to my children, my two boys and they were little. We talked all the time and we were very close, and I had become very close with Betty. So, I knew I needed to tell them and that was even almost harder than telling my own mom and dad. But I went to Beaver Creek and we spent the day there. I took the boys with me, and the president was playing with the boys and I went in to talk with Betty and this was a moment in my life that I remember so vividly. We cried, I told her, we cried. She was like, “Okay. You’re going to help women, aren’t you?” And I said, “I can’t even think about it, I don’t know if I’m going to be alive, I’m never going to see my children…” She said, “Well, you’re not going to be thinking about you.” She was crying. I was crying. We were laughing; we were crying.

She said, “We have to go tell Jerry.” I said, “Well, I think maybe you should tell him. I’ll be there.” And she’s holding my hand and tapping my hand and everything. We went into that little office there, it’s right at the top of the steps at Beaver Creek, and I just broke down. It was almost as if I – I don’t know why. He was like a dad in some respects. I was letting him down; there was something wrong with this. It was a bad thing. And he just – I could see him – his face got red, he said, “What about your dad? What about your father?” And I told him, I said, “You know, he could use a call from you because they’re not talking about this.” And I hadn’t gone public or anything, so this was all very quiet and I hadn’t even decided what I was going to do.

And the president was so angry about Brian, my husband. I’d never seen him like this. He was furious and it almost made me feel like – very safe- because he said, “Aren’t you angry?” And I go, “I, I don’t know. I don’t have time. I
have two children, I don’t know what I’m doing.” He was holding my hand and we were crying, and he was just walking and then he started pacing and then he lit up his pipe, and then he was…he was furious. He was absolutely furious. There was something so wonderful about that when I look back on it because it wasn’t an easy thing for them to understand. Because, just like my dad, it’s the generation of people that said, “Well, we can fix this.” Well, we can’t fix this. I am still here today, and this is an amazing thing. But in those days, we weren’t sure. At that point I probably had about five more years to live, and little children and this whole stigma. And the president was just beyond – he was very angry – which I loved him for it. It was just very special, really.

Smith: And they were outspoken in subsequent years, both in their support of you and the cause, at a time when that was not politically fashionable.

Fisher: He was very supportive of me – both of them. And they helped me during that period of time, that July when I was diagnosed in ’91 and I think I saw them in August, and then into January, when I went public. I was on the phone with her all the time, the president was on the phone with my father, Betty was talking to my mother. Her biggest thing to me was: be really sure, because you can’t take it back. Once you say something publicly like that, you can’t take it back. And she is so outspoken, anyway.

So, she’s been my mentor on this whole thing all the time, and the president was there for me. Between my father agreeing that I could use him and the president agreeing that I could use him – I mean, there were times when I asked the president, “Won’t you please do this?” And he would go, “No, I can’t do that.” There were things he wouldn’t do, like my father wouldn’t do, either. They just wouldn’t use up their political chits, I think. Which, okay, I’ll do it, I’ll do it anyway, it’s all right. So Betty and I would have those conversations; how are we going to get this done, how am I going to get this done. But they were there for me in that personal way that says how to handle yourself, even though you may not know, you’ll never really know if you’ve affected anybody.
Smith: Then when you gave your speech to the convention, were they there?

Fisher: Yes. It was amazing. I had asked Betty because they wanted to know who did I want to introduce me. And I had asked her if she would. She said that obviously she would want to, but she was coming to this convention and not talking to anybody. Because this was – was it abortion in those days? It was something else, equal rights for women….and she didn’t want to say anything to anybody. So she wasn’t going to overshadow - that she was coming. So they were there in the president’s box with my mother and father. I could see them in the box – and my brother. They were amazing, they were just amazing.

Smith: It’s interesting because maybe you’ve begun to answer one of the questions I’ve always had. Clearly the party moved over here in their later years, and I’ve often wondered, did they simply stay where they were and by contrast with party appeared to be more “liberal,” or, in fact, did they themselves also evolve through experiences like this? I know for a fact that he’s the only president ever to have put his name on a pro-gay rights organization, for example. And that’s surprising, if you accept the caricature of West Michigan, conservative congressman, vanilla.

Fisher: When you look at the people from West Michigan actually.

Smith: And you just wonder, how do you think they evolved? Because I think of them as a partnership. Did she move him in some ways, do you think?

Fisher: Oh, I absolutely think. I think she moved him all the time.

Smith: But he was moveable.

Fisher: He was moveable, which is amazing, when you think about it.

Smith: Let’s face it, most people get more conservative with age. I remember in the eulogy I said, “Our attitudes harden along with our arteries,” but Gerald Ford seemed to be just the opposite.
Fisher: It’s almost as if he could take a deep breath and say, “What’s humanity? What’s being human?” And I think a lot of these things were about being human, and so he didn’t move to the right with the party, as I saw it.

Smith: First of all there was the pro-choice issue. They had clearly nailed their banner to that mast and weren’t going to change their minds.

Fisher: And what about ERA? Do you remember that?

Smith: Yeah.

Fisher: And I think that that was a lot of the reason that she would be quiet, she wouldn’t talk or she wouldn’t say things to upset the apple cart, rather than say something that would be against a sitting president or something like that. She was very respectful of that stuff, and she followed her husband that way. There are many times when I think, yes, she led him; but I do think there were times when she would have loved to have said things, but she wouldn’t do it because it might embarrass. And she wouldn’t want to do that.

Those are different kinds of values. And your question being the party – you know, Richard, I remember when President Bush ’41, when we were talking about – I used to come to Washington and sit with his speechwriters and try to give them language for him – because every time he spoke out on AIDS, he said the wrong thing. He couldn’t get it. And I felt so bad, because it wasn’t as if he and Barbara were not wanting to get it; they really wanted to be a part of the community and to help. It was just like...

Smith: Just tone deaf?

Fisher: Maybe.

Smith: Not insensitive, but just not...

Fisher: It’s like this being shoved at you at a time when there was so much other stuff going on, but also shoved at you and you need to learn what words to use and what words to not use. It’s almost like a different language kind of thing. And everybody was very sensitive to that. The party went even further. I would sit
with President Ford and Betty at their home and I would ask questions and they would go, “Well, we’re just going to let that go. We’re just going to let it be.” You could see sometimes that they would be riled up about something. I had a hard time, myself, working for him when the election came around and Reagan promising that he would “I’m going to be there for you – and all my people are going to be working for you,” and then it was like going out in the field, we were fighting Carter and Reagan.

Smith: Really?

Fisher: It was just awful.

Smith: Describe that.

Fisher: It was awful. It’s one thing to be fighting against the Democrats if you’re a Republican, but it’s another to be fighting against your own party. His people were very adamant and they didn’t want Jerry Ford in there. I think that there was just a lot of…

Smith: Do you think what he had in mind was 1980?

Fisher: I felt so strongly about him and it was very difficult for me to be in this campaign. It was different than just taking him and doing trips for him. You’re in a world – well, you know what the campaigns are like – they’re awful. But to be fighting against all odds – that’s why I don’t think it was just the Nixon pardon that did it.

Smith: Yeah. Right.

Fisher: I think it was the lack of support from the Republican Party that didn’t push him there for that election.

Smith: Were you at the convention? We keep hearing how nasty the atmosphere was.

Fisher: Which one was this?

Smith: In ’76 – the Ford-Reagan. That it was very personal and often bitter.

Fisher: In Kansas City?
Smith: Yes. What do you recall?

Fisher: I recall it being bitter, and I recall it being angry. And yet, I just needed to do my job. But I also recall that being a time when Betty was going through a lot of stuff.

Smith: You were aware of her problems?

Fisher: Yeah. Well, there are some things I think I just don’t want to say. But, yes, I was aware of her problem. But in those days it was a little different. You had a drink, but even the president – I don’t know if he ever knew this but – I would water down his drinks because it’s not a matter of – in those days people just drank to drink. It wasn’t…

Smith: It really was a different culture.

Fisher: It was a different culture. And then when she was facing her problems, he didn’t do it – he stopped. He was amazing that way, so supportive. I felt, watching him do that, it says a lot.

Smith: His self-discipline is something that people comment on. He was a remarkably disciplined man.

Fisher: Unbelievable. And that’s why I always – you know they always show that thing of him sliding down the steps and Chevy Chase and all of this – but he’s the most athletic president we had had until some of these younger ones. He swam every day, twice a day.

Smith: Maybe it’s not a euphemism, people just talk about, well, Mrs. Ford was late a lot. That’s how they sort of described…some people read something into that, other people figured she was just not punctual. Was it something you had to take into account in planning and organizing events?

Fisher: Well, I worked for him, so the only time I got to spend time with her in those days was when she went on a trip with him. And then I would make it my business to sit with her a little bit because she was sometimes, in those days, a little bit left out. It was about the president, and so forth.
Smith: How did she handle that?

Fisher: Because I think that was during the time she was drinking and having pain in her neck, and all of that stuff, I felt there was a lot of sadness in her. And facing your own mortality with the breast cancer, there is not anybody…I totally get that, I totally understand that. And I think that there is just something that just sits right back here all the time, and it just changes the way you relate to people and the way you relate to your life. There seemed to me that before the intervention and before all that stuff, that there was some sadness. Looking back and it’s always 20/20, obviously, but it seemed like there was a lot of sadness there. That was my sense.

Smith: That’s an interesting description. And presumably that lifted in later years.

Fisher: Absolutely. Once Betty went through Long Beach and sort of got her life back, and her family and her friends and moved into the world of “I’m going to make it a better place” part, you couldn’t stop her.

Smith: Do you remember when you went to work in the White House?

Fisher: Well, I was a volunteer. That was in the fall of ’74, and I did a trip in Grand Rapids, and one in Scottsdale. But I think that I went on full time maybe in ’75. But I was a volunteer at the end of that year, or something like that.

Smith: Were you surprised by the pardon?

Fisher: No. My father would have done that.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction to the pardon?

Fisher: Yes. But I was also young and I was not looking historically. I just didn’t want people to be upset with him. I wouldn’t say I was politically savvy. I was a Republican, I grew up in a Republican home, and there was no reason for them to be upset with him, because this was important. And think about what he was trying to do for the country. I mean, I felt very strongly about it, but I wasn’t a political pundit. I’m still not a political pundit.
Smith: Who did you report to? How was the White House organized in a way that your function…

Fisher: My job was under Red Cavaney, and if he wasn’t there, our direct boss was Don Rumsfeld or Dick Cheney.

Smith: And it’s interesting because we picked up from a number of people, differences between – people tend to equate the two now.

Fisher: What, Rumsfeld and Cheney?

Smith: Rumsfeld and Cheney, as if they were one person. But one senses that in fact, the atmosphere in the Ford White House was different under each one.

Fisher: Definitely, I think so.

Smith: How would you describe it?

Fisher: I was the woman on the team. I didn’t have a family – of course, I had a family – but I was considered not to have a family, so I was gone almost every week. And I always had the last trip. I had the last trip of the week. I would come back on Air Force One with the president and I was exhausted because I would then get the call the next morning on Sunday because the president had gotten some sleep. Now he wanted to go to the Washington Hilton because a friend of his was having an event. And it wasn’t planned and who would they call? Me. So I never, like, got a day off. It was very difficult for me. And I didn’t really get to see, except on trips, Rumsfeld and Cheney. And then I’d sit with them all the time. That’s how I know all of the Cabinet and everybody, because on trips I would take care of them. You know what I mean. I would arrange for them; if they needed something, I would get them something, whatever it was; but that’s how I knew all of the men. There were no women. At President Ford’s ninetieth birthday I was like, this is just amazing to me because I know all of the men; I had never met a lot of the wives. It was interesting.

So, Rumsfeld and Cheney: Rumsfeld is a different personality, I think, totally, than Cheney. Cheney was different then than he is now. A lot different.
Cheney was in that same morality that Gerald Ford was in. He was from the West a little bit, but he was still of that same kind of…

Smith: It’s interesting, even people who are very critical of Cheney today, go out of their way to say why they thought he was one of the best chiefs of staff because he, at least, did not appear to have an agenda of his own. And he made sure that diverse viewpoints were presented for the president’s consideration, which is maybe one of the most important things any chief of staff can do.

Fisher: It wasn’t about him. It never felt like it was about him, it always felt like what would be the right thing to do. And, like you say, diverse. I wasn’t ever at that level, but I know that he was so totally different than you hear and see him talking now. [He was] very much in the background on trips and stuff. He wasn’t like, “Do it this way…” He was very much like, however you’re doing it, don’t worry about me, I’ll find my way. Rumsfeld’s a little more demanding. Cheney was never really demanding.

Smith: Well, that’s totally consistent with what we’ve been told.

Fisher: And he was very gentle. I really, really adored him.

Smith: Dorothy Dowton, who was the president’s personal secretary, first of all, drew a sharp contrast – and by her own acknowledgement, she’s critical of Rumsfeld. He tried to get her fired. He tried to replace the president’s personal secretary. And she said it was night and day when Cheney took over. You relaxed, you still worked hard, but it was almost as if you felt no longer under Big Brother.

Fisher: Right. I think a lot of that is probably true. But Rumsfeld was also there in the very beginning, so there was a sense of “We need to pull this together quickly.” So there may have been a little bit more, to give him the benefit of the doubt, there may have been a little bit more pressure and stress on that.

I need to just tell you a quick story about the president. The way he thought of his people. Two stories: He always knew when I was on a trip with him, or if I
was doing his trip. So, I can’t remember exactly where we were, it might have been Portland, could have been anywhere. I’d walk him into the hotel and there would be the agents – this was in the beginning – there would be the agents and communications and all these people, and the press and everybody, and I’d go this way and the agents would say, “This way, Mr. President.” And he’d say, “No, I’m going on Mary’s elevator.” He was very aware of the people around him.

Smith: Which is by no means universally the case with political figures.

Fisher: No, because, it just happens. But he was very aware and he knew I was being – I mean, I went to my father, I went to Dick Cheney, and I went to all these men and I said, “Don’t you think that you could talk to Red, because I should be getting paid the same amount. I’m training all these guys.” In those days, Richard, we’re talking the ’70s, I would never have done anything to embarrass the president, so would I have sued? They knew I wouldn’t do that. And the whole thing was, “You don’t need it.” That’s just not good. But [it was] their way of getting back at me.

But the president knew I was sort of being run down because he’d see me everywhere. He’d come back from a long trip and then he’d see me the next day in Washington and then the next day. I mean, I was always there. One time we were on Air Force One and Terry O’Donnell said – my memory is a little fading - but we landed at Andrews and he brought me back and said, “The president wants to see you.” Because we would all go off the back and he’d go off the front and that was before the 747, so I never saw that one. We were on 27000 and he handed me a corsage which somebody had probably given him for Betty or whatever, and he just said, “I just hope this makes you feel better. I know it’s been a rough trip.” Now, that was a little silly thing, but it meant a lot to me, and it was like, I know that he understands. His character was very much about the people, and for me that always meant a lot.

Smith: That’s a wonderful story.
Fisher: It really was a very special – he was very special. So that’s why I always gave him his – he always had a board under his mattress wherever we went. He always had ice cream, even if the doctor said, don’t give him ice cream. Because I always took care of him like I was a mother, I just wanted him to be comfortable. And then I know there is a funny story here because I did walk in on him one time when he didn’t have his clothes on and that was awful. That was just awful. There were lots of things that happened that mostly were funny and that everybody would laugh at today. I actually told that story in a speech: the one about taking him into the ladies room. Did I ever tell you that story?

We were somewhere and he was in the Green Room and he said, before I go on I want to go to the men’s room and I said, oh yeah, absolutely. And the agents – I don’t know about now, but then the agents always had a bathroom that was going to be his, whether it was a ladies room or a men’s room. It had been swept, and it was clean and he could go in there and nobody was in there. So, I must have just been thinking about too many things, and I knew he had to be on at a certain time, I said, come with me, and I walked him right into a ladies room, and I stood there and the door closed – and they let me do this. There were ten agents standing there and I saw the ladies’ thing and then I heard this scream inside and it was, “Oh my God.” And all the agents were laughing. They thought this was so funny; I’d taken the president to the ladies’ room – I mean, you just don’t think, it was habit. I never went into a men’s room. It was very much a habit. So things like that are the kinds of things that happened.

Smith: How did he respond when he walked out?

Fisher: He was not angry. He was very…I can’t actually remember exactly what he said, but I kept saying, “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.” He knew that I would never do something like that on purpose. It just happens.

Smith: Were you on either of the trips with the assassination attempts out in California?
Fisher: I was in the plane. Luckily it wasn’t my trip. I can’t tell you whose trip it was, but it wasn’t my trip. I was in the plane because I had done Monterrey, and we were going to San Francisco. Betty Ford was on the plane, and so when we had landed in San Francisco, I was on the plane because we were all going back when Sarah Jane Moore…I was not there for Sacramento. It doesn’t matter. It’s like: you’re there when those things happen; then you think, I’m standing around here, I’m walking in front of all these big guys, I don’t have a gun. What am I doing? How stupid am I?

Smith: How did Mrs. Ford react to the news?

Fisher: Well, I didn’t see because we didn’t know what happened. They took her, and I think there was another plane. I can’t quite remember, but I remember them coming into the airport so fast with all the cars screeching. It happened pretty quickly.

Smith: Did you get to know the kids at all during that period?

Fisher: I did Susan. She was on trips a lot. And then she was taking pictures for a while, and I got to know…the problem was that if they went to Vail to ski or something, I always got Milwaukee on the way in or the way out. So I never really [got] what you would say the “good trips,” where the family would be, because I was the girl. I got Milwaukee. I was really good in Milwaukee, I can’t tell you how many times I did Milwaukee.

Smith: Did you go on any foreign trips?

Fisher: I did Bucharest, Romania.

Smith: With Ceausescu.

Fisher: With Ceausescu. And although it was my trip, they had to send Jon D______, who was a volunteer from Chicago, who was a great guy, because the Ceausescu people would not negotiate with a woman. So I would do the work, I would do the schedule. But that’s very interesting when you go to a Communist country and you realize that you can’t do it the way you normally do it. But, yes.
There’s a great story about Kissinger in there, because he was on that trip. It was very fun because when Kissinger traveled, we always had the State Department/White House thing. Who’s going to get the better office, and who’s going to…shouldn’t it be the president, not the State Department? Well, they give you these homes and you have to work with State because you’re out of the country. I’m sure it’s much different now, but then it was, “Who’s more important, the president or the secretary of state?” Well, the secretary of state thought he was more important and the president was just the president, who was the president. So it was my job on that trip to get all the staff, which would include the secretary of state. He was considered staff. He didn’t like that very much. So I was always moving him and telling him to go somewhere. He wanted to know, “Who was she, who is she?”

Then he told me I should go to Belgrade with him. He thought that would be a great thing. So I’m calling my father, I’m going, “You know, your friend,” because he was friends, used to talk to him like all the time on the phone, “is coming on pretty strong.” He didn’t know I was Max’s daughter and it was a little funny. He was always, his agents would come to me and say, “The secretary needs to see you now,” and I knew he didn’t need to see me, but there I was. I was the only woman on the trip, so it was that kind of stuff.

Smith: Tito was still around then, wasn’t he? Yugoslavia.

Fisher: I didn’t do Yugoslavia. I had to go to Fort Smith, Arkansas. I did Ceausescu, but we were…

Smith: Didn’t do China?

Fisher: I was supposed to go to China, but I was the one advanceman they left behind. So I was up twenty-four hours a day because I was doing the schedule from here, and that’s when I met and worked with a lot of the senior staff because there wasn’t anybody else here.

Smith: Were you in Helsinki?

Fisher: Just on the way to Bucharest.
Smith: Then of course, he went to Japan and saw the emperor.

Fisher: Yeah, but I didn’t get to do that, either. You know, it’s funny because I was supposed to go to China. This has nothing to do with… But just a month ago I was supposed to go, and they denied me my visa because I’m HIV positive.

Smith: Really? Wow. What does that tell you about their claims to be a great power?

Fisher: Well, America does that. I’ve been working since 1982 to try and change that. Not that I can do anything about it, but it’s really an awful policy.

Smith: I guess it’s fair to assume that you really got to know them better after the White House years.

Fisher: Absolutely. Yeah, because I went and spent time with them, and I did trips for him. I remember doing the University of Michigan for him, or when they would call. I didn’t go work for him – I was burned out.

Smith: You mentioned Ann Arbor. It clearly had a special place in his heart.

Fisher: In his heart, and they had for him, too. It’s both. Really, both.

Smith: I’ve heard it from a number of people – we talked at the very beginning about talking slow. Apparently, it was almost like you flipped a switch. Every year he tried to go out and give a pep talk to the Michigan team before the big game. And it was a different man. It was someone who was eloquent, and just overwhelming, and knew every player and knew everything about every player. And brought them all into it, and it was just an extraordinary experience. People who had the chance to observe it, they never forgot it.

Fisher: I never observed it. I would have loved to. I always thought that he was, in many ways, better off the cuff. I remember thinking to myself, remember there was a communications department when I was at the White House, and…

Smith: Bob Hartmann, who was kind of a lightning rod, and still is.

Fisher: Is he?
Smith: Well, he’s gone, but he remains a lightning rod, sort of polarizing. Some people thought he was just very protective, some people thought possessive.

Fisher: I think both, actually. I think he was. But I’m talking Bob Mead, [he] was the communications director. I think it was Bob. Anyway, television. A lot of the time, since I had been in television, when we would do trips, I would be able to do a lot of the press advance because I knew what to do. I had been in the media. But I would have to say that those were the beginning of the days of the media, and I don’t think that he was a television president. He wasn’t what you would consider on television, charismatic. He hadn’t grown up that way.

Smith: He got better.

Fisher: Much better. Decency might be the word you said before, but a humanist is really regular, and that’s not a bad thing.

Smith: Particularly in the bubble of the presidency.

Fisher: Especially since he wasn’t even out there to get it. He was about to retire. He wanted to be Speaker of the House, didn’t he?

Smith: Yeah.

Fisher: That was what I understood it to be – and then he was going to retire that year.

Smith: There is a school of thought that says Reagan, by pushing for the nomination, actually made him a better candidate.

Fisher: Made Ford a better candidate?

Smith: Yeah. Think of the acceptance speech he gave. It’s probably one of the best speeches he ever gave. He really, really, worked at it, and he was pushed to do things at a level that he hadn’t…

Fisher: …ever done before.

Smith: Yeah.
Fisher: He hadn’t aspired to it. I don’t know if it was Reagan pushing him, or whether it was because he felt he could do the best job for the country. I have a tendency to believe that nobody could push him. He could make you think that you were pushing him, but in my heart of hearts, I think that he felt he would do the best job for the country.

Smith: In the campaign you have the debates and of course, the famous Polish gaffe – where were you that night?

Fisher: I don’t know. I know I wasn’t on that trip. It so reminded me of Romney and the brainwashing thing.

Smith: You knew instantly that it was a real problem.

Fisher: There were too many problems. There were really too many problems. And, like I say, I don’t think of him as – not that Carter was so great on television, but, President Ford was coming into his own. Give him another few years; he would have been a great orator.

Smith: It’s interesting that you say that because he said to people that the hardest thing about losing was that he felt he had done a good job. He had to unlearn in some ways, being a Congressman. He had to evolve from that role into the role of executive, which was very different.

Fisher: But that’s why I think that nobody pushed him. I think that he felt that he was there now, and he could move now, and “give me my chance” kind of thing. Because this was all a learning curve that he hadn’t planned on.

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

Fisher: I think the last time I saw him was after my father died and I gave him his signed five dollar bill. I think that was the last time I saw him.

Smith: And that was out at Beaver Creek?

Fisher: Yeah. He was fragile. And I had just gone through this with Dad, so you can tell. And yet, you know, they were always so close, Betty and the president, and it’s like when I was there and we had dinner together, we didn’t always
eat in the dining room. Sometimes we’d eat in the den, and in Palm Springs, too. And they called each other Mom and Dad kind of thing. They were very relaxed and comfortable and easy going. I remember having lunch that day with them in Beaver Creek, and his memory of my father, and things that went on years ago, long term. It was amazing, and she was helping him with the short term stuff. Then it was time for them to both rest. He was worried about her and she was worried about him. They were just the best together.

Smith: I think that was also part of the dynamic when he died; that people, first of all had not seen her in a while, they hadn’t seen the kids in a long while, and I think they were, perhaps, surprised at how close the family was, and in particular, how close the marriage was.

Fisher: Well, as close as the marriage was, and it was really close, and the children – you say children – we’re talking adults – my age and stuff, too. But if you could be proud of somebody, I was so proud of all of them for the way they handled themselves during the Washington time and the Grand Rapids time, and being up there at the Rotunda. I mean, these are human people, and they were trying to say, this is what my dad would have wanted us to do.

Smith: There’s a wonderful story which sort of sums it all up. We’d been told at ABC at the beginning of the week, out at St. Margaret’s, don’t be surprised if you see Mrs. Ford in wheelchair. Well, of course, we didn’t, until at the very end, briefly, outside the museum. But she walked that long distance to the gravesite. The following week someone commented on that to her, in terms of admiration and surprise. And she said, “Well, that’s what my husband would have wanted.” As simple as that, she was doing it for him.

Fisher: Absolutely. That’s the way she thought, and she still thinks that way.

Smith: Do you keep in touch with her?

Fisher: I do. It’s been hard this last bit of time.

Smith: Since his passing?

Fisher: No, just in this last year.
Smith: One senses that she is still grieving.

Fisher: Yeah, that’s true.

Smith: And she’s told people, “I’m retired.” That’s her characterization. On the one hand, she must be enormously proud and gratified to know that the Betty Ford Center is in Susan’s hands.

Fisher: Right. Oh, she’s very proud of her.

Smith: How many people create something and then, in fact, have a succession in their own lifetime that they can be completely comfortable with? So that’s on the plus side. But one senses that she is somewhat reclusive.

Fisher: She’s not somewhat; she is. And I also think that she’s frail, she’s fragile. And my concern, obviously, is that I have to now talk with Jan to get to her because she’s not answering her phone anymore like she used to. And maybe she’s not getting the messages, and there’s a lot of stuff going on with nurses and this, that, and the other thing. So, for me, I feel like I’ve – and I don’t know why – but maybe it’s just because they’re keeping…you know how when you get older your circle gets much smaller. I watched it happen with my dad. And I think the family has sort of made it be like that. I haven’t talked to her – I’ve talked around her, but not with her – in quite a while. Maybe nine months. For me, it’s very sad. She’s so much a part of my life. Of course she’s proud, but she misses him terribly. This is not easy.

Smith: Growing old is not easy, under the best of circumstances. But one tiny metaphor: I don’t think people realize, in the best sense of the word, how much he was her goad. He would complain about it, but every week, disciplined as he was, he would do it. I think it was Tuesday. He would sit down, you know there was that huge table in the conference room, and once a week everything he had to autograph was stacked up in front of him, and he’d do it manfully – get it out of the way – and he’d say, “Now, come on Mother, you’ve got to do yours.” And that’s not there anymore.

Fisher: No.
Smith: That friendly persuasion.

Fisher: I don’t think she feels that she has to. I think that she feels like she’s done it. I know she feels like she’s just waiting, in some respects.

Smith: She has said to people, “I don’t know why I’m still here.”

Fisher: Right. Yeah.

Smith: This sort of brings up the fact, another one of those things that I don’t think people realize because they are accustomed to more obvious displays, but how important faith was to both of them. It wasn’t, to use the cliché, worn on their sleeve. But it was clearly a very significant part of their lives.

Fisher: Yes, and it’s interesting because I think that’s another reason that they respected my dad and us for being Jewish, and they had a sense of what that meant. She has a spirituality. She’s spiritual as well as having faith, I think. Has a lot of “this is happening for a reason,” kind of thing, and we do these things because…based in some inner strength.

Smith: You hope – I don’t mean to sound saccharine, but – you have to hope that she believes that when the times comes, that they’d be reunited.

Fisher: Well, I think they probably will. I think she thinks that. And, yeah, but see that’s – now you get me going, Richard. I was going through my book and reading because I was trying to remember some of the stories and stuff, and I cry when I think about him, and her. They were such a part of my life for so many years, and it’s like, I miss him. I miss him.

Smith: For people who didn’t know them, or just know them as names in a textbook – what would you tell them? Is there something that would surprise people about either Gerald or Betty Ford?

Fisher: I think that the closeness that they had would surprise people. They called each other Mother and Dad, and their closeness and how they looked out for each other in so many respects. You talk about him goading her; she used to goad him pretty good, too.
Smith: She could zing.

Fisher: Absolutely. But I watched my mom do that with my father, and they were the only ones that could do that, by the way. So I think that that would surprise people as how really close they are. They knew how each other was thinking.

Smith: You wonder – it’s purely speculative – whether he felt any degree of guilt over all those years when he was coming up the ladder and he was on the road as much as he was. And she was already beginning to experience some problems. Not unlike a lot of American women in her generation. In some ways she is such a representative figure.

Fisher: Unbelievable. So much so that my mother’s situation, and my mother’s alcoholism, was very similar. So, I grew up with that in my home. I really do know how Susan…but hers was so public, my mother’s wasn’t so public, and I think that, yes, she was representative of a generation of women. She used to stand up for ERA. I’ll never forget that choice.

Smith: Remember the famous *Sixty Minutes* interview.

Fisher: Oh!

Smith: When you look at the transcript of that interview – I said years later, “Hillary Clinton could not say this today in the White House, what Betty Ford said a generation ago.”

Fisher: Well, and also because it wasn’t a twenty-four hour news cycle where you heard it over and over and over and over again. She was very outspoken, and maybe part of that was…I think that that kept – I look at my mother doing stuff like that, too. And it kept my father very interested. I think that there is a piece of “you know, I know how to say this, and I’m going to keep…” That was part of their relationship. To me, watching them was just as much fun.

Smith: Well, and clearly, he was so proud of her.

Fisher: Oh, no question.
Smith: The stories about every year the Betty Ford Center would have a big alumni weekend, and he’d be there cooking hot dogs – just part of the scene. She got the Medal of Freedom years before he got the Medal of Freedom. Well, again, he was just so willing to, in some ways, submerge his own identity, celebrity, whatever, in her causes.

Fisher: Oh, absolutely. There’s no question that this was about her, a lot of it was about her. And that’s where I thought they were so – you don’t want to say a President and a First Lady were cute – it was adorable. It was heartwarming. And you say: is there anything that you would want to say that people wouldn’t understand, or wouldn’t know about them? I think that’s one of the things that people wouldn’t know about them, is that incredible heart connection.

Smith: Last thing, how do you think each one of them should be remembered?

Fisher: Oh, I’m grateful that he’s being remembered as having done the right thing, to me. And Betty, oh, well, as affecting the disease of alcoholism and women and breast cancer - but for me, personally, her legacy is large. She took risks - that perhaps being a president, he took a risk, obviously, with the pardon and things like that – but she took risks on a social level, on a personal level, on a family level. And so, to me, I always talk about her when I’m giving speeches. She’s my mentor and I always think, what would she tell me about this? How should I handle this? Because she was the one that really pulled me along to help me make a difference in the world. And so, for her, her legacy is very large for me and my life. I can’t even think about her being gone. I don’t want to think of it. Sorry.

Smith: No, you just wonder, again though, in the last few years – I don’t know if you’ve seen it – one of the best things Ken Burns ever did was his documentary about Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. It’s called, “Not for Ourselves Alone,” and it’s very moving. In fact, I gave it to her for Christmas last year.
Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in the last years of her life, had actually been repudiated by the National Women’s Organization that she had founded because she had written the Women’s Bible, which was a characteristically audacious, bold, editing of the Bible to remove some of the patriarchy. And Susan B. Anthony was put in this impossible position where she defended her friend, but it wasn’t enough to keep her from being censured by the organization. Anyway, in the last years of her life, she really withdrew, but the last speech she gave, she wrote this extraordinary thing. If you’ve not seen it, you should read it. It’s called the Solitude of Self, in which she talks about particularly, women in their later years. And that in the end, whatever one’s gender, and however much we might like to sentimentalize to the contrary, each one of us is alone. Each one of is on his or her own. And it’s clearly about aging, and aging well. But anyway, it’s a remarkable essay, and I thought about it in connection with Mrs. Ford.

Fisher: And it’s an essay?

Smith: It’s an essay by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, it’s a speech, called The Solitude of Self.

Fisher: Okay. Interesting.

Smith: Anything else that we haven’t…we’ve covered a lot.

Fisher: Well, you know the regular kind of people that it looks like we have president and first lady? That’s the kind of regular person Jerry Ford was. It’s interesting to me to kind of – I know history will draw this and I won’t be around, but there’s a lot about this president that is very much like Jerry Ford.

Smith: I also thought there was a connection. Again, when the president died, and the reaction – and some of it was “the country needed to feel good about itself at that point.” But a lot of it also reinforced what I think Obama had already caught on to, which was: contrary to conventional thinking, we weren’t a 50-50 country. There was a large center, there was a very large number of Americans, if not a majority, who wanted to get serious, who didn’t care about ideology as much as about practical problem solving, who wanted
civility restored to the public square, all of those things that President Ford represented, and for which he sometimes took heat from the increasingly strident right wing.

I will never forget, at the time of the Monica Lewinski madness, we collaborated, I worked with him on it, an OpEd piece that appeared in the New York Times in which he proposed, short of impeachment, as he put it, a unique punishment for a unique offense. The idea was to have the president appear before a joint session of Congress, nationally televised, stand in the well of the House; be formally rebuked by both houses of Congress; not say anything; and then the country could get back to business. And people would have felt that, you know what, Congress rose to the occasion instead of sinking to the occasion. The president accepted it manfully.

It would have been a dignified way out of a very undignified situation. And he took more heat for that from the right wing, especially. But of course, subsequently, I learned that when it first appeared the White House was willing to grab it like manna from Heaven, and the Republicans in the House committee didn’t want to go along. Well, then a month later came along the mid-term elections in which, of course, the Republicans lost, and all of a sudden they wanted to dust off Jerry Ford’s proposal. At that point the White House was feeling its oats. But it’s a classic case of, if only people had been able to look beyond their immediate emotional, partisan, irrationality, and thought about what was good, not only for the country, but frankly what was good for them in the long run, instead of just playing to the base.

Fisher: But that’s how he always thought. Look, it’s the same thing with the pardon. Actually, it’s the same.

Smith: It’s exactly the same. Putting your country first, even if you take a hit.

Fisher: Right.

Smith: This has been wonderful. Thank you.

Fisher: Thank you.
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Smith: One name that is a legend locally, for better or worse, is Frank McKay. Who was Frank McKay?

DeJonge: Frank McKay started his political career as the circuit court assignment clerk in the old County Building. Frank made a lot of friends from local attorneys – big attorneys. In the course of time these people owed Frank favors. Frank just used that office as a stepping stone to form his own political organization. One of the guys that he not only promoted, but saw elected was Bartel Jonkman, known locally as Barney Jonkman. Barney Jonkman served in Congress for a number of years. When the war ended it was Jerry Ford, who I had never met, Jerry Ford was backed by the Home Front group: Paul Goebel, former mayor, as you know, of Grand Rapids - wonderful person; Doc Ver Meulen, a local dentist – these guys are all dead. The ones who really got behind Jerry Ford.

Smith: The Home Front - I’m trying to make this connection between the opposition to the MacKay organization – was that part of this?

DeJonge: Absolutely, and they worked hard to take the power away from Frank MacKay and his representative in Washington, Barney Jonkman.

Smith: How much power did MacKay have?

DeJonge: A lot. Frank MacKay was on trial in the Detroit area, I believe, for murder. The story is that he hired the Purple Gang out of Detroit to murder a state senator – I can’t remember his name – who was to testify before a grand jury. The day before he was called to testify, he was on his way to Detroit and he was shot and killed. They felt that - nobody was able to prove it – that Frank MacKay was behind that murder and that he had been in contact with the Purple Gang to conduct the murder. So they were totally in opposition to Frank MacKay. These people that I mentioned, Paul Goebel and Doc Ver
Meulen, these were persons who, in Grand Rapids, were highly respected, who hated the fact that MacKay had taken control of the Republican party in Kent County and beyond. Frank MacKay, the story is – and I’m sure it’s true, got a kickback from every sack of cement that went into that bridge in Port Huron – and became a very wealthy man.

I even got a threatening letter one time from him. He had a county supervisor in Plainfield Township who was under his thumb. I heard that this person had zoned all of Frank MacKay’s land in Plainfield Township – now the city of Walker. He zoned it agriculture and it was residential. Frank MacKay paid about ten dollars a year in taxes. I heard about that and I wrote a series of two stories. Jay Smith was the name of the supervisor. I exposed it in the paper and I got a letter from Frank MacKay and I have one regret – that I didn’t save the letter. There was a veiled threat that if I didn’t lay off – blah blah blah – which I didn’t take seriously and I tossed the letter. I wish I’d kept it. So, anyway, that’s how strong he was.

Smith: Did he hold court? MacKay Tower – was that his office?

DeJonge: Yeah. One of the deskmen at the Grand Rapids Press, Fred Baker, at the time was the business reporter, went to see Frank MacKay. He wanted a car – this was during the war – and MacKay said, “What kind do you want?” He was interested in an Oldsmobile. This was on a Saturday. Frank MacKay called the Oldsmobile plant and he said, “There will be a man by the name of Fred Baker at such and such a gate on Saturday. Have a car ready for him.” The car was there. There was no mention of cost, but Fred was an honest man and did pay for that car. But I mean, that’s how much power – these cars were rationed – you couldn’t buy a car, as you know during World War II. I had to wait until I got back from overseas – I had my name in two places for a car – I waited two years. Frank MacKay got it within a matter of a few days.

Smith: What was the source of his power?

DeJonge: Looking back, it had to be that so many people were indebted to him for favors that he did over the years.
Smith: Now when did Vandenberg fit into all this, because he’d been a newspaperman and apparently enjoyed the support of the organization early on. Of course, by ’48, when Ford ran for Congress, I assume that he’d broken – I mean Vandenberg supported Ford against Jonkman.

DeJonge: Oh yeah. Well, Vandenberg was with the group of Paul Goebel and Doc Ver Meulen and would naturally have been supportive of Jerry Ford’s efforts. Let me backtrack. I said Fred Baker wanted the car – while Fred was talking to MacKay in his office, the phone rang, and it was a friend. The friend, Fred said “I could only hear one voice – MacKay’s” – he said, “You need a car?” “Yes,” and then it was the car that MacKay got for this friend of his, while Fred Baker was sitting there listening to the conversation, with no mention made of cost.

Smith: That’s power.

DeJonge: Yeah.

Smith: Tell me, when Ford came back from the war – what had his father’s role been in the local political scene? He apparently was quite active.

DeJonge: Yes, he was. I knew him only for a short time because I joined the paper when I graduated from the Calvin College in June of ’50. At that time, my first year at the Press, I was assigned to cover the Grand Rapids Board of Education and the Kent Intermediate School District. I did that for one year and then the person who was covering politics was moved over to city hall and the city editor and the managing editor and the editor appointed me to cover politics starting in 1951, August. I covered that until just about the day I left the Press to become Kent County Clerk and Register of Deeds. That was in with the death of Jack Bronkema, who was the Clerk Registrar and that was 1979, November.

Smith: Tell us about Jerry Ford, Sr. What was he like? It has become clear talking to people and reading what the President himself had to say, that his father was the biggest single influence in his life.
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DeJonge: Jerry Ford, Sr., if you didn’t know who his son was, and later met Jerry Ford, Jr. – you would think that was his natural father - his biological father, because they were so similar. Jerry Ford, Sr. was well respected all through Kent County. He was chairman at the time I started covering politics of the Kent County Republican Committee - for a short time, possibly a year, or not more than two. Then I lost track of Senior and my introduction to Jerry Ford, Jr. began.

Smith: Did you know his mother at all - Dorothy?

DeJonge: Yes, I did. I met her, really, only one time, but it was memorable because Jerry had been elected Minority Leader of the House. He defeated Charley Halleck from Indiana. He was in town to visit his mother – he had a local office, too – and I heard that Jerry was going to have breakfast with his mother in the Waters Building, which is on Fulton. I got in touch with Jerry and I said, “Jerry, can I bring a camera to your mother’s apartment and have breakfast with you?” He said, “Oh, absolutely, Maury.” And so I came with our photographer Ralph Truax, who is dead now. His mother was like a mother hen over Jerry. Here he was now, the Minority Leader of the House of Representatives and she said to him, “Now Jerry, don’t work too hard.” And he said, “I won’t, Mother.” Just that simple exchange. She was, in my impression, a very kind person – a person who was just in love with her natural son and it was a good relationship – very strong – you could feel it.

Smith: This may be speculative, so I preface it with that. In ’48 he took on Jonkman and that was also the year that he first proposed to and then married Betty. And over the years – it’s a little murky – the sequence of events where he proposed to her but said he couldn’t set a date, and he couldn’t really say why he couldn’t set a date. The story was – the public story was – he wanted to take Jonkman by surprise, and so he couldn’t tell her what his political plans were. The alternate story is – and we’ve heard it from a number of people – given the sort of cultural conservatism of this area – he probably thought twice about letting it be known that he was going to marry a divorcee before the Republican primary. Is that something that could have, in fact, turned off some voters?
DeJonge: Yes, it could have, because – and times have changed – but back in ’48 I was a junior in college and if you were divorced, you were almost without a name, particularly in the Dutch Reform churches. And Catholics weren’t fond of divorce, either. But divorce was rare with many of the Dutch voters and church members in Grand Rapids. The churches’ rules were pretty stiff on that.

Smith: For the people who don’t know Michigan and they hear about the Dutch – explain who the Dutch were and what their impact was on the local culture and politics.

DeJonge: It was considerable although the Dutch kind of stayed away from politics. Politics – it wasn’t dirty – but it wasn’t real nice. So they kind of stayed away from it. But their influence was great because the ones that came to this area of west Michigan were hard working. Many of them farmers. Many of them skilled factory workers. The Dutch had a thing that if your father was a baker, you would be a baker. If your father was a farmer, you would be a farmer. I remember in my sociology class, my sociology professor said the most clannish people in the world are Jews. Next, right behind are the Dutch. If you weren’t Dutch, they didn’t warm up to you right away.

Smith: I assume the impact would show itself - there was nothing open on a Sunday in this town.

DeJonge: No, and they didn’t buy the Sunday paper. The one they should have not bought was Monday’s because that was being printed on Sunday. I knew a former commissioner from the city of Wyoming who would go to the drugstore on Saturday night, buy a Sunday paper and have them put it in a brown paper bag as he walked home. But that has all changed and there are people who still feel the Dutch are that conservative yet, but it’s not true. We have, I would say, a dozen or more divorced persons in my Christian Reformed Church. And we just had a nice sermon Sunday on Sunday observance. Far different than when I was growing up. I had a friend, we were at a cottage on Silver Lake up by Hart, and his kids were with him and my two children – a girl and a boy. We let them swim on Sunday. His kids – four
boys – asked if they could go swimming. His dad said, “You can go up to your knees, but don’t splash.” True story.

Smith: That’s wonderful. That’s local color. Ford was a real fiscal conservative, there’s no doubt about that. But it is interesting, because at one point I believe the story is true: there were people in and around Grand Rapids, when he was on the House Appropriations Committee - in particular the Defense sub-committee - and they wanted to get a military base for this area. Thought it would be a great boon for their community and – what’s the point of having a Congressman on those committees – and he strongly discouraged that, because he thought it was not a stable base for the area economy. Just too subject to boom and bust and all of that. That shows some courage, to say no to your friends who come to you asking for what seems to them perfectly logical.

DeJonge: They brought a weather school in. A weather school, but the numbers were almost insignificant. But some of those guys, the soldiers who were assigned to the weather school, met and married nice Dutch girls. But the numbers were not significant. But you talk about courage – that’s Ford’s middle name. Look at the courage he showed when he pardoned Nixon.

Smith: What was the local reaction when that happened?

DeJonge: There were many against it, there were many for it. I would say, probably, more at the time were against that pardon. As a newspaper person, I favored it – it was time. And I have had several interviews with Ford on that subject.

Smith: You know, it is interesting - he said, everywhere he went, that was always the first question people asked, until November, 2001, when the Kennedy Library gave him the Profiles of Courage Award for the pardon. And he said, after that, people didn’t ask the question. It was almost as if the page had been turned.

DeJonge: Is that right? Well, look what’s happened now. People who never spoke kindly about President Ford, and I’m talking about the national media, now they say, it was a great move that took a lot of courage. Ford, in his death, has risen in the eyes of the national media.
Smith: It is interesting – that week I was wearing two hats. I was working for ABC for most of the week and then I was back here with the family, and it was very clear that the media was taken aback by the reaction, and it seemed to grow as the week went along. My theory, in part was, you had a lot of young people who were being introduced to Ford for the first time. It is sort of like when Harry Truman died, and they were contrasting what they were seeing with what they had come to expect in the last couple of presidencies and they liked what they saw. I think that fed into this kind of instant reassessment of Ford – what kind of man he was – what kind of president he was – and all of a sudden, he seemed awfully attractive as an alternative to the kind of ugly partisanship that pervades politics today.

DeJonge: You know, I’m not sure we ever had a Congressman before Ford like Ford, and I’m not sure we ever will have another.

Smith: What kind of Congressman was he?

DeJonge: He was a guy, if he met you one time, he would never forget your name. So you felt a kinship with this guy. Jerry and I had a close relationship. Very close. It was this relationship he carried on even with persons he was meeting for the first time. By the time they finished talking with Jerry, they felt they had a friend, and he would never forget their name. I said to him one time, this was after he was president, I said, “Jerry, how in the world can you keep up a schedule like this and still be very lucid and everything about you is very calm.” He said, “I have the ability – I can tell my staff, even if I’m on Air Force One, I’m going to take a fifteen minute nap. Wake me up.” He said, “I can go to sleep, in fifteen minutes wake me up – I’m ready to go.” That’s not me – no way.

Smith: He liked people – you can’t fake it. You can’t fake a career - liking and caring about other people.

DeJonge: In the years that I covered politics I met more phonies in my life and there are more phonies than there are genuine people. Jerry was genuine, you felt it the first time you met him and it never faded. This guy was so real it’s unbelievable. I tell you, when Jerry died I shed tears. When I retired I got as
many letters from Democrats complimenting me for having a decent attitude toward both parties. As a matter of fact, when I was appointed county clerk by the Sixth Circuit Court judges, because I had covered county government as well, the secretary of the Michigan Republicans came in my office – Hank Fuhs. He said, “Maury, I’m going to have to ask you a question. You’ve covered politics all these years and the judges have appointed you. As a party, I have to ask you, are you a Republican or a Democrat?” I said, “Henry, you have just paid me the ultimate compliment if you had to ask what I am.” I have been a closet Republican all my life, and it goes back to my dad and his dad. But I considered that a compliment.

Smith: Very complimentary. Ford as a young man had a temper and worked very hard, with the help of his mother, to overcome it. Did you ever see his temper?

DeJonge: I asked him that. I said, “Jerry, have you ever really been angry since you have been in Congress?” He said, “One time. A guy came in my office and Anna Kampstra, who you are going to be interviewing, Anna Kampstra sent him in, and [he] was offering me a bribe.” He said, “Immediately – my temper soared, I said you’ve got fifteen seconds to get out of my office and never come back - that’s the only time I had anger.” Ford always said he could disagree with his opponents in the House without becoming disagreeable, and that’s what he achieved.

Smith: Clearly, very early – almost from his arrival – in the House, say by contrast with people like Jack Kennedy or Richard Nixon, it was pretty clear their ambitions were elsewhere and it seemed pretty clear Ford wanted to make his career in the House. That was going to be his venue and the old Bulls who ran the place pretty quickly took notice of this young guy who wasn’t flashy, wasn’t eloquent, but who did his homework – who worked harder than anyone else, who asked smarter questions than anyone else – and then they began singling him out for choice assignments within a few years of his arrival in DC.

DeJonge: No question. I observed him – my wife and my two children were with me – and he was Minority Leader and the people in Grand Rapids didn’t - I don’t
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think they realized how much power Ford had. Not wicked power – good, honest to goodness power. And when he entered the floor of the Chamber, the Congressmen just huddled around him to get their marching orders. And that opened my eyes. I knew Ford, but when I saw the respect that his peers were giving him once he called the meeting to order there on the House floor, it was something to see.

Smith: That raises a sensitive issue – the whole question of his intelligence. There were the gags about him bumbling and stumbling and all that sort of thing. Tell me about his mind, not his IQ. Tell me about his smarts.

DeJonge: He was so much smarter than what he was given credit for or he would have never gone as far as he did. Even to the appointment of vice president. I was there that night when Ford was in his home – there was a light rain falling – and the neighbors had gathered around his house. He came out and he spoke to them in the same way he would speak to you or me, in such a humble way.

I had given a speech to public administrators of the country from the big corporations. They were going to get Stewart Alsop, but Alsop died and so someone told this group about me and my relationship with Ford and they contacted me and I went and I took my son. When I finished my speech I had made arrangements with Ford to meet him in the Vice Presidential office, which was very impressive because his office in Grand Rapids was small.

Smith: Where was his office?

DeJonge: In Grand Rapids? It was on Cherry, on the north side of Cherry where it takes a bend to go on toward downtown. Small office. There was a Marine guard at the first floor. I told him I had an appointment with Vice President Ford, so he ushered me upstairs, and his secretary served me a cup of coffee on Vice Presidential china and I thought, “Hot Dog!” In a matter of five minutes she said, “you may go in Mr. DeJonge.” I went in and Jerry was sitting at his great big desk a mile and a half away, and he said, “Maury, welcome.” I said, “Jerry, this is scary,” and he says, “Why?” I said, “It’s all so different. You’re Vice President, you’re in this huge office.” He said, “Maury, nothing has changed – remember that.” That was Ford – didn’t change when he became
president. It kind of surprised me. I knew Nixon was a friend, and Ford was a friend of Nixon, but I didn’t realize that they were so close that Nixon would appoint him in his retirement or vacancy.

I was there when he was sworn in – heard his inaugural speech. Went in – I wasn’t supposed to go in the room – but these high rollers from Congress and Senate didn’t know me, and so when they went into this big room for a little reception, I went in like I was one of them. I had an interview with Chief Justice Berger. I told him who I was, I was a reporter for the Grand Rapids Press, and he looked at me and he said, “I usually don’t give interviews to reporters, but since you’re from the new president’s hometown I’ll make an exception.” So I had a nice interview with him.

Smith: This was right after the swearing in?

DeJonge: Right after the swearing in.

Smith: What was Berger’s mood?

DeJonge: He sounded very, very happy that Nixon was gone and Ford was in. It didn’t take long for people to realize – those who really studied this guy – to appreciate who he was, how honest he was. I have yet to hear, other than Democrats who didn’t vote for him, say well, he’s a lousy speaker and – and he was not a spellbinder. Just like this guy we’re dealing with now, Obama. You know, he makes McCain look kind of sick. McCain was looking down at his notes all the time and Obama was free as a bird in his speeches. But it didn’t take long for people to really come to, not only appreciate, but to love Jerry Ford.

Smith: And yet the public didn’t ‘get it’ in those two and half years, and going back to what you said earlier, it wasn’t until his death that people got this more vivid sense of who he really was. David Broder wrote, it was too late for the American people to finally realize, this was the kind of guy we want, we say we want, for president, but we didn’t know it at the time. We didn’t appreciate it.
DeJonge: That’s right. I sat next to David Broder when Ford made his announcement that he had chosen Bob Dole. Before he came out on the platform, Broder said to me, “You’re from Grand Rapids?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Do you have any idea who is he going to appoint?” I said no, absolutely not. It was a surprise to everyone when he picked Bob Dole, because you know the reputation Bob Dole had. I asked Ford that question in one of my interviews with him at his home in Rancho Mirage. If you will just give me a second because that question, I think – here it is.

“What was your reasoning in selecting Senator Dole as your running mate in 1976?” This interview was January, 1979. “Had you asked others before going to Dole?” Answer: “We had gone through a rather extensive process in putting together a list of about ten or twelve names. We had our polling people, as I recall, take about fifteen names. We had an in depth poll nationwide. After those results came back, we whittled it down and we then checked and double-checked with party leaders, with other individuals in and out of the White House. When we got down to the night after my nomination in Kansas City, as I recall, we had about five names and we talked and discussed the pluses and minuses of the five people. The next morning, bright and early, we went over the list again, and on the basis of that process, I selected Bob Dole. It wasn’t an easy job, and we tried to do it as objectively as possible. When we concluded the campaign, I think Bob Dole did for the ticket what I felt had to be done.” I said, “Were you ever sorry over the choice?” Answer: “I never regretted the choice. I think Bob Dole’s part on the ticket, which was aimed at helping to get the southern team, western states, he achieved that result. We did it with the exception of one state, Texas.”

Smith: You said you were at the ’76 convention Talk about the ’76 convention. Going into that convention, was it still uncertain as to the outcome?

DeJonge: You bet. Practically until the last state was called we were not sure that Reagan wouldn’t be the – and we had guys from Kent County who were supportive of Reagan.

Smith: Talk about that.
DeJonge: One of them worked with a stocks and bonds outfit in the Waterville Building. I used to argue with him. I said, what in the world, why are you for Reagan, who is running against Ford from Grand Rapids, who is the vice president – now president? He said, I just think Reagan would be a better man – and he voted that way at the convention. So there were some Kent County supporters for Reagan and it wasn’t until that last state, and I can’t recall, that we were absolutely sure. Nancy Reagan tried to steal the show by going into a dance – and the delegates thought that was wonderful. Betty decided, oh no, she’s not getting away with that. Betty got up and she was a pro dancer, and Betty outdid her and everybody clapped longer. It didn’t hurt.

Smith: Tell me, did you get to know Mrs. Ford?

DeJonge: Oh man, did I know Betty.

Smith: Tell us about Betty Ford – because they would seem to be opposites attracting.

DeJonge: Let me show you a couple of pictures that will tell you. There’s me and Betty and Sheila Weidenfeld, her secretary. Here was the day before the election in ’76, Ford gave a farewell speech at the airport in which he broke down. I have that on tape, which I did not bring. He said, “All that I am, I owe to my father, Gerald R. Ford, Sr., and my mother Dorothy Ford.” And then he broke down. I’m telling you, just about everybody in there – it was a good crowd there – just about everybody cried.

Smith: That’s when they were dedicating the mural.

DeJonge: Yeah. See, I was in Vail when Paul Collins did the painting. Paul Collins, while I was interviewing Ford in the chalet where he was staying, was doing drawings. Then when he got back to Grand Rapids, he finished those drawings as you see now. But, you asked about Betty.

Smith: Yeah. Tell us, because she would seem to be something of a free spirit.

DeJonge: Yeah, she was good for Ford.

Smith: Tell us about that.
DeJonge: I started to tell you, this was at the tarmac at Kent County Airport the day before the election – or the day of the election in ’76. Ford was saying goodbye and this picture, this also of Ford and Betty.

Smith: They look to be in very good spirits. Do you have a sense of what their mood was about the prospects for the election?

DeJonge: I think Ford had closed the gap so fast at the end and it is just a turkey’s shame that he wasn’t elected. He would have made a fine president.

Smith: Do you have a sense of what his mood really was at that point, in terms of their expectations?

DeJonge: I don’t think that Ford was surprised he lost. He felt it deeply, no question about that. And he did a very kind thing for me. The day he left the White House to go to California with Betty, he called me from the White House and I wrote a story on his reaction. He said it hurts to lose. Ford just wasn’t used to losing – whether he played football or whether he was in politics, he wasn’t used to losing, but he was gracious in his defeat. As you know, he and Carter became close friends.

Smith: Let’s go back – I really would love to hear you talk about Betty. Tell us about Betty Ford.

DeJonge: Ford always credited Betty. In his failure to be present when the kids were growing up, he always said, “That job fell on Betty and I’m sorry for that – I was gone most of the time.” Betty accepted that role because she was so in love with the guy. I don’t think she had a bitter moment in her relationship and marriage with Jerry Ford. I really feel that. I got to know Betty and stuff like this wouldn’t happen.

Smith: She was very unlike him, wasn’t she?

DeJonge: She came from a modeling career – she came from a professional dancing career. Ford was none of these. Ford was just such a downright, likeable, honest person – the words fail you – the guy – we won’t see him again.
Smith: She also had – it’s sort of legendary – she had a sense of humor that she didn’t hesitate to poke fun at him.

DeJonge: Yeah, I can’t say I ever heard her poke fun of Jerry. When he came to Grand Rapids, if Betty was not with him, he would always say, “Betty sends her love.” It got to be kind of a joke between myself and a reporter from the Grand Rapids Herald, Jim Mudge, who later worked for Ford. I’d say, “Betty sends her love,” and pretty soon Jerry would say, “Betty sends her love.” It got to be kind of a joke, but that’s how much these two people thought of each other. She was beautiful.

Smith: Her interest in clothes and her interest in the arts were on a level with Jackie Kennedy’s. Unlike Mrs. Kennedy, she’d actually had a career – she had been a dancer. Martha Graham was her teacher and you can’t get much more involved in the arts than that. This must have been a bit of shock to the Dutch Calvinists - the Calder sculpture. How did that burst upon the scene?

DeJonge: There was a county commissioner, a friend of mine by the name of Bob Blandford. Bob was a city commissioner and because he held that office he was a member of the Board of Supervisors, which at that time was seventy-seven members. Bob Blandford was a guy who never kept his mouth shut and I think on his second meeting on the Board of Supervisors he stood up and made a speech. Old John Collins, who ruled the roost on the board, never fully stood up, he would half-stand up and he said, “Mr. Blandford, you have to be a member of this board for two years before you’re allowed to say a word.” But that didn’t shut Bob up. Blandford was the guy who fought that Calder and he gave me lots of stories in his criticism of the Calder. But Stuart Hoffius, who was the senior circuit court judge and who asked me to become county clerk. Stuart Hoffius and a very beautiful blond lady – now I won’t be able to remember her name - I think Alexander Calder fell in love with her because she was very pretty – she pushed it and Stuart Hoffius also was impressed with this lovely lady. They won out and Blandford kept up his attack for all it was worth. They had to cover $25,000 worth of plumbing – they were going to have a fountain in the plaza and the plumbing was in and covered with concrete. They had to dig it all up to put the Calder in. But the
community has accepted it because there are visitors who come to see the Calder.

Smith: The Calder was funded with federal funds – the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities?

DeJonge: Yeah, and that was Blandford’s opposition - that it could be spent more wisely. Oh he had all sorts of names for it – piece of junk - and then the art lovers in Grand Rapids and Kent County were mad at Bob Blandford for the names he called it.

Smith: I think Ford himself didn’t know what Calder was, but he since grew to appreciate it. In fact, Sandy Calder posthumously received the Medal of Freedom from the Ford White House.

DeJonge: I have to admit, I had never heard of Alexander Calder in my life, either. Got to meet him because he would come often to see how the work was progressing. The thing is painted Calder red – they named a special color after him. But it was a tough time – many were opposed to it, many wanted the fountain, but Blandford lost and Stuart Hoffius and this pretty lady succeeded.

Smith: Is Stuart Hoffius still around?

DeJonge: I asked that same question about a week ago and someone told me they think is, but he might have Alzheimer’s.

Smith: One thing to give a backdrop to Ford’s political career - tell us about the time when Grand Rapids had more than one newspaper.

DeJonge: We had the Grand Rapids Herald. It always was second-best to the Press, I think, and this is only my thought. The Herald had a Sunday paper. A lot of the conservatives, many of the Dutch, did not subscribe to the Herald daily, because they had a Sunday paper. The Herald slowly saw their circulation die down until finally Booth Newspapers, owner of the Press, Saganon News, Bay City News, Muskegon, bought them out. We hired some of their best people in the newsroom. Werner Veit became not only the editor, he became publisher of Booth Newspapers. We got the good ones. Bill Bolls, our city editor, he came aboard – nicer guy never lived. Jim Mudge went with Ford for
a short time. He was a good guy. We hired John Hormuth. John Hormuth was a fighter pilot in World War II. Wonderful, wonderful person. He was our Sunday editor. The Press was pretty fussy about who they hired. I remember I applied as soon as I came back from Italy and I didn’t have a suit of clothes. You couldn’t buy a suit. In my uniform, I went to see Mr. Woodruff. He said how much education? I said high school. He said you have to be a college grad to work for the Press. He said you go get your college degree, come back and see me. He didn’t think he’d see me. I went to college on the GI Bill, got my degree and I was hired. Not by Mr. Woodruff, but by Mr. Kesterson who was the managing editor. Very English in his appearance – nice, nice guy. And I had some of the best assignments of any reporter. They sent me to the Netherlands for the dedication of the airport at Amsterdam Schiphol – and covered local, state, and national conventions. I say to my wife, “Really I had a great career at the paper.”

Smith: What was the local reaction when he left office and went out to California? Were there people here who were upset about that?

DeJonge: Yeah. They said, here he lived in Grand Rapids most of his life, except in his infancy, and now that he’s been president…and I brought that up to Ford in one of my interviews out there with him and he said, “Well, Maury, I know that some people are upset,” he said, “but I did it for a couple of reasons. Number one, for Betty’s health.” He said, “That’s important.” And he said he liked California. We were walking to his home from his office which was the former home of the dancer, Ginger Rogers, and we stopped. The sun was going down behind the mountains. He said, “Maury, do you get an idea now why we moved to California?” I said, “Jerry, you don’t have to apologize to me. I understand.” Then we went in the house and Betty was sitting at her desk. She was on the telephone, and she nodded. He then showed me through his house – his weight room and his swimming pool and stuff.

I had given a speech on Ford to the Breakfast Club of Grand Rapids, and I sent a copy of that speech to Ford. He called me and said, “Maury, the next time you are in the desert,” – he always called it the desert – “you and Theta stop in for coffee or for breakfast.” We go there in February. So I called him
up after about three days and said, “Jerry, we are in Palm Springs.” He said, “Ah, good. What are you doing tomorrow?” I said, “Waiting for your phone call.” When I got there Bob Barrett, his go-to man, and his secretary Penny Circle, were there. She said, “Maury, Jerry had to go to the hospital to get a shot – he did something to his hip.” So I said, “We’ll wait.” She said, “He’s expected anytime.”

We waited about fifteen minutes. He came in the door and he said, “Maury, I’m so sorry, but I must have rolled over in bed wrong last night and I did something to my hip and we went to the Eisenhower Hospital and they gave me a shot of cortisone.” I said, “Jerry, you don’t have to apologize to me.” So then we went in his office.

He liked to visit with old friends and talk about people he knew and knows yet – in the past. An hour went by and we were just coffee drinking and talking and I said, “Jerry, we’ve been here an hour and taking way too much of your time.” He said, “Maury, I like to meet with old friends.” I said, “But we are leaving now.” But that’s how gracious he was. I can’t say enough about that guy.

Smith: Did you see him at other times in the White House during his presidency? You mentioned the day he became president.

DeJonge: The only time I saw him in the White House was at his inauguration. I called him when I had a suspicion that he was going to be named the vice president. I said, “Jerry, I would like to come to Washington to interview you.” He let the cat out of the bag, really. He said, “Maury, you know in Cedar Springs they always have this Red Flannel Parade.” He said, “I’m going to be in Cedar Springs tomorrow for the parade – come see me there.” And I thought, why is he coming to Cedar Springs, is he going to be the vice president? It was going through my mind – and that’s what happened. Our county treasurer, John Damstra, had a real fancy sports car convertible and John liked to show it off. He was in the parade and he said to Ford – “Ride with me!” Ford said, “No, I’m walking this parade.” He walked the whole parade with me at his side and then we went into, I call it a barn, and we had a chicken dinner together and I got my interview with him.
Smith: And this was the day after he had been nominated for the vice presidency?

DeJonge: I wrote a story on that. Cedar Springs never saw so many people. They were hanging out of the windows. I think I remember that town had 6,100 people – that was its population. In the article I said nobody knows how many people were there – they were in the thousands. Because here was Ford now, no longer their Congressman, now their vice president. He had a red vest on instead of red flannel. And oh, they went nuts.

Smith: But he was unchanged.

DeJonge: Unchanged. Never changed. Like I say, we visited him in Vail.

Smith: Tell me about that.

DeJonge: That’s where Paul did his drawings. Paul Collins. Paul sat up here, up on a stoop and Jerry had the worst looking – oops – I’d better not say it.

Smith: That jacket? That plaid jacket. Tell me about it.

DeJonge: With plaid pants! And they were double-knit and everybody who – I had that picture in here and everybody who I showed that to, they say, “Look at the way he’s dressed!” But anyway, we had a great interview. He was so kind and Susan came walking down the way or she was on a bike. But I’m going to show you that picture. You will really – but he looked putz – Ford always looked putz.

Smith: Where did he get his fashion sense? Not from Betty.

DeJonge: No – he had a – here is Bill Simon – remember him?

Smith: Yup.

DeJonge: He came to Grand Rapids. He and I went swimming together at the convention. Okay – here it is.

Smith: The proverbial picture worth ten thousand words. Now, that couldn’t have been Betty’s fashion sense.
DeJonge: No, he used a local tailor whose office was on Ottawa and Lyon and he was a well-known tailor in Grand Rapids. But Jerry had his own style and I remember he made a sport coat for him – it was terrible, but Jerry liked it so he made it. One of our photographers, Jay Abbott and I, we snuck a note in the inside pocket of his new sport coat.

Smith: What did the note say?

DeJonge: Something about the coat – I don’t remember.

Smith: Not complimentary.

DeJonge: No and he answered, jokingly. I could never make him mad. Very few people could.

Smith: How much of that was the 70’s and how much of that was Jerry Ford’s sense of fashion. Because, let’s face it, people who look back now, we’re all embarrassed at what people wore in the 70’s.

DeJonge: Oh, I am, too, the stuff I remember.

Smith: Leisure suits.

DeJonge: And everything was double-knit because it didn’t wrinkle and they were homely, ugly stuff. I had a pair of black and white shoes - oh terrible – oh everyone dressed terribly back then. Jerry didn’t have a corner on poor dress.

Smith: One senses Mrs. Ford kind of looked out for him in later years. “You’re not going to wear that suit.”

DeJonge: I’m sure, because when they dedicated this place, Bill Gill, who was the news director for WOTV and myself were appointed the people to welcome the visiting journalists from all over – Japan, China, Germany. We had to credential every one of them. It was a big, big job. We did it and we got compliments from Ford on it. The picture that was taken, the Prime Minister of Canada, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Sr., down the line, beautiful picture. I’ve saved that.

Smith: Is Bill Gill still around?
Maury DeJonge  August 8, 2008

DeJonge: I saw Bill about a year ago. One of the guys from our paper died and I went to the funeral chapel and saw Bill for the first time in many years. Bill and I were always close. We were competitors in a way, but newspapers can’t compete with television, which can give you instant news, but we can do a better job. You can go back tomorrow and read it again. You can’t do that with television or radio. Still, newspapers are losing readers – even the Times.

I’ve got to tell this, when Ford was appointed vice president there came the media – New York Times, Boston Globe, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, and all of them were told by Republican headquarters, “Go see Maury.” And so there they’d come to the Press. I’d treat them to coffee on the third floor. They were all looking for junk – all looking for the worst thing they could find on Jerry Ford. I’ll never forget the guy from CBS, I can’t remember his name – he’s no longer with them, his parting words to me were, “This guy couldn’t have been an Eagle Scout all his life.” I said to him, “If you find anything on Jerry Ford, you come back and tell me.” And he walked out.

They all left empty-handed – every one of them. Nobody found a thing. Even the FBI was in here and they hid in the closet when I walked into Republican headquarters, as I did routinely, just to make myself known and available. The secretary said, “Oh here comes Maury, don’t let him see you.” The FBI hid in the closet. I found that out from her later. But they all had garbage on their mind. Never found it.

Smith: The kids, of course, didn’t grow up here – this wasn’t their home. In fact, I think it means more to them now when they come back. Obviously there is a special kind of bond.

DeJonge: Yeah, we really didn’t know the kids. I remember Pete Secchia had a suite at the Kansas City convention – Pete and I are friends. We fight, but we’re friends. He had arranged for an interview in his suite with Jack Ford and Tony Orlando. He said, be there at 6:30. I said, I’ll be there. I had first gone to this Nelson Rockefeller reception, went to Pete’s suite, got there at exactly twenty-five after and had my interviews with Jack Ford and Tony Orlando separately, in the bedroom. That night, I got back from the convention and
Pete’s waiting at the entrance to the hotel – Hallmark Hotel I guess – and it’s around eleven thirty at night. He said to me, “You embarrassed me today.” I said, “I embarrassed you? How’s that?” He said, “I told you to be in my suite at six o’clock.” I said, “Peter, you said six-thirty and I was there and I got my interviews.” He said, “I said six.”

And a crowd started to gather, we’re arguing now. I said, “Peter, I’m not going to argue with you out here with all these people around, but I’m looking you up tomorrow.” The next morning I thought he’d be at the pool – he had a broken leg at the time and he was in the wheelchair and had his own private nurse - and I thought he’d be sitting at the pool. I had my bathing suit on and Joanie was there. I said, “Joanie, where’s Peter?” She said, “Maury, he’s sorry.” I said, “I want Peter to tell me he is sorry.” She said, “No, let’s go swimming.” So the two of us went in the pool. By this time my temper is back down and Peter and I stayed friends. When he was ambassador he wanted me to come to Italy, but I didn’t have time. Good guy.

Smith: Tell me about this place and the impact that it made on the city. When it was decided that there was going to be a Ford museum, I guess he was offered several sites, including some on the outskirts of town. But the decision was made to put it here and presumably that was one of the catalysts, along with the hotel obviously, and all that that began the turnaround.

DeJonge: Well, you know, in one of the interviews, I broke the story that Ford and Betty were going to be buried here. I said, “You’re coming back to Grand Rapids to be buried?” and he said yes. And he said it will be just north of the museum. And it happened. I haven’t seen it yet. I brought my camera – I said to Theta, my wife, “I’m going to try to take a picture of that, I still feel bad.”

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him or spoke to him?

DeJonge: Let’s see, it was January, ’79. You mentioned Mike Lloyd. Mike and I are not friends. I had called Ford and I said, “Jerry, sometime, if it’s okay with you, I would like to do an interview asking you every question I can think of.” He said, “Maury, it will happen and I’ll call you.” That was January of ’79, he said, come to my office and we’ll have that interview. At that time he said the
only other paper I’m doing this for is the New York Times. So I had my interview and I put it on tape and later Mike met with Jerry in Chicago and he did an interview. Mike chose to run his interview and not mine. He mentioned in his first of a series of two or three, that it started with Maury DeJonge in January of ’79. That’s it.

I said to Mike, at least give me credit for having one of the first interviews and he did. Then Grand Rapids Magazine called me and they said Maury, we understand that you have a copy of that tape. I said, “You bet.” They said, “We would like to run that story.” I said, “Well, before I’ll say yes, I want to check with Mike Lloyd to see if he will approve.” I called Mike and he said, “Absolutely not. That’s Press property. You were employed by the Press when you made the tape. We have it in our safe, and I chose to run my interview.” I said, “Well, Mike I have a copy.” And so I got a letter from a New York lawyer, ordering me to turn that tape over to the Press immediately, and I said three words. I had Roger Boor as my lawyer, and Roger said, “Don’t let them have that.”

That’s a keepsake – I treasure that thing. I was so careful with it, not even my wife heard it. I transcribed it myself, so nobody has ever seen or heard that tape except me. But I got it and I will keep it. I suppose Mike’s got a point, but he ordered the chief editorial writer, who also edits the public policy column - he says, accept no more letters from Maury DeJonge. So I called – that was at the time – it was the guy who was in the accident with Pete and Joanie – such a nice guy. I said, “Have you gotten the word?” and he says, “Yeah, Maury, I hate to tell you, but Mike has said, ‘No more letters from Maury’.” To me that is very small because I had many people who would read my letters on different subjects.

Smith: Were you surprised by the response – the funeral? Obviously, it was the biggest event in Grand Rapids history.

DeJonge: I was so surprised. I knew it would be big, I never saw such a crowd. They were across the bridge. They were south. I couldn’t believe it and anybody’s estimate on crowd would strictly be a guess. I think sixty-seventy thousand, what do I know? I never saw a crowd like that.
Jack Kennedy, when he came to town, he was a senator at that time, running for president. It was huge crowd in Campau Square. I rode in the motorcade back to Nelson and Kalamazoo Avenue where his train was waiting. We were in the second car. Kennedy got out of his car and I walked with him. I walked with him and I said, “Senator, would you believe this is a Republican town?” He said, “Not today, it isn’t.” I sent him a couple of pictures that our photographer took. And he sent me a handwritten note thanking me. I kept that, too.

They were lined up all down Division Avenue. When they got to Catholic Central High School, the mob blocked the street. So we had to get out, climbed on the roof of the car, said a few words, back in the car to Burton, Burton to Nelson, Nelson to the railroad station.

Then Nixon came to town. I was traveling with Al Bentley, who was a Congressman who was running for the Senate against Pat McNamara. He was a multi-millionaire, about two hundred million, original GM stock – that way. He was the guy that got shot in the Chamber by that Puerto Rican – remember that? It goes way back. And he used that suit, with the bullet hole in it in his campaign, which I thought was so corny. I lived with him for three weeks in his home in Owosso and we traveled all over by his airplane as he made his stops. He threw a big party in Detroit about two days before the election for a different nationalities. A big dinner, and all, and there was maybe two or three thousand people at Cobo Hall. Bentley was caught up in that mob and he got up there and he sounded like Jesus. He said, “Lo, I will be with you always.” And I thought, oh no. So we went back to his house – we flew back to Owosso. He said, “Maury, do you think I’m going to win?” I said, “No, Al. You’re going to lose.” McNamara cleaned his clock.

Smith: Owosso was also the home of Thomas E. Dewey.

DeJonge: Right across the street – slightly at an angle to the left was – and he pointed it out to me. I’ll never forget - I slept at his home - he had carpeting about that thick. I’d go home and my carpeting was about like this. He had the money and he was quite certain he was going to be elected to the Senate. But he lost big.
Remember T. John Lesinski? He was a lieutenant governor under Williams. T. John, in Hamtramck, was debating Al Bentley. You know what Hamtramck is like – all Democrats. Bentley made a comment, kidding T. John about his weight. When it was all over T. John walked up to Bentley and said, “I could have knocked you out making fun of my weight.” Oh he was livid, he was so mad. And Bentley said, “I was just kidding, John. I was just kidding.” He didn’t take it as kidding.

Smith: Tell me, was George Romney in over his head as a presidential candidate?

DeJonge: Senior?

Smith: Yeah.

DeJonge: I wish he would have been elected – nominated and elected. This guy was a great governor in the state of Michigan. I didn’t cover him much, but he spoke at Calvin College one night that I covered and he used a couple damn and hells in his speech. I thought, that’s not going to go over very big with this Calvin College crowd, but he was such a success with American Motors. He was talking about gas guzzling dinosaurs way ahead of his time and he was right. When he came back from, Vietnam or Korea, I can’t remember, he said we were brainwashed, and he was right! We were brainwashed by Lyndon Johnson – that it was a war we were winning. They used that against George Romney to this day and it is false. He was right.

Bud Vestal covered George Romney when I was covering Al Bentley for all the Booth papers. He ran Bud Vestal’s legs off. When the three weeks were over, I called Vestal and I said, boy, I was tired, Bud. He said, “Did you hear what happened to me?” I said, “No.” He said when it was all over, “I went home laid on the davenport and I passed out. I fell on the floor. I had to take a week off.” He said, “Romney just drove me crazy.” That’s the kind of guy he was. When he played golf, he jogged. He didn’t walk, he jogged. That doesn’t make him president, but I still think he would have been a good one.

Smith: Tell us, sort of wrapping up, if you were describing Ford to a generation who never knew him, or to people who thought they knew him – something they
didn’t know about Ford – something they ought to know about him – something that goes to the heart of who he was.

DeJonge: Boy, that is so tough without my fingers on a computer, but number one: intelligence; number two: right up there with number one, so trustworthy, so humble, so competent in everything. Well you know what he inherited from – good grief, we had interest rates going nuts, our inflation was horrible, just terrible and Ford was bringing that down in that short period of time. I think he would have been a total success and achieved great things had he been elected. But, no, it’s so tough to describe this guy – it’s something you have to feel.

Smith: Television wasn’t his friend, was it? He wasn’t a television president.

DeJonge: No. No way. He started it and it narrowed it considerably, but he was like what – fourteen, eighteen points behind this peanut farmer? I didn’t think – I interviewed Carter’s son and he told me his dad announced at a Thanksgiving dinner I’m going to run for president and I’m going to win. And he did.

Smith: And wasn’t it extraordinary – to bring this story full circle – I remember at the church – the funeral – when I was up there, I think I was in a fog – you don’t really notice things, but I read afterwards that Roslyn Carter was weeping in her pew. Who would have predicted in 1976 that’s how the story would end.

DeJonge: I know. The guy next door –

Smith: Marty.

DeJonge: He spent ten minutes apologizing to me because I was not invited. But I hold no grudge against that – I said, “Marty, forget it.” But tell me this, I heard that after, or during the funeral, an eagle flew over. Is that true?

Smith: I’ve heard that, too. I don’t know. I can’t tell you that, but I’ve heard that as well.

DeJonge: And the day was unbelievably beautiful – the sun was out – not a cloud in the sky – and if that’s a true story, it ought to be told. Someone who was there
said, and I thought they said it was on television. I don’t know. But that would be a godsend if that was true – because that’s where that guy is.

Smith: Thank you.

DeJonge: You’re welcome.

Smith: This is great – and fun.
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Smith: First of all, thanks so much for doing this. We really appreciate it, on this gorgeous mid-winter day. Is this typical?

Friedersdorf: I’d say this time of year it’s typical, around eighty degrees. We had cold days in January, but February and March are really beautiful months.

Smith: I’m interested in your life before Gerald Ford. How did your path lead to Washington and ultimately to the Ford White House?

Friedersdorf: I came to Washington in 1961 after the ’60 election with a freshman congressman from Indiana, Richard L. Roudebush, 6th Indiana district. Congressman Ford, of course, was a power in the Republican house delegation and I met many of his staffers, including Bob Hartmann and became friends. I was involved somewhat negatively with President Ford at first because when he ran against Charlie Halleck from Indiana I was working the phones for Charlie Halleck and the Republican delegation from Indiana. But we lost and President Ford never held it against any of the Indiana delegation.

Smith: What was the beef against Halleck? Was it in some ways almost a repeat of the complaint against Joe Martin back in ’58?

Friedersdorf: It’s a combination of the age thing and minority status, and Halleck had a drinking problem. That was pretty well known. And then you had a group of Young Turks like Gerald R. Ford and Melvin Laird and Donald Rumsfeld and Bob Griffin, and they were up and coming. It was a generational difference and it was after the ’64 election which was such a debacle. We lost a lot of seats in the Goldwater election. The house members felt it was time for Charlie to go.

Smith: How was Halleck treated after that by the winners, in effect?
Friedersdorf: He was treated with respect and honor and I think that in his heart of hearts he knew that his time was over. I never saw any resentment or any vengeance or any indication that there was bad blood.

Smith: What was it that people saw in Ford at that point that would lead them to make him the Republican Leader? What were the qualities that they saw?

Friedersdorf: Halleck was a very inspired Minority Leader in his heyday.

Smith: Halleck was. I’m interested in what it was Halleck had, but then I’m wondering about Ford.

Friedersdorf: Well, Halleck had been a very, very effective Leader for a number of years and I think that, as we said, his time had come. But, getting to President Ford, there were a lot of possibilities in the House side at that time, but Ford seemed to have a more broad base of support. He was a very vigorous, energetic, attractive, intelligent type of person that Republicans just seemed to naturally gravitate towards. He’s sort of a natural Leader, which he had been all his life in every pursuit. And I think it was just the cream coming to the top.

Smith: And the party, as we said, in those days really was sort of grounded in the Midwest, wasn’t it?

Friedersdorf: Right.

Smith: I mean, you had your Northeastern wing. You had a growing Southern wing. You had, certainly, Goldwater support in the Rocky Mountains states.

Friedersdorf: Right.

Smith: But the Midwest was still the heart of it.

Friedersdorf: It was the heart of the Republican Party: Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota.

Smith: What did it mean to be a conservative in the Jerry Ford sense of the word?

Friedersdorf: Well, it was an entirely different conservative than now. When I think about President Ford, I think about how he would have reacted to the Republican party’s record during the last eight or ten years on big spending and an
aggressive, almost combative, foreign policy that was just the opposite of what we thought [as of] conservatism. We were the Walter Judd type conservatives: reduce spending, lower taxes, strong foreign policy, but not an adventurous, hostile foreign policy. I think that’s what it stood for.

Smith: And yet clearly having to some degree, at least, accommodate yourself to the electoral realities. This was the height of the Great Society, ’64 and the landslide for Johnson. It wasn’t enough simply to say, “No. We’re against this.” Presumably, there was some attempt to come up with a conservative alternative, a more constructive opposition, if you will.

Friedersdorf: Well, I think we talked about balanced budgets and these programs, I think if you go back and check the record, most of those programs have turned out to be really successful, like Medicare and Medicaid. Probably the majority of Republicans voted against them. In hindsight, I think we were wrong. I think now even those members who voted during that era against those programs would say they were worthwhile.

Smith: For example, Bob Dole.

Friedersdorf: Right.

Smith: Who was also a member of this…

Friedersdorf: Well, he was a member. I omitted him, but he was a solid member of that group.

Smith: And, in fact, played a key role in Ford’s victory over Charlie Halleck.

Friedersdorf: That’s right.

Smith: Clearly there was a change from the Ev and Charlie Show to the Ev and Jerry Show. When we talked with Mel Laird yesterday, one had a sense that Dirksen tended to be very accommodationist with LBJ. Whether it was Vietnam or whatever, that there was a relationship between Dirksen and Johnson, and that Dirksen was easily flattered, at least in Mel’s viewpoint. And that, in some ways it fell to the House Republicans of lift the banner of opposition a little more than in the Senate.
Friedersdorf: I think that’s true. I think the Senate was – it’s just the nature of the Senate to
be club-like and accommodating. They seem to all be part of one fraternity
over there. Where, in the House, it’s a much more partisan atmosphere.

Smith: Even then it was?

Friedersdorf: I think so, I think so.

Smith: What is it about being a Congressman, because clearly – I don’t mean to jump
ahead – but the criticism was voiced of Ford when he became president that it
took too long for him to shift gears from being on Capitol Hill to the White
House. What is it about being in the House for twenty-five years that would
define someone, shape their Leadership?

Friedersdorf: Well, I think a Congressman, as a House member, is much closer to the issues
because he has to run every two years. In fact he was always running. Back
in those days, it wasn’t nearly as expensive, but he still was always raising
money. And I think they visited the districts more often. I know the House
member that I worked for ten years, he went back to Indiana every single
weekend. So you were practically, you were in touch with your constituency
constantly. And I know Senators, some of them probably go home every six
months, the ones that had just been elected.

So I think the House is much closer to the public and I think that President
Ford, coming in after having been Leader, was very sensitized to the requests
of the House members. He was constantly pounded on every day on the floor.
You could just see them lining up, as soon as he came down the aisle. They
would be lined up at the Leadership desk about this project and that project
and “Can you come here?” , “Can you do that?” And it was a hard transition
from becoming a member of the House to being vice president and president.
Very hard transition.

Smith: He always thought, and I don’t think it was just a line, he believed genuinely
that he had adversaries, but no enemies. Now, that may be stretching it, but
how would you describe his relations with members in both parties,
particularly in the House?
Friedersdorf: I never heard a Democrat or Republican ever say anything critical or mean or vicious about President Ford when he was House Leader. He had the respect of everybody in the House. Members would violently disagree with him on the issues, but he was one of those individuals that absolutely seemed to have a personality that was not abrasive. He could tell you “No”. He could tell you “I can’t do that” in a way that there was no offense taken and there was no bitterness. Of course, that’s why he became president, because he was a person that could be confirmed, he had that many friends in both the House and Senate. I don’t think you can say that about many Leaders over the years that don’t have really, really bitter enemies. Personal enemies. And Ford just didn’t generate enemies.

Smith: The relationship with Tip O’Neill was very close?

Friedersdorf: Yes, extremely close. They played golf together. They had cocktails together occasionally after work. They socialized. They fought like cats and dogs on the floor, but after five o’clock, six o’clock, they were friends.

Smith: There are stories of him and Hale Boggs, who I guess used to debate down at the National Press Club. They would drive down together, decide on the way what they would debate that day. They’d go down to the Press Club, they’d have their debate, and then they’d go off and have lunch or drink and resume the battle. It’s sounds so unlike today.

Friedersdorf: It’s just such an incredible atmosphere that it’s hard for me to imagine working up there now, [the way] the atmosphere is. I never had any hesitation going in and talking to the Speaker about something that President Ford wanted to bring up. He was always accommodating. He might not agree with it, but it was a very congenial atmosphere.

Smith: Now, how did you get into the business of congressional relations?

Friedersdorf: I was working on the Hill and my boss ran for the Senate against Vance Hartke in 1968. Anyway, I was hired by Don Rumsfeld at OEO to run congressional relations. And then when Rumsfeld and Cheney went over to the White House under Nixon to take over the Office of Price Control, I got an offer to go over and be on the congressional relations staff at the White
House, as assistant to the president for congressional relations working the House side. Jerry Ford was the Minority Leader, so I was in and out of his office every day, practically, and got to know him much better than my real boss, President Nixon. And the day that Nixon resigned and President Ford was sworn in, President Ford had a receiving line in the White House, and as I went through the line, he said, “I want you to stay. I’m going to need all the help I can get.” And I was very pleased to hear that. So I stayed on during his administration.

Smith: I take it that he was an easier man to know than Richard Nixon.

Friedersdorf: Well, I felt like Jerry Ford was a big brother. I’d traveled with him when he was Minority Leader. We would have these trips – him and Rumsfeld and Laird and Bob Griffin and a lot of the Young Turks in the Republican party -

Smith: Charlie Goodell?

Friedersdorf: Charlie Goodell. We would go around the country during recess and speak in Democrat districts where we had hopes to elect a Republican. So, I did travel with Ford. I got to know him quite well. I had a very, let’s say unpleasant experience. One time, we were in Indiana around Kokomo or Muncie. He’d given a speech the night before and we were staying in a private home. I was in the same bedroom with Ford, twin beds, and he said, “I’m a heavy sleeper. I want to get up at six. There’s a plane that’s going to take me to Indianapolis.” So, my alarm didn’t go off and we overslept an hour and I have never been chewed out like Ford could do it. So I run out and got him a cup of coffee. I brought the cup of coffee back and he’d calmed down a little, but by the time we got to the airport, on the way to the airport, he said, “That’s okay, Max. The plane will wait on me.” He got real mad. He could fly off the handle.

Smith: He had a temper.

Friedersdorf: Yeah, he did.

Smith: And apparently spent a lifetime trying to control it.
Friedersdorf: But I woke up and it was seven o’clock instead of six and I thought, “How am I going to wake him up?” So, I went over and I took his shoulder and I said, “Mr. Leader. Mr. Leader.” He woke up, he said, “What time is it?” I said, “It’s seven o’clock.” He said, “Augh!” And he was a big guy, I mean, strong as a bull. I know he would never hit me, but I remember he was all-American center on Michigan. But that’s the kind of guy he was.

Smith: Yeah. He really wanted to be Speaker of the House, didn’t he?

Friedersdorf: Yeah, he told me he did. That was the height of his goal. I think he would rather be Speaker than President.

Smith: When you were in and out of his office doing congressional relations for the Nixon White House - clearly that gets us into the whole Watergate period. Do you remember where you were when you first heard about the break in?

Friedersdorf: I was out on Highway 123 in Fairfax County. I’d been down to the country club in Fairfax that morning playing golf. It was on a Saturday and I was driving down. I had the radio on and it was just a small announcement that there’d been a burglary at the Democratic National headquarters in Watergate. And I didn’t think too much about it. I thought, “Why would somebody break in there?” and so on and so forth. But as the thing developed and it became the horrible scandal it was, I thanked my lucky stars, because that spring, I’d gotten a call from John Mitchell over at CREEP, Committee to Reelect. He’d wanted me to come over to CREEP, to take a leave of absence from the White House and come over, and work on the Committee to Reelect and do some speechwriting and advance work. He wasn’t specific.

I hung up the phone. I ran over to the West wing. I went into Bill Timmons office and I said, “Bill, Mitchell wants me to come over to CREEP. I took this job to work congressional relations in the White House. I do not want to go to the Committee. That is not my cup of tea.” He said, “Don’t worry about it. I’ll call Mitchell and tell him you cannot.” He got me out of that and I thought, “Ugh.” Many, many of the guys I know that were working in the White House that were drafted and went over there got into trouble and some of them went to prison, some of them served time.
Smith: Do you think Mitchell took secrets with him to the grave?

Friedersdorf: My theory on that has always been that they had too much money to spend over there. We were ahead 43 to 29 in the polls. Guys like Liddy and those guys were trying to impress Mitchell. Or they were freelancing. Or they were too active for the situation. And when they did this and they got caught and things blew up, John Mitchell was probably briefed or privy to most of it. And President Nixon was trying to protect John Mitchell, his former law partner and best friend. I’ve always thought that’s how it developed and that Nixon, for all his faults, he was extremely loyal to people and I don’t think he would have ever done anything that would implicate or reflect on John Mitchell. And I think that was the heart of his problem, the heart of his motivation, let’s say.

Section Not Released

Smith: Were you surprised by the taping system?

Friedersdorf: Yes, I had no idea that was in there. You just didn’t think about it, you know. But in retrospect, maybe I should’ve, but I was not alone.

Smith: During this period, is Ford asking you, as, in effect, the White House representative, “What’s going on?” or “Can you explain this Watergate business to me?” Was there a growing alarm on the Hill among Republicans?

Friedersdorf: It was sort of like an ink blot spreading. I think people at first thought it would go away and it was kind of like slow death or torture by drips. Each day, there’d be something else come out and it seemed like House Leader Ford and the Republican Leadership didn’t know any more about it than we did at the White House. It was all kept within a very tight circle, [text embargoed] Haldeman and Erlichman and the president and Colson. I don’t think it went much beyond that.

Smith: We were talking about Mel Laird. When he went back to the White House, it’s now revealed that Fred Buzhardt told him within a month or so that in fact Nixon was involved in the cover up at the very least, based upon Buzhardt’s listening to the tapes. But apparently Laird kept that to himself.
Friedersdorf: That didn’t get very far. I doubt President Ford knew that. Perhaps he did if Laird shared that with him, but he didn’t share it with the White House staff. I was convinced up until a couple days before they finally came up with the smoking gun, which was just a few days before, we were all convinced that it would go away. But we started counting votes on impeachment pretty early, because we could see that was coming in the House. And we were keeping a list and checking Congressmen on how they would vote on a bill of impeachment and also the Senate, too. So we were wary of it.

Smith: For example, the Saturday Night Massacre - did that significantly advance the calls for impeachment in the house? When Cox was fired, remember that? And Richardson refused to quit and…

Friedersdorf: Oh yeah, the Saturday Night Massacre? Oh, that was a major, major blow. Because Ruckelshaus was considered part of the Nixon team. We weren’t that much surprised at Elliot Richardson, he was kind of a weak reed, but when Ruckelshaus went along with it then the whole thing I think was a major blow.

Smith: Plus, by that time, Agnew had resigned.

Friedersdorf: It was a real distraction at the time. I think at the time it might have been just a bit helpful, not helpful in the long-term, but it took your mind off of Watergate for a day or two.

Smith: I’ll tell you something extraordinary. We talked to Jerry Jones, who worked with Haig later on. Just before Haldeman left, whenever it was, April, May of ’73, Haldeman had Jones reorganizing the personnel office. He called him one day and he said, “How many jobs report to the vice president?” Jones did some figuring and he said, “About 50.” Haldeman said, “Good. I want letters of resignation.” Now this is in April of ’73., Jones at least thinks they knew as early as then that Agnew was going to be in trouble. What was it like to come into work, day after day after day?

Friedersdorf: It was tough and a lot of my friends resigned and went to other jobs. Most of the guys on the congressional relations staff left. And Dick Cook and Gene Cowan and Ken Deliciu and Bill Timmons, who were hardcore Nixon. These
guys were quitting and taking private sector jobs. I had made up my mind that I was going to stay until the thing was over, until the last day. And I did. President Nixon gave that emotional address in the East Room the day that he resigned, and then that evening – no, that was the day he did resign - but the evening before, he asked us to bring down the remaining supporters from the House and Senate. We had less than forty votes, counting House and Senate. That’s how extreme we were. Guys like Senator Eastland, Senator Stennis, Joe Waggoner, John Rhodes, Les Arends, the hardcore of the hardcore. And we assembled them in the Cabinet Room about 6:00 p.m. and we waited on the president, waited on the president. Some of the guys were getting restless, they had things to go to, but everybody stayed.

He finally came in and he said, “I’m going on television tonight and I’m going to announce my resignation. I’m going to resign tomorrow at noon.” Everybody was kind of anticipating it, but there were a lot of tears in the room. And Nixon kind of broke down, he was starting to tear up and he laid his head down on the desk and you could see his shoulders heaving. And we, everybody in the room, was just – just the drama of that. And he finally raised up and he said, “I’m sorry I let you down.” And he got up and he sort of ran out of the room back into the Oval Office. It was one of the most painful, depressing things I’ve ever seen. The President of the United States.

And, of course, the next day, he spoke in the East Room. If you remember that speech, he got into his mother and there wasn’t a dry eye in that room. Then he went out and got in the helicopter. That’s when President Ford; it was like a new day. It was like the sun coming up over Mount Everest. Nixon was gone and Ford was there. It was almost like a celebration. They lifted a weight off our shoulders. But I stayed until that day and I thought President Ford would want an entirely new team. But I had stayed and I felt like I would like to work for him if he wanted me. But I didn’t say a word. He just said, “Max, I want you to stay right here.”

Smith: You know, it’s fascinating, people who were there have told us, following the swearing in, there was a receiving line and then people were invited into the State Dining Room for a reception. Someone said, “You could watch the
Nixon people just strip away and go back to their offices”. How much of a problem was that for a while, at least, the White House was basically staffed with Nixon loyalists?

Friedersdorf: Well, you know, it played out in a strange way because I was on Nixon’s staff, but I was so close to Ford, I considered myself a Ford person. I’d spent more time with Ford, a hundred times more than I had with Nixon. But there were people like Bob Hartmann who were very vindictive. They wanted to get rid of every single Nixon person. If you had [the] Nixon stain on you, Bob wanted that person gone. Then there were guys like Jack Marsh, they were thinking about Ford’s administration and not whether you were Nixon person or a Ford. They wanted to keep the people that could do the job. And Jack was a big, big influence on President Ford. President Ford respected Jack’s judgment, which we all did. Jack was a steady hand at that time and I think that his attitude toward the Nixon people was that they did their job. They didn’t throw them all out. They had kept some of them.

Smith: Hartmann was almost a polarizing figure, wasn’t he?

Friedersdorf: Yes, he was. And a good friend of mine. I got along with him, but he had a lot of enemies. Guys like Rumsfeld and him, they just clashed all the time.

Smith: What contributed to that?

Friedersdorf: Well, you know Hartmann as well as I do, probably, and he was an irascible guy. And he was tremendously loyal to Ford.

Smith: Possessive of Ford, though, too.

Friedersdorf: Yes, that’s the word ‘possessive.’ He didn’t want anybody else. And he started writing his speeches after he became president. He’d been writing his speeches for years. Well, Rumsfeld wanted to vet those speeches and we had a committee that would go over those speeches, but if you’d change one word, Hartmann would go ballistic. He couldn’t accept the fact that this former Congressman, who he was his right arm for years and years, did all of his writing, all of his PR, he was his campaign manager, he was everything - that suddenly this man was President of the United States, and he had a big staff
and a lot of responsibility to different constituents. And this was hard for Bob to accept.

Smith: As someone who had spent twenty-five years on the Hill, how did that affect your job doing congressional relations? Because part of the irony, the paradox, of the Ford presidency is, post-Nixon, there’s this huge backlash from the Hill. Worse after ’74. With the elections going as badly as they did, how did you do your job?

Friedersdorf: Well, President Ford was very perceptive to that and he understood that naturally all the Congressmen, they would want to see him personally. And he realized he couldn’t see all of them personally every day that wanted to see him. It wasn’t like he was Minority Leader again and that they could all just come up and vent their problems on him. He had to run the country. So, he made it clear that the congressional relations guys – he would take their calls, but he would say, “Well, Max or some of the staff will come up and see you. Give them the information and I’ll look over it.” He was very helpful in getting us involved and not trying to play Mr. Congressional Relations any longer. We had a good staff and we gradually weaned them off of that.

One of the things that’s hard to do is, they were so familiar with him, they would call him Jerry. He’d come up to give the State of the Union and they’d say Jerry. And Bob Griffin used to just go bananas. Bob would say, “Damn it, that is Mr. President. That is not Jerry!” It was a hard thing to do.

Smith: I assume Ford wasn’t offended by them calling him Jerry.

Friedersdorf: No, no, not at all. And some of them never did change. Al Cederberg, we would go over to those Ford dinners when the president was living and he would call him Jerry. I don’t think I ever heard Al Cederberg in his life call him Mr. President. Chuck Chamberlain called him Jerry. Bill Broomfield called him Jerry. They were part of the Michigan delegation, they’d been with him for years, so you’re not going to change those guys. But he did, on business, try to make them understand that the congressional relations staff were the persons to deal with. And Marsh was very instrumental in that, too, having been a former House member.
Smith: Let me ask you, because you have this honeymoon and it’s very short-lived. During that month before the pardon: were you getting advice, were people in the Congress telling the president how to handle Nixon?

Friedersdorf: Yeah, that’s all they talked about. Watergate was still in their mind. I think that they were wanting to see closure, but they weren’t certain what kind of closure. It’s hard for even a partisan Democrat to imagine putting a former president on trial. When he had resigned, they got their pound of flesh. And I think it was beginning to die down. It was really beginning to die down by the time the pardon came. Of course that just re-opened all those wounds.

Smith: How bad was it?

Friedersdorf: Horrible!

Smith: What’d you hear?

Friedersdorf: When Nixon resigned and right after President Ford took office, was sworn in, I got a call from Fulbright, Senator Fulbright and Hubert Humphrey, and [they] said, “President Nixon had designated us as a delegation to go to China.” This was a third trip to China. It was a very important delegation. It had senators and a lot of members from the House foreign relations. A high level delegation. “Is that trip still on?” I went to see President Ford. I said, “You know, Nixon had laid on this trip and these guys during recess in August want to know if this trip is still on.” And he said, “Absolutely. I’ll get them one of the Air Force planes,” and so on. So, anyway, it went on and he said, “I want you to go with them. You’ll be in recess.” And I said, “Okay, I will.”

So, we had a really good delegation. Barbara Jordan was on it. Hubert Humphrey was the chairman. Fulbright. It was a powerful delegation. And we were down in central China, miles from anywhere, and one of the Air Force guys came in when we were having a meeting and told me to come out. He said, “You know, we just got communication from home that President Ford has pardoned Richard Nixon and they wanted you to let the delegation know.” So I went back in and when the meeting broke up, I asked Senator Humphrey if we could all stay there a few minutes. We’d been meeting with
the Chinese. He said, “Sure, we’ll hang around. I’ll keep them here.” I told them and Barbara Jordan got so upset, she said, “Senator Humphrey, I think we should all go out to the airport and get on a plane and go home. Where we should be is in Washington, D.C. This is just terrible! We’ve got to do something about this.” And Humphrey said, “No, we’ve got a program. We’ve got a mission here. We’ve got a few more days of meetings. We’ll go home when we’re scheduled to go home.” And she just threw a fit.

Smith: Really?

Friedersdorf: Oh! And some of the others on the delegation, too, Democrats, threw a fit. But Fulbright and Humphrey said, “No, we’re going to finish this trip.” And it was Humphrey’s call.

Smith: Humphrey had a pretty good relationship with President Ford, didn’t he?

Friedersdorf: He did and I spent a lot of time with Humphrey on that trip. I’m a great admirer of Hubert Humphrey.

Smith: There’s a wonderful story in ’76, when Humphrey was in the hospital, I think it was up in New York, not long before the election, and President Ford went to visit him. Humphrey said, “You’re going to get some votes out of the Humphrey household.” And of course Bess Truman voted for him in ’76. I guess it was a big shocker, after the president died, when George McGovern told Larry King that he’d voted for Ford in ’76 - then found out that his wife had, too, after the fact. So, it was interesting, those people who, ideologically, you wouldn’t voting for Ford. It had to have been something personal.

Friedersdorf: Yeah, I never knew what the relationship was, but Humphrey was very, very fond of President Ford. And he told Barbara Jordan, “We were sent over here by the president.” This is only the third trip to China in the last twenty or thirty years and we’re supposed to meet with some Leaders of the country. He said, “We’re not going to bail out of here.” He calmed her down real quick.

Smith: Do you think the pardon was the single biggest factor that lead to Ford’s defeat in ’76?
Friedersdorf: I do. Tragedy, the way that it turned out, because Ford deserved a second term. He had a bob-tailed first term and I think things would’ve been a lot different. Carter, you know, we don’t have to go into the Carter administration, but the way that turned out, I think President Ford would’ve had a great second term.

Smith: Well, you know, there is this argument. He, himself, is said to have believed that just when he learned how to be president, he lost it.

Friedersdorf: Right. He was just gaining momentum.

Smith: The economy was turning around.

Friedersdorf: Right. And his popularity, you know. Without the pardon, there were other factors. I know that, even with the pardon, that election was extremely close, except for a few votes in southern Ohio. I think six counties in Ohio would have switched Ohio and then if he’d had carried that and, I believe it was Hawaii, he didn’t need too much. I’d talked to Laird about that and Laird said that they wanted Ford to go back to Ohio that last weekend. I can’t remember what the issue was in southern Ohio, there was something that was really hurting the GOP. And they thought they would take Ford out there for the final push and that would put him over. It was close anyway, but he had made a commitment to somewhere in Minnesota or someplace else that was already locked up, one of those upper Midwest states. Laird said, “You know how Jerry was. He made a commitment, he was going to go.” And he said, “That may have cost him the election.”

Smith: The whole fight with Reagan, that must’ve affected the race. The criticism has been made that Ford was late in really getting into the ’76 campaign and perhaps a little naïve in underestimating Reagan.

Friedersdorf: I think it was a combination of that. I felt that many of us in the White House from the president on down underestimated Reagan. You know, he couldn’t beat an incumbent. We were so overconfident and then after we started in, he was doing good. Even then there was still overconfidence.
Smith: Someone told me, for example, in terms of the retail politics that were being played at the end - thank God for the Bicentennial. You had the Queen’s visit and the State Dinner. And someone said, “It’s a good thing the Queen never saw the guest list, because it was bloated with Republican delegates and their families, people whose votes you had to have in Kansas City.”

Friedersdorf: President Ford, he had the right guy in the right place. Jim Baker was magnificent. He saved that presidency. Without him, I don’t think it would’ve happened. He pulled every stop out you can think of.

Smith: Stu Spencer tells a wonderful story. Stu says, it’s a Friday night and Stu, you know, was stewing. The president loved to campaign. They had these polls that showed that if you go out there and give some Bob Hartmann speech that wasn’t very good, his numbers would go down. Well, how do you tell a president not to campaign? They’re in the Oval Office, just the three of them, him, Cheney, and the president. It’s a Friday night and he’s kind of fed up anyway and the president’s not getting it, so he finally says, “You know, Mr. President, you’re a great president, but you’re a fucking lousy campaigner.”

Friedersdorf: Stu told him that?

Smith: Yes. And Ford didn’t take it personally. But the sequel is what makes the story. That story appeared in Germond and Witcover’s book the following year and Stu went ballistic. And he called Cheney to chew him out for careless-

Friedersdorf: What book was this?

Smith: Germond and Witcover’s. And so he’s going on and yelling at Dick for breaking the confidence and Cheney said, “Stu, there was a third person in that room.” Ford told the story on himself!

Friedersdorf: I’ll be darned.

Smith: Which tells you volumes.
Friedersdorf: Yeah, I can see him doing that. Something like that wouldn’t offend him. He knew he had trouble speaking and he wasn’t the greatest Speaker that ever came down the pike.

Smith: There is this argument that actually the Reagan challenge made him a better candidate.

Friedersdorf: It did and, you know, by the end of the campaign, his speaking performances were much improved. He was not stumbling over words, he was giving the right emphasis and the speech he gave at the convention, I thought was a magnificent speech. The best speech I ever heard him give. He was just high that night. But, getting that Mississippi delegation there…

Smith: How did he get that? Because Clarke Reed has a reputation for being purchase-able or at least someone who can be bought. Though he doesn’t always stay bought. What was the story around Mississippi?

Friedersdorf: I don’t know. I don’t know how they finally got that. I know that the whole thing hung in balance and, I guess, Jim Baker or Jack Marsh or Stu Spencer could tell you, but we had to have them and we got them.

Smith: It really, literally, did go right down to the line.

Friedersdorf: It did. I think just a handful of less than twelve delegates decided that.

Smith: What could you offer delegates?

Friedersdorf: I don’t know.

Smith: What about up on the Hill? Obviously, Reagan had some support from the Jesse Helms’s of the world.

Friedersdorf: Well, they had me working on Jesse Helms and the North Carolina delegation. Jesse Helms, I called him and he wanted Ford to come down there for something. And he went down there and I don’t know whether that turned some of North Carolina. But, I had a really good relationship with Helms and I can’t remember if it was Ford or Stu or Baker who’d asked me to call him and find out what would really make him happy and that was a trip
down there. And Ford did it. And we got a few more of those North Carolinians.

Smith: You just never got Helms.

Friedersdorf: No, no, no. And I don’t know whether he backed off or if it made a difference, but we were working those guys. But I don’t know about the Mississippi. If I did know, I’ve forgotten.

Smith: Let me back up to the spring of ’75 and the fall of Saigon. What are your memories around that time?

Friedersdorf: The guy scrambling off the roof. My memories around that time--

Smith: Well, let me interrupt because Mel Laird is still convinced that the president and Congress let the South go. I understand it, but I find it hard to believe. You were on the Hill. What was the mood at that point in terms of additional funding for the South?

Friedersdorf: Well, we were getting those end the war resolutions and amendments constantly. Mike Mansfield in the Senate and Tip O’Neill and his crowd in the House and they were passing. We just couldn’t sustain it. And they were smart. They were starting to cut the money off, not so much the troops. They finally realized that to cut the money off was the way to stop the war. But my recollection of it after all these years is one of tremendous relief. I know it was an embarrassing, humiliating way to leave, but most of us, including myself, had for a long time lost faith in that war. I supported it strongly when Nixon was in there. And, you know, Laird gives himself credit in the book for them starting the withdrawals. He did, and that was very encouraging, but Nixon let it go on too long. That thing was so sour by the time he came in, but he tried to win it. And I think Kissinger and the military were convincing it him could be won. But by the time Ford got in there, I think it was way, way past time it could ever be won.

Smith: There’s nothing Ford could’ve said on Capital Hill that could’ve reversed that move.
Friedersdorf: No. I think when Ford came in it was a given that that thing was going to peter out. I don’t know in what manner it would peter out, but certainly the way it played out was ugly.

Smith: What was the toughest part of those years during the Ford presidency?

Friedersdorf: I think after the pardon, we caught a lot of flack on that every day and between then and the election and trying to overcome that.

Smith: I assume the Republicans who were up for reelection were pretty upset by that. Did you hear from them?

Friedersdorf: Oh, yes. Yes, they were livid. They were absolutely livid and they said, “We weren’t consulted,” “It’s going to kill the Republican party,” “We’re all going to lose.” I think it was in August, he did that, and you know the campaign was under way right after Labor Day, so they didn’t have much time to recover. It was wonderful before the pardon because Ford could do no wrong for those first months, but after that, it was difficult.

Smith: What does it tell you about Ford the man that he goes out to California, right before the election, and Nixon’s in the hospital, close to death. And everyone said, “Don’t go near him.” And, what does he do? He goes to visit Nixon.

Friedersdorf: Yeah, I have to admire him for that. That was the kind of man he was.

Smith: The other thing was, of course, you had these huge fights over foreign policy. And here, Jerry Ford, the child of Capitol Hill, spends his presidency trying to fend off Congress.

Friedersdorf: Well, we had incredible legislative problems because the Democrats adopted a strategy that any program the president would support, like emergency medical services, programs that were very, very appealing in their name and in what they did, he would send the legislation up and the budget to accompany it. The Democrats then would raise the ante so much that it would be a budget buster and it would force him to veto it. And I think in just the short time he was in, he had over 62, 64 vetoes. And our time was consumed with trying to sustain his vetoes. And I think Ford sustained a vast majority
of those which was pretty incredible considering the Democrats had a big majority. Which I think speaks very well for Ford legislatively.

Smith: It could be argued he was the last president who was willing to spend his capital in an effort to hold the line on spending. He really was a conservative when it came to federal spending.

Friedersdorf: Right. His political philosophy was fiscal responsibility and preserving the budget. He’s probably the only president in the history of the country that presented his own budget program to the Congress and to the press. You know, he’d come out of the Congress on the appropriations committee and defense subcommittee. He could read a budget. He knew what was in there. Probably the best educated president we have ever had on the actual fiscal workings of the budget.

Smith: Did you know Mrs. Ford during that period? Did you spend much time around her?

Friedersdorf: Yes, at social things. I got to know her better after Ford left office. President Reagan appointed me to consul general in Bermuda. And Priscilla and I were in Bermuda and President Ford and Mrs. Ford used to come out to stay in Bermuda and we would play golf together and have dinner with them.

Smith: President Ford and Mrs. Ford.

Friedersdorf: Yeah, what did I say?

Smith: You said President Ford and Mrs. Reagan.

Friedersdorf: No, no, I take that back.

Smith: For many reasons, that would be an unlikely couple.

Friedersdorf: President and Mrs. Ford. Those were wonderful times. We could be very casual.

Smith: Now was that after she’d taken care of her problem?

Friedersdorf: She was just recovering and I remember very, very vividly, we were on the elevator in the Hamilton Princess Hotel one evening. We had come back
from dinner and we were going up to the Ford’s suite for a nightcap. And the four of us got on the elevator and some other guy jumped in the elevator and he took a double take and saw this was President Ford and Mrs. Ford and he said to Mrs. Ford, “How’s your drinking problem?” And, you know, it was embarrassing. And she said, “Oh, I’m doing fine.” You know, without any glimmer of resentment or shock. I was totally, totally impressed by her presence of mind. And President Ford didn’t bat an eye either, so that’s the kind of people they were.

Smith: Unflappable.

Friedersdorf: Yeah, unflappable. That’s the word. But he used to come out there fairly often. He was on the board of American Express, I believe, at that time. And they had their board meetings in Bermuda and he would always invite Priscilla and I to dinner and we would play golf together. We had a lot of great times. One time, we were playing and he was my partner and we were playing Sandy Weil and Jim Robinson who were the big muckety-mucks in American Express and President Ford and I, by the way, we beat them, but President Ford was to my left about thirty yards and a little bit in front and I heeled a golf shot and hit him right in the fanny, just square in the fanny. I was mortified. I threw down my golf club and I ran over there and I said, “Are you alright, Mr. President?” He turned around and laughed and said, “I wish you’d work on that shot a little more.” It didn’t hurt him, but he thought it was funny. But I was so embarrassed.

Smith: He was usually the one who was being criticized for -

Friedersdorf: He never got credit for the athlete he was, you know. Here’s a guy who was all-American football player. He coached football and went to Yale law school full-time. He was an excellent skier. He was an excellent swimmer. He was a tremendous athlete and thanks to Chevy Chase, they made out like he was some awkward person. It was unfortunate.

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him?
Friedersdorf: I think at the Ford banquet, probably. And then the next year, they didn’t come. They had a video. He wasn’t feeling well. You remember that one at the Archives?

Smith: Yes. Yes.

Friedersdorf: That’s the last time I saw him on film, but I think the year before he had been there and I talked to him a little bit, but I think that was the last time.

Smith: He really was in extraordinary good health up until his ninetieth birthday and then I think things caught up with him. When the doctors said, “You really shouldn’t travel,” I think that was rough because he loved to travel. He loved rubber chicken, he loved talking politics.

Friedersdorf: Well, I think that was one of the things that caused Mrs. Ford’s problem was he was gone so much. The last thing I would do in the evening when I was Congressional Relations and he was Leader, I always went by his office to check before I’d go back to the White House and see what was coming up the next day and just see if there was anything I could do, what was going on. We’d sit in there and talk about what had happened during the day.

I remember one evening he got a call from Mrs. Ford and he had to go catch a damn plane and go somewhere that evening to make a speech. And she was not feeling well. She said, “Why don’t you cancel that and come home?” But he said, “Betty, I’ve made a commitment”. You know, he was torn and it was a sad situation. It was so wonderful when he got to be president because he could spend more time with Mrs. Ford and he didn’t have to go on the road all the time and when he did, he could take her. But he was running around to these fundraisers all over the country that all the Congressmen wanted him, that it was difficult for her to be home alone all that time.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Friedersdorf: Well, I think it’s a cliché to say this, but a unifier and a president who was the right person at the right time. I can’t think of any politician that could’ve filled that slot like he did when we were in such terrible, terrible political shape. The country was just torn apart. People were thinking that maybe the
Union would not last. It was really a serious, serious time. I think one of the most dangerous times since the Civil War. The country was falling apart, but he put it back together. And I think he’ll be remembered as a very, very good president.
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Smith: When did you first meet Gerald Ford?

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

Smith: He was already in the House.

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

Smith: Tell us about that group.

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

Smith: Now you were elected in ’52.

Laird: I was elected in ’52.

Smith: So you had the experience, you were in the one majority Republican House.
Laird: I was in that.

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

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

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

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

Smith: Really?

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

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

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

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

Laird: Much different. We had, of course, Speaker Rayburn who was a very unusual person. I remember the time that Speaker Rayburn called me aside after the debate about the HEW appropriation bill, and the ranking Democrat was John Fogarty from Rhode Island. Rayburn called me over and he said, “Mel, that was a tremendous job you and John Fogarty did on that HEW bill. You are getting along very well in the House. As a matter of fact, I want you to have a new office. I’ve been talking with John McCormick, and we’re going to give
you a private dining room just outside the dining room itself, but very near the Speaker’s dining room.” See, that wouldn’t happen today.

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

Laird: Trying to encourage me.

Smith: On both sides of the aisle?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Laird: Yes.

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

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

Smith: Did you have friends across the aisle?
Laird: Yes, we had a lot of friends across the aisle and we saw them quite often.

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

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

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

Laird: Right.

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

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

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

Smith: Now this is against Charlie Halleck.

Laird: Yeah.

Smith: Oh, I’m sorry – before Charlie Halleck there was Joe Martin, who was ousted.
Laird: That was a different coup.

Smith: Was Ford involved with that at all?

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

Smith: Just because Martin was a preview of Halleck.

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

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

Laird: Yes, Ford was the second choice.

Smith: And was he not interested in doing it?

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

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

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

Smith: Not aggressive enough.

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

Smith: And then in between, in ’62, there’s this contest – a preview of the Halleck fight – against Charlie Hoeven for the number three job.
Laird: Charlie Hoeven, from Iowa. That’s a job – conference chairman – and we elected Ford to that at that time. That’s when Ford first came into the leadership role, and the conference oversees all the business of the Republicans in the House.

Smith: At that point, of course, Kennedy is still in the White House. He’s this very telegenic, charismatic figure. Was there a concern among Republicans on the Hill that you needed fresh blood – someone who could…particularly on television be a little bit more…

Laird: Yeah, we felt that we had to have - and, just between us, Charlie wasn’t taking as good care of himself…

Smith: Well, I know in the book it says – and I’ve heard this because I wrote a book about Tom Dewey, and I knew about how Halleck had an alcohol problem.

Laird: Well, we could not put up with that and have him come to the floor under any condition like that. That’s underlying.

Smith: Was that a problem in those days – more of a problem than later on? Was it part of the culture?

Laird: I don’t think so. I think we have the same thing. You go all the way back to Bob LaFollette. He turned into an alcoholic. There is something about Washington that kind of gets some people to turn. It’s too bad, but they do.

Smith: So after the Goldwater defeat, and you put this campaign together, Don Rumsfeld is involved?

Laird: Yes.

Smith: Bob Dole and the Kansas delegation is involved. It’s almost a training ground for a whole generation of leaders.

Laird: We had a good group. But it was a lot of work.

Smith: What would have happened to you if you had lost?

Laird: If we’d lost? Well, Halleck would have continued.
Smith: Would there have been revenge taken?

Laird: They might have taken some revenge. We weren’t in a position to…

Smith: Do you think, at that point, does Ford see himself as a potential Speaker of the House? That’s his ambition?

Laird: Yes.

Smith: With this new job, he is on the road constantly. I don’t know if you knew Betty in those days.

Laird: Oh, yeah. Sure. Betty was very close. We always took our vacations together. On July 4th we went down to a golf club in Virginia, I remember, and we couldn’t get an extra room, so we had to all bunk together. We were very close. Betty was very fine and we had great times with her.

Smith: Did you sense that she was unhappy at all? We now know that he was away a lot and…

Laird: She was somewhat unhappy. Most of our wives get a little unhappy. If you are out speaking around the country and really doing your job, they are in the house, it’s not the best place for a wife.

Smith: Now Ford had been, at least, on the list of vice presidential candidates. Nixon had considered him in ’60. In fact, you go back then, in ’64 Eisenhower gave a list of names to reporters – eleven candidates who he could support in ’64 for president. Your name was on the list and Jerry Ford’s name was on the list, among others. And Richard Nixon’s was not on the list.

Laird: Richard Nixon was not. That’s the part of the story that happened at that time. People kept putting out the fact that Ike left him off.

Smith: The *Ev and Charlie Show* turns into the *Ev and Jerry Show*. And I gather that Dirksen was more willing to go along with LBJ, whether it was the war or whatever, than perhaps you and the House were.

Laird: No, we pulled Dirksen back on that somewhat.

Smith: Describe that relationship.
Laird: Jerry was cool about the war, you know.

Smith: While still in the House.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Laird: Oh, no. We questioned him. As a matter of fact, you’ll read some of the exchanges in the White House tapes. You probably have – where Ford was confronted on several occasions – “You’ve got to do something about Laird –
you got to muzzle him.” You probably noticed that. Well, Ford never tried to muzzle me. As a matter of fact, he was very encouraging.

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

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

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

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

Smith: Yeah. Did Ford take those things personally?

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

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

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

Smith: Tell me about his intelligence.

Laird: Very intelligent. There was no question about his intelligence. There was sometimes a question about his judgment, but he was very intelligent. I mean, I will never forgive him for the manner in which he handled the pardon. Jeez, we had worked out…
Smith: Tell us about that, because he always said – he had this press conference on the 28th of August and he went in there – I think he can also be criticized for naiveté. Because he goes into this press conference believing, in that atmosphere, that people are going to ask about Cyprus and Turkey and inflation, and of course, all they want to talk about is Nixon. And he came out of that press conference angry, and…

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

Smith: And tell us your scheme.

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

Smith: Members of both parties?

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

Smith: But he didn’t do that.
Laird: No, he didn’t. And that’s because he’d agreed with his people Sunday morning, bright and early. They talked about it Saturday night, too. It was a shame because I thought I had him convinced the other way.

Smith: And you saw him that day?

Laird: Saw him? I played eighteen holes of golf with him, and I had lunch with him.

Smith: What was his mood?

Laird: His mood was fine. The next day, when we were out on the first tee, he asked me, “What do you think about that pardon?” I said, “Jerry, you know what I think about the way that was handled. If you don’t, you’re blind, deaf, and dumb, because I’ve talked to you about that.” And I said, “Now, listen, we’ve got a chance to win this tournament, we’re only two shots behind. I’ll talk to you about the pardon, what happened today, after this golf game.”

Smith: In the book, the extraordinary revelation is, at least the claim is made, that the pardon was unnecessary.

Laird: That is correct.

Smith: What is the background of that?

Laird: Well, you know, I had a lot to do with putting together Leon Jaworski. You probably knew that.

Smith: Now, this is after Archibald Cox is fired, and a search is on for another special prosecutor.

Laird: A search, and I had the responsibility to get a prosecutor and get it fast. So I called Freddy Vinson, the son of the former Chief Justice. I was having dinner with him at the Shoreham Hotel. It was a crippled children’s ball. My wife and I always went with the Vinson’s and a few other people that were old time Washington people. And I said, “Charley, I just got back from the White House. I was called away from the dinner and was told that the attorney general was not going to be cooperative on getting – he’d gone back over – he had told us he was going to fire Cox.” And he agreed to that at the White House that Saturday about two o’clock. He called me, and I was getting ready
for this dance/party, and he said, “Mel, I can’t do it.” And I said, “Jeez, I’ve been working on a new person. We’ve got a hell of a guy for this.” I’d talked to the Congressman from Houston, who lived in the same building complex as Jaworski. Jaworski was also recommended to me by Vinson, and he was very friendly with Vinson. But he said, “He’s ____________ bar association, he’s got a hell of a reputation, you’ll have no problem with him as special prosecutor.”

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

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

Smith: John Doar.

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

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

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

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

Laird: Yeah, but that’s another story entirely. Ford went the other way. You understand.
Smith: Yeah. Back up, because you had left the Defense Department and then you had come, somewhat reluctantly, back into the Nixon White House.

Laird: I came back in, yeah.

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

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

Smith: Right. Did you discuss it with Ford?

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

Smith: From Fred Buzhardt?

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

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

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

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

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

Smith: When you told him that, what was his reaction?
Laird: I said, “I can’t stay with you any longer.” He said, “Mel, I wish you would reconsider that. I would like you to stay.” I said, “I can’t, somebody that lied to me.” That’s it. So I resigned.

Smith: Ford said much of the same thing. It goes back to this Boy Scout image.

Laird: But Ford never got the word from Fred. I tried to tell Ford.

Smith: What did you tell him?

Laird: I told him, “I know that he’s guilty.”

Smith: And is this before Ford is vice president, when he was still on the Hill?

Laird: No, no, no.

Smith: Oh, this was during his vice presidency?

Laird: Yeah.

Smith: You played an integral role in Ford being selected for the vice presidency.

Laird: He wouldn’t have been selected if I wasn’t up there. I guarantee you that. Because Nixon came in the morning before Ford was appointed and he told Harlow and me that he was going to appoint John Connally. And we said, “Well, that’s a mistake. Will you give us twenty-four hours? We’d like to get some people from the Hill down here to talk with you, because that is a bad, bad mistake. It is wrong person at this time.” I have nothing against Connally, I have great respect and admiration for him, but he should not be in that position now. We had just gone through a lot of things in which really, he had been accused of various things, and I thought you had to make a real clean appointment as vice president. And I did recommend Rockefeller.

Smith: And what was Nixon’s reaction to that?

Laird: I’m talking to you now about the appointment of Rockefeller during Ford.

Smith: Oh, I see. Okay.

Laird: I mean, I was for Ford in the first time, but this time it had to do with…
Smith: When Ford needed a vice president.

Laird: Yeah. We get a little bit ahead of ourselves.

Smith: Let me go back to the Ford selection. Nixon wants Connally. He sees Connally as his successor.

Laird: Well, he loved Connally.

Smith: What was it about Connally that he…

Laird: Well, he thought he was a flamboyant, sort of a wonderful guy – that kind of guy that he would have loved to have been. He would have loved to have been a John Connally.

Smith: That self-assurance?

Laird: Yeah.

Smith: The Texas swagger?

Laird: Oh, yeah. He wanted that. He was his hero. That’s right. You’re making fun of me, but…

Smith: No, no, no, listen, I know exactly what you are saying.

Laird: It’s true, I’m telling you.

Smith: My question then is: there is a story – and I don’t know whether it’s true or not, but I’ve heard it from more than one source – supposedly Nixon said to Rockefeller at one point there in the Oval Office about this time, and Nixon says, “Can you imagine Jerry Ford in that chair?” Nixon thought Ford was his insurance against impeachment. Which was a total misreading of the reality of the situation. That actually, Ford may have made it more likely that Nixon would have been impeached.

Laird: Right.

Smith: You, then, must have discussed with Ford – over the years there has been this notion that there was no transition, no planning for a transition, that everything happened…
Laird: Oh, yeah, we had a transition. We had a good transition.

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

Laird: Yes.

Smith: You did?

Laird: I thought we ought to plan for it.

Smith: And how did you discuss that with him?

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

Smith: What was his response?

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

Smith: And how did you prepare for it?

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

Smith: Which he didn’t do.

Laird: No. Which he should have done.

Smith: Was that ‘Good Old Jerry’?

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

Smith: Is that a weakness in a president?

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

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

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

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

Smith: He had to be loyal to Nixon, but he couldn’t be so loyal as to…

Laird: No, but you don’t have to.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Laird: Yes, I did.

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

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

Smith: But he heard it first from you?
Laird: From me. You see the problem is, I couldn’t really tell how I knew because, although Buzhardt had been my general counsel for four years, and had a loyalty to me, it was not proper as general counsel to the president, probably, to talk to me. It wasn’t my problem, but it was Fred’s problem. Do you understand?

Smith: Yes. Sure.

Laird: And I protected that.

Smith: Was Ford surprised?

Laird: Yeah.

Smith: I take it there was never any real relationship between them, was there – between Ford and Agnew?

Laird: No, no, no. No relationship at all. But, of course, Ford was disappointed that this was going to break this way. He wanted to make sure that I was right, and I told him, I let him know how I heard. I said, “You know, it’s going to come out sometime, but I don’t want to embarrass Fred Buzhardt.” Fred Buzhardt was with me always and I made him general counsel of the Department of Defense and no one could have been loyaler than Fred Buzhardt.

Smith: By the way, just as an aside, did people speculate about the identity of Deep Throat?

Laird: Oh yes, sure.

Smith: Were there obvious suspects? Was there anything like a consensus about who it might be?

Laird: No, there was no consensus. He was one of the men who was talked about.

Smith: Mark Felt?

Laird: Yeah.

Smith: You were, on August 7, 1974, in a prayer meeting. Tell us about that group of people.
Laird: The prayer meeting.

Smith: Yeah.

Laird: I was leading the prayer meeting.

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

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

Smith: Tell us about that.

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

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

Laird: No, he didn’t.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Laird:   Yes.

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

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

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

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

Smith:   And what was the mood?

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

Smith:   And that included Mrs. Ford?
Laird: Yeah. She had become involved in the last few weeks there, but she was glad everything was over.

Smith: Do you think she knew, at some point during those few weeks, that she was going to live in the White House?

Laird: Yeah, I think so.

Smith: Did you know about her problem at that point?

Laird: Yes. I knew about her problem, yeah. But I didn’t know exactly what it was. I thought it was – I didn’t realize it was drugs. I thought it was probably just too much booze at that time. Because we used to go down to the White House quite often, and we’d go upstairs and have a few drinks. I always had my Manhattans and she was drinking. I thought she was drinking. Now some people say that she was taking some sort of drugs that affected her. I don’t know. I knew her doctor well, though, and I can’t believe…I sent him over to the White House and he married one of my – Bill Broody – who was one of them in my office – he married Bill Broody’s secretary. As a matter of fact, I brought Bill Broody’s secretary home when I was over on one of my trips to Spain, and Bill was looking for a secretary and I said, “Bill, you’re not making any search for a secretary. I brought one back last week from Spain.” And this was a good gal.

Smith: One last thing and the minute I ask you about it, you’ll agree, I think. You were very candid in the criticism that you made about the fall of Saigon, about the last days of Vietnam, and, in some ways, because you were such a close friend of President Ford’s, I think it’s even more important to get that on the record. What was the nature of your criticism of how things were handled? And, given the political climate of that time, how might have things been handled differently?

Laird: Well, first, that was not Ford’s fault, and we’d gotten everybody out of there. There were a lot of stragglers, the people that looked like Americans on the helicopter, most of them weren’t Americans. No. You understand that?

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

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

Laird: I have always criticized them.

Smith: Describe that.

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

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

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

Smith: Did you discuss it with him?

Laird: Yes.

Smith: And what was his rejoinder?

Laird: He didn’t think it was worthwhile fighting over Vietnam anymore. But you weren’t fighting over Vietnam, you were fighting over what had been contributed and the sacrifices that had been made and now it came out in a
different way. I could have shot that damned helicopter out of the sky, because that wasn’t a helicopter evacuating major players in that thing.

Smith: How should President Ford be remembered?

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

Smith: That says it all. That’s perfect. Thank you.
Smith: Could you begin by explaining what the Military District of Washington is, and what it does?

Wagner: I'll give you a two part answer. The Military District of Washington is an Army two-star command in Washington, D.C. that is responsible for all Army and Joint Service ceremonial support to the federal government. Ceremonies at the White House, State Department, Pentagon, and then elsewhere in the National Capitol Region as directed. That includes responsibility for very large events like the inauguration of a president, DOD support to the inauguration of a president, state funerals, military support for summits – those kinds of events. It also includes things like day-to-day ceremonies in Arlington National Cemetery, retirements, promotions, color guards for community organizations, and everything in between. Since 9/11, when the U.S. Northern Command was established, that is the responsibility for homeland defense throughout the continental United States. That same time or roughly at that same time in 2003, a separate command was established here in Washington, D.C., which is the Joint Force Headquarters National Capitol Region and that essentially uses the MDW and some augmentation from other services to create a security homeland defense focused headquarters in the National Capitol Region. It also has responsibility for some of those larger events to include state funerals.

Smith: So is it, for lack of a better word, a kind of enhanced security component to your normal functions?

Wagner: That’s correct.

Smith: Auxiliary?

Wagner: In general terms, any military support in terms of homeland defense, in terms of disaster relief, any of those things, that is authorized in the United States is
only at the request of local authorities. So, military support to an event like the inauguration or like a state funeral or for a nuclear security summit, as we saw recently here in the Washington, D.C. area, is essentially support that is requested by Secret Service or requested by the Congress of the United States, or requested by the District of Columbia, the city government, to provide capabilities that they don’t have.

Smith: Now, this may be splitting hairs, but I think there are people who would appreciate knowing what makes a state funeral a state funeral. I’ll qualify that by pointing out that Richard Nixon chose not to have a Washington component in his funeral. Harry Truman for very different reasons planned on such a component, and then in the end did not have it. There’s some confusion, at least in my mind, as to whether the Nixon funeral was a state funeral or not. Could you clarify that?

Wagner: Certainly. In the broadest historical sense, a state funeral is the funeral for a nation’s leader. As we see in Shakespeare, we see a king stand up and say “I am England.” He very literally means that he is the personality that holds the nation together. And so, in that way, when we talk about a state funeral, we talk about a national leader. A state funeral is more narrowly defined in military regulation as being a funeral for an incumbent president, former president, a president-elect, or another person designated by the president of the United States to receive a state funeral. The wording of a presidential proclamation that initiates a state funeral is not terrifically clear. It doesn’t traditionally use the words “state funeral,” though it may. It traditionally uses something that says “Speaking as the president, I therefore direct that the military forces or the armed forces of the United States will provide such courtesies as are appropriate to the station of President Ford,” for instance.

Smith: So, geography is not a factor, per se. The fact that a former president, for example, doesn’t lie in state in the Capitol, that his services take place entirely outside the city of Washington, that would not, per se, keep it from being a state funeral?

Wagner: That’s correct.
Smith: Using your own experience, how does one prepare for this job? And maybe you could give us a capsule description of what your job is.

Wagner: Fair enough. My title is Chief of State Funeral Plans and Operations at Joint Force Headquarters National Capitol Region. What that essentially means - I think of the job as being about equal thirds. It’s about one third liaison to the former First Family, to use the most typical example. About one third liaison to the family for development of the funeral plan, for discovering their desires, and for communicating those intentions to the other supporting members of the federal government and state and local communities as well. So, it’s about a third family liaison. It’s about a third military planning, how you get the right people in the right place, fed, watered, with a place to sleep, trained appropriately to conduct the ceremonies. And it’s about a third inter-agency liaison, if you will, such as talking to a local chief of police in a state, chief of police or police commander, and all the various inter-agency components that need to collaborate in order to make an event of this magnitude flow smoothly.

Smith: And how does one prepare – or does one prepare? Is there an obvious route to what you’re doing now?

Wagner: There’s not an obvious route. It feels a little bit as if it’s one of those things that, for me at least, a responsibility that I’ve fallen into and grown into, if you will.

Smith: How long have you been in that position?

Wagner: I’ve been responsible for planning funerals largely since 2000, so for ten years, with the primary responsibility really coming since about 2004.

Smith: Let me ask you, because obviously everyone’s different, everyone’s unique, every president, every presidential family, every First Lady – by the way, I think it’s safe to say there’s never been a state funeral for a former First Lady.

Wagner: That’s correct.

Smith: We don’t want to intrude on either state secrets or the legitimate realm of family privacy, but it would be very helpful if you could walk us through how
you first got involved with the Ford family and the process leading up to the Ford funeral.

Wagner: Starting back in probably 1993 I was a member of The U.S. Army Band, (Pershing’s Own) here in Washington, D.C., and one of my responsibilities was to ensure that musical organizations across the country that might be called on in the case of a funeral for a former president, bands that were stationed in proximity to their homes, if you will, to the former president’s homes, were prepared to execute the ceremonies if necessary. In about 1993, that became a part of my responsibility and I began to work with Colorado National Guard Band and the Air Force Academy Band in the event that President Ford passed away in residence in Vail in the Beaver Creek area. Began to work with bands in the Midwest, including the Michigan National Guard Band there in Grand Rapids or Wyoming, Michigan and to periodically train them and train with them and ensure that they had the kind of assistance that they needed to be sure that they were properly outfitted in terms of uniforms and equipment and then to work the bands here in the Washington, D.C. area. Over time, that responsibility expanded. I got pulled in more and more questions of musical choices of liturgy and how those things fit together and I think started being invited along by my predecessor to talk about some of those things in meetings with family and senior staff.

Smith: How awkward was that, particularly early on?

Wagner: Well, it’s hard to go to anybody and say, “I’m here to talk with you about your funeral.” But it’s easy to talk with almost anyone about what’s important to them, about how they would like to be remembered, and about how they would like to see their legacy perpetuated. We all like to feel that we’ve made a difference. The individuals who’ve led this country are certainly no exception to that. They’ve definitely, each of them in their own unique ways, made significant differences in the world. And how that is thought of and how their story is told to a new generation is of great interest to them and to their family. One of the things that I find useful is not to go in and sit down and say, “Let’s plan a funeral,” but to really start the conversation with, “What’s important to you?” - “What places are important
to you?” - “What parts of your story do you think are important to remember, maybe other than the White House years?”

Smith: Sure.

Wagner: The situation like that is what evolved into, for instance, in the course of President Ford’s funeral, really a chronological telling through the funeral of his World War II service, of his service in the House, and then as the Vice President and the President of the Senate before moving into the White House. That sequential storytelling really became the focus more than thinking about ‘How do we do a funeral?’

Smith: Let me ask you, because my sense is that, before you reached that phase of personalizing the ceremonies, there is a ceremonial plan. There’s some question over how much input the Fords had in what, for lack of a better word, I’ll call the “first draft.” I knew before the Reagan funeral there was a plan and it was in many ways an offshoot of the Eisenhower plan. The fact that now we have presidents on the west coast, clearly changes logistical planning. At one time, it was thought to require the overnight at Bethlehem Chapel on the grounds of Washington National Cathedral. And I know that was originally in the Reagan plan, and it was decided to dispense with that given the expected crowds. They wanted to go right to the Rotunda. Do you initially say the equivalent of. ‘Here’s a basic chassis. You customize this model to fit your desires’?

Wagner: That’s a fair question. When my predecessor twice removed, Paul Miller, who was responsible for the conduct of President Kennedy’s funeral, was called to the White House to implement that funeral plan, there was no consolidated plan. There were some general customs; there were some general notions that a cordon for a living president was twenty-one service members with the same symbolism as a twenty-one gun salute. And if the president had passed away and we were in fact carrying the casket to a cordon that it should be twenty-one members, as well.

Smith: The fact is, in November of 1963, there had not been a presidential funeral since Franklin Roosevelt’s.
Wagner: Correct.

Smith: So, a whole generation had passed.

Wagner: A whole generation and really no planning. And, even the Roosevelt funeral - the planning was definitely influenced by the fact that it was war time. There was much less of a public observance.

Smith: Ironic, given his historical and emotional connection to the American people.

Wagner: Exactly.

Smith: Is that why, for example, there was no lying in state at the Capitol - which has always struck me as bizarre?

Wagner: Yes. Right. And the records that I’ve read indicate that to be the case. That there was a sense that what was perceived as prolonged national mourning was in fact giving aid and comfort to the enemy and there was no interest in that. Interesting how our perspectives have changed.

Smith: Of course, it’s ironic, because after the fact, they found his wishes. And a lot of what was done in fact turned out, by accident, to have reflected his desire for a very simple service.

Wagner: To be precisely what he asked for. Sure. But, to get back to Kennedy, there really was no plan for the Kennedy funeral. And, after the Kennedy funeral—

Smith: By the way, what was done? I mean, the legend is Mrs. Kennedy wanted it patterned after the Lincoln funeral. And it’s astonishing what was done was done in the course of that weekend. But people went and did their research at the archives or wherever they did and came back and complied with her wishes.

Wagner: There was a lot of make it up one evening and execute it the next day during the course of the Kennedy funeral and some startling anomalies - the presence of soldiers of the Irish Republic at the gravesite in Arlington Cemetery. He’d been to Ireland recently and there was that heritage, but it was really kind of an odd thing when you think about it. He’d been many places in the world
and why that? Timing. This contingent happened to be in the states, those kinds of things.

But, after the Kennedy funeral, the Department of Defense closed the barn door after the horses were gone and said, “There really ought to be a generic plan for a state funeral.” And it looks about like this: arrival at a location out of town, a church or a library or a public building, movement by air or by train to the nation’s capital, understanding the Bethlehem Chapel component, understanding that it’s difficult to do large scale ceremonies in the darkness, and then the procession to the Capitol for the lying in state, a church here in the nation’s capital for a funeral service, and then movement to an interment location. So, that framework is encapsulated in a document that was a Department of the Army pamphlet 1-1, published in 1965 and concurrently published as a Navy regulation, as an Air Force manual, as a Coast Guard regulation. We didn’t do Department of Defense directives in those days. The services all published the same thing with their own number on the front and that became the template, if you will.

Smith: By the way, one of the things that also resulted was a much longer series of ceremonies. It’s remarkable President Kennedy was assassinated on a Friday and buried on a Monday. That would not be the case presumably today.

Wagner: Right. But, if we look at that template being built and President Eisenhower being the first president to die after that, then the first public execution of that plan would’ve been in 1969 for President Eisenhower.

Smith: In between you had both Herbert Hoover and Douglas MacArthur who had state funerals.

Wagner: Right. And it’s interesting because, when I talk to incoming commanders, when I talk to individuals who will be key in some way to the state funeral planning process and kind of walk them through the history and authorizations and those things, I have a slide that says, “Who’s authorized a state funeral?” and in the lower right-hand corner, there’s that category “Other Individuals Authorized by the President of the United States.” That always occasions a great deal of nervousness because that implies that there’s really
not advance planning. So, the question becomes ‘How often do we do that?’ And the answer, really, is that within the last fifty years, we’ve done it once.

Smith:  MacArthur.

Wagner:  For MacArthur and not really without planning, but by prior arrangement at the invitation of President Kennedy.

Smith:  Oh, okay. I didn’t realize that it had originated under Kennedy.

Wagner:  Kennedy actually wrote each of the World War II era five stars a personal letter and offered to them on behalf of the nation a state funeral. They were the heroes of his young adulthood clearly and he made that offer. General Eisenhower had already been president. Most of the rest of that group is a pretty self-effacing group of individuals and didn’t do it.

Smith:  Omar Bradley.

Wagner:  Omar Bradley, Chester Nimitz, Hap Arnold – I’m going to do this upside down and backwards - but that group.

Smith:  Everyone but MacArthur.

Wagner:  But MacArthur said, “Why, yes, thank you.” And if the camera wasn’t running, I’d say maybe he thought, “Well, if Truman got one then maybe I should get one, too.”

Smith:  It’s interesting. He’d established this unlikely friendship with Kennedy.

Wagner:  Sure.

Smith:  Kennedy had expected a blowhard and was, in fact, mesmerized by MacArthur at his most mesmerizing.

Wagner:  So MacArthur did receive a state funeral. He died at the Waldorf Astoria the old Walter Reed Army Hospital and returned to New York. Departure from New York Penn Station. Whenever I think I’m having a bad day, I imagine what it must’ve been like to stage a departure on 7th Avenue.

Smith:  At the Armory.
Wagner: And then movement, exactly. Just can’t imagine it. But then came by train to Washington and then onto Norfolk where he’s buried. The interesting thing is that when you talk to people who remember the Kennedy assassination, they don’t remember the Hoover funeral and they don’t remember the MacArthur funeral, both of which happened soon after and really in the shadow of the Kennedy funeral.

Smith: I remember them vividly.

Wagner: Well, you’re like me, you’re a buff. You’re a student of this. But no one ever says, “Oh, yes, of course, I remember the MacArthur funeral as well.”

Smith: Bobby Kennedy. Did he have a state funeral?

Wagner: He did not.

Smith: Okay.

Wagner: There are a few individuals over time that have received what DOD has chosen to call ‘funerals without classification’.

Smith: Earl Warren, for example. Would he be in that side?

Wagner: A Chief Justice would be authorized an official funeral which is just a step down, really. It involves almost the same forces as a state funeral.

Smith: So, Chief Justice Rehnquist, for example, who died on the job.

Wagner: Died on the job. Was authorized an official funeral. The call was made from the White House to the family, making that offer. The family chose to celebrate his life in a more private way, if you will, to involve the Court community, to involve his church community, and, beyond that, to be very, very private.

Smith: Yeah. Again, that goes to the heart of the fact that every family has its own unique characteristics, its own pattern, and there needs have to be superimposed on—

Smith: Of course you weren’t around, but the Truman funeral was famous. Elaborate services were planned and he is said to have observed, “It’s going to be a great show. Too bad I’m not going to be around to enjoy it.” And then, of course, he lived long enough it was December and Mrs. Truman, I guess, the feeling was she really wasn’t up to the whole Washington end of things. And so that was cancelled. And, in some ways, it became more poignant being restricted to Independence because that was so evocative of Truman the man. And then, Nixon, on his own, decided not to have a Washington component.

Wagner: Absolutely. So, it had been a very long time since a funeral with a Washington component when President Reagan died in June of 2004.

Smith: Thirty-one years.

Wagner: Since President Johnson in January of ’73.

Smith: It’s obviously a little bit off the story, but it goes to the process. I knew there was a plan, a quite elaborate plan, but my sense was the old gang got together, the team that had presented Reagan and they had their input. There were changes made along the way.

Wagner: Well, I think it’s fair to say that that community that had been closely involved with the Reagan White House in terms of advance was involved to a considerable extent for years, that President Reagan had had conversations with a number of those individuals over time and shared intent with them. And that, in fact, there was a detailed plan that changed very little after execution. There’s always a question when you lay out a plan with a family about the desired sequence of events and how you build in rest, and how a plan might need to be different in December than it is in June just because of the number of hours of daylight that are available.

Smith: At one point, the idea was that the final service would take place in the courtyard as opposed to moving it out with the spectacular view of the mountains and the ocean beyond. And I remember at one point suggesting, “Ronald Reagan was a great communicator. There’s a whole generation that’s as mesmerized by his voice as FDR’s radio audiences were. Somewhere in this service, his voice should be heard.” I still think it
would’ve been dynamite. And Mrs. Reagan thought about it and said, “I couldn’t get through it.” Well, jump ahead and, of course, the idea resurfaced in the Ford funeral.

Wagner: Yes, it did.

Smith: And we had this remarkable clip from his farewell address to Congress. He didn’t have an Eisenhower TV farewell address. His address appropriately was on Capitol Hill. And at the end, he had this very poignant prayer for the American people, powerful stuff.

Wagner: Absolutely.

Smith: And it was incorporated in the plan. And it didn’t happen. I assume for similar reasons, the decision was made to have Father Certain read that prayer.

Wagner: Yes, the decision was made the night before the service in Grace at the family’s request that his voice not fill that church on that last day.

Smith: Do things like that happen? I mean, are there last minute changes?

Wagner: Always. Always. There are last minute changes due to health of family members. There are last minute changes due to what’s going on in the world. When President Reagan died in June of 2004, the incumbent president, President Bush, was in Florence, Italy, en route to Normandy for the 60th Anniversary of D-Day observance, en route to Sea Island, Georgia for an economic summit. In fact, there were a number of world leaders already gathered on Sea Island. Not only was the White House concerned about how they could interrupt the flow of those world events, but the Reagan family and staff were sensitive to the timing of those events and the importance that they would’ve held for President Reagan. So, adjustments were made in time schedule in the frantic first day or first half day of trying to put a schedule together for the conduct of that funeral. Changes were made about the timing of events in order to deal with who needed to be where, when, when aircraft to get people could be made available, to move the family, those kinds of things.
Smith: That brings up something. When President Ford died - the first service in the Rotunda that Saturday night where Dick Cheney, in effect, spoke for the country. There was some comment about the fact that the President wasn’t there. The President was at his ranch. But the plan always had been - because of the Capitol Hill component - that the vice president would be the chief eulogist that evening.

Wagner: Well, the situation there was different. In the cases of both the Reagan and Ford funerals, Mr. Cheney delivered the eulogy on Capitol Hill. The reason behind it was different. During the course of the Reagan funeral, because of President Bush’s commitments to the economic summit in Sea Island, the options essentially were offered to the family about whether it was preferable to wait until the incumbent president could be there or to allow the vice president to offer the eulogy in the Rotunda. And the decision was made to proceed and have Mr. Cheney offer the remarks there. Then President Bush was in fact back in the city, paid his respects, while President Reagan lay in state and escorted Mrs. Reagan in the National Cathedral. In the case of the Fords, because of the close personal relationship between Vice President Cheney and President Ford and the Ford family, the request had been placed before the funeral from the family to the White House that Mr. Cheney be allowed to speak for the administration, that the incumbent president defer to him, which the Bush administration was happy to do.

Smith: Knowing that President Bush would be speaking for the nation at the Cathedral.

Wagner: Exactly.

Smith: How did the Ford plan change over the years? My experience - I talked about it a little bit – was that the one thing he was adamant about was that he did not want a caisson through the streets of Washington. I wonder if you had that conversation or other people, your associates, had that conversation. There are some legends about what may or may not have been said. It’s a revealing request.
Wagner: It is. As I came to the Ford plan in terms of contact with those on the staff who were really involved in shepherding the plan over the years, if you will. There was a choice of what I would call stage one of the area of demise - whether there would be services in Vail and Beaver Creek to start with, or whether the services would initially be in Palm Springs where they were in residence. There was always the intent of going home to the museum in Grand Rapids for interment. The Nation’s Capital was always very important to the Fords, not only because of his service, but I think because the Washington, D.C. area is where the family grew up, the children grew up. There was active discussion for many years between my predecessors and the Fords, including the President, about whether or not there would be a main funeral procession on Constitution Avenue. I think that you were one of the people who were asked by President Ford at one point to offer your thoughts on that subject. And, in fact, as I became more directly involved with the funeral in the fall of 2004, early November of 2004—

Smith: So, post-Reagan funeral.

Wagner: Post-Reagan funeral and I think that’s critical. Post-Reagan funeral, most of the individuals that I would call my clients took that opportunity to reflect on what they might like their own funeral to be like. And the Fords, as they called their team together to entertain those discussions, were quick to express the fact that in their mind the Reagan funeral, the sequence of the conduct of the ceremonies, was perfect for President Reagan and perfect for that family. That it addressed their needs, it addressed his legacy. But that it didn’t feel like them, like the Ford family. They were anxious to think about ways in which President Ford’s funeral could be not different for different’s sake, but different in ways that told the story of a different man.

Smith: Exactly. I wrote him a memo – I don’t know if you ever saw it or heard about it –

Wagner: I tried not to quote it just a moment ago.

Smith: It started out by saying, “Your funeral has to be Truman-esque, not Reagan-esque,” simply making the point that, “This is the most personal decision.
you’ll make, but it is a story and that your story is your story. It’s not a reflection on any other president. Each one of these is unique.” I remember in 2000, the first time when Marty and I went out there and had the conversation with him, both of them. And, needless to say, subsequently the plans were much changed. I would say much improved. But he was adamant at that point. So, that was not a seed that anyone else planted. And, before the Reagan funeral, he felt pretty strongly about it. Which, again, just goes to show that every one of these is as personalized as a fingerprint.

Wagner: Absolutely.

Smith: It’s awkward. If you think that maybe something should be revisited, if you think that perhaps some ceremonial is being overlooked, can you have that conversation? Can you invite reconsideration of decisions or do you just sort of salute and say ‘whatever you want’.

Wagner: Well, you can invite reconsideration. Obviously, you have to sense the room, you have to sense people, you have to sense a time when they’re open to such discussions. And families and staffs work differently.

Smith: Did you find the Fords and those around them to be fairly comfortable to deal with?

Wagner: The meetings, particularly in Palm Springs, starting on November 4th of 2004, and moving forward until just a few months before his death, were remarkable collaborative staff exercises that I was privileged to be a part of. Family friends like Ann Cullen, trusted advisors like Greg Willard; the professional staff, Penny Circle, certainly the Secret Service was always with us, and the children, increasingly with Jack especially. You were involved in many of those and people representing the Foundation.

Smith: Is there anything unconventional about the process that this went through?

Wagner: Well, everybody approaches the subject differently. My sense is, and I probably of all the people in the room for those meetings, had less direct experience of working with President Ford than anyone else. But that series of meetings rang true with my understanding. Essentially there would be
memos and there would be updated plans and updated proposals and people would make their arguments in writing. And then that group would come together and spend the mornings thrashing them out. And then we’d all have lunch. We’d come back after lunch. President and Mrs. Ford would sit at the head of the table. We’d brief what we thought the best answers were. And we’d get the crooked finger of the President’s that said, ‘Yes, that part was good and that part was not so good.

Smith: Were there things that were rejected?

Wagner: There were many things that were talked about and that evolved over time. And it became both a planning effort and in many ways a story-telling. Really a remarkable time.

Smith: Yeah. The fact that they wanted to have a journalist among the eulogists - originally to be Hugh Sidey until he passed away - is part of that story.

Wagner: Absolutely.

Smith: And the fact that they wanted Jimmy Carter is a significant part of that story.

Wagner: Absolutely.

Smith: For the message that it sent. It’s interesting. When you’re up there and you’re doing that, you’re in a fog and you’re trying to hold yourself together and the Fords are sitting right in front of you.

Wagner: When you’re eulogizing.

Smith: Yeah. But for some reason it sticks in my memory, I remember I heard this sound and I looked over and Rosalyn Carter was weeping. I thought to myself, “Who would’ve thought thirty years ago that this is how the story ends?” Only in America. You know? I’ll never forget. On Air Force One, going back to Grand Rapids, President Carter had Gerald Ford’s youngest great-grandchild on his shoulder and was walking up and down the aisle. Did you see that?

Wagner: I did. I have a copy of that picture in my office.
Smith: I mean, what an extraordinary sight. Do you have memories of things that stick out in your mind of that trip? Were you prepared for the public response, which I know, many colleagues in the media, found surprising.

Wagner: Places where I was stunned by the response – and I’ve been in a lot of funeral motorcades, including the last trip with President Reagan from Point Mugu to the library, which was astonishing, just astonishing. But the congregation in the Cathedral on a day when most of Washington didn’t have to be there, didn’t even have to be in the city - the full Cathedral there, the arrival in Grand Rapids - and pretty much everything in Grand Rapids, that evening, going out and there being just tens of thousands of people standing in the cold—

Smith: On a January night. The weather, of course, was perfect, though.

Wagner: It was better than we had any right to expect. Far better than we had any right to expect.

Smith: Yes. Certainly, the odds were not in our favor. I know a few members of the family and I think Mrs. Ford in particular were surprised that Saturday when they flew back to Andrews and drove through Alexandria. She was astonished that night at the crowds on the streets. Obviously, they hadn’t lived in the neighborhood in a long time; I just don’t think they were prepared for what they saw.

Wagner: At some point in that drive, we were in Redskins football game traffic leaving Andrews on the Beltway and eight, ten lanes of traffic just stopped, got out of the car and stood.

Smith: Really?

Wagner: Coming through Alexandria in the dark with a hundred and twenty-some car motorcade including the incumbent vice president during war time and we’re on Alexandria streets that were designed for horse and buggies to pass at the wide spots.

Smith: They’re designed for George Washington’s funeral.
Wagner: There you go. And I’m just thinking, “My goodness, what are we in the midst of here?” And yet, the turnout in the dark in the drizzle was quite remarkable.

Smith: And, clearly the family was blown away by what they were saying.

Wagner: Terrifically.

Smith: And the stop at the World War II Memorial which turned out to be much more than a photo op. The little things. Again, the decision to go into the Capitol, not up the main staircase, as is done ordinarily, but through the House, presumably reflecting his long service there.

Wagner: Right. And we talked about that early in the planning process, early in the conversation about the possibility of doing that. The word ‘unprecedented’ arrival up some steps other than the main central rotunda steps came up, and we had a hallway conversation during a break. Actually, because the Johnson funeral was within days of an inauguration at that point, it was conducted on the East side and the swearing in platform was in fact still over the center steps during the Johnson funeral in January of ’73. It is in fact true that within recent memory, other steps have been used at the Capitol on the East side, but never the House steps and then proceeding to the House Chamber. That tribute on the House side makes the story of President Ford’s funeral even more powerful. But we need use the right words, or we’ll get a call from the Johnson girls with a gentle reminder on the East side of the Capitol generally.

Smith: Music, scripture, all of those things had to be chosen or re-chosen, as the case may be.

Wagner: Yes. Music, as it evolved over time, highlighting always the close relationship of the Fords with the Army Chorus over the years.

Smith: And especially Alvy Powell.

Wagner: And especially Alvy Powell. Highlighting his Navy service in “Eternal Father,” and I wish I had a nickel for every email that we wrote over the years concerning the use of “Hail the Victors” in a funeral and how to do that appropriately. And I think one of the great adventures – you talked about how the funeral changed in process – well, it had been long been a request of
President Ford that the University of Michigan band welcome him back to Michigan. And we had a little problem because the University of Michigan was in the Rose Bowl.

Smith: For which he would’ve been the loudest cheerleader.

Wagner: Which would’ve definitely been fine with him. Wherever he was, it was fine with him. That wasn’t the issue at all. But the issue was how to get the band back or if it was possible to get the band back.

Smith: The band wanted to participate.

Wagner: The band wanted very much to participate, but the timing of the Rose Parade and the game was such that it essentially meant that the band had to leave immediately after the game, go to the airport, get on a charter aircraft, come to Grand Rapids, have breakfast, change clothes, and play the arrival ceremony. The University of Michigan did have planes chartered to move the band. They had planes chartered to move the University leadership and trustees and on about the third or fourth loop, to get around to moving the band. And there were long conversations about how they really needed to consider what was most important on that overnight flight. In fact, the first folks that came home were not the big donors, or the university trustees. It was the band. The rest of the University of Michigan community spent an extra day in California and waited for the plane to come back for them. And we were able to have the band welcome the President home.

Smith: Did anything go wrong? That’s not a fair question to ask, but I can’t resist because, if it did, I should preface, no one noticed. I’ll give you an example. Even the fact that we were running a little bit late turned out to be a blessing because the interment and those planes and the sunset were synchronized.

Wagner: I’d like to take credit for that, but at that point, we were hours off schedule, but it didn’t matter. It didn’t matter. Greg Willard and I had a conversation early in that last day and decided that essentially it was going to take as long as it took and that Mrs. Ford was going to move at her speed and we weren’t going to be concerned.
Smith: As I recall, the original plan was that the museum would close a little bit earlier than it did, but that the lines were so long - did you sort of bump up against the latest possible time?

Wagner: We built some extra time in. We had a little bit of flex there.

Smith: And I noticed the line was moving a lot faster at the end than it was at the beginning.

Wagner: It was. We reengineered a few things in the middle of the night, too. It's an interesting building. It's not a building that's designed to have large numbers of people go through the lobby.

Smith: 60,000 people overnight.

Wagner: Overnight.

Smith: Phenomenal.

Wagner: In the winter, all wearing heavy coats.

Smith: Yeah. A two-mile line at one point and extraordinary camaraderie. I don't think there was an arrest that night.

Wagner: If there was, I never heard about it.

Smith: Did anything go wrong?

Wagner: You did come back to that question, didn't you?

Smith: I recall a couple times when it seemed like we were waiting.

Wagner: Well, and that's what I would say. There are places and the one that comes to mind is leaving the United States Capitol on the way to the Cathedral service. Would I have wished that family and honorary pallbearers had less of a wait before the casket and the four children came down the steps? Yes, absolutely. It was plenty cold that morning.

Smith: Yeah.
Wagner: That was a long, cold stand. But my abiding image of that, until the casket came down the steps, was just a beautiful picture on that early winter morning - was a sailor at the end of the cordon, bottom of the cordon, and the wind was blowing and that Dixie cup hat came off. The two people standing closest to the sailor were Mr. Rumsfeld and Mr. Cheney and they bent down, picked up the hat, and put it back on the head. It blew off again and they did it again.

Smith: I had been up at the cathedral with ABC that morning, but I was told by people afterwards that one of the things that surprised them – and, again, particularly after no caisson, et cetera, et cetera – that there were a surprising number of people who were out on the street of Washington that morning to pay their respects.

Wagner: Including the White House house staff on the North side who passed by. Including the Blair House staff, who’d become quite close to the family in those few days.

Smith: Really? That’s very touching.

Wagner: It was something.

Smith: We talked a little bit about the Cathedral service. My sense was that the first President Bush who is sensitive to the fact that he tears up really easily was consciously trying not to get too emotional. Came close a couple of times. I think this was just a few days after he had teared up – there was a scene where he was introducing Jeb in Florida to the legislature or something and he got very emotional. And he was probably embarrassed by that fact. But it was an interesting choice of speakers. I think most people were surprised Mrs. Reagan was there. I don’t think they knew in advance. At least that’s what I heard later, that they did not know that she was going to be there. It was obviously pretty gracious on her part to make that effort.

Wagner: Sure.

Smith: Did you know that she was going?

Wagner: I knew she’d be there.
Smith: And then, it’s so funny, a friend of mine who’d been in the Johnson administration after watching Mrs. Ford go all the way down the aisle, said, “She’s got a dancer’s legs.” It’s complimentary, but that must’ve been quite an ordeal. I don’t think her health was perfect that week and it must’ve exacted a real toll.

Wagner: Well, we - family and Greg Willard and certainly General Guy Swan who was her escort – we were all very protective of her throughout the week and making sure many times that there was a second person on her other arm. And she was a trooper. And getting out of the car and up the steps into the Cathedral was one person and walking down the aisle was a very self-possessed woman.

Smith: It’s interesting you say that. The following week, when she was at home, someone commented to her on how impressed they were, particularly at that long walk at the very end in Grand Rapids. We’d been told at ABC, “Don’t be surprised if you see her in a wheelchair.” Of course, we never did until the very end and then she got out and I think she was on Steve’s arm and walked all the way down to the interment.

Wagner: Right, there was a General on one side and Steve on the right.

Smith: And this person complimented her and said, “I don’t know how you did it.” And in a sort of matter of fact way, she said, “I just did what my husband would want me to do.” Says volumes.

Wagner: Exactly.

Smith: The kids impressed a lot of people. A lot of people hadn’t seen them, of course, in years. Their gesture of going down to the Capitol and greeting people, which they then repeated in Grand Rapids, drew a lot of favorable comment.

Wagner: It was interesting. Remarkable. Again, I think very genuine, very much in character with his family. When I think about that – I’m trying to get my days straight – it would’ve been, I think, Sunday evening. We arrived at the Capitol on Saturday late in the day. Sunday evening, Mrs. Ford’s children
and their spouses, a few close friends and staff came up from Blair House to the Capitol around dinner time. It was dark. I don’t remember how late in the evening it was, but it was dark. Their intent was to just go and sit inside the circle for awhile. And we came in on the House side through the door under the House steps and Betty and the grandchildren and the girls were there. I had been busy all day getting ready for the next week’s events, for the 2nd and the 3rd and hadn’t watched the news. And we came in through the door and the girls, the grandchildren, met Mrs. Ford in the hallway down just inside the door and proceeded to tell her all about their day, speaking with people in the Rotunda who’d come to pay their respects. I was done. It was remarkable - this sharing moment. Maybe it snuck up on me because I hadn’t been watching it on the news. I’d been too busy. But it was a moment, very much a Ford family moment.

Smith: How much of a problem did the New Year’s holiday create? Did it require significant changes in the planning or in the plan?

Wagner: Not really.

Smith: I mean, did you just add a day in D.C.?

Wagner: We just added another day in Blair House, another day in the Capitol. It didn’t create a problem. The kind of behind the scenes piece of that is that, because it was over the New Year in the year of a cycle of an off-year election, we carried in with the Republican Party in control of both houses of Congress and we carried out three days later with the Democratic Party in control of both houses of Congress.

Smith: By the way, there really did seem to be genuine bipartisan feeling surrounding these events in D.C., more than pro forma, more than the purely ceremonial kinds of reactions that you get sometimes.

Wagner: Absolutely. Absolutely. But it was interesting just from a staff perspective of ‘here’s the staff of the Speaker’s office, the Majority Leader’s office, all the political appointees who were associated with rules and those committees that are very important to the conduct of an event like this on the Hill. And everybody has their office in a box under their arm and they’re in the process
of moving and they’re bringing their life with them into the meeting. And it’s sitting on the conference table in front of them as we’re collaborating to make the plan for events up there. I think that part was seamless. I don’t think anybody outside of those staff meetings saw it, but it was an interesting time.

Smith: I remember walking up there and the thought - on the first day of the year - a line of people waiting to get inside the Capitol to pay their respects. Speaking of unprecedented.

Wagner: Right. Absolutely.

Smith: How did the family express themselves to you and your colleagues?

Wagner: They were remarkably warm and genuine to everyone who supported the event. They made a point of speaking to body bearers, to individuals standing guard of honor. It was very personal to them. Very personal.

Smith: I’ve heard rumors, only rumors, that other first families, were moved by what they felt to be the intimacy, the family feeling, for lack of a better word, that accompanied the pomp and the official aspects. It felt like a family funeral.

Wagner: Sure.

Smith: And that they took that into consideration in some of their own plans. I understand that the Johnson girls revisited their plans. What impact do you think it had?

Wagner: Well, I think the impact is in terms of how other First Families look at state funerals. I think the impact is actually a combined impact of the Reagan and Ford funerals occurring in reasonable proximity and being very different events with very different feelings. Each perfect in their own way. Each perfect for the family. And each in that way that we don’t necessarily understand, I think, perfect for the Nation at that time and that moment.

Smith: That does raise the question of creative tension between the state aspects and the personal ones. There’s always going to be a little bit of back and forth in terms of striking the balance.

Wagner: Well, there’s an art and a science to it.
Smith: So, you necessarily re-invent the wheel in some ways with each.

Wagner: In some ways.

Smith: Again, they both in their own way influenced what follows.

Wagner: Sure, and I think if other families take away lessons, to use the example of the Fords and Carters as a remarkable example of families and individuals who have been in that unique position of being President of the United States and who find common ground whatever their differences may have been. The families do talk, the staffs do talk, and I think the message that they’ve taken away is one that they do have an opportunity to work with the host of people who will support the funeral to build an event. And ‘event’ sometimes sounds like a harsh word, but not really. To tell the story once again in a way that is meaningful for them and meaningful for the nation.

Smith: Is there an awareness that this is in fact a national event? That, however intense the personal grief is in the family and among close friends, there is inevitably a national component.

Wagner: There is. These are families who have lived – many of them almost half of their lives and many of their children, most of their cognizant lives in the spotlight, if you will, of being on the national stage. They do have an awareness of that. They also have the remarkable gift of each of the individuals who I have known that has been President of the United States - that when you are with them, you have a sense of your complete engagement and their complete engagement and involvement. A very strong sense of presence and of connections. It’s a great thing, makes great successful politicians, but it also means that there are many thousands of people who feel a genuine, very real for them, personal connection. And, I think families recognize that they also need to have an opportunity to grieve and celebrate.

Smith: Where there people surprised that Jimmy Carter was giving a eulogy for Gerald Ford

Wagner: There may have been people during the funeral who had an opportunity to hear what the gallery was whispering. I certainly wasn’t one of them.
Smith: But in terms of the general public, you wonder whether – a lot of people didn’t know that they’d become friends.

Wagner: But a lot of people also didn’t remember where things stood or where things seemed to stand in 1977 either. And I think it may be only for those of us who remember the one can understand or begin to understand how remarkable that friendship really is.

Smith: Yeah. Last thing, and I don’t know how to phrase this, given the subject at hand. In any other line of work, when it’s all over, you can go out and have a beer and say, “Geez, we really did a bang-up job.” What’s the equivalent in your line of work? How do you, for lack of a better word, engage in self-congratulation? How do you know you’ve pulled it off and acknowledge that fact?

Wagner: Well, with the military, we have lots of ways to recognize jobs well done and to recognize the important contribution of every individual. And making sure that the people who played key roles are recognized in ways that reflect their effort, reflect their work, reflect their service, reflect their care, is important.

Smith: But just at the visceral level—

Wagner: The people who understand this know. And, I guess, what I would say is where you know is the people like, for me personally, you do a ceremony in subsequent years in support of for example, a Senator Kennedy’s funeral, Senator Byrd’s funeral recently, Lady Bird Johnson’s funeral. Out of nowhere you get a three word text from someone you’d been in the foxhole with in a prior intense funeral setting - a Greg Willard, a Susan Ford. And right then, hearing from someone like them, you know – job well done, very well done.

Smith: Yeah. Does it take you time to decompress?

Wagner: Absolutely. Absolutely. It certainly is a period of time when going through a funeral, being that ‘on’, being that focused, is what people around the military, I guess, in a way would call that kind of a foxhole experience. It’s the being under fire together in a way which is very different. And I don’t say that in a way that in any way says that planning a funeral is like being under
Mike Wagner  

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fire. It’s not. But that intense shared experience, whether it’s being on a championship sports team or being a part of any focused effort like that, and you get to the end and it takes you awhile to take a deep breath and to kind of settle down and come back up to be ready to engage and have the energy again.

Smith: I think people would be interested to know - clearly there’s a different role, different magnitude in terms of the First Ladies services. Can you explain the difference and, maybe, where there isn’t a difference in terms of the planning process?

Wagner: The former First Ladies have no authorization in regulation or in public law for military support for their funerals. Certainly not for the kind of planning and support on a large-scale that is part of a state funeral, part of our tradition of a state funeral. Traditionally, the military extends to a former First Lady the same courtesy that we extend to a dependent in Arlington National Cemetery. We carry the casket, provide a chaplain if asked. We’ll advise, we’ll assist in those kinds of ways, but the ceremonial requirements or the ceremonial traditions are much less public. Generally there’s not a Washington component or if there is, it’s a memorial service, a later event, but a very different tradition.

Smith: Anything we haven’t covered? Anything that you take away that really sticks with you?

Wagner: I don’t know if I can tell this story or if I can get through this story, but I’ll try. The way we do events in the National Capitol Region, the collaboration of all the various protocol, agencies, all the various military support, all the security and law enforcement support, for years, up to and including the Reagan funeral, were handled pretty much on the basis of unofficial collaboration, coordination, between the organizations. As part of the same reorganization of DOD and of the Department of Homeland Security and changing roles post-9/11, the Department of Homeland Security decided to designate certain events as national special security events and to put Secret Service in charge of planning those events.
Smith: Planning the security aspects?

Wagner: In essentially planning the security aspect of those events, which was a significant cultural change for Secret Service from a focus on when their protectees were at an event to responsibility for large-scale public events, whether or not their protectee was present or any protectees were present. Very different focus for them. And, particularly here in the Washington, D.C. area, a terrific challenge to get their arms around and change the relationships and bring the literally hundreds of law enforcement and other inter-agency partners together. Prior to the Ford funeral, about eighteen months beforehand, when that effort began, not specifically directed toward the Ford funeral, but certainly realizing that President Ford was in failing health or declining health is probably a better word, a Secret Service agent named Stacy Bauerschmidt, who was the assistant to the special agent in charge of the Washington field office of the Secret Service, which generally means you become the project person for the boss, got handed the job to figure out how to make this work, figure out how to make all these people play nice together, figure out how to make all these people do the coordination. She got handed the job and set about it.

Deep breath. Stacy was the daughter of a couple who lived in western Michigan. He was a veteran. I would guess a veteran of the Korean War, who came home and had a newborn daughter named Stacy and had some trouble with veteran’s benefits. And, as Stacy told the story, her parents – excuse me, sorry, I do this – were on the edge of eviction because a check hadn’t come and because somehow in the system things were held up. And in desperation, they called their Representative’s office and said, “We’ve got this problem. We don’t know what to do.” Of course, we know what district they were in. They were in President Ford’s district, Congressman Ford’s district, and the check arrived and they kept the house. Now, I don’t know the details. You could probably go back and find the details. Bauerschmidt is not that common a name. But it was very real to her. It was a story she grew up with and, to her, she had a chance to pay a man back. She did just that. I don’t think anybody knows that story but me and Stacy.
Smith: It’s a great story. That’s why we do oral history projects.

Wagner: It’s a very Ford story.

Smith: It is a Ford story. That’s perfect.
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Smith: Thank you very much for doing this. You obviously have a remarkable story in your own right. How did your path cross with that of Betty Ford.

Brinker: Well, you know, after my sister died, or as we went through the journey of her very unsuccessful end with breast cancer—

Smith: How long was she ill?

Brinker: She was diagnosed in 1977 at the end of the year, I think it was, and she died in 1980 at the age of 36. I’ll never forget it. In a lot of ways, it was as if it were yesterday. In fact, I just wrote a book about it, Promise Me, which has a picture of Mrs. Ford in it. So, you know, in those days, cancer was “The Big C,” it was spoken of in whispers. People crossed the streets sometimes when they saw my sister. We lived in Peoria, Illinois and we know there was cancer there, being in hospitals. Still it was nothing like it is today. People were much less willing to address these issues out loud.

Smith: Was there even more of the stigma, if that’s the word, attached to breast cancer?

Brinker: Yes, of course, even though it was “The Big C,” that was usually lung cancer or maybe an intestinal cancer. But when it came to breast cancer, it was even worse. It was more hidden in the shadows. You couldn’t print the word ‘breast’ in most newspapers or magazines and certainly couldn’t use the words on TV or radio. So, in fact, when we started Susan G. Komen for the Cure a few years after my sister died, many people advised me to make it be Susan G. Komen Foundation for Women’s Cancers. But, aside from that, when Susan was going through her care and treatment, and we finally got her to M.D. Anderson, it was far too late. But, she used to always say, “If Betty Ford could take her chemotherapy and have it and be like she was, so brave and always looked good and always had a very positive demeanor, so can I.”
So, she was a role model for untold hundreds and thousands of people who didn’t have a voice.

Smith: Did she know Mrs. Ford?

Brinker: No.

Smith: Was it just that Betty Ford was a public figure?

Brinker: That Betty Ford was a public figure. She was the First Lady and she talked about it, so Susie knew that she had chemotherapy and, therefore, if she could do it, it was like it was alright. It was like what you should do. And when I think of those pictures of Betty, they’re apocryphal now, throwing the football, the President talking about her disease - we just went through all those videos the other day because we’re doing some archival work at Susan G. Komen - and the pictures of him at the press conference announcing that Betty had breast cancer. Then everything about it changed. You know, everything about the disease and the acculturation of it began to change and I think people know it. But I think that the full credit for what Betty did in those days will have a voice itself for hundreds and hundreds of years, because it just wasn’t done. People didn’t talk about disease. Look at President Franklin Roosevelt. He couldn’t even talk about the infantile paralysis he had and there was a great staging going on in the films. You didn’t discuss disease because you knew you’d be disadvantaged. You knew you could lose your job. It usually meant death. People were more afraid of cancer than they were of the treatment because, or maybe it was both. They thought if you had cancer, you die.

Smith: Let me ask you to try to take people in this culture back thirty or forty years and make them understand what, on the surface, seems incredible. Did women discuss it among themselves? Was it something that they talked about, shared their fears, their concerns?

Brinker: You know, no. There was no patient support or there were very few. Maybe there was one patient support group, but it wasn’t really entrenched where women were. It was more for aftercare. So there wasn’t really an opportunity. There was no patient advocacy. There were no 1-800 numbers.
No cell phones. No internet. No outreach to people. Certainly you didn’t talk about this at school. And, in your doctor’s office, when you walked in, you never saw a breast self-exam card, or ‘Have you had a mammogram?’ even after they developed mammography. So, you were beginning to see some discussion of it in doctors’ offices. Maybe your gynecologist did a breast self-exam, but honestly it was not discussed openly like it is today. Not even close.

Smith: Is it logical to assume that it is part of a general relaxation of popular attitudes about sex and sexual attractiveness?

Brinker: I honestly think that, in those days, there was the great fear of being mutilated because the surgery was so huge. If there was a discussion of it, there was so much fear and almost running away. Remember how teenage girls ran away when they were pregnant and they were hidden. It was almost like that. However, I think as you went farther down the demographic chain, the sexual part and the mutilation and the fear about all that got worse in any event.

But what most people began to realize is that it was happening a lot more often. A) People were aging, but b) it was just happening more often. People were living longer and many people died of this without ever knowing what they died of years and years ago and centuries ago. So, you had to be very brave to confront a disease like breast cancer and to be public about it. I don’t know of anyone else like that was that public about it. I really don’t. I grew up in a rather empowered household and was very aware that President Nixon signed the national cancer act. Very aware of people who led the cancer movement in this country. But there was no talk about breast cancer and certainly no actresses, no public spokesperson, because it would ruin your career. You know, they would a) think you were going to die and b) you would be considered mutilated and not fit for prime time.

So, it was more, I think with women, than even a sexual concern. It was a fear of life and everything about it and the very, very severe treatment. You know, the Halstead radical mastectomy was the only option offered. Most people from after the turn of the century until about 1960, in the late 60s, and in some places in the country earlier than that - my aunt had had that terribly
debilitating [procedure] where, literally, half of your body was removed from your waist up.

Smith: And you did not know necessarily going into the operating room?

Brinker: No, you did not know and you were not given a choice. So, you could wake up and have half your body missing, practically, and not know what you were waking up to and all the adjustment that went with it. It was terrible. And if you were given a cobalt therapy or rather rudimentary therapy, it was burning all over. I mean, it was really brutal. But, to have Betty talk about it, Betty Ford, our First Lady, talk about it the way she did. It was her spirit more than anything that enlightened people and the rate of mammography, of course, went up significantly after that. It then dipped a little bit, but she was always in the forefront of this movement. Always. And I sought to meet her immediately. I had married a man from Texas called Norm Brinker, who was a wonderful man, since passed away. And he was friendly with Trammell Crow, who was one of his very good friends. When I started the foundation, we were going to do a big luncheon and I thought in my mind, “Who could we give an award to?” And these are the days before there were award luncheons for every disease and every body part. Ours was really one of the first. So, I said to Norman one night, “I would do anything if I could get even a phone call to Mrs. Ford because I have a feeling that maybe she would understand how important this would be”, especially in Texas, to do this in Dallas, Texas, at that time, where possibly women were even a little more unempowered about things in those days. So, he said, “Well, let me call Trammell Crow.” I knew they were great friends. I went to see Trammell and he picked up the phone and I’ll never forget it - she took the call. She was fabulous about it and I said to her, “You know, Mrs. Ford, we really need you here because I don’t have anyone to speak on my sister’s behalf. I don’t have anyone to speak on behalf of this disease and I feel we can do something important here. We can begin to really amplify this issue, but we really need you here. We need you to come.” And she sort of joked - the first event we were going to do was going to be at Norman’s polo club and we were going to have a little dinner out there and a little demonstration - and she says, “Well, I’ll be happy to come as long as I don’t have to ride a horse.” And she just
said that and she has that great sense of humor. I said, “No, no, you won’t have to ride a horse.”

Smith: And this was your first contact with her?

Brinker: Yes, it was my first contact. And when she came, in fact, there’s a picture of her arriving for the very first event in my new book, *Promise Me*. My son, who now is thirty-five, he was just a little boy, he was only eight years old, standing there with a bouquet of roses to hand her as she got off the plane. And she came every single year as long as we had that event for years. I think it must’ve been fifteen or twenty years and then [she] came to Washington when we had other events. But, she spoke out about this. And then, of course, right shortly after that, her position on substance abuse – again, leading edge – who does that? You know, at the time, you thought, “Who does that? Who would talk about that?” We were all hiding. Everybody was hiding whether they had a drink too many or whether they were taking pills or whatever. And she was the vanguard of that sort of ability to be frank and to be open and it set people free. It literally was an emancipation of people who were completely bound by secrecy, shame, and fear. And that’s why I think she probably was one of the greatest First Ladies that this country has ever known.

Smith: She’s unique in that her real historical impact is probably greater after she left the White House. It’s interesting. If you think about how ordinary people live their lives, she’s probably had more impact than many presidents.

Brinker: Right. Oh, yes. And actually, I think, besides all of the patients and women and people through her activism, she opened their hearts and minds. Also, would say that the whole discussion of disease in this society changed or evolved. Disease became more personalized. People used to talk about disease like it was a control science project or someone landing on the moon. It was never personalized. She put a name and a face on issues that opened up an entire dialogue for forever more.

Smith: I’ve often wondered – actually I mentioned this in the eulogy – most of us, as we get older, the cliché is that we tend to become more conservative. And,
they seemed more open, more compassionate. I’ve often wondered how much of it was her influence on him or having kids who were still relatively young, and grandchildren.

Brinker: Great children.

Smith: And maybe most nebulous was the experience of going through the intervention and the continuing work with the Betty Ford Center where they saw people who you might not at first blush ever expect to see there. To see good people, decent people, accomplished people, who had a problem, a weakness, and whether all of that came together. Obviously, they were quite outspoken in their views about choice, but, you know, he signed a gay rights petition. I mean, he did a lot of things that you don’t ordinarily associate with a conservative Republican president.

Brinker: Right. And I think that he was, in a way, the quintessential moderate. I really don’t think of him as a dyed in the wool conservative, because, though he was fiscally conservative in his beliefs, I think if you took an honest poll in America, you’d find their beliefs lined up pretty much with what most people thought. And I think that’s why they’re so revered as a couple and as a presidency. You know, I mean, I think it was very, very important that they spoke out on the issues they did. It resonated and it continues to resonate. And she was very outspoken about all that. You know, going to the Republican meetings and endorsing candidates that the rest of the Republican Party didn’t feel were acceptable. And the truth will out. That’s how a lot of people feel, that they don’t want those kinds of issues to become part of a political dialogue.

There are a lot of people in this country who feel that gender orientation has no place or gender preference doesn’t have any place in a political discussion in America. So, I think they led with such dignity and such a wise and credible set of beliefs that I think, again, the respect for them will grow and grow and grow as times move on. And particularly, if we elect people who are highly partisan, I think that it shows what it should be rather than exercising every bit of your partisanship. I think President Ford understood and was a master negotiator himself and a leader. You know what he did in
the Republican Party alone and in Congress, and all of the jobs that he held before then prepared him for that kind of public presence and persona, I think.

Smith: You saw them together. Tell us about your sense of their relationship.

Brinker: Yeah. You know what? They were really, really loving, attractive, and I hate to use the word ‘cute’ together, but they were. They were easy. They could joke with each other. He used to tease, “Well, you know Betty did this,” or “Betty said that.” He always quoted her all the time and she always quoted him all the time. You know, she was a wonderful dancer and loved to dance when she was young. And they loved to dance together, as you know. So, I used to love to watch the pictures of them dancing at the White House because they were so in step with each other. It was like they were in harmony with each other.

Smith: In some ways it’s a case of opposites attracting. He was famously punctual.

Brinker: Right.

Smith: And she never made a deadline probably in her life. And, with some couples, that would be an issue.—

Brinker: I think he just adored her and I think she was, you know, even with her substance issues later that came to bear, I think she was a wonderful mother and he knew that. And he also knew that she loved him very much.

Smith: I’ve often wondered- we’re talking with the kids now - whether he felt any kind of guilt. The fact is, like lots of men in his generation and lots of men in this town, when he was climbing the professional ladder, he’d been away a lot on the road.

Brinker: Yeah, sure. And so, she was left with the burden of the children and the public persona and everything. I’m sure the gratitude for that grew more and more. You know, I didn’t observe them so much in public, but kind of remember just seeing pictures. You could get a sense of people’s chemistry. And they just seemed so comfortable with each other.
Smith: Yeah. I think that’s part of the problem now. She says she misses her boyfriend.

Brinker: Oh, yeah, sure. I mean, it has to be really hard. They were together so many years. Their best years, probably they would’ve both said, were after he left the White House, after getting out of all that. They loved their house in Vail and they loved wherever they were. They really enjoyed it in California. They really loved that. I can remember visiting them in the desert and how much they loved that experience and his golf. And, you know, when he was younger and skiing, how much they loved that. Norman and I visited them several times in their house in Vail and we used to go skiing there. And we would see them in the summer if we came to the desert and they just always were the same. Hospitable, charismatic, and very comfortable.

Smith: When was the last time you saw or talked to her?

Brinker: You know what? I’ve tried to call several times but we couldn’t connect. I do talk to Vaden and I talk to Susan. Susan did a wonderful piece for our thirtieth year honoring the promise and she did a video on behalf of her mother. And I’ve sent several messages to her and I saw her, of course, at the funeral, which, you know, was quite awhile ago, but I was just stunned.

Smith: Were you surprised by the amount of reaction? Because, you know, he’d been out of the public eye a while. I was with ABC the first half of the week and then with the family the second half. I can tell you, journalists, particularly younger journalists, were surprised. There was a whole generation that was being introduced to him for the first time. They were seeing these clippings and they were contrasting it with the ugliness of our current politics. And he looked awfully good.

Brinker: Well, this is what I mean. I think that their image and their ease on the dance floor, so to speak, is something in their leadership style - because he always reached out. He was always friendly. He had an ability to talk to anyone and so did she. And that’s just not what you see today. We seem to have people who are in corners, you know, who don’t reach out to each other easily, who don’t go out and have dinner together, who don’t live here, really. So, as a
result, you have such a fractured political system now. And I’m sad about it. We just don’t have the style and the outreach for people to feel included and inclusive. Times have been very difficult the last few years and I think that’s created even more distance between people and their politicians.

Smith: He and Hale Boggs, his Democratic counterpart, would have debates at the National Press Club. They would drive down together to the club and decide what they were going to debate that day. They’d go to the club and they’d have their debate and go have a drink and lunch and then go back to the Hill. It’s not as if the ‘60s were an era of good feelings, but institutionally, you had people who were rewarded for getting things done. Now they’re rewarded for keeping things from getting done.

Brinker: From getting done and also, you know, we don’t have a political class anymore. It used to be that a lot of politicians had a gravitas, a sort of respect, and now it’s as if we just dislike all of them. The civility has just gone out of it. And I think all of those fellows and, you know, Tip O’Neill and Ronald Reagan, when you look at the camaraderie there, I feel like we’ll never see that again. I hope that’s not true.

Smith: I understand your feelings. I think the media had a lot to do with it.

Brinker: Yeah, of course, on every issue.

Smith: Cable TV and the internet have coarsened and polarized—

Brinker: And scripted.

Smith: And scripted.

Brinker: So that no one can really say how they feel. No one’s free to say anything and there’s so much media that, you know, if someone blinks a certain way, it’s a story and it’s so sensational and tabloid. So, that’s a problem.

Smith: How do you think she should be remembered?

Brinker: I think she should be remembered as a woman who really did it all. You know, she not only was a great wife and a great mother and figured out how to do it all, even with the steps along the way and the difficulty she personally
had, but she was a leader in a time that wasn’t easy to be a leader. In other words, she didn’t have the option, as many people do today, to act almost any way you want to as a woman. Things were very scripted and prescribed for women. And Betty had a way of transitioning from the classic First Lady role into the role of a leader. And that kind of leadership, as you said, will go on for generations and generations because she broke ceilings and walls in the nicest possible way and by example - other than preaching, teaching, shouting. It was always by example. And I think she will be seen as a very important First Lady as time goes on who served at a difficult juncture of history.

Smith: I also wonder if you look at her in the ‘60s, she’s almost representative of a generation of women. She was a dancer. She was an accomplished, creative individual who was very happily married and who loved being a mother, but who also sensed that there was more potentially to life than that. She saw a psychiatrist at one point, which she was very candid about. You get a sense of a whole generation of women who were on the cusp of great change.

Brinker: Exactly.

Smith: They were unknowingly, in some ways, they were pioneers.

Brinker: Unknowingly evolutionary. She was evolutionary in being able to do the things that she did. And, you know, it isn’t just so much the disease part, it’s the living your life in public. Because even after that, she had to become much more public in a way and people were watching very carefully all the time, watching for signs.

Smith: That’s interesting because she typically made a joke about the first state dinner – “everyone was watching, which one.” But I assume, as often is the case, humor hides something very serious.

Brinker: Right, it does. And also you learn to live with it. And once you’re a breast cancer survivor, it doesn’t matter who you are, you always wonder, “Is it going to come back?”, “Is it going to?”, “When?”, “How?”, “If.” She had a husband in the White House. She was still fairly on the young side.
Smith: But she had a relatively advanced case.

Brinker: Yeah, and she did chemotherapy and I’m sure she had doubts and fears in her own mind which also one didn’t deal with openly. Yet she managed to always be able to talk about it, even if somebody asked her. I do know that. Friends of mine in the cancer community would ask her “Are you okay?” and “Have you had any fears about it?” and she was always open about it. And that, in itself, is a whole other set of issues that survivors deal with aside from the diagnosis. And the now you’re in public and this isn’t spoken about and now everyone’s looking at you to see if you’re sick and you’re going to die or how you’re going to look or how you’re going to act or if you act different or if there’s something about you that’s different. Especially a disease like breast cancer in those days.

Smith: And there’s not a more visible position in the world than the one she was in.

Brinker: No, every garment inspected, every image looked at carefully. “Does she fit in her clothes?” “How does that look?” “How must that be?” “What’s her husband thinking about all that?” “Are they going to break up over it?” I mean, there’s lots of that.

Smith: That’s a large issue. She obviously was a leader. He, less obviously, it seems to me, was a leader. I mean, leading by example. Showing other men this is how you’re supposed to react.

Brinker: This is how you do it. And you go to the press conference and you speak out loud about it. “My Betty has been diagnosed” to the public. And then resuming your playful life right afterwards. That was the cue that was so important to people. Another cue that was very important to people, because, you know, I keep saying about the throwing the football, that may be one of the most important pictures ever in history, that and out on the White House lawn. Because it’s a resumption of a life. It’s a presumption that you can live with cancer and that you live beyond these things.

Smith: And it’s a loving life.
Brinker: And it’s a loving one. And in those days, you have to remember, Richard, you were dealing with a subject that was as taboo as almost anything I can think of and they got through this. And I just loved him because there was just a certain masculinity about him that was not macho at all. He was a very gentle person inside. He was a kind person. And you could tell that. And, so, his kindness helped her and together they even grew more as a couple. And he is a leader. You know, when he had his political issues, I think they just really sailed through a lot of those kinds of things because they were so in tune and they had such a great afterlife. You know, he loved golf. They loved being in that house in Vail. They loved having their children there. They loved living that kind of life. They were doing sports.

Smith: Time was good to the Fords.

Brinker: Yeah, very good. And they were invited everywhere and they were admired and then she did her Betty Ford work.

Smith: He lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his way of thinking on the pardon.

Brinker: That’s right.

Smith: And he said when the Kennedys gave him the Profiles in Courage award it was just an extraordinary turning point. He said, “People don’t ask the question anymore. For twenty-five years, people asked the pardon question.”

Brinker: That’s right. And he took such a strong position on that and I think history would’ve judged him right at that point. It was very, very interesting, all that, but he did the right thing and he lived, as you say, long enough to see it, which was a great blessing for both of them, I think, and for their children. You know, it was nice that their children have a legacy in the rest of the world that sometimes, you see, today, people don’t understand how long things take to do. People always think that things should happen instantly. And if you do something, you should be immediately rewarded for it or it should immediately turn around. Young people, particularly, don’t understand that. So, this was a man who lived with a set of principles, did what he thought was right, and lived through it. Didn’t whine. Didn’t complain. Didn’t say, “Oh,
gee, I was hounded.” And that’s a difference today that you see a lot of.
People playing the blame game, blaming someone else.

Smith: And Susan now has stepped into her mother’s shoes?

Brinker: Yeah, she stepped into her shoes and I owe her a call because I want to keep up with what she’s doing. She’s such a great woman and she’s worked very hard. She’s had some of her own challenges, you know, and she’s just great. She’ll do a great job there. Susan’s a hard worker and she knew what her mom wanted to accomplish and that’s really important to keep the Center the way it is. And she cares a lot about her brothers. They’re very close. So, that’s very nice and it’s nice for everybody to keep in touch with them, too.

Smith: That’s perfect.
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Smith: Thanks so much for doing this. I appreciate it.

Buchanan: I’m delighted.

Smith: Let me ask you. First of all, what was the attitude in the Nixon White House toward the Republican Congressional leadership, and Ford in particular, during that first term?

Buchanan: Well, for the first couple of years, Nixon had one of his speechwriters at all the cabinet meetings, congressional leadership and others, and I was in all the congressional leadership meetings. I think the attitude was very respectful, but I don’t think there was a sense that this was a very powerful, competent, and really able force that we had on Capitol Hill. Nixon was the first time since Zachary Taylor that we had a president with both Houses of the Congress in opposition to him and I don’t think that Nixon felt that these fellows were up to his level of the game.

Smith: Would you distinguish at all, not necessarily in terms of competence, but in terms of loyalty, between a Jerry Ford and a Hugh Scott?

Buchanan: I know what you’re going to say. Everybody in the White House distinguished between the two. Jerry Ford was a friend of Richard Nixon. Nixon liked him. I’d been out with Nixon for Jerry Ford in Michigan and Romney in Michigan, out there in 1996. Jerry Ford was a friend and a buddy of Nixon’s and I think they genuinely liked each other. I think Hugh Scott was looked upon as on the other side of the party. He was certainly looked upon by me and the other conservatives as that. Hugh Scott is the one who famously said, “Don’t worry. They get the rhetoric and we get the action.” That meant ‘They’ were conservatives and ‘we’ are the liberals.

Smith: I don’t know about Ford, but you hear stories about Scott constantly leaking to his advantage and not necessarily to the White House’s.
Buchanan: I think that was the feeling, that Scott was in business for himself and that Gerald Ford was part of the team and he was the leader of the team in the House, and Hugh Scott probably would not have been Richard Nixon’s choice for a Senate Minority Leader.

Smith: Correct me if I’m wrong, but I think Scott voted against both Haynesworth and Carswell. I know he voted against Carswell.

Buchanan: Carswell got about forty-five votes.

Smith: Forty-five votes, that’s right.

Buchanan: And, you know, I worked on the Carswell account, if you will, when he was nominated and I kept calling the judge. I’d done this for Burger, I’d gotten materials on Burger and we wanted to get them out early to the press room. First impression, right to the press, they’d have to run with it. Burger had written this wonderful piece on law and order for *U.S. News & World Report* in ’67 and we put it out. So, I called Judge Carswell and I said, “Judge, are there any law review articles you’ve written you’re particularly proud of and you’d like to have represent your point of view?” “No, I haven’t written much of that.” “Are there any articles that you’ve written that represent your views?” “No, I can’t think of any of that.” And I said, “Well, Judge, tell me a little more about your war record.” And so we went to talking about his war record in the Pacific. But the Judge had no real academic credentials and I guess you have to fault John Mitchell for that.

Smith: Presumably, there’s a real qualitative difference between Haynesworth and Carswell.

Buchanan: Oh, Haynesworth was Chief Judge of the 4th Circuit and should’ve been confirmed. It was an appalling atrocity. I think he had a speech defect, Judge Haynesworth did, but he was just vilified and viciously attacked as some kind of racist. It was all a pack of lies. But, I will say this: when Carswell was rejected, I’m sure it was Carswell; I was called by Haldeman and told to write a statement on that which I assumed would be for Ziegler to deliver and I was told he wanted it very tough. So, I wrote this statement that said this was an act of regional discrimination against the South and was really rough. I went
over and went into the Oval Office and I gave it to Nixon and Nixon looked at it and then he walked past me straight for the pressroom where he delivered it. It was a very powerful, effective statement, but I had no idea it was for the President of the United States.

Smith: And there was no filter.

Buchanan: No filter.

Smith: Were you surprised by what happened to Spiro Agnew? Let me preface that. One of the people we talked with is Jerry Jones. He had been reorganizing the personnel office for Haldeman. He got a call, so it had to be before April of ’73, Haldeman was still there. And Haldeman wanted to know how many people worked for the vice president. Jones came up with a number and Haldeman said, “Fine. I want undated letters of resignation from all of them.” Now, it raises a couple of possibilities.

Buchanan: Now, wait a minute. See, he got the undated letters of resignation from all of us as I recall the day after the election.

Smith: And that’s the first thing that it raises. Is it possible that this was belated, that in fact they didn’t have letters from the vice president’s staff?

Buchanan: It’d be hard for me to believe, because I think the vice president’s chief of staff sat in the senior staff meeting, and I’m sure he had people in the meeting where Haldeman came in where Nixon came in and spoke - the exhaustible volcanoes speech, as everybody remembers it. And everybody’s to go back and say what you’ve done, what you would like to do in the second administration, and send in your letter of resignation, which cast a bit of a pall over our victory party. Sweet Old Bob, as he called himself, the initials fit. So, what I’m saying is that I’m sure that the chief of staff to the vice president - became a federal judge and he’s since died - I’m sure he was in the meeting and it would’ve applied to him as well.

Smith: It certainly would not have been an effort by the vice president to resist that.

Buchanan: Oh, no, I don’t think so. Well, that’s an excellent question. I don’t know. I don’t think at that point the vice president would’ve defied an order for all the
senior staff, of whom the vice president’s chief of staff was considered one, to send in their letters of resignation. But you raise a very interesting point. These were the vice president’s hires, they weren’t the president’s.

Smith: It raises the larger question. Would the Oval Office have known about the Maryland investigation? Remember, the *Wall Street Journal*, I think it was in August, went public with their story. This would be several months before that. Is it reasonable to believe that the Justice Department and through the Justice Department the Oval Office would’ve known that there was at least something afoot in Maryland?

Buchanan: Yes. Now, I came in on this fairly late, I will admit. I went to the press conference that Agnew had, and this was fairly late on where he talked about, I believe, “damn lies,” and was really defiant. James Reston was there and wrote a terrific column saying Agnew denied everything. I went back to my office and I either called or memo’d over there and said, “Why are we not standing behind the vice president? And Al Haig said, “Come on over.” And I came on over and he said, “The vice president’s been taking envelopes in the basement.” And I was just jolted completely by that. I had not known it, but the sense I got of all of this and even of the Saturday Night Massacre was that Elliot Richardson was communicating much more closely with the White House than folks were led to believe.

Smith: Speaking of the Saturday Night Massacre, to this day, it’s unclear. We talked to Judge Bork, we talked to other people who were in the Justice Department, and one senses that the President believed he had an understanding with Richardson.

Buchanan: He did.

Smith: And Richardson, for lack of a better word, double crossed him.

Buchanan: That’s exactly right. I was called and I’m not sure by whom, maybe it was Haig, but this was during the week and I was called and they said they wanted to get rid of Cox. And I said, “Is Richardson aboard?” And they said, “Yeah.” So I said, “Do it.” And apparently, Richardson reneged on the back course, backed off and so Ruckelshaus and Bork had to do it. I wrote Nixon a
memo, I think, to this effect because I was in the Oval Office with Nixon and he was talking about Brezhnev and he was talking about the Middle East and all that time - basically around the time of that war - we were talking for a long period of time. I had recommended, I think, that he had to fire Richardson, to get rid of him. And Richardson was coming in. And I said, “Well, I’ll go out the other door.” And I went out the door that I didn’t think they were coming in and they were coming in. And here was Richardson with sort of a strange grin on his face and Al Haig was grimacing. But Richardson was walking in to get fired. This was Saturday.

Smith: So, the signal had been sent to the Oval Office that, in effect, the deal was off.

Buchanan: Oh, yeah, Nixon told me basically, “Look, I don’t have any choice.” There were no tapes running then. But basically he was saying, “You’ve got Brezhnev and the Russians are pushing me on the Middle East. If I’ve got my own attorney general backing me down and I can’t do anything about it, who’s going to believe you in the world?” And he very much saw it in those terms, that, look, it was them or him. So, he went ahead and did it. But he felt very much that it had an effect on foreign policy. That’s what we’re talking about. So, as I say of Richardson, I’ll never forget his expression. It looked like one of these fellows who’s taken to be hanged but somehow didn’t realize it. It was a funny expression on his face.

Smith: Bork is not the only one in that department who has expressed the view that Richardson was very ambitious, politically. That Richardson saw himself as a future president.

Buchanan: Oh, sure, Elliot did. Later in life, I talked to Elliot and, you know, I liked Elliot and I talked to him. He’d had four cabinet seats. I think he had four chairs or four of those plaques.

Smith: Apparently, he did not want to be attorney general.

Buchanan: Well, it was a ________, but right. I talked to him and I said, I forget which election it was, but I said, “Why don’t you go up there? Walk in there and be governor of Massachusetts?” And he said, “Pat, I’ve got things I care about in my life and it’s towards the end of my life and I don’t want to be deciding
sewer contracts. What I care about is the Law of the Sea Treaty.” He was a
globalist and he believed in this. He wanted to focus on that and I respected
that. He was a nice fellow. He used to come over on Crossfire. He’d come
over late at night and I had this lovely gal there and she said, “Elliot
Richardson? The famous Elliot Richardson?” And I said, “Yeah, he’ll be
here.” And she came out into my office with this panicked look on her face
and I said, “Don’t worry. He’ll do just fine when the camera goes on.” A lot
of those fellows came at 11:30 at night that way.

Smith: When Agnew resigned, I believe I read you wrote the President a memo
suggesting that he pick Ford for vice president.

Buchanan: Yeah, it was not only that I wrote him a memo - there is a memo in the Ford
files and I wrote it to the President - but it was very, very close to the date of
selection, very close. And I gave the reasons, the arguments for and against,
and I said, “Overall, I think Ford is your best choice.” I think George H.W.
Bush was being pushed by a lot of congressmen and I said Ford is most
acceptable to both parties and all these things he could do for you. And I sent
it over there and I got a phone call from Al. He said, “The old man wants
Connally.” I said, “Well, if the old man wants Connally, take Connally. But
I’m sending you a memo with the reasons why I think Ford would be the
better choice. But if the old man wants him, take him.”

Smith: Was confirmability the dominant factor?

Buchanan: I have to think that was it because the old man wanted Connally. He really
did. He loved John Connally. He thought Connally was phenomenal.

Smith: I don’t know if you heard Robert Byrd told Tom Korologos, who told us,
when he went up there and [Byrd] pointed down and he said, “If you send
down Connally’s name, there’ll be blood on that floor.”

Buchanan: Well, I think that was what convinced the president that he couldn’t get it
through. And Ford would get through and only had a little problem with the
$200 in cash, I guess, for the year, whatever he’d taken out in checks and
stuff. If you read the testimony, I think there was a problem there.
Smith: Would you call it a reluctant choice on Nixon’s part?

Buchanan: No, Connally was his preferred choice. Clearly, if he wasn’t going to get his preferred choice, Jerry Ford’s the one he would’ve liked to have taken. He was Chowder & Marching, he was a friend, and he would be consistent with Nixon’s foreign policy. What was it that Nixon said to Rockefeller? Did he talk about Bush?

Smith: Now, there’s a famous scene and I believe it’s true because I’ve had reason to check into it.

Buchanan: “Can you imagine seeing Jerry Ford in this chair?”

Smith: Yeah.

Buchanan: No, wait a minute now. You say Jerry Ford.

Smith: Yeah, that’s the story and it got back to Ford.

Buchanan: Now, I heard that story, but it might’ve been that I heard it about Bush. I’m not sure because I didn’t get it firsthand, but I’ve heard this story. You might be right. It might’ve been “Can you imagine Jerry Ford sitting in this chair?”

Smith: To me, that’s just Nixon stroking Nelson’s ego.

Buchanan: Right. Nixon stroking Nixon’s, too.

Smith: Yeah.

Buchanan: That you and I are big players.

Smith: Well, remember when he said, “There are three or four people who understand the use of power - me, John Connally, and, I guess, Nelson.”

Buchanan: Right. What did he call Connally? He used the term ‘big’, of course he mentioned the ‘big play’, and he always mentioned that. But there was another term about Connally was these people were larger than these other people.

Smith: Someone was directed to go to the Treasury Department with a personal message that there’s some meeting the next day and the president would
really like to have the secretary there. And they thought it was pretty nice that
he was sending a personal invitation. And Connally says, “You’re very nice
gentleman and it’s nice to meet you, but you just tell the president when he
wants me to attend a meeting, he can call me.” I wonder if that kind of brass
plated self-assurance was one of the things that really appealed to Nixon.

Buchanan: It really is. It’s undeniable. John Connally was the ‘Big Man’. Connally had
delivered Texas for Humphrey. He’d been Secretary of the Navy and
Governor of Texas for three terms and he was a big, independent tough man.
And this is one thing I really admired about Nixon. Nixon constantly looked
for people who were bigger than him in the areas they knew. He once told
me, “Pat, I want a national security advisor who can teach me something. Not
one I have to teach something.” And I think that was why Henry Kissinger
was picked. He had no problems bringing in Pat Moynihan. Irving Kristol
was a terrific fellow and he had him in for dinner. And Connally was a big
player. He wanted all those big people around him which was the sign of a
strong man, I think. And it was said of John Connally that he not only
surrounded himself with smaller people, but little people, physically. My
friend, Mickey Gardiner, I grew up with, was about five feet high. He didn’t
have the big folks around him.

Smith: Let me ask you. There’s always friction between presidents and vice
presidents or more specifically between their staffs. There is built in
resentment. And Ford is put in this unique position; in many ways, he’s
walking a tightrope. And he spends a lot of time out of town. What were the
views that people held inside the White House, particularly as it became more
and more embattled, toward the vice president and his defense of the
president?

Buchanan: I think they felt Ford was loyal and Ford was supportive of the president and
he was out there defending the president, quite frankly, when it was getting
tougher and tougher to be out there and to be credibly defending the president.
So, I didn’t get that. I got that Ford was a loyal soldier up until the final days
when it was impossible to go out and say certain things and where their
interests clearly parted. But I’ve always thought Ford was a loyal guy. I mean, his staff was something else.

Smith: Are we talking about Hartmann in particular?

Buchanan: Hartmann in particular.

Smith: What was it about Hartmann that was so polarizing?

Buchanan: Well, Hartmann was considered a leaker. He was considered someone who had lines to the press. And he was someone who was considered a well-poisoner.

Smith: At what point does the line between being protective of your boss cross over into being possessive of your boss, because that became a real issue?

Buchanan: I don’t know about his relationship with Ford. But Bill Moyers interviewed me and he asked me on the show what did I think of Gerald Ford as a potential president. I said, “Well, Gerald Ford’s a good man, solid man” stuff like that, “but nobody can match Richard Nixon for his knowledge of foreign policy.” So that was taken and Brokaw used it and [it was] taken as dumping on Ford. And it was all up in the networks and I felt badly because I liked Ford. So it was at that point I said, “You know, Mr. Vice President, I want to send you a copy of the memo I sent to the president” which was the memo recommending Ford for V.P. So, to heal the breach that was inadvertent - I was just trying to praise the old man in saying the old man was indispensible, not that Ford wasn’t. But I’ve always looked upon Hartmann as a well-poisoner.

Smith: Can you pinpoint a moment when you concluded that it was over?

Buchanan: Sure. I was at Camp David that Sunday. I went up there, was called up there, and it’s in the Woodward-Bernstein second book.

Smith: Had the Supreme Court ruled on the tapes?

Buchanan: Oh, the tapes had gone, as a matter of fact, the House had been voting. What that was, the last week, the beginning of the final week when you knew it was over. I’d assumed we were going to go down the road to the Senate vote and
we would lose, quite frankly. I assumed it. But, the certain sign of death was when(?) went up to Camp David with Al Haig and Pat Buchanan and Jim St. Clair and Ray Price and Ron Ziegler and Steve Bull was back in the White House. It had to do with tapes, we wanted Bull to check a tape and it was the tape of June 23rd. Nixon had asked for it and heard it and then sent the tape back and said, “We’re not giving up any more tapes.” And, we got the tape of the 23rd. That was the one where it looked like Nixon had knowledge early on, and we knew when that hit that would be fatal.

So, we had to decide what to do and the decision was taken up there and something I sort of urged was, “Look, this tape, we don’t want the old man resigning right now. What to do is you just drop the tape. Boom. And the tape will blow a hole in the bottom of the ship and we’ll be gone by the end of the week.” And that’s what we did. On Monday, we dropped the tape. I remember, Al Haig asked me to brief him, he sent me around to brief and talk to a lot of people. And I went into Dean Burch’s office and Timmons was there and a couple other guys and I related what I’m relaying to you at much greater length and when I finished, Dean Burch looked at me and said, “Jesus Christ. Get the scotch.”

Smith: What other response can he give?

Buchanan: And we started drinking.

Smith: But, presumably - to back up - when the Court ruled on the tapes, that set in motion this irreversible—

Buchanan: This is why the firing of Archie Cox, and what I urged him to do was basically fire Archibald Cox, burn the tapes, get rid of all the tapes except the subpoenaed tapes, the seven of them at the time, whatever it is, those tapes, get rid of all those except your Brezhnev tapes and all your national security tapes that are important for your memoirs and all that and for the foreign policy. Get rid of that - in effect, cut your arm off, let it go and then get up and away from this whole thing. Then let them go and do what they want to do, but don’t give them any more. And this is what has always, always bothered me and bothers me to this day. The old man could be so
decisive…that he was not decisive there to just do it. And, I think if he’d have done it, sure we would’ve taken a hit, but at least it might’ve been the last firestorm. Instead, you had one after another after another and you kept bleeding and bleeding and bleeding. So, that’s what we took eighteen months.

Smith: It’s incredible. Can you imagine in today’s media climate Watergate going on for two years?

Buchanan: No, you can’t. Because all you had were the networks then. But I will say there were a lot of White House limos outside the Mayflower Hotel at 10:30 getting a *Washington Post*.

Smith: You may be in a better position to answer this question than anyone else, because one of the things we’ve come back to over and over again in this series is the transition and how difficult it was on both sides. Frankly, for the Nixon White House folks who stayed around to be meshed - first of all, to go through this experience. After the Ford swearing in, there’s a receiving line and a reception down in the State Dining Room and people say that you could see the Nixon people just kind of peel off. Again, it’s perfectly understandable.

Buchanan: I don’t even remember going to it.

Smith: Okay.

Buchanan: I wasn’t there.

Smith: You were obviously at the President’s farewell.

Buchanan: I was at the farewell, but I didn’t go in and get a chair. Everybody went in early. I was standing, I think, right behind the cameras focused on Nixon, but I saw the whole thing. And I went outside and saw him go off in the helicopter. And a nice lady from the *Washington Star* as I was walking back to my office said, “How do you feel?” But it was very tough. I don’t recall going to the function. I might’ve been there, but I just don’t recall it.
Smith: I assume there were lots of people wondering “Am I going to have a job next week?”

Buchanan: Well, I went to Al Haig and said, “I want to leave.” I said, “You know, look. I’m tired. I’ve had eight and a half years with the old man and it’s time for me to go.” And he said, “Stick around for awhile.”

Smith: Did Al Haig intend to stick around for awhile?

Buchanan: Well, I think he did. He did say we can teach the Ford people a few things and I was amenable to that.

Smith: What did you want to teach them?

Buchanan: Well, frankly, I was not fond of the staff, in particular, Hartmann. So, I stayed around. I did a briefing book for him and a briefing book or two for Ford. They’ve probably got them up at the Library. One of them, I think, I wrote about he should take a hard line on New York City on the Bailout which didn’t work out that well.

Smith: It did initially.

Buchanan: And we sort of knew the pardon was coming. You know, let me tell you a story. I didn’t have it hard, but I was over talking to Jerry terHorst and I said, “Look, this amnesty thing for the Vietnam thing,” I said, “is a terrible mistake the President’s making.” It’d divide the country and the whole thing and heck, the war wasn’t even over, I mean, for the Vietnamese. And terHorst said something which tends to undercut his stance later where he resigned. He said to me in almost direct terms, “Well, we’ve got to do this one before we do the other one.” I took that to mean they were going to do the amnesty before we pardoned Nixon, but this was in late August, because I was up in Canada when the pardon came down. I was on one of these American Council of Young Political Leaders meetings, you know, with Canadian parliamentarians and all of that. So, that told me that it was in the works.

Smith: Mel Laird—

Buchanan: Right. He’s still with us, isn’t he?
Smith: Mel Laird, of course, loves Ford, but Mel had his own way of taking care of the pardon. He was going to get a bipartisan congressional delegation to go down to the White House and, in effect, petition the president to do this. Now, the question I have is—

Buchanan: To do what?

Smith: To pardon Nixon.

Buchanan: Oh, he was? Okay.

Smith: The question I have is, in the supercharged political climate at that point, wouldn’t any trial balloon have been shot down before it got above the trees? I mean, was there any way to prepare the country for this?

Buchanan: I don’t think so. You could’ve had a big discussion of it over a long period of time, but I think the president did it the right way. I remember telling him as I was leaving that, “History’s going to vindicate the decision you’ve made in pardoning the old man.”

Smith: Really?

Buchanan: I did. I told him that right there. And by that time, of course, he wanted me and he wanted us all out after the pardon. It was a free fire zone on the Nixon people in there, you know, because he really wanted them out. Haig was moved out. Hartmann was moved in and then Hartmann was gone and Rumsfeld came in. And we laughed, we said, “We’ve got to keep McLaughlin here because after him, us.”

Smith: That’s interesting because, Rumsfeld, before he actually took the job, right at the transition, he came back from Belgium or wherever he was. His advice to Ford was “clean house,” that you have to establish a break and so on. Ford was reluctant to do that for a number of reasons, including the fact that you needed some continuity; there were a lot of very talented people in the Nixon White House. And he thought it was unfair to tar everyone with the Watergate brush.

Buchanan: Right.
Smith: Which raises the question, can you be too nice to be president?

Buchanan: Well, Richard Nixon said, and he quoted Asquith’s famous quote, “A Prime Minister’s got to be a good butcher.” Asquith told Churchill this when Churchill became the First Lord of the Admiralty. And he said, “There are several who must be pole axed now” and Asquith went and did it. I think Nixon attributed it to Disraeli or someone. It may have been Disraeli first, but it was certainly Asquith. I agree with that, but let me say - this is not because Nixon had the most competent White House staff I’ve ever seen, especially a lot of guys in the first term who were out of there. But even in the second term, it was far more – I mean, we’d gone through national campaigns. We’d run the White House. We’d had national experience. Ford’s guys were basically Hill staff; they weren’t national staff. So, his decision was probably right, but there were some good people he should’ve kept on. Other people were too visibly connected with Nixon like me, and, by then, probably Al Haig, and so that would’ve been the wise thing.

But to transition, a fairly rapid transition, but not a butchering. I think a butchery would be a terrible mistake because, you’re right, a lot of us would’ve felt, “Look, he didn’t win this presidency. We did. We won it twice and who are these guys that are here and saying, ‘Get out of your offices’?” And there was a feeling of that. I remember that Korologos came in the day after the pardon. The pardon was on a Sunday, I believe, and on Monday, Ford had been at 75% with what was called ‘the toasted English muffin’ phase of his presidency. All of a sudden, this gigantic firestorm - all over the country, every reporter, columnist, and journalist. “This is unprecedented. This is a ‘deal’.” And Korologos came into the senior staff meeting and said, “Hey, you Ford people, welcome to the NFL!”

Smith: I can hear him say it. Can’t you also hear Rumsfeld telling him to fire everyone?

Buchanan: Let me tell you a story about Rumsfeld. I went over there. Rumsfeld and I had been buddies and friends. I was one guy that got along with him, had no rivalry, no competition or competitiveness which he had with a lot of other people. I went over to him and told him, “Look, I don’t’ want to stay here. I
really don’t. I’ve worked for the old man. I’ve been working every weekend. I’m really beat. So, I’ll tell you what. What about me going off the premises November 15th and off the payroll December 15th?” In other words, I’d have four weeks of vacation. And he said, “What about off the premises October 15th and off the payroll November 15th?” I said, “Okay.”

Smith: Where you going to be the ambassador to South Africa?

Buchanan: Well, let me tell you about that. Haig called me over. And, again, as I say, I was willing to work with Al because Al was a buddy of mine and we’d been together. I’d worked with him and “Look, whatever you want to do, Al. Okay. But I’m not long-term here.” And so, he called me over then and I said, “I’m going.” And he said, “Would you like an embassy?” I said, “An embassy?” I’d always wanted to be an ambassador to NATO. Never got it in my life, even under Reagan. But I said, “Gee, that sounds interesting.” And I think he had three embassies. He said, “Okay, what about Vienna?” I said, “Al, Vienna’s a fairly expensive place. I’d been a newspaperman and I’d been a staff guy and I can’t afford Vienna. I can’t do it.” And he said, “What about South Africa?” And I’d been studying South Africa, writing about it in St. Louis, the whole apartheid thing. That was exciting and interesting and I knew the South Africans. So, I said, “I’ll take South Africa.” And what he did was, Haig took it in and ran it through and Ford signed off. Alright? So, we’re up in Canada and the pardon hits on Sunday. And Monday morning, Spencer Oliver, who’s a friend of mine, who’s the guy who was wiretapped in Watergate, a guy I grew up with, a Democrat, you know, head of the Democratic Governor’s Conference Association. Spencer comes to me on a bus because it’s a joint thing. He and I were co-chairs of this little delegation. He says, “Hey, I understand you’re going to be ambassador to South Africa.” I said, “What?” He said, “It’s in Evans and Novak.” This is the day after the pardon. Shelley was with me and so, I say, “Shelley, get off the bus and get to the airport and get back home.” And Novak had a column in there that said something like “bloody-nosed, gut-fighter Buchanan to get embassy,” “diplomats appalled” and all this stuff. And it had been dumped out by Hartmann. He put it out there right in the firestorm of the pardon. It was just abolished, the whole idea. And I was glad it was because some of them like
Peter Flanagan had been made ambassador to Spain, I think. You can check that out. And some of the others had sort of gone forward, but this finished it off. The pardon finished it off and it was after that, you could see that the Ford people’s whole idea was ‘get rid of all of them’. After the pardon, they were under fire for the pardon, the Nixon connection, the press were after him. “Why is he still here?” And I think the Ford people were in something of a panic then to get us out.

Smith: Haig told us he had a confrontation with the President. He’d gone to the President to tell him the Secret Service had told him about Hartmann and misbehavior. We’ll leave it at that.

Buchanan: Holy smokes.

Smith: What’s that?

Buchanan: Holy smokes. I hadn’t heard that.

Smith: Yeah. Clearly, Al Haig and Robert Hartmann were put on the planet to piss each other off. I mean, to just annoy the hell out of each other.

Buchanan: Right. Let me tell you a story I’d forgot. After I think the Novak column hit and it blamed it all on Haig doing this, Novak said that he was home and Haig called him. Haig said, “I’m going to sue you for five million dollars.” And Novak said, “Al, I’m sorry. I don’t have five million dollars.”

Smith: Novak blamed Haig for the story?

Buchanan: No, Haig blamed Novak, but I knew in a second that Hartmann was behind it. But Haig called Novak. That would ensure that Haig knows exactly where this was coming from.

Smith: And, basically, Haig told us that these agents had come to him with complaints about Hartmann’s drinking and more.

Buchanan: Right. Hartmann was a heavy drinker.

Smith: And he goes to the President and he says, “Look, I’ve seen how a president can be brought down by staff.” Almost a sort of ‘it’s you or me’. And I can
see Ford saying, “Al, you have to let me handle this.” And the way Haig constructs the conversation, he then said, “Well, I know now. That’s an answer. I know you don’t want me to stay.”

Buchanan: Al said that?

Smith: Yeah.

Buchanan: In other words, it was the choice between the two of them?

Smith: In effect.

Buchanan: Yeah. Well, you know, let me go back. Hartmann was one of the individuals when I went to work with Nixon up there in ’66, ’67, and ’68, he would tell me to go see people in Washington and meet with them. Hartmann lived, didn’t he, off Massachusetts Avenue just down the hill inside Maryland? Because, I think I went to his house and spent several hours with him. A sort of caustic, rough character and he drank and we were drinking in the afternoon, I think, on a Sunday or something. But, clearly, Nixon then had respect for him and, you know, I didn’t feel any hostility to him. He was another one of these characters that Nixon told me I really ought to get to know.

Smith: That’s fascinating.

Buchanan: Yeah, but when he got in there, I don’t know what it was about Hartmann, but it clearly was a mistake on my part in that Moyers interview. Moyers fed it to Brokaw to make it look like I’m trashing the vice president of the United States.

Smith: Hartmann saw enemies everywhere. I think Hartmann felt he had to compensate for a boss who saw no enemies anywhere. Again, it fed into that protective possessiveness.

Buchanan: Right.

Smith: Do you think Haig had it as a goal before leaving - whenever he left - to secure a pardon?
Buchanan: You know, it wouldn’t be based on hard information, but I would certainly say yeah.

Smith: I’ve often wondered if the real story of the pardon is not what anyone said, but what they didn’t say, that kind of non-verbal language that politicians have.

Buchanan: I’m sure it’s not certitude based on fact, or that I’ve got a piece of paper, but I am sure that Al Haig wanted to make sure Richard Nixon was pardoned and he would do what he could to bring that about and he would work assiduously to bring it about.

Smith: Beyond that, it’d be sheer speculation as to whether that originated with the President himself.

Buchanan: Richard Nixon?

Smith: Right or whether it was something that was done by Haig on his own.

Buchanan: I think Haig would certainly do it on his own and my guess is he and the old man were in touch, too. But I don’t know any knowledge of that at all.

Smith: It’s very interesting. Haig told us he never listened to the smoking gun tape or the other tapes.

Buchanan: No, we heard them. Well, we got word from Steve Bull. We were at Camp David and we said, “Bull, what does it say?” and things like that. We had enough to conclude. And what the conclusion was that a) Nixon had heard the tape, b) he had shot down sending the tape on to Jaworski after having heard the tape, and c) for months after that, all of us were stating what we were told was the truth, which was that Nixon had no knowledge of this thing before a certain period, whereas the tape suggested he did, which was destructive of the President’s credibility. And that’s what happened when you dropped the tape. Everybody said he lied. And that was the thing that dropped the bottom out of his 30% support or 25 or whatever he had.

Smith: It seems like all roads lead back to Fred Buzhardt. Laird said Buzhardt, who’d been his counsel at the Pentagon—
Pat Buchanan

Buchanan: Fred Buzhardt was at West Point with Haig in ’46.

Smith: Laird somewhat reluctantly comes back into the White House as part of this larger defense effort. He’s there about a month, and he gets a call from Buzhardt who’s been listening to the tapes. And, basically, warns Laird, “Be careful what you say because the president’s in it up to his neck.” That’s Laird’s version. Laird wrestled with his conscience and decided to stay on. Subsequently, when we talked to Haig he says, “Oh, no, I never listened to any tapes.” He said, “Fred Buzhardt gave me some very good advice, which was ‘Don’t ever be alone in the room with a tape’.” Presumably, that’s the throwback to the missing 18 ½ minutes. Do you have a theory about the missing 18 ½ tapes?

Buchanan: Well, you know, I have theories, but I shouldn’t use them. I’ve joked around with Bernstein about it in a bar and I was kidding around about it and he put it in the book and it probably hurt Rose Mary Woods, the joke did. And I had no knowledge of it and it’s one of the things I really regret because she was a great buddy of mine and a great loyalist of the old man’s. So, no, I really don’t know how it happened. I don’t.

Smith: You left the White House when?

Buchanan: I was off the premises, I think, November 15th. Oh, no, I was off the premises October 15th. I’m sorry.

Smith: October 15th.

Buchanan: Right.

Smith: Per Rumsfeld’s suggestion.

Buchanan: Right. And I told the story when I was talking to Cheney and he said, “Yeah, that would be Don.”

Smith: Rockefeller went to his grave convinced that it was Rumsfeld that did him in. Remember who deep-sixed George Bush at the CIA at the same time that the vice president was replaced and all of that?
Buchanan: But didn’t Rumsfeld get rid of Schlesinger and then get himself in Defense and all of that?

Smith: Rumsfeld insists that he didn’t want to go to the Defense Department at all. I remember asking Cheney, “Did Ford find it difficult to fire people?” and he said, “Not Schlesinger.” Colby came in and Colby was a gentleman about the whole thing. Ford offered him an embassy and he thanked the president very profusely. Didn’t take it, but he took it in a classy way.

Buchanan: Can I tell you a quick interrupting story?

Smith: Yeah.

Buchanan: I left the White House and I was going to write a book that was about conservative votes, liberal victories. I got a little contract of fifteen grand for it. And I was going to start writing a column. So, I went out to this store. It was a store in Bethesda where you bought supplies. You know, you get all these supplies like you’re going to school. You get all your papers and things where you’re going to be working on your own. And in there was Bill Colby and he was doing the same thing. He went out at the same time from the CIA.

Smith: I’ll tell you a footnote. There was a real streak of paranoia in Rockefeller. He literally believed that Bill Colby was a Soviet agent.

Buchanan: _______ the guy was some CIA cadre thing. They took care of my friend Angleton.

Smith: In the Reagan challenge in ’76, Nixon goes to China the week of the New Hampshire primary.

Buchanan: Right.

Smith: Do you have any sense of what the Nixon-Ford relationship was after the pardon?

Buchanan: When I went to see Nixon around Labor Day, it probably would’ve been after. What day was the pardon?

Smith: September 8th.
Buchanan: Okay, I wonder if it was before then, but sometime around then, I went out there to talk to Nixon and he was in terrible, terrible shape.

Smith: Both physically and emotionally?

Buchanan: Not physically then. That’s before the phlebitis. But emotionally he was. We had dinner with him and the Mrs. and Shelley and I were up there in that room of his, but he was in terrible shape. I don’t recall him saying anything derogatory about Gerald Ford then. This might’ve been before the pardon. But, anyhow, Nixon wanted me to get involved writing his book and stuff and I didn’t want to do it. So, no, but I want to get this in about the break with Ford. I went to see Ford and he told me something like, “I think you ought to go out to the private sector.” It wasn’t a fight, but it was quite clear that he felt I should be moving along that path. I’d intended to, so it didn’t make any difference to me and I think that’s the time that I told him that he’d done a great thing with the pardon and that history would vindicate him. But, he called me back in, I guess it was a year later. I was a journalist, a columnist and it was right after John Paul Stevens had been nominated and Stevens got a unanimous vote, I think.

Smith: He was never asked about abortion.

Buchanan: Yes. And he got a unanimous vote and Ford had a meeting with columnists and I was one of them then. I came in and we each got to ask him one question. And I’m sure there’s a transcription of it, but he said there that John Paul Stevens was the kind of appointee that he would be making if he ran again and were president again. And I said to myself, “Did we come all the way up the Hill for this?” And, at that point, I went out of the meeting and I called Sears and said, basically, “I’m with your guy. I’m with Reagan.” Even though I liked Reagan, admired him, and conservatively much closer to him naturally. I was not with him because I liked Ford.(?) Ford was a good guy. He was a good man. I thought he was doing a good job as best he could, but I’ll never forget when he had that statement, “I don’t want a honeymoon, I want a long, happy marriage with the Congress.” And the Congress of the United States is ripping everything apart, and he wants a good, long marriage.
Smith: In some ways you can trace the trajectory of the Ford presidency as two and a half years of unlearning some of his congressional instincts or, at least, learning the difference between Congress and being an executive - above all, occupying the Oval Office. He said what really hurt about the ’76 election was he felt he’d just mastered the job when he lost it.

Buchanan: Right.

Smith: Did Reagan make him a better candidate on balance?

Buchanan: Sure. Sure. The Reagan challenge really woke them up. I mean, I think Reagan made some big mistakes. They oversold New Hampshire. They’re going to win it. For Heaven’s sakes, they should’ve said, “We’re going to do the best we can coming in to New Hampshire against the sitting president.” But Reagan ran a dead heat. It was considered a loss and he collapsed in Florida, but that’s another story. That was a good campaign. Eventually, it was, but I think there’s no doubt that Gerald Ford was a better candidate. I was at the convention with the Reagan folks. I was up there. They didn’t pay my way or anything, but I was sitting up there pretty much in front of Reagan. And I do think when Ford waved him down and Reagan came down there and stole that convention, a lot of folks said, “We nominated the wrong guy.” And, of course, Reagan would not take that VP.

Smith: To this day, you hear all these versions, but I am convinced because Cheney has said it, a number of other people have said it, people close to Reagan have said it, they’ve quoted William French Smith as saying it at the time - “Make it crystal clear we will meet afterwards, but the precondition for that meeting is that the vice presidency not be raised.”

Buchanan: This is what I’ve heard. I’ve heard that Reagan said, “I don’t want to meet with him, because he’ll offer me the vice presidency and I’ll probably take it.” And he didn’t want to meet with him and he didn’t want the vice presidency. And you almost had to have Reagan on that ticket. I mean, given the way Reagan ran, the closeness of it, it was a natural. It was almost like an Obama-Hillary ticket.
Smith: There are Reagan people, to this day, who say, “Well, if Ford had only offered him the vice presidency…” Other Reagan people say he made it clear he didn’t want the vice presidency.

Buchanan: Reagan didn’t want it. He did not want it. Everything I’ve heard, he did not want it. He was just afraid he was such a pushover that he would take it. Ronald Reagan is a very nice guy. That’s one of his problems - if you asked him, “Can you do this for the cause?”

Smith: During the Reagan years, did you hear from the president anything about Ford? Derogatory or otherwise?

Buchanan: I shouldn’t say. It was pretty funny. Ford had the reputation from falling down the stairs. We were at Geneva for the first summit. We were at an early breakfast with the President and the staff were talking to him and saying, “Here’s what you do, sir.” But he just wanted to be with the boys before he headed over there. He, of course, did magnificently with no coat in zero degrees - Gorbachev with this 1950’s fedora on and overcoat. And we were in a house and when you went to go down the stairs, the second floor was awfully low in terms of the stairs. You’d have to duck your head coming down from the second floor to the first floor. So, we had a sign right on the overhang that said, ‘Watch your head, Jerry Ford’.

Smith: The funny thing is, Ford probably would’ve laughed at that.

Buchanan: He would’ve laughed at it. But I don’t think Reagan bore any animosity toward Gerald Ford. He certainly didn’t by the time I got there. I think there was contention, I think, between the First Lady and Betty. I think that was there. But, by the time I got there, it was Reagan’s second term. Basically when I went into the White House, no, they bore no animosity. I wouldn’t hear anything. I would be surprised to hear it. Gerald Ford had been a pretty good guy, a pretty good president. He beat Reagan fair and square. There were unforced errors on Reagan’s part. Otherwise, he would’ve won the nomination. Reagan was probably better off not having won the nomination. Carter set him up and I think the country was ready to change and Carter had a good strong hold in the south. He beat Ford in ten out of eleven states there,
didn’t he, except in Virginia. So, by then, I bet Reagan would say, “I’m glad I lost that and I’m glad I lost ’68, too!”
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Smith: What does it feel like to be back in this room?

Jenkins: It’s a wonderful feeling in a way, you know, my memories. I’m ambivalent. I’m sorry, but what comes to all of us. And he was a big part of my life for a relatively short period of time. Always the kindest person, thoughtful. My wife and I always said, “Wouldn’t you like to have them for next door neighbors?”

Smith: How did you become acquainted?

Jenkins: Well, I was active in the golf world and I was paired with him the first time he played in the Bob Hope Classic. In fact, I would take Bob’s place for one or two days. So we played Bermuda Dunes and that’s the first time I met him.

Smith: Now, was that after his presidency?

Jenkins: Yes. After his presidency, he came out and he played the Crosby tournament. Then he came down here and played in the Hope. He was a great competitor. He didn’t frolic around. He wanted to make all the putts.

Smith: Did his language reflect his occasional frustration on the course?

Jenkins: Oh, I’ve seen some explosive tendencies, which we all have from time to time.

Smith: Did you know he had a temper? And he had spent a lot of effort controlling it. Tell me about it.

Jenkins: The one I remember most vividly was down in Mazatlan, Mexico. The Betty Ford Center was establishing a unit down there at the behest of a very wealthy Mexican who had had his wife and his children in the Betty Ford Center up here. We went out to play golf and I had brought a friend of mine, Glenn Davis, the old Army halfback. Jerry Ford loved football and so they got along famously. We got out on the course and he didn’t play well. And the paparazzi in Mexico, we found, was just unbelievable. He finally lost his temper, but he got over it right away.
Smith: Did he have a sense of humor?

Jenkins: Yeah, he did, he had a good sense of humor, I always thought. Particularly if you were on a subject like golf or sports. He loved to recount his Navy days.

Smith: Really? What did he talk about?

Jenkins: Well, the story he told over again - near the end of his life - we’d go to lunch maybe once a month with him – he was a young ensign on a fleet carrier and they got caught in a typhoon. If you recall it, there was a book called *Halsey’s Typhoon*. And he came out from the officer’s quarters at midnight and they were in the midst of this typhoon and he almost washed overboard. A young member of the crew, you know how you get metal, he grabbed that and the crew member threw him back on board. He said, “I came pretty close to losing it all right there.” And he got a big kick out of Bob Hope, which everybody did.

Smith: Was Hope funny?

Jenkins: Yeah, people ask me that all the time. I had a thirty year relationship with him and I think of times – we’re now going to have the 50th anniversary of the Ryder Cup matches at our course down here. Well, there are only four courses west of the Mississippi that ever hosted the Ryder Cup. Bob was the non-playing captain of the American team. Lord Brabazon was the non-playing captain of the British team. So they both got up to say a few words and Brabazon said something about hiring unemployed comedians. And Bob said, “Yes, it’s true, I was born in England, but I left in a very short time as soon as I realized I had little chance to become king.”

Reagan would call him and ask him to get his writers to send him jokes that would be appropriate for some function.

Smith: I wonder what the president thought watching Hope in the last years which were -

Jenkins: Very sad. It was awful. And I think they learned a lesson. It was just not good.

Smith: Was it that he just couldn’t quit the stage?

Jenkins: Oh no, he was gone by then. He mentally was not functioning. He didn’t know where he was or who he was. And he was paraded around by people around him
and some of his old friends thought it was a tragic error, including this one. He knew.

Smith: There’s a story – I think Penny, it must have been Penny – someone told me this story that tells you a lot about the both of them. That, before the very end, Hope would decide he’d want to play golf and call the president. The president would go out and they’d play one or two holes and then Hope would lie down. And the president would come back and then he would go back and get him when Hope was ready. Does that ring a bell at all?

Jenkins: Yeah, he had a nurse, a male nurse, with him most of that time and the nurse would say, “Well, let’s go have a drink.” And Bob, he hadn’t had a regular drink in twenty years and they’d go in and he’d have the bartender mix a little chocolate something and hand it to Bob and that satisfied him. He was placid. And he’d been so sharp, you know, so many times. I was a young stock broker and I was fortunate enough to get Bob’s account. There was a picture taken and he was standing - he was at a party - I was seated. He had his arm around me and I said, “Would you autograph this for my office?” So it came back and it said, “It’s like hugging my money.” There were just lots of little things like that.

Smith: Go back not that long ago, maybe the 80s, when the Fords sort of were new in town. For people who haven’t been here, I mean, you think about who was around – Sinatra and Hope and obviously a lot of old Hollywood-types - Alice Faye - even Spiro Agnew – was out here. What was the place like when they first arrived?

Jenkins: Well, I can’t say I can compare it to any place like that. I mean, it seems odd to say that, but it blossomed from an arid, virtually abandoned – our family came here in 1934 when there weren’t a lot of paved roads. And it just became a haven for some of the movie crowd. They would come down here. There were gambling establishments that were illegal, but were open here – half a dozen of them. So it was a playground for them and they’d come down and get away. Then people didn’t pay a lot of attention to their hijinks, you know. But later on when the Fords came in the 80s, that was not the case. It had gotten a lot more sophisticated. But the impression I had, it was so just mind-boggling as how they plunged into every charitable thing down here. They didn’t miss anything. Hope said at one of the
occasions, he says, “Jerry and Betty Ford would go to the opening of a refrigerator door if they think it’ll help the community.”

Smith: What sorts of things for example?

Jenkins: Well, the Living Desert, they would come to dinner, which is a little wildlife…and the Hope Classic Ball, they were always there. We had a lot of different ones. They didn’t miss any of them.

Smith: Is there a season when a lot of these charitable events are concentrated?

Jenkins: Oh yeah, it starts after the first of the year, ends at Easter. It’s now _________, much more so, but for years, that was the season. Nobody came before Christmas. You stayed home at Christmas and came out after Christmas and everything exploded. The Hope Classic put it on the national scene and has been a wonderful contributor to charity.

Smith: I remember being surprised at the number of folks, when the president died, who overnight went through St. Margaret’s Church. There were close to 60,000 people who went through there. It brought home how deep the roots were that they had sunk in this area. That they were more than just celebrities you read about...

Jenkins: Well, yeah. You know, this is not original to me, but the people would constantly say to me, “They’re just so unassuming.” We would look forward to the occasions when they would ask us to the house for dinner. We would ask them for dinner. On one occasion, and this is illustrative of my point, they didn’t respond right away which they ordinarily did, so we became concerned. But there was no need for it because Betty picked up the phone and said, “We have a new puppy and we can’t housebreak her. We don’t want to leave the house. You come over here.”

Smith: Tell me about Mrs. Ford. You must have gotten to know her well.

Jenkins: I had great admiration for her because we sort of went through the birth of the Betty Ford Center together.

Smith: Tell me about that.

Jenkins: When they first embarked on that, obviously there’s always some doubters about the location and people, it had a certain stigma to it, which she erased fortunately,
quickly. She brought Dr. Pursch, who was her guiding light, as you know. He kicked it off with a wonderful speech I’ll never forget. He said, “Trying to send an alcoholic to a psychiatrist is like sending a jellyfish to an orthopedic surgeon.” Anyway, Dr. West was another marvelous person, and he developed the curriculum along with John Schwartzlose. I was liaison because I’d been at the Eisenhower Medical Center since its beginning and we wanted to be sure that they didn’t make any egregious errors that would affect both of us, and they didn’t. And Betty would listen. She would listen to the people John sent and the people in leadership capacity and learn and do it. She never asked for any credit for that, but we all sensed that. We knew that we were very fortunate to have that kind of leadership.

Smith: She was never just a name on the door.

Jenkins: No, no.

Smith: And one sensed he was so proud of her for what she had achieved.

Jenkins: Oh yeah. And he quit drinking. Oh, he was, definitely.

Smith: There are stories I have been told. I guess there was an alumni event…It was not unusual for him to be on the grill cooking hotdogs in that kind of behind the scenes involvement in her center.

Jenkins: He was very conscious of everything that went on over there. I’m from a farm family and we used to say, “The best fertilizer is the owner’s shadow.” And that’s what Jerry Ford was at the Betty Ford Center.

Smith: That’s a great line.

Did he talk politics?

Jenkins: He did, but he never instigated that kind of a talk. The majority of our conversations – he told a story about, which I’d often seen him refer to was when he played in the East-West All-Star game. He was not the starting center, but the starting center got hurt in the first five minutes of the game, so he played the rest of the game. Then they paid for his trip back on the train and they sent him to Los Angeles and he got to go through a Hollywood movie set. And when he got back to Michigan, Arch Ward, who sponsored the college all-star game, said, “I’d like for you to play.”
Now, he got paid $150 for each of those, which he saved for his first year in law school, Yale. He really needed that money. He was most proud of his football ability. He told me a story about playing in a driving rainstorm at the time and at the end, he said, “I was totally exhausted sitting in the locker room and Fielding H. Yost, who was an icon in football.” “Hurry up” Yost was the coach at Michigan- he came in, and he had retired, but he came in and put his arm around Jerry and said, “That’s the best game I’ve ever seen a center play.” He loved that.

Smith: That’s great. I’d not heard that.

Did he have a lot of friends?

Jenkins: Oh yeah. Pretty hard not to like Jerry Ford. Or else you got to believe in Santa Claus. Yeah, he had a lot of friends and I frankly don’t know his political friendships and enemies where he spent a lifetime. I would not be an authority on that. But in the local community, they were just idolized because they just never turned anything down.

Smith: How often did he play golf?

Jenkins: Well, he played two or three times a week. Quite a bit. Played in the afternoon, played nine holes a lot of the time. You know, when he first came down, and he hit the ball a long way. He had a bad reputation that was undeserved. His short game was not particularly good. If you can make those short games work, you can make a watch. That’s the part of the game that’s so frustrating, I think, for all of us.

Smith: It’s funny, I just saw yesterday, Golf Digest came out ranking the presidents as golfers. There were fifteen presidents who were golfers. The top three in their estimation were JFK, Ike, and Ford.

Jenkins: You know, I never played with JFK. I played with Nixon and I played with Ford and I played with Reagan. That’s not much of a judgment, but I know Bob Hope always said JFK was the best and you never saw anything in the press about him playing golf.

Smith: No, you didn’t. Well, because I think by that time, think how many Democrats had tried to make it into an issue with Eisenhower.
Jenkins: Oh yeah, they beat up on Eisenhower for having a putting green.

Smith: Now, Ike came out here in the winter, didn’t he?

Jenkins: Oh yeah, I was fortunate enough to be president of the club that he stayed at. He and Mamie were very gracious, they were wonderful to us. We were considerably younger, but they’d invite us over and he would barbecue in the backyard.

Smith: I often thought that Eisenhower was Ford’s kind of president.

Jenkins: Yeah, I think so.

Smith: Someone for whom really blatant partisanship was a – he didn’t have any time for that.

Jenkins: No, he didn’t.

Smith: Pragmatist.

Jenkins: And you know, one time Lyndon Johnson came out to visit Ike and Ike was getting in pretty bad shape so we were playing a little 3-par course over in Palm Springs. In fact, he’d played the day before and gotten a hole-in-one with Lyndon Johnson. So we were driving over to play it. Freeman Gosden, I was telling over at Amos(?), “Mr. President, would you mind telling us what you told Lyndon?” And Ike said, “No, not at all. He never did a damn thing I told him to do.”

Smith: President Ford took some heat particularly early on after he left the White House for going on boards and “commercializing” the presidency. What’s your take on all of that?

Jenkins: My general feeling is he paid his dues. I think it’s just almost silliness, for instance, for the three major automobile corporations’ heads to catch hell because they came down in a jet. I mean, do you want some guy that can’t afford the train to be running General Motors and Ford? These guys have proven their worth and in particular our presidents have. Now, to give an example that just makes my blood boil even now, I went to high school with a young fellow down here whose mother was a Cherokee Indian and his father was a Tobacco Road guy. We played football together and he got in the Naval V-12 unit and, he wasn’t a student, but he got his degree from USC and he went into the Navy and seen ships. Forty years later, he
says, “Paul, this is Bill McGonagle.” I says, “Gee, Bill.” He said, “I’m retired from the Navy and I’d like to come over and play golf with ya.” I said, “Great. We’ll have some lunch.” Well, he walked into the room and I looked and there was a little…and I said, “Is that what I think it is, a Medal of Honor?” And he said, “Yeah.” He’d been captain of an intelligence ship, badly wounded, and saved the ship, go back to Malta, and the story goes on and on. But I said, “What do you get for that?” He said, “Four hundred dollars a month.” Now, you know, when I look at Madonna and Britney Spears and Bill McGonagle…

Smith: Your point is well taken.

Tell me about Ford - comedy about him stumbling and being clumsy, whereas in fact as we know, he was a real natural athlete.

Jenkins: Probably the best that ever served as a president, because he was versatile, for one thing. He could ski and… No, he kind of tossed it off every time. He just considered the source. But he had a pretty good relationship with the press, generally.

Smith: He liked reporters.

Jenkins: M-hmm. Yeah, he wasn’t afraid of the give and take like some of his predecessors.

Smith: And I assume here he was pretty accessible to journalists.

Jenkins: Oh, yes. A number of times I remember him mentioning that he had to stay because he had to do an interview with Brokaw or one of those ilk.

Smith: In his later years, did he play as often?

Jenkins: No, he became very frail and weak and he was very cognizant that he shouldn’t. He had one bad scene with the, oh, he was over at the private course and he passed out. It was a hot day and playing with Jimmy Greenbaum and a couple of others. That was a warning to him, I think.

Smith: How tough was it for him to acknowledge physical limitations? Because he was, as you say, he was a very athletic guy. He loved to travel. And I often thought, around his ninetieth birthday, I think when the doctors really advised him to cut back on the travel, that that must have been rough on him.
Jenkins: I’m sure it was, but he took it pretty well. I can recall a couple of times when I said, “How are you?” and he said, “Well, I’m old!” “Oh, well, I meant how do you feel?” He said, “I feel okay, but I’m old!” Occasionally we would be at a dinner party where someone could come up to him – case in point, a society lady at the house here started badgering him a little bit at dinner about the Warren Commission. And he tolerated that pretty well and then he finally got a little tired of it and said, “Listen, we were very capable. We did our homework. We’re utterly, totally convinced, unless you have some material evidence that’s different from ours, that we made the right decision.” And she put her napkin up and… It was pretty...

Smith: I think Oliver Stone was not one of his favorite people.

Jenkins: Oh, yeah. No, no.

Smith: I only heard him disparage two people and the worst thing he could say about someone was, “He’s a bad man.”

Jenkins: Yeah.

Smith: And one of them was Gordon Liddy and the other was John Dean. And, you know, when you stop to think about it, you can understand where he was coming from.

Jenkins: I recall, now that you mention that, one time we were playing golf and I know Jimmy Carter had done something and I was irate and he said, “He’s a good man, Paul. Breathe through your nose.”

Smith: They really did become friends, didn’t they?

Jenkins: Yes, they did.

Smith: Unlikely friendship in some ways.

Jenkins: Yeah, I thought it was. But they traveled, as you said, to distant places together and those were momentous occasions.

Smith: They’d also both run against Ronald Reagan.

Jenkins: I don’t want to touch that.

Smith: I mean, that was one of the things they had in common.
Jenkins: You might’ve put a third name in there.

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

Jenkins: Yes. We had lunch at Eldorado Country Club and I think Jim Greenbaum was with us. He stayed with him pretty much, they had a standing date for lunch. I was obviously struck by how frail he was, but he was mentally lucid. He hadn’t lost a peg there.

Boy, I miss him.

Smith: What do you miss?

Jenkins: He always came with an air of fun and, you know, I was not involved in anything serious with him, so we’d talk about our kids and our dogs and football. For awhile we had a standard ten dollar bet every time Michigan went to USC, the University of Spoiled Children. But I had a lot of ten dollar bills I collected for a while there.

Smith: Did he pay up with good grace?

Jenkins: Oh, we were at a formal dinner one time, he got up and “Where was I?”, he was asking the Secret Service. He wanted to pay me the ten dollars he’d lost New Year’s Day.

Smith: It’s funny, I never saw it but people who did testify. He wasn’t thought of as an eloquent man, but he would go back most years to Michigan for the Ohio game and he would find a way to go back and give a pep talk to the team. And it’s like someone flipped a switch. A whole different voice. And people who were there, not once but multiple times, said it was extraordinary. The kids ate it up, but obviously he tapped in to something. It was a real passion.

Jenkins: In relation to that, I have to say, you asked me earlier how did I feel about his stipends from lectures afterwards. He worked at that. He became much better as time went on. It wasn’t a situation where he was just showing up to be there, he had something to say and he put it very well. He got better all the time. So, and I talk to people, I didn’t serve on any boards with him of any consequence, but he always had his homework done and he walked in there with questions and answers that he
wanted to have. It’s often given a Midwestern _______, but it’s more equivalent to, in my opinion, successful people. He had a work ethic.

Smith: He bordered on being a workaholic.

Jenkins: Yeah, he did.

Smith: I mean, you talk to people here, they worked Saturdays. He was in here part of the day Sunday as well.

Jenkins: Well, I’m sure he was probably that way in the White House, too. We had a caddy over at the club and we called him Freddy the Foot because if he liked you and you hit the ball out of bounds, he’d kick your ball back in bounds. So President Ford hit one out of bounds, we were playing over there and I saw Freddy go up and kick it. I said, “That the longest field goal you ever made?” and Freddy said, “Against the wind, it is.”

Smith: The president was willing to accept that?

Jenkins: Oh, the president knew what he was doing, yeah.

Smith: You know, there are wonderful stories about, I think up at Vail, early in the Clinton administration. President Clinton had, in fact, invited himself to play golf with the president and Arnold Palmer, who, I guess, is sort of cantankerous.

Jenkins: Can be.

Smith: Yeah. And, of course, being Bill Clinton, he played according to his own rules. And they played the whole day with lots of mulligans and Arnold Palmer was getting pretty steamed up over this. And at the end of the day, President Clinton said, “This is great. Let’s play again tomorrow.” And President Ford said, “Okay, but only if you play by the rules.”

Jenkins: And he never did that! He came out here and it was the same story. He had some hang-up that he had to shoot the low score. And, you know, Ike had a brother, Edgar, who was over at La Quinta, and Edgar was a better golfer than Ike. That preyed on Ike’s mind and Ike had a temper just like Jerry did, particularly on the golf course. He was mad at himself, but it got pretty quiet sometimes.
Smith: No clubs wrapped around trees or anything?

Jenkins: Oh no, nothing like that. In fact, they had a little thing at Eldorado Country Club. You’d make a bet for two dollars and on the ninth hole, there was a rock on the edge of the lake. And we would bet fifty dollars closest to the rock because Ike’s drive would always go right out by the rock.

Smith: To someone who’s never played the game, what is it about golf that has such appeal to people, particularly to hard-driving, hard-charging professional types?

Jenkins: I think, for one thing, it’s not a team sport, it’s all in you. And, it’s a game where you can play with one who’s not proficient. You know, do you put Pete Sampras with Charlie Parkenfarker(?) on the tennis court? Charlie’s going to wish he’d never seen him. But he could play golf and give him four strokes a side and it’s neck and neck. And it’s unique in that respect. The other area it’s unique in is, and I hope they never lose this, it’s traditionally your responsibility to play the game fairly and honestly. Instead of being an NFL lineman that said, “I didn’t do it!” Those are reasons, there are more reasons.

Smith: Is it relaxing?

Jenkins: I think so because to play well, you have to get your mind, you can’t play with any of these distractions in you. And I’ve spent a lifetime doing that.

Smith: Do you think that’s one of the reasons Ford found it so enjoyable?

Jenkins: Yeah, because, first of all, the challenge of getting better. The harder you try, the worse you do quite often in golf. It’s not a matter of trying. Everything has to click. You could look terrible in a practice and go out and play a good round of golf.

Smith: He did, on at least one occasion didn’t he, get a hole-in-one? It might not have been here, but…

Jenkins: Well, I’m sure he must have. It’d be rare to play as much as he did and not get a hole-in-one.

Smith: I see a picture of he and Steve. They played a lot in his later years, didn’t they?
Jenkins: I don’t know. I didn’t see Steve very often down here. When I did, obviously, they would go out, it was on Christmas holiday or something like that.

Smith: Did you see any of the other kids around?

Jenkins: Well, yeah, Susan all the time. Of course, she’s doing a wonderful job and I’m sure Betty’s very proud of that.

Smith: That must be, for someone to build something with your name on it in which you’ve invested so much passion, then to know the secession is taken care of in a way that you can relax.

Jenkins: Well, I’m sure, you know, she’s a worrier like all of us. She wanted to protect what she built and the ideal person was Susan. So, I think we’ve just seen the beginning of the institution.

Smith: How long were you involved with the Center? Or the Institute?

Jenkins: Well, gosh, I’m 81 years old as of Monday, so I probably got off when I was 72 or 3. From the very beginning, I was.

Smith: I’ve been told, by the way, that by more than one person that she, in effect, saved Leonard Firestone’s life.

Jenkins: Oh, no question about that in my mind. Leonard started drinking when he was fourteen years old. The gate guards to the Firestone estate would give him wine. Whew, boy, I think a part of the disease, if you want to call it that, is people have a tendency to fall off, fall back. I think it’s a part of it, sometimes. But, you know, Alcoholics Anonymous do a wonderful job. It’s interesting to me, just as a casual observer, that a very large percentage of the patients, and I saw a lot of them, are sensitive people and bright, which just enhances the tragedy of it.

Smith: And how did they react to her?

Jenkins: The patients loved her. Oh, man, you know, they couldn’t believe she’s over there working with both hands eight hours a day. Maybe that’s where Jerry got it.

Smith: I’ve been told that it was not unusual for a woman of a certain age to arrive there, resistant to being there and people at the Center would call Mrs. Ford, and whatever
the time of day she would drop whatever she was doing and go over there and sort of sit on her bed and hold her hand and walk her through her own experience.

Jenkins: It was a remarkable experience. And I’m glad I got to go through it the way I did. I went in - they have a Professional In Residence program - and I went in and Betty said, “If you’re going to be a good trustee, you’ve got to go through this and get a feel for what it’s like.” And one of the requirements is that the group has to accept you. So, I did and the group accepted me and it was an eye-opener to me, a revelation.

Smith: In what way?

Jenkins: Well, I think one of the things, for instance, was an assignment that they had to write a letter to the person that they thought was either the one they loved the most or they felt was a causative factor in them being there. And then they’d sit there with the counselor in a roundtable atmosphere and read these letters. There’s not a dry eye in the house. There was a celebrity patient in my group, and I won’t mention the name for obvious reasons, and, boy, it just tore you up. It was a football player and he sent a letter to his father, “Why didn’t you love me?”

Smith: Were the celebrities treated like everyone else by everyone else?

Jenkins: Well, first of all, there weren’t that many of them. And, yeah, they were treated like everybody else, maybe a little worse if anything, because, you know, they were a little more difficult to handle as you could well imagine.

Smith: Shame must be a part of the thing that must be overcome, I assume. The stigma, even now…

Jenkins: Oh yeah, and I’m sure that’s true in cancer, maybe to a lesser degree. That’s part of our civilization, I think, that you fight that stigma if you have one of these diseases.

Smith: You stop and think what she has accomplished, not just as First Lady. In many ways her influence is greater since leaving the White House. When you stop to think in terms of affecting ordinary people, families, actually live their lives, she’s had more impact than a lot of presidents.
Jenkins: Oh, you can take breast cancer, we haven’t even mentioned. And there’re some of our presidents that haven’t had that much effect, you’re right.

Smith: Is it really true that back then people just didn’t talk about it?

Jenkins: Oh no, they didn’t talk about it. They always had an uncle that was upstairs and nobody… I’ll tell you a cute story. We were at a dinner party, this certain fellow who had been a US ambassador to a foreign country was talking about his adult life and he had a raging affair with County Smirnoff(?). And he said, “I lived in Colorado for awhile, but” he said, “the altitude began to get to my liver.”

Smith: Did you ever see them in Vail?

Jenkins: I played in the tournament.

Smith: Oh, you did?

Jenkins: I played one time with Weiskopf and the fellow from Golf Digest and then the great Celtic basketball player John…

Smith: Havlicek.

Jenkins: Havlicek. And John had just taken up golf. But you know what, when it got down to a twelve foot putt we had to have, John made it. And it didn’t surprise any of us either. Talk about a competitor. But it was a wonderful tournament. We had a lot of fun. They had a show afterwards that Bob would always come up and do.

Smith: And the house in Vail, were you in the house?

Jenkins: Yes.

Smith: Describe that.

Jenkins: Well, it would fit in Architectural Digest, it was a beautiful home up in the pine trees there. Pretty special.

Smith: You’ve heard about the parties out there, I guess there was a deck? There were parties outside?

Jenkins: Yes.
Smith: With a view, I assume.

Jenkins: Oh, you looked down over the valley. They loved it up there. That was a big part of their life. When they came here, they definitely built a relationship with that community as well.

Smith: They were, I guess, as active in events there and causes as they were here.

Jenkins: Yes.

Smith: You know, in the last few years, their friends all urged them not to go to Vail.

Jenkins: Yes. Well, the doctors, yeah.

Smith: A number of people urged them not to go.

Jenkins: Well, you know, Jimmy Greenbaum tried to talk them out of it and he lived there right next to them. And they said, “No, it’s a big part of our lives and we understand the risk we’re taking and we still want to go.” It was a lovely place, nice parlay, here and there.

Smith: One last thing. If you were telling something to people who didn’t know him, who never knew him, or only as a name in a history book or an old grainy film clip, what should people know about Gerald Ford?

Jenkins: Well, you know, the thing I think he probably was most proud of in the long run was his ability to rally the country after the Nixon debacle. And it cost him the presidency without a shadow of a doubt and I think Jerry Ford always knew that and he took that stand.

Smith: Political courage, personal courage.

Jenkins: Yeah, courage would be a by-word.

Smith: That’s great.

When you saw him the last time, how long was that before…? Was it a few months or…do you have any idea?

Jenkins: I don’t have any idea. I think I would guess a little over a month, but it was in the spring.
Smith: When was the last time you saw Mrs. Ford?

Jenkins: At the funeral. I haven’t seen her since then.

Smith: One senses she’s still grieving.

Jenkins: Oh, I think so. They were really close. But, boy, she doesn’t have to take a back seat to anyone for her career.

Smith: It is an extraordinary story. When you think of all the things she’s confronted and overcome. And really became the source of inspiration to so many people.

Jenkins: Absolutely. And, what do I long for? I long for our country to get the kind of relationship with Obama that they had with Tip O’Neill and Jerry. Tip O’Neill, boy, what a character.

Smith: Did you see them together?

Jenkins: Oh, yeah, they played golf in the Hope tournament several times and we would come over here when he was here and he was very fond of Tip. There was nothing false.

Smith: And they obviously were fond of each other.

Jenkins: Oh, yeah. And Tip would bring out a congressman named Marty Rousseau(?) a few times. I don’t know that he brought out anyone other than Marty on a regular basis.

Smith: Opposites attracting?

Jenkins: Yes. But Marty was an NBA caliber basketball player and younger.

Smith: He really hit it off well with younger people, didn’t he?

Jenkins: Oh, yeah, I think he did.

Smith: I almost sensed that they liked to have younger people around them, almost deliberately as a way of staying young.

Jenkins: I think they did, yeah. Now, Susan was the one they saw the most of. Jack was over on the coast and she went over there, I guess, this summer for awhile. We have a
place over there, but we didn’t bother her. I just don’t know that I… I cry at stop signs.

Smith: Listen, thank you, very much. This has been great.

Jenkins: Oh, sure.
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Smith: Thank you for doing this. Tell us about your life before Gerald Ford.

O’Neill: I was born into a military family; my father was in the infantry and then morphed into the Air Force. He was in the service for thirty-seven years; then went to law school and practiced public service law the rest of his life. But I grew up as a military kid, which means I moved around. I was born in St. Louis and then we moved to Illinois and Hawaii and New Mexico and California and Alaska, went to different places. Then I went to school in northern California, first in Fresno and then at Claremont Graduate School. Then I got recruited into the government in 1961 in something called the Management Intern Program which doesn’t exist anymore, where they hired about three hundred people a year into the middle management ranks of the government. They had a written test and an oral test.

Smith: Now those obviously were the Kennedy years.

O’Neill: Actually, I started work on July 3, 1961, and part of the reason I decided to give up my doctoral studies in economics was, first of all, it was painful to try to go to school on a $2100 a year fellowship with a wife and two kids; but also because I was really intrigued with the notion that if you want to make a difference, come to Washington. So I did. I got recruited; I had a job.

Smith: Was that part of the Kennedy appeal?

O’Neill: Absolutely. And it sounds corny I suppose, to young people especially, to say the highest calling is to go do something that benefits the whole society.

Smith: I was going to ask you: how do you communicate that? I’m old enough to remember, too, the extraordinary aura that that administration generated. The Peace Corps being a tangible example, but the program you referred to likewise. How do you communicate that to today’s young people?
O’Neill: It was an interesting time and it’s probably too easy to get romantic about it, but there was a sense in the country that any problem we could define, we could solve. It was the American way. And yes, we have problems in our cities and yes, our education system isn’t working right and health care, but we can fix it.

Smith: Don’t you think a little of that was a hangover from the war and the Depression? We had beaten the Depression, won World War II. The Fifties, which are fashionable to mock – in many ways represent the apogee of American confidence and power; and so it’s not surprising.

O’Neill: I think that’s right. And I think there is also something, for me anyway, to the personality of John Kennedy. Having spent a lot of time as an undergraduate and in graduate school thinking about policy and political figures, when he would have press conferences, I would listen to the press conferences because they were full of content and humor. He was a person who was really extraordinary at the quick quip that kind of captured the essence of an issue. And I was proud to be part of that kind of administration where, when we made a mistake in Cuba, the President stood up and said we did. He dealt with the crisis in a way that turned out to be correct more than incorrect; even though he’d launched into something he shouldn’t have, obviously.

Smith: But what does it tell you about the American people that in the wake of the Bay of Pigs, his numbers went up?

O’Neill: Absolutely. People got great confidence. I remember being at a meeting someplace here in Washington when the crisis was unfolding, and on a noon break in the conference, a friend and I went over to the Coast Guard to find out what we needed to do to see about signing up if we were needed. It wasn’t just me – it was that kind of a feeling that if our country needs us, we are here for them. It was really extraordinary.

Smith: What do you think destroyed that? Was it the assassination and the whole litany of Vietnam and Watergate?

O’Neill: I actually think that most people have gotten the Johnson years wrong because they focus on Vietnam. In effect, after the transfer from this elegant person to
this earthy, let me show you my gallbladder scar, kind of a president. It was really extraordinary what he was able to legislate – civil rights and the whole panoply of things that I actually think were not only well intended, but they were good ideas, because I believe this: that Lyndon Johnson’s idea about government was to try things, and if they worked, then expand them and if they didn’t work, scrap them.

Smith: Rooseveltian, in some ways – FDR’s.

O’Neill: Exactly. So he knew urban renewal. People don’t even know what this means anymore, but urban renewal was a disaster because it cleaned out whole communities and erected monumental, colossal, Soviet kind of public housing blocks and stuff. So Lyndon Johnson’s answer to that was Model Cities. And when he started with the idea of Model Cities, I was here then and working in the administration. By then I was in the Bureau of the Budget. The idea of Model Cities - the way Lyndon Johnson first fashioned it - was seven cities so that we could do something on a big enough scale, concentrate funds, so that we could demonstrate we could really cure the problems that were growing in urban centers. By the time the legislation was enacted, there were 150 Model Cities, which meant the funds got distributed everywhere. And the reason there were 150 is because at that time these legislators had to be bought off by having their city designated in order to pass the legislation. So, in a way, that experiment never had a chance because it was a bureaucratic nightmare by the time it was enacted.

But I think Johnson’s initial idea was right; similar to his idea about neighborhood health care centers. We ought to try neighborhood health care centers and see if it’s a way that we can provide care to the underserved and dense populations areas by having a place people can go instead of the emergency room. So I think there were probably too many initiatives, but there were lots of good ideas and I think Lyndon Johnson would have scrapped the ones that didn’t work well.

Smith: It’s interesting that you say that because you can look at the last forty years of American political history as a reaction to the Great Society.
O’Neill: I agree with you.

Smith: That said, though, how many of the Great Society programs have been repealed? Not many.

O’Neill: Exactly.

Smith: You don’t hear a lot of talk about getting rid of Medicare or Head Start. It’s a dichotomy that there is this consensus, somewhat of a consensus, that government tried to do too much; that conventional thinking, underlay the Nixon and Reagan and even our own era, in some ways. But when you get to the operational – you know, the old line, the American people are philosophically conservative and operationally liberal.

O’Neill: Right. I’ll tell you one parting thought on that. I actually like aspirational goals because I think people respond really well to aspirational goals. And the phrase, The Great Society, always appealed to me because it seemed to me aspirational. If you apply that notion of a Great Society to the entire society, it’s not about the government, it’s about we the people aspiring to be a great society.

Smith: It requires a communal sense of identity, which everything about today’s culture tends to work against. Richard Nixon - what kind of contact did you have with him?

O’Neill: It’s interesting, I went to the Bureau of the Budget in January of 1967. My first assignment – this again because of a Lyndon Johnson initiative – during the Johnson administration Bob McNamara was the secretary of defense, and had been appointed by Kennedy. But he (McNamara) was there until 1967 and a half, maybe. McNamara brought with him a bunch of tools associated with the whiz kids, which means operations research and systems thinking ideas, and was busily applying them to the activity of national defense. And Lyndon Johnson liked the order of that so much that he called in Charlie Schultz, who was then the director of the Bureau of the Budget, and told him, “Charlie, I want you to hire people into the Bureau of the Budget and bring these ideas that McNamara is applying to national defense to all the domestic activities of government, because we need to think more concretely and more
clearly and more systematically about the domestic activities of the
government. So I want you to hire a bunch of people in OMB.” I was one of
the people they hired to do that. My first assignments were to work on health
and medical care. And so when President Nixon was elected, I was a grade
16, which meant I was a kind of upper middle part of the Civil Service.

I worked for an assistant director who was a political appointee and after
about six months I got really deeply involved in the topic of the day which
was welfare reform; and the buzz word in those days was the negative income
tax. There had been some work done in New Jersey during the Johnson
administration, actually testing the idea of giving low income people money,
related to their lack of wealth accumulation or income inversely to where they
were on the income spectrum. And so with my background in economics and
operational research, this was a really nice fit for me. I became the go-to
numbers guy on the distributional implications of different levels of income
support and phase out of financial support for President Nixon’s largest first
year initiatives.

It’s interesting, my co-conspirator in this was Jodie Allen, who later became
the editorial page editor for the Sunday *Outlook* section for the *Washington
Post*. But in those days she was a computer programming expert and she
worked at HEW. And so the two of us would go down – the government
didn’t have, except for the Defense Department – the domestic government
didn’t have computers big enough to do these simulation studies. So Jodie
Allen and I would go down to a place called CDC that had this mammoth
computer, and generate these data sets so that we could answer President
Nixon’s questions about how the money would be distributed by income
class, by state, by county, all that kind of thing because obviously there were
political questions about all of this.

And I think maybe it was in June or July of 1969, President Nixon went to
Romania and he had his entourage with him, Bob Haldeman, whoever from
the State Department, and John Erlichman. So John Erlichman called me from
Air Force One as they were leaving Romania to get the latest data on the
distributional implications of the Family Assistance Program.
Smith: That’s right.

O’Neill: And that was my beginning of really substantial involvement with the inner circle during the Nixon administration. It was all about substantive things. On February 18, 1971 President Nixon sent the most systematic message about health and medical care to the Congress that has ever been written by any president in history, including this one. It still is a document that stands the test of time.

Smith: It’s interesting because what you say sort of runs counter to the popular notion of Nixon as a president who was not only disengaged from, but almost contemptuous of, domestic policy.

O’Neill: Absolutely not. You know, the Family Assistance Program was the domestic equivalent of going to China.

Smith: Yeah.

O’Neill: It was absolutely antithetical to most people in his party to think that the federal government ought to actually collect money and hand it out willy-nilly to people, based on the fact that they didn’t have much or any income at all. The initiative that was launched on August 8, 1969 included the Family Assistance Program, revenue sharing, and reform of the Office of Economic Opportunity. The interesting philosophical thing in revenue sharing was the idea that the federal tax system from a societal point of view, is arguably the most equitable. But Nixon believed collecting taxes and then having the federal government make the decision was not directionally correct, and so he believed we distribute some of that money to state and local governments so that people at that level could make their own decisions about what were the high priorities in their jurisdictions.

It started as a moderate program, I think $5 billion, but the idea was to sequentially move forward with getting rid of federal decision making about domestic priorities and letting people in their own communities decide how best to allocate resources. And the point it illustrated to me about Nixon was that he was really a pretty deep thinker about the subject of government and federalism. And if you think about it, the idea of revenue sharing was really
antithetical to political Washington because it passed the power to other people and members of Congress did not believe they would get any credit for it.

Smith: In the press releases.

O’Neill: This reminds me of an episode from my time with President Ford when I said to him, I think maybe in early 1975, “There is no support for revenue sharing in the Congress. And as soon as they have a chance, they are going to kill it.” And he was blown away. He said, “I don’t think that’s right, Paul.” But it turned out to be right. The Congress got rid of revenue sharing. But President Ford was a strong supporter of the idea and thought that it sufficiently entrenched it would stay in place.

Smith: Let me ask you a large question about him, I want to be careful how I phrase this, I don’t want to make it sound like a pejorative. On the one hand, he did tend to believe the best of people, which is exactly what you want, obviously, in a president, and particularly at that time. On the other hand, the classic example is his first press conference as president at the end of August. Which I always thought was the tipping point that led to the pardon. Because he went into that press conference honestly believing that the press corps would want to talk to him about Greece and Turkey and Cyprus.

O’Neill: Right, important…

Smith: The business that he was trying to get his arms around as a new president. He’d been forewarned that that was not likely to be the case, but he believed otherwise. And he left that press conference unhappy, mostly with himself. He didn’t think he’d handled the flood of Nixon questions terribly well. But I think he was also angry that he had been subjected to this flood of Nixon questions. And two weeks later came the pardon. Was he naïve in some ways? For someone who had been in Washington for twenty-five years…

O’Neill: I’m going to tell you a companion story that relates to what you are saying. I go back to what you said earlier. President Ford was a person who started with a presumption everyone was on the up and up, and until proved otherwise, that’s how he viewed you. He gave everybody and everything the
benefit of the doubt, and so there was something I had the privilege to watch because I was here for fifteen years during that time from Kennedy through the end of the Ford administration. I was privileged enough to be high enough up that I could see this in person - that people really didn’t understand significant things like what you are suggesting about what the media could really be like. I think the media has grown more ferocious over the decades, but I think he miscalibrated that he would be treated in a respectful way and they would not spend all of their time wanting to relive the Nixon thing, which in a way the media loved because it was soap opera every day from late 1972 until Nixon left. I think they truly didn’t want to give that up, it was too much fun. I suppose it got them customers.

But there is another example of that kind of thing, and remember, he was vice president for a time and so he was even closer to what it was like to be president. But in September of 1974 (the month after he became President) he went to Ohio to give a speech at, I think, Ohio State. And so he gave the speech and the theme of it was the federal government is going to take a stronger, more useful role in providing for the transition from the world of school to the world of work. And so during the Nixon administration, as I went up in the ranks, actually even beginning with the Family Assistance program I believe the speechwriting department never released a speech without it crossing over my desk to make sure that there were no inaccuracies, both in facts or in tone or presentation, and mostly they took my edits. There was a woman there named Agnes Waldren who was magical about getting facts right, and I was a part of her support network. And so President Ford went in September of 1974, a month after he’d become president, to give this speech at Ohio State, and I think even before he finished delivering the speech - they released an advance text - my phone was ringing off the hook from people in the media saying we’re traveling with the President, he’s made this speech about strengthening the role of the federal government and the transition from academe to work and we want to know how much money is going to be spent on this, how will it be distributed.

After I got four or five of these calls, I called the chief of staff and said, “What is this about? I don’t know anything about this.” They had not run this
by me, so that’s why I didn’t know anything about it. Milton Friedman, not the economist, but the speechwriter was there answered the phone. I said, “Milt, something has gone wrong. The President’s made this speech. I never saw it, I don’t know what it’s all about.” And he said, “Oh, well, for God’s sake Paul, it’s just a speech.” And I think President Ford would have said the same thing, “It’s just a speech. I give speeches all the time.”

Smith: Is that the congressional mind set? As opposed to the presidential mind set?

O’Neill: Yes. It’s a learned mind set. If you give speeches and you’re in the Congress for twenty-five years, and then you’re vice president, and basically, people don’t pay any attention to what you say, then you think speeches are speeches. I don’t have to be accountable for this. And I think President Ford didn’t get that right away. It only took a few encounters for him to realize, “Oh, my God.” So they instituted the process so I saw everything. I must tell you, it was really jarring when I was secretary of the Treasury for Bush ’43, I never saw anything before it was delivered and they made some horrible gaffs because I didn’t get a chance to look at what they were going to say about my area of responsibility; because they didn’t know what they were talking about.

Smith: That raises a huge question. If you look at the trajectory of the Ford presidency, it seems to me one way of looking at it is as someone who came into office with essentially a congressional outlook, who, in a relatively short period of time, under the pressure of events, was forced to learn how to be an executive, how to be a president. Those are two very different kinds of roles.

O’Neill: I would separate those. I would say he was already good at being an executive before he became president. He didn’t understand, I think, but he learned quickly the public personae thing about being president. So I’ll give you a vignette on the other end of this: in January of 1976, (I’m a student of public policy making and of the operating of the Executive Office of the President), so I knew from reviewing the history that the last president to be able to do his own press conference with an open press on the annual budget was Harry Truman. And he really did it. If you go back and listen to some of the tapes and read the transcript, Harry Truman knew everything about the budget that he presented to the Congress and was delighted to go meet with the media at
the time of release so he could demonstrate to them he owned everything in that book. He was not representing somebody else’s creation; it was Harry Truman’s stamp. And those of us who worked in the executive office on economic things believed that the real expression of an administration policy is in the budget documents. It may be dry and boring to some people, but to people who are insiders, they know that’s where the priorities are set.

Smith: Do you think that was - I presume like Ford - was that a function of the time that Truman had spent in the Senate?

O’Neill: Both had a proclivity to want to know, not just to float on top of the government apparatus; but to run the government apparatus and to make personal decisions about everything; “I believe as President, these are the right things where we should be allocating resources or not.” So knowing all this, I said in the fall of 1975 to President Ford, “Harry Truman was the last president to defend his budget. You should have an open meeting with the media and present your budget because you know this budget so well, you don’t need any of the rest of us.” And the reason he had this knowledge is that he spent days and weeks going through everything in the budget with the experts, making conscious decisions about where we ought to allocate what resources. At the time I thought I knew more about the inner workings of how we allocated resources and why they were allocated, than anyone else. But President Ford was right up there in his own command of the material. I’ll never forget one night in the Oval Office, it must have been about ten o’clock and we were finishing up weeks of going through five inch binders where there is something really important on every page, and we got to a line item for retired military care. It was a line item; I think it was maybe $15 million (in a $40 billion budget). And President Ford said, “Tell me about this one, Paul.” And I just had this blank look. He was so tickled that I didn’t know what that was. But I think it showed the level of detail that he looked at, and how much he thought that was his responsibility.

Smith: It’s fascinating you say that because, of course, that is in many ways at odds with the way the modern presidency has evolved. I’ve often said he was the
least self-dramatizing of presidents, which didn’t serve him well in the increasingly theatrical nature of the job.

O’Neill: Yeah, show business.

Smith: Something Rod Hills said to us...“You know, the older I get, the more experience I have, the more I think about all this, the more it seems to me the acid test of a successful presidency is the ability to make the government work.” And again, that’s not a bumper sticker – no one will make a campaign commercial about it. But when it doesn’t happen, you can be sure people are unhappy.

O’Neill: There are consequences. Exactly. So, anyway, he had this press conference in 1976 to present his budget – he decided he was going to do it. And it was interesting, he held the press conference at the State Department auditorium, which is a big place, it holds hundreds of people.

Smith: Where Jack Kennedy held his press conferences.

O’Neill: There must have been 350 journalists there and it was open season. And President Ford had a bunch of us - there were probably ten or so people up on the stage with him. He didn’t need any of us. He honestly didn’t need any of us. We were a prop. But I’ll tell you, he was so generous that somebody asked him a question about Medicare and he answered it, and then he said, “But I think Paul O’Neill down there can give you a more detailed answer.” And I think it was his deliberate intent to give me some spotlight time. He didn’t need to do it; his answer was sufficient, but he was like that. You know what I mean? He really cared about people a lot.

Smith: Did you ever see his temper?

O’Neill: One time I saw his temper when I thought maybe he was going to bite through his pipe. Jim Schlesinger sent him a memo – you probably know about this – Jim Schlesinger sent him a memo and basically told President Ford, I’ve forgotten what the issue was, but that if President Ford did what he was proposing to do, that it would severely threaten the security of the United States. No one in the world knew more about the ins and outs of national
defense and resource allocations and their implications than President Ford. And he was so furious at getting what he considered to be an affront to his intelligence from his defense secretary telling him something he believed to be completely untrue, he was furious.

So I was in a meeting with the President when he got this memo, sitting there at his desk as we often did. There was a Cabinet meeting the next day, I think, and while people were assembling I stood in the Cabinet room next to Jim Schlesinger and said to him, “Jim, you ought to apologize to the President because he’s furious about that memo you sent him.” Jim was puffing on his pipe and said something like, “We’ll see.” I think it was in that week he got fired.

Smith: Was that relationship just doomed? One senses really bad chemistry.

O’Neill: I think Schlesinger really underestimated President Ford. A lot of people underestimated President Ford. They didn’t understand that this guy had a first class brain, and he was a student of everything about government. He didn’t wear it on his sleeve, and he didn’t go out of his way to let people know that he had all this stuff going on in his head about rights and wrongs, and allocations. But it was going on all the time. I think he really was not willing to tolerate someone telling him something he believed to be factually wrong. And I think he probably believed that Schlesinger knew it wasn’t right, which was a bad thing. If it had been some innocent – but Schlesinger had been studying defense policy for two or three decades himself. So I think President Ford felt like, I can’t have somebody around me who, first of all doesn’t understand what I know; and then would knowingly mislead me. If I were not as equipped as I am to do this job, this advice would be disastrous for the country.

Smith: And putting it on paper.

O’Neill: It was way over the top.

Smith: Ford was, among other things, a shrewder student of the people around him than he was often credited with.
O’Neill: I agree with that.

Smith: I wonder whether at times he used that reputation – a bit of an innocent, a bit naïve - almost using that persona in some ways.

O’Neill: Cagey.

Smith: Exactly.

O’Neill: He was. I think that’s right. He kept his own counsel when he thought there wasn’t was any particular value in letting people know what was going on in his brain.

Smith: As a young congressman, he’d been put on the CIA oversight committee because clearly the Old Bulls had decided this was someone who we could trust.

O’Neill: Exactly.

Smith: And he never betrayed that. You wonder whether he took some secrets with him to the grave.

O’Neill: I don’t know. It’s easy to speculate. I think he was a lot more complicated person than people give him credit for.

Smith: How so? That’s an interesting observation.

O’Neill: I think in the way that he posted people. I think people thought he made Carla Hills his secretary of Housing and Urban Development because she was a woman. I don’t think that’s right; I think he had an enormous respect for her intellect. It was not about, “Hey, this is a woman – that will make Betty happy.” That’s a superficial thing; but it was a quality thing. He was about quality. People who were reverential about him were people like Cederberg, who had worked with him for decades. You don’t find that kind of personal fealty in much of Washington, but there were people like that – Lud Ashley, the congressman from Ohio.

Smith: Right.
O’Neill: There were people like that who would do whatever President Ford said, just because they believed he’d figured it out better than they had. He had a lot of people like that who thought, “If Jerry Ford thinks it’s right, it’s got to be right.”

Smith: And clearly a lot of friends on both sides of the aisle.

O’Neill: Absolutely. I think his friendship with Tip was real. Very real.

Smith: There is a wonderful story; Don Penny told us a story showing his own naiveté. One day the President and O’Neill had met in the Oval Office, had a great meeting, and Tip went out on the driveway and proceeded to unload, on him. Penny saw this and was appalled. He went back in and said, “Mr. President, you won’t believe what Tip’s out there saying,” and he retold all of this, and the President sat smoking his pipe and said, “Oh, Don, that’s just politics.” Which is very revealing. You wish we could recapture some of that.

O’Neill: Absolutely. It was a better place than where we are now.

Smith: As Vice President, he was in a very awkward situation. In your contacts with him, did you ever hear or discern anything that led you to believe that he was consciously preparing to be president.

O’Neill: During the time he was vice president, in a way I was his relief valve. When he wanted to talk about something in policy, he’d call me in and we’d talk about the economic effects of building cloverleaves in the highway in Michigan to create economic development. Honest to God, we’d have that kind of a conversation. “Well, look, if we built this cloverleaf over here at I84, or whatever it is, it will have the effect of creating opportunity for gas stations and restaurants.” And he was really interested in those substantive things. What do government actions do on the community level? And when he was president, after he’d been there, I think, for three or four months, he said, “You know, Paul, there’s a lot of really interesting stuff in the local papers. I’ll make sure that after I finish the Grand Rapids Press, I’ll have it sent over to you. So you can read the Grand Rapids Press and you can see how this stuff plays on the local level.” We’re up here talking way up here,
“because it will help you to have a different perspective if you see what this means when it gets down there.”

Smith: That’s fascinating.

O’Neill: So we had those kinds of conversations.

Smith: Did he ever talk about Watergate?

O’Neill: Nope. Not with me. I’m sure he must have, but he never drew me into that. And I was thankful for that. In reminiscing about these times, during the time from when Erlichman and Haldeman left from April 30, 1973, and when Nixon resigned in August of 1974, every recommendation I sent to the White House about all the things that I was responsible for was approved. Everything. And increasingly, that really made me uncomfortable because it meant I was the decision maker. And so there was a great relief the day, maybe two or three days after President Ford became president, I sent over a recommendation and he sent it back unapproved. I had this sigh of relief, “My God, I’m so glad I’m not making the decisions anymore.” Because there was that time when Haig was working on trying to manage the Watergate situation and I think he [Nixon] was actively involved, still, in international affairs, but that the domestic stuff was mine. That was a really intimidating realization.

Smith: Let me ask you, because it gets back in some ways to what we were talking about earlier, both the congressional outlook, his loyalty to friends. The whole situation around Bob Hartmann and the speechwriting operation - in some corners there was condescension toward the new President who brought in his “Grand Rapids” crowd. And some were maybe more successful than others. But the fact that the President of the United States would, over time, tolerate or adapt himself to dual speechwriting operations, which is what it evolved into, is hard to fathom.

O’Neill: I think so, but if you look at the substance, I don’t think it is too hard to reconcile. I think Bob Hartmann probably wrote most of the speech the President gave in the East Room when he was sworn in. And it was a wonderful speech. And so on substantive grounds, I think Hartmann had a role. He was a thorny, prickly personality.
Smith: And why was he a polarizing figure?

O’Neill: He didn’t go out of his way to make friends, let me say that. He was arrogant, I guess. And he didn’t believe anyone could write better than he could, so there was a lot of that about him. But it also led to some mistakes. And I don’t know who owned the Whip [Inflation Now] thing, whoever owned it should have been whipped, because it was such a bad idea. And that may have been Hartmann’s doing.

Smith: It originated in the speechwriting operation.

O’Neill: And again, within that same time period, when speeches are just speeches, it was a carryover – “We’re going to be held accountable for this. Oh, my God, make sure this is exactly what we want to say.”

Smith: Right. They were still making first impressions. One can understand Hartmann in the sense of feeling protective about his boss. But you wonder at what point being protective shades over into being possessive in an unhealthy way?

O’Neill: I think there was a certain amount of that. And I think the President tolerated it, because he didn’t see the prickliness and the internal warfare and all of that stuff that was going on.

Smith: Because there was the ’75 State of the Union Address, where literally at the last minute, I guess he had two drafts and he himself spent a day trying to…did you witness any of that?

O’Neill: Yeah, kind of second hand. Another thing, the director of OMB was Jim Lynn, and I think in that process - I’m pretty sure it was the ’75 process - there were several people who went to Williamsburg to work on the speech. I guess they thought they would get inspiration or something. So it was that kind of red team and green team of people, and as I recall, I haven’t read it for a long time, it ended up being kind of a mishmash. It had the one memorable thing about things are not good.

Smith: Which no president before or since has ever attempted.
O’Neill: Exactly right. But if he had said otherwise, the country would have said, “He’s not telling us the truth.” And so he did tell the truth. You know, he was really big on telling the truth.

Smith: A funny story which we were told by Jack Marsh. Anyone else, when he decided on the Vietnam amnesty program, would have put out a press release on Friday afternoon and headed to Camp David. But what does he do? He goes to Chicago to tell the VFW, knowing there is not going to be any applause. The day before he leaves, Jack Marsh walks into the Oval Office and says, “I’ve got some bad news.” He says, “What’s that?” Steve, on his eighteenth birthday, never registered for the draft. He said, “He looked gobsmacked.” Before the day was over they had it all taken care of. The press never caught on. I’m not sure that would happen today.

O’Neill: There were a couple of times during his presidency when he called me in and said, “Look, what I’m going to do is going to be very controversial. And I need for the implementation to be as close to perfect as possible, and you need to be responsible for implementation.” So one was about the people who had gone to Canada to avoid the draft, and he brought Charlie Goodell in, remember Charlie?

Smith: Yeah.

O’Neill: His son is now head of the NFL. But he brought Charlie in and got us to organize a process so that we could keep the process from being a negative that would give people ammunition. The other time he called me in and said, “This has got to work right.” It’s when he decided to bring in refugees from Vietnam, including Hmong and thirty thousand people. We moved an enormous number of people into Indian Gap, Pennsylvania and some place in Arkansas, and got them settled without a big furor in the country. Actually, he called me and I got Julia Vadala Taft who was Will Taft’s wife, who had been a White House fellow and was at the State Department. She subsequently made a career out of refugee resettlement. But we made that work right so that it worked in the community. It did not create a big furor, the people were welcomed and they were distributed through the country.
Smith: I’ve often thought that was his finest hour, because immediately after the fall of Saigon, Congress’s reaction was “Let’s pull the plug. Let’s pretend we were never there, and to hell with the refugees.” And he put together this coalition with George Meany and the American Jewish Congress and others to shame Congress.

O’Neill: It was the right thing to do. It would have been easy to look the other way. He thought it was the right thing to do. But he wanted it to go well, so the back end was the implementation needs to be perfect, you need to be sure this works okay because I’m really putting a lot at risk here for a good reason.

Smith: That’s fascinating because in this town we always hear about initiatives, but there is not a whole lot of attention paid to execution. I wonder whether some of that was the congressional experience – that oversight of programs.

O’Neill: I think he knew that you had to pay attention to the implementation side. Otherwise value-based propositions could get torpedoed or ridiculed forever if they were not properly executed. It reminds me of one other vignette. Sitting in my office, I was a deputy director of OMB and it was during the time when we were relocating the Vietnam refugees, and there was a young brigadier general whose name was Sharp. He had been sent over from the Pentagon to tell me that Secretary Schlesinger had directed him to tell me that the Defense Department and the military services were not going to participate in this relocation of the Vietnamese refugees.

Smith: Did he offer a rationale?

O’Neill: Because it would deplete the resources we need for national defense. We can’t do this, that’s not the military’s job, get somebody else to do it. So I said to him, “Okay, General Sharp, let me get the phone here. I want you to know I’m going to call the President and I want you to tell him you’re not going to do what he wants you to do.” And he said, “That won’t really be necessary.” That was the last I heard of it. And he went back and told Schlesinger, “O’Neill told me we’ve got to do this and he threatened me with the President.” So a lot of times I didn’t have to use the President, I just had to threaten to use him.
Smith: Did you ever share that story with him?

O’Neill: Oh, yeah, absolutely. I told him there’s this young brigadier general over here, you may hear about this because I threatened that you were going to give him the order if he wasn’t going to take it from me. But the President told me, “Do whatever you need to do.” So I had great confidence I would get backed.

Smith: Let me ask you, because we’ve lost Jim Lynn, and he was clearly a very important part of this administration. Tell us about Lynn, how he operated and what his significance was in the Ford presidency.

O’Neill: I first got to know him when he was an undersecretary of Commerce. He had this kind of robotic penguin figure, very energetic and with a great seriousness of purpose. During the ’73 shakeup after the election in ’72, he was designated as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. So I got to know him really well there because he was pushing a so-called Section 8 housing program, which I thought was a disastrous idea, because they were going to create a whole lot of subsidized housing and the costs were going to be enormous and greater than what was being alleged.

And so we had pitched battles over all that, and President Nixon put the legislation forward. What was said by the President was really important about these things, and he understood that - Lynn would come over to the Executive Office and he would stay around until two o’clock in the morning, basically until everyone else went home, to make sure that what he wanted in the President’s remarks was not changed by me or anyone else in the Executive Office of the President. So I got to know Jim really well because we were at odds over what we had to do.

And it’s ironic that the first piece of legislation that President Ford signed as president was a Section 8 housing legislation. So that was a big success for Jim. And somebody else could better tell you the story than I can. Fred Malek left the Nixon administration in September and they indicated to me that they were making me the deputy director. Under the 1974 budget act, there was a provision requiring for the first time Senate confirmation of the director of OMB and the deputy director of OMB. And so Roy Ash was the director, and
when Fred Malek left as a deputy director, the Nixon administration said we’re going to appoint you deputy director. In anticipation of Fred’s leaving. And when President Ford came in, he sent the nomination for me to be the deputy director and then – I’ve forgotten how much later it was – he appointed Carla and brought Jim over to be the director when Roy Ash left. I guess Roy left in January or February of 1975, and Jim came in as the director when I’d been confirmed then. Actually on my birthday in 1974 as deputy director. And so Jim came and he was a learner. He wanted to learn about the details. And where he’d been at Commerce and where he had been at HUD, gave him particular knowledge about those two places. But he didn’t really know anything much of substance. So most of the time he was at OMB, because he came in January or February of 1975, and we left together in January of 1977, he was learning. One innovation while he was there was to create a booklet called ‘76 Issues, which was kind of a turn on the fact that it was 1976, and he got the OMB people, with consultation with departments and agencies to write policy analysis papers to explain the major decisions in the President’s budget. That was a Jim Lynn innovation.

Smith: Carla told us her experiences, and those of others, of people who sat in the Oval Office and the President, Solomon-like, would hear their case, OMB’s case, and make a decision. You must have sat in on some of those?

O’Neill: I sat in on a whole lot of those, and I remember especially the ones that we had involving Jim and Carla because he is the former HUD secretary and thought he knew better what should be done at HUD than Carla would ever know. I think, in probably every dispute Jim and Carla had, the President resolved in Carla’s favor; and Jim – nobody else will tell you this – Jim would say, “It’s because she has better legs than I do.” It was that kind of a relationship.

Smith: Was she a charmer?

O’Neill: She was, but she was smart as hell. She mastered her brief – she was really good. But it got to a point where they didn’t talk to each other. All the business between the Executive Office and HUD was done between Carla and I.
Smith: Yeah, it’s an awkward relationship.

O’Neill: It was difficult.

Smith: One senses from what some people have told us that he did less of that over time, that he found that perhaps it wasn’t the best use of his time.

O’Neill: I don’t remember that. And what comes to my mind is that let’s say it’s March, 1976 or February of 1976 when we had the identification of seven Swine Flu cases at Fort Dix in New Jersey. And over a couple of month’s time, that all played out. There is a book about that. It’s called *Swine Flu Affair*, it was written by the guy who wrote the landmark book about the presidency at Harvard.

Smith: Neustadt.

O’Neill: Yeah, Richard Neustadt. And the co-author was Harvey Fineberg, who is the president of the National Academy of Sciences. They wrote a book about that time and the reason it comes to mind when you raised this issue about President Ford changing his style – that would have really complicated the issue. And the book lays out the whole story. But the President was really concerned about getting the decision right about what to do about the Swine Flu, and so he personally met with the people who were at HEW who were responsible for this area, with the CDC director, with the assistant secretary who was responsible for public health issues – repeatedly - to get a sense.

This was a really interesting decision making case because I said to the President, “I think we really ought to get leading virologists and epidemiologists from all over the country in here and get them to sit around the Cabinet table (there were twenty-three of them, I think), and get them to tell you their personal, individual views about what to do about this issue.” They all came in, including Salk and Sabin, who hated each other through their whole careers, who developed different ways of doing polio vaccination. And all of these pre-eminent scientists sitting around the table and President Ford said, “Here’s what it looks like. Here’s what I have as a recommendation, that we should vaccinate the whole population. I want to hear it from you all; should we do this?” And it took a couple of hours, but
they all said absolutely, there’s no question, you should do this. So at the end of the meeting, the President stood up and said, “I’m going to my office and I’m going to be there for the next half hour for any of you who want an individual meeting because you have a view that you are not willing or feel threatened to express in front of this larger group. Come through this little door here into the secretary’s office and she’ll tell me you’re waiting for me and I’ll see you individually.” Nobody came.

So an hour later he went down to the White House press briefing and said we’re going to vaccinate the whole population. And it turned out it had this horrible side effect of creating facial paralysis for forty or forty-five thousand people, and the Swine Flu never developed. We never had a spread of cases. But it’s an illustration of a continuation into the spring of 1976 of the President taking personal accountability and responsibility. Not doing it all himself, but marshalling the best advice that was available to make a presidential decision. I would say the outcome was not everything you would like, but the decision process was everything you would want in a president.

Smith: It brings you to the kind of conservative he was and the decision that was made pretty early in the presidency to publicly announce that the administration would not be proposing new domestic programs - presumably until we got a handle on the budget and the like. I’ve been working for years on this biography of Nelson Rockefeller, and at least one individual has indicated that a contributing factor to that public announcement was Rockefeller’s inclination every week at their lunch to come in with a big new program. And he was not consulted about this decision. Jim Cannon informed him after the fact and he was bewildered because in New York that’s how you win elections.

O’Neill: A new program every week.

Smith: Exactly. It raises this larger issue: first of all, if you recall that, what was behind it? And it gets to this larger question, what kind of conservative was Gerald Ford? Because while he was in office, he was regularly described as the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge; and then, of course, post-Reagan, it’s all been redefined.
O’Neill: I honestly don’t think this was an illustration of conservatism; it was an illustration of intellectual consistency. But first I’m going to tell you a story about Rockefeller and the energy initiative that he mounted. You know, it seems laughable in today’s terms, but Rockefeller had this idea that we should set up a new hundred billion dollar energy authority.

Smith: The Energy Independence Corporation.

O’Neill: One hundred billion dollars. Which I believed was crazy and dishonest in a way; because it was going to try to do off-budget accounting for one hundred billion dollars and you know…

Smith: Like what he had done in New York.

O’Neill: Exactly. So, early on I said to the President, “I’ve been through this, and I don’t think this makes any sense at all.” And President Ford said, “But Paul, every vice president is entitled to his initiative ideas. This is not going to pass, so just calm down. Don’t get excited about it. It will be okay.” So in that instant President Ford was letting the Vice President have his initiative idea, even though he, President Ford, knew it was a good(?) idea and knew that it wouldn’t go anywhere. But I don’t think that the domestic freeze was aimed at Nelson Rockefeller. I saw it as an intellectual consistency with facts that existed on the ground.

It’s been a long time, so don’t hold me to this, but the federal budget, if you can believe it, as we were preparing it that year, was going to be four hundred and twelve billion dollars and President Ford believed that we needed to reduce spending by twenty-eight billion dollars. I think those are the numbers. And he didn’t think it was appropriate to be proposing new things to pay for at the same time he was demanding of the Congress, “Don’t add on anything to what we already have in the budget, and help me get this twenty-eight billion dollars that we need to get in order to restore some semblance of fiscal sanity to the federal government.” So to me the domestic thing was not really aimed at the Vice President. He may have been splashed by it, but I think it was a signal to everybody, “This is true for everybody. There are not going to be any domestic spending programs until we solve this budget problem.” And
I think he really did believe that there’s an importance to fiscal responsibility. I never talked to him about it directly in his later life, but I think he must have cringed when he saw the quote about Dick Cheney telling me the federal budget deficits don’t matter. Because I know he didn’t believe that.

Smith: He was a child of the Depression.

O’Neill: Absolutely.

Smith: Seared for life.

O’Neill: Absolutely. But I also think it was not only that, Richard, it was his understanding of how things are coupled together in the world. So it’s not really true that there are no consequences to having a huge and growing and unbelievably large federal budget deficit. There are ultimately consequences that are really unfortunate for the society.

Smith: Or adding new huge entitlements without paying for them.

O’Neill: He never said anything to me about it, but I’m sure he must have cringed when we passed an eight trillion dollar new entitlement program for Medicaid/Medicare drugs without one penny of revenue to pay for it. Eight trillion dollars.

Smith: Let me ask you, because this may or may not be awkward, but I am curious as to whether in those later years, he must have been in a somewhat awkward position himself, given that so many of his people were in the second Bush presidency, responsible for policies that he may or may not have agreed with. How did he handle that? And did you have conversations about your own experiences. Did he talk about the war? Brent Scowcroft just told us, for example, they had conversations in which he made known his dissatisfaction with…

O’Neill: He felt a strong sense that former presidents should keep their own counsel about most things about the government – which he did in his later years after he left the presidency. He didn’t get into the business of being a critic or someone who knew better than the sitting president. And I think after I got fired from the Bush administration, and was saying publicly later in the book
that Suskind published that there was never any evidence of weapons of mass
destruction, you could see him clench his jaw about things like that. I think
that if he had been president during that time, he might have chosen to go to
Iraq, but he would have said we have suspicions that they have weapons, but
we don’t have any evidence.

Smith: Yeah.

O’Neill: From the very beginning of the administration, I kept saying there is no
evidence of weapons. There is a theory about weapons and there are people
like Chalabi, who have their own agenda, who say they are seeing weapons,
but there’s no credible evidence of weapons of mass destruction. And Bush
’43 obviously didn’t want to hear it, and neither did Cheney and Rumsfeld,
because it didn’t promote what they wanted to do. So by resting on the
assumption that the suspicions were correct, they were able to go forward and
say, “We’re doing this in good faith.” And I think President Ford never would
have done that.

Smith: Did you hear from him?

O’Neill: I would get great notes from him and he sent me things. So, I’ve got signed
autographs of the times all the other living presidents were there, they all
signed a photograph for me. But President Ford is the one who made sure I
got it. So he was like that; he was ever thoughtful. I think he really
appreciated me helping to quickly secure the money so we could build the
Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy building in Ann Arbor. I was
determined we would get it done before he died, which we did. But he wasn’t
able to go to the dedication ceremony, which I think he would have been
willing to risk dying on the plane, he so much wanted to be a part of that.

Smith: Tell me your role in getting the money for it.

O’Neill: I was co-chair of the fundraising. We raised $33 million in six months,
because we were in a hurry to get it done. So we called out all the people.
Sandy Weill gave us $5 million just like that. But you know, those later years,
he would call me and ask me about budget issues and what I thought about
what was going on with budgets. But I don’t recall him ever criticizing another president. Actually, he became friends with Jimmy Carter.

Smith: Good friends.

O’Neill: Really good friends. So I’ll tell you a story about that. This was in 1988. I got a call from him saying, “President Carter and I believe we could do something useful if we assembled a group of people to write a series of position papers about the important issues before the country. We’d like for you to be the co-author, President Carter has decided his rep ought to be Alice Rivlin and we’d like for you to do our part in this – to write the paper on the economy and on federal budget policy.”

Smith: This was the America Agenda Project?

O’Neill: Yeah. And the reason to do it is because there wasn’t a sitting president running for office. So it was going to be – it turned out later – George Bush and Mondale, or whoever he was running against. So, this was in the spirit of bipartisanship; we don’t know who is going to be president, and we ought to write something that’s good for whoever becomes president. Oh, boy did that ever appeal to me. So we had the organizational meeting in Atlanta at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, and there was a reception and a dinner.

I was still carrying not happy feelings about Carter because I thought he partly won because he misrepresented things in the 1976 election. He made a big point out of how many government commissions and agencies and stuff there were, and it was a substantial misrepresentation in the way that he did it. And it was not the only thing; I thought he’d done a lot of things that were beyond the pale and so I thought this is a really bad guy and I was not sorry when he was a one-term president.

So anyway, I waltz into this organizing reception and dinner in Atlanta and I walked in. I think President Ford hadn’t arrived yet; there’s Jimmy Carter. And he said, “I am really glad to see you. I’ve thought for so long what a great contributor to public policy you’ve been.” I thought, “Wow, this is really different.” So, when President Ford came in, I said to him, “You know, maybe President Carter is not such a bad guy after all.” I told him the story.
And he’d long before decided Jimmy Carter was not a bad guy and formed their friendship and worked together on a bunch of things.

Smith: You wonder how much that friendship was eased by the fact that they both had run against Ronald Reagan.

O’Neill: That could be.

Smith: They had that in common.

O’Neill: But I think they truly were friends. And I thought the papers we produced were really quite good. I’m not sure anybody really ever looked at them after we wrote them, but they were really quite good.

Smith: The ’76 campaign – I realize you weren’t in the political operation.

O’Neill: I wasn’t, actually. President Ford really protected me from all that. Except – you might think this is really political – he asked me to come to the convention in Kansas City, which I really couldn’t afford to do. I’d saved up a little money for my daughter to go to college and I had to borrow some of that money so I could go as a non-civil servant to Kansas City before we had the elaborate rules that we have now. To pay my own way to Kansas City. And the reason he wanted me to go was so that if there were substantive issues, I would be there and I could deal with the substantive issues. But then, after he selected Bob Dole, he made me the connection with Bob Dole to make sure that Bob Dole didn’t create any faux pas about federal policy out of ignorance or lack of understanding.

Smith: How did that happen?

O’Neill: He just called me in and said, “You know, Bob Dole has been announced as the vice presidential candidate and I want you to be available to him at all times so that if he is going to give a speech, or he’s going to make representations, you make sure he’s grounded in facts.” That was my assignment.

Smith: Now, did you discuss that with Dole?

O’Neill: No, it’s what President Ford said. He told Dole.
Smith: What was your impression?

O’Neill: I thought he was a really quick study, but I didn’t have to worry too much about substance with him, because he was all about politics. He was up here shooting zingers and stuff, we didn’t have anything to do with policy.

Smith: What was your observation of that convention, just from someone watching it?

O’Neill: It was interesting. I’d gotten to know a lot of these people really well. And we had a control office – Jerry Jones was there and Jim Cavanaugh and Red Cavaney – a whole team of people. And I guess I could refresh my memory and remember, but we were in the control office and we were planning everything to the finest detail. So Reagan was arriving at the Kansas City International Airport, and it was on a late Sunday afternoon, like five or six o’clock. So we spent a couple of days figuring out how we could make sure that President Ford arrived in the same news window so President Ford would dominate the news, and Reagan wouldn’t get any coverage. We were working that level of detail. Bill Timmons was there. You know Bill.

Smith: Yeah.

O’Neill: Bill would remember all the people who were at that convention. But we were working that level of detail and it was really touch and go. Reagan was a force, he really was. It was very close.

Smith: Do you think, in retrospect, that the White House was slow to take Reagan seriously? That he would, in fact, run; and secondly, that he could be as potent a challenger as he turned out to be?

O’Neill: I’m not a good witness for that. I don’t know.

Smith: Tell us about Rumsfeld as chief of staff.

O’Neill: Reflecting back on when I first got to know him was when he was appointed as head of OEO, and that’s when I first got to know Cheney. I thought in that role, Don was a guy with really strong ideas about how to create performance with people and measurement systems, and discipline and all the rest of that. I
thought he did a really good job of doing what President Nixon wanted to do, which was substantially dismantle OEO. And I thought he did a reasonably good job; he didn’t get it done; it ended up there under a guy named Arnett after Don and there was a guy after that called Howie Phillips, who was with the ideological unit of all time. Anyway, that’s how I first got to know Don and then he kind of disappeared from my view when he was doing things in the White House. When he went to NATO, he was out of view. So, when I think back, as chief of staff after Al Haig, I thought he kind of combined the Haldeman process and the Haig process. And after he came back, he became a constructive influence, I thought, in making sure that the President’s policy was his, and providing access for everyone who had a legitimate reason to deal with the President. So I thought he did that well. I didn’t like the personal animosity that he was a party to with Hartmann. They really antagonistically disliked each other.

Smith: It’s almost as if they were put on the planet to annoy each other.

O’Neill: And it was like when there would be some silly thing where Rumsfeld thought he’d won the issue, he would revel in that, which I thought was really kind of small ball.

Smith: Nelson Rockefeller went to his grave convinced that Rumsfeld was largely responsible for his being dumped from the ticket.

O’Neill: I think that’s probably true. I thought Rumsfeld thought if he could be a secretary of Defense, maybe he could be the vice presidential candidate. And I think the Bush lockdown at CIA was his doing. He’s an unbelievably ambitious person.

Smith: It would get to the point where the vice president’s staff weren’t given parking places. That level of pettiness. Well, it works two ways. True story, someone who was there swears it’s true. Rockefeller, one day, who got less inhibited with age.

O’Neill: That’s true. Some of the things he did were…
Smith: In some ways, he didn’t age well. The lifelong discipline just sort of relaxed. But he would walk by Rumsfeld’s office first thing in the morning, open the door, and say, “Rummy, you’re never going to be vice president.”

O’Neill: I believe that. I was a great fan of Nelson Rockefeller’s.

Smith: What did you like about him?

O’Neill: I liked the fact that he didn’t have to do anything with his life and he devoted his whole life to trying to make the world a better place. I mean, whether you agreed with the things he did, he was truly an unchained believer in the idea of a great society. And in his own way, that’s what he tried to do in New York. He was flamboyant, but he was a real student of public policy. He went to the depths and details of public policy. I’ll tell you a story about Nelson Rockefeller. This is 1973. Roy Ash is then the director of OMB; George Schultz has gone to be the secretary of the Treasury, so Roy Ash comes in.

This is like in March of 1973, Nelson Rockefeller comes down to meet with people in the White House. Roy Ash’s office was in the White House in those days because he didn’t want to see himself as diminished because George Schultz had had an office in the White House. So Roy Ash had insisted he had to have an office. I’ll never forget, Nelson came in, Roy Ash asked me to come. Nelson was there to plead for an operating subsidy for the New York transit system. So after he made his pitch, Roy said, “Paul, why don’t you tell him what you think?” So I went through this elaborate analysis of why it was a bad idea. “It might be good for New York, but do you understand, Governor, because of the way revenues flow to the government and the way they are then distributed, if we do what you’re wanting to do, we’re going to be taking money from the people in Louisiana and sending it to New York City to subsidize the subway riders and that’s simple inequitable. It’s not something we should consciously do. It’s just wrong federal policy.”

He laughed and he said, “Let me tell you why you’re wrong, Mr. O’Neill. Here’s why you’re wrong. If we have to raise the subway fee,” (and I think it was from thirty-five to fifty cents or something), “we’re not going to get enough votes in New York City as that we can offset upstate the negative
votes with positive votes from and we’re all going to get thrown out of office. That’s why we need an operating subsidy.” You know, so he understood it wasn’t the right thing to do, but, by God, we can’t afford to lose our offices. But it was the candor and the honesty of all of that, of saying, I know this is not the right thing to do, but I’ve got to plead this case.

Smith: And this was a guy at the end of fifteen years of the governorship who also knew that he had stretched beyond the limits what a state could do.

O’Neill: Absolutely. Anyway, I liked Nelson Rockefeller. I guess Jim Cannon, or somebody, told me that when Rumsfeld went to Defense, the Vice President went to the President and said, “O’Neill should be the chief of staff, not Cheney.”

Smith: Really? That’s interesting.

O’Neill: Ask Jim about that.

Smith: I will. That’s very interesting. Dorothy Downton, whom Rumsfeld tried to get fired, contrasts the prevailing mood of the White House under Rumsfeld and under Cheney as being, at least relatively speaking, more relaxed. From her perspective it was a more pleasant work environment.

O’Neill: But it was interesting. I remember one time after – no I guess it was when Rumsfeld was still chief of staff – and we were in Jim Lynn’s office in the Old Executive Office Building debating some policy thing, and the secretary came in and said, “Mr. Rumsfeld, Mr. Cheney is on the phone for you.” And so Rumsfeld picked up the phone, put it up to his mouth and said, “Speak.” It was so rude and unnecessary, I was just astounded how somebody could be like that.

Smith: He also struck me as someone of great intellectual gifts, that weren’t quite matched to people skills.

O’Neill: It’s interesting, though. He and I were successive chairmen of the Rand Corporation. Did you know that?

Smith: No, I did not.
O’Neill: Yeah, our paths have intertwined a long time, in a lot of different ways.

Smith: Were you surprised by the pardon?

O’Neill: I would say a different word – rather than being surprised – I guess I was stunned. It was a Sunday morning and the sun was out and it was such a relief to be out from under the awful conditions of the Nixon administration. And those first thirty days were so great working with President Ford because he started right in. You can look at the logs and see I spent more time with him than I did with my wife from August of ’74 until January of ’77.

Smith: What was his mood during that first month?

O’Neill: Energy. We were soaking it up. Get in here and get me briefed about all the things I don’t really know about. Because there were a whole lot of things even – I shouldn’t say even as vice president – his role of vice president was out there doing a lot of speeches and things like that. And now it was substantive time and, wow, was he ever ready for that. And so we hit the ground running with him. We spent endless hours with him in the Cabinet room and the Oval Office briefing every aspect of federal government policy – everything. So here it is, Sunday morning, life is good again, a President who cares about, and is really into, public policy issues, and he announces the pardon. And before the commentators started in, I guess I was close enough to it, I knew, this is the end of the honeymoon already.

While I wasn’t ready to be back in the fire, I was okay with the pardon. I thought getting this out of the way is really an important thing to do, and I guess I didn’t fully understand the political implications of people suspecting that this was a deal. It never occurred to me, Richard, that it was deal. I don’t care what anyone else says, I don’t think President Ford would have done that – it’s not in his character to do that kind of thing. So that never occurred to me, that it was a bargain for the presidency was what it was about. I don’t believe that, I don’t think it’s true. But I knew as soon as I heard the announcement we were back in the fire. And I really was not looking forward to being in the fire quite yet.

Smith: Did you have much contact with Mrs. Ford?
O’Neill: No, not very much. Indirectly, mostly. I talked to people who would speak to her. I just don’t want to bother her – and like people who get older, she has some good ones and some that are not so good.

Smith: But I mean back then, during the White House – obviously you were in different circles, but did you have any contact really aside from social events?

O’Neill: No, not a lot. But the kids were kind of part of the scene. I was in the Oval Office so much that I would frequently see Susan or Jack. Michael was away and he was living in Pittsburgh, I didn’t see too much of him, except at occasions. Steve was not really around much; at least not as visible as Jack and Susan were. Susan was around a lot because she was an acolyte for Kennerly -

Smith: Who was a virtual member of the family.

O’Neill: Absolutely.

Smith: What does that tell you about Ford? Remember when Saigon was falling?

O’Neill: I’ll tell you a story about Kennerly. This is about the Mayaguez incident. So there are a whole bunch of people around the Cabinet room and they are deciding what to do about the Mayaguez, whether we’d have to declare war or send the battleships in. And Kennerly, who was shooting photographs, said something in a pause in the conversation like, “Maybe they didn’t mean it. Maybe it was unintentional.” And it completely changed the conversation. It turned out he was right. But that intervention that really probably changed the course of history around the Mayaguez incident was probably Kennerly’s intervention. If Okamoto or Ollie Atkinson, who was Nixon’s photographer, had done that, they would have been second guessed out of the world. Right? Nixon would never have accepted that.

Smith: When Saigon is about to fall, he sends General Wayland but he sends Kennerly with him because he knows he’ll get an unvarnished report.

O’Neill: Absolutely, from a guy who’s been there and knows what it looks like.

Smith: A very unorthodox presidential representative.
O’Neill: Absolutely.

Smith: Did he have a sense of humor?

O’Neill: Absolutely. I’m trying to think of illustrations. It kind of disappears with time because it’s topical, you know what I mean? It wasn’t Tip and Reagan sitting around telling dirty stories to each other, he didn’t do that. But it was whimsy and it was a little mild tug at the ends of your mouth, not about falling down on the floor rolling in laughter. A kind of quiet humor.

Smith: Did he talk sports? In the winter on weekends, don’t disturb him when he’s watching football.

O’Neill: Yeah, I know he really loved sports. But I don’t really remember – just passing things – again were topical – did you get to see that last night. But not that we’d just sit there and talk about sports.

Smith: Maybe this is off the wall, but one of the things that have always intrigued me, is to the degree to which he was sensitive and/or resentful of the portrayal of him – the Saturday Night Live, Chevy Chase business. The stumbling, bumbling, portrayal, which in turn fed into the whole question about his intelligence.

O’Neill: I think at the time, it’s hard to know without him as a witness, but I think he saw it as a gag and it’s what people on television do. I don’t think he understood how serious it was from the point of view of insolence and people’s opinion. He never could accept the idea that people would – I don’t think the staff ever figured it out either - that when he went skiing he was going to fall once in a while. He was an expert skier, but he was going to fall once in a while and the television would get it. Right? And they would not show him whizzing down the Black Diamond slopes of Vail, they would show him falling down. He never really got that and I think he was such a gifted athlete, he never understood how they could make his missing a step coming down the stairs on Air Force One, or bumping his head on a helicopter, this is what it’s like 24 hours a day with President Ford. He couldn’t get it that people were accepting those vignettes, kind of snapshots,
of this is the real President Ford. I don’t think he ever got that, Richard.
Because it wasn’t true.

Smith: And again, as I say he was not self-dramatizing. He wasn’t a PR type; that aspect of the presidency for some reason eluded him.

O’Neill: He was not a theatrical speaker. Probably the best speech he ever gave was the ’76 convention speech. It was really well done and delivered with enthusiasm. I thought it was a great speech.

Smith: By the end of that campaign, did you think he had caught up? Did you think there was a real chance?

O’Neill: I thought it was going to be close, but I thought he had a real shot at it. But if you remember, it was not just about Watergate. It was about the state of the economy.

Smith: The weekend before the election there were economic numbers that came out. Greenspan famously referred to “The Pause” in economic recovery. And I’ve often thought at the very last minute whether that engendered doubt.

O’Neill: It certainly didn’t help. So after that the Congress had hearings. I was still around until January and there were some people on the Hill who believed that the Office of Management and Budget had held back funds so that the economic recovery would not be what it should have been, which was unbelievable to me. But I went up and testified about where the funds are and how they are flowing and all the rest of that and believe it or not, we don’t send money out in wheelbarrows if we don’t owe bills.

Smith: Did it take him a while to bounce back from losing? He said, “I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer.” I just wondered if you noticed any change.

O’Neill: He just seemed to me to go on. I’m sure it hurt a hell of a lot, but I never saw it in his behavior or in his interest. Right away he started engaging me in what do you think about the budget documents and are we doing the right thing about public policy? There is something else that occurs to me as I’m telling you this. He got an award at the Lotus Club maybe some place between 1983 and 1985, and I only remember this because I was one of the testimonial
givers and I think I’ve got a video tape of that at home with other people
talking about President Ford. And he was there. This was to honor him in a
very elite, whatever that means, crowd. I’ll have to dig around and see if I can
find that for you because it might be helpful.

Smith: That would be great to see.

O’Neill: I saw him then, increasingly with the formation of the Ford Foundation and
had reasons to see him on a regular basis. But he spent his energy on other
things. I think he was a great contributing board member on the boards he was
on.

Smith: Do you think he took a bum rap for serving on boards.

O’Neill: I do, but what the hell, he had knowledge and wisdom and judgment to bring
to bear and why not?

Smith: And by all accounts, he took it very seriously.

O’Neill: Absolutely. He was not a free rider, absolutely not. He brought something to
the party.

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

O’Neill: It probably was at the last dinner that he attended.

Smith: For instance, the 90th birthday, they had the dinner at the White House.

O’Neill: I was there. I have pictures from there.

Smith: That must have been a very special occasion.

O’Neill: It was great. It was the first time I had gone back to the White House after I
got fired.

Smith: Oh really?

O’Neill: Yeah. Henry Kissinger said to me that night, “Pretty brave of you to be here.”
And I said to him, “I’m here for President Ford, not for President Bush.” But
it’s interesting, President Bush kept saying, “God, you look great!” So I said
to him, “You know, why not?”
Smith: How do you think President Ford should be remembered?

O’Neill: In the broad sense, as a value-based human being, who cared in every way about his country first and foremost, and about his family, of course. But history may heal this, I think maybe he was one of our most important presidents because he served under unprecedented circumstances and he did it with distinction and honor.

Smith: You said earlier that he never disappointed you.

O’Neill: Absolutely, in anything he did. I never thought this is really small bore for President Ford. I never saw him do anything that I would say didn’t pass muster as the right thing. And that includes his behavior toward people. I never saw small things from him. He never put people down. He never made people feel small. That’s a really important human quality. He never did that to anyone.
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Smith: What does it feel like to be back in this room?

Circle: It’s very difficult. I spent so much time in this room with him, and every time I’d walk in after he passed away, I couldn’t stay in here long because I really feel his presence in here.

Smith: He spent a lot of years in this room, didn’t he?

Circle: Yeah, exactly. It is very hard, even when I walked in today.

Smith: How did it all begin for you?

Circle: For me? Through a mutual friend who asked me if I would like to go out with Bob Barrett on a date. I had seen his picture and I said, “No, thank you.” And he said, “Well, you know he works for President Ford.” And I said – and this was only when President Ford was coming back and forth – he was still in office.

Smith: Oh, he was still in the presidency? Okay.

Circle: This was in 1977 – or he had just left in ’77.

Smith: That’s right, the beginning of ’77.

Circle: So it was ’76 that I first had been offered that wonderful opportunity…So I said, “No, no, I don’t care to go out with him.” And at the end of ’76 they came out here and for some reason, I was introduced to Bob Barrett. I was some place and he walked in and I was with my male friend, and he introduced me to Bob. So Bob and I (does all of this get printed?)

Smith: You’ll see a transcript – this will all be printed and you’ll have a chance to look over the whole transcript.

Circle: Will someone see this other than us before I see it again?
Smith: No.

Circle: Okay, because I don’t know if this should be part of it.

Smith: Don’t worry about it because you’ll have an opportunity – within reason, yes – you will have an opportunity.

Circle: So anyway, Bob asked me out and I went out with him for dinner, and he kind of indicated that he’d like to take me out again. He also had talked to me about the job, that possibly in the future I could get a job here, which was right up my alley. So, I said, “I’ll tell you what, the job is going to last longer than a relationship with you would, and I would really prefer to have the job.” And he said okay. So, we’d date from time to time and I met all of his friends and we’d all go out in groups and all of that.

Then a relative died in the San Francisco Bay area, and I went up for the funeral and Bob and all of his friends and President Ford were all going to be at the Bing Crosby Golf Tournament, which is what it was called at the time. So Bob called me and said, “We’re coming up to San Jose, President Ford wants to look at some property he has. We’ll pick you up and bring you down to the Bing Crosby – you were going home today, weren’t you?” I said, “Yes,” so they came and picked me up and took me down to the Bing Crosby, and so I followed President Ford around.

But the night I got there, it was the night of Jimmy Carter’s State of the Union address, and they whooshed me into the house, and sat me down and there was President Ford. I’d never met him before. He stood up and he said, “Hello.” He was very interested in the speech. After that they invited me to dinner, so Bob Barrett pushed me into the car with President Ford.

I had no idea what to talk to him about, I’d never met him, and he was just very friendly and very social and very nice. We went into dinner and I sat there with fifteen men and me and everybody in the whole restaurant – I mean it was an experience I’d never had before. It was very interesting. And that’s how I got to know President Ford. A couple of months later, Bob Barrett called and said, “I’d like to offer you the job.”
Smith: What was the job – the original job?

Circle: As a staff assistant. I would do scheduling. Well, I guess I was doing scheduling – it was with another person.

Smith: And how was the office organized in those days?

Circle: There were about fourteen people in the office at that point. There were about three people in the very front office in the reception area, and then Bob Barrett and Dick Wennekamp were in the office that I acquired. Then the scheduling office was the next office – there were two of us in there. Then Mrs. Ford’s assistant and then President Ford’s personal secretary, who was right here where Shelli is. And then the mailroom had a couple of desks in it – and two desks in the hallway. So there were a lot of people here at that time.

Smith: So, obviously this building was standing before they built the house?

Circle: No. Well, yes, the building was standing. It was Ginger Rogers’ mother’s house. They renovated it into an office, as you can tell. You can tell this had to be a house at one time. While they were building his house, and Leonard Firestone owned this property, and bought this house and then gave it to USC. Then we leased it from USC – the Secret Service and we – through GSA-leased it from USC.

Smith: This property. But their home was separate.

Circle: But their home, President Ford bought from Leonard Firestone. But he figured that we needed an office and a place for Secret Service, and then the gate was put up and that sort of thing. You’ve seen Leonard’s house, right?

Smith: I’m not sure which is Leonard’s house.

Circle: The third one down. Well, when we leave here I’ll drive by there for you.

Smith: Oh, okay. Clearly Leonard is a very important part of this whole story, isn’t he?

Circle: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: Had they been friends before the Fords came out here?
Circle: Oh, yes. Yes, in fact, I think that’s one of the reasons they moved out here. I think Leonard was pretty instrumental in getting them to move out here. They leased a house in Thunderbird Heights while this was being built, and then the office was up the block. In fact, some friends of mine had owned the house, and sold it to Pat Priest, I guess her name was, and then she leased it to whomever – probably GSA for President Ford’s office. Then they came in and the year that I started, I started May 1, 1978, and we moved into this building, probably mid-May. So I originally worked in that building when I started.

Smith: Was it the 20th or the 25th anniversary when he gave you your pardon?

Circle: I have it. It’s going up in my office at home. It was my 20th anniversary, yes. He gave me my pardon. Well, that was very interesting because on my 20th anniversary I wrote a letter to President and Mrs. Ford and told them that, “I know that all these years he thought that I was one of Bob Barrett’s girlfriends,” – but that I really hadn’t been, and I wanted them to finally know that. Because I’m not really sure – I think President Ford, when I started here, he was very, very leery of me. I had to prove myself.

Smith: How so?

Circle: By working twice as hard as everyone else. Because he made a comment, at least Bob Barrett told me that he made a comment. I think it was Bob that told me that, that said, “I don’t want some (he said bimbo, but President Ford never would have used that word) walking around here, tossing her hair around while all these people are working so hard.” But he came to find out that I was probably the hardest worker around here.

Smith: He was a workaholic, wasn’t he?

Circle: He was, absolutely.

Smith: You were in here on Saturdays?

Circle: Not every Saturday, but – when I started here, I probably had a day off in the first five years – I probably had one day off – if that, a week. If that. There were days I worked all the way through – twenty-four hours.
Smith: And what was the volume of work that sustained that?

Circle: He traveled six out of seven days. He traveled Mondays through Saturdays. Sometimes he’d come home on Saturdays. But the travel, we would do scheduling for him at the conference table. We would probably have to do – I can’t remember how many schedules – probably thirty or forty, forty-five – and I would put them all around the table. If there was a mistake or a change to be made mid-schedule, I would have to start typing from the first page if I couldn’t cut and paste and make it work. It was an extraordinary job in those days. It was unbelievable. I just don’t know how we managed with the travel that he did.

Smith: What was that travel for?

Circle: Speeches. Board meetings – no, he didn’t do board meetings until after the ’80 election. But meetings, and mostly speaking engagements, I think. And then, campaigning – he would campaign every year. He campaigned in ’78 and ’80 and that sort of thing.

Smith: That was before his rapprochement with Jimmy Carter.

Circle: Yes. Well, you know, when we went to Detroit for the convention in 1980, you know what happened there. The co-presidency with Reagan.

Smith: What’s your recollection of that, because it’s been reported a number of ways.

Circle: Oh, I remember it well.

Smith: What do you remember?

Circle: We were in the suite, pretty much the whole time. I have pictures of it. We’d sit around and we were kind of bored. Leon Parma was there, Bob Phinney and his wife were there, Leon Parma and his wife, and President Ford and I were sitting at a table and we’d work and do – I really don’t know what kind of work we had, but we had piles of work to do when we were there. We didn’t have mail or anything in Detroit, so I’m not sure what we worked on, but he would sit down with me and we’d work and go through
correspondence and that sort of thing. And it was kind of boring. Jack Marsh and all of those people would come in and out.

Now, mind you, I was new then and I was not, I guess my job – I had been promoted by then – so I was second in line after Bob Barrett, but I really wasn’t involved and I didn’t know all the players then. But Stu Spencer and Jack Marsh and all of the heavyweights – Henry Kissinger were in and out of there all the time. Henry Kissinger stayed there a lot of the time because he was in my pictures. Nothing was happening and I don’t think President Ford seriously considered it – at least from my perspective. And we were all saying, I would look at someone and say, what are we going to call him? President Ford, Vice-President, you know, what you call him after he’s been President of the United States. And I think he kind of felt that way, too.

The co-presidency – there’s no way it would be a co-presidency with Reagan – and considering the background, this is from my perspective now, I’m telling you. I can’t imagine that could ever have happened – and I remember sitting there for a long time and nothing was going on and I looked at the television – we were watching the television constantly, and I decided, “Oh, there’s nothing happening, I’m going to go downstairs and change clothes and shower;” and I’d be back because we’d have to go to dinner eventually.

This was quite late – and time for the convention to start, so it was what – seven, eight o’clock. And I went downstairs – I had to go down two elevators. I got in the shower, came out and I had a towel around me and I was trying to figure out what I was going to wear, and Dan Rather said, “The decision’s been made. Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford are getting into the limousines to go to Convention Hall.” I went, “Oh, my God!” There I was, standing in a towel and I’d been waiting for days and days for this to happen. This isn’t about me – and so I rushed, I got dressed real quick, I got in the elevator, got in the next elevator, ran into the suite, and everybody is still sitting there watching television. I mean, Dan Rather, that was his first big faux pas, it really was, and I mean, more to come…but that was his first big one. And then it was just announced that he had picked Bush, and so it was really kind of unremarkable to me – the whole thing. Behind the scenes, I’m sure there
was a lot going on, but President Ford was pretty much in the suite the whole time.

Smith: Barrett left when?

Circle: He left after that. I think he really thought President Ford would become president again in 1980. He thought that they would draft him, he could really get the draft going and all of that. And he didn’t want President Ford to be a board member – that’s why I changed that a little earlier, saying no, he didn’t have boards then. Because that would have been bad if he was going to run for president again. But after all of that happened in Detroit and all of that – I think Bob left that year, or maybe the beginning of ’81 – no, I think he left the end of 1980.

Smith: Now, the president took some heat over “commercializing” the ex-presidency.

Circle: He did.

Smith: Some of that was siphoned off on to Bob. How much of that was fair? I’m asking for a value judgment, I realize. But let’s break it down. The boards, you know, that’s a different category altogether, it seems to me, because he took them seriously and obviously worked at it and what’s wrong with doing that?

Circle: There’s a lot of blame to go around on that. But President Ford is the least to blame, because he was very naïve about all of that when he came out of the White House.

Smith: In what sense?

Circle: Money. And earning money and what anything was worth, and that sort of thing. And he was pretty much brainwashed to think that he should expect and deserve everything. Okay? I saw that happening and, I’m not speaking out of school here, but to make $25,000 for a speech was like “unbelievable” to him, in comparison to now when you look at what Clinton is making. That was unbelievable.
Harry Walker was his speaking agent and he was pretty brutal, too. He was a tough guy. I don’t know if you knew his reputation or knew about him, but he was a really tough guy. He and Bob, together, really got these speaking engagements going and he made a lot of money. The thing is that President Ford was also told that he should expect private planes, and that sort of thing and he was very uncomfortable with that at first. But started to believe that this is what was expected of a former president – or that he should expect that kind of treatment. Did I answer your question?

Smith: Yeah, well, it’s interesting because it seems as if he almost had to learn the job of being an ex-president.

Circle: He did. There was really no precedent for what he was doing before that. Let’s see – Nixon – there really was no precedent, so he had to learn it all.

Smith: Plus, two things. He left office without any money.

Circle: Right.

Smith: Had a family to provide for.

Circle: Right.

Smith: And the other big thing that people don’t take into consideration is, all of a sudden he was told: You have to raise X million dollars to build a library and museum. And I know he was quoted as saying that was the toughest thing he ever did. In those days, again, by comparison – it was like nine million to build a museum and then whatever the library cost. But he had to raise it as a defeated, former president.

Circle: Right.

Smith: And a lot of those speaking fees went to the Foundation.

Circle: Well, and not only that, he worked hard for his money, Richard. I mean, he prepared for those speaking engagements. He really worked hard for that. It wasn’t as if anyone was giving him something for nothing. It wasn’t as if he went on these things and partied all week and went to the spa, and all of that. He worked very hard. So, I don’t begrudge him that, and no one should,
except that was the first time it ever happened. And so they accused him. Tom DeFrank is one of the people that said it at that point. He did an article about how much President Ford made.

Smith: Was he sensitive about it?

Circle: Yes, he was – very.

Smith: Of course, another thing that people didn’t take into consideration were all the college campuses and the charity work that he did – which didn’t get the kind of publicity that the paid engagements did.

Circle: Exactly. And that was when anybody would call, I would always use that – the charitable work that he did, the academic work that he did. And he did a great job on raising money for the library and museum. He did, he worked very hard for that. That was his baby, it really was. You know that.

Smith: About the decision to split the facility – that’s what you’d expect a congressman to do.

Circle: I just never understood that.

Smith: Well, because you don’t want to alienate anyone, so, like Solomon, you split the baby.

Circle: I’m telling you, a couple of years ago, when it was brought up again, he said, no, I don’t want to do that. He was adamant about that.

Smith: Yeah. Well, that was the model. He created it. He was comfortable with it. Obviously at that point the Ford School didn’t really exist in the way that it does now. But the university held a very special place in his heart, didn’t it?

Circle: Oh yes, up until the very end, it still did. It is very strange. Sometimes I still think he’s here. I speak about him in the present and it’s been so much a part of my life for so many years, it’s hard to believe it’s over sometimes.

Smith: Someone said, I think today, that he really, in those last months, almost every day would say, I’m going to Ann Arbor for the dedication of the school.
Circle: Oh, he did. Definitely. He really planned to go and he was going to go, except that he had, I can’t remember what happened that week, I believe that he got very ill, I think he might have had pneumonia or something like that, and he couldn’t go. Oh that was the biggest disappointment of his life. He was just devastated by that. And really, he shouldn’t have gone. It was so cold, do you remember?

Smith: I wasn’t there.

Circle: No, I know, but I’m sure you knew.

Smith: Yeah.

Circle: It was so cold he could never have survived that. He was not in good health at all to have survived that.

Smith: Tell me about his sense of humor.

Circle: Well, he had a very odd sense of humor. I know I would sit here - sometimes I could make him laugh. It would just depend upon the mood, or the subject, or whatever. I knew the things that could really make him laugh. But sometimes we’d be going through stuff and I’d make a comment that would just absolutely crack me up. You don’t usually laugh when you say something funny, but it would just crack me up and I’d look at him and he’d just be looking at me like it just went right over his head and I could never understand that. He had a good sense of humor. But there were certain things that made him laugh more than others, which I can’t recall at the moment.

Smith: There were certain TV programs that they watched together. And I know they enjoyed going to New York and to the theater.

Circle: Yes, he used to watch Steve on the Young and the Restless soap opera every day when Steve was on. Yes – did you hear that? Oh, yeah, well Steve was in this soap opera for years and we’d turn it on at eleven o’clock every morning and he would watch him. He’d work, but he would watch him. Football game, he’d sit right there in the chair and watch the Michigan football game.

Smith: And there was no chit chat.
Circle: Don’t talk to him. Don’t ever talk to him when you’re watching. I’d walk in the door and I’d look and I’d close the door and go. I mean, I don’t care how important it was. The world could be coming to an end and he’d yell at me if I said one word to him.

Smith: I think they saw *The Producers* in New York.

Circle: Yes, they did.

Smith: They enjoyed it?

Circle: Yes, very much. They really enjoyed their trips to New York. They had to stop it after a certain period of time, but they’d go every fall, and she’d do some Christmas shopping, and they really enjoyed that trip.

Smith: Well, I guess they both had happy memories of New York, too, from long ago.

Circle: May I tell you a really nice story – a Mrs. Ford story?

Smith: Yes.

Circle: It’s kind of about me, but it’s a really nice story.

Smith: That’s fine.

Circle: In 1979, I think it was, maybe it was in 1980, we went to New York and she was losing her secretary and she was going to interview some people on the East Coast. She was invited to a party at Halston’s penthouse. I don’t remember the reason for the trip – oh, I guess she did something with Martha Graham, because Martha Graham was there and she and Martha Graham were in a limo together at one point. So I went with her. We stayed at the Waldorf and then we went to Halston’s for dinner. Elizabeth Taylor and Liza Minnelli and a few people came over prior to the dinner and then we all went over to Halston’s and had dinner.

I mean, it was just celebrities from wall to wall, and then we went to Studio 54. There was Mrs. Ford, and she was so attractive, she looked so good, with Elizabeth Taylor and Halston and all these people – Liza Minnelli and a
whole group of people. I was with Chris Chase, who wrote their book with her – both books, I believe, with her. We went into the ladies room, and of course there were all the lines of coke in there. I had no idea what that was, because I’d never seen coke before. I’d never been around it. It was just never in that area in my life. Anyway, Mrs. Ford and I laughed about that later. She said, “What did you do?” and I said, “Well, there was powder all over and I just went (blew).” And she said, “Oh! You didn’t do that!” And I said, “No, no, I’m just kidding.”

Anyway, we’re going home and I think it was that night, and it was late, and she said, “You’ve never been to New York before have you?” And I said, “No, I haven’t.” She said, “Let’s go to Fifth Avenue,” and she made the agents go to Fifth Avenue and I remember St. Patrick’s because they drove us there. I think Saks Fifth Avenue, and all these stores were on the other side of the street, and we walked and we window shopped down Fifth Avenue so she could show it to me. She was telling me all about the first time she went there with Martha Graham and all of that. It was really a nice trip. It was really something I’ll never forget.

Smith: Tell us about Phyllis Brown.

Circle: I can’t really tell you about Phyllis Brown.

Smith: Okay. The only reason I asked was, supposedly she, late in life, I guess, contacted the office about dropping by and it was politely suggested that probably…

Circle: I’ll tell you that story. Okay? I mean, she contacted the office quite frequently. Now I don’t know if we should put this in here or not.

Smith: When you see the transcript you can…

Circle: Nobody will see it before I do?

Smith: No one will see it before you do, I guarantee you.

Circle: Okay. She got my name, so she would call me all the time. Which was good, because it’s better nobody else ever knew about this. She would write
occasionally, and I don’t know how I ever really found out who she was. Well, Jim Cannon interviewed her for his book, and Jim Cannon talked to me about her a lot, and he talked to her a lot. But she called and told me she was coming out here with her new boyfriend, an attorney from here, I guess. She wanted to see President Ford and he was kind of on the downswing at that time. It was a couple of years before he passed away. So I came in and I told him, and he said, “Well, what does she want?” I said, “Well, she has a boyfriend and she wants to stop by and say hello.” He said, “Oh, of course she does.”

Of course. I mean, this was the biggest thrill of her life – why she ever gave him up – so, he said, “Well, talk to me when you hear from her again.” And I said, “Okay.” And so, I did, and he said, “No.” I said, “Okay,” and I just left – don’t change your mind, you can’t change your mind. So then I told her and she got mad. She said, “I just don’t understand.” I said, “I’m sorry Phyllis, but he just doesn’t have the time today. It’s just a very difficult situation, he has so many people coming in and he’s involved in a project right now and it’s…” and I was just blah-blah – with anything that would come into my head. She bought it but she wasn’t happy. That really worried me because I thought, oh God, what is she going to do now. But she didn’t do anything, thank God.

Smith: Over the years, I guess the staff was reduced in size?

Circle: Yes, gradually.

Smith: Was there a kind of decrescendo in travel over time, or was he just as busy…

Circle: He was always busy, always busy. And the traveling – he always traveled a lot. He stopped doing the six days a week thing, which was really good because Mrs. Ford was so unhappy with him being gone so much.

Smith: You came onboard before the intervention?

Circle: No, right after. It was in April, I started in May.

Smith: Okay. Did he feel guilty at all – being away as much as he was – when they came back from the White House – leaving her in effect on her own…
Circle: I’m sure it did, and the way he treated his children, you knew that he felt guilty that he hadn’t spent the time with them that he should have. But that was his makeup. That was his being. If he felt guilty, he’d make it up with other things.

Smith: Including time, toward the later years. Steve is maybe the most obvious example, they spent a lot of time together?

Circle: Well, not a lot. Not like some families. You know what I mean? But more than he ever had before, okay. Steve would come and they would sit and talk, and spend time together and all of that. But, I’m telling you, as guilty as he may have felt about it, he couldn’t change it. It was just within him and that was his life. And that’s what kept him active, that’s what kept him young, that’s what kept him on top of it. He just had to do that.

Smith: Did you ever see him with Nixon?

Circle: Never.

Smith: Or Reagan?

Circle: No, but I heard about his trip with Reagan. He went over to see him after he’d had Alzheimer’s.

Smith: What did he say?

Circle: He said he didn’t know him. It was very difficult. But I’ve learned so much about their relationship. Before I knew anything about their relationship, I assumed that the reason for the bitterness – this has nothing to do with the Fords, this is just my feeling about it – that they knew he had Alzheimer’s, and they knew that if he was going to be President of the United States, he had to do it when he wanted to do it. And for President Ford to get the nomination, they were too bitter. You know, people are bitter, but there has to be a reason for that deep bitterness that Nancy and Ronald Reagan had – not Ronald Reagan as much as she had. Now maybe I’m totally wrong, but they just didn’t have a warm relationship and they blamed him. Look at the things she’s said since, really, really nasty things about them.
Smith: You read the DeFrank book and you get the sense that the president’s attitude, whatever resentment he may have felt since ’76, sort of was washed away once the Reagan Alzheimer’s diagnosis appeared.

Circle: He never showed any animosity towards them to me. You make little comments from time to time, when you’re talking about something, and he would make little comments, but he never showed any bitterness or bad feelings towards them at all. He was a remarkable man. He really was. I learned so much from him in his acceptance of everyone, no matter who it was. He never held a grudge. You know how he’d get mad? Then it would be over with, and it would be completely forgotten.

Smith: How much of that – because politically you saw that – we talked about this - the Republican Party sort of went over here, and I don’t know whether he changed, whether she influenced him to become in some ways more liberal, particularly on social issues, but, they were who they were and they were quite outspoken. And they seemed to be quite comfortable with where they were and if the rest of the party wanted to go over there, that was okay. How much of that just him being him? Did he change over time?

Circle: No. He’s the most disciplined human being I’ve ever seen in my life. When I quit smoking, I quit cold turkey, and everybody thought it was the most remarkable thing in the world. He did that with everything. He quit smoking, he quit drinking. He loved to have a cocktail and he was funny as can be when I first started here and we’d be places and he would have a couple of drinks and somebody would make him laugh. He had the best laugh. Have you ever heard that laugh? I don’t think you’d hear it very often after that. But he just quit that. Nothing bothered him. He thought that was the thing to do, and he would do it. There are very few people on this earth who have discipline like that. It’s incredible. And for her. He didn’t have a problem with drinking, but because she couldn’t, he didn’t.

Smith: Pro-choice, that was controversial, but it was something that grew out of the ‘70s, and something with which they were long associated. To be as supportive of gay rights, in today’s Republican Party, was a different matter. Did they have friends who were gay?
Circle: I’m sure. I’m sure they did. I’m sure people that have worked for them have been gay. Those things did not bother him. Being pro-choice, gay rights, none of that bothered him. That’s the way – see he was not judgmental at all.

Smith: Different kind of conservative.

Circle: Yeah, he is. But, I tend to be pretty much that way, too. And maybe I even learned a little more from him. He was so equal with everyone. He was so much the same with everyone, including Clinton and Carter. He wasn’t partisan at all. I know too many people that are and the contrast is unbelievable.

Smith: Tell me about the evolution of his relationship with President Carter.

Circle: Oh, it happened on their trip to Sadat’s funeral. It happened on the airplane, and I don’t know – everyone asks about that – no one can understand how they could possibly be friends.

Smith: Well, I’ve often thought one thing that brought them together, was Ronald Reagan.

Circle: Yeah, exactly, that’s true.

Smith: But also, when you peel away the surface you realize in some ways, how similar at least their values were. Their backgrounds, workaholic, kind of rural faith, a mainly traditional, kind of rock ribbed family. They would have a lot in common if you could get beyond the fact that they ran against each other.

Circle: Well, yes, and you know, I kind of think – people would always comment on that relationship and I think President Ford kind of liked that. I think he kind of proved to everybody how magnanimous he really is. I really do, and I think that was just the example that he set to show people. Because he would always get this smile on his face when someone would say something to him about his relationship with Jimmy Carter. Because I think he knows what people think about Jimmy Carter.

Smith: And he had a very good relationship with the first President Bush.
Circle: Oh, yes. He had a pretty rocky relationship, I think, over the years, right? When he went to the CIA – Bush - just from what I’ve read.

Smith: Well, in fact, Bush was being a good soldier. The story was Don Rumsfeld was deep sixing Bush over at the CIA at the same time that he dumped Rockefeller from the ticket. And what it said was, Bush was the ultimate good soldier because the price of his confirmation as CIA director was to publicly renounce any interest in 1976. Which, of course, is exactly what Rumsfeld wanted to hear. So, not a rocky relationship, I think it would be a very good relationship, but to the Bushes, at that point in their lives, it would seem like, at the very least, a dead end. And yet, the president asked him to do it, so he did it.

Circle: I see. Well, I think then, Bush thought he’d never have an opportunity to be president.

Smith: But they’d been in the House together, and of course, President Ford knew his dad, Senator Prescott Bush.

Circle: Right. Bush is a good guy, ’41, a really good guy.

Smith: Was it difficult for him in the last few years dealing with the second Bush administration?

Circle: I think so. Let me tell you, we kept hearing that they were coming out here. Remember when he made the visit out here?

Smith: In the last year of the president’s life.

Circle: Yes. Do you know that I called Cheney’s office and said, “We haven’t heard from the White House. Are they really planning to come out here and not visit President Ford, because he can’t do that?” And she said, “Oh my God, you haven’t heard from anybody? I can’t believe that would happen.” I said, “Please do something, he’s got to come out.” Do you think he would have come out here and not met with President Ford?

Smith: No.

Circle: I mean, I can’t imagine that.
Smith: But when it did happen, by all accounts, it was a very…

Circle: It was very nice. Very warm. I was at the house when they were there with – who’s deputy chief of staff, do you know? I can’t think of his name right now, but he was there.

Smith: Was it Josh Bolton?

Circle: No, no. The other chief of staff – what was his name – Andy?

Smith: Andy Card.

Circle: Andy Card? It was his deputy, and I can’t remember his name, but he was a really nice guy. And we were sitting there and we were talking, and they had really nice visit. Very warm, as I said, and it was good. I don’t think President Ford was real happy with him in many instances, but that would never go any further than his house.

Smith: Was he uncomfortable about the war?

Circle: I don’t know. I could never get a feel for that with him, and I never asked him. I used to, early on, ask him what he thought about certain situations, but in the last few years, I really didn’t. I never went there with him.

Smith: Let’s talk about the Clinton story. Well, first of all, confirm that I guess President Clinton, shortly after becoming president, visited the Fords in Vail. Wasn’t that right? Or in Beaver Creek.

Circle: Right. That was nice.

Smith: And played golf.

Circle: They played golf and he did his normal, what do you call them, Mulligans. Clinton did, everybody in Vail was talking about it. I was in Europe at the time, but when I got back I got filled in quickly.

Smith: Then, when the whole impeachment business began, what did President Ford…
Circle: Oh my God, he was just appalled that Clinton would do what he had done. You know that, Richard. Well, you know how he felt about it, and the whole impeachment thing – he just said, “He has a real problem and he needs help, and he’d better get it.” He was disgusted by that whole thing. And I think it was a respect for the White House, the presidency and all the rest of it, and you know how he felt.

Smith: And yet, when the time came, he went out on a limb to write that Op-ed piece in the *Times* that proposed a very dignified ending to a pretty sordid situation.

Circle: He loved that. Yeah. That was just the answer for him.

Smith: And what was the response?

Circle: From Clinton?

Smith: Well, no. You took a lot of heat.

Circle: Not really.

Smith: I thought – Tom DeLay wrote you…

Circle: Oh, he wrote President Ford a terrible letter, oh yeah, he did. I forgot about that. Oh I wonder where that letter is. Is it in the library?

Smith: I don’t know.

Circle: It must be. It must be because he must have sent it to the library. Because otherwise I’d have it.

Smith: There were two letters from Tom DeLay, remember? There was the first letter in which he took him to task over why all this was unconstitutional. And then, just a couple weeks later, there was a second letter asking President Ford’s help in getting him into a golf course.

Circle: Oh, exactly. Oh Tom DeLay was a bad guy. He was such a bad guy. Even President Ford thought that. He thought that all along. The guy didn’t show anyone anything. But, no, we didn’t take much heat about that Clinton thing. Actually, most people agreed with him.
Smith: I wondered. Because on talk radio, the Rush Limbaugh’s and all of those folks, were really upset that…

Circle: But he didn’t care about that. Judy used to come in here and say, “You know what Rush Limbaugh said?” And he’d go, “I don’t really care.” Because he didn’t. He was never a conservative to that degree. That’s fanatical – it is. I mean for President Ford that was fanatical.

Smith: Yeah. I wish he’d known – I found out years later – when the article first appeared, there were people in the Clinton White House who thought it was a life preserver thrown to them.

Circle: Oh, yes, to Clinton, I’ve heard.

Smith: And, of course the Republicans on the House committee who were feeling their oats and didn’t see that they were about to go over the cliff, said, “Absolutely no way.” They were the impediment. Then come the mid-term elections where, guess what, Republicans don’t do as well as they expect, and at that point I’ve been told something by Lanny Davis - that at least two members of the Republican House committee, one of them was Lindsey Graham, said, after the election, “You know, maybe we should dust off President Ford’s proposal as a way of bringing this to a close.”

Circle: Really?

Smith: And by that point, the Clinton White House was feeling its oats and figured, hey, these bastards are going to impeach us anyway, let’s play it out. But if the two sides had been able to look beyond their passions.

Circle: I know – there was no other answer. That was the perfect answer. Anyway, he was very happy with that, and I didn’t get any grief from the media or anybody. It doesn’t even remain as a big thing in my mind, except how furious he was at Clinton.

Smith: But then, subsequently, I think the whole story of the impeachment proceeding itself - I was told, Bob Strauss called him at one point, and asked him on behalf of the White House, if he would be their witness in front of the House Judiciary Committee. Asked President Ford. This was after the article
appeared and Bob Strauss...there were going to be hearings before the House Judiciary Committee on impeachment and so each side would get to make a presentation. And they thought, we’ll have one witness, and we’ll get President Ford.

Circle: Really? I don’t remember that at all.

Smith: And he said, “Bob, I wrote the article, and when the time comes I’ll make phone calls, but that’s asking too much.” So they went ahead with the hearings and so on. And then subsequent to that, there was a telephone conversation with President Clinton – ending with President Clinton, in a very friendly way, suggesting that this idea is unconstitutional. They can’t do this. There is no precedent for this. As it was reconstructed for me, at that point the president said, “Bill, I spent twenty-five years up there, and in my experience, they can do pretty much anything they want.”

Circle: Really. See, I don’t know any of this. The Bob Strauss call, maybe I was aware that he called, but I don’t remember that. It was unremarkable to me, anything that happened after that. All I remember is that everyone was just so bowled over – especially, what’s her name? – not Yvonna – remember? She called me? What’s her name?

Smith: Arianna Huffington!

Circle: Huffington – I couldn’t think of her name. She called me and goes, “Penny (with Greek accent)” – what is her? – I can’t talk like her.

Smith: Greek – I don’t know – but very foreign.

Circle: Yeah, very foreign, like a phony, affected accent.

Smith: Maria Callas.

Circle: Yeah. “President Ford didn’t really write that OpEd.” And I know she was sitting there with Nancy Reagan, I know she was. I could just see them sitting there together and they are looking at each other – and I’m sitting at my desk and I have this mental image of them. And I said, “Yes, he did.” She said, “Ohhhh, no, he didn’t. Richard Norton Smith wrote it.” And I said, “President
Ford wrote it, Richard Norton Smith edited it.” She said, “No, no, no. Richard Norton Smith wrote it.” I said, “Well,” what’s her name again?

Smith: Arianna.

Circle: I can’t stand the woman, Arianna – I said, “Arianna, think whatever you like, President Ford wrote the article. He signed off on it.” And she said, “Oh, well, I know differently.” “Well, good.” I called you and told you that didn’t I? I mean, that woman, I can’t stand her.

Smith: Who were his friends?

Circle: Well, he has lots of different friends. And I think I mentioned this to you, Leonard Firestone was his really close friend. Leonard Firestone loved him dearly and he felt the same. Leonard would come over and sit in my office for hours at a time, and he’d turn his hearing aid off, and I’d be sitting there for an hour trying to talk to him. He would talk about what they’d done in the past, he and President Ford. When he appointed him ambassador to Belgium – Belgium, right? – and he would talk about him. He was a very close, probably his closest friend. People who were irreverent and could say anything. David Kennerly could walk in anytime and say anything he wanted to. But let me see, some of the people like Jim Greenbaum, like – I can’t gossip here because this is an oral history.

Smith: Oh, well…

Circle: And, I mean, Jim Greenbaum was in Vail and here, and so they did things. Jim really cares about President Ford.

Smith: And Bob Hope.

Circle: Oh, yeah, Bob Hope. He loved Bob Hope. But friends with President Ford, this is why I’m having a little trouble, were not the kind of “Come over for dinner, we’ll see you next week,” that sort of thing. A phone conversation, a golf game, maybe a social event where they all went to dinner together with their wives. The people Paul Jenkins, Wayne Hoffman, were fairly close friends. Fred Wilson was a good friend early on in the desert and Kirk Kerkorian is a good friend of Fred Wilson’s and so they would always come
to President Ford with business opportunities and that sort of thing, which kind of never came to fruition, or he’d do a speaking engagement for them. But Fred was a good friend early on. The Grand Rapids people – good friends. He had such a loyalty to Grand Rapids. And Sandy Weill was a very good friend.

Smith: Were there people back in Washington that he kept in close touch with?

Circle: Well, Sandy Weill was American Express and Citigroup – he made these two companies and he retired the year President Ford died, I think, in 2006. But he was a very good friend with President Ford.

The Vail people – like Bill Hamlin and, God, there are so many – the Stouffers, and Sheika and Pepi are very good friends. But President Ford never really pursued friendship because he didn’t have to. Do you know what I mean?

Smith: Sure.

Circle: He would never just call somebody out of the blue, or rarely. Marvin Davis was a good friend.

Smith: A number of times this week I’ve asked people to describe – this place in the 80s must have been – when you had Sinatra and Dinah Shore and Ginger Rogers was still around, and Alice Faye – all of these – Spiro Agnew was even out here – but …

Circle: Spiro Agnew and President Ford never got together. Did Lee Simmons mention Spiro Agnew? I think Spiro Agnew said something derogatory once to Lee Simmons – I think he saw him someplace and Spiro Agnew said, “Where do you work?” and he said, “I work for President Ford.” And he said, “Oh, that’s a shame,” or something like that. Spiro Agnew – why would he have a problem with President Ford? He really shouldn’t have, he’s the one that got in trouble. It wasn’t President Ford that made him do it. President Ford had nothing to do with becoming vice president. They never crossed paths, I don’t think – maybe once or twice, but –

Smith: How small a world is this?
Circle: It was smaller in 1980, much smaller. Frank Sinatra was at Susan’s wedding. I believe Bob Hope was there – I know he was invited. But there were a lot of celebrities.

Smith: Another thing – we’ve talked to a couple of your colleagues – seeing Bob Hope in his last years and how he was sort of trundled out, must have made a negative impression on his friends, including the President, and I just wonder whether they took that into account, thinking, God I hope that never happens to me.

Circle: Well, it was really sad because they kept dragging him out to that golf course for the Bob Hope Classic every year. The last year he was there I was making dinner and I turned the TV on, it was a news station, and they were having some Bob Hope thing, and a photographer was following him out. He went out to the golf course, and he was with the guy that was taking care of him, and they were walking and Bob Hope looks at him and says, “Where are we?” He said, “We’re on such and such a course. We’re going to go meet Jerry Ford and…” “Who’s that?” I went, “Oh my God.” I mean, it wasn’t on national news or anything, but I wonder how many people in the desert saw that. He was just gone, the poor man. He should never have been out there. My God, he was what - ninety-nine years old? The last time he went out there and he just couldn’t handle it. That was very sad. That was very hard on President Ford, too, I’m sure.

Smith: There are stories that - talk about generous – the word would come that Bob Hope would like to play golf with him, so they’d go out and play one hole, or maybe two holes…

Circle: Yeah, they did.

Smith: And then Bob Hope would want to lie down and President Ford would come back to the office until the call came that he was ready for the next hole.

Circle: Oh, no, I never heard that.

Smith: Oh, yeah, I heard that.

Circle: No – no, I don’t think so.
Smith: No? Okay.

Circle: No, President Ford didn’t ever go back out. He never would. He’d be too involved in what he was doing at his desk. I could see him going out and playing one or two holes with him, and he did that, I believe. I think it was Bob Hope, it was someone. He’d go over to Morningside and they’d play two holes and then that would be it.

Smith: I assume, once a Congressman, always a Congressman, which meant, the mail had to be answered pronto.

Circle: Oh, God. Within 48 hours. He had a staff meeting when I first started here and he said, “I want a turnaround within 48 hours,” of all the mail that came in. And the mail – piles and piles this high every day, but we did it. I still do that now. I’m still that conscientious about my own mail because I was inundated with mail. But, he would have to work Saturdays because he wanted his mail, and when the anthrax scare came – oh my God – Shelli and her husband, who was a Secret Service agent, put on those suits and went out and sorted the mail.

We didn’t get our mail on Saturdays because it was too much trouble. They would have to put them in a big barrel at the post office – put all the mail in a big barrel that was closed outside, and it was just too much to do it on Saturdays. There was not one Saturday – the week before a Saturday that we didn’t go through absolute hell with President Ford because he wanted to know why we weren’t going to be there Saturday to do the mail. And he couldn’t get that – so, yes, is that a congressional thing? He never got over that.

Smith: Yeah.

Circle: That was just so important to him.

Smith: Did the mail taper off over time?

Circle: Yeah, it did. The last couple of years when he wasn’t working – when he was not well enough to come in and work a lot, it started tapering off. Because people got the message and knew he wasn’t going to travel anymore and do
speeches, and once that happened, it started tapering off. Although there was still quite a volume in 2006.

Smith: And he wasn’t the most mechanically inclined of people – is that fair to say?

Circle: No.

Smith: Telephones were a challenge.

Circle: Oh, God! You know my story, don’t you? He’d pick up the phone – I have to do this for you – you don’t have to move…

Circle: He’d pick up the phone – [demonstrates] “I would like you to speak with Penny. Okay, hold on, I’ll get her for you.” [clicking noise] Get up, go down the hall, “Penny, Penny,” he’d say, [clicking noises] “there’s a call for you.” I’d say, “What?” He’d say, “There’s a call for you.” And I’d look down at the phone and there was nothing blinking, so I’d have to come in and hang up the phone and go back and put it on hold, and go back to my desk. Isn’t that funny? He just didn’t get that for the longest time. The last couple of years he finally got it and he learned how to put it on hold. But he could never program a VCR or anything. And had a little trouble remembering how to do this – no he wasn’t mechanically inclined, but he didn’t have to be.

Smith: And computers?

Circle: Oh, yeah. I used to play bridge with him on his computer. And he could get his e-mail with help. But when he first got his computer, to get him to learn how to use it, I would come in here for about an hour, maybe three times, four times a week, and we’d play bridge on the computer and he loved that, because he loved playing bridge. And he really didn’t play bridge much in the years I was here. I don’t think he ever did. But apparently they had played quite a bit before.

Smith: How special was that day at the Kennedy Library in 2001 with the Profiles in Courage Award?

Circle: So special. Weren’t you involved in that? Okay.

Smith: He wasn’t going to go.
Circle: When he got the initial call, he wasn’t going to go. And I came in and told him and he said no. He said, “I’m just not traveling that much anymore.” I said, “President Ford, this is so important.” And he said, “No.” And I knew I wasn’t going to push it right then. I’d come back. When he said no, you don’t argue with him. It just makes it worse. He’s adamant at the moment.

Smith: I got a call from Ken Duberstein.

Circle: And then did you call me? And then we put him on the phone with Kennedy, right - Ted Kennedy?

Smith: Well, I think the strategy was – what is it going to take to impress upon him, and I think we agreed that Mrs. Ford was crucial.

Circle: Really? I thought we had Kennedy call him.

Smith: He may have. I don’t remember. But I do remember the call from Ken and clearly, she might have a more instinctive appreciation. He was so modest – that was part of it, too – that this was – to us – the ultimate vindication. But he wouldn’t see it that way.

Circle: He wasn’t thinking that way – and then once he realized what this was about, then it was no question at all. But I remember you calling me and I said, “Yeah, I talked to him and he said no,” and I said, “but I’ll go back.” And then I thought Kennedy would call him, and when he talked to Ted Kennedy he said, “Oh, sure, I’ll be there.” But, see, he wasn’t processing it. He wasn’t thinking what that was, at all.

Smith: Yeah. And then when it actually happened…

Circle: Oh, he never got over that. That was just total vindication for him.

Smith: Both the Senator and Caroline, they could not have been nicer, and I’m sure he never knew what a controversy it sparked internally in the Kennedy Foundation.

Circle: It did? Oh I didn’t know that. I always wondered about that.
Smith: If you notice, remember, he shared the podium with John Lewis, and that was – which was great, it turned out to be wonderful, but they created this lifetime achievement award to placate the people on the board who were opposed to the Ford selection. And the person who actually persuaded a majority of the board – in the end the board was fine – but the person who drove it through was David McCullough.

Circle: Oh, no kidding.

Smith: And remember, David McCullough had come to the museum.

Circle: Yes.

Smith: And spent some time with the President, and for whatever reason, it paid off.

Circle: Yeah, it did. It was a pivotal moment in his life. I’ll tell you, he never forgot about that and he talked about it frequently.

Smith: And then, of course, there was the re-dedication of the Museum in ’97. He must have been surprised how much money it took. They built the place, and they had a little endowment, and it just grew and the demands grew with it.

Circle: I know it.

Smith: I thought he came back to Grand Rapids frequently – to my way of thinking – at that age, I was delighted that he would come back as often as he did.

Circle: He would have come back more often, I think, had there been a reason to. He loved Grand Rapids. I would ride in the car with him when I’d go with him to Grand Rapids, and he would point out everything in the town, and how it used to look, and how it looked now. He was very, very proud of Grand Rapids. And I really think, Richard, had there been activities or events or something, he would have gone back more often. But then again, he didn’t have any plane, and it was difficult because you had to change planes from here. And no one would provide a plane for him, so it was very difficult getting back there. I’m sorry, but…

Smith: No, no, listen, you won’t get any argument here.
Circle: I’m not talking about you.

Smith: And I tried – I will say this, though, nothing like patting yourself on the back – I think he came back more often when I was there, just because we were doing things.

Circle: He did. Exactly. The Christmas lighting, the Christmas tree lighting – that started with you.

Smith: No, but for example: the twenty-fifth anniversary, I just thought this is too good an opportunity to pass up, so we had Alan Greenspan. He came back and introduced Alan Greenspan. Justice Stevens, he came back and introduced Justice Stevens and then Billy Graham, which was an amazing event.

Circle: Wasn’t it amazing. It was. But, see, a lot happened when you were there. Nothing happened after you left and before you were there. There wasn’t a whole lot happening. Frank Mackamen was good, but he was an academic.

Smith: And he was based in Ann Arbor – at the Library.

Circle: Right, he was. Dennis Daellenbach was in Ann Arbor, too, wasn’t he? And nobody really liked Dennis that much. He didn’t do a lot. After that was Elaine, and that was so late on, so far on in his life that he couldn’t really travel that much. But it was fun when you were there. There was something happening all the time.

Smith: It was so great to see him come back, and it was an event in Grand Rapids whenever he came back. You must have seen this all the time, the autograph seekers.

Circle: Oh my God.

Smith: It had to be a bane of his existence.

Circle: Oh, it was his. He hated that. He really disliked that. He would sit in the conference room and sign and sign and sign and sign. And then there were the people that just kept coming back for more. And you know darn well that they were selling them. That was a bad part of his job because he didn’t like at all.
And it really was funny because he and Mrs. Ford went before Congress for something for the Betty Ford Center, and I was sitting there and every Congressman had a photographer there. President Ford just couldn’t go with that. He just couldn’t believe that because he hated that so much. And he said, “And then they are going to send all those pictures in to be signed.” He couldn’t believe that every Congressman had a photographer. That was just amazing.

Smith: When they went back to Washington, did they stay at the Willard?

Circle: Yes, usually.

Smith: Did they ever use the official guest house?

Circle: Yes. In fact, I was there with him, early on in the 80s. Yes, they did – Jackson Place. But he couldn’t really sleep there, there was no room for him. He’d have to sleep at a hotel, but we used it as much as we could for an office and that sort of thing. Then the year that he went back, he went into the – what is it when they vote? Do you remember when he went back to Washington?

Smith: Yeah, the well of the House.

Circle: And he went into the House, and they were all there and he walked in, and he got a standing…oh my God – I couldn’t go in there. You can’t go in there – you have to be a Congressman, or whatever to go in there. And I walked around and I went to the exits and I could see him and, boy, he was in his glory. Do you remember when he did that?

Smith: Yeah.

Circle: That was not too many years ago.

Smith: Right.

Circle: And everyone turned around and saw him and they stood up and they cheered – oh, it was just amazing. It got me.

Smith: Did they enjoy going back to Washington?

Circle: Yeah, he did.
Smith: Of course, every year there was the event of the Press Club. The journalism prizes that he gave out. And the board meeting. The reunion.

Circle: Yeah, he would look forward to that. He did, he looked forward to that. He looked forward to seeing everybody at the dinner and that sort of thing. He enjoyed the journalism awards, he enjoyed that luncheon.

Smith: By and large, he did like reporters, didn’t he?

Circle: Oh, very much. More so than any other president I’ve ever seen. And he knew them all by name, just like Secret Service agents. It was amazing, he knew them all by name.

Smith: And was he pretty accessible to the press? People wanting to talk to him – call him, that sort of thing?

Circle: Yeah, he was – if there was a reason for it. Not just to chat. And he had his favorites. And he’d always take care of local people. He’d always do that, which is a really nice quality of his – that he would take care of the people that counted.

Smith: Again, I realize that this is sort of asking you to guess, but do you think he knew that Tom DeFrank would write a book?

Circle: He knew. He knew. Every time he was interviewed he knew. But I have to say one thing, he was very accessible to Tom DeFrank. I mean, he was always willing to do it for him once a year. But when they invited Tom to lunch, this is my only regret about that book, my only personal regret about it. I haven’t even read the whole thing yet, but when he came for lunch and he reported on how President Ford looked, that was out of line, totally. That was not part of the agreement, and I’m really mad at Tom about that. I think everybody in the family is.

Smith: He kept pressing and pressing and pressing.

Circle: Oh, later on in life, Tom changed somewhat. He was always very nice and a good friend, but I’m really mad at him about that, because I have to say, and I’m not patting myself on the back, but I protected President Ford and his
dignity to the nth degree. No one knew how sick he was, no one. People would call and I would talk to them and I would say, “Oh, he’s going to be fine.” People knew that he wasn’t well, but no one knew to what degree he wasn’t well. And nobody would ever have known had he not written that in that book.

Smith: Tell me about Philadelphia.

Circle: Philadelphia…

Smith: 2000 – you went from Vail…

Circle: Yes, we went from Vail, and I remember Monday morning someone called me as I was loading my car and told me that President Ford had something wrong with his throat and he couldn’t talk right. And it wasn’t his regular doctor, he said he had shingles in his throat. I said, “I’ve never heard of shingles in your throat. That can’t be.” And they said, yeah, that’s what it is, but he’s going to go. And he sounded like he was inebriated. He was slurring – his tongue was swollen. Oh God, that whole trip was just such a nightmare. So we got to Washington and he had all of these interviews scheduled, and so he did the interviews, one by one. You saw them, didn’t you? He sounded like there was something terribly wrong.

Smith: On the C-SPAN program, in particular.

Circle: With Wolf?

Smith: No, C-SPAN, I think with Steve Scully.

Circle: And then there was Wolf Blitzer, but he did it on the floor, and Larry King, and God, I can’t remember who else. Oh my God, it was just awful. And then they went into the booth where they went during the convention and I can remember seeing his hair was all messed up and he was waving and his hair was all messed. We were all in the Green Room. Prior to that McCain and Cindy McCain and Bush ’41 was there, all these people.

The agents called me at six o’clock in the morning, said, “You’ve got to get up here.” I said, “What’s wrong?” He said, “President Ford’s leaving.” I said,
“Leaving the hotel?” and I went up and he had his briefcase and he was all
dressed and he had his briefcase on his lap, and I knew something was
desperately wrong. He said, “Tell the manager I will never stay at this hotel
again.” I said, “Okay,” and he said, “I am so unhappy here.”

Well, apparently he hadn’t slept all night and it was just awful. I went in and
saw Mrs. Ford and she was getting ready - he thought to go on the plane - but
they were taking him to the hospital. That’s when they determined he had a
stroke. He had had a stroke. He’d gone the night before because he hadn’t felt
well, and they wanted to keep him, but he said no. They should have kept
him. They should have said, you have to stay. But nobody did, so then they
found out that he’d had two strokes.

I went to see him at the hospital and I sat down and he said, “What do you
have for me?” He looked at me, “Penny, we get to work.” I said nothing. I just
sat there with him and talked to him. It was such an uncertain time. It was just
an awful trip. Then, when they were going to do the operation on his tongue,
because they figured it was a virus, they asked every department head in the
hospital to give their opinion as to whether they thought they should do it or
not, because if it was cancer, it would have spread through his whole body.
They called his doctor here. They called Dr. Mahler, who had been his doctor
early on, who was in New York. They called everyone and everyone gave
their opinion and they decided to do the surgery. I remember I went and sat in
the park and just sat there and prayed and hoped that everything was going to
be okay. I got the call and they said that he was fine. Oh God, that was just an
awful trip. He had no idea what was happening to him. You never want to see
somebody in that position, ever.

Smith: How was Mrs. Ford handling all that?

Circle: Oh, she was just amazing. She was so strong. Everyone calls her frail. She’s
the least frail person I’ve ever known in my life. She was just unbelievable.
When I went in that morning - I can still see her standing, looking in the
mirror, doing her hair - she said, “We’re going to take him to the hospital.” I
said, “That’s good.” She said, “He’s just not going to be able to stand it.” And
I said, “He’ll be okay, and you’ll be okay.” She said, “I’m fine, I’m fine.” And all those days in the hospital, she was so strong. She was just amazing.

Smith: And Bush ’43 visited him at the hospital.

Circle: Oh, did he?

Smith: Yeah, during the convention.

Circle: And I think ’41 did, too, didn’t he? ’41 was right above me. He called me – the people that called me every single day from that hotel and from that convention, President Bush called me every single day, Henry Kissinger called me, he would leave messages. I was on the phone in that damn room from six o’clock in the morning until three in the morning. I swear to God my phone wouldn’t stop. I had almost no sleep. Henry Kissinger called every single day – he would call and he left a message the last night, and he said, “I don’t care what time you get in. I don’t care what time you’re available. You call me.” And he did that every single time President Ford was in the hospital, he did that the last year – I swear to God, Henry Kissinger called more than anybody. And Cheney called a lot.

Smith: You know the call I got – in Grand Rapids – as soon as the news was out. Within twenty minutes, I got two calls. One from Tricia Nixon, and one from Julie Eisenhower.

Circle: No kidding. Oh, isn’t that nice.

Smith: Both very concerned, wanted to be remembered.

Circle: Isn’t that nice, really nice. They have always done that. And Lady Bird Johnson was really good about that, too.

Smith: There was a real friendship there, wasn’t there?

Circle: Yeah, she was a darling woman, really. And she had a great staff, too. I really like everyone around her.
Smith: There’s a question, because people are always trying to play divide and conquer with the former presidents – as if they think that you don’t talk to each other.

Circle: Right. Ohhh, yes.

Smith: Explain how that works.

Circle: Oh, it’s wonderful. It’s a wonderful group of people, and we all stay in touch. There is just this little…further away, the Reagan people, they are just a little further away because they are so much better than we are – but they are pretty close with the other presidents. Like Joann Drake – she’s quite close with – Fred Ryan was a great guy. He always stayed in touch and there was never any of that with him. But women are different, I think. But I am so close with Jean Becker, the Johnson people, too. And the Carter people.

Smith: Nancy…

Circle: Nancy Konigsmark. And the one I talk to even more than Nancy was his personal secretary, my God, I can’t remember her name. She retired about 2005, I think she retired. But she was wonderful, and I talked to her a lot. But we all kept in touch and we figured we were all in such a unique situation that we should get together once a year. We never did, but we still stay in touch, and that’s really nice. Everyone always checks in.

Smith: People trying to prey, prey, prey.

Circle: The letters – okay. I would get a letter that said President Bush had agreed to do this, and they were going to contact President Carter, but President Bush had indicated that he would like President Ford to be involved. So I would call Jean and say, “Tell me about this,” and if she didn’t know, she would call me and say, “No, we got the same letter. President Ford’s involved.” People did that all the time. They would write – and Carter. All the former presidents. I never really got – but to some degree I got involved with Clinton’s people after they left. Clinton’s people, Mack McClarty, was the greatest guy in the Clinton administration. I adored him. He was the greatest guy. I worked with him on NAFTA. I worked quite closely with him. He and a couple of other
people stay in touch with me all the time – from the Clinton administration. But as far as this sort of thing, and his chief of staff, or whomever - I don’t really know their staff or who is what.

Smith: Speaking about that, because I’ve run into Mack at a couple of things, he knows who you are…

Circle: He does.

Smith: He’s very good on the personal, very good. But remember, it was, you know – let’s be fair – of course, Mrs. Ford got the Medal of Honor during the first Bush presidency. And then it was in the Clinton presidency that President Ford - it was the 25th anniversary and two days before, it was no accident, another Op-ed piece – the one on affirmative action. And Willis Ward, which really made waves.

Circle: Yeah, exactly.

Smith: Because I was told later on – it would have been nicer, frankly, in an ideal world, if they had just honored President Ford – but being the Clinton White House they had eight or nine other people that they were going to include. But he turned out to be the star attraction of the day. And in part, because of that piece, which, again, was so counterintuitive.

Circle: Exactly. Yeah, when we went for that – oh, how much of this should I tell you – Bob Barrett and I walked over with Henry Kissinger to the White House. Bob and I weren’t invited to the reception, so we walked into the room and were seated. The room where he was going to receive the Medal of Freedom.

Smith: The East Room.

Circle: Was that the East Room? Okay. The stage was here, and the seating was in front of the stage, and then back and around we were over here, we were in the last row over here. And it was fine. We could see the stage just fine. We were sitting there waiting while the reception was going on, and Mack McClarty was – well, I recognized him because he and I had been on the phone together for hours and hours over a period of months, but I knew him from his pictures in the paper and on television, but he didn’t know me from
Adam. And he came up and he was talking to someone down the row, and I leaned back as he was finishing up and I said, “Mack,” and he came over, and I said, “Penny Circle.” And he went, “Ah! Penny Circle!” and he was just all over me and he was so happy to meet me – I mean, you could tell, and I was so happy to meet him face to face. And he said, “What are you doing here?” and I said, “Well, we’re here for the Medal.” And he said, “Why aren’t you in the reception?” I said, “Well, we weren’t invited.” And he said, “Well, of course you were invited to the reception.” I said, “No, it’s okay,” and he said, “Well, okay,” and he left and then a couple of ushers came up and escorted us into the reception.

We were thrown into the receiving line and I get into the receiving line and President Clinton is right there and he comes up and I said, “Hello, sir.” I’ll just tell you – I wasn’t going to tell you what I thought at the time, I just said, “Hello, sir, I’m Penny Circle, President Ford’s chief of staff.” And then Mrs. Clinton came up and all of that – and it was really nice. Bob Barrett was kind of left a little bit in the background there, because he didn’t know Mack McClarty or anything. So later in the limo Susan said, “So you knew Mack McClarty?” And I said, “Yeah, I worked with him on NAFTA with your father.” And she said, “Oh, because my dad asked Bob how he knew Mack McClarty and he said, ‘Oh, he was doing some business with him in the White House.’” And I said, “He did?” I said, “The only reason we were in there was because he knew me;” and she said, “Yeah, I know.” But, this is how it works in this business.

Smith: NAFTA – there was a classic example of former presidents coming together, across the aisle to support free trade. Were there other instances? Of course later on and more recently you had the tsunami relief effort.

Circle: There was another one, too.

Smith: 9/11, of course, after 9/11.

Circle: 9/11, yeah.

Smith: What do you remember of 9/11? They were in Vail.
Circle: They were. Yeah, I’m getting confused with Reagan’s funeral. They were in Vail and I was coming home on Friday – it was September 11th. I was coming home on Friday, and the Fords – that was 2001, that was a year after his strokes, so he wasn’t completely healthy then. He got much better after that, but that was just a year later and I don’t think he was in great health. I think it was hard for him to travel. But you saw them on television, I’m sure – behind the Clintons, who were sleeping at the time. Remember that picture? That was a good picture.

It was so upsetting. I remember an agent – he’d been swimming in the morning and an agent came and told him and he just couldn’t figure it out. He couldn’t come to terms with it. He came back and he sat down at his breakfast table and read the paper and he turned the television on. It was hard for anyone to realize what really happened. It was like a bad dream. But it was very somber around the house and then they left and I guess I didn’t see them again until they came back at the end of September.

Smith: Remember – talk about one of the last missions – remember when King Hussan of Morocco died? Was it the King of Morocco or King Hussein?

Circle: King Hussein.

Smith: King Hussein died and he went. How exhausting was that?

Circle: It was – it was terribly exhausting. Because we found out like at two or three in the morning. The Air Force called and said, “Okay we have to go.” I was asleep and I called President Ford and woke him up and told him to get ready to go. I ran to the office and I had Judy go to the office, too, just in case he needed anything. He didn’t. But it was very exhausting, especially jumping out of bed. But he was ready to go because they knew it was coming at any minute. I mean, the plane was there and all, so they knew it was imminent. It was an exhausting trip when he got back.

Smith: Because as I remember it also entailed a long procession on foot.

Circle: It did and we were kind of worried about that, but he was fine. He managed okay. But, yeah, that was hard on him.
Smith: Did he ever meet Queen Elizabeth after the ’76 Bicentennial? Did their paths ever cross?

Circle: I think so. I’m not sure. But, I wonder when he was in London if he saw her. Maybe not, maybe not, but he’s very fond of her, or was very fond of her.

Smith: How difficult were the last couple of years?

Circle: I can’t imagine ever going through something like that again. It was terrible. It was so stressful and so – I don’t think I had one easy moment in about two years. And this is not about me. It was for him.

Smith: How obnoxious, for lack of a better word, was the media deathwatch?

Circle: It was terrible. It was God-awful. Every single time he’d sneeze, I’d get a phone call, and I mean they were just vultures. And the cars would pile up – people in this area had to be just sick of it, because the whole front of the hospital was just all media. The minute he would go into the hospital… It was very difficult because there were factions who would tell me the minute he’d go in the hospital, to announce it. But that was just the wrong thing to do because, if we could have twelve hours to prepare for him to go into the hospital – I mean, they find out soon enough. They find out. There is someone at the hospital who reports it.

I’m telling you, they were vultures. They were terrible people. There are only a few that came out unscathed from my perspective, and that I’ll stay friends with – that had consideration and cared about him enough – but most of them were just vultures. Some of the national – I’ll tell you what – the media changed between 1985 and 1990. They were a kinder, gentler group of people before this. Now they don’t care. And they are just nasty and rude and obnoxious.

Smith: He was fond of Hugh Sidey, wasn’t he?

Circle: Very. He wrote an Op-ed piece on him when he died. Remember? It was over Thanksgiving. I can’t remember what year. He was very fond of him. He was very fond of most of his press people that were in the White House when he was there. Most of the group.
Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him?

Circle: Ah. I do. It was – he died on Monday – I saw him on Friday. He was sleeping and I had gone to see him and I put my hand on his arm and he held my hand and I stood there – and he held my hand for maybe an hour. I wasn’t going to move. It was just a very sad time. He knew it was me. It was a tough time.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction? The public reaction over the ensuing week?

Circle: Oh, yes. The people – it was a holiday weekend – and the people in Washington surprised me most of all. I was surprised by the people here, standing on the side of the road when the motorcade went by. There were a lot of people at the airport, but I think the thing that surprised me the most was Washington, D.C. As hard as those people are, there were so many people standing on the sides of the road when we went through. When you got to Alexandria, you can understand that, but that was still overwhelming. My God, that whole town was out. The whole town, I’m sure, out on the streets. And, of course, in Michigan. But Washington, D.C. surprised me the most.

Smith: Remember the day of the service at the cathedral, because I was up at the cathedral for ABC, so I wasn’t in the motorcade. But, remember, he had insisted on no caissons in the streets of Washington?

Circle: Yes, I know.

Smith: And yet, the crowds apparently that turned out as if there had been a caisson.

Circle: I know, I know exactly. Remember, that was in 1990 when you and Marty came out, and I believe that was the first time he said he didn’t want the caisson, wasn’t it? I still have your notes that you wrote. In fact, I don’t think I have them. They are in the funeral files.

Smith: Did they find it distasteful? The Fords, to be involved in this process – the funeral planning?
Circle: It was hard at first, but they got used to it. You know, they did get used to it finally. Because they knew it had to be done. And I think after Reagan died, they realized that they had to do something.

Smith: Do you miss him?

Circle: Oh…yeah. Yeah, more than I can ever say.

Smith: What did you learn from him?

Circle: So many things. What I told you about his not being judgmental, that was such a good lesson for me because he would accept anything anybody believed, and, whether he believed it or not, it was fine with him. He showed that in every part of his life. In his bipartisanship, in his reaction to people, he just never really criticized anyone’s values or thoughts or feelings about anything. He was very, very pragmatic about that. I learned that and that was very good. And his discipline was just beyond belief. What a good example for other people, if they took that example.

Smith: That’s what Lorraine said. She said she learned discipline from him.

Circle: Yeah, absolutely. And if somebody needed to learn discipline, to be around him, boy, that was a good, good lesson. He was a good teacher, and he was such a fine person. People will always say he was a good man. “He wasn’t so smart, but he was a good man.” He was very smart, he was very smart. He was a lot smarter than many people who claimed to be intellectuals, I’ll you that. It was a lesson every day. Not so much in things like having to have your mail on Saturdays or not taking vacations because you have to work.

Smith: And you didn’t get rich working in his office.

Circle: And I didn’t get rich working in his office. Well, that’s another thing I learned. I’m a little more generous than President Ford was, and I make a lot less money. But he was such a good man and I was so fortunate to have the experience and the opportunity to be around him as closely as I was. We had a good relationship. I can’t remember, except for the first day I was in here, where I don’t really think he was mad at me, the very first day when I had the
job, when Bob Barrett left. I don’t think he was ever angry at me once for anything. That’s saying something. He never yelled at me.

Smith: He did have a temper.

Circle: Yeah, sure he had a temper, but once it was over, it was over. And I was never the beneficiary of that directly. Which is nice to say.

Smith: Yeah. That’s perfect. Perfect.
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Smith: First of all, thank you so much for doing this.

There’s so much I want to talk to you about, including, not only Gerald Ford, but the Congress that obviously was so much a part of his life. When did you come to this neighborhood? When did your paths first cross with the Fords?

Abbruzzese: I left the Army in 1970. I’d only been married a few years. I had a daughter. And when I left and got the job on Capitol Hill, I bought this house in October of ’71. I didn’t focus on him being in the neighborhood because I had some officers down the Hill who were my instructors when I was a cadet. That’s what I really was interested in. One day, the following spring, Betty came over when I was at work with a gift for my son who had just been born and I thought it was a very nice courtesy call. But actually she and my wife, Louise, got to be very friendly and Susan began to babysit for her. I think she was about 16. A wonderful babysitter.

Smith: Really?

Abbruzzese: She was absolutely wonderful. I could even show you a couple of embarrassing pictures that she took later on of the children, especially my youngest, that we don’t show because I don’t want to be arrested.

Smith: What made her a wonderful babysitter?

Abbruzzese: She genuinely loved being around small children. She was affectionate. She was even without any knowledge - I don’t know how much babysitting she did - but she really knew how to take care of them. She was very good in every respect, attentive, never missed a thing.

Smith: Very conscientious.

Abbruzzese: Oh, yeah, and when they went to the White House, I think in Thanksgiving of ’75, she wanted to take the children to the White House for Thanksgiving
pumpkins. And when she got home, they’d locked themselves out of the house. We’d gone out that evening and that’s why she was babysitting. When we got home, I found out the Secret Service broke the screen in the upper window to get into the house.

Smith: So she continued to babysit even after they lived in the White House?

Abbruzzese: No, I think slowly that went out. She may have done it, but I don’t know that she did it very often. Essentially, it was while they lived in the neighborhood, which was from ’71 to ’74, about 2 ½ years.

Smith: Describe the neighborhood. What was it like then?

Abbruzzese: Very few young children. I think there were only one or two neighbors that had young children. About a half a dozen military and Colonel Jack Meyer was from, if you don’t mind the parochial thing, was from the West Point Class of ’39. Had built the house down the street and he was a real estate agent. He sold the house to a neighbor across the street. Sold a house to the neighbor two doors away. All classmates. He was a tactical officer when I was a cadet. Another officer up the hill, Dick Lafferly(?) was a math instructor as a plebe. And Ray Marlin(?), a two-star general had been a tactical officer my last two years, for whom I have great thanks.

Smith: So almost a military enclave in some ways.

Abbruzzese: Yeah. It was still more Democratic than most neighborhoods. I would say then it was about 50/50. But most military officers are Republicans. Now it’s even more Democratic, though. We have many more families that are Democrats, although I don’t know what their politics are. We have parties frequently. Every Memorial Day, we close off the street and have a party, so it’s also a very social neighborhood.

Smith: Let’s go back to the Congress because it’s obviously a very different institution today from what it was then.

Abbruzzese: Yeah.
Smith: And everyone talks about Ford being someone who was almost as popular among Democrats as he was among Republicans. What was it like on Capitol Hill then as opposed to later years? And what was it that made Ford the success that he was?

Abbruzzese: It depended on where you worked and to some extent on your own member. Most members, even the conservative ones and the liberal ones, were fairly bipartisan at that time. Members of the different party would meet for lunch occasionally, frequently rather, in the members’ dining room. When I organized my trips, we would always have almost an equal number of Democratic and Republican members, even though in the early 70s, well after Watergate, the Republicans only had about 140 members in the House. But we’d go on a trip, six Republicans, six Democrats. And there was a good reason for that, though. And it was because the Democratic members had subcommittee chairmanships, so they had their own field of operations. And when a recess came and that was the only time we could travel, they had businesses to do. They would do their own hearings in their district or they would do a foreign trip of their own. Of course, on our delegation, it was very pleasant because we went to NATO countries. And who doesn’t want to go to England, Germany, Italy, and Spain? After awhile, everybody loved it. And I recall getting on the plane one time and just before we took off, Wayne Hays stood up and said, “Gentlemen, I only have one thing to say. I want you to enjoy yourself. For anybody who doesn’t go to meetings, plan on buying your own ticket back home.” It worked perfectly.

Smith: So these weren’t junkets. These were working…?

Abbruzzese: We had members who would go on a North Atlantic assembly trip just for the trip. And they loved it. And after that they became regular participants. Another aspect of it was that, if a Republican wanted to participate in the international leadership of the organization, the rest of the delegation supported them. So we had Republicans and Democrats sharing leadership positions in the organization.

Smith: You mentioned, of course, Watergate. It comes along and begins to devour the Nixon presidency. Did you have almost over-the-fence conversations? I
mean, what kind of interactions did you have with your neighbor across the street? And would you talk about it?

Abbruzzese: No, when we first began to talk, I said, “Look, I think you ought to know that I work for Wayne Hays.” He said, “I understand everything.”

Smith: What do you think he meant by that?

Abbruzzese: Well, Wayne Hays was a conservative Democrat, but he was not conservative on everything. He was sort of supported by unions. On national security and foreign policies, Republicans and Democrats very largely voted alike. The most important characters to come out of it was in WWII, General Bradley and General Patton didn’t get along. And Bradley was a three-star in North Africa and Patton was a two-star. When Patton got in trouble over slapping a soldier, every once in awhile this would happen, and he was very forward about pushing his unit to go forward and he was really an outstanding tactical leader. And somebody, after the war, said to Bradley, “Well, what do you think about Patton, though?” And he didn’t want to be disloyal and he didn’t want to be dishonest so he said, “He’s really a very strange duck.” And that was what people would say about Wayne Hays, something like that.

The chairman of the committee and he lived, Doc Morgan was the chairman, they lived in adjacent districts. Doc Morgan liked him very much, but he couldn’t protect him when he got in this trouble over Liz Ray. So afterwards, we were chatting one time and he said, “You know, it sure was a shame about Wayne. You know, if it wasn’t the way he dealt with people, he would’ve been Speaker.” Couldn’t avoid insulting another member. He was bad at that, but he was very sharp. He always knew his stuff. He never came into a hearing ignorant of the subject or the issues. Not only the international aspects of it, but the domestic political implications of it. He was really very good at that. And if he got up on the floor and made a statement about something, it was usually because he felt strongly in a non-partisan matter. And he would always carry 20 or 30 votes with him. Always. So he was a very able individual.
Smith: Beyond saying to you “I understand all about that,” is that all he needed to say?

Abbruzzese: Well, after that, we never discussed any issues on the Hill. When they would visit the house, we would have dinner and we would talk about children, the national situation or international situation, but we didn’t get to that stuff. That was more sensitive than our national security.

Smith: I understand.

When Agnew resigns, was there speculation in the neighborhood? Because it all happened very fast.

Abbruzzese: I was surprised. And I was very happy because I thought he would change the atmosphere. And he did. Everywhere he went, he improved the atmosphere, especially with the press. He was just very good.

Smith: I assume you must have had press staked out here at some point. And this was before he becomes President, but during the vice presidency…

Abbruzzese: We would occasionally have press here when something was happening, but it was not like the week of the resignation.

Smith: Let me just back up for one moment. By that time, did you think there was going to be a resignation? Did you believe that your neighbor was…?

Abbruzzese: I thought he was going to go down. I thought he was good. I felt that when Sirica came out, to me that defined it for me. The eighteen minute tape, that’s what helped the Republicans change. It gave them their excuse. Even before that they knew he had to go but they weren’t going to do it because they were loyal. And when that happened, then seven members of the 16 Republicans on the judiciary committee voted for impeachment and all the Democrats. And the only person who was ever unpleasant to Ford on that committee, especially during his hearings and afterwards when he came up once to discuss the pardon, was Elizabeth Holtzman. But she had a very prickly personality. She would not allow Democratic liberal colleagues to be friendly with her on some occasions.
Smith: Really.

Abbruzzese: We had a friend who was the staff director of a joint committee on the workings of the House and he went into her office and asked to see Congressman Holtzman. He wanted to help her to see if she wanted to have any work done to modernize the office. They threw him out.

Smith: Really? So, in some ways, it’s almost a badge of honor to be harassed by…

Abbruzzese: She was from Brooklyn. Her worst enemies were other liberals from Brooklyn. But I think that’s a more common situation than you think.

Smith: And I think it works on the other side of the aisle as well.

Abbruzzese: For instance, upstate, Sherry Boehlert and Jerry Solomon were always at loggerheads. And Sherry Boehlert would say, “God won’t let me get along with him.” Of course, Jerry wanted him to be a good right-wing Republican. I almost got fired over that, too. Among other times, I was really almost officially fired another time, but that’s another story.

Smith: Was it your sense that Ford got along with just about everyone?

Abbruzzese: Oh, yeah. He was never threatening. Never condescending. Never uncivil. And he would never do something even when he was going to run for Majority Leader. At that period, they were not satisfied with the Minority Leadership.

Smith: Charley Halleck.

Abbruzzese: Oh, yeah. Even at that time, he says, “No, I’m not going to do that because I’m not going to do anything in secret.” And afterwards, Halleck said, “Don’t worry about it, Jerry. I understand.” And he was really concerned about the impact on their friendship because he was fond of him.

Smith: Really? That’s interesting.

Abbruzzese: Yeah, he really had a generous heart for other people. Along with Phillip Hart and half a dozen members, he was one a very small group of members that to me took the Thomas Moore attitude on serving your country. Be
ambitious. Work hard. Be loyal. And be a man of character. Don’t put your ambition above the country. Which was the problem Thomas Moore had about putting the country before his faith. And Ford was like that and so was Phillip. And there were other members and in every Congress there are members like that.

I think by and large even now, members are largely honest and aboveboard and they really want to do good work. But they get trapped in the partisan system. They get trapped in being forced to raise money to get a subcommittee chairmanship. Leadership calls on them for a favor. You don’t want to be loyal to your district. You don’t want to be loyal to what you believe is the best thing. It’s very difficult to do that nowadays.

Smith: And so much, including the media, drive you in the direction of partisanship.

Abbruzzese: That’s because media can’t work when people are getting along and when they’re all doing the right thing. During the Wayne Hays investigation, I got a call from, I think, Jack Whitman, who was working for Jack Anderson. They’d gone into his funding for a lot of things and there wasn’t anything there. And he asked me a lot of questions about the operation of our delegation. And I said, “There isn’t a dime out of place because everything we do is by check. We can’t even go across the street without writing a check for it, you know. And it’s spent overseas. We do the report when we came home. The only thing we don’t report is the cost of the airplane. And the overtime for people.” And he said, “Well, that’s good news.” And I said, “Why don’t you report that?” He said, “We don’t do that. I’m a muckraker.”

Smith: It says volumes, doesn’t it?

Abbruzzese: Yeah.

Smith: Once he became vice president, I mean, at that moment, was there excitement in the neighborhood? What was the reaction?

Abbruzzese: Oh, yeah. The cars going through the street were terrible. And the Secret Service was out front and, you know, they took out his garage and they put in a reinforced driveway. And while they were doing it, a newspaper wrote,
“How much is this going to cost?” So he paid for it himself out of his own pocket. He didn’t need a driveway. He needed a garage for his cars. And when he sold his house, they said, “Boy, he’s going to be rich.” He got an assessment and an assessed value and he sold for exactly that amount of money. He sold it for $137,000, I believe, and he could’ve gotten another $30,000 or $40,000, at least. So he was always taking the heat.

I recall a friend I knew who worked on the judiciary committee, when he was being vetted for the vice presidency, they were going into all his official travel. And he traveled every weekend. They went through every receipt for every trip. And that was about 50 trips for about 33 years. What is that, 400 trips? There was $47 out of place. And they thought they had him so they went to Congressman Brooks. Congressman Brooks was very partisan and he would not let friendship come between him and getting a Republican. And they said, “Well, we’ve got this.” He said, “Anything else?” They said, “Well, we don’t have anything. He’s clean. He’s clean as Caesar’s wife.” He was always that way.

Smith: Tell me about Mrs. Ford in those days. Did you visit back and forth?

Abbruzzese: My wife would go back and forth. They would go back and forth all the time. When the Bishop lived here, he and his wife used to babysit for the children. If ever she had to travel with him, which happened occasionally, the children would stay here. And the kids put plastic things on the showers. They decorated different parts of the house with all sorts of junk which was really quite attractive. And when we had to redo the bathroom up there and put a new shower in, we were not happy, but we had to throw them away. You know, after they sold the house, the fellow who bought the house wanted to keep everything that was in the house that was historic. And at one point, they took out the sink in the kitchen. That sink in the kitchen, that old sink, sat in the back of the den until 3 months ago. These people bought the house and when they put it in, they just took it out.

Smith: Describe the interior of the house, because we’ve heard people say it’s actually quite small.
Abbruzzese: Oh, no, not at all. It’s got nice rooms. It’s got over 3,000 square feet. They have a large living room on the right side which goes to the rear of the house which is about 13 by 20. There’s this den that used to be the garage, so that’s about 20 by 20. And the kitchen and dining space was out in the back and looked on the swimming pool. He swam. He had a heating element in it, so he would swim until November. He would swim 10 or 11 months a year. I guess if it weren’t really freezing, he would swim every day if he could.

Smith: Great exercise.

Abbruzzese: Oh, yeah. And upstairs, they’ve got one, two, three, I think they’ve got 4 or 5 bedrooms upstairs. A lot of space. Really pretty nice.

Smith: What were the kids like?

Abbruzzese: Susan was a real teenager. She didn’t like school work and all that.

Smith: She liked her jeans.

Abbruzzese: Yeah, and she was a lot of fun to be around. Mike was already out of the house. I think he was finishing college about that time. And I think he very quickly began teaching in Winston-Salem. And I think now is the dean or something. Jack, after he got out, he wanted to travel. He did some travelling and he got on television. He had a long time booking on a television show. I did not get to know the other boy.

Smith: Steve. He was on a soap opera.

Abbruzzese: Steve was the one on a soap opera. But Jack had moved out also. But Steve also was a great deal of fun and actually he gave them a little bit of heartache, too. He didn’t get in serious trouble, but he gave them a little bit of heartache.

Smith: What kind of parent was Jerry Ford?

Abbruzzese: He travelled a lot and I personally think he felt guilty about his travelling. But he accepted it. And they had a housekeeper who was wonderful and was really a member of the family. But she was very social. She didn’t run around a lot, but she was very pleasant. She was just nice to be in the neighborhood. When she came out of the house, she would always talk to
somebody. You know, conversations. It’s just actually at that time and even now, my wife will go out in the street and if she sees somebody driving by, she’ll go out to talk to them in the car. A car would come by and stop. After five minutes, that car would go down. A second car would stop. They would have a conversation. This went on all the time. And, until I resigned myself that that was part of life here, I just couldn’t believe that that’s the way people live. And it’s always been that way.

Smith: Was the Secret Service disrupting the neighborhood at all?

Abbruzzese: No, they were pretty good. On a couple of times when the Fords came over, my wife would feed them. When Susan came over, she would make pizzas for the Secret Service. And so, coming over was a good deal.

Smith: Tell us about the week when I assume everyone’s life changed forever.

Abbruzzese: There was a lot of rain that week and you couldn’t move the Secret Service and the press. They had the press stand across the street and because of the rain, I felt as a matter of self-protection, my garage at that time, I was new to the house, was still empty. So I would pull up the garage in the morning, make a pot of coffee and put it out there. And they could use the downstairs bathroom. And in my little den down there, they made telephone calls. I never got charged a dime for a long distance call or anything like that.

Smith: That’s pretty gracious on your part.

And you had network people as well.

Abbruzzese: Yeah, and they were really always, I never heard a word. I think on the second or third day, we paid for a beach house at Delaware so I gave a neighbor the key and she would come up in the morning and make the coffee and put it out. Then I’m ashamed to say this, but in the afternoon, I would make a pitcher of martinis. I suppose I shouldn’t be saying that anymore, but that’s what I did.

Smith: But they were well received?

Abbruzzese: Oh, yeah.
Smith: That week did you see the Fords or did you talk with them at all or any members of the family?

Abbruzzese: Well we were gone for the whole week. And, of course, he was here for a week while he was President. The only thing that happened that was really out of the way was that, on one occasion, I backed out of the driveway and I hit his car. I spent $90 to have it repaired. I didn’t even report it because, if I did that, other things would’ve come up and I didn’t want to bother with it.

Smith: So the night that Nixon resigns and he has this little impromptu press conference you were out at the beach?

Abbruzzese: Well, he was mobbed. When he came to the house, we couldn’t get close to him. I mean, early in the morning, I think that first morning after Nixon announced his resignation, I went out to the house and Betty came to the door in her housecoat. And we chatted for awhile and somebody got a picture of that. But Louise spent much more time with them.

Smith: Did she seem—?

Abbruzzese: She was smooth. She took everything well. She could’ve been an army wife. I mean, she put up with so much of his travelling.

Smith: That’s an interesting characterization.

Abbruzzese: And, for her, it was just like being an army wife.

Smith: Did you sense that she had “a problem” however you define that?

Abbruzzese: No, I didn’t. I have to say, I really didn’t know it until I saw it in the papers. My wife saw it, but she didn’t even say anything to me. But that’s my wife. She won’t say anything either. One time before it was reported, a neighbor’s wife mentioned, “You know, she drinks.” And I would talk to her on the phone several times, frequently, when she would call to ask for Louise or something like that. I could understand everything she said, but every once in awhile, on reflection, I may have heard a little slur in her voice, but she still spoke clearly. To be honest, I don’t think it was one of those very big, drunk
all the time problems. It was just that she had taken medication for her neck pain and she would have a couple of drinks to get through the day.

Smith: And she was in pain, wasn’t she?

Abbruzzese: She was really in pain. Now, I had a similar condition with my neck. I still have it in fact. And I was taking three Motrins a day, 800 milligrams. And I went to my doctor and told him, “I can’t do this anymore.” So I took some three or four weeks of traction. And then I discovered that if I was in the shower and the shower was over my neck, I would get relief. Now, I do that and I don’t have any trouble anymore. I’m fixated on that and every time somebody tells me they have neck pain, I peddle that to them.

Smith: So, the night that Nixon resigns and he comes out of the front door to tell everyone, among other things, that Henry Kissinger is staying on, were you in the house while that was going on?

Abbruzzese: Yes. I might’ve been outside, too. I don’t think I stayed out that much, but I could see all the TV lights set up.

Smith: I mean, there’s not a lot of room. Was the street closed off at that point? I’m just trying to imagine where they put reporters.

Abbruzzese: Cars did not come down the street. They would go up to Vassar, the next street, and go around and come up to their house the other way. I must confess to one of my crimes at that time. When I came in the neighborhood, they would let me in to get in my driveway. And I couldn’t get in the driveway, so I parked on the street facing that way and I got a $50 ticket from the Alexandria police.

Another thing that happened was, a woman in that house, while he lived there, her house was broken into and she was attacked. And the police came around asking. The detective was asking us what kind of a person she was. I said, “What do you mean? She just lives a normal life. She doesn’t do anything. She’s a working woman and comes home.” He said, “Well, do you know that she drinks and has parties?” And I said, “Gee whiz, are you telling me that if she drinks and has parties, it’s alright to rape her?” He says, “Well, thanks a
lot” and he left. Being paranoid, I always connected that to the $50 ticket I got afterwards.

Smith: That’s interesting. Well, who knows?

Abbruzzese: Yeah. I don’t know that there’s any connection.

Smith: Once he is sworn in, do you remember your first conversation?

Abbruzzese: Well, my daughter was born in ’74 in September. He was already President. And my daughter was born on the day that Betty Ford was operated on for melanoma. I mean her skin cancer.

Smith: Or breast cancer?

Abbruzzese: Yeah, breast cancer. You’re right. And I did not know that she’d gone into the hospital, but the next day, when I got up there, it was in the papers, so I knew. And when I went up to the hospital, the chief nurse in the ward said, “We’ve broken rules. We’re really sorry, but we had a problem.” I said, “What it is?” He said, “The press has been calling.” It was at Bethesda Naval Hospital which is a military hospital. We were using it for that. And they said, “They kept calling all day.” They wanted to know what my wife is doing in the hospital. And he said, “Having a baby.” And they said, “What entitles her to be in the hospital?” Because someone had an idea that we know. They got her into the hospital because of a personal relationship. And he says, “Well, after a while, we just finally told them that she’s a member of military family.”

Smith: As I recall, I think Mrs. Ford took your wife a present for the baby.

Abbruzzese: Well, that was before then, when we were new to the neighborhood. In ’72, she came over. My son was born in March of ’72. We moved in October of ’71. She brought over a present then for the baby. They really looked upon things alike and they both found each other likeable.

Smith: Did they have any interaction during that period when they both were at Bethesda?
Abbruzzese: I don’t think so because, after another day or so, my wife came out of the hospital and Betty Ford stayed in for several more days.

Smith: Did you go to the White House during the Ford presidency?

Abbruzzese: Yeah, we went there several times. My wife took the children up there for Thanksgiving in ’74. We went there for a couple of dinners. I think at least two. I think for the president of Ireland and for the president of Italy.

Smith: That’s appropriate.

What was the reaction in the neighborhood to the pardon?

Abbruzzese: Well, I thought it was a mistake. I figured he had to do it, but other people in the House, I think, most of them opposed it at the time. I didn’t oppose it. I thought it was a mistake. I was looking at it in political terms. But the people I knew on Capitol Hill all of them said, “We’ve got him now.” By the way, his autobiography is one of the few autobiographies that I’ve read which is better than most of the biographies of him, because of the straight way he tells it. He doesn’t defend himself by attacking people. He’s never on a counter attack. I have a shelf of biographies if you want to look at them afterwards. I think that I have only one biography that I’ve read in which a man said, “I did something. I did this. And I was wrong and I’m ashamed of myself.” And that was General William Dean who commanded our forces in Korea when they were captured. He was captured with his division in Korea. And he said, “I didn’t behave the way I should’ve and I’m ashamed of that. So the only thing I can say is, don’t ever surrender your character.” I admired that greatly and Ford was like that. In his biography, when he talks about his actions, you would almost think that it’s a third person who’s completely disinterested who’s just relating events and his straightness really is a great tonic.

Smith: Did it bother you that he was caricatured as clumsy, physically - the kind of a guy who fell down a lot?

Abbruzzese: I used to have unpleasant conversations and my view was a guy that could play football that well is not clumsy. He was a very graceful man.
Smith: Now, you said you had conversations with him?

Abbruzzese: Oh, no, no, no. On Capitol Hill. Young Democrats, they loved seeing that stuff. They were entertained by that. But I just felt bad for him.

Smith: You had that whole crop of Watergate Babies that came in, in ’74, who changed the whole tenor of the House in many ways.

Abbruzzese: Well, since that period, the sense of civility and courtesy has declined, but didn’t really go down then all at once. He really restored civility to that Congress and also in relations between the departments. He was absolutely wonderful in that respect. For me, I think they started the decline in the early 80s when Newt Gingrich came in. And I hope I’m being honest about this. And he had the philosophy that, “We really can’t win on the issues. Now, we know they’re sleazy,” and he meant that sincerely, “and that’s the way we’re going to get him.” And some of his own members said to him, “But, you know, if we go after that character, it’s going to cost some of us our jobs, too.” He said, “That’s alright. There are more of them than there are of us, so they’ll lose more seats.” And he was completely right. But it went down after that frequently.

I had arranged a lunch between him and three British MPs, I think, in 1982. They were three people with economic interests. They came over and the embassy asked me to set up a meeting with some members of the House. So I set up a meeting, then I also set up a private lunch with Newt Gingrich. They had a long, very good conversation. Very intelligent. And one of them said and he was not a Labor member, you know, I think he was a liberal Democrat, “But your proposals on economic issues, you know they’re going to hurt people.” He says, “We know that, but it’s the only way we’re going to get our program through.” But he never emphasized that in his presentations.

Smith: Bob Michel was sort of the last of his kind. I mean, he was very much in the Ford tradition.

Abbruzzese: You don’t know how many times I had people tell me, “I wish we had Michel back.” I left in September of ’94 before the election where the Republicans took over because the unpleasantness had really gone too far. And I’d had
enough time and I felt I don’t need this anymore. My wife was working, so we were wealthy. Not really. But I just didn’t want to stay there and watch all this unhappiness going on. And even Republicans couldn’t get along with each other to a certain extent. And I always thought that the Democrats were really terrible at internecine warfare. Just unbelievable.

Smith: ’76 campaign, did you have any contact with them at all?

Abbruzzese: No, not at all.

Smith: And after they left the White House, did either through the kids, I mean, for example, Susan—?

Abbruzzese: Well, we went to Susan’s wedding. A year or two later, we went out to the West Coast to her wedding and had a wonderful weekend there. I think he was quite happy. I really would have liked to have seen him reelected even though I was a Democrat because, well, you know, when it comes to the presidency, I have voted for Democrats and I’ve voted for Republicans. I’m not good at, “He may be a crook, but he’s ours.” I’ve never been good at that philosophy. My classmates and I have frequent debates on this, you know. And three quarters of them are Republicans.

Smith: But when you saw them out on the West Coast, they both seemed happy with their new life?

Abbruzzese: Oh, yes. They loved it. They loved it out there. And Susan’s wedding was a wonderful affair.

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him or had any contact with him?

Abbruzzese: I think it was some time later in the 80s, I’m not sure when.

Smith: When he died, were you surprised by the reaction? I know a lot of colleagues in the media I think were. That there was as much as there was. I know the family was blown away by the number of people who were out on the streets in Alexandria when they came back that Saturday night.

Abbruzzese: I was slightly surprised. I thought it was going to be that way, but it was even more so than I ever expected. He’s just a very beautiful guy. Did a lot for the
country. And I think the more things progress the way they are, the better his reputation will be.

Smith: Did you hear from anyone at that time? Because, Susan, of course, told us we should talk with you.

Abbruzzese: Well, I think Susan talked with my wife about that time. And I think every once in awhile, they would hear about the house. It went through a couple of owners.

Is that thing still on?

Smith: Yeah, sure.

Abbruzzese: Well, I’ll tell you. After he was in the White House, the fellow who owned that house was a bachelor. He decided to have a birthday party for the President. Invited a whole bunch of people, all the neighbors, all the Cabinet and all that. A couple from the Cabinet went, but no one else came and I didn’t think they would. You know, he’s a perfect stranger. We went over and the backyard was decorated with tables all around the swimming pool. I just can’t imagine how much it cost. He had a giant birthday cake in the middle of the pool held up by straps on all the sides. And, for the people there who were Cabinet members, it was a very painful evening.

Then we had a person move in who rented the house, who had his family living in the area and he rented this house with his girlfriend. I don’t want to get into that. I can’t get into that.

Smith: Had a somewhat checkered history?

Abbruzzese: Every once in awhile, Betty would say, “Is there something that can be done?” And they said, “Just ignore it. That’s the best you can do.”

Smith: But it sounds like they took a continuing interest in the neighborhood.

Abbruzzese: Yes. The most recent owner put it on the market about three years ago, I think, for a $1,025,000. It sold 6 weeks ago for $735,000 and even that was a lot because of all the work that has to be done. The swimming pool was neglected and it was in such bad shape that it would cost more to fill it in than
to repair it. And if you repaired it, they would have a lot of trouble with that even afterwards. So they just filled it in. And what a mess that was because it rained every day. Streets were filled with mud. But now the people who are there are just wonderful, an English couple. Really very nice.

Smith: I take it are there still occasional tourists who drive by here?

Abbruzzese: I would say once or twice a week when the weather’s good, somebody will drive by and slow down, look at the sign over my garage and look at the sign and they would walk across and look at the plaque on the house.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Abbruzzese: I think that he was a much better President than he’ll ever get credit for. I don’t think it’s possible for him to get the credit he deserves because so much of it was in terms of the feeling in the country. And that was really because his qualities of leadership. Intellectual capability. He was very intelligent. But that’s not why. Intellectual ability, understanding, knowledge, they’re necessary for good Presidents, but qualities of leadership are what count and personal judgment. And there’s no relationship, in my view, between intelligence and good judgment. And he had all those things. And that’s what he will be admired for. And I think Lou Cannon has done a good biography of him, too.

Smith: And how do you remember him?

Abbruzzese: I think he’s just a very fine person. Glad to know him. By the way, when Ford was vice president, Wayne Hays in the fall of ’74 went to a television station for an interview. And I went with him and I’ve told you before that we were not really that close. And we went in and he introduced me and said, “This is Peter Abbruzzese. He’s on my staff. He’s a good friend of Jerry Ford. In fact, he’s his only friend.”

Smith: Would Ford have laughed at that?

Abbruzzese: Oh, he would’ve loved it because he understood Wayne Hays. His best friends would say to me, “Pete, why does he do those things?” “Well, I don’t know.” I mean, Wayne Hays.
Smith: And whatever happened to Hays?

Abbruzzese: He went back and he immediately in the next election ran for the state Senate. He was elected. And in 1980, he lost out when Ronald Reagan was elected. But that seat was held by a Democrat for another 20 years.

Smith: Is he still around?

Abbruzzese: Oh, no, he died several years ago. I don’t even know if his wife is still in the house. I think he sold the farm after he left. And after he sold the farm, he gave half the money from the farm to his ex-wife. I mean, all of a sudden, he just found himself a gentleman. So there was a very decent person trying to get out.

Smith: Were there people in the neighborhood who were, not on the personal level, but let’s face it – the circus moved on - were there people in the neighborhood on some level glad to at least see their lives return to normal?

Abbruzzese: No, all the neighbors at that time liked them and were happy with them in the neighborhood. Their politics didn’t matter.

Smith: And they would put up with all the disruption…

Abbruzzese: When it comes to a house or two away, it wasn’t so bad.

Smith: You wonder what the security would be like today. It’d probably be a lot worse.

Abbruzzese: They’d probably move him out right away. They’d move him to the Hay Adams or across the street.

Smith: This is great.
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Smith: Peter, first of all, let me ask you, did you live in Grand Rapids all your life?

Cook: Yes, born and raised in Grand Rapids - south end of town. Born on Shamrock Street and raised on London Street.

Smith: It presumably has changed a great deal in 94 years.

Cook: Well, you know where those two streets are. They’re both one block long dead end streets between Clyde Park and Century, down by the old Kelvinator plant that doesn’t exist anymore.

Smith: We’d love to try to get a sense of what Grand Rapids looked like, felt like, when Gerald Ford was a boy, say in the 1920s-1930s, before the Depression, during the Depression. Talk about what the town was like in those days.

Cook: I can remember this. The southwest side of town where I lived, down where London and Lynch Street and Crofton, Hogan, all that, by the old Kelvinator plant – they were all Dutch. On the other side of the river were the Polish. But it was all Dutch down there. In fact it was so Dutch there was a church there, and they would have a Dutch service at nine o’clock and then an English service at ten o’clock.

Smith: Really? So when you say it was all Dutch, there were people down there who spoke Dutch routinely?

Cook: Oh, yeah. They spoke some English, too, but you’d have some of the older people – we kids – when the older people didn’t want us to hear what they were talking about, they’d talk in Dutch.

Smith: English was a second language – that’s interesting. What was the economy – was it basically all furniture? Was furniture the mainstay of the local economy?
Cook: And all of that goes way back and I think – and of course, Grand Rapids was the furniture capital of the world. Remember that? That was before your time. We had a lot of old trees in Michigan, the wood and everything. All these different furniture plants – we were the furniture capital of the world – remember that – Grand Rapids.

I remember South – there were three major schools – well, four major schools. There was South High School, Union, Central and Catholic Central.

Smith: Now tell me, because over the years I got the impression that there was a bit of a rivalry particularly between Central and South.

Cook: Oh, South and Union. Big rivalry. Every Thanksgiving Day they’d have a football game on Island Park, which is in the middle of the river – Grand River down there. It’s gone now, but there was a little ball park down there in the middle of the river – Island Park. Every Thanksgiving Day South and Union would play – it was always for the city championship and sometimes for the state championship.

Smith: So I take it from that, that being a football player was a big deal in Grand Rapids.

Cook: Oh, yeah, sure.

Smith: What school did you go to?

Cook: South High School – with Jerry Ford. He was the Class of ’31 and I was the Class of ’32.

Smith: Because we’ve been told over the years, his parents in particular wanted him to go to South High because they thought it was a much more diverse range of people that he would be exposed to. That Central High was a little bit more upper crust.

Cook: Upper crust – I’d say upper crust. That’s a good term. Upper crust.

Smith: And tell me about South High. What was it like, what was the student body like? Was it, in fact, very diverse?
Cook: You know, I can remember this. There were only three African-Americans. Siki McGee was a black guy – he played football and everything; then there was a female, I can’t remember her name. She was a four-star student. There were three black people in South High School – three black kids.

My folks had five boys in a two bedroom bungalow. Before I went to South High School there was a football player at South that got hit and got paralyzed, and my dad said to us kids, “You kids can’t play football, you’ve got to play instruments. Play in the band.” So I played trumpet, Art played clarinet, trombone, baritone, flute, and piccolo. We had a Cook orchestra. When we started dating, all my dad wanted to know – does she play piano? The girl we were dating - he needed a piano player.

Smith: Did you know Jerry’s parents at all?

Cook: No. See Jerry had two sets of parents and…

Smith: There was Dorothy and Gerald Ford, Sr. here in Grand Rapids, whom he always regarded as his dad.

Cook: I knew his brother Dick. Dick Ford. But I didn’t know his parents. I remember visiting Jerry several times in Washington. I’ll tell you a little story. I belong to this DOCA organization and we’d have our annual meetings in Washington. And so my wife and I invited Jerry and Betty to come to our dinner in Washington. Well, he said, “Peter, I can’t because I have to speak Saturday morning at Cedar Springs.” Back then we had a corporate airplane. I said, “Well, Jerry, you come and after dinner we’ll fly back to Grand Rapids, so you can be at Cedar Springs.” He said, okay. He came, but he said, “Betty can’t come because our dog is sick and she has to take care of the dog.” After, we found, she was drunk. This was when she started to be on alcohol. But he didn’t tell us that. We found that out afterwards.

That’s a little story in the background, anyhow.

Smith: Did you know her from your early days in Grand Rapids? Or was it much later?
Cook: Only after they got married, when they were in Washington. I danced with her several times in Washington.

Smith: Did you? She was a good dancer.

Cook: Good dancer, real good dancer. I was not a good dancer, but all I had to do was hold her hand.

Smith: Tell me again, South High – he was a football player. Was he kind of a big man on campus?

Cook: He was because he played center on the football team. In South and Union, I think that year we were state championship football team.

Smith: Was he a popular guy?

Cook: Yeah, he was. He never felt he was popular, but he was popular. Everyone liked him.

Smith: Tell me about the Depression in Grand Rapids. How did it make itself felt?

Cook: Oh, boy. I remember that for sure, you know. What that was, you had the little chips that you could buy bread and milk with?

Smith: Like scrip?

Cook: Like scrip or something. Because my folks were poor and so you’d get so many scrips and you could go to the grocery store and get bread and milk with it. That was in the Depression, oh boy.

Smith: What did people do? How did they get through it?

Cook: I don’t think a lot of them did. I remember as a kid going downtown in the night and there were a lot of guys sleeping under the bridges and stuff by the river. Only did that a couple of times. My folks took me down to see that.

Smith: Now, he put himself through college.

Cook: Who?

Smith: Jerry.
Cook: Oh, yeah.

Smith: And he sold his blood along the way. Got a scholarship. But it was tough.

Cook: Yeah.

Smith: What did you do after high school?

Cook: I got a job at the Kelvinator plant. I remember, seventeen cents an hour and then the minimum wage of thirty-five cents an hour came in.

Smith: That was a New Deal measure?

Cook: Right. New Deal, yup.

Smith: So you doubled your income.

Cook: Doubled my income. But, here’s the good thing, there was a guy in charge of the paint mix room. There were three coats of paint on those refrigerators: primer, intermediate and finish coat. He was in charge of the big tanks – the chemist. After the whistle would blow, the spray gunners would drop their guns and head out. He had to come out with a bucket of paint thinner and clean the paint out of those spray guns. I’d stay and help him. I wouldn’t get paid for it, but I’d stay and help him for fifteen or twenty minutes. One day he came to me and said, “Peter, they are putting on a night shift. I’m recommending you be in charge of the paint mix room.” Oh, boy. He said, “You’ll go from thirty-five cents an hour to a dollar and a quarter an hour.” Oh, jeez, great, I did.

Smith: You must have felt like a rich man.

Cook: I did! Then I decided I didn’t want to work at Kelvinator all my life so I went downtown to Davenport and started going to Davenport during the day.

Smith: Let me ask you before I leave this: downtown, were there movie theaters in the ‘30s?

Cook: Oh, there was the Majestic, I remember the Majestic, the Regent, yeah. There were two I remember, I think there were three.
Smith: Where were the places that high school kids hung out? There must have been restaurants or theaters or places where your classmates would congregate after school.

Cook: There was Houseman Field, Central High School Houseman Field there, and a lot of times there would be events there. And then there was – I can’t remember – South High had a park about three blocks from South High School, too. There was a big park there with a stadium. And then, you guys don’t remember this, Island Park in Grand River. That was great. Right in the middle of Grand River – there was a park out there. It was small, but there was a football field.

Smith: And the movie theaters – did you go to the movies?

Cook: The Majestic and the Regent, I remember when, way back, of course this recently when Jack Loeks started the theater downtown – what’s the name of that? The what?

Nelson: [inaudible]

Cook: That’s still downtown, but…

Smith: Tell me about Frank McKay. He ran this town, didn’t he?

Cook: He ran the state.

Smith: He ran the state?

Cook: Oh, yeah. And of course, I knew him as a kid, I knew who he was. He was the governor, wasn’t he?

Smith: Well, no, he was the political boss here in Grand Rapids.

Cook: That’s right. Yeah. I remember my dad was a mechanic for a road contractor, and Claude Loomis said I’ve got to buy, I forget the brand of tires, because Frank McKay owns that tire company. And if you don’t buy those tires for trucks, you’ll never get a state job.

Smith: That’s power.
Cook: Yeah, that’s power.

Smith: Where did this power come from? Do you know? What made him able to dictate to people like that?

Cook: I don’t know. I was a kid.

Smith: Yeah. I take it Grand Rapids was a very Republican town in those days?

Cook: Yeah, it was.

Smith: And he was the boss, I mean the political boss.

Cook: Yeah.

Smith: When Ford came back after the war and decided to run for Congress, do you remember Bartel Jonkman, the guy he ran against? The Congressman he ran against?

Cook: I do remember that name. Yes I do, because I supported Jerry Ford.

Smith: Can you describe Jonkman?

Cook: No. I know the name, I remember the name.

Smith: He was an isolationist, and Ford was an internationalist. How much of that, because we’ve been talking to other people, how much of that was a generational fight? All these young vets who just came back from the war, sort of taking on the old guard, the MacKay machine. That sounds like what was going on.

Cook: Do you remember – you know John McCain?

Smith: Right.

Cook: Admiral McCain – do you know Admiral McCain?

Smith: No.

Cook: Yeah. Well I belonged to DOCA group - Defense Orientation Conference Association. They were a group of civilians who supported our military. Way back then a lot of the civilians didn’t want to support our military, but this
DOCA group did. Admiral McCain talked to us. This was when his son John McCain was a prisoner in Vietnam. Vietnam was it?

Smith: Yeah.

Cook: Never forget him talking to us about that. He was telling us what the Vietnamese people, if he would do a lot of favors, they would release his son. He said, “I can’t do any of that stuff.” He never did. Finally, they did release his son.

Smith: Yeah. Why did you support Jerry Ford when he first ran for Congress?

Cook: Well, I knew him. I went to South High School with him. He was Class of ’31, I was Class of ’32. Oh, I knew Jerry Ford.

Smith: What did you like about him?

Cook: I just liked him. Then of course he became our Congressman.

Smith: And what kind of Congressman – he was back here a lot as a Congressman, wasn’t he?

Cook: Oh, yeah. Right, yup he was. A good Congressman.

Smith: Good constituent service?

Cook: Then he became vice president, president. Yeah.

Smith: Right.

Cook: Nixon. Was it Nixon? Yeah, then he became president. I’d go to Washington several times and visit Jerry Ford.

Smith: When he was in Congress, did you ever go lobby him for something – for Grand Rapids?

Cook: No. I remember he pardoned Nixon, remember that?

Smith: How unpopular was that, even out here?

Cook: To me it wasn’t unpopular because I supported Nixon, but then it made Jerry Ford unpopular with the media people. Yeah.
Smith: You do you remember arguments at the time?

Cook: I remember a lot of arguments, I can’t remember how they go on, but yeah. They accused Jerry of pardoning the bad guy or something like that. I don’t know what they were talking about.

Smith: And there were people who thought there was a deal.

Cook: Yeah, well, it wasn’t Nixon, what was the name of the guy that he supported – Agnew?

Smith: His vice president was Agnew.

Cook: That’s vice president.

Smith: Who Ford replaced.

Cook: That’s right, Agnew.

Smith: How was it decided that this museum would be in Grand Rapids? What was the process whereby it came to be here? The library was going to be in Ann Arbor, and were there people here in Grand Rapids who were campaigning to have the museum?

Cook: I remember – I felt that the library ought to be in Grand Rapids, too, instead of Ann Arbor, but then they talked about this museum. I can’t remember the details, but I’ve been a supporter, of course, for a long time.

Smith: What was on this site before the museum? What did this neighborhood look like back then?

Cook: Jeez. I can remember land, but there were some old stores, I think there were some stores along here, too.

Smith: And downtown – this and the hotel, and the new art museum, really began the renewal of downtown?

Cook: The restoration or whatever it was downtown. Yeah.

Smith: What was downtown like before that?
Cook: Of course, as a kid, it was just small. I remember the streetcars downtown. Streetcars would run down Grandville Avenue, over to Warner Park.

Smith: And was anything open on a Sunday?

Cook: Hardly anything. Oh, no. That’s right. Everything was closed.

Smith: Was that the Dutch influence?

Cook: I think it was mostly the Dutch people, oh, yeah.

Smith: For people who don’t know, when they hear Dutch, what does that mean? What impact did they have? What was their outlook? They are fiscally conservative, presumably. Pretty traditional in a lot of ways? What does it mean?

Cook: To be Dutch?

Smith: Yeah, to be Dutch in West Michigan?

Cook: I remember the Dutch came over and they settled in New York and Michigan and Iowa. I remember in Holland.

Smith: Conservative?

Cook: Very conservative, yeah. Very conservative. In Grand Rapids, remember, the Dutch were on this side of the river and the Italians were on the other side of the river. The west side were Italians, the south side were the Dutch.

Smith: Was there a black population in Grand Rapids, to speak of?

Cook: Very few. In Grand Rapids, in South High School there were three blacks. Siki McGee was a ball player, then there was a gal, and she was a real sharp gal. And then there was another gal, I can’t remember her (inaudible). But Siki McGee and there was another guy…

Smith: And did he play football with Jerry Ford?

Cook: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Smith: You saw Ford at the White House?
Cook: Oh, yeah, several times.

Smith: Did you go to a state dinner, or what kind of things would you…?

Cook: Oh, a state dinner up in his office? We were both from South High School, and I told you, when we invited he and Betty. Did I tell you that?

Smith: She has really made a lot of history in her own right though, hasn’t she?

Cook: Oh, afterwards, sure.

Smith: With what she has done in terms of the Betty Ford Center.

Cook: Yeah, with the Betty Ford, uh…

Smith: Center.

Cook: Center. Yeah. I guess you go through stages in your life, she went through one stage, but then afterwards she really, she did a lot of good.

Smith: When they left the White House and did not come back to Grand Rapids, did that cause a lot of comment?

Cook: Comment, I don’t remember. I remember, though, I went twice – I flew to California – what was the place in California?

Smith: Rancho Mirage.

Cook: Yeah, Rancho Mirage.

Smith: Right near Palm Springs.

Cook: Near Palm Springs, yeah. I visited him out there, twice. I remember the last time he was getting pretty weak. I remember he stood up, he had a – somebody sort of had to help him stand up. He talked to us holding on to the table with his hand. Everybody knew he was in pretty ill – or whatever.

Smith: That wasn’t too long before…

Cook: He couldn’t walk. I remember when they took him over to the other side of the room, they had two guys took him by the arms and took him over to the other side of the room to talk or something like that.
Smith: What do you remember of the funeral? Were you surprised at the local response? The numbers…?

Cook: Surprised? No, he was so well known…I remember, was it the funeral or something where all the highways were closed, I mean the people standing on the highways and roads – was that the funeral?

Smith: Yes. And the long lines.

Cook: Oh, long lines, yeah.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered? What about Jerry Ford, besides the offices he held, what about him as a person?

Cook: As a person? He was a great person. He was willing to help people, and he got the high office and everything, but he never became an imperialistic guy, no. He was always, ordinary isn’t the right word, but he was always an ordinary guy. Normal guy.

Smith: Accessible.

Cook: Yup.

Smith: Do you miss the old days, the old Grand Rapids, is this better than it was? Or just different?

Cook: In some ways it may be better, I don’t know. I miss the old days.

Smith: What do you miss about the old days?

Cook: I guess I miss the people. Just the people. The economy, of course, it used to be the furniture capital of the world, remember that? People would come from all around the United States to these furniture shows and all these, it wasn’t furniture companies we had, and then I guess we ran out of woods in Michigan pretty soon. So, the stuff moved down to the Carolinas. Remember – you’re too young – we were the furniture capital of the world, Grand Rapids. The furniture capital of the world. I can’t remember the names of the furniture companies.

Unknown: In 1985 President Ford came to the opening of your business.
Smith: Oh really?

Cook: Yup, he did.

Smith: 1985? How did you start your business?

Cook: How did I start my business?

Smith: Mazda – you were ahead of the curve. You were selling small cars before anyone knew they wanted small cars.

Cook: That goes way back. Way back. Started with Volkswagen and Porsche-Audi for twenty-five years, and then in ’77 the Japanese cars started coming to market – Mazda – so they came to me, and I became the only independently-owned Mazda distributor in the United States. I had Mazda Great Lakes. They gave me the five Great Lakes states. So I set up all the Mazda dealers in the five Great Lakes states. Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio and Wisconsin.

Smith: And today you look at what’s happening to Ford and General Motors, it’s the small car that everyone wants to buy.

Cook: I know. But to me it’s something – I can remember I knew way back in the Volkswagen days, we had about a year’s wait for that little Volkswagen Bug. And I knew a guy who worked at General Motors, I said, “Why doesn’t General Motors make a little car like that?” I forget what he said, but it was something like, “Well, they’ll never sell more than two percent of the cars in this country, so we’ll never do that little thing – make that little thing.”

Smith: Well, I suppose when gasoline was fifteen cents a gallon, that attitude was understandable.

Cook: Well, I suppose so.

Smith: But when it’s four dollars a gallon…

Cook: Yeah, but that little car with the air-cooled engine in the back…

Smith: Did you sell many cars in the beginning? I mean, Volkswagens and the like – were you a success from the beginning?
Cook: Oh, sure. I can remember we had a year’s wait list for those cars. I remember one year’s wait list. We got to set up dealers, and then the Allies bombed the plant out in Wolfsburg, Germany during the war. And after the war, remember, all those German soldiers needed work, so the Allies rebuilt the plant in Wolfsburg so the German guys had something to do. Dr. Porsche was the guy that designed the little Volkswagen. It was the one good thing Hitler did. He said, “Dr. Porsche, we need a small car, a people’s car,” he said. That’s why Dr. Porsche designed this little Volkswagen and they made it in Wolfsburg.

Smith: I wonder how much of that success had to do with Dutch thrift? If the Dutch in West Michigan are as thrifty as I think they are, they would appreciate a small car because it’s a lot cheaper to drive than a big one.

Cook: I can’t remember, but remember, we had a year’s wait list for that little Volkswagen. A year’s wait list. The Allies had bombed the plant out over there…

Smith: And I think history repeats itself. I think there still a year’s wait list for small cars. Was there anything we haven’t covered? Anything about Jerry Ford?

Cook: Jerry Ford – yeah, of course, I remember him a couple of times in Washington, remember he was a football coach for – when Davenport started that University of Grand Rapids, or something like that? Jerry Ford was a coach there for a couple of years. After the war, all the soldiers come back from the war and they all had scrips or something to go to college, see? So Davenport started this university and had Jerry Ford as their coach out there. Then the scrips ran out.

Smith: Did you know Phil Buchen?

Cook: Oh, sure.

Smith: What was he like?

Cook: Phil Buchen?

Smith: They were law partners together, weren’t they?
Cook: Yeah – I’m trying to think. Yeah, they were law partners. Phil Buchen. Yeah.

Smith: Along with a man named Julius Amberg, I believe.

Cook: I remember that name, too. But I remember Phil Buchen. I used to see him quite a bit, way back. Phil Buchen. Yeah. I think I’ve outlived most of those guys.

Smith: Well, it’s not a complaint – maybe it’s a lament.

Unknown: There is one story you tell. He’s supposed to not say about Betty, he was supposed to tell...

Cook: About what?

Unknown: Your story that we’ve told you many times – the story is supposed to be that President Ford came in and one man met him at the airport, and then a few weeks later Air Force One came in and the streets were all blocked off. That was your story about taking him on your plane that you really wanted to tell, Peter. You got off on the Betty tangent rather than telling about how only one man was at the airport.

Smith: This would be before the vice presidency?

Cook: The title – it’s the same guy, only one guy meeting him at the airport, now he’s got a title, now the whole place is jammed. You get a title and, yeah. I said, he’s the same guy.

Smith: Now, walk me through that. You met him at the airport? This was before the vice presidency or…?

Cook: Oh I knew him in South High School.

Smith: Okay, but when he came to town, and you said one person met him at the airport – was that when he was still a Congressman?

Cook: Yeah. I flew him to town, didn’t I, from Washington?

Unknown: Well, this was the story with the Red Flannel Days.

Cook: Yeah, that’s right.
Smith: But you flew him – he was coming home for the Red Flannel Days…

Cook: Yeah, he had a speech. There was only one guy at the airport to meet him. Was it a month later and he’s vice president or something? And he had to speak at Calvin College – yeah, that’s right. He was to speak at Calvin College. My gosh, there was a thousand people out there to meet him, now because he’s vice president. Same guy, but different title.

Smith: But you know, it’s the same guy – that’s the key. Because he didn’t change.

Cook: He didn’t change at all, no. He was always the same. When he was president I would visit him in Washington. He was always the same guy.

Smith: That’s the key. He didn’t change.

Cook: No. He had a lot different responsibilities and everything.

Smith: That’s what we want. Thank you.

Unknown: I didn’t know if you wanted him to elaborate on when he came – you asked him to come to your grand opening at their new company and he came with the head officials of Japan – you had a party at the Amway Grand.

Cook: Oh yeah.

Smith: He came back a lot, as a former president. He came back to Grand Rapids quite a bit.

Cook: He did. This is sort of his home town, really – his home town. Grand Rapids.

Unknown: The President called him on his birthday.

Smith: You’d get a birthday call?

Cook: Yeah. I don’t know if he knew, but his secretary knew.

Smith: But he was the one on the phone.

Cook: Yeah. Sure. I remember the last time I visited him in Santa Barbara, was it? Santa Barbara, California?

Smith: Oh, Palm Springs?
Cook: Palm Springs. He was getting very weak, like I told you. They had to help him up.

Smith: Was that toward the end of his life?

Cook: Toward the end of his life. Maybe about a year before he passed away.

Smith: I think he was very frustrated once he could no longer travel. That was a real source of pleasure for him, including coming back here. I think the last time he came back here was his ninetieth birthday, and they had the big crowd outside the museum.

Cook: I think so. We were there. Yeah. Well, life is great. Wait until you young people get to your nineties and all.

Smith: I was going to say, I should live so long, but, thank you.
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McPherson: I knew Ford growing up. He and my father were friends and I saw him from time to time. I saw President Ford many times when I was working for him as Deputy Director of the Presidential Personnel. At those meetings I developed some understanding of President Ford’s decision making.

Smith: Excellent.

McPherson: I also saw President Ford when I was Jim Baker’s deputy in the President’s fight for the nomination in 1976. Baker was responsible for “delegate hunting” for Ford at the convention.

Smith: That’s gold. I mean, all of this is gold. Let’s talk about West Michigan, because it is a distinctive place. One senses it has changed considerably over the years. The influence of the Dutch, and the Christian Reformed Church were clearly significant. Sometimes, there’s a semi-comical element - the stories about people buying a Sunday paper on Saturday and not reading it until Monday. I’m trying to get a sense of what made West Michigan stand out. Was it not the place that most influenced Gerald Ford; and why were they such a good match during those years where he was in the Congress?

McPherson: The Dutch were a cultural influence since they arrived in large numbers around the turn of the century. My grandmother came from Holland about 1900 when her father came to Grand Rapids to work in the furniture factories. She married a local farmer, my grandfather, and so I was always very aware of the Dutch community, though my grandmother became a Methodist when she married. The Dutch community and their churches were not a dominate political influence in Kent county until probably the late ’50 early ’60s.

Smith: We’ve been told that they tended to shy away from political involvement.
McPherson: I think they did for generations, but they began to get really active in the late ‘50s and into the ‘60s. I hope someone has or will do a careful study of why and how the Dutch moved into an active political role. I am talking here about their role in Kent County (Grand Rapids). In Ottawa County (the other county of Ford’s congressman district) it is my impression that the Dutch were a larger portion of the population and the Dutch were politically active much earlier. In Kent County, as the Dutch became more prominent economically and the immigrant generations passed away, the Dutch community apparently began to feel that they could and should exercise more of a direct political role and should elect leaders from their own community to public offices like the State Senate and House. The big change was the Dutch organizing aggressively through local Dutch churches (mostly the Christian Reform Church I think) to control the primaries. Of course it was the Republican primary that was generally important in Kent County. Jerry Ford was already in Congress before this degree of involvement by the Dutch. I am not aware of the role of the Dutch churches when Ford won the primary for Congress in 1948. Ford defeated an incumbent who I think was Dutch, Congressman Yonkman, though I never heard he was the Dutch candidate. I had the impression that Ford always had strong Dutch community support but also had strong support from others.

For example, Ford, I think, developed a close relationship with many in the Catholic community. Grand Rapids has a large Polish-Catholic community. There’s an African-American community. I grew up on a farm in the Vergennes Township in Kent County. The Dutch were there – people like my grandmother, but not in huge numbers. So, major rural parts in Kent County generally were not very Dutch. The board of supervisors for Kent County was divided about equally into the 1940s between greater Grand Rapids and the rest the county. In brief, the full county was not politically dominated by the Dutch as I was growing up in the 1940s and 1950s.

Smith: Did the broader culture have more of an influence?
McPherson: Yes, but it depended on where in West Michigan you lived. As I said, I grew up in rural Kent County. I didn’t grow up in Ottawa County, and I think if I’d grown up in Ottawa County it might have felt differently. Or if I’d have grown up in one of the dominantly Dutch communities in Grand Rapids, it would have no doubt felt differently as well. The Dutch definitely were more socially conservative than much of the rest of West Michigan. I remember being struck by the fact that the Christian Reform high schools did not have dances after football games. We had those dances at Lowell High School.

Smith: Clearly the nature of conservatism evolved during the Ford years. When he was in the White House he was regarded as the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge. And then almost overnight with the rise of Ronald Reagan, conservatism was redefined. Certainly with the advent of the religious right as part of the governing coalition. So when you say social conservative – that almost has a…

McPherson: Social and economic conservatism.

Smith: Certainly fiscal conservatism.

McPherson: Absolutely. In West Michigan when Ford was growing up and then a Congressman, most everybody thought that you should not spend money you didn’t have. We didn’t think abortion was a good idea. On the other hand, growing up I remember a couple of girls in my high school that I think had abortions. But it wasn’t as if these young girls were forever bad girls if they were otherwise good people. This was in the late 1950s.

Smith: That raises a really important point. Because my sense is that Ford is of a generation that practiced economic conservatism and a healthy skepticism about what government could do to bring about Utopia, through social engineering.

McPherson: Ford generation clearly thought it was the job to individual hard work. It was about individual merit and hard work. We were expected to be responsible people. Working hard and taking responsibility was a key value of West Michigan culture.
Smith: By my sense is that along with that went, for lack of a better word, a decent reticence about subjects that you didn’t discuss. Certainly you didn’t see them as part of the political agenda.

McPherson: Yes.

Smith: We were talking with Justice Stevens. He was never asked about abortion in his confirmation hearings. But to go back to West Michigan and that generation - America in the ‘50s, for lack of a better cliché, there were a lot of things below the surface; a lot of things that are now part of the daily conversation.

McPherson: I think, by the way, that kind of view was the Kansas that Bob Dole grew up in too. In my view, the old Midwest had a set of strong convictions and no doubt, if you didn’t work hard, if you were a derelict, you were kind of an outcast, and if you weren’t responsible for your kids and your family and so forth. But it wasn’t so much a political issue, it was a social question.

Smith: How did your path first cross with that of Gerald Ford?

McPherson: He was our congressman. My family lived in Kent County, and therefore I lived in Ford’s Fifth Congressional District. My father was politically active and always worked for the Republican Party and therefore worked for Jerry Ford. I periodically saw Ford in that context. He’d always had his trailer that he took around the district including to the city of Lowell, the little town where I went to high school. As I think about this, that time seems like America of a long time ago, an America without drugs and without the kind of crime and so forth that we now have. At least that was the way it was in my little community.

Smith: Isn’t it interesting that someone who was as politically secure in his district spent as much time in the district?

McPherson: I thought that Ford gained energy from his conversations with people. I felt he was interested in what I, as a teenager, had to say. And I remember walking across the Kent County Fair with him one time when I was in college. I was
taking him from one place to another, and people stopped him all along the way and asked him things. I was impressed by how he would ask them questions back and really want to understand. He seemed curious about people and problems. I was impressed by his range of interest in people and practical issues.

There was an old Dutch farmer in our township; he was one of the smartest people I’ve ever known. No education, but really smart and wise. And he had this regular letter writing relationship with Jerry Ford. Orie Gronabone was his name. I remember Ford telling me, “You know, he gives me a real common sense perspective on things.” Ford clearly read his letters. As I came to know Ford, I admire him and thought him a very good and sensible man. That’s the way my father thought of him - sound, predictable, and caring about his district.

I went to the Peace Corps for a couple years right after Michigan State, and when I got back I went to law school at American University in Washington. I went to Ford and said I’d like to work on Capitol Hill. Ford got me a job with a Congressman Zion of Indiana. I of course maintain some relationship with Congressman Ford.

Smith: That’s interesting.

McPherson: I always felt that Ford had a relationship with members of the Catholic community. Many of them probably voted for his Democrat opponent but everyone liked Jerry personally.

Smith: There must have been, I can’t remember the name, I guess there was a gadfly…

McPherson…who ran against him for Congress lots of times and Ford beat him fairly easily as I recall. There was a difference in political views, but almost everyone thought that Jerry Ford was a good person. It is true that some, especially Democrats, thought that he was aggressive enough or did not propose enough new ideas.
Smith: You mentioned the Catholic community – I wonder if you have any sense what his relationship was with the African-American community.

McPherson: I don’t know any details about it. But I think that he knew their leadership and many individuals and he wanted to hear their views. I am sure that he was too conservative for many in the African-American community and they became more vocal in the 1960s. Still Ford did not think of himself as a congressman for 60% of the population of his district. He was the Congressman for his whole district.

Smith: So when you saw him in the Minority Leader’s office, he was basically the same man?

McPherson: He was the same man. He was elected to Minority leader by members like Mel Laird. Laird was a brilliant, capable and a somewhat Machiavellian individual who made great contributions to the country. Ford clearly was not Machiavellian as that term is generally used, though Ford did plan. I think Laird saw Ford as a person he could perhaps control. It was a mistake for Laird or anyone to think that ultimately Ford was going to be somebody else’s man.

Smith: We had a great interview with Laird. Bob Dole says Mel Laird’s the guy who puts poison in the stream a mile up river and then runs into town to save everyone. Pretty good line.

McPherson: Now, Ford also had relationships with younger people, for example, Congressman Rumsfeld, who supported Ford when he ran for leader. Ford had this great capacity for friendship. Most people have friends, but Ford had friends with a much broader range of backgrounds than most people realized. I say that when I was working in WH Personnel and came to have a broader understanding of Ford’s relationships.

Smith: That’s an interesting observation. Plus the Republican Party was a different party then. It was a party centered in the Midwest. And you had a northeastern wing; and you had parts out west. Initially, you didn’t really have much of a southern contingent. That didn’t begin to develop until after the Goldwater…
McPherson: Eisenhower picked up a number of states in the South, but the Republican Party really began gaining strength at a state level in the South in ’64 and thereafter.

Smith: There has been criticism over the years that the Republicans were of a get-along, go-along permanent minority mindset. Now, that clearly doesn’t dovetail with Ford’s ambition to be Speaker of the House. But there is that persistent criticism…

McPherson: about Ford and Michael.

Smith: The older I get, the more I am convinced the single biggest political factor – trumping ideology or anything else – is generational. And certainly if you look at this subject, each generation of House Republicans tends to look over their shoulder and to some degree, condescend to an earlier generation of House Republicans.

McPherson: But I think it may also have been generational with the Democratic Party. I think that if Michael, and Ford before him, could work with the majority and could get at least some things done. But by the time you had people like Speaker Jim Wright running the House – his idea was to say, “We’re just going to do it and you Republicans shouldn’t even complain.” The Democrats got to be so entrenched in their hold on the House. It does seem to me that it was generational both with Republicans and the Democrats.

Smith: Consider the ‘74 Watergate Babies, and all that. One of the great ironies was that Gerald Ford, who spends his adult life on Capitol Hill, as president finds himself defending the rights of the Executive against these newly empowered, energized, aggressive lawmakers.

McPherson: Much of this was a mistake.

Smith: The War Powers Act is the classic example.

McPherson: During a presidential crisis and their aftermath a lot of unwise things can happen. We had the Anti-Impoundment Act, which stopped the future use of the very helpful quasi-line item veto. We lost presidential impoundment in
the last year of Nixon’s presidency. The country would have been much better off fiscally if the Anti-Impoundment Act had never been passed. We also got some unfortunate court decisions during the Clinton years e.g. body guard to the president can be forced to testify, etc.

Smith: Now where were you as Watergate unfolded?

McPherson: I was a tax lawyer at the IRS during those last Nixon years. The Nixon WH wanted me to come over and work in White House legal office, as part of the impeachment defense. It was a great career decision not to do that.

Smith: So, how did you come into the White House?

McPherson: Over the years, I had been very active in the Young Republicans, and I’d come to know Sen. Bill Brock very well. Bill Walker was then head of the White House Presidential Personnel and needed a clear conservative for his office. Brock urged that I be hired.

Smith: Bill Walker or Ron Walker?

McPherson: Bill Walker. Bill Walker was a protégé of Rumsfeld from Illinois, and he was the Director of WH Presidential Personnel at the time. When Walker offered me a job, I said I wanted to do it but that I thought he probably ought to know that I had grown up in the President’s congressional district and I knew the President some. That’s exactly the way I phrased it. I not sure Walker took much notice because I said it so causally. I never mentioned it to anybody else again. It’s unwise in the White House, unless you really have lots of access to the president, to talk about how you know the president. However, I thought it was fair for Walker to know.

Smith: You were in an ideal position, then.

McPherson: So Walker a few weeks later, ran down the hall past my office and said, “Peter, you are working on this personnel problem. I want you to go with me over to see the President.” So I walked into the Oval Office and the President said, “Peter! What are you doing here?” It was fun, actually. I got a big kick telling my father about Ford’s comment and Walker seemed pleased too.
Smith: Clearly, one of the conundrums that Ford faced from day one was how to balance his sense of fair play and justice toward the vast majority of the Nixon holdovers, who had nothing to do with Watergate and who in many cases were highly competent. Plus he had a government to run, so there was an element of continuity. How do you balance that against the need, political and otherwise, for change? For people to see that this is a Ford administration and not an extension of the Nixon. Rumsfeld has been pretty explicit, and others have backed him up, that he strongly urged the President to clean house early. And one senses that the President, for a number of reasons, was not inclined to take that advice. Over time, clearly, he put in place a Cabinet of his own, and a very impressive group of “Ford people.” How did that play itself out in the personnel shop?

McPherson: There was a feeling that there needed to be a break between the two administrations. Certainly Presidential Personnel had the impression we were supposed to do. It’s also true that the Nixon people had been there for many years. The fully productive life of a senior government official generally isn’t a full eight years, and so there was some turnover in the nature of things. In any case Ford wanted to recruit some new strong people. That is reflected in the careers of so many of the Ford people. When you go back and look at the Reagan and the two Bush administrations, there are a lot of Ford people.

Smith: Let me just nail down: how early in the Ford presidency did you go to work there?

McPherson: I think I went to work in February.

Smith: Of ’75?

McPherson: Yes.

Smith: The other side of this coin, of course, is the criticism that the people Ford brought with him, mostly from the Hill, were not quite presidential caliber. That may not be fair, but I would be interested in how you mesh out of your kind of local circle, with the demands of this very different job. Plus you had the Nixon holdovers.
McPherson: Well, of course, it’s a person by person question. Some of the people Ford brought with him from his Hill experience were excellent. There was of course Don Rumsfeld. Another excellent example was former Congressman Jack Marsh who provided advice to the President on a range of issues. He was one of the wisest people I have every worked with and I suspect history will not give him full credit because he was so self-effacing. Some of the other people the President brought from the Hill were not prepared for the much more demanding jobs at the WH. Bob Hartmann is the person people usually talk about in that context but I personally never had much contact with Hartman.

Smith: Why was Hartman such a polarizing figure?

McPherson: Maybe a little bit because of personality. I had the impression that Hartmann was sort of gruff and not very communicative. The reason there was a vacancy for me to fill at the WH, by the way, was because Hartmann insisted my predecessor be fired. My predecessor continues to be a great friend of mine over these years. He did something that Hartmann didn’t like and Hartmann insisted that he be fired. Hartmann exercised authority such as in this case some felt it was unfair and arbitrary. I stayed out of his way. I knew enough to not get involved with him.

Smith: Is there a thin line between protective and possessive?

McPherson: Oh, sure. Ford trusted Hartmann and needed to have somebody like that around. Hartmann had no agenda in terms of getting a better job personally. His agenda was President Ford. I think that Hartmann’s biggest problem was that he had lived and professionally grown up in a single and not-large world, and all of a sudden he had real power in a much bigger world. And he didn’t have time to adjust and perhaps did not want to. There is not much time to adjust to the bigger world of the WH. Others will have more developed views on Hartmann.

Smith: Very well put.
McPherson: There are a few people in most WHs who have time to think about things more and talk to more people. Jack March is a good example of a person who did this.

Smith: Enough critical things have been said about Hartmann…in Hartmann’s defense, he played a critically useful role at the very end of the Nixon presidency, with Haig and making certain that Ford didn’t even accidentally leave an impression regarding the pardon and all that.

McPherson: That was a historically important role, and I think that Hartmann doesn’t get enough credit for his role. The older I am, the more I’m disinclined to make final and complete judgments about individuals. I tend to take them in pieces – this works and that does not work.

Smith: And I wonder - Hartmann having seen Ford on the Hill, knowing him in ways that other people didn’t…for lack of a better word, the Eagle Scout quality about Jerry Ford, the fact that he was genuinely shocked that anyone would lie to him. It’s a hugely admirable, human trait, but it may not be the best outlook for a president. And you wonder whether Hartmann, in his own mind, was compensating to some degree by being the SOB.

McPherson: He’d probably always played that role with Ford. I assume but I don’t know for sure.

Let me mention something that goes back to Ford’s relationship with his community. I was the young man who of course wanted to impress the President. I soon found that when I went to see the President on something, that if I told a little news about Kent County, he just loved it. I remember there was a man who was a pillar of the community in Lowell by the name of Norm Borgensen, who had just died. And I said, “Mr. President, did you know that Norm Borgensen died?” And he said, “Is that right? Nobody told me. Norm was a wonderful friend of mine.” He loved his community and the individuals in his community.

Smith: So the congressman never wholly went away.
McPherson: The congressman never completely left. I had the impression he was always the congressman from the Fifth Congressional District, in at least some part of his soul. That was true, even after he left public life. When I saw him after he left office, he always wanted to hear about or talk about people back home.

Smith: And yet presumably the trajectory of those two and half years is the degree to which he was able to master a very different set of leadership skills.

McPherson: And he was the person to do it.

Smith: Could you see that?

McPherson: Yes. Absolutely. Look at the Nixon pardon. I’m thrilled yet when I think about his wonderful speech to the convention. I’ve never seen him give a better speech. It was a very presidential speech. I think he thought about national issues because of his roles on the Hill – but he understood what he had to do to be the leader of the nation. It could not have been easy to go from a brief time as Vice President and years as Minority leader and then to President of the United States. It’s always irritated me that people did not understand how smart and knowledgeable Ford was on a great range of issue. They mistook lack of flashiness…

Smith: Plus, Midwesterners talk slow.

McPherson: They talk slow and they don’t try to impress with brilliance. In fact, if you are trying to be brilliant, you are viewed as somebody from New York or somewhere like that, back in those days anyway. It’s a little different now because Grand Rapids and Michigan are more cosmopolitan. But that’s not the Grand Rapids that Jerry Ford grew up in.

At the WH I became the chief operating officer of the Presidential Personnel and from time to time gave the office’s recommendations directly to the President. Ford always knew so much about people, about government organizations, about history. I of course felt that I better really know what I talking about when I went to see the President because he was likely to know a lot more than I did about the some part of the issue a hand. And he was
thoughtful about people and issues but he definitely had his own developed
opinions on lots of topics. There could be no assumption that he was going to
accept what we told him he ought to do.

Smith: That’s interesting. We’ve talked with Cabinet officers and others who have
related wonderful stories about the budget process, where he would get both
sides into the Oval Office. You can’t imagine Richard Nixon making
decisions that way – but he liked to have the protagonists, in this case, the
antagonists.

McPherson: He liked to talk about it and think it through. He liked other people there. In
some ways it wasn’t a debate forum. It was a let’s discuss it forum.

Let me tell you a story about Ford’s decision making. Kissinger is brilliant
and certainly Ford felt he was. I said to Kissinger just before a big dinner the
other night and said, “I bet you never knew this story about your appointment
of Rodgers to be Undersecretary for Economic Affairs at the State
Department.” Henry did not know the story. WH personnel and Chief of Staff
Dick Cheney did not think the President should appoint Rogers. This was the
spring of ’76 and the convention was a few months away. The Cuban
community was strongly opposed to Rogers. We thought why do we need to
do this now?

Smith: Now, this was the appointment of?

McPherson: Of an Undersecretary for Economic Affairs at the State Department – Rogers
was a competent good man by the way. He was Assistant Secretary at State
for Latin America. So the appointment is before the President for his decision
Cheney, Doug Bennett, who is the head of the office, went to see the
President to lay out why he shouldn’t make the appointment. I am told by the
others to make the case and I did so. Ford ponder the question a few
moments, and said, “Well, Henry wants this, I know. But I have also thought
about it, and I am going to go with Rodgers because it is the right thing to
do.” And we all sat up straight and said, yes sir. I really respected President
Ford.
Smith: Did it include the political ramifications in Florida?

McPherson: Yes. I argued to the President that he could do this for Rogers in another day, another time. Rodgers was already an Assistant Secretary; he doesn’t need to move up. Besides Rogers was particularly an economic policy person, he was a foreign policy person. I think Ford made the decision because he thought it was right and did not want to take politics into consideration. So, after I told this story to Henry, Henry stands up at the dinner and says, “Ah, Peter McPherson told me a great story about how he tried to roll me and he never told me about it until tonight’ which wasn’t quite the way I phrased it. And Cheney came up to me afterwards and said, “Peter. We all experienced those situations from time to time, didn’t we?” This was about two months ago.

Smith: Let me ask, how was the White House different with Rumsfeld in the chief of staff job and Cheney? Or was it?

McPherson: Well, it didn’t seem to change immediately. Rumsfeld had his so-called snowflakes – brief memo on directions or ideas - that were always coming. Cheney was more of an institutional manger, from where I sat, than Rumsfeld. Does that sound right?

Smith: Yeah. We’ve also been told that there were people, including the President’s personal secretary, who thought it was a more relaxed atmosphere under Cheney.

McPherson: Oh, I think probably.

Smith: Certainly not in terms of relaxed professional standards or work product, but a somewhat…

McPherson: Easier personal relationships.

Smith: Exactly.

McPherson: As far as I was concerned, Rumsfeld did very well. Overall Cheney’s way of operating did not seem that much seem that much different from where I sat. I am certain that I do not have a full view however.
Smith:  Was the White House slow on the uptake regarding Reagan? Because there have been stories about efforts being made which, in retrospect, seem a little off the wall - appointing him to a Cabinet position, for example.

McPherson:  Yes. There was a crazy idea. Reagan wasn’t going to accept secretary of transportation.

Smith:  It would border on insult.

McPherson:  Exactly. I’m sure that that’s what Reagan must have thought.

Smith:  Was the offer made?

McPherson:  I believe so. I was told it was.

I thought there were two key decisions which were not good policy and hurt our relations with the conservative. Not meeting with Solzhenitsyn - and Kissinger always understood international politics better than he did domestic politics – that was a real mistake. And, too, the supporting of the Secretary of Labor on the common situs.

Smith:  John Dunlop.

McPherson:  Dunlop is a brilliant man, but he’s an organized labor person. The Republican Party is not the party of organized labor. You go to Oklahoma, you go to Texas, and other parts of the country that were the center of conservative Republican strength and the President’s support of the common situs legislation really made critical people mad.

Smith:  Explain it for people who are not familiar with the term.

McPherson:  To be simplistic the common situs legislation essentially requires union workers for large portions of construction work even if it was not a government paid for construction. It flew right in the face of the right to work legislation of many states. How we ever got into this mess…those two decisions, in my view, gave legs to Reagan that he never would have had otherwise.
Smith: Interesting.

You get this checkerboard approach to foreign policy, where, on the one hand, détente is being pursued, but then you’ve got confrontation in Angola, and other parts of the Third World. You’ve got the Soyuz-Apollo mission going forward, and Helsinki.

McPherson: Foreign policy almost is never totally coherent in any administration because of the complexity and differences in the world. Tidy minds find foreign policy very frustrating. The world is too big and complex.

Smith: And primary campaigns are all about tidiness.

McPherson: The world is too complex to be totally consistent so you have to do the best you can. On the other hand, I never understood why Henry felt so strongly – and I’d be curious, if you ever talk to him, which you no doubt will or have – why he was so against the President seeing Solzhenitsyn. First Ford should have seen him as the right thing to do on human rights. Moreover, the Russians understood that we had a political campaign going on. It not as if they never did anything to irritate us.

Smith: And then, remember, this sort of Africa split…

McPherson: This common situs legislation – I would be very interested in what people like Jim Baker say – but it was my view then, it’s been my view ever since, that those two decisions caused Reagan’s base to say they had to do something. The pardoning of those who left for Canada during Vietnam upset conservatives but that decision had begun work itself out by the summer of 1976 in my view. Moreover, that those pardons probably needed healing. Just like the Nixon pardon, the decision was sound.

Smith: Of course there’s an irony here. Jump forward a year to the convention, and instead of picking a really emotional hot button issue to try to shake those last delegates free, Sears embraces this procedural issue about naming your vice president…
McPherson: Let me talk about the convention. Jim Baker asked me to go over and work for him and be in charge of the team of people working on delegates for the convention.

Smith: Leading up to the convention?

McPherson: Yes. I went over a few months before the convention. Baker was in charge of the delegate hunt, which was much of the campaign at that point in time.

Smith: Someone, told us that if Her Majesty ever got a look at the guest list for the Bicentennial dinner at the White House, she might have been surprised at how many uncommitted delegates and their families were there.

McPherson: Certainly. We worked the delegate problem from all legal angles. We had the person in charge of each of the regions in the country – most of them with a lot of convention experience. Over the years I had been involved in a number of party conventions and this was a particularly exciting for me. *Reagan’s operation was run by Sears, who was a great technician and strategist,* and had great credibility with the press, mostly because he spent a lot of time with them and could tell a great story. He was to be able to persuade the press like few I have known. Reagan announced Sen. Schweiker of Pennsylvania as the Reagan vice president nominee and that immediately put Pennsylvania in play. Sears then convinced the press that Reagan probably had the Penn delegation and it was plausible. Ford and our team really worked those delegations. However the person that delivered the delegation for Ford was Drew Lewis of Pennsylvania. Drew later made history as Reagan Secretary of Labor. Drew’s gone, isn’t he? He was a good man.

Smith: I don’t know.

McPherson: I’m almost sure he is. But Drew pulled that delegation together.

Smith: Did Sears think that by picking Schweiker they could bring Lewis with him?

McPherson: Yes, they certainly hoped so, because Lewis was a political creation of Schweiker. Sears clearly felt that they had something to do with the Schweiker move because Ford was winning. Ford was lining up the
delegation one-by-one. Both camps more or less knew where the delegates were going. There were some major uncertainties like Mississippi but the trend was clear and Sears knew that sooner or later the press would figure it out. So he pulled out Schweiker and created enough uncertainty so he was able to have another few weeks of uncertainty. By the convention it was fairly clear Ford had Penn but Sears was not though, as we will discuss later.

But there was no question that we used state dinners and various kinds of stroking of delegates.

For example – it sounds astounding, but Hawaii was uncertain enough, that we recommended the President call every delegate in Hawaii – every delegate – that was a total of eighteen or nineteen people. And, of course, true to form, one guy when he is talking to the President says, “Okay, I’ll vote for you if you appoint me to this Presidential commission.” It was a commission at HEW as I remember. Of course the President did not commit anything.

Smith: Dick Cheney told us about a family who came from Brooklyn or the Bronx or something. I think it was a woman. And she would go back and forth; one week she was for Reagan and one week she was with Ford. Finally, “So what is it going to take?” And she said, “I want to meet the President in the Oval Office and bring my family.” And a meeting was arranged and on the day in question, this really disreputable looking bunch of people show up and had their visit with the President.

McPherson: All of the delegates weren’t model citizens. Cheney was very involved in all this. He was the key and of course was the gatekeeper to the President, ran the President’s schedule and so forth. The President was wonderful. The President understood the politics but never made any personnel or other such commitments.

Smith: Yeah, it’s congressional.

McPherson: It’s lot like congressional politics. So we get to the convention and there’s a problem. We had the majority of delegates including those states that were bound by their state primaries to vote for the President. For example Indiana
primary bound the delegates from that state to vote for Ford. But when Indiana party selected their delegation they created a problem. The Ford people who had won the primary were party people and they did not want to be too confrontational. They wanted to work with the Reagan people after the convention. So Indiana’s party put some Reagan people on the delegation on the theory that they would vote for Ford pursuant to the binding primary requirement. Unfortunately for Ford, that primary did not bind Reagan supports to vote in support of Ford on procedural matters. On the other hand, when delegations bound to Reagan, his people usually did not allow any Ford supporters as delegates e.g. in New Mexico Sen. Domenici, a Ford supported, was not allowed to be a delegate. So when you look at the formally committed delegates, Ford had the majority but it was still close. If you look at the vote on procedural matters the outcome was not so clear. So John Sears came up with his famous 16-C proposal, which was something about the candidate naming your vice president.

Smith: You had to name your vice presidential…I’ll show you mine if you’ll show me yours.

McPherson: Of course but it was in fact a test of power. Test of strength.

Smith: But a procedural test as opposed to…anything gut, emotional.

McPherson: There was an emotional/public policy move Sears tried later and I will talk about that in a few minutes. But back to the procedural vote, the afternoon before 16-C, I suggested to Baker that I get together Cliff White, Dean Birch, and Bill Timmons for one more look at the formally committed Ford delegations in which there were Reagan supporters. Our regional political people were working hard but I thought these old hands might have some ideas. The group mapped out some additional ideas on how to deal with some of these problem delegations like Indiana. In that case the former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz was on the Indiana delegation as a Ford supporter. Butz was a powerful man in Indiana. This went reasonable well. We went to Butz and he had an impact on some of the Reagan supporters using a moral argument of the primary vote.
But we still had the problem with Mississippi which was remained uncommitted as we the evening session of the convention approached. The 16-C vote was to take place that night.

Smith: With the famous Clarke Reed.

McPherson: Famous Clarke Reed. Clarke Reed had committed to both sides. He certainly had committed to President Ford.

Smith: Probably not the first time.

McPherson: But Reed apparently thought Reagan wouldn’t be in the race to the end and so it was freebie to commit to Reagan as well. I know Reagan thought he had Reed’s commitment. His approach in the time leading up to that night was to tell both camps that he could not go public yet but rather he would work quietly. But then the convention came with an approaching 16-C. Mississippi caucuses that afternoon to decide how to vote on 16-C. Reed cannot keep stalling both sides. Mississippi has what is called unit rule – there were 60 votes, and whoever had the majority gets all 60 votes. If you got 31 votes to 29, you got all 60. In the end Reed fell apart, latterly crumpled. He just kind of folded up in his bed and could hardly move. Ford had this excellent convention man who became a preacher, the southern strategist for Nixon.

Smith: Harry Dent?

McPherson: Yes, Harry Dent. He worked Mississippi for Ford before and that night. As the evening session was approaching, we did not yet know the outcome of the Mississippi caucus. At that time I delivered the delegate vote count for 16-C to Cheney who in turn took it to the President – I delivered it at about five o’clock – the convention was beginning at seven – The vote count showed an undecided convention, with Mississippi being the swing. Well, Mississippi, as I said ended up voting all their 60 votes with us, and Ford won the procedure vote with some votes to spare and people saw what was happening. And there are a lot of other things that impacted that vote, but the Mississippi was critical. I’ve still that vote count chart we used in the trailer.
Smith: To what do you attribute Mississippi’s decision?

McPherson: Harry Dent’s good work was the key on top of the relentless work leading up to the convention. I know of no other time that Mississippi had so much attention at a Republican convention.

Smith: Did Reed become less of a factor?

McPherson: Yes. As best I can tell he was not a factor in the Mississippi vote on 16-C. He literally was crumpled up on his bed and was inoperable.

Smith: A Nixonian turn of phrase. And that was a bitter convention, wasn’t it?

McPherson: Yes for some of people most directly involved.

Smith: To people watching, the First Lady, the wives and friends.

McPherson: I was sort of the day to day operator, if you will, of the trailer. Timmons was there, but Timmons was doing a lot of things. Timmons is a very good man.

Smith: We had a great interview with Timmons.

McPherson: My friend Charlie Black was my counterpart over in the Reagan trailer, just a few yards away. We won the 16-C and that was the critical vote at the convention. Ford might have won the nomination if we had lost 16-C but it would have been real struggle.

Smith: Plus, you would have had to name a vice presidential pick.

McPherson: Most important, we would have lost the momentum. The next day was the platform day and Reagan folks proposed a full platform, including a plank on the Panama Canal, several hardline and anti-détente positions. And Rockefeller and Kissinger were up in their box extremely upset about the Reagan platform and demanding that we tell the floor organization to vote against the Reagan platform. The process was moving quickly on the floor for a single vote on the whole Reagan platform. So the question was, as Timmons and I are sitting there in the trailer with our floor network – our communication network – should we tell our people to vote against the
resolution. Maybe Cheney and others had already worked out a position but we could not get a clear direction on what to do. So we decided to tell our floor structure to tell the delegates to vote their conscience. Timmons will remember this. Have you talked to him?

Smith: Yeah.

McPherson: No one told us anything, so we just said to vote your conscience. It passed by a voice vote and that was it.

Smith: And you know the famous Tom Korologos story about this? Kissinger threatened to resign, not for the first time – and you can hear Korologos saying this, he said, “Henry, if you’re going to resign, do it fast, we need the votes.”

McPherson: Korologos is a wonderful guy. So the thing went by and it was so smart not to oppose this because there was no gain among this group of people to argue about the Panama Canal.

Smith: But it goes again to your point about Kissinger’s grasp of geo-politics being much surer than domestic politics. Plus he saw it in very personal terms, as a repudiation of his legacy.

McPherson: And maybe another way to think about it is when your responsibility is international, you don’t take other areas into consideration as much as you might. Maybe that’s the way to say it, because he’s enormously clever. If he had the responsibility for domestic affairs, he might have had a different view altogether. I never told Henry that story. He probably knows it.

Smith: What made Baker so good at what he was doing?

McPherson: Baker is organized; Baker is an extraordinary tactician, even in working on problems new to him. Baker is very good with people; people like Baker. He’s an extraordinary effective within government and Congress. More than that however he sees the big picture and gets it done.
Smith: And obviously good with the press.

McPherson: And great with the press and has credibility with the press. He engenders confidence. He may be the best of anyone in modern times in getting things done in government.

Smith: The confluence of policy and politics; some people are good at one, but not both.

McPherson: Baker always talks about himself as a politician who works the policy, instead of the other way around - a policy person who worked the politics. He was able to accomplish most things he has sought out to do – I saw it, for example, in the Canadian Free Trade Agreement when I was his Deputy at Treasury. We just would not had the Canadian Free Trade Agreement without Baker and that agreement led to the three party trade agreement with the US, Mexico and Canada. The economics of this country would be different if the US hadn’t done the Canadian trade agreement.

Smith: Yeah. The whole question about the vice presidency. I’m satisfied after many conversations, that those closest to Governor Reagan, in advance of the convention, made it crystal clear that he was not interested in the vice presidency, and that it should not be raised.

McPherson: You’re talking about the Ford convention, ’76?

Smith: Yeah, when they met after the nomination. And yet Reagan supposedly told Baker once they were both in the White House that, had Ford asked him – I almost sensed he was trying to have it both ways because the real Reagan, not to mention Mrs. Reagan, would have opposed him going on that ticket.

McPherson: I don’t know, I think that Reagan was a patriot. And that if Ford had said, “We need to patch everything together here. We can’t have Carter for four years, would you do this?” I think he might have done it. Now there would have been some debates about Henry Kissinger’s status and other questions.

Smith: Do you think it was ever seriously considered?
McPherson: I just don’t know. I think the biggest issue was Kissinger. And Kissinger brought some problems to the President, but he also brought some huge strength too.

So the more interesting issue was what happened at the convention in 1980 when Henry and Greenspan tried to get Ford to be a co-president to Reagan. Fortunately sound judgment prevailed on this. On the other hand, if Henry and Alan had not tried to reach for so much control of the Reagan Presidency, could Ford and Reagan have worked it out with Ford as Vice President?

Smith: Would Mrs. Ford have been willing to – at that point in their lives?

McPherson: Who knows? It was a bad idea anyway.

Smith: Exactly. It is your sense that it was something that Kissinger and Greenspan were promoting?

McPherson: Yes, absolutely. It was their ticket back into the game. And of course both had much to contribute to the county. Nevertheless the whole idea was unrealistic.

Smith: But it’s fascinating, on the other side of the coin, people today forget Reagan’s willingness to be pragmatic in pursuit of victory. They claim Reagan would be a Tea Partier. Interesting. Is that the Ronald Reagan who put Richard Schweiker on his ticket in ’76 and was willing to put Gerald Ford on his ticket in 1980, and who did put George Bush on his ticket in 1980.

McPherson: Absolutely. Ronald Reagan had this wonderful capability of articulating a vision and a spirit, but the capacity not to be so constrained by such that he defeated his own ends.

Smith: That’s great. And if you could bottle that…you’d be a wealthy man. And I suspect our politics would be a lot healthier.

After the convention, were you involved in the campaign?

McPherson: Yes. I ran several of the states in the Midwest for the campaign and then after the election I came back to the WH.
Smith: And of course, the rationale for putting Bob Dole on the ticket was, going into that convention, you didn’t even have your own base. The farm belt was, at that point, literally up for grabs.

McPherson: It was a problem because we should have had that base. But we did not and it goes back, in at least some part, to decisions like the common situs decision. I’ll bet you when you talk to some of these other people like Baker – ask him – he’ll probably complain about the common situs decision.

Smith: It’s a great line of questioning. Did your heart sink when you watched the Poland debate?

McPherson: Oh, when he talked about Poland? Absolutely! I’m sitting there and my friend Don Sundquist, who later became governor of Tennessee – “Ah jeez, did he say that?”

Smith: It reinforced all the doubts about his capacity to be president.

McPherson: I certainly had no doubts but it surely hurt the President. On the other hand, I love those polling data, day by day, as we approached the election. Each day Ford was stronger. And we damned near won that election.

Smith: What did you think at the end?

McPherson: That we might win it. We were climbing a point a day. Ford was steadily more presidential. We don’t like these long campaigns in this country, and I think for good reason. But I also think there is enormous growth in candidates as they run for president. They became more sensitive to a set of people, to a set of the issues. They become bigger people because they must.

Smith: That raises one quick question: on balance, do you think the Reagan challenge made Ford a better candidate, and therefore, a stronger candidate in November, or did it contribute to his defeat?

McPherson: I think if we hadn’t lost North Carolina, the Reagan Challenge would have helped. If Ford had won NC, Ford probably would have been able to wrap it
quite quickly. Ford had to fight on too long. North Carolina probably insured
the convention and the convention just was too much.

I wanted to tell you one other story. Ford, after he left the presidency, was
always very helpful to me, which he was to so many people. When I was
President at Michigan State University, I brought the Detroit College of Law
from Detroit to Michigan State at East Lansing and built a new law school
building. Ford gave the speech to dedicate the building.

Smith: I think I wrote the speech.

McPherson: Did you? It was a great speech. I sat in a little room just before his speech for
about 30 minutes. He wanted to tell me about my grandfather. My grandfather
was a political leader who more or less ran rural Michigan for about twenty
years just before Ford went to Congress. It was great fun. And then I said to
Ford, “Now, tell me about your primary against Jonkman?” And he said,
“Well, you know, he was really an isolationist. I’d come back after the War.
I’d seen the world and did not agree with Jonkman. I couldn’t get Sen.
Vandenberg to be publicly for me, but Vandenberg did a whole lot to elect
me.” I’m sure that you’ve heard that before.

Smith: I heard something like that, yes.

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Smith: First off, Peter Pocklington, thanks so much for doing this, we really appreciate it. Tell us a little bit about you, and how your path first happened to cross that of Gerald and Betty Ford

Pocklington: Well, I was an owner of a hockey franchise in Edmonton, Alberta, and bought the Oilers in 1976 when it was in the World Hockey Association, and by ’79 we’d joined the NHL and started to amass some pretty incredible talent. One of them being Wayne Gretzky, who I bought when he was seventeen. He flew into Edmonton, I sent my plane for him. They came into Edmonton, he was a young guy that I doubt had even started to shave yet, and yet he was probably, looking backwards, he was certainly the greatest hockey player that ever was.

Smith: Did you have any idea at the time?

Pocklington: I knew he was damn good but I didn’t know he was as good as he turned out to be, obviously, and bought Wayne and then we assembled, through good management, and maybe a lot of good luck, probably the greatest NHL team that ever was – really did great things during the Eighties – and early Nineties – we won five Stanley Cups and, at one time had five players on the team that scored at least more than fifty goals each. Which is incredible now if you get one, you’re in great shape. So we really had one of those fairy tale teams, and I also did other things – bought and sold businesses and, one of the things that I championed was the thing called Junior Achievement, because I wanted youngsters to learn some of the things that I had been fortunate enough to learn – business wasn’t all bad and, it is kind of exciting, actually, and to raise the profile of that I brought in speakers. And this would be in 1979 or 80, and I’m trying to remember exactly when I did phone President Ford.

But I phoned his office and asked for him and they wanted to know who I was, this audacious character wanting to talk to the president. And finally they put me through to President Ford. And I said, “Mr. President, I really want to have you up as a speaker.” I gave him a little background of me and said, I’m trying to bring in people from the…number one, with integrity, and some conservative thought, poor old Canada is pretty Socialist, and he agreed to do it. So, I sent my airplane down to Palm Springs and picked him up and brought him into Edmonton and I believe we had thirteen or fourteen hundred people show up at the speech that President Ford put on and he did a great job and stayed the next day and we had him for dinner at our home and met
various people. But I charged them all to come to dinner to meet President Ford because of the fact we needed the money for Junior Achievement.

So he kind of set the model for what I did with many, many speakers and he also helped me, by the way, and introduced me to many of these speakers. One was President Bush ’41, who I had up, and also Maggie Thatcher and Kissinger, and the list is long. And raised millions for Junior Achievement, in fact, because the strongest Junior Achievement chapter in Canada, really because of Jerry Ford. Jerry Ford got the thing rolling and gave me a few ideas on it. And part of meeting him and I really enjoyed him, he was kind of down to earth and…

Smith: What did you expect? Was this the first time you met him?

Pocklington: Oh first time I met him! I met him at the airport when the guys brought him in and I was a little reticent, you know, and poor little broken down Canadian kid with the President of the United States coming in, but he made me feel very much at home and warm and got to know him over the next two days – more than maybe I thought I would and ended up making a deal with him that I would like to kind of use him as my mentor and pay him an honorarium and arrange the odd speaking engagement for a couple of my companies. And he agreed to that and we became pals ever since and starting, I think it was that year, it became a tradition, I had the team down to Palm Springs, and then finally Pebble Beach with President Ford. He would play golf with the players and after the game, we’d all go to his residence for a cocktail party and meet Betty. Kind of old home week, he loved to be around people and sports.

Smith: Now, did that include Gretzky?

Pocklington: Oh yes, of course.

Smith: Did they hit it off?

Pocklington: Oh, they really did, and he was just a kid at that time, of course, 20-21. They were all pretty young. He really, really, really, enjoyed being around the players and then after the cocktail party at his home we went over to a place called Wally’s Desert Turtle, and we rented the whole restaurant, and it was kind of a charming restaurant in Rancho Mirage, and after dinner he’d get up and give a ten or fifteen minute speech and motivate the guys. Part of my reasoning was that if these kids could hang around with prior presidents rather than, whatever, raise their self-concept. In building the team, I brought in a fellow from Los Angeles called John Boyle, who ran a thing called Omega. It’s a four-day seminar. You become what you think about. If you want to raise your behavior and ability to do things, you don’t worry about practicing that, you raise your self-concept – kind of like the inner game of tennis, the inner game of whatever. And with Wayne it was very easy – he took to it and that’s
really the reason the team was so damn good, because it was programmed. So Jerry Ford was part of that.

Smith: He was in effect the motivational speaker?

Pocklington: Oh, but in a different way than rah rah rah. It was more strength and integrity, and never say die, and we’re going to win regardless. He was almost Churchillian in the way he hung in.

Smith: I didn’t know if you heard, again the notion of him as tongue-tied…he had a practice of going back to Ann Arbor, usually before the big, I guess, game with Ohio.

Pocklington: Right.

Smith: And he would go out on the field with the team and give them a pep talk.

Pocklington: Yeah.

Smith: And I never had a chance to see it, but I’ve talked to a number of people who did, and they were all of the same mind. In that setting, there was a kind of eloquence, free-flow, beyond articulate – I mean, almost a sermon, pushing all the right buttons…

Pocklington: Oh, no question.

Smith: And connecting, you know, emotionally.

Pocklington: He had an alter ego that nobody knew about that just popped into, as you say, with youngsters that were going to win. And man, could he get them going. But not in a rah rah sense, but more in a, “you’re not going to beat us,” sense, and damn it, they won continually. And we all looked forward to our yearly meeting with President Ford and the golf and, finally, we took it over to Pebble Beach, and for years did it at Pebble Beach and played two days. Played Pebble and then we’d play Spanish Bay and then maybe, Pobby Hills.

Smith: And how long, do you remember the last time you did it?

Pocklington: Well the last time, I sold the team in 1993, so it would be ’93. So every year, we didn’t miss a year. And every time we won a Stanley Cup the guys would present President Ford with his Stanley Cup ring and so he’s got five Stanley Cup rings in the safe somewhere.

Smith: Did he know hockey?

Pocklington: Well, he sure got to know it. Growing up in that part of the country there was lots of hockey, and, being close to the Canadian border, and of course, the great hockey in Chicago and Boston and New York, when he was young, of course he saw it.
Smith: Did he seem knowledgeable about the game?

Pocklington: Yes and no. I don’t think he was a student of hockey, but he loved sports and loved the players and loved to be part of the action.

Smith: Do you think it applied to all sports?

Pocklington: Oh, no question. But, maybe strongly football. As you know, he was a football fanatic. In fact, we flew him into Ann Arbor – and they presented him with his sweater – they retired his sweater and there had to be a hundred thousand people in the place. I’ve never seen anything like it. And they drove him around in a golf cart, and of course everybody cheered and went mad and so it was very exciting.

Smith: Very emotional for him?

Pocklington: Oh, absolutely, and emotional for me, because I love sport and I love that kind of theater, which it was. But he was very instrumental in, believe it or not, helping us win five Stanley Cups. Nobody knows that.

Smith: No, that’s great. Did you get to know Mrs. Ford?

Pocklington: Very well.

Smith: Was there anything about either one of them that surprised you as you began to get to know them?

Pocklington: Well, let me give you a little background with Betty, because being in the sports business with guys that love to drink, I had seven of them go through Betty Ford. Sat them down and said if you want to clean up your act and be part of the team, you're going to have to go dry out. So we sent them to the Betty Ford Center and straightened every one of them out, strangely enough. One died afterwards from cirrhosis of the liver, but they really enjoyed the Betty Ford Center and through that association I became a board member on the Betty Ford board and got to know, obviously, Betty very well, because she was there at every meeting. She ran a tough ship.

Smith: How so?

Pocklington: She – I mean the reason it is so successful is because of Betty Ford – no other reason. They put on a great program, but she oversaw everything. She was very detailed, she was there every day, visited every day, talked to the patients, made sure that the board did what they had to do. It was very tightly run and professionally run. I was surprised that she had that acumen. She was pretty outstanding.

Smith: She ever have to fire people?
Pocklington: Well, she did through the president of the place – a guy named John Schwartzlose – and John did a good job in doing her bidding, very strong and good at it and to this day it has a rating of – check it out with people - 96% of them refer to the Betty Ford Center. So it’s like Kodak – it’s got a pretty strong branding. So she saved a lot of people, turned a lot of people around and I enjoyed being part of it, and now that she no longer – now that her daughter has taken over – I’ve now become – I think they call me emeritus – no longer go to the meetings. They are bringing on a bunch of younger people.

Smith: And how frequently were those board meetings?

Pocklington: While I was on their executive committee and the finance committee, every three months, and finance meeting, every six weeks.

Smith: And I take it she was involved in everything?

Pocklington: Absolutely. There is no question. That’s why it reached the pinnacle of turning people around. I think it has the, in fact I know it has the highest, turnaround rate of any bunch in that it is also very well priced. It is medium priced, it’s not way up in the sky like most people think because of the few celebrities that went through. They gave it a celebrity status.

Smith: And does that reflect her wishes as well?

Pocklington: She wanted to make sure that, in fact they give away ten percent of their tuitions to people who can’t afford them. So she makes sure that everybody gets looked after. But we do have or did have a lot of celebrities that went through, that quite frankly gave it a profile that a small, new business needed.

Smith: The general public wonder, what if any, ongoing relationship any of those people might have with Mrs. Ford.

Pocklington: Oh, I don’t think any of them ever had, other than people that maybe she knew before they came in. I know she had two or three or four people that she knew well that went through, but one of the things that we instituted in Betty Ford was an ongoing follow-up with the patients who had come through, because, as you know, a lot of them fall off the wagon afterwards and to raise the level of keeping people sober we contacted them a couple of times a month for a couple years to make sure that they were behaving themselves and stuck to the program. So that’s one of the reasons it was very successful.

Smith: And I assume, because of its visibility, there must be more people who want to get in than the place can…

Pocklington: No, it’s – Betty wished to keep it small and private. She didn’t really want to get to the point where it was some great big hospital that lost its personal
touch. I think when I left a month or two ago, it was at 115 beds and they are always full. And one of the things I helped institute was – they’d get all these calls but they weren’t closing them – so we put together a bunch of people to train them on how to close when people phoned and not only just phone, they get put together and made sure we got them in. So, that’s why it’s always full. It’s very well run, even from the business end of it. They have everybody that phones, we put the full court press on them to make sure we bring them in because they are really just reaching out – we need some help and before they weren’t closing enough of them. And it’s 50/50 men and women.

Smith: Age diversity there?

Pocklington: Oh, anywhere from 20 to 70. It’s amazing, and now, of course, the drug of choice is, I guess alcohol is still the strongest, but I tell you there is so many other things now, from crack cocaine to meth to some…..

Smith: So it does address drug issues.

Pocklington: It does address those others, but mainly alcohol was easier to do, because with drugs, especially meth, it takes a while to bring them down to where their system is almost normal to get them turned around on the Twelve Step program.

Smith: There must be instances that, I’m not looking for names, obviously, but there must be cases where friends, or friends of friends, approached her directly.

Pocklington: Well, that has obviously happened a few times and she simply addressed the situation, says come with me and takes them to the hospital and they put that particular person in and two or three of the high profile celebrities just that way.

Smith: Were you surprised, or was she surprised to know that she has turned into this administrator?

Pocklington: Oh, I think she probably looks at how it all started. As you know, President Ford did an intervention on Betty with the family. He said, Sweetheart we love you dearly, but you’ve got a serious problem here and the family is going to implode unless we correct this. And they did and she went to, I think it was a Navy hospital, and within a few months she and Leonard Firestone decided to put together the Betty Ford Center. And because she is so strong and dedicated, there is no question that it was going to be successful.

Smith: But it must have been an extraordinary process of self-discovery for her to learn that she could do all of these things, that she could meet all of these challenges. That there were such untapped abilities.
Peter Pocklington

June 2, 2008

Pocklington: Well, you know most successful marriages, you marry someone certainly with equal abilities and strengths, and there is no question that Betty was certainly Jerry’s equal as far as abilities and she was amazing, and their marriage was one of the best I’ve ever seen.

Smith: Do you think there is a secret to that? If you could bottle it, and market it, what was it?

Pocklington: I think number one was strong loyalty, because they’d been through a lot of, you know, bang-bang – he was on the road a lot, he was away a couple of hundred days a year.

Smith: Do you think he felt any degree of guilt about that? Let me ask the question differently. My sense was that he really made an effort in later years to spend quality time with the kids, and obviously with her as well. And that he was certainly aware of the fact that he had been on the road.

Pocklington: He was aware by the time she got into trouble with the drugs and the pain killers and the alcohol, and I think it was kind of a, wrong expression, “come to Jesus” meeting, but it was kind of that, “let’s get things back under control” and he even quit drinking when she did. Not that he drank a lot, but had enjoyed the odd cocktail and he said he quit and became dedicated to helping her remain sober, which she did and never lapsed. But he was part of her strength and vise versa – they really complemented one another in their endeavors and he went to a lot of, in fact he went to all the social gatherings for the Betty Ford thing. The yearly alumni dinner, he would always come and be present and go to a lot of the meetings.

Smith: I’ve heard stories of him on the grill cooking hot dogs.

Pocklington: Oh, absolutely. During the day when, it’s really a two and a half-three day effort, and he became very involved. No question. Cooked hot dogs and got involved with the people. And I think that is another reason – that’s part of the glue that held the whole thing together, because she was so involved and brought him into these things, people loved to be part of it.

Smith: Did people feel at all, initially, awkward, about interacting with the Fords?

Pocklington: Well, there’s no question, because I know how I felt when I first met, then he was President Ford to me, now he was Jerry, but, when you meet a former president, you figure he’s God – he is elevated to we, the folks, so I’m sure most people feel that way. I know when we introduced him to people, when we brought them as friends of the hockey club to these things, part of our deal every year, I’d bring in twenty or thirty business friends, and the first time meeting they were all kind of awed, and it meant a lot to them. So he really was the glue that helped me put all this together and keep it together. So
people do feel, no question, feel awed by him. And he’s kind of a striking character, he’s kind of patrician.

Smith: Interesting you should say that because it’s an interesting observation. I mean he was very approachable, very accessible, in many ways down to earth, but there was also a dignity…

Pocklington: Oh, without question.

Smith: …about him.

Pocklington: There was another strength. Absolutely. So many people felt that, and a lot of them couldn’t get by it and I didn’t know any better.

Smith: How so?

Pocklington: Well, he radiated kind of a strength, and they really never got by it to know who he really was – the kind guy behind the patrician sense. He really was, he really had a soft spot.

Smith: Tell me about that.

Pocklington: Between all of these crazy meetings we’d fly around and I always had to make sure we had ice cream on the plane, which I wasn’t supposed to tell Betty about.

Laughter

Pocklington: And that was a secret – I could have the ice cream on it and he’d eat it as long as I wouldn’t tell Betty.

Smith: Did she watch out for – watch his weight.

Pocklington: Oh, without question.

Smith: Really.

Pocklington: So we had to keep the ice cream thing fairly quiet.

Smith: He seemed like a pretty self-disciplined guy.

Pocklington: Oh, he sure was. Yeah he really was. But other than the ice cream he would devour newspapers – he’d go through three-four-five newspapers before he really started to chat and then we’d talk about the events of what he had just read about. And then often we’d go back and talk about some of the things he did when he was president and before he was president. I was always curious about the Warren Commission. And he said that, with the information we were given, this is the conclusion we came to. And he would never vary from that statement, because I always tried to wiggle around behind and see if he
thinks there really was a conspiracy, etc. But he felt not and said again, with the information that they were supplied, this was the conclusion they had to come to. I think that its showing that that was absolutely correct.

Smith: He wasn’t happy with Oliver Stone, was he?

Pocklington: Oh…..many times, playing golf, because I ran, too, for the leadership of the Conservative Party in Canada against Brian Mulroney – he ran and I ran and four or five other did – but I really ran because we had this character Pierre Trudeau who Jerry obviously knew and …

Smith: What did he think of Trudeau?

Pocklington: Well, he was a Socialist – an absolute Socialist. And the reason I ran for the leadership of the party was number one, a New Year’s speech he did with CBC and he said, “I will guide the ship with such skill that the destination will not be known until we arrive.” I mean you know he was going to dismantle the whole damn thing and create a Socialist society, which he was trying to do and came close to. I mean it is still pretty far left. It seems what they like to do down here, the politics of envy, they got it and we want and we’re going to pass it out. But Trudeau was a very charming character and I…

Smith: There is a kind of Kennedyesque aura that attaches itself to that whole era.

Pocklington: The press did that. It was kind of Canadian’s Camelot – similar to Jack Kennedy. I took Trudeau skiing one time – I owned a ski mountain in western Canada in Kamloops, and skied with him for the day, and he’d just gotten back from visiting Castro. And talked about Castro using the French word lumière, light bulb. I mean, “Pierre, the guy’s a Communist,” “Oh, no, no, no.” I mean he was, Pierre liked to think he was above all this – that we commoners didn’t understand and he had had a tough time in that, if you remember he had a wife, Margaret, who was a bit of a character, in fact…

Smith: Decidedly unCanadian?

Laughter

Pocklington: Kind of decidedly very common Canadian. She loved to carry on with, in fact, two or three of my hockey players – had carried on with her. But Pierre was not very happy – they had just come back from Cuba and I’m sure that Castro had had a roll in the hay with Margaret and he was not very happy. But he is a great skier and we didn’t stop for lunch. I was beat by three and he was still wanting to go. I said, “Pierre, we gotta calm down.” He was twenty-thirty years my senior. But it was because of that outing that I got involved – wanted to get into politics and change the way things were. I was an egotistical pup and thought, damn it, we can’t let this guy destroy Canada. So I ran for the leadership of the Conservative Party and got to know Brian
Mulroney, obviously very well, running against him. And we had, at that
time, a fellow by the name of Joe Clark who was…

Smith: a short-lived prime minister…

Pocklington: a short-lived prime minister, thank God, ‘cause he was way to the left and not
that Brian was much more to the right, but it was maybe center. But I ran on
flat-rate tax of twenty percent, get rid of all crown corporations, 45% of
Canada’s industry was owned by the federal government, and promote free
trade with the U.S. and free trade with anybody that cared to trade with us. So
I was, at that time, a bit of a radical as far as the press were concerned. But I
really enjoyed politics, and that’s why I enjoyed Jerry Ford so much. So many
times when we were golfing, just before I was going to hit a drive, he’d start
talking about Trudeau, and I’d say “For god’s sake Jerry, shut up!” He knew
he’d get me roiled and…

Smith: What did he think of Trudeau?

Pocklington: Oh I think personally he enjoyed him. He liked Pierre, because Pierre was a
charming guy. And, as you know, President Ford wasn’t as far right as I was,
he was pretty centered, but Trudeau was pretty left, and he’d really get me
going when we’d chatted about that.

Smith: Was he knowledgeable about Canadian politics?

Pocklington: Oh, absolutely. He was unbelievably well-read. I mean, as I say, every time
we’d go somewhere he’d devour his five or six newspapers before we went…
once we took off he’d get into the newspapers and you couldn’t bother him
until he ate a little ice cream and read his damn newspapers. But he spent an
hour on them. He’d go through the Wall Street and the Washington Post and,
I’m trying to remember what other papers he had.

Smith: He read The Times?

Pocklington: The New York Times. He also had the British The Herald, but he was really
very well read. I don’t think most people really understood that he was as
knowledgeable as he was on everything. You could talk to him about anything
and everything – once you got to know him, but most people didn’t realize
that.

Smith: What other subjects, what other interests or kinds of things that might surprise
people.

Pocklington: What did surprise me was that he didn’t like fishing. I love to fish. I used to
go fishing a lot up to the area, could take a bunch of businessmen, always
tried to get Jerry to go along. “Naw, I don’t want to go fishing.” He didn’t like
roughing it, he was, he liked to be in good surroundings and civilized.
Smith: He wasn’t a camper.

Pocklington: He wasn’t a camper. Wasn’t a shooter or a fisherman – that was the other part of him that was very different, because to me, most men that I like to be with like to hunt and fish and golf and sports and so on. But Jerry wasn’t that, and it was interesting.

Smith: As you got to know him, did he talk much about his colleagues, did he talk much about Nixon?

Pocklington: I asked him a lot about Nixon, because I wanted Nixon to come up and speak and Jerry wrote him a letter on my behalf, but he said Dick had a bit of a dark side to him – he said he was very bright – knew what he was about – but he really had a dark side that he didn’t, I don’t suppose he’s told many people that, but he said there is that dark side.

Smith: Did you sense that Watergate surprised him – or the language, for example…

Pocklington: That hurt him, because Jerry doesn’t use profanity – I’ve never heard him – oh a time when he misses a putt or something – but no, he was very eloquent, well-spoken at all times, always a gentleman. I know he was shocked by Dick Nixon and the tapes and the fact that he had to lie and didn’t need to and said he’d still be there if he hadn’t lied.

Smith: Ford really was a bit of the Eagle Scout, wasn’t he?

Pocklington: Yeah. Oh he really was – all the way to end, he was an Eagle Scout. No question. Loved that, that upbringing really meant a lot to him.

Smith: Did he talk about his parents? Or his upbringing?

Pocklington: Well, he sure loved the folks that adopted him. He was very close to them. And they obviously did a good job on him. And I met his brother when we went to Ann Arbor to the football thing and they’re all pretty conservative, laid back people. But yeah, he talked about, told me the whole story of when he was adopted.

Smith: You know that’s interesting, because he from boyhood, he had a temper.

Pocklington: Oh, I’ve seen that two or three times. There is no question. He could really get, you could just see him seething.

Smith: What would cause him…

Pocklington: What would set him off, I’m trying to think what did set him off. I tried to look around it, because he was, he’d get pretty upset.

Smith: Red-faced?
Pocklington: Oh, very red-faced. You could see him having to try to control it and he always did. You knew he was really pissed off at something, but he always controlled it. So he did have a temper. There’s no question.

Smith: Beyond missing a putt?

Pocklington: Beyond missing a putt when it came to serious stuff, yeah, he really got teed off, but always controlled it.

Smith: I only heard him speak negatively of two people. I’ll never forget, he said, the ultimate epitaph was, “He’s a bad man.”

Pocklington: Yes, I’ve heard him say that.

Smith: He’s a bad man, and there were only two people I’ve ever heard him say it about. One was John Dean and other was Gordon Liddy.

Pocklington: Yeah, I’ve heard – he told me about Gordon Liddy. He didn’t think much of him, but, I tell you one fellow we brought to one of these golf outings was Alan Shepard, and Alan Shepard played golf with Gretzky and Jerry and I and what a charming, wonderful guy he was. So Jerry asked him what his experience of being on the moon was, and he said, “You know the thing that was really interesting was the fact, when you look up from the earth in the sky and see the moon, when you look from the moon, looking at the earth, it’s four times as big.” He said that was the thing that really impressed him the most. And Jerry was awed by that, as I was.

Smith: Of course he was on the original NASA committee in the House. There’s a reason that if you go to the museum in Grand Rapids that it’s a spaceman out there. He didn’t want a statue of himself.

Pocklington: Right.

Smith: So that was one of his interests.

Pocklington: Very much so. So he was, we really enjoyed Alan Shepard – and when we played then, he had cancer at the time, I don’t recall what brand it was, but it was obviously fatal, and…but what a sweet man he was. One of the most charming guys and very eloquent. He made a little short speech after Jerry made his that evening.

Smith: You’d think that to go through life forever being thought as the first American in space, in some ways would be very limiting. It obviously would open a lot of doors, but would also be the first, and in most instances, the only thing, most people knew about you. I suppose it is similar to having been President of the United States.
Peter Pocklington  June 2, 2008

Pocklington: That’s very true, but he was more than that. I tell you, he really impressed me a lot.

Smith: Were there other people who impressed the President – or people he became friends with or, frankly, didn’t impress the President?

Pocklington: I don’t think he was really enamored by Bill Clinton. He never said anything that was untowards, but I knew him well enough that that kind of behavior wasn’t acceptable.

Smith: The latter half of the Clinton presidency and the whole scandal.

Pocklington: That’s right. I mean that did not impress him “a-tall.” Jerry was a straight arrow, he didn’t fool around ever on Betty and he was always straight and very loyal.

Smith: Plus, you think of him as someone who was of a generation that had a reverence for the White House and the presidency.

Pocklington: Oh, absolutely. And that really upset him. That really bothered him.

Smith: Did he talk much about his years in the White House – did he tell war stories?

Pocklington: Well, he did. I was always interested in his war stories. He was very strong on the Mayaguez thing, he was bound and determined that no one was going to pull any wool over his eyes and always was incredibly strong and got it handled immediately. I also asked him about his meeting in Russia and, as you know, a lot of people thought he was weak-kneed on it, but he said he enjoyed it and got a lot done and he thought positively and had a bit of an admiration for the Russians, even though they were obviously not what we wanted.

Smith: Maybe the hardest thing of all is for somebody in that position is to see someone across the table in human terms and not just as the leader of another system.

Pocklington: And not the enemy. From my point of view, he looked at most people as, he checked them out, tried them out and see if they were real people, regardless of what side of the aisle they were, or what crazy country they were from. So he had a bit of a respect for the Russians in the fact that that was their culture and we had to deal with it and I think he did so very successfully.

Smith: Did he form judgments about people quickly? My sense was that he was a pretty optimistic guy.

Pocklington: Oh, he used the word optimist, optimistic, I think in every speech he made. He said I am an optimist. And he was. I think that was one of the reasons we got along so well. Because I love optimism, I love to see people win win win.
You become what you think about. He was always optimistic, I always believed that good was going to overcome evil. And that was really what he was about and that was who it was – always optimistic. I always gave someone an extra chance, an extra yard.

Smith: Did he harbor regrets about ‘76, about not having that full term?

Pocklington: I think he was very disappointed, like really disappointed. He said to me, it really came down to, “you know if we just had thirty more days the economy was turned around, we missed by such a small margin.” I think he got to know Jimmy Carter when he went over to Egypt to the funeral and I’m not so sure he was his best pal until then, but he did get, obviously closer, and spoke nice things about him after that. But, he was really disappointed. I think he was heartbroken deep down that he didn’t have that second term. And one that he had won legitimately in his mind, that he had gone to the voters. I also asked him about the pardon of Dick Nixon. He said, “Peter, I had to do it,” he said it was taking up “forty percent of my time. Talking to the press about that problem, and he said, “You know, the guy was human, there’s no sense hanging him up,” but he said, “I had to clean up the office. I had to put it behind us, closure. Let’s get on with building America and not worrying about what this character had done.” And that’s the reason he did it. He said, “I know it was going to harm me politically, but that’s too bad.”

Smith: You know, the wonderful thing that was unlike someone like Lyndon Johnson, who only lived four years – in fact, literally died the day before the peace treaty was announced – President Ford lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his way of thinking…

Pocklington: No question…

Smith: I’ll never forget that day at the Kennedy Library, when the Profiles in Courage Award that was the cherry on top of the sundae. He must have taken real satisfaction in knowing that…

Pocklington: Huge. In fact, he invited even me to the Profiles in Courage thing, and for some reason didn’t go. It’s a long damn way to go to Boston, but I wish I’d gone because it really meant a lot to him. And he spoke of it afterwards that this was pretty good stuff.

Smith: He didn’t ever seem like someone who would think in terms of personal vindication.

Pocklington: No…

Smith: But you’re only human, it must have been…
Pocklington: You’re only human, he was almost egoless from the point of view of “I have to be better than you.” He just wasn’t that.

Smith: Which is so unusual in a politician.

Pocklington: Ah! It’s huge!

Smith: And a president!

Pocklington: A president! I mean, I’ve known a few of them and they are pretty egocentric folks. Jerry wasn’t ‘a-tall’ – just wasn’t. And I think that’s one of the reasons that I really came to admire him. I learned from it and had to grow up and get over the ego nonsense. So, from that point of view I got more out of the relationship than he obviously did.

Smith: Did they have a lot of friends?

Pocklington: They had a lot of acquaintances.

Smith: I was going to say, the whole apparatus has got to get in the way of a kind of natural, relaxed, you know. My sense, at least from the time I was around them, that they consciously tried to have younger people around them. That it was almost a deliberate effort.

Pocklington: It certainly was in my case, because I was twenty-five younger, thirty years younger. And I’m trying to think of some of his other people that he would call friends. I’m not really sure that he got too close to too many people. Lots of acquaintances, lots of people that he was obviously very polite to. But he certainly had lots from the White House years and a lot of the people on his board – they were all pretty good pals.

Smith: Let’s face it, there is also a sense that there are a lot of people out there who would like to use you. He would spend, to me, and I think most people would agree, an obscene amount signing autographs. Baseballs, footballs, pictures, you know, whatever. Virtually setting a day a week aside just to do that sort of thing. Maybe it goes with the territory, but there must also be people out there who would like nothing better than to attach the prestige of former president.

Pocklington: Oh, there’s no question.

Smith: And yet he was criticized, particularly early on, for commercializing…was he sensitive about that?

Pocklington: Well, I remember one time when we played golf with a couple of fellows and I think Jerry and I lost ten bucks each to them and they said, we’ll take a five, but you’ve got to sign it. I mean, that kind of crap and he wasn’t particularly impressed with that, nor was I, quite frankly. I mean they tried to use the fact
that they’d rather have, that they could show their pals they played with President Ford. So there was a lot of that and I’m sure he had to suffer that. But never suffered fools well. He just didn’t.

Smith: Can you think of an instance?

Pocklington: Oh, there were a couple of instances. I had him up to Toronto to do a speech, I had him, three or four other things that he did and people that tried to get too close too quickly, you know, he would become very professional…the guard would go up and that really incensed him when people tried to close in on him too quickly, unless he wanted to be there. So he kept his guard.

Smith: I guess you almost have to, don’t you, as a former president?

Pocklington: Of course, no question. I mean, that’s a balancing act, too.

Smith: Do you have a sense of how the Fords related with their Secret Service?

Pocklington: Oh really well, in fact, one fellow, damn, I’m trying to remember his name, because they always went on these golf outings and he always had, at least a couple of fellows in the front of the plane that were Secret Service, and this one guy, oh goodness…Lee Simons, and he really got to know these fellows and they became almost friends, it seemed. Yeah, he really related very warmly with his, people who were around him for a while. And was very kind to them. Maybe kind is the wrong word. Very respectful of them, but liked them a lot.

Smith: He had been the target of two would-be assassins.

Pocklington: Oh no question, that crazy broad in California, Weezie, or…

Smith: Do you think he had an extra sort of sensitivity about such things?

Pocklington: Well, I also had been through something like that. A guy came to the house to kidnap my wife and at the end of the day I ended up getting shot. So, there’s always, with a profile, he had a world profile, I had a Canadian profile because of sports, but after that I was a little bit wary of, and I’m sure he was, had to be, having been tried to get shot a couple of time. A lot of crazies out there.

Smith: Did he talk about Reagan?

Pocklington: I sensed there was a – that he thought – he, Jerry, thought he was just as good a president as Reagan was. That there was a bit of a, how would I say, yeah, there was something there. Because I was Jerry’s friend I really didn’t want to find out an awful lot about it, but there was a sense of why him and not me?

Smith: And the whole challenge in ’76 had to have been….
Pocklington: Ah! No question.

Smith: Yeah.

Pocklington: So there was an underlying something there that I really didn’t never discussed.

Smith: Can you think of anyone he held a grudge against?

Pocklington: No, I don’t think so, he really let bygones be bygones. No, well, maybe not. I remember, George Will, I always enjoyed. A pretty smart guy, in my opinion. Jerry didn’t like George Will.

Smith: Why?

Pocklington: Oh, I’ve got a feeling that this goes back to something George Will said about Jerry when he was president. So he had no time for George Will. Or for that other clown that was on Saturday Night Live.

Smith: Chevy Chase.

Pocklington: Chevy Chase – no time for Chevy Chase.

Smith: Because, you know, they appeared together at a conference on humor. I mean, he was a good sport.

Pocklington: Oh, that’s right. Yeah.

Smith: He was a very good sport.

Pocklington: He went beyond it. But, I’m not sure he was very impressed with Chevy Chase. He kind of, I think in Jerry’s sense demeaned him a little and he didn’t like that.

Smith: There is a school of thought that says, you know, that his health was extraordinarily good, up until about his 90th birthday…

Pocklington: And then he failed.

Smith: My sense was, once he was no longer able to travel, that was a kind of death.

Pocklington: Oh, without question.

Smith: He loved being on the road.

Pocklington: Loved to be on the road. Loved to be doing something. No, I remember the last two or three years he wasn’t Jerry any more.

Smith: How? For someone of his will, and self-discipline and all of these qualities, it must have been an extraordinarily difficult thing for him to go through.
Pocklington: Well, it was tough because he loved to golf and then he got down to nine holes, and, the fact that he could only play nine holes, and then very slowly, really bothered him. He didn’t like to ever make an excuse about ever letting go, never letting up.

Smith: The only time I ever saw his temper, and he really was blowing up at himself, he came back to Grand Rapids for a speech, and he wouldn’t wear glasses. And and the lighting wasn’t what it should have been…

Pocklington: Right.

Smith: And the paper wasn’t at the angle it should have been, and he stumbled over a few words, and he was visibly angry, and I think he was angry at getting older. Did you sense that?

Pocklington: No question. He said, Peter it’s no fun to get old. And I said, well, Jerry, it beats the alternative. He said, “I’m not so sure.” And this was when he was just playing nine holes.

Smith: When did he give up golf? How long did he continue to play?

Pocklington: Oh, he played until he was – how old was he when he died? – 93?

Smith: Yes.

Pocklington: 91? Yeah, he could, he still wanted to, his heart was still there.

Smith: He continued to swim.

Pocklington: Oh, yeah. He needed that conditioning. Every morning get up and did his lengths and made sure – it was his routine – he had to – it was what kept him going. Because he was a strong guy.

Smith: And he wanted to keep going.

Pocklington: He sure did. He never wanted to give up. One of the last memories I had, I got him an aircraft carrier, a model aircraft carrier that’s now in the museum, and it was an absolute detailed 1 to 350, and he just was so proud of that ship and the reason I knew he would like it, I met him in Grand Rapids, oh, twenty years ago and we went through the museum, and he showed me the original ship that he was on during the Navy and said he damn near fell off the thing. He was really into that ship and into the Navy and loved the Navy and loved the whole experience. So when I got him this aircraft carrier, he was delighted and it was not far before he died. I’ve got a good picture of it. So he had that sense – that he loved the Navy, loved that part of his life – very much so. Talked about it often.
Smith: Their friends, of course, the last couple summers, would all try to get them to not go to Vail.

Pocklington: Well, you get up there and you have to go on oxygen, I mean, it’s 7,000 feet where they lived. And he loved it, he seemed to want to go.

Smith: Tell me about the place in Vail, and the place they had in Vail. I mean, it seems like they were First Citizens.

Pocklington: Well, they were. He invited my wife and I to AEI, that first year he started the conference. And I think it was in 80 or 81.

Smith: And tell us, for people who don’t know, about the annual conference.

Pocklington: This thing was really well attended and people loved to go. He had people from all over the world, business people from all over the world, plus ten or fifteen, there would be always seven or eight people from the House, sitting members, either Senate or House, and he always had five or six or seven ex-world leaders. He had Giscard d’Estaing, Jimmy Callaghan, Helmut Schmidt, what a character he was.

Smith: Really? How did they get along?

Pocklington: Well, you know, they all got along famously. Especially Giscard, that silver-tongued Frenchman, who to me is an outright Socialist, which really bothered me.

Smith: Well, you look at Schmidt, and you look at James Callaghan, old Labor…

Pocklington: Oh, no question – they all got along famously. It was fun, I enjoyed meeting them all. In fact, I flew Giscard d’Estaing back to Canada, he was staying at a ranch near where we lived, and we lived in Edmonton, up near Calgary so I flew him back and spent a couple of days horseback riding with him. Charming guy, very charming.

Smith: Did they say what it was about Ford that…

Pocklington: They all loved Jerry Ford. He was the salt of the earth to them, and that’s the only reason they came all the way to Vail, because of Jerry Ford. For no other reason, they wouldn’t have done it for anybody else, so he had cemented a strong relationship when he was president with these people.

Smith: It clearly transcended ideology.

Pocklington: Without question – no question, because Jim Callaghan, as you know, is a very, very, very, left Socialist, but a charming guy.

Smith: Sunny Jim.
Pocklington: Sunny Jim. Charming guy. He had Maggie Thatcher there one year. The Iron Lady.

Smith: What was the chemistry there?

Pocklington: Well, I’ll tell you, she’s very, very different. I’m not sure they were, I think AEI brought Maggie in, and I had her up to Edmonton for a couple of days. I have a cute story about Maggie, she did her speech and taking her back to the hotel with her, I don’t know what they call their Secret Service guys, a couple of cops, actually. And she leaned over across to Eva and said, “Like to come up for a wee noggin?” And I said, what the hell’s a noggin – so it turned out to be a bottle of scotch. Christ, we coiffed the whole thing between the three of us in two hours. But she was – she’s always been my hero.

Smith: Larger than life?

Pocklington: I mean, Eva said if she’d been ten years younger I would have tried to run away with her, I mean, to me she was – I liked Maggie. But I like that kind of strength, I’m really a Libertarian myself, and tend to be conservative, but in strength and create wealth and let’s get at it, but these guys who want to take it and distribute it, I have no time for. But Jerry said nice things about Maggie Thatcher, although he was out of office by the time, I think, when she came in. When did she come in? ‘78?

Smith: ‘79

Pocklington: May of ‘79, so she was new, but…and who else did he have there that was interesting? Oh, he had the premiere of Jamaica, I can’t remember his name. Anyway, he all these interesting people to this AEI, Seega, that’s the guy’s name. He wanted me to build a fish plant, or some damn thing in Jamaica. So we flew down and spent three or four days having a look at – it’s too wild and wooly for me – Jamaica. It’s nuts. Who the hell else did he have?

Smith: Was Ford involved in dealing making?

Pocklington: Only from the point of view to introduce you. He was strictly a catalyst. He wasn’t a dealmaker businessman from that point of view, although he was on the board of Travelers and really respected. What’s his name, that ran…

Smith: Sandy Weill?

Pocklington: Sandy Weill, he really respected Sandy Weill. I remember a couple of times on the golf course he should have been on a board meeting, and he’d be half on the board meeting and half on the golf course, a lot going on in one of them. And he said, “Peter, I’m going to have to take nine holes off, because this is important.” I said, “You go right ahead, do what you have to do.”
Smith: What was your take? Because, again, he took some criticism. Every president, in effect, invents the job of ex-president and it shouldn’t come as any surprise that they tend to project their interests and personalities and priorities. You knew Richard Nixon would spend the rest of his life crafting a comeback.

Pocklington: No question.

Smith: You knew Jimmy Carter would pursue, from whatever pulpit he could create, the causes that mattered to him.

Pocklington: That’s exactly right.

Smith: It’s not terribly surprising.

Pocklington: Not at all.

Smith: And I wondered, again, about Ford who left office with virtually nothing.

Pocklington: He had zero. I remember the first AEI meeting, and he had a rented house in Vail near the hotel where we put on the conference, and within a couple of years, of course, he had a $5 million house that was beautiful and was very well done. But he worked hard, after he left the presidency, as I say, he was on the road a couple of hundred days a year, did a lot of speeches, and not for the kind of money they pay now, but maybe fifteen, twenty, twenty-five grand a shot. But he worked hard and made a lot of money. Did well.

Smith: And wasn’t apologetic about it.

Pocklington: Oh, absolutely not! And I don’t think he should have been. Because he had grown to that lifestyle in being the President of the United States, and being with, obviously, people who had a lot of money and were very successful, and he wanted to continue that. He wanted to be part of that structure that he had become used to. And he never had his hand out, he always worked hard for everything he did. So I was always very impressed with that. That was one of the things that impressed me about Jerry Ford.

Smith: And also, presumably, wanting to leave something for the kids.

Pocklington: Absolutely – and did a good job of it. I don’t know how big his estate was but it was certainly ample. And he earned it all. More power to him.

Smith: How…did you see him with the kids?

Pocklington: Played golf a few times with Steve. I enjoyed his son, Steve. Always up, optimistic like his dad, and he got along well with Steve. I’m not sure he was very close to Susan or Jack, oh, maybe Jack. Jack’s kind of an entertaining, nice man. Very bright. I have a lot of time for Jack, he’s the best of both his dad and mom. Yeah, he’s a charmer. And I think Jerry felt the same way, but
I’m not sure he was really close to his other son, or maybe Susan. But, of course, he was always on the road, and you can’t build a family life, a strong family life, unless you’re part of the family.

Smith: I want to talk about the guilt – whether, he felt that, in some ways, Mrs. Ford, because of that, had had to bear an extra portion of responsibility.

Pocklington: Oh she did. There’s no question. She had four kids to bring up and she worked hard. He was never there during his years in Congress and the Presidency. I mean, he was always busy. And she, that’s why, I guess, she took a drink and she hurt her back or something and got on those damn pain pills. And between the two of them, it got her. But that’s understandable.

Smith: She turns out to be almost a representative figure, I mean, there are lots and lots and lots of women of her generation who were in the same situation, and certainly could relate to her.

Pocklington: No question.

Smith: The kind of quiet desperation.

Pocklington: Yup, there’s no question. I remember one of the speakers we had up to Edmonton was a guy – that was Hague – and his wife came with him and I felt she was in quiet desperation, without question. And she was kind of a mummy compared to…I felt badly.

Smith: Did you get so you could detect the signals?

Pocklington: Oh, without question. Very much so.

Smith: What is it about political wives that make them so vulnerable? I don’t know if that is still the case, but certainly at that time – is it because they are relegated to the shadows and are expected to play this kind of one-dimensional role?

Pocklington: Well, I think most strong men that get into politics, and obviously the ones that win get to the top are the strong ones – they become so much of what they’ve done in the office, that they are the present and, I don’t want to say, but you’re my little wife, but that’s really what happens. In very few instances, except when now, Brian and Mila Mulroney – they’re both friends. Mila is as strong as he is, maybe stronger. And she’s a pistol. But unless these women are as strong and tough as the guys, man they do get pushed down, very quickly. It’s a tough life – real tough. Look at the Kennedys, I mean she suffered from having a character like Jack around.

Smith: Did Ford ever talk about JFK – apart from the Warren Commission?

Pocklington: Because he was so straight, he wasn’t impressed with the carryings on, and he wouldn’t talk much about it. It’s too bad that you have to do that.
Smith: You are absolutely right in what you say about his own moral standards, and yet it is interesting because over time, influenced in part by her, you know obviously we know what his position was about a woman’s right to choose. He is remains the only president who ever signed his name to a gay rights petition. Was there a sense that he sort of moved? Did he change, or was he what he’d always been and it stood out by contrast with the party’s move to the right?

Pocklington: Well, he was pulled. Because I asked him about abortion, because I ran for the leadership of the party in Canada. And he said, as far as he was concerned, the way to answer that is abortion is intimate domain of family. And leave it there. Then you don’t get on either side of it. And I thought about it and I said, “Jerry, you are absolutely correct, that’s what I believe.”

Smith: To me, he is of a generation of mid-west conservative, who were defined first and foremost as economic conservatives, who had a very healthy skepticism about the role of government, especially when it was promising to re-engineer society. And at the same time, want government out of the board room, out of classroom, out of the bedroom. It was a generation that wouldn’t discuss these subjects that were frankly too personal, too intimate to be part of the public discourse.

Pocklington: The other thing that bothered him was the fact that we were becoming a society with little or no shame. As you just said, he grew up an Eagle Scout and, you know, there was right and wrong. Doesn’t seem to be much of that, much anymore. He and I, one of the things we disagreed on, was he figured all these drug felons should be thrown in jail. I said, Jerry, we can’t do that. Our prisons are too damn full now, I said, in fact, we should let 70% of them go that are there because of drugs and I said, I’d rather, because I’ve now got involved with your wife, that we’ve got to get people off drugs, help them, that’s one place I will extend them their help, and get them off drugs and alcohol and so on, because they are not bad people, but they’re sure as hell going to be if you throw them in jail with the felons. And we disagreed on that.

Smith: In many ways he remained a rock ribbed conservative. Certainly, fiscally, he was…

Pocklington: Oh, absolutely. He said to me one year in his presidency he ran a $60 billion deficit, and he was just appalled. It hurt him to his heart. He said, we can’t do that, we’ve got to run a balanced budget. And we got to cut spending, and…

Smith: And that raises the Republican Party. Clearly, the flipside of living as long as he did was, he saw the party twist its form.
Pocklington: Quite frankly disintegrate. It just upset him to the end. Especially in the last few years, it really bothered him. As you know, I think Jerry had the strongest veto pen of any president ever, and this character has none, and that’s… he always stood his ground where… that’s too bad.

Smith: He is probably the last president who was really going to spend his political capital on behalf of some kind of budget balance.

Pocklington: Oh, without question. We talked about that a lot, because that’s why he asked me why I tried to get involved in Canadian politics. I said, Jerry, the place is mad, they want to Socialize everything. This damn Socialized health care is going to destroy the country. I said don’t ever get it in the U.S., it’ll break you. He said, I know. He said, try to tell that to the people on the other side. No, he was always strongly, fiscally conservative and wanted to uphold those values.

Smith: And what about his sense of humor?

Pocklington: Oh, he had a good sense of humor. We used to tell mild stories, never the far out jobbies, you know, you’d try to save the ones that weren’t too far away from who he was. No, he had a good sense of humor. He chuckled and get a good smile on his face.

Smith: And if he ever was a just a little bit full of himself, Mrs. Ford had a very gentle way….

Pocklington: She brought him down to earth. Yeah, there’s no question. Like, “Take the garbage out, Jerry.” Yeah, she was a great mellowing influence, that’s why the marriage worked so damn well. I mean, she was, in her own rights, strong enough to keep up with Jerry, especially in the latter years.

Smith: It wasn’t opposite attracts, was it?

Pocklington: Oh, no, no, no. No, I think, early on, she was a pretty good looking outfit – looking at the pictures way back, and, chatting with him over the years, he was pretty enamored by her, and they got married very quickly and it was a great marriage. But then he got drawn away a little bit because of the politics, but brought back in when he saw the damage that was done. He couldn’t have done without her.

Smith: You almost wonder, on the downside, if he’d won in ’76, if there hadn’t been this intervention…

Pocklington: Oh! God only knows where it would have gone, because he would have been pretty busy, obviously, if he’d won in ’76. But, no, it worked out, maybe there was a greater calling – a great spirit heading for Betty and Jerry.

Smith: I think of her as something of a free spirit.
Pocklington: Oh, she is, very much so. He’s a little more regulated, but she’s uh….

Smith: Outspoken?

Pocklington: Oh, can be. Yeah. But she’s very smart, also. She’s got pretty good judgment, you know, on some of the things in the early years of Betty Ford, when we were trying to find other revenues. She said, “Peter, there must be other ways we can make money.” And I said, “Well, what if we sold underwear with Betty Ford across it.” And she looked at me and she said, “You’re out of your mind.” I said, “Betty, you asked.” I said, “The younger kids have these BFC parties and they all, a lot of them, their bathing suits…” and she thought that was a little bit out of….anyway.

Smith: Was she open to new ideas?

Pocklington: Very much so. Oh, we’d discuss everything. And you could discuss everything with Betty. She was a little, uhm, she had her raunchy side. (Laughter) She was fun. I got a kick out of Betty. You know, she’s not as prim and proper as…

Smith: She didn’t need to drink to be…

Pocklington: Naw, yes…you’re absolutely correct. She’s got a real laughable, folksy side to her, too. Yeah. I like Betty. In fact, I love Betty – she’s very special. Loved them both.

Smith: Have you seen her since his death?

Pocklington: Yes, I have. A couple…

Smith: How is she?

Pocklington: Oh, according to Penny, she’s getting better, but the first two times she was pretty frail, she came out to the alumni thing in November, was it November?, yeah, November, and man, she was very, very, very frail. I mean really frail. I think she had just gotten over a bout of bronchial pneumonia, and she was, I didn’t think she was going to make it. But apparently, Penny said she is charging back now. But she also said that Jerry, in the last few years kind of forced her to do more than maybe she wanted to. But she was always bright and front and center when he was around.

Smith: One sensed that it was really difficult for her. I mean, first of all, there was this ongoing debate, people pressing them to get trained medical care in the house. Because that’s not their job, the Secret Service.

Pocklington: You’re right.

Smith: I think they both resisted it as long as possible.
Pocklington: They did – no question.

Smith: And I think it hurt…and you can understand why, but, my sense was, in her case, there was an extra element, which was, I’m going to take care of my husband.

Pocklington: Yes. I remember when I took the aircraft carrier over, and he had a nurse then and he kind of didn’t want me to see him in that position, where he had a nurse. He was such a proud son of a gun, you know.

Smith: He was always immaculate.

Pocklington: No question, immaculate. Yeah, he was a very proud guy, he didn’t want me…anyway, we knew each other well enough that he knew I’d understand and vice versa, but it bothered him.

Smith: Was that the last time you saw him?

Pocklington: Yes, it is.

Smith: How…?

Pocklington: It was a couple of months before he died. It was in September, September – yeah.

Smith: And was he still going to the office at that point?

Pocklington: No, no, he was sitting at home. The nurse was there and he had his kimono on and slippers and, then he went in and put on something for this picture, a pair of slacks and, and his eyes started to light up when he saw the ship and I’ve even got the proper airplanes, I phoned the Navy Department and told this character that built the thing what fleet, what wings should be on the deck, and good God, what a model. So he was really excited about that, and it seemed to bring him out of his weakened self to become the old Jerry I had known for about fifteen minutes and then he lost his energy again. And so you could see he was clearly on the way out. It was tough to see.

Smith: How was Mrs. Ford?

Pocklington: Oh, god, she was right there, you know. “Okay, Jerry, now you go in the living room with Peter, and let’s get this picture taken.” She took command again. Yeah, right up until the time he died, she was very strong. Even during the funeral she was very strong. I was shocked.

Smith: Remember that last walk – to the grave site?

Pocklington: (Exhale)
Smith: Where I thought, my god, is she going to be able to make it? We’d been told at ABC, with the very first ceremony in California, don’t be surprised if she is in a wheelchair. Of course we didn’t see her in a wheelchair.

Pocklington: No.

Smith: Until, very briefly, and then I think she was on Steve’s arm. Everyone was urging her to sit down and, you know, she wasn’t…

Pocklington: Not a chance.

Smith: She wasn’t going to do that, you know?

Pocklington: No, that’s true.

Smith: And someone asked her later on, how she managed to do that, and she said, that’s what my husband would have wanted.

Pocklington: No question. That’s a good point. That’s true. Yeah, that’s true. She was the ideal gal for Jerry Ford. Perfect couple.

Smith: What made her the ideal?

Pocklington: Just that one comment – that’s what Jerry would have wanted me to do. I mean, how many wives would go outside of herself and make sure that he was looked after first. And she was that way, as I said, “No ice cream, Peter, don’t give him ice cream.”

Smith: How do you remember him?

Pocklington: Well, I’m not sure…my dad and I were really close, I was probably closer to Jerry than I was to my own father. And he was kind of, if I had something to chat about, I remember in ‘82 or 3, the Canadian government wanted me, I was in the meat business, I owned Swift in Canada, they wanted me to go to Cuba and help the Castro government set up some abattoirs. So I phoned Jerry and he said, well, Peter, you know if you do, you and I are going to have to maybe distance ourselves. And I said, “Enough said, Jerry.”

Smith: Really?

Pocklington: So I phoned the Canadian government and I said, I don’t think I have any interest in wanting to go to Cuba.

Smith: What do you think he meant by that?

Pocklington: Well, because of the American position on Cuba. He couldn’t be seen hanging out with a character who built a meat plant in Cuba. So that was enough said – and done. So he and I were pretty good friends. Very close. I could really ask him anything, period.
Smith: Personal issues?

Pocklington: Oh, absolutely. He was, we were pretty close.

Smith: Do you miss him?

Pocklington: Oh a lot. I look at that damn shelf and I get a tear – and I’ve got so many pictures of he and I on the golf course, or he and I during these Oilers things, because we always hired that great big tall bugger from Palm Springs, what the hell was his name, the photographer, umm, he was at all the events.

Smith: Oh, Kennerly. Was it David Kennerly?

Pocklington: Um, Mark.

Smith: Okay.

Pocklington: Mark, um, he’s about eight feet high and he always there with his camera. So we’ve got some great pictures. About a week ago I got them out and looked at a few.

Smith: Imagine talking to someone who didn’t know him, and maybe only thinks they know him … what would you tell them that they don’t know?

Pocklington: Well, in my opinion, I don’t think he was, and I should never use a negative, but to me, when you look at what is a politician, he wasn’t a politician. He was really just a strong friend that you’d want through thick and thin. If you wanted somebody at your back in a fight, man, he was it. He was always there, didn’t matter the circumstance, didn’t matter the – he was going to win – he was that positive – that strong – and that’s why I wish he’d won the second term. Because America needed him at that time, not Jimmy Carter, who was to me a patsy. But, we needed a Jerry Ford and everybody lost because he didn’t make it. All because, I think of that damn interview on TV and Poland – I mean, to me, that really hurt him. And I saw that before I knew him. I thought, oh my goodness, Jerry.

Smith: Did he talk about it?

Pocklington: No. No, I didn’t want to go there.

Smith: We actually, maybe I got away with murder, on occasion, when we re-did the museum…

Pocklington: Right.

Smith: and we had the Polish gaffe playing…what other former president would think it was a good idea to get the staircase from the embassy in Saigon…

Laugh
Smith: I mean, you know, who would think of that?

Pocklington: That’s true.

Smith: Not only was he comfortable with it, but, he insisted on it. Anyway, there is this gallery, and it plays over and over again, and, the way we would handle this thing…”Mr. President, you weren’t wrong, you were just ten years ahead of your time.”

Pocklington: That’s exactly right.

Smith: And he laughed.

Pocklington: Well, he was self-deprecating. There’s no question. And he didn’t mind that. Golfing, he hit some awfully bad shots, and of course we’d rib him about it.

Smith: Would any ever hit a spectator while you were playing?

Pocklington: Well, as he says, he turned golf into a contact sport, he used that line in his speeches. No, I never saw him tee off into somebody …..

Smith: When we were working on the funeral plans, it’s very revealing, the one thing he was adamant about was he didn’t want a caisson through the streets of Washington.

Pocklington: Oh really? Why?

Smith: I never really could pin him down, but it was very clear, you knew when Gerald Ford felt strongly about something…

Pocklington: Yeah, you didn’t want to go there.

Smith: You didn’t go. One particularly inept individual who clearly didn’t know the president very well, tried to change his mind by shaming him into the…..

Pocklington: Oof…

Smith: And actually said something to the effect of, “Well now, Mr. President, you wouldn’t want people to think of you as a second rate president.”

Pocklington: Oh, you’ve got to be kidding. The guy said that?

Smith: Can you imagine? Talk about exercising self-control.

Pocklington: Wow.

Smith: But they just, literally didn’t, didn’t understand. First of all, he felt strongly enough about it, he didn’t go there.

Pocklington: I always knew where his bounds were. Absolutely.
Smith: But he was adamant about it. And, you know, the way it turned out—I thought very moving, coming in that night, that Saturday night, going through Alexandria where there were thousands of people…in a neighborhood where they hadn’t lived in thirty years, and then stopping at the World War II Memorial and then up to the Capitol. And the whole point was, it was a very individualized ceremony.

Pocklington: Very much so.

Smith: Reflecting his …..

Pocklington: It was who he was.

Smith: Yeah.

Pocklington: Yeah. It took me a few years to understand where the bounds were. Once I knew where the bounds were…you just didn’t go beyond. Well, you could tell in general conversation where his bounds were, and I would come to a halt at that point, because the friendship meant more to me than irritating—going somewhere that obviously he wasn’t going to be too pleased about. And to me the relationship was more fun than trying to test him. I didn’t need it and he didn’t need it. Because I respected him a lot, the position in life that he had attained and also, I must admit, he added so much to what I was doing that I didn’t want to interrupt that. He did such a job with the team, in helping me to win, and the more you won the more money I made, obviously.

Smith: One last thing. He was not the sort of guy who lay awake at night wondering about his historical legacy. Although as we’ve said, he was very gratified by the fact that, particularly on the pardon, people had come around to his way of thinking. But beyond that, it may very well be that the Betty Ford Center makes the case that what she’s done has impacted ordinary people and how they’ve lived their lives as much as most presidents.

Pocklington: Oh no question.

Smith: And my sense was, he was inordinately proud of her.

Pocklington: Oh! Hugely proud!

Smith: There was the joke, that for fundraising purposes, he had east of the Mississippi and she had west of the Mississippi.

Pocklington: Oh—I did and it was all rot. I remember we were going to put on a hockey game up in Ottawa for Mila Mulroney to raise—we raised a million, seven or eight, for cystic fibrosis, and I’d phoned the Montreal characters and said come on down, and we’ll have this game and I charged everybody $5 grand a couple to go to 24 Sussex, which is our White House in Canada. And charged the hell out of them, played Robin Hood. And wanted to do that here for the
Betty Ford Center, so I phoned Eisner, at the time, who had the Ducks. And he’s a raving bloody socialist, but I didn’t know this going in, so I took Jerry and Betty and we flew them over to a game, and we sat in their box and we watched Edmonton play the Ducks. And thank god we beat them. But maybe we shouldn’t have, they should have said, let the Ducks win tonight, and we’re going to do the same thing there. And Betty said, look, you’ve got to make sure that you split this thing, not all for the Betty Ford Center, but split it to make sure that his charity gets half. And, anyway, he (Eisner) said to me, you know, this isn’t quite my politics. And I said, what the hell you talking about? And I found out he was a raving bloody Democrat and…

Smith: But what’s political about the Betty Ford Center.

Pocklington: Well, that’s what I thought. I said, “Goddamnit, we’re saving Democrats as well as Republicans here, I need your help.” And he pulled out, the son of a bitch. God, I was not very happy with that. But they came up with some lame excuse where I had to get Celine Dion to come and do part of the show, and so I phone her manager. And at that time they were busy, which was probably so. But, he then kind of pushed it away and that was it. And there was another time that I didn’t realize the political divide you have in this country. I wanted Jerry to be on the NHL board of governors as an advisor. And talked to two or three of the guys and then talked to a couple that were very Democrat – are you kidding? Man, they deep-sixed that so fast, they had more power than I did….and I, unfortunately told Jerry before I brought it up that I was going to try and do that and he thought for sure I could probably get it handled, and I couldn’t. I was very embarrassed by that.

Smith: How did he handle it?

Pocklington: Oh he said, yeah, I understand. He didn’t say much. He was a very understanding guy, and I guess he understood what I didn’t understand – that kind of tough going there with a strong Republican against a bunch of Democrats. But Billy Worts from Chicago was obviously a Democrat and he deep-sixed it.

Smith: One last thing, we’ve gone full-circle. You said he really enjoyed, obviously loved sports, did he have friends who were athletes? We all know about people like Jack Nicklaus.

Pocklington: He had lots of golfing pals. I’ve got a few pictures – one of them he’s coming off the beach at Pebble Beach – he’s playing with Arnold Palmer and I had it blown up and put some comical remark coming out of the mouth of Palmer, and Jerry said, “Hhm.” And I got a kick out of it, wasn’t going to say much, but he did, his ball erred a lot on the…Pebble Beach is a tough course, too.

Smith: Was he no-nonsense on the course?
Pocklington: Pretty much so. He was always, with other people around him, he was always all business. He was the President and that was it. And he was fun when you got away from the rest of the folks – he lightened up a little. Yeah, he was a good guy.

Smith: This has been fun. I can’t thank you enough.

Pocklington: Well, I’ve enjoyed it, too. It’s brought back a lot of good memories.

Smith: Well, that’s the point of the whole exercise. And we’ll make sure, once we get it, we’ll share it with you.
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Smith: Let’s start with: where did your paths cross for the first time?

Secchia: We crossed paths during his Congressional re-election campaigns. 1963-1964 I knew of him and he knew of me from meeting at local Republican gatherings. Back then the Lincoln Day dinner might be a $15 ticket. Everybody went to those and he was the main provider of guest speakers. He would bring in friends like Nixon, who was a cohort of his in the Congress. I have photos of us together, which was the typical $12-15 ticket. This low price doesn’t exist anymore. It would be “How are you?” “How are you Peter. Good to see you”. Boom…gone!

We really became better friends sometime in the late ‘60s when he would come to Grand Rapids and would give me a call. Mildred Leonard was his secretary at the time. I remember one call I got from her. She said, “I don’t know who you are, but I have a long list of people here who want to have lunch with the Congressman, but he wants to meet with you, and he’d like to meet with you at some club. I can’t remember where it was – the Penn Club, or some restaurant. I remember I said, “No, why don’t we meet at the Starboard Tack (Now the Great Lakes Shipping Company)?” It was a restaurant I had just opened in 1969. She said, “I’ll check with him,” and we met there.

I gave him some ideas on his re-election campaign – how to meet younger people. He was receptive.

Smith: Let me interrupt that, because that raises a couple of things. One, I’m intrigued that you said, how to meet younger people. In ‘69 this is a time when the whole country is going to hell and campuses are exploding and so forth. Was there a connection there? Curiosity on his part?
Secchia: It was “worry” mostly on my part, because whenever I did see him at an event, he would be off in a corner talking to people older than he, or at least his generation. Those who were of my generation were standing on the other side of the room, sort of like the fourth grade school dance – the boys were here and the girls were there. I thought he needed to meet some of the younger, upcoming people from our community. Now that is the story of the first lunch. The relationship actually goes back before that when he asked me if I’d like to come and work with him at the Republican convention in Miami in 1968. There were two conventions I traveled with him, at my own expense. We stayed at the [Hotel] Fontainebleau – in ’68 and again in ’72. In 1968 the “Vietnam Veterans Against the War” were miserably obnoxious, it was almost violent.

He put me in charge of the Ford kids. I really don’t know how I got invited to be there, but maybe I was just a nanny, or maybe I was someone he trusted with his family. He would go in the morning for two or three hours before the conventions began, because as the Minority Leader, he was chairman of the convention. There were times when he would leave the hotel and say, “Pete, get the kids to these seats,” then give me the tickets. We were given a security officer/driver who was a retired sheriff from Miami – Dade County? I don’t remember his name. But that driver drove our car. Susan might have been sixteen at the time and the boys were older. There were all kinds of problems that could occur, so I was invited to come along and observe. This all came about and I’m sort of getting out of whack here, because the question, “How did it all start?” comes back to me as I go through this process.

But now I go back to the ’68 convention and I can remember Sen. Jacob Javits from New York, making a speech on TV that angered me about my Republican principles. It caused me to get on the phone and talk to Mildred Leonard, or whoever it was at that time was his administrative assistant. I said, “This is crazy, can you ask Jerry to get me a ticket to the convention?” He called to say, “Yes, come on down.” So I went down and I ended up staying there with them and he ended up using me to help get the kids to the conventions and attend various functions with him.
Smith: Was Betty there?

Secchia: Yes. But she went to the convention with others. Mrs. Nixon’s car had been urinated on by the Veterans Against the War, fruit was being thrown at the windshields and there was some minor riots – it’s hard to sort them out over the 30+ years that have passed, but it was not a comfortable situation. I remember Ford had a pool cabana next to Barbara Walters, and Barbara Walters had a African-American woman assigned who was taking care of the Walters’ children. She treated that person with a very mean-spirited attitude. It annoyed Congressman Ford at the time – that this would be happening at his convention and he displayed dismay very obviously with her over the way she was treating that woman. I was observing, as a young man – maybe 31 years old at the time, and watching. From that point on he would then confide in me, ask me to come up to the room and go through some of his speeches with him. “What do you think about saying this?” He was always good at that, “What do you think? You think I ought to do this – think I ought to say this?” The relationship developed – and it was then, after that ’68 trip, and after a couple years of seeing each other around town, that we became good friends.

Then he would come to Grand Rapids. He would visit with Joan and me. I think at the time he was making $36,000 a year. He had holes in his socks, he was traveling all the time, he didn’t have any spare money whatsoever. He would confide in us. It was almost like he didn’t have a very close relationship with his own children at that time. He was busy and Betty was taking care of the family life, but he was focused on Minority Leader work – traveling, electing, re-electing, the *Ev and Jerry Show*, all the things that he did. So I became the go-to guy in Grand Rapids.

Smith: Do you think after the White House years, particularly the later years, that he had a certain amount of guilt over having missed, not only part of his kids growing up, but burdening Betty with the responsibility for their upraising? It was a generational thing, like a lot of ambitious men, not only politicians, but others of his generations. He had a goal – a professional goal – and that tended to shape his life.
Secchia: I think he had guilt feelings, but I also think he had a secondary issue, with Betty’s health. The term “alcoholic,” “over-drinking” wasn’t really the issue. She had a lot of pain and the painkiller with one drink… I would stay with them upstairs in the White House. I was often the only guest. I’d sit by her bed for hours and Dr. Lukash used to call me up and say, “Can you come out to D.C. and sit with Betty? The president has to go on a trip, and he would like someone here.” I would sit by her bed and talk to her. She had some very serious discomfort, and all the time we entertained or had an evening together, I never saw her have more than a drink and a half. There wasn’t any over consumption of alcohol, it was a combination of the drugs. He felt guilty that he wasn’t able to be there for her. I think the fact that he never developed a close relationship, and that might be hard for his kids to hear now, but in those days, and it might have been a generational thing, parents didn’t talk to children like they do today. Parents led children, disciplined children, but didn’t talk to them, didn’t have the “get inside your head” kind of attitude. That’s another role that I played.

He asked me to fly out and stay with the kids and then he would get on Air Force Two, which was an old prop driven Convair, I’ll never forget that, and take off and say, “Look, I want you to talk to Susan about this and talk to Mike about this,” and so, I was a big brother, or a son that he never had in politics. Because he didn’t have any in politics, he taught me my politics, so we had a lot of political conversations. I don’t want to upgrade my position in this thing, but we had many conversations about what I could do for him, generated by him, by the way. Not me saying, “What can I do for you?” It was him saying, “Would you mind doing this for me? I just haven’t got the time.” (Mostly in Grand Rapids.)

Smith: This brings up a couple of things. You wonder, let’s face it, most people in parenting tend to reproduce their own experiences, their own memories from childhood and I’m wondering how much of that approach reflected the norms in the Ford household when he was growing up. Kind of a hierarchical…

Secchia: Because of his tragic background with what happened with his birth father.
Smith: But also, the kind of discipline and structure that an earlier generation took for granted.

Secchia: I think there was no question about it. He loved his new father, (the “Ford” father) very much. Respected him immensely. He told me the story about Leslie King many times. Shortly after Ford was nominated to be the vice president, he was on the west coast, maybe Washington or Oregon. I believe he might have been with Congresswoman Edith Green who later had helped (it would have been a friend, if I’m not mistaken). He was scheduled to give a speech in Knoxville, Tennessee where I was involved. I had arranged for him to be the speaker. Nobody in my industry at that time, (manufactured housing) ever heard of this Congressman from Michigan. He was the Minority Leader, and if you watched the *Ev and Jerry Show*, you might know who he was. But I convinced them to have him as their keynote speaker.

When he was named V.P. the previous months, I thought he would cancel. He called me and said, “I’m coming,” and when he came in as the Vice President of the United States they knew. When he still came in I noticed right then and there that – (I had expected a big change) – but there was no change whatsoever. He was still the same Jerry Ford. But my phone started ringing off the hook. I was there for a tradeshow and I’ll never forget the first call was from a British tabloid, (speaking with British accent) “Hello, Governor,” he said, “is this true that your vice president has an assumed name?” I’m thinking, oh gosh, what am I supposed to say, what do I say I know? Do I not know it, do I know it? Is it going to be a problem? Has it been released? Do I talk of this? I was just a nervous wreck. I said, “Well, I really can’t talk about those things.” They made a big splash out of Leslie King, Jr. – not being Gerald R. Ford, Jr.

There was a story he liked to tell about his birth father visiting him when he was working at the local drug store. He took me there to show me the neighborhood, his old family house, where he worked, where he went to school. He told me the story about this – (you’ve heard it over and over again) – but it had an impact on him because he had to make a decision right then. He told his birth father...“I love the father who has given my mother a home.
I love the father who has given me his name.” I thought then that if it were me, I would have said, “Where have you been, you son of a bitch?”

He was much more gentle and kinder than that. Much more Christian. He always said it in kinder terms, but I think he told me that he was very firm that he didn’t want to see Mr. King again – and that he’d hurt his mother. So that is probably part of what built the kind of life model he has, you need to be good to your wife and kind to your mother, and kind to your family. But he also had this drive to be good at what he did. Not to be a statesman, he never used that term, but he wanted to be the man who had the frequent flyer mile record for dedicated traveling, or “nobody can outwork me…I work hard,”

Smith: You wonder what sort of mix from the parents, because the sense I get, is that his dad was the person who influenced him the most, of anyone - the values and the qualities. His mother had great drive. The famous story about when she died in church and they found her appointment book - it was filled for a month, or whatever. You can see him as the perfect product of these two different, yet very complementary, personalities.

Secchia: You’ve got to remember, he was of the generation, wrongly or rightly, who didn’t give a lot of credit to the mother’s role in raising family. We all grew up with that, in that generation of Charles Atlas kicking sand in the face to show the woman he controlled the world. Jerry was a gentleman in a world that didn’t have too many gentlemen. He created a role that allowed him to disagree without being disagreeable. I’ll never forget one day, I was at the White House. I came downstairs after breakfast. The president was out playing golf and I read the Washington Post. Tip O’Neill called GRF everything but a decent human being in the paper. When GRF returned from golf, he buzzed me and I came down to the Oval Office. He was in his golf clothes. He was in the Oval Office chair and I said, “Did you see this?” I laid the paper down. He said, “Oh, that’s just Tip. That’s politics.” I said, “But he called you all these terrible names!” Jerry Ford looked at me and he said, “Well, that’s who I was playing golf with this morning.”
I said, “I don’t get this!” He said, “Peter, in Washington, you must learn to disagree without being disagreeable.” That sentence is really what everybody is talking about today, the old-fashioned politics that people could get along. They disagreed, but they disagreed without being disagreeable. That was his mantra. That all came about from the raising and the discipline that he had, and that he understood, and from his family.

Smith: He was, to put it mildly, fiscally conservative. How much of that do you think was a product of the Depression? Because, clearly, there is a whole generation of kids who went without, and who have a whole different idea of the meaning of money.

Secchia: He was of a generation where a job was important and loyalty to the boss was important. The fact that, like my grandmother used to say, “Your cousin works over there at that gas station – it’s a very good company, his paycheck cashes every week.” That was important in telling that child of the Depression that it was important that you just didn’t get a paycheck, but you get a paycheck that was cashable. Jerry Ford wasn’t just fiscally responsible – he was tighter than a second coat of paint. You couldn’t get him to spend a nickel for anything. The people who traveled with him had to carry small bills.

I remember very well when we had these cars in Miami for the two Republican conventions that I attended (’68 and ’72), I would ride with him and we’d go to events. We’d come back and we’d say goodnight to the driver and the driver would be standing there with his hand out – a retired officer – I’d have to find some cash to tip him. Jerry never thought about that. I don’t know whether he avoided it, but he didn’t do it. It got to be, I would rag on him constantly about being tighter than a second coat of paint. He’d just laugh, “I’m from Grand Rapids and that’s the way it ought to be.” He also prided himself on his knowledge of the budget and the defense appropriations. He understood better than anybody where the money went, and he would get very concerned about certain issues.

Smith: Let me go back because it’s remarkable that a Congressman who was as entrenched as he was in this district, would, particularly with all of his other
obligations and travel, still take seriously the obligation to come back as frequently as possible. The fact that, at that point in his career, twenty years on the Hill, he was still curious about reaching out to new audiences and the like. It wouldn’t happen today. If you had a safe district, you wouldn’t be home. I heard him talk about Guy Vander Jagt as an example – a cautionary example - of someone who was a great guy, but who “went Washington” and who got so caught up in the national scene that he neglected the district. Now here is someone who is even more caught up in the national scene, and yet one senses, he never neglected the home front – even if the home front was as safe politically as anything could be.

Guy Vander Jagt was an orator. Jerry Ford was a legislator. Guy enjoyed the social circuit. Jerry Ford didn’t enjoy the social circuit. So Guy had a reason to extend a trip or a visit where Jerry would not. So, that was one difference. Another difference was that Vander Jagt had a district that you couldn’t fly to. His district went from, I believe Traverse City down to the southwestern corner of Michigan, then you had to fly to Grand Rapids and drive three or four hours either way. Where in the case of Jerry Ford’s district, most of it was right here, to Holland and back. It wasn’t that different. Jerry Ford had more of a root base than Guy had. Guy was a little more of a party boy. Jerry would drink his martinis and he’d have a good time, but he’d never over imbibe. He had a little button on his chair at the White House and I can remember we’d talk and he’d press the little button and they’d bring him his drink. He enjoyed the dialogue but not the speaking. He wasn’t the speaker Guy was. Guy got standing ovations and adulation with his speeches. Jerry felt, “Well, I’m glad its over and time for me to leave. Okay.”

Was he sensitive? I remember him saying that if he’d had the chance to relive his live, he would have spent more effort on developing his communications skills.

Well I think that learning came at the ’76 election when he was having difficulty explaining his position. When in fact, he was misinterpreted sometimes by just his choice of delivery – not even the words – just the way he delivered it and it became – Stu Spencer used to talk to me about this and
say, “The guy is good at what he does, but I can’t get him to be the communicator that he needs to be.” Of course, being challenged by the Great Communicator in the ’76 primary, was very threatening to Jerry Ford because he was, as in the case of McCain – white skin, melanoma-threatened - fighting this good-looking, thin, eloquent, preacher-kind of opponent. I think McCain…

Smith: It was an oratorical mismatch.

Secchia: Yes, and I think McCain is being forced to go a little bit negative early to try to balance out that mismatch. Obama is a rock star, but can he lead? Jerry Ford had the same issues – “Why is this man challenging me? I am the sitting president.”

Smith: That raises a question. I assume the competitive juices kicked in, and that must be one key to understanding Ford. He was a very competitive guy, wasn’t he?

Secchia: He was very competitive, but he was also very concerned that people didn’t understand that he had a job to do, to clean up the mess that had been left by the Nixon administration. And at the same time go out on the street and debate or fight from a podium, this “Great Communicator.” Why is he [Reagan] doing this? Why doesn’t he just wait his turn? Why? This is a very complicated story and if I may take it chronologically…

Smith: By the way, one thing, then we’ll get into this because you’re right, it’s a huge, important one. I’ve heard Stu Spencer say, and imagine what it tells you about Ford that someone like Stu Spencer or anyone could say this: they were coming up with the Rose Garden strategy, and Ford, being Ford, wanted to get out on the campaign trail and he wanted to eat rubber chicken and he wanted to do all those things that he loved. I don’t think anyone wanted to tell him to his face why they wanted him to stay in the White House. Certainly the White House staff didn’t want to, but Stu Spencer, being Stu, he didn’t mind. Finally, he said, “Mr. President, you don’t understand, you’re a fucking lousy campaigner.”
Secchia: Well, that very well could have been discussed. The issue that really was the
problem was that this man had such a goal-oriented composition that he knew
what he had to do was Whip Inflation Now. He had to get the budget under
control. He had to get us out of Vietnam. I mean, there was a list on top of list
that had to be done. And that didn’t include flying to Oshkosh, Wisconsin and
talking to the local Caterpillar factory workers.

I can remember having the arguments with him that Reagan provided him a
chance to be re-elected because the challenge of the primary forced him to go
to places where he had never gone. He had a hard time recognizing that he
was the Fifth District Congressman of Michigan who wasn’t known in the
Sixth, Fourth, and Third Districts very well, and yet he wanted to run in
Wisconsin, California, Oregon, Washington. He had to get out and he had to
spread his message. He had to just be seen back then. The message wasn’t as
important as being known and paying homage to the local politicians, because
back in those days the Republican Party headquarters in this county or that
village or that community, was the office for the re-election.

I want to backtrack to this because when he pardoned Nixon on a Sunday
night, I had no knowledge that this was going to happen. Like everybody else,
it caught me by surprise. Jerry terHorst resigned and I was bewildered, as was
everyone else, wondering what was going to happen. On Monday morning I
got a phone call from somebody, I can’t remember whether it was Nell Yates
or Mildred Leonard - it might have been Bob Hartmann, I can’t recall, said,
“Would you come out to Washington tomorrow night and have dinner with
the President?” I said, “Why, sure.” “He needs to be with someone – a
friend.” It turned out that Monday when I got that call, we didn’t have this
twenty-four hour news cycle of Fox and CNN, Jerry Ford had been in
Pittsburgh to give a talk and had been booed. Demonstrations had begun and
the accusations were flying. The internet and the blogs weren’t yet created,
but the fervor was just growing – the fire was being stoked. It was not
comfortable. On Tuesday I flew into Washington and I waited for him to
come upstairs to have dinner. Betty decided not to join us. She wasn’t feeling
well, so I sat and talked to her. I read the paper and I went back in and talked
to her, then I read the paper.
Smith: How was she? Did she talk about the pardon?

Secchia: No – if she did, I don’t recall it. It wouldn’t have been my place to bring it up and it didn’t come up. I tried to make her feel good and feel happy. She was going through a rough period. I can’t remember what it was we talked about, but she was happy to have a friend from home who sat next to her bed and got her things if she needed them, or made calls for her.

Smith: Do you think the transition to the White House was a difficult one?

Secchia: Yes. But I want to finish this story. So Ford finally came upstairs and it was pretty late – it might have been close to nine o’clock. He had a series of newspapers that were lying on a credenza just behind the television set, sort of in the center of family quarters. He would pick up the paper and go to the editorial page and he read both of them, the Washington Post and New York Times. He came in, sat down in his chair, and I was sitting there on the couch. He pressed his button and ordered his martini and turned to me and said, “Nixon really fucked up the pea patch.” That’s the first time I’d ever heard him use the F word. He said, “I had to do it and it will cost me the ’76 election, but I had to do it.” Like a dummy, I had the vision that I was way over my head. I was a thirty-seven year old young business guy trying to sell lumber, and I just felt like I was over my head. I really didn’t need to be told anything I shouldn’t be told. It was like – I hadn’t even started reading spy books yet, but I was scared that I was over my heard. I said, “Look, you don’t have to tell me about it.”

I regret to this day I did that because we then changed the subject and we went to dinner. But he was very concerned about that and was very upset that there was not even a doubt that it wouldn’t cost him the ’76 election. There wasn’t even a doubt in his mind. Later on he had second thoughts about what it was and the little things, but that was a telling moment for me.

Smith: In later years he must have returned to the subject. Was he hurt that people suspected a deal? Was he surprised at the ferocity of the reaction?

Secchia: He spent a lot of time – you’ve got to remember, Jerry Ford’s viewpoint, because he was so goal-oriented, and dedicated to accomplishing what he was
supposed to accomplish – a lot of time wasn’t a lot of time in your world or
my world – in his world it was a lot of time. He called a few people and said,
“Look, get this straightened out – they don’t understand this.” Yeah, he was
hurt. He was not very happy with some of the people – Alexander Haig and
others who had said things that got people going in different directions.

Smith: And, of course, he lost a press secretary.

Secchia: Right – who over-reacted in an emotional moment – probably because he
wasn’t counseled. But then again, when you’re a new president, you don’t
realize that…what your obligations are: “I’m supposed to discuss this with
him.”

Smith: Ford later on said… he understood terHorst was upset that he hadn’t told him,
but he said, “Stop and think. If I’d told him, he would have had, in effect, a
Hobson’s choice. Either he would have had to tell others, which he [Ford]
obviously didn’t want, or he would have had to lie.” It tells you so much
about Ford, that those are the two choices and neither one is acceptable. So,
he, in effect from his viewpoint was saving terHorst from being put in an
impossible situation.

Secchia: Knowing Jerry Ford, I’m not so sure that he made the final decision until the
last moment because Ford was always one to jump back and forth and listen
to different ideas. In many cases we all felt that the person who talked to him
last impacted his thinking the most. I don’t know who that was in this case,
but I don’t think he made that decision on Tuesday and then kept it until
Sunday night. He obviously went through this, what would work, what
wouldn’t work, pros and cons and came up with a decision. But, that isn’t the
guy that I knew.

The guy that I knew was your basic Midwesterner who drew out the
thousands of people you saw at the funeral procession, who was enamored by
both sides of the aisle, the First World War, the Second World War, and
Vietnam vets. He just appealed to a great number of persons because his
‘steady as you go’ ship was something that wasn’t rocking in the rough seas
of ’74 and ’75, the Housing Community Development Act, the wild inflation,
Jimmy Carter shooting rabbits in ponds. Jerry Ford was just steady as Steady Eddie, and he built a confidence around himself. So as that circle of understanding of him in the Fifth Congressional District started to expand out into other areas, and over the years of his retirement, it got stronger and stronger. It built to the point that he was a very popular figure. And rightfully so.

Smith: I think I heard him say, or at least it was attributed to him – very uncharacteristic and I don’t think it was for public consumption – he was known to have observed that Nixon never said thank you for the pardon. That he never really thanked him.

Secchia: Well, there was a comedy skit made about that and I bought the painting by the artist of where, if you remember, there was a skit where he was playing poker with Nixon and Nixon sneezes and said, “Pardon me,” and Ford said, “I already did.” I bought that painting and I had it hanging in my office for years. But he never said to me anything about the thank you. I don’t recall that.

Smith: Did you have a sense of what his relationship with Nixon actually was in later years?

Secchia: Yes, in 1972 or 73, he came to Grand Rapids and we had dinner. He gave a talk somewhere and he said, “Meet me after.” I met him in the Old Pub, which was a restaurant in the old Pantlind Hotel. He and I had dinner - they were famous for their Sizzler, which was a terrible cut of beef, but on a hot sizzling plate, with a piece of buttered toast. I’ll never forget that night. We sat there, the bartender was behind the bar, we were the only table – the hotel was about to close. Nobody talked to him, other than the waitress who took the order. Nobody came up, there were no autograph seekers. He was a pariah to many because of his support of Nixon’s Vietnam policy.

After dinner we went up and sat at the bar and had a nightcap. These were his drinking days, not over drinking, but days people don’t realize he participated in. We had a drink at the bar and the bartender gave us the perfunctory “Hello, goodbye,” and Jerry said to me, “I promised Betty I wouldn’t run again. I
wasn’t going to, but I have to run one more time or it will appear I’m deserting Nixon in the middle of this terrible period, and so I owe it to Dick Nixon to stay on as Minority Leader, and run again.” That must have been the ’72 election. He ran for re-election and that was to be his last – and his respect and admiration for Nixon was strong.

Smith: I wonder if it survived later events. He must have had a different outlook, or at least an outlook that had to have been affected by what both of them had been through.

Secchia: I think the line that he used that night about the pea patch is – there were other issues that he didn’t realize were going on.

Smith: That gets to the heart of him in so many ways. There is a quote out there that says, “I always was truthful in my dealings with other people, and I expected other people to be truthful.” On the one hand, you can say, thank God we have people like that in public life, but in certain circumstances you can also turn that around and say, “Boy, he’s naïve.” He was genuinely astonished that Nixon lied to him. That’s the sense that one gets - that he was genuinely outraged by the language on the tapes and he was genuinely surprised that Nixon would lie to him.

Secchia: I think so. He didn’t like anybody lying to him. He didn’t think he would do it to people, why would they do it him? In the case of Nixon, again, I wish I could say that he told me something that would reveal a new light on this, but so many things he told me and so many things we talked about, I just automatically purged from my mind, because he was The President of the United States, and I was a lumber salesman from Grand Rapids. I really didn’t expect to be involved in that level and the fact that our friendship flourished and the calls became more frequent and my visits became more frequent. We were his special guests for the Bicentennial Dinner. He said, “Betty and I have a surprise for you,” and I didn’t know what he was talking about. Then we got the invitation and turns out that, according to them, we were allowed to sit together at the same table, which is very unique and supposedly, per Betty, that “each time you have a state dinner, you allow one couple, and that’s a
special significant award that we give to people we love. And you and Joan were given that honor.”

Now this is the Bicentennial Dinner. I couldn’t even rent the right kind of tuxedo. I had to call Maria Downs, who was the social secretary and say, “Maria, what is a white tie?” Maria looked in the book and found pictures from the Kennedy events years ago and said, “Well, it looks just like a white tie.” So I went to see Gus Afendoulis, the Greek tailor, and he said, “Peter, I’ll take care of you.” I went on a road trip to sell lumber and I came back and he had a white tux for me with black piping – a white tuxedo! I said, “Gus, I can’t wear this!” He said, “Ah, they’ll love ya!” I said, “Gus, I’ll look like the Platters, you know, shaboom, shaboom, I can’t do that!” He said, “Well, what is a white tie? This is a white tuxedo.”

Well, we finally found out that I needed a dickey, but nobody ever told me I needed a white vest [dickey]. So we got to the Hay-Adams and we were reading the paper as we were flying in, and the guest list is printed. It says people are paying a fortune for an invitation. The Queen of England is going to be there, and this is a big deal. So we get there – (I tell this story because there is humor in it). I go to the room and get dressed. If I pull my pants up to where they are supposed to be so that my stomach isn’t showing, my ankles are hanging out, if I drop them down, my stomach is hanging out. Something is wrong with this outfit.

I go downstairs, my wife has got her hair all done, had an original outfit made. I go downstairs and bump into Bo Callaway. That ought to be on your list – a person to talk to. Bo Callaway had resigned as chairman of the Ford re-election campaign over the Crested Butte scandal where he had been former Secretary of the Army and had bought this giant ski resort property from the Army Corps of Engineers, so he felt it in his best interest to get out. I see Bo, and Bo comes from a very wealthy, successful family, so I say, “Bo, you want to ride over with us.” “Why sure Pete.” Well, it went downhill from there. Everybody else has limos coming up to the Adams. I’m flagging a cab. It’s a hundred degrees, it’s raining, it’s humid – oh, it was awful! The cab driver I get is from someplace – Southern Africa, where it’s warm. He’s
wearing a winter ski cap, a jacket, no air conditioning, three fenders on a four-fender car, a dirty cab – it’s a mess. Bo gets in, I get in the front seat, my wife and Bo and his wife get in the back seat. We get in - limousine, limousine, limousine, cab, limousine, limousine, one cab.

They re-route us around through the south because they are going to take it from the lawn, where it was going to be, to come into the east side of the White House. When we get there the bright lights are on and all the TV anchors are there and everybody is… I’m still not in the right kind of outfit, so I go to see Chief Justice Berger. I get out of the cab about fifty yards or thirty yards before the exit and I go up there and I look at Chief Justice Berger, and he looks at me like he’s seen me before, and obviously I’m going to the event. He had on a cape, top hat, cane – I said, “Would you open your jacket so I can see? – I’m from Grand Rapids, I don’t know what…” He opens his jacket – oh my God, there’s a vest that you wear with a white tie, and I didn’t have a vest, so that’s why my dickey ended here and my stomach was there. So I go in the White House, Bo Callaway is just mortified, by the way when our cab pulls up.

I go in the White House and I find Rex Scouten, who was then the Head Usher, and I said, “I need help, Mr. Scouten, I need help.” So he says, “What’s the matter, Mr. Secchia?” “Oh my God,” I said, “Do you have a fat waiter who’s off duty tonight that I can borrow…?” Well, this whole thing was backwards. We were wearing white ties, and the staff was wearing black ties. So they take me in there and they unbuckle my studs (back then we wore these studs), and I had all this stuff and suspenders and cummerbund. They take me all apart, I’m sitting there with nothing on, they went down to get this vest – this Secret Service agent comes into the room. He points at me and says to his wrist microphone: “Keep them there, keep them there! There’s some guy in here with no clothes on.”

What happened was the Queen and the President had decided to come down the back elevator, through Mr. Scouten’s office and I’m holding them up, right? So they are trying to put me back together. They can’t put me outside the door because then I’m in where the Marine Band is playing, in the lobby.
They can’t put me in the other end, because I’m at the elevator, so they are trying to get me put together. “It will be a minute! It will be a minute!” So finally they get me out and everybody had already gone out and they are waiting for the President and the Queen.

Well, we go downstairs and we present our invitation and it’s got a table number. We do not know that we’ve got the same table number that’s unique, because we go to parties in Grand Rapids. The Marine won’t let us in. He says, “Something’s wrong here.” So he dials and says, “Who is this guy – what’s the deal? And he’s the guy.” So they have us at a table with Alice Roosevelt Longworth and some other people, and I don’t know anything about this. So finally, the Marine says, “Okay, go,” and he announces us. We go out, and just as we go out all the lights are bright, shining on us. Loud applause. I said, “Joan, is my stomach showing?” “No.” I said, “Joan, Jerry said we have a – this is a surprise – is something going on I don’t know about it?” She says, “I don’t know.” “Do we wave? What do we do?” She says, “Just keep walking.” Okay, so we kept walking.

What happened, is we came out in the Rose Garden, and the President and Queen came out upstairs on the portico right above us – so all the people were looking over us at them and applauding. And so we’re standing there saying, “Oh my God, what’s going on?”

So Ford thought this was funny because he liked this kind of humor. He loved to scorch friends, and did it twenty years later when Betty had her 20 year anniversary for the Betty Ford Center. I bought a table, and I couldn’t find persons from Grand Rapids who wanted to fly out west to attend the dinner, so I gave the table back to the Ford staff and she seated my wife and me at a table of ten, with eight prominent Democrats, and one of them was Hillary Clinton. And all the first ladies arrive, except Hillary. She was late. She made a dramatic entrance and came to our table. The minute she sat the conversation began. [Joseph] Califano was next to me from Lyndon Johnson’s years. The staff comes over from Betty Ford’s table and says, “Mrs. Ford wants to know if you are enjoying your table?” I mean, it was like, always trying to have fun, but do it in a very subtle way.
Smith: He was impressed by Hillary Clinton. One sensed maybe he thought more of her than he did of her husband – in sheer intellectual ability.

Secchia: Jerry Ford might have thought that this was his coming out party for political correctness to be in admiration of a woman because, in his years of politics there were, other than Hale Boggs wife [Lindy], who came in and he was a friend of Lindy Boggs (that’s another one you might want to interview). Lindy Boggs and he were friends. I don’t know that, he probably said that to me, but I can’t remember that.

Smith: Tell me about his sense of humor.

Secchia: Oh he had a great sense of humor. He didn’t know how to laugh boisterously, or out loud, but we had a lot of fun. We had bets on Michigan-Michigan State. He went to China and the White House called me and said we don’t have a copy of the music for the Michigan fight song. I said I’d get it to them right away, and I sent them the Michigan State fight song (their rival). I wasn’t there, but supposedly it was written up in newspapers and magazines that when the plane arrived, he was greeted to the wrong fight song.

When we dedicated the Gerald R. Ford Freeway (US196), we had University of Michigan blankets and I was chairman of the dedication. So I put a Michigan State blanket under it, and when he pulled the rope, the University of Michigan blanket came off and the Grand Valley Band started to play *Hail to the Victors*. I had paid them to change over to the Michigan State song and I have a video tape with him turning to Governor Milliken and saying, “Where’s Secchia?” I mean, to the point of when we dedicated this museum, his brothers had a policeman assigned to me to make sure I didn’t do anything to embarrass him( at this event.

Smith: Now he did return the favor at the dedication of the airport.

Secchia: Yes, he was funny. (Oh, did you wrote the line? - obviously). That was a very funny line, and that’s another issue. When I suggested that Kent County rename the airport, I had been given a tip by somebody out in California that Palm Springs was thinking about naming their airport Gerald R. Ford. I said,
wait a minute, we can’t do that, we’ve got to…so I started talking to the commissioners and it was a fast-tracked project.

There were eighteen letters to the editor calling me everything but a decent human being – that I was being selfish doing this for my friend. That it was an ego trip for me – and it was not a pleasant situation. I lost three votes on the county commission – two of them were Republicans, actually, but we carried the day. When we flew home with Air Force One and the casket, and we landed at Gerald R. Ford International, it all came back to me that, as miserable as I felt and as awful as those letters were, we did the right thing. I remember, because the casket was in the compartment right in front of where I was sitting and I looked at it and I said, “You’re coming home, Bubba.” I used to joke around with him because he was a football player – he’d say, “Why do you call me Bubba?” I said, “Football players are all Bubba.”

We had a lot of fun. His sense of humor was great. I know there are conflicting stories on this but, and you might have been here – I don’t think so, I think it might have been Will Jones - I called him up and tried to convince him to come home to be buried here and his answer was, “Well, let me talk to Betty about that.” A few days later he called me back and said, “We’re going to do it, Peter. Can you give us some more information?” So I got a catalog for diving and there was a ‘his and her’ wet suit advertisement. I said, “We checked the water tables, and I’d ordered this matching suit for them so they would be very comfortable.” Well, he called me back with, “You’re kidding, aren’t you?” He’d take humor to a certain point, but then he really got a little bit lost as to what, “Was it really supposed to be funny?”

Smith: He was a very literal guy.

The subject of religion, it is interesting, because people drew the contrast in ’76 between a Carter who was very vocally born again and really came out of a southern, evangelical tradition. And yet my sense was, much more than the public knew, religion mattered, faith mattered to the Fords.

Who was Billy Zeoli?
Secchia: Billy Zeoli was – oh boy, this is one of those ones I’m going to have to read about – Billy Zeoli was a preacher who had an organization that, to this day, has some support from friends of ours. I think Doug DeVos happens to be the head of his organization. He spent most of his time with Christian athletes, and doing meetings and really got very big. Got divorced. Was a friend of Ford’s. I never really could figure out why, but I think because Jerry Ford was who he was, when someone offered to come out and pray with him, or be with him, he accepted that offer. Probably because he didn’t know how to deny it.

They were friends, but not close friends. They were friends because they shared that Christian issue. I remember when Jerry Ford became president, the night we were at his house in Arlington and he said to me, “What do you think I should do?” I said, “Why are you asking me? You’ve got Kissinger here, you’ve got all these people here.” He said, “You’re a friend.” I remember my comment back to him was, “Don’t F it up. You’ve got a chance here to do something.” He said, “Make me a list of what you think I should be concerned about.” I went back to my room in Washington that night, and I dictated nine points, one of them was: don’t bring God to you in the White House, like Nixon did, go out and go to church. Go out to be with the people in their churches. Two: Split Henry Kissinger’s job, he can’t be National Security Advisor and Secretary of State, it just isn’t going to work and it isn’t going to work for you when you get into campaign time. There was three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine and I used to get notes from him from the White House, number two is gone, number six is gone, number four is gone. He actually kept it and he would X it out and drop me a note. They weren’t any great tidbits of wisdom, they were just obvious to me that they would be clumsy for him.

Billy Zeoli offered him something that allowed him some Christian moments privately, because of what he did. But since I’m not part of their prayer circle, I can’t really comment on how it came about. But Billy was a friend of mine from just being somebody I saw around town. There were others he wasn’t friends with. He was a very, very different individual who built his organization and made religious films and sent out documents that Jerry Ford thought were wonderful, that they were teaching the gospel all over the world.
We never discussed that relationship. There were certain ones, I could ask you the same question, there were certain relationships you didn’t discuss with him because they really weren’t something you’d be interested in, or you were afraid you might say something that would make it difficult for everybody. This was one that I never really understood or got close to.

Smith: Did you sense that religion mattered? Presumably, coming out of his upbringing in the Ford household…

Secchia: No, I sensed that he had a strong faith, and that he did pray. I think Mike is a perfect example of that upbringing. Jack was on the other side of that. One of my tasks was, the night of the Bicentennial Dinner – I got a call from the President – he said, “I want you to watch Jack. I don’t want him in Georgetown tonight, standing on a table smoking grass, or reading in the paper that he embarrassed the Queen of England and his country.” That is another humorous story, but when it came time after dinner to (at that time, almost everybody smoked). I saw Jack go out on the south portico to have a cigarette and I went out to talk to him.

My message to Jack was, “Look, tonight’s a very important night for your father.” Now you remember, we’re in the middle of the campaign - we are talking about July of the re-election year and I have been given the assignment to take care of the delegate (Mr. Reed) from Mississippi. Clarke Reed was his name.

“Peter, you’re in charge of him. If he needs a coffee, get him a coffee. If he needs a drink, get him a drink. Ashtray? Yes, sir! I want Mr. Reed to have a wonderful time, but I want you to watch Jack.” So I go outside on the south portico to talk to Jack. I said, “Jack, now look, this is a very important night.” Jack had just started visiting Washington and going out and he was getting a little negative press. He was eighteen or nineteen or twenty, maybe twenty-one, but he was just at the stage where the president was concerned. So I went out to talk to him. I was thirty-seven, he was twenty-one. I thought, why am I doing this?…but just remind him not to do anything that would be embarrassing. So I go out to remind him. I don’t know that he ever smoked. I don’t know that he ever caused trouble, but I was just to remind him that this
was a special night and it could make a difference on a lot of delegates because we were very close in the delegate count for the August convention. Of course, the next month was the convention in Kansas City, where we had Jim Baker who was going to count our votes and we didn’t know if we had the votes.

I went out and I’m talking to Jack and this British staffer came out wearing a black tie, and asked if I had a light. I did, so I lit his cigarette, and just to make conversation, I said, “Excuse me, what do you do for the Queen?” He says, “That’s a rather personal question?” It was Prince Philip. I said, “I’m sorry, I’m from Grand Rapids, I didn’t recognize you.” He said, “Oh, I can deal with it, I have an agreement with the Queen mother and her daughter, that whoever was in the family…that I would never wear a white tie to one of her stuffy kind of…” Oh my God, I couldn’t dig my way out of that hole, so meanwhile Jack is out there laughing and Prince Philip is thinking I’m a fool, and I couldn’t wait to tell Jerry Ford that story. But we did get through the night and there were no problems. We did have a wonderful evening.

Smith: There was the famous incident when the Marine Band played The Lady is a Tramp.

Secchia: Right. That’s because Jerry Ford, who loved to delegate to the people he cared about – he said, “Susan’s in charge of the music tonight.” Susan picked this, and I’m sitting there with Clarke Reed, “Would you like a cigarette? Would you like a drink Mr. Reed? Can I get your ashtray cleaned?” I could not believe it when that music started to play and my wife looked at me and I looked at my wife, “I can’t believe this.” That was that famous night. It was a long night, but it was a wonderful night and they did very well. The Fords were magnificent.

Smith: Were you surprised at all? There was a certain amount - Washington can be a pretty insular town – of condescension. Doubts about his intelligence, doubts about his athletic ability, etc, etc, etc. And she was condescended to in a different sort of way. The notion that this Cub Scout den mother from Grand Rapids was going to be in Jackie Kennedy’s place. Did they ever talk about
that? How did they deal with that? Except simply to just do the job and disprove it.

Secchia: That didn’t bother them – they recognized the criticism as based on East Coast values, but the fact that they were Midwesterners was a point of pride. Midwesterners might always have a problem getting in the club at Harvard, but he had gone to Yale, so he felt that he had earned whatever it was that they were in search of finding in their president. So it never really got to him. He never really let the letters to the editor, or the personal issues bother him.

Smith: Or Chevy Chase?

Secchia: Well, Chevy Chase was a – he laughed at Chevy Chase. He did not get mean about that. I chaired the Humor in the Presidency when we had Chevy Chase here in Grand Rapids and I can remember sitting with Tip O’Neill at Tootsie Van Kelly’s - a little bar and pub that I owned here - for an hour and a half talking about the Chevy Chase issues and how he felt Ford was misjudged by people.

Smith: Was there real affection there between Tip and Ford?

Secchia: Without a doubt, without a doubt. A mutual admiration society. Both respected the opposition who can get the job done. It’s funny, you can go to a football game and watch the linebacker from Michigan just totally destroy the running backs at Michigan State, and then watch the Michigan State quarterback just pepper the Michigan defense with completed passes. That quarterback leads one team and that linebacker leads the other team and they both lead them to the conclusion of the game, which might be a win or a loss, but they walk off the field with their arm around each other. They lead the opposition while you were throwing well. You made twenty-seven tackles – I mean they respected each other for what they were able to do for their team.

That mutual respect was based on knowledge, effectiveness and ability – where today the vitriolic discourse in D.C. is based on personality, church, past history, what you did in high school or college. Really – when is the last time you read about the debate of the effectiveness of a leader in the legislature rather than, well, he’s one of them? Ick! So they had that respect,
and I would say I never saw a better relationship between two totally opposite political visionaries. That relationship is one that will someday be written about – how the odd couple they were. They were the odd couple. I could tell you more stories that he would tell me about Tip.

Smith: Tell us another one.

Secchia: Well, they would call each other when they had a problem on the floor. They would discuss an issue. Tip would say why I can’t go here, but I can go here if you’ll go here. And they worked those deals. Today, it’s the pork barrel that’s being offered by Senator Reid, or Nancy Pelosi – we’ll put twenty million into your peanut farm subsidy in Georgia if you’ll vote against the surge in Iraq. That’s not the same as the relationship that Ford and Tip had. But while you need this for your caucus, there were little tweaks that they were able to work that got them both where they had to be eventually. But it wasn’t so polarized and so vitriolic and so publicized and there wasn’t a reporter standing behind every bush like the paparazzi would do a starlet.

That was a genuine affection, and maybe just a mutual respect that you didn’t attack. If you told Jerry Ford you were angry at Tip O’Neill, keep it to yourself, “I’ll work with Tip.” I heard that. I remember a wonderful story when he told me that Jim Baker was going to be the next chairman of the Republican National Committee and I said, “I’m not getting that information.” He said, “Well, what is your information?” I said, “Well, Bill Brock and his secretary, Muffett, (I think her name) [Secchia note: Muffett may have been his last name. The Sec. may have been Orror(?) Browning] are working very hard. I think they are close to getting the votes.” He said, “Cheney (C.O.S then) tells me that Baker’s got the votes.” I said, “Well, you’d better count again, just so you don’t get embarrassed.”

Well, that night I had dinner with him and the two of us were upstairs. He had removed Mary Louise Smith (from Iowa) as the chairman of the RNC and he was going to replace her with Baker – get the election and replace her with Baker. We all know that Baker later became a very competent statesman, but at that time, he was not well known – he was a deputy secretary in Commerce and had been involved a little in the ’76 campaign by counting delegates. He
was in charge of that. But, Ford called that night after dinner. Ford and I got into it and he asked me to leave the White House. That’s the first time – he didn’t just say, “let me get you a car and take you to your hotel,” or you go on upstairs to sleep, whatever. He actually wanted me to leave the White House.

Smith: Over what?

Secchia: Over our discussion that he was wrong, that he shouldn’t be backing Baker. It was going to blow up on him, and the fact that he had screwed up with Mary Louise Smith. That he never told – if you remember correctly – he never discussed it with Barry Goldwater, who made a big stink that the conservative wing of the party had been ignored on this switch, and they shouldn’t have been. Well Reagan had his own candidate, Dick Richards, to be the chairman of the party because Reagan was running in the primary that summer and my discussion was coming from a chubby, chunky lumber salesman from Grand Rapids wearing jeans and a flannel shirt at the White House. So Gerald R. Ford said, “You don’t know what you’re talking about, we’ve got the votes. Baker’s going to win. If I screwed up on Mary Louise Smith, it was….I think it’s time for you to go.” Boing. I left the White House.

It was snowing and I didn’t have a coat and I was staying at the Madison so I had to walk several blocks up Connecticut. I’ll never forget that night. I laughed because I’d just been thrown out of the White House. My friend had asked me to leave – what did I do wrong? I only told him – and I’ll never forget – I was freezing, there was snow coming down, there were no cell phones then, no cabs, dark – get to the Madison and walk into it – back then they had a small bar, very small. I went into the bar to get a beer and bartender says, “How you doing? How’d your night go?” I thought, “You don’t want to hear it.”

The next morning the phone rings. It’s Nell Yates. I’ve got a 9:30 plane at DCA, which isn’t far – 15 minutes from the hotel. “President wants to see you right away.” I said, “I’ve got a plane at 9.” She says, “Now. There’s a car downstairs at the curb to pick you up.” “Yes, ma’am.” Quick, get up, shower, downstairs, in the car to the White House. Someone is meeting me, right inside – right to the Oval Office. President Ford is sitting there like this –
writing. Doesn’t even look up. Says: “I checked with Cheney, I checked with Baker, we counted the votes, Baker is dropping out today, Bill Brock does have the votes. I’ve talked to Barry Goldwater and we put that to bed – that issue – and how the hell do you get so much information when you are out in Grand Rapids selling lumber? Now get outta here.” And I left. He hardly even looked up.

The friendship, of course, rekindled, but he was already beginning to be out of touch as a president, getting information fed to him that wasn’t really what was going on. I think then he found that he had to have more Pete Secchias in his world that he could talk to about what was really going on back home. After the election decided to move his voting registration to California. He asked me to do it quietly and carefully so that it wouldn’t alarm people. It was basically based on two reasons. One is, he came back home and we went to dinner at the 1913 Room, he couldn’t eat his dinner, between autographs, everybody who came to the table, “I went to high school with your brother’s cousin’s sister-in-law, and we’re old friends and do you remember so and so,” and we were trying to eat dinner and it was just awful. He said, this was right before he left the White House, “You know, I don’t know that it’s going be easy for me to be in Grand Rapids and Betty’s health can’t handle the climate.” So then they went to California, and then they went there just, supposedly part-time.

Smith: But I take it that there was some local backlash.

Secchia: Big time. We had a family here, the Dilley family, and I don’t know if you want to interview them, but they were always writing letters to the editor. They were the loyal opposition to Jerry Ford. Whatever he did, one of the brothers in the Dilley, Dilley, and Dilley law firm would have a letter to the editor. As recently as a few years ago on the airport naming, just vitriolic, they just could not stand him.

Smith: Do you know where that started?
Secchia: That started back in the ’48 campaign through the family, but I didn’t know that because I didn’t get to be his friend until the ‘60s, so I don’t have that information. Did you ever get hold of Maury DeJonge?

Smith: Yes, I’m going to see him Friday.

Secchia: There’s where you’re going to fill in the ’48-’78 gap. He’ll be great because he’s got that newspaper mind and he’s got that memory. He’s probably got boxes of info. I have all these photos in my computer of Betty Ford in my kitchen making dinner for Jerry and Joan and me. She and I making…

Smith: Was she a good cook?

Secchia: Well, she was a good cook in the sense that she didn’t often cook. It was the fact that she was comfortable in the kitchen – she put an apron on and helped me. I was making veal parmesan and I had an Italian recipe and she was chopping – she was doing okay. But we were friends and we were having fun, and that was more important than whether – but we had a nice time.

Smith: Tell me about that love-match. Because it was clearly a very close marriage. I think a lot of people were – I don’t mean to say surprised – but I think a lot of people learned a lot of things at the time of his death. I think, particularly for younger people who were being introduced to him for the first time, there is one reason why, as the week went on, it built and built and built. Because people were contrasting what they were seeing with what we have. For a lot of folks, it came as news that the Fords had been married as long as they had. Everyone knows about Nancy and Ronnie, in part because Nancy and Ronnie wanted people to know about them.

Secchia: You’ve got to remember that period of time. You’re coming after Jackie and President Kennedy - both accused of having their own little flings. Then you have the divorces of the Reagans and then you have the issues that go back to the Lyndon Johnson wild days. The relationship that Nixon had was not one that anybody ever really understood. So you add up all those years of the monarchy being a queen and a king are not – who’s wearing the clothes, who’s the boss?
Jerry Ford had this, in my judgment, this value of the worth of his wife that was very high, without being obsequiously subservient to the public. Privately, it was also, “Well, I want to talk to Betty about that.” There was never a major decision without, “I want to talk to Betty about that.” Now, not presidential decisions, and I’m not so sure that she was involved in the pardon, she may have been, but the issues that had to do with their life, she was “Mother says this, that’s the way it will be.” And that may be the result of that relationship that also forced him to feel comfortable saying to his real father, “I don’t want to see you again. My mother, my new father are very important to me. Mother rules.”

In his house, she, Betty, ruled because he was committed to being a legislator. And it is no different than many of the businessmen in my era – I go to the office, don’t call me, don’t bother me, let me do my work and I will try to get enough treasury to build, to get our kids’ teeth fixed, to get our kids into college, to get us a good health plan, to find us a nice home – and it was sort of an understanding of, “You do this, and I will do that.” It was a division of labor in that generation. This generation, the division is a battle between, well, I want to be a working wife and you can be the house husband, or you can do it a different way. But that changed. Betty and Jerry Ford – they were the post-World War II poster children. We’ve been through a war, our parents went through a Depression, we’re going to stay together no matter what. Nobody is going to come between us. But he was not a good husband. I mean, he was not home very often. He was on the road doing what he thought he had to do.

Smith: Maybe that’s when she developed some of her problems, particularly with alcohol, and the drug dependency, which really is an offshoot of the pain that she was going through.

Secchia: No question about that.

Smith: But the fact that he wasn’t there then.

Secchia: Where he really felt guilty – one of the things that he used to talk to me about was, he would say that he had to be somewhere, and he had to be somewhere
because he had jerks like me, who were running the Kent County Republican 
Party. “You’ve got to be at our dinner.” She was having pain and suffering, 
and he wasn’t going to share that with county chairman, but he had to be to an 
event because there were people attending. He would leave her alone and he 
would need somebody to be with her. Dr. Lukash, which I don’t know if he is 
still alive or not…

Smith: No, he’s passed away.

Secchia: Dr. Lukash would have been a great interview because he knew the inside of a 
lot of things and he was a very dedicated friend of theirs. GRF knew that he 
had to have somebody, a surrogate person – sometimes it was me, sometimes 
it was somebody else there but that wasn’t really guilt as much as it was 
defensive. He felt: “I have to do what I have to do, so I’d better find 
somebody else to be there.”

Smith: But go down the road, after they left Washington and the intervention takes 
place. I’m just wondering whether by that time he felt any sort of 
responsibility, simply for the fact that he let this creep up on him.

Secchia: There were issues that bothered the family. One day I received a phone call 
from Betty Ford and it was a very difficult conversation because she said, 
“Peter, this is Betty.” “Hi, Betty.” “They did it to me again.” I said, “What are 
you talking about?” She said, “They did it to me again.” I said, “I’m sorry, 
what did they do?” She replied: “I went to this doctor and he gave me too 
much medication. They just don’t want me to leave their office and be able to 
say that they weren’t able to help me. So they are over-compensating me with 
pain killer.”

I had been aware of the issues with a couple of drinks, maybe one, maybe 
two, and the combination of the pain killer, and I immediately hung up the 
phone and called their C.O.S. Barrett. I didn’t want to call him and say, “Hey, 
I just got a disturbing call from your wife.” So I said to Bob, “What do we do 
about this, guys? Here’s the phone call I got.” But I think Barrett was working 
with the kids and developing this intervention. I don’t even know what 
happened because I wasn’t that close to Bob. But, I was probably a threat to
Bob because I was very close to the president. Penny Circle told me that Bob didn’t want anybody else close to the president. But that’s okay because I was here and I didn’t want to be flying back and forth to Palm Springs.

That call was a telling moment that Betty was out of control and she had no way to handle this. Then when I got into it, I found it was a pretty common occurrence that a doctor had Betty Ford as a client and would try to reduce her pain. He surely didn’t want her telling the neighborhood in his market that he wasn’t competent – or unable to improve her health, so he gave her a little extra medication. That was the part I knew about. Susan discussed the intervention with me and what they were going to do as a family. Susan was the one who called me to tell me he was going to be vice president and she wasn’t supposed to tell me. That’s another funny story about the Ford relationship.

I was home and she called me. She said, “Peter, I’m not allowed to tell you this, but Mom’s getting dressed.” “Mom’s getting dressed?” “Yes, she’s getting dressed up. She’s been invited tonight to the White House.” I thought, “What’s going on here, what’s she trying to tell me?” She said, “I can’t tell you anything more than that.” I thought, “What is she talking about?” So I hung up the phone. We were watching the six o’clock national news or what we saw in Grand Rapids then, and they were talking about going to be in the East Room tonight and Nixon is going to announce his choice of vice president, I thought. “Mom’s getting dressed – I’m not allowed to tell you this.” Oh my God, he’s going to be the vice presidential nominee. I’m going to make some money on this deal.

So I call three guys who I knew were interested in politics, or involved - friends of mine (not activists). Calls: I found a babysitter, got a voice mail message, and had a no answer. I couldn’t make a single ten dollar bet that Ford was going to be Vice President of the United States. Well, twenty minutes later they opened up the TV at seven-thirty or eight o’clock, whatever it was, and Nixon came to the podium, and I’m watching with Joan, and they announce that Jerry Ford would be the vice president. I said, “I didn’t make a buck on it. I could have had more fun with that.”
Smith: My sense was, he was so proud of her. First of all, for what she had overcome, but secondly, for what she created with the Betty Ford Center. She got the Medal of Honor long before he got the Medal of Honor. She probably had higher poll ratings than he did, etc., etc., etc. And yet my sense was, that was wonderful.

Secchia: His self-deprecating humor about how the fact that Betty was more popular than he was when he was campaigning, was always a very effective line, I thought, because it endeared him to all those other women of that generation who were never recognized as being the competent leaders they were.

Smith: What does it tell you also about, just the White House climate, when the *Sixty Minutes* interview aired, the immediate reaction was, “Oh my God, this is terrible!”

Secchia: After what?

Smith: In the White House, when she did the famous interview with Morley Safer, and talked about what she would do if Susan said she was having an affair, and she talked about, what if her kids were smoking grass – and abortion, etc., etc. First Ladies never talked about those things before and it really was a watershed moment in many, many ways. Not surprisingly, the political team in the White House thought, “Oh my God, this is terrible!” It took a few days for the polls to come in and to their astonishment, there were a lot of people who found it very refreshing. It really was, in many ways, the beginning of her reputation as a bit of a free spirit, someone who actually, without maybe deliberately trying to, contributed to the openness of the Ford White House. It actually advanced that storyline. But the immediate reaction was, “Oh my God, this is a disaster!”

Secchia: And his reaction to that was the most surprising. He could have used one of the trite, “Well, that’s Betty being Betty.” The typical answer many of us husbands might use, but he said, “That’s her opinion, and we don’t agree on everything.” They had the same discussion about women’s rights and the ERA, and he had to be careful in his re-election campaign. But his reaction to what she said was very supportive of her, and really that might have been a
watershed moment for his presidency, rather than her statement being a
watershed moment for the First Lady.

Smith: Jump ahead, because in later years, they’d go to every Republican convention,
and every four years they were more and more isolated in a lot of ways.

Secchia: Are you talking about the Philadelphia convention in ‘92?

Smith: Whether it was abortion or gay rights or issues where the party went this way,
my question is: did he change, and how much of it was her influence – or was
it simply that the party went this way – because, let’s face it, when he was in
the White House he was viewed as the most conservative president since
Calvin Coolidge. But in many ways, conservatism was about to undergo a
redefinition, particularly on social issues. There were things that weren’t on
the agenda in the Fifth District in Michigan. Tell me if I’m wrong:
conservatism, first and foremost, was a matter of matter of economics and
foreign policy. But there were a host of issues that, frankly, you just didn’t
discuss. Let alone regard as part of the public agenda.

Secchia: Well, the Right to Life and the ERA were already being discussed quite
openly. But Jerry Ford never really was a straight party guy – a partisan kind
of House Speaker. I tried to explain this to John McCain when he was at my
home last week (spring of 2008). I said, “You know, you and Jerry Ford have
a lot in common in the way you approach things.” I wanted him [McCain] to
come to the burial site, but he flew into Muskegon and it was too long a drive,
but he will be here, I’m sure. I don’t think he even noticed, or has read enough
to realize that he and GRF are similar. But Ford did speak out against his
party on several issues, and I don’t think GRF changed. I think the party
changed. But again, it’s part of the Internet, the information, the 24 hour news
cycle. We now discuss all these issues 24/7. While you and I are sleeping,
somebody is blogging away and some Drudge report being written about what
you, or somebody said. And somebody else is running with it and using it.
Jerry Ford really never changed. He might have been more vocal on some
issues that he didn’t want to make front page with when he was in the White
House.
Smith: How much of an influence do you think she was?

Secchia: She was a strong influence, and I don’t think the influence diminished. I think she was a strong influence pre the White House, during the White House, and after the White House. It’s just that he was so busy pre the White House, being a Legislator and a House Leader that he didn’t spend a lot of time discussing family issues with her. When he was in the White House, he really felt it important because he needed to hear other viewpoints than just his palace guard. That’s how his relationship with Rumsfeld and Cheney started to develop, because he found those two to be two that he could always count on to tell him the truth. But in many cases, not what he wanted to hear – but the truth. There were others that were not so close because they weren’t seen that way by him.

Smith: Was it awkward for him in later years? Particularly, let’s face it, over the last eight years, in terms of the alumni from his administration like Paul O’Neill, or Cheney, or Rumsfeld. Did you discuss it?

Secchia: We did. He would talk to me about, in the case of Paul O’Neill. He thought Paul was a great public servant and a wonderful, bright young man, who may have said a few things that he shouldn’t say. But Jerry Ford was never one to be vitriolic against somebody who spoke what they felt they had to say (including his wife). It was like, well, that’s what she thinks she has to say. That’s what Paul thought he had to say. He kept his faith in Paul and his friendship with Paul throughout all of that. So, was it difficult for him? No. But there were people who had served in his administration who, at times, had to explain their actions to him, without him demanding the explanation. It was just sort of an automatic camaraderie amongst that group of people. “You know what I just said was written up, I think I’d better call.” Henry Kissinger was a perfect example. He was always chewing on some piece of foot leather that he had in his mouth, and he would call the president and explain it. The president was always very good about that. “Well Henry told me what really happened, and…”

Smith: Was he too nice to be president?
Secchia: Could he have been re-elected if he hadn’t been so nice? Probably. But, he and I had this discussion many times. When you run for the Presidency and you lose by one voter precinct in Ohio, a couple thousand votes in Hawaii or Washington – it boils down to: what cost you the election? Was it the pardon, was it the stumbling, was it the knee that collapsed on the airplane, was it the Chevy Chase mocking you every night, was it the comment you made about “Drop dead New York.” None of these. All of these impacted (each of them) the election by a tenth of a percentage point. But if you have eight or ten of these, you have a percentage point, and percentage point is a 51-49, and you get close, but you don’t get closure. None of them by themselves, Betty’s position on the ERA, that’s one of my 10-15 items, they all cost him a little.

Smith: And the Reagan challenge.

Secchia: Well, the Reagan challenge, I think, helped him. I think if Reagan hadn’t challenged him, he wouldn’t have campaigned in Minnesota and other non-Ford states. He wouldn’t have turned out the vote.

Smith: That’s interesting, because I’ve also argued this, that it made him a better candidate.

Secchia: It made him a better candidate, but it made him a more understood candidate. To get people out to the polls they have to be pumped, you just can’t depend on a party mechanism getting people to the polls. You have to believe in the candidate. If they’ve never met him, they’re not going to believe in him. I often would say to him, “Look, say thank you to Ronald Reagan.”

Now going to the convention in 1980, when they were talking about – when they said Jerry Ford might be vice president. A rather funny story that night. He gave me his phone number for his suite, and said, “Call me if there is anything you think I should know.” I had promised Guy Vander Jagt that I would keep the Michigan delegation in their seats when he spoke. He had the keynote address that night (postponed one day). I had made a promise to him that I would keep the Michigan delegates in their seats. I was, at that time, the Republican National Committeeman, and soon to be elected Vice Chairman of the Party, but he felt I had some influence and I said I’d do that.
We ran a full page ad for Guy Vander Jagt for Vice President. Jim Sparling, who was his administrative assistant, and I and a few others paid for that, and we tried to get Guy consideration. It’s not unusual that you do that for a vice presidential candidate. In fact, I was on the phone with Cheney trying to convince him to consider Engler when Cheney flew to Texas and Bush convinced him to take the VP job. I mean, this is always something you’re doing if you have friends that are involved. At this particular (Detroit) convention, I had the phone number and Bob Griffin asked me for it. I said, “I can’t give it to you. He told me this is just to use if I need to talk to him.”

And, of course, the word was then out. In 1980 the TV anchor guys carried giant backpacks with antennas and they wanted interviews. Pettit, (Tom Pettit) from NBC came to me to interview me because he said, “I hear that you say that Jerry Ford will not be the vice president of the United States. I’d like to interview you to find out why you say that.” I said, “I can’t talk right now, we’re getting ready for Vander Jagt’s address, and when he’s done, I’ll be happy to talk to you, but right now I’ve got to keep the delegates in their seats.” Well, people were not in their seats because the word was Jerry Ford was being considered. Vander Jagt was trying to get that same job. Vander Jagt was the keynote speaker. Ford was up in his room and this current back and forth – who’s doing it – who’s orchestrating it – I’m on the floor as a delegate. So Pettit’s there and I can hear him telling his control booth, “Well, Vander Jagt spoke for forty-five minutes and never stopped, never ended.” By the time it ended, Pettit was gone.

Smith: By the time that ended, it also ended for Vander Jagt.

Secchia: By the time the speech ended. But, I saw NBC’s Tom Pettit the next morning in the gift shop in the hotel. He asked me, “Why were you so adamant with everybody who asked you, that Ford would not be the vice president? I said, “Well, it’s pretty obvious to me because Ford lives in California, Reagan lives in California. One of them has to move, and I don’t think you’re going to ever convince either one of them they should move for the other. But I thought I learned in fifth grade constitutional studies that that was the deal.” Pettit says, “Oh my God, that never came up last
night.” You go back and you look at all the transcripts and it never came up in all the discussions. Then 30 years later Cheney moves back from Texas to Wyoming to run for vice president. He got a lot of heat for that. But even though he was from Wyoming, and he’d only temporarily gone with Halliburton to Texas, when he moved back home, it appeared to be the kind of move that Ford - and you know from your interviews with Ford and Reagan, that that relationship would have had a hard time understanding, well, who is moving? You can’t ask Reagan to move – that was not going to happen.

Smith: Was it ever really seriously – my sense is that it’s been exaggerated over the years.

Secchia: Here’s what happened that evening. I gave that suite phone number to Senator Bob Griffin because he convinced me he had to talk to Ford. Told him to tell no one. About an hour later I’m walking – you know how you fight your way through a convention – I see this gathering and all these antennas sticking up from all those backpacks. Bob Griffin was having a small press conference – I’m watching from the back. He says, “I have his private number up in his suite and I’ve been talking to them.” I thought, “You #@% (mumbling). That was terrible. I was offended. I told him later I thought that was a cheap shot. “That was not what I gave it to you for.” I don’t think the idea was ever serious, but Barrett or Kissinger could tell you that they didn’t tell me. I don’t think it would have worked. I don’t think Jerry Ford would ever be the architect of it. He might have used it to negotiate from his congressional days, learning how you negotiate it. And he might have been to help some of his friends who were in his cabinet become part of Reagan’s leadership group.

Smith: I can’t image Mrs. Ford would have been thrilled about the idea.

Secchia: I don’t know where it came from. I was so adamantly convinced that it wasn’t going to happen, I didn’t give it much credibility.

Smith: Remember who was doing the negotiating supposedly for the Ford team – Kissinger, Greenspan, one other, I don’t remember.
Secchia: You’ll probably interview one of them and you’ll find out what really happened, but I don’t think it had any credibility whatsoever with the delegates. In my judgment they wanted to be “back in the action.” Ford group (individuals) may have.

Smith: Let me ask you, because you mentioned Barrett’s name, when the President first left the White House, he signed up for a lot of things which were actually beyond criticism. He had a deal with NBC, obviously was going to write his memoirs and all that – and even going on some boards that would have passed muster. But there was criticism that he was “cashing in” on the presidency. People didn’t know that he had to raise nine million dollars to build this Gerald R. Ford Museum building, which he said later was the toughest thing he ever did.

There are a lot of things people didn’t know, but the deals like the Franklin Mint – there were commercial ventures that in retrospect might best have been passed. I always wondered about the dynamic of that, because a really good staff person is counterintuitive, and they protect you from yourself. I wondered whether that was not the case at that point. Whether basically, for the first time in his life, he [Ford] saw how easy it was to make a lot of money. He hadn’t made money and he had family he wanted to take care of, he had kids he wanted to leave…

Secchia: I think those first four years were tough because, first off, the house that was his office was gifted by Firestone to the University of Southern California (USC), and it was, at his death, to go back to them. So they had, in actuality, a charitable remainder trust where they had made their gift to the University and it was their building on a sublease to the Ford people. There were overhead expenses that had to be met, and that’s where Sandy Weil comes in and some of the American Express boards that were always questioned.

But now you have to put it all in perspective. Four years later when Jimmy Carter lost and then he went into the post-presidency period, building Habitat for Humanity and not being the big board member and not making the big bucks, staying in Plains, Georgia. He was fitting a mold that would put pressure on another former president to go out and not do things. The staff is
trying to be the balance. But then you have the Herbert Walker Bush victory, and the post-'92 when fifteen years ago Ford is still alive and healthy, and ’74 Bush making a million dollars to give a speech. I don’t know if it was a million, but he got paid big bucks to go to Tokyo and give a speech.

Smith: Reagan. Reagan famously goes to Japan – gets two million dollars for two speeches.

Secchia: Right. You see what other past presidents are now doing and you say, “Wait a minute,” I was worried about Ford taking this $80,000 a year as a board member, or this $50,000 to give a speech, and another former president is making two million. Everything that you do seems less destructive to the image of the presidency if others have already violated it to great extremes. And it wasn’t just Reagan and wasn’t just Democrat vs Republicans. Clinton was just out hustling – Ford, Reagan, the money they raised for their museums. Ford’s money that he raised was from people who aren’t part of that Washington scene. We (Ford administration) didn’t have any relationships with Kuwait, or some of these countries that made big Bush ’41 contributions. So I think a lot of what Ford did in his later years was a little more open market acceptable.

It’s really now out of control when you look at what Clinton has reported he’s earned since his presidency – what his wife as earned since her First Ladyship. It’s just like “Wow, how could anybody ever say Ford did anything wrong.” If the Franklin Mint made him a couple hundred grand, it’s nothing compared to what these people make now. I think all of that changed over these years (1976-2006).

Smith: In fact, correct me if I’m wrong, but a lot of those Ford speaking fees actually came back to the Foundation.

Secchia: Toward the end, a lot of the speaking fees came to the Foundation because we arranged it where it was convenient to do that. Where, rather than Jerry Ford by himself, with very little staff, Barrett or Penny, or someone saying, “He needs to have a private plane and $25,000 or $50,000 written out to the Foundation.” That was a way to keep it out of the mainstream of concerned
citizen dialogue. It made it easier for all of us because it was money for the Ford Foundation.

The other side of it – making the money the legitimate way – was dwarfed by his successors, whether it be George Herbert Walker Bush or Reagan, and they both did very well. Bush didn’t really need the money, he just did it because it was what Reagan had done, and it seemed okay. But that was ten-twelve years after Ford.

Smith: It’s another chapter of that whole ex-presidency story, because people looked at Jimmy Carter and said, “Boy, isn’t this admirable?” This guy’s out there building houses and eradicating disease and off negotiating peace settlements. My sense was Ford could, on one level agree that was admirable. At the same time he had a much more, shall we say, traditional view of an ex-president’s responsibility. That basically, if a president asked him to do something, he’d do it. But he also took very seriously the fact that there is only one president, and only one secretary of state. And that with the best of intentions, an ex-president, no matter who it is, could really gum up public policy.

Secchia: You have to also remember that when Ford left the White House, Jimmy Carter was the bain of his existence, and that over the next several years they leaned on each other and made some “you help me, I’ll help you” kind of deals and they became good friends. So, even though, yes he would say that was wrong because there is only one secretary of state, he would also just, as Jerry Ford would, look the other way and worry about something else.

Smith: I shouldn’t express an opinion on this, but I thought that the worst part of the Mike Lloyd excerpts was very little context. They left out that long period when Carter and Ford, in fact, really were friends. He campaigned in ’80 against Carter, but after ’80 there was a quarter century when they became good friends, and had a lot of respect for each other. The wives, clearly, became very close – had a lot of shared interests, and the like.

That was all left out because that wasn’t headline material. I thought at the funeral, one of the images that will remain, was when I was standing up there – you’re in a fog – and you don’t really notice a lot of things, but I read
afterwards that Roselyn Carter was weeping in her pew. Who would have predicted that thirty years earlier? And what does that tell you about these people and the friendship that existed? Yet none of that found its way into the post ex-post facto reconstruction of those thirty years.

Secchia: It is a friendship that will endure. The Bo Schembechler empty seat and Roselyn Carter weeping – all the little things you saw, that you knew if you were close to him – they weren’t a surprise to me. I mean, that was just expected. It was vintage Jerry Ford.

Smith: Were you surprised at all by the reaction – the outpouring, not only here, but elsewhere?

Secchia: When I flew to Washington, I was just part of the turtles coming home. You gravitate to where that is going to be, but then to be invited on Air Force One to come home on Air Force One. I never left my seat – I watched the casket, I didn’t go to the window and look at Michigan stadium when the plane flew over. I was sitting there trying to think, (in that hour and a half) about “how we got where we are,” and “what would happen when we got home.” When we first hit Patterson Avenue, (we came out that back road and we went down Patterson Avenue) I saw people three and four deep, parking their cars up on the lawns of industrial buildings. Then we came to 28th Street and we turned right and they were four, five and six deep. I started to read the signs, “Welcome home, the gentleman from Grand Rapids,” “Thank you, Mr. Ford.” Boy Scouts saluting, veterans in their uniforms, and then we turned on the 296expressway and the traffic was stopped in both directions – it wasn’t supposed to be stopped on the eastbound lanes, but all cars stopped.

They had on the radio, and they had their kids – this is the middle, or first week of a Michigan January – they had their kids up on the roof of the car – they had cameras out – they were waving, and as the procession got closer to town the traffic and people were hanging off the overhead bridges, and the thicker the crowd got, the closer we were to downtown. We pulled up on Bridge Street to cross over to the Museum, and they were twenty people thick - including World War I veterans. This was not an organized crowd. I’ve turned out crowds for presidential visits and vice presidential visits –
candidates’ visits. I’ve got pictures of Reagan and me and Ford and the campaign in 1976 and 1980, and beyond. I’ve got all these pictures. We had to work the crowd. You get these people out, you’re in charge of that. You get the uniforms, you get the Scouts over here. We’d bring in bands to fill up space. We hung banners to keep the camera picture right. None of that was done – there was no organized effort. This all was spontaneous.

Closer to the Museum (where he was going to lie in state), the crowd was thicker and thicker and thicker. It got more quiet – it was respectful. The surprise wasn’t just the turnout, the surprise was the line to go by the casket. To walk that line as I did the next morning and saw Jack Lousma, our candidate for Senate in 1984, an astronaut who had resigned his Marine Corps to come home, and Jerry Ford endorsed. To see people – the Secretary of State (Michigan) – to see these people who waited in line for three, four and five hours, to proceed past the casket and pay their respects was just an unbelievable turnout.

As we drove into town in the car, I was thinking to myself, I’d ridden this path many times with him when nobody paid much attention and I just felt like DaVinci or Michelangelo. Like you’ve completed a piece of art – you wrote a symphony of your life that is now being applauded – the applause is deafening, and I hope you are looking down and you’re seeing this because this the way they are saying, “Thank you for what you did, what you stood for.”

I know the family was just unbelievably impressed by that crowd and the continued fervor into the next day, and then the procession to the church and the way back. I remember seeing a Scout standing outside in the cold in a short-sleeved shirt saluting. And then we went to the church and that was a long process – getting the casket out – the service. By riding by that same Scout and the same people still standing out there, saluting. It was just marvelous. Was I surprised? Yes. Was I grateful? Yes. Did I feel that he was out from under the joke of being the yokel, being the uncoordinated, being not the president people wanted? I think the whole world saw a whole new perspective on that.
Smith: Yeah. I was wearing two hats that week. The first part of the week I was with ABC, and I sensed the media, in particular, were astonished at the reaction and how it grew and grew and grew as the week went by. I think part of it was the timing – it was after the election and people desperately wanted to feel good about their government and Ford, as I said, was being introduced to a lot of people for the first time, and they were contrasting his qualities and the kind of politics that he practiced with the ugly and personal today. All of that. There is a little bit of misplaced nostalgia because people forgot, there was no era of good feelings in the 70s. Anyone who remembered Vietnam and Watergate and the stridency of that period, but the difference was that Ford never joined that. He never had an enemy, at least he didn’t think he had enemies. Again, the contrast – I think that’s part of – it was kind of Trumanesque phenomenon that was going on as the week unfolded, and there was some contrast with the grandeur, understandable, the elegance of the Reagan funeral, which was truly an occasion of state.

Secchia: I think we have to remember that if you were under the age of 45 in 2006 you had no recollection of Ford’s years. Maybe 50? If you were ten years old, do you pay any attention to Washington politics? So, forty years ago, fifty years ago, basically the kids who were coming by the casket and families were the older generation, sort of like taking my family back to my roots in Italy. When you are bringing people back to your roots, this is the kind of man that represented us. So half of America didn’t remember that. But they were taught it and I think the media was shocked that that happened. I have no question about it. The next day was just an awesome day. I don’t remember much of it because I was in a fog. I did a lot of crying. Did you already interview Leon Parma?

Smith: Yeah.

Secchia: They were in a car with me. It was the most disappointing moment I had the whole week. I was riding in the motorcade - Jack Nicklaus in the middle and Leon Parma on the outside. I was looking out the window. I saw these emotional signs and kids and people in wheelchairs and knew they had been waiting for hours. It was a clear day, but it was cold. Parma kept saying to
Nicklaus, “I remember in ’94 when you missed that putt on the 17th hole in
the…” and I’d say “Look at that sign – look at those people,” and I was losing
it. I thought, “This is amazing, it was just amazing.” And then Parma would
say, ( Jack was a polite guy, nice guy that he is) “You know, I remember you
and Fuzzy Thurston on that interview.” We were almost to downtown; the
people were hanging off the bridge rafters of the overpass. I shouted, “This is
absolutely amazing,” and Parma came up with another golf story. I turned to
the two of them and I said, “You know, we’re home to bury our friend. Would
you pay f---ing attention to what’s going on and stop talking about golf?” And
there was silence. I was so angry – not at Jack, but at Leon.

The next morning Jack Nicklaus came up to me and he said, “You know, I
found out why you were so concerned.” I thought, “Well, good for you.” He
said, “You don’t like golf.” “No, that isn’t it…I like the man we were here to
honor and I didn’t think the conversation was appropriate.” I’ll never see him
again, and I’ll never get to talk to him again, but I’m sure that kind of activity
went on throughout the week, and I’m sure you were in the media wagons and
you heard some conversations.

Smith: His health really remained pretty extraordinary up to his ninetieth birthday. It
seemed to me, because I wasn’t here then, that when he concluded or was no
doubt told, by his doctors, “You really can’t travel anymore.” That that was
like switching a switch – that part of his life was over – a part that he really
cherished. That was right about that time.

Secchia: I chaired his ninetieth birthday party, and, have you seen the photo where we
took with him with all the kids? We put together a committee. Others didn’t
want to do this, but I thought, we’ve got to do that because these kids, I think
we allowed eight years and under or ten years and under, these kids will never
meet a president, so let’s have a picture that’s a “forever picture.” We sold it
here at the museum, and thousands of kids and ten thousand people showed
up for that birthday party, and he was speaking very clearly. But, he was
eloquent. He was tired.

We had him in a golf cart, but he did a marvelous job. He and I spent a lot of
time together on that particular trip. We had a chance to reminisce about some
of the things that we had done together, or that he had done. He got a big kick out of the Cabinet Room that I had funded for the museum. I said, “I did that for you. I didn’t do that for any archivist or for anybody else. That’s for you because I was in that room with you and you told me what happened in that room.” (sometimes)

He was still pretty lucid, and I visited him shortly thereafter in Palm Springs and he was sitting in a chair, watching the University of Michigan game. It was basketball season and I had Governor John Engler with me because my company had a board meeting out there. The others (Directors) all went to play golf and we made arrangements to go over and pay our respects to President Ford.

Michigan was playing basketball that day on cable TV. We three sat in his office… and had a nice chat. I looked at my watch and I said, “Well, you know, if you’d spring a few bucks you ol’ tightwad, maybe you could watch the Michigan game on cable,” (you had to have special pay-per-view rights). He said, “Oh, I do.” I said, “Well then, why are we sitting here?” Well, he got up instantly and we took the path over to the house. He forgot his cane. Judy came running down the path and down the sidewalk after us. “Mr. President, Mr. President, you forgot your cane!” He was so intent on watching his Wolverines play that he forgot that he needed a cane (or his walker). We went quickly and Engler followed us, we went in the house (in that back door through that little narrow area where they had their personal goodies). We went inside and watched the game. He sat in his chair right in front of the screen. He knew every player, what they had done, what their record was. We sat there and watched that game, and he didn’t take any phone calls. He got to watch his Michigan Wolverines. After the game, we left and I said to Penny Circle, “I can’t believe he spent the money to get that extra package on cable TV.” She said, “He didn’t, somebody gave it to him.” We all know he didn’t change.

I know the last time I came to visit him, he was not going to the office much.

Smith: Do you know how close that was to the end?
Secchia: No, I don’t know.

Smith: Within the last year?

Secchia: I never admitted the end was coming. I could look it up and research it but, he got out of bed and came out and gave me a hug. Betty was in her robe – probably the hundred times I saw Betty over the years, she was in a robe 80 times – she loves being in a robe and a pair of slippers and just hanging out. She too came out and we chatted about a few things. You don’t measure it – you don’t want the end to ever come, so I never did that to the end. It was always, “Remember the time we did this, remember the time we did that?” We’d laugh about things. It was the way I wanted to remember him.

Smith: This may be speculative, but that ninetieth birthday, I think that’s the last time he was in Grand Rapids.

Secchia: See, I don’t even know that.

Smith: Yeah, I think that was the last time, and I wonder if he realized that that would probably be the last time that he’d be here.

Secchia: Richard, you’re the historian, I don’t know that. I don’t know that he didn’t come back again. He was ninety-two when he died, was he?

Smith: Ninety-three.

Secchia: He probably didn’t come back because – that was an outpouring – they ran thousands of people through the museum that day.

Smith: He was very proud of this place, wasn’t he?

Secchia: Yes and he was really proud that his friends made it happen, but it was not an easy thing for him and he said it was difficult. It was difficult for him. When Bush calls Kuwait and he gets a pile of money for his museum, or Clinton calls so and so. If we asked Ford to call somebody like a Max Fisher, we might get a hundred grand out of him, not a hundred million or not a fifty million. I would call Ford and say, “Hey, you know Max is getting old, you’d better call him because we’re soon going to lose him.” And we lost him. We
never got that big gift that Max said was going to come to the Gerald R. Ford Foundation. We had a lot of people like that, because Ford didn’t want to ask. And he didn’t have a right-hand man who was a fundraiser.

We can all go back and look at who raised the money for this guy and that guy. We didn’t have that. Carl Morgenstern was the first financial chairman for this, and then he went to Florida all winter and we didn’t have funding to pay the bills. So I took over and then I was asked to resign because we needed the Democrat legislature’s approval to fund the money to buy the land, and Tom Mattieu, a legislator at the time, went to one of the Ford brothers and said, “As long as Secchia’s name is on that committee we’re not going to appropriate the money.” So the brother came to me, and I said, “Well, I’ll be happy to resign.” So I resigned and then later I continued to raise the money.

Smith: Was there ever any doubt – I understood he was offered other building sites. There were parcels identified on the outskirts of town?

Secchia: Yeah. Out there by the East Beltline and there were other community leaders who wouldn’t accept that. I think Mary Ann Keeler was one of the people who insisted it be downtown. Mostly wanted it to be downtown. I don’t think there was any real movement – there was some consideration, either Fred Meijer or somebody had the land. I’m not so sure Fred knew him that well early in the years, because Fred was trying very hard to not be partisan, not to be involved with anyone personally.

Smith: Was it seen, in fact, as a catalyst for downtown revitalization?

Secchia: It was one of the keys. The Celebration on the Grand was started year we opened the museum, and I was its first chairman. We had a salmon fishing contest, a bike ride, fireworks, the opening of the museum, the opening of the art museum, and the opening of the DeVos Performance Hall, and we had all that thrown together. We dedicated the hotel. So we put all that into a package and we called it “Celebration on the Grand,” and we just had our twenty-seventh or twenty-eighth Celebration on the Grand. Well, the salmon contest is gone, the bike race has been moved to a different time of year, and we try to celebrate ourselves. The museum, the hotel, and the art museum were the
catalysts, because we ended up – we really dedicated the DeVos Performance
Hall the year before.

Smith: He must have been impressed when he would come back in the later years,
and see what had happened downtown.

Secchia: Oh, he was enamored with that. It was his parade – in 1976 we scheduled a
parade – the one that the guy who wrote the book, “Say It After I’m Dead.”

Smith: Tom DeFrank.

Secchia: Tom DeFrank. When Tom DeFrank came here he referred to the fact that he
has a press badge that Jerry called himself Jerry when he was president. Well,
this was an event I put on, and I called it Jerry’s Hometown Downtown
Celebration. All the press credentials said, “Jerry’s Hometown Downtown” or
“Jerry’s Hometown Downtown Celebration” and Tom DeFrank made a big
ing about how GRF was this humble guy. I’ll never forget the event. We
held it at the Calder Plaza, and he was vice president at the time.

Then in ’76 his staff wanted me to host a parade. He came home to vote the
night before, and they refused to allow me to have the parade because there
were so many empty buildings between the Pantlind and Jefferson Ave and
they didn’t have enough police to man the empty space. Of course, this is only
thirteen years after Kennedy’s assassination in Dallas, and so empty second
and third story buildings were a big fear of the Secret Service. It took a lot of
negotiations and I found off-duty policemen and off-duty retired to wear their
uniforms and pack their, if they were allowed to carry, heat. They took all the
positions and I was able to go back to the Secret Service and we did it. Then
we got a call that night from Bob Teeter and he wanted to cancel the parade.

He said, “If we go back to Ohio, we can win Ohio.” Betty got on the phone –
(they were in Air Force One) – she said, “Peter, we’re coming home. Jerry’s
tired. There’s no voice left.” I had a broken leg at the time and I was in a golf
cart, and I had forty-some bands and I had a big parade – thousands of people
to welcome them home that night. After that night I had a meeting with the
leadership in the community about how we had to do something about all
these empty buildings and how we almost lost this Presidential homecoming
and it was a blight on our downtown and they all said, you’re right, and they all committed, and that’s why we have a lot of the buildings today with the Van Andel Museum, the Meijers Heart Center and all the buildings along downtown that have names of philanthropy.

Grand Rapids, in that thirty years, from ’76, the night of the parade, until 2006, became designated the number two philanthropic city in America, because the families all gave money for all this redevelopment. Jerry Ford always saw this as important to his legacy and it was, because little did he know that his downtown procession would be through those same streets.

Smith: It’s ironic, you can bracket the story between two parades, one that almost never was and then the ultimate homecoming and it’s a very different city.

Secchia: That’s right, and that was those thirty years of great development and progression, including this museum and AD, which was four years later. Then what happened the fall of his funeral, I got a call from John Wheeler, who was my partner. He and I had done forty some buildings, cleaned them up, took out pigeon poop by the wheelbarrow load, and did everything we could do to hang awnings, and plant flowers. The town itself had the Downtown Development Authority and the Downtown Alliance, and we have people who sweep the streets. Marvin Hamlisch came here and said, “How do you keep your city so clean and so happy?” I said, “Well, we work at it.” Everybody was part of this, so when he came back home and the procession went up those same streets, right up the hill of Fulton Street, it went right down the same streets that were empty – I hadn’t thought about that before – that all because…and there it was.

Smith: Let me sort of wrap up with a couple of things. Tell us something that might surprise people about Ford.

Secchia: I think he was an administrative genius. He always struck me as the kind of guy you could take all the papers of different issues that were pertinent and as they floated to the ground, he’d be able to pick out the two or three that needed to be decided first. That, combined with the fact that he was probably the most athletic president we ever had. I would say that if we could ever
convince America that he was an administrative genius, and the most athletic, they would have hard time believing that because they read the media reports and I always felt badly for him that he was perceived that way. I think everybody now knows that he was a good bipartisan, working gentlemen who could disagree without being disagreeable, but they probably will never know that he was the most athletic and administrative – I can see him dozens of times, just sitting back and sucking on his pipe and picking out those issues that had to be dealt with – and he dealt with them. He made decisions and he surrounded himself with people who fed him those papers.

Smith: Talk about a good life – here is someone, I think I may have mentioned – poor Lyndon Johnson, who literally died the day before a peace agreement was announced in Vietnam, and who during that very short period of his ex-presidency, was virtually a recluse. Driven into exile. Ford, who had a very different temperament anyway, but nevertheless lived long enough to have the satisfaction of knowing that most people had come around to hold a very different view – not only of the pardon – but I think in a broader sense of his presidency.

Secchia: I think he was who he was, and it never bothered him other than the Profiles in Courage turnaround of that issue, but he was always comfortable with himself. He was one of those kind of guys that had the skin that he knew what he lived in, and people read about those kind of people today as unique. He was always comfortable in his own skin.

Smith: Comfortable with having big egos around him – comfortable with the debates that would result from all of that.

Secchia: And comfortable with having a Kennerly or Secchia who could pop in and tell him he was full of bologna, and, naw, you shouldn’t do this, and give us the comfort of knowing that he was still our friend. David and I have had many conversations about how we were unique in living through that period. David did it every day. I didn’t do it every day. Another thing about Ford that people won’t know is, Jimmy Carter’s big claim – the big success of his presidency was the Camp David Accords. I can remember Jerry Ford telling me in the fall of ’76 that everything was in play to create the Camp David Accords. And
that he thought it would be best if we postponed the meeting so that the next
president could host it. He made that decision in the summer and postponed it
to the winter/spring of the next year. When Sadat came here I was having
breakfast with Ford at a small meeting of people over here in the Black and
Silver Room that no longer exists in the George Welsh Civic Auditorium, and
the phone rang and one of his staff said, “Mr. President, this phone call, you
should take.” He said to me, “Sadat. Come on with me.”

So I went with him and we went in the back room and of course I only heard
his end of the conversation. Then later he told me that Sadat was calling him
from the airport – that they just concluded the meetings and that he wanted
President Ford to know that he was very thankful for all the work that Ford
had done getting it ready and making it happen. Jerry Ford, I heard him on his
conversation saying that he was very happy that “Anwar, you’re a great man
and you’ve done this.” I remember afterwards reading about how Jimmy
Carter’s great claim to fame was that particular event. Never once did I ever
hear Jerry Ford say, “I set it up, I did all the work, I yielded to it in the fall of
’76 to postpone it for the next president.” Never a word.

So that falls in the category of coordinated athlete, administrative genius, and
visionary – whether it’s Vladivostok and the basket, that he wanted approval
or the Anwar Sadat meeting, who he loved dearly, by the way. He felt that
Sadat was one of the world’s great leaders. And when he was invited to go
over to the funeral, that was a tough trip for him because that was certainly
one of his closer friends and allies.

Smith: That’s a perfect note on which to end.
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Smith: We talked yesterday with Bill Gill and got some great stories, some of them understandably embargoed probably during the president’s lifetime. He talked about this little - he didn’t use the phrase “kitchen cabinet” - but this little advisory group of four people who met with him from time to time, particularly during the vice presidency. When he would come back here they’d meet at some coffee shop. Two of them are gone which means two of them are still around. One of them is a Republican leader of some sort whom he didn’t identify, and himself. Are you the fourth? (Could be Walt Russell?)

Secchia: I have no idea. One of Jerry Ford’s unique talents was to meet with little groups of people and each one of them thought they were the only group, you’ll find as you get through all these interviews. Well, “there was one special group and I was part of that.”

Smith: It’s interesting, though, ego aside, he walked us through the conversation in a way that sounded pretty credible. These folks - this was about two months before Nixon quit - basically, they were beating up on Ford. They were pressing him to put more distance between himself and the White House.

Secchia: Local people?

Smith: Yes. And he was in, I don’t think it’s too strong to say, some degree of anguish, caught between his loyalty and what might be in his own, and for that matter, the country’s interest. Clearly, this conversation took for granted that the time was coming when he would be in the Oval Office, which is why, according to Bill, it was off the record, at least during his lifetime. But at one point he quoted Ford as saying, almost his head in his hands, “But, you don’t understand. No one else is defending this guy.” And their sort of collective response was, “That’s admirable as a human trait, a personal trait, but you’ve got to look beyond that at this point. You have larger obligations.” Does that sound credible to you?
I suspect he was getting that advice from other sources as well.

Secchia: Let’s work our way back to 1974. I don’t think there were four people in Kent County who understood what was going on in Washington outside of Jerry Ford. So I would doubt that he would put much stock into what four locals had to say about this issue. When the pardon was given, I believe it was on a Sunday night. If I’ve done this interview before, stop me.

He was in Pittsburgh on Monday and the wheels came off the cart, the protestors at the White House, the loud crescendo of boos and harassment just came up out of nowhere from a White House entry honeymoon that had gone fairly well up to that point. Jerry terHorst action totally surprised him. I received a call on that Monday from, I can’t remember who, maybe it was Nell Yates, (his private Oval Office secretary – or Terry ODonnell his scheduler) I don’t remember who it was. They said, “President’s coming back tomorrow,” which would’ve been Tuesday, “after he overnights in Pittsburgh and he wanted to know if you’d come by for dinner on Tuesday.”

So I went to D.C. for dinner that night. He would usually come upstairs for dinner at 7:00, 7:30, sometimes 8:00, but very seldom later than that. And that night it was almost 9:00 and he hadn’t come up yet. He was busy reacting to all of the pressure that he was receiving. When he came up, he pressed the little button on his chair and asked for his martini. That was the only time I ever heard him use the f-word. But he said to me, “Nixon had really f’ed up the pea patch and it had to be done.” And I recall just saying, “Why am I in this conversation, it’s above my pay grade?”

And so I (regretfully today) shut him down to end this high level tone and said, “Why don’t we talk about something else?” And he said, “This will probably cost me the ’76 election.” (The first time I had heard him mention’76.) And I tended to sort of agree with this, but you have to remember at this point in time, I was not a Republican “Leader.” A lot of people think I was born that way, but I was not involved in active party politics in ‘75. I was helping Jerry Ford and some like-minded candidates in a very minor way. I was a young, I mean, I still dressed the same as I am, i.e.,
in jeans and a plaid shirt. I was just hanging out at the White House helping him and didn’t deserve to be there, but he kept inviting me.

That night Betty wasn’t feeling well. She was in bed with her neck propped up and her brace on. We talked a little bit, but she wanted to rest and read. So I went out to wait in their sitting area. When the President came upstairs, he picked up the papers and the first thing he did was go to the editorial which was his way of devouring a newspaper. He’d open up the paper and look at the letters to the editor in Grand Rapids, but when he was in Washington, he’d open up the *Washington Post* or *New York Times* and take a peek at the editorial.

This day they were brutally attacking his “pardon” decision and that just made the night go deeper and deeper into the darkness of despair, kind of, “What did I do?” and “Why did I do it?”

But his mind was made up. There was no question in his mind that he *did the right thing* then. I watched him receive the Congressional Medal of Honor. And the Kennedy Profiles in Courage Award. The pride was abundantly clear.

Smith: The Kennedy Profiles in Courage award?

Secchia: Both, the one from Congress and the “Profiles” award.

Smith: The Congressional Gold Medal.

Secchia: The Congressional Gold Medal. I watched him when he received that and I think that happened after the Kennedy. But he reflected on the fact that “finally I am proven right.” It was like a weight was lifted off his shoulders. I don’t remember him ever mentioning this when I was home. Now I’d ask Jack, remember Jack Stiles, jack was his closest friend that he took to Washington?

Smith: Jack Stiles? Who was Jack Stiles first of all?

Secchia: Jack Stiles, Jerry Ford respected early in his career because Jack got things done for him. It was a funny relationship. (It was sort of the kind of the
relationship I had with him.) He depended on me to get things done for him and I think Jack had filled that void for him in his early congressional years.

Smith: But who was Jack Stiles? Where did he come from?

Secchia: He was a local man. Nobody really knew much about him. The night he died, he was supposed to have dinner with me. He had called me at 4 pm...to say he had arranged a lady friend to meet with him and he went to Grand Haven. On his way home he rolled his car. They found his car the next morning in a ditch in the creek off West River Drive. Jack lived a fast life and was a small problem for the president in Washington. During this negotiation was the Midnight Massacre. All of these things happened fast. I believe President Ford was trying very hard to keep Jack out of the spotlight because there were some strange feelings about him, whether it be here or there. But I had dinner with Jack several times and I have a picture of us having a dinner on Ford’s first trip home at the old Harley Inn. The hotel’s not even there anymore, but I have a picture of that dinner, just the four of us. But I don’t remember anything about Bill Gill’s four-person group, but knowing Jerry Ford, I don’t doubt it.

Smith: One thing Bill said…

Secchia: This is Bill Gill the television guy?

Smith: Yeah. He didn’t say it, critically, he said it almost matter of factly, he said, “Jerry Ford was not without guile.” Now, that obviously runs counter to the popular impression. I don’t take it as criticism. I mean, anyone who wants to be Speaker of the House has more than simply ambition.

Secchia: Well, you know what, there’s good ambition and there’s bad ambition.

Smith: Well, sure. Sure.

Secchia: Jerry Ford wanted to be Speaker of the House because he believed that was the ultimate position for someone who had dedicated many years to legislative reasoning. He’d studied the budget, he understood the administrative procedures of the House. He was like John Engler as our governor. He understood the insides facts and workings of the government.
Smith: Let me ask you about Jack Stiles. As I may have said earlier, Nelson Rockefeller didn’t age well. There was a streak of, it’s not too much to say, of paranoia. As vice president he saw enemies, and he had convinced himself that Rumsfeld was his ultimate enemy.

Secchia: Rockefeller?

Smith: Yeah, but he had literally also convinced himself that Jack Stiles’ death was no accident.

Secchia: Did he?

Smith: Yeah, he believed that the president was surrounded by people who didn’t want him to get reelected in 1976, and that somehow Stiles’ death factored into - that they started the campaign very late and so forth and so on.

Secchia: If they did a sperm check on Jack’s body, they would have found he was short a few gallons. No one knew at 4 p.m. that evening where he was going. I mean, he was out drinking and rendezvousing. I wouldn’t refute that. But the campaign started late because President Ford had wanted to wait, to no get into the primaries…However, the next day after he received the Kansas City nomination we all met in Vail with Stu Spencer, Cheney and Baker (5-6 of us) to plan the campaign.

Smith: So, he had a local reputation?

Secchia: I don’t know if he had a big reputation because you have to remember that these men were 25 years older than me so I didn’t know about their younger days, (their prowling days). I just knew Jack was a loyal friend of President Ford’s from years gone by.

Smith: What was his professional background?

Secchia: I’m sorry…I forgot.

Smith: But it’s interesting that the president had him for such a close friend and in effect as a political ally given the vulnerabilities that went along with that.
Secchia: And I think those vulnerabilities really approached this risky status when Jerry Ford’s role became more important. When Jerry Ford was a congressman and later, the Minority Leader, nobody really paid attention to who he hung around with, or who he had dinner with when he came back to town. I can remember taking Jerry Ford to an old hotel in D.C. where the piano player (Mark Russell), used to play. It’s the old Shoreham Hotel, right on the river by the parkway, off of Connecticut Ave. a couple blocks. It’s where Mark Russell used to play in the early ‘70s.

Jerry and I went in there and we had dinner and a few drinks. We were talking and I was proud of my relationship with Jerry. I went over to Mark Russell and said, “Do you realize the Minority Leader of the U.S. Congress is in this room?” Russell played all this political satire and he looked at me like, “No, which one is he?” And I had to point out “The Minority Leader.” Now, if Mark Russell, who is a 24/7 full-time political satirist and humorist and musician, didn’t know who the Minority Leader was, then who was paying any attention to who he was having dinner with, me or Jack Stiles. It just didn’t matter to most.

Rockefeller had this paranoia and he was also involved in a lot of intelligence operations that I wasn’t involved in. I would challenge his thinking. I think Jack was just a party boy whose time had come. Great guy, fun to be with, and maybe drank a little too much, but he didn’t talk a lot and he was loyal to Ford and that was important to Jerry Ford. Now, with your experience you know more about Jerry Ford than anybody and you’ll find that more than half of us think they were Jerry Ford’s best friend.

Smith: That passes for guile. I mean, beyond individual ego, there are successful politicians - all have the ability to make individuals think that they have a unique place in their lives.

Secchia: The good ones.

Smith: The good ones, absolutely.

Secchia: And I don’t think Jerry Ford could be called a manipulator as I would say John Edwards was, or some other people who had issues to hide, but it’s hard
to get a good interview out of people like me because I love the guy like a big brother. Do not want to hurt his legacy.

Smith: Tell me how broad a range of friends he had.

Secchia: Well, you could start with Jack Stiles. I think one of the questions you’ll find in Maury DeJonge’s interview that was never shared was one of the questions was, “My editors can’t quite understand it, why do you consider Pete Secchia as one of your closest friends?” And that’s right in the interview.

Smith: Really?

Secchia: Uh-huh. I have a copy of the interview because Maury told me 30 years ago that he would give me a copy some day. He gave me one a few months ago. I don’t know where it is, I think I have it at the office, but you’ll get it eventually. It was because he had this broad range of friends that he knew where to go for answers. Jerry Ford was the consummate politician in the sense that he wasn’t being partisan political, but he knew how to work the halls of Congress. And if the lobby system worked as it did when Jerry Ford was in Congress from late 40s to the 70s, when you needed to know something about airplanes or military aircraft or civilian aircraft, you had to call somebody who knew that product or industry. Someone who could find the answers for you, so you could make a better decision.

So that was Jerry Ford’s way of operating. He could call somebody or ask or tell somebody to get the answer from a person, but he liked to do that himself. He loved to talk to you about what you do and why you do it. So he had different friends from different sectors. I know that Bob Sheiffer (CBS) and Jones and some of those TV guys were his contacts. I remember when GRF hired Ron Nessen and he thought it was sort of neat that he was able to get this national press man to come and be his press secretary. He was a bit naïve in some ways. He was enraptured by certain musicians or entertainers, but we all are. Wouldn’t you love it if Abraham Lincoln was resurrected and came walking in the room? You’d want to run up and ask him a dozen questions before he disappeared again.
Smith: How much of that was the Eagle Scout in Ford and how much of that was Grand Rapids?

Secchia: I think there’s a lot that has the same values. I don’t think there’s a big difference between Eagle Scouting and the culture of Grand Rapids. There are people who will see us as country bumpkin-ish and there are others who think that our sartorial splendiferousness is lacking. The fact is, that we’re Midwesterners. Scouting teaches kids to have goals, earn them, wear a badge. Always Jerry Ford wore that badge of honor when he was in the legislature. He was our congressman. He defeated an isolationist. He had his points.

Smith: It’s interesting. We spent two fascinating hours yesterday with Dorothy Dowton and it was interesting because she volunteered what others have sort of grudgingly yielded up, which was the extent to which, even when they were in the vice presidency, the Nixon people didn’t want them around, looked down on them, saw them as Grand Rapids. Now, some of that you can understand, some of it’s unavoidable given their roles, but some of it’s cultural condescension. He obviously had to be aware of it.

Secchia: Oh, he was aware of it. He was well aware of it. When he brought Bill Seidman in to the vice president’s office and Phil Buchen who was his attorney, these were people he knew he could depend on and that’s who he wanted around him. If you look at the Nixon White House and you have the California boys and the fast movers, fast talkers, somewhat shifty manipulators and then you bring in Bill Seidman and Phil Buchen and Jack Stiles and Pete Secchia, it was…“Who are those guys?”

Smith: I want to talk about Phil Buchen. One of the things that Bill Gill said yesterday was that part of the burden, Phil Buchen talked to Duncan Littlefair and they both communicated to the President their views on the advisability of a pardon. And I don’t know Duncan Littlefair except from a distance by reputation. But I would have thought that he was a political liberal who would not necessarily look favorably upon a Nixon pardon. Bill insisted that in this particular case, he did and he communicated those views through Buchen and apparently directly himself to Ford. Does that sound credible?
Secchia: I can’t challenge it nor can I confirm it. Was Buchen in agreement with Littlefair?

Smith: Yes.

Secchia: There’s been so many years gone by…

Smith: You know, it sounds basic, but it’s basic for a reason. Tell us about Phil Buchen.

Secchia: Well, Phil’s relationship with Ford had gone back to the pre-congressional days. Jerry Ford always felt that they had an honorable legal partnership and a good personal relationship. Therefore, when Jerry moved out of the legal business, when he needed legal help, he went right back to where he would’ve been nurtured as an early member of the bar. So they had a quiet but strong relationship. Phil was, I think, wanting to be a little more involved in the exciting side of Washington. But because of Phil’s physical condition, and his health deteriorating quite rapidly towards the final years there, I just think they were very happy to come back and draw down from the deals or D.C.

I can’t say specific incidents I might be reminded of, but when someone, you see it now, too, because you’ve been through several of them, but if someone goes from being your newspaper editor in Grand Rapids, to being a congressman, to being speaker, to being president, or they make their way up any ladder of success, you expect changes and sometimes you don’t get changes. Everybody expected changes. But those who knew the man (or his bride) know there were few changes except the fact that there were more demands on time, more demands on their ability to attend events, more babies to kiss, more funerals to attend. So a lot of people change because their life clock starts ticking faster.

I knew a lot of these people back when we were all nothing. I mean, I’m still a country bumpkin and I’m proud of it. I don’t even like to go to Washington, never did like to go to Washington (even when GRF was president). G.H.W. Bush asked me to be in his administration, I said no. I mean, that’s how I ended up being ambassador to Italy. I didn’t want to go to Washington.
Smith: Did Ford change?

Secchia: No. Where he did change, he changed for the better. He learned, he became more understanding and expansive on issues that I would never claim to understand. I don’t know if I told you this story about, Golda Meir - do you remember reading this one?

I was upstairs with Ford one night in the residence and he said to me, “Peter, what do you think about Golda Meir coming to visit?” It had been in the press that she was going to ask for - in today’s standards it’s probably minor – “million in aid.” And he said, “What do you think?” I said, naively, “Well, you know, we have inflation, we have a big deficit, people don’t like it when the government keeps giving away money to other governments. Maybe you ought not do it.” He said, “Well, that’s specifically why she’s coming.” And he says, “But that’s what you think?”

A few minutes later, a buzzer goes off, I don’t know whether it was in the chair or if the steward came out of the kitchen, but the call comes through and he says, “It’s Henry Kissinger. He’s in Tel Aviv and he’s about to get on the plane with the prime minister.” Then President Ford picks up the phone and says, “Henry, I’ve been talking to Pete and I don’t think we’re going to do it.” And I’m sitting there with this vision that the Mossad is listening in and I’m going to find out that there’s somebody in my hotel room when I get back to the Madison Hotel. I don’t know what I’m talking about, I was just making conversation. But after you get into it, you find out that he’d talked to a dozen other people who’d had similar advice.

Smith: So it wasn’t the fact of doing what the last person who’d advised him to do?

Secchia: No, and he got that bad rap. I don’t think that was the way it was. It was just that he had a great memory. I used to describe him as an administrative genius because everybody thought he was an administrative dum-dum and that he didn’t know the issues. But, this is a guy you can take a whole bunch of papers on different issues, throw them up in the air, and as they float to the ground, he’ll pull the one out of the pack that needs attention. And then he’ll know who to call to ask their thoughts and maybe he won’t agree with you,
he’ll just ask your thoughts. And you might think, “Well, I just talked to him and I told him this and that’s what he did.” That’s bullshit. He’d talked to dozens of other people.

Smith: Over time, all those years in Congress…clearly people evolve. They learn. They grow, presumably, the more they’re exposed to what's unfamiliar. His conservatism: Did that change?

Secchia: I think it diminished. When he first was in Congress, I didn’t know him. I didn’t meet him until later in the 60s, but I don’t think he would’ve ever supported the ERA and some of the issues that Betty was strongly in favor of if he still lived in Grand Rapids. He still talked to all the people here that he talked to back then. I think his conservatism diminished on some of these social issues. I believe if today he was making a decision on civil unions or same sex benefits, he would’ve been a pioneer on that. Too, I think that he’s probably similar to the current governor of Utah on how he would’ve viewed those issues.

Smith: I realize this is speculative, but how much influence did Mrs. Ford have on those kinds of issues? How much was simply being exposed to a broader range of opinion and reality, living longer, which has a way of playing havoc with ideology. Because he did seem to become in some ways more liberal, for lack of a better word, with age.

Secchia: Well, I think America has become more liberal and I think he was a strong barometer of the public sense. So as he became more entrenched and more familiar with the issues facing the country and the world, I mean, I doubt he’d put up with the Republican Party that we have today.

Smith: Could he get nominated in this district today? If he were running for the first time, if he wasn’t the Jerry Ford of legend, would his kind of conservative - if you want to call it that.

Secchia: Well, his kind of conservatism probably doesn’t exist today. There are still conservatives here, but it’s like engineering and computer work. Everything is now for niche markets and what used to be conservatism was everybody who was over here who might agree with the majority of these ten issues.
Today you have fiscal conservatives, social conservatives, religious conservatives, it won’t be the same. If he was running today as the attractive candidate that he was, you have to remember, in this district, the election is the primary, the Republican primary. So if you were able to get the Republican primary vote…

Smith: That’s the question. In today’s Republican Party, would he win a primary?

Secchia: I think so, but I wouldn’t know enough about 1948’s comparison. He ran against Jonkman who obviously was out of step. There again it is Jerry Ford the barometer, he read that shift before anybody else read that and he wasn’t supposed to win. At least those who were entrenched in the leadership here thought that he didn’t have much of a chance.

Smith: Describe then, if you could kind of encapsulate, when you really began to know him…give us a sense of the political culture, in this town and then maybe the broader culture. We’re trying to trace, among other things, impact of the Christian Reformed Church upon the broader culture of West Michigan. But also, invariably, spilling over into the political culture. Clearly it has evolved, but where was it when you first really begin to know Ford? How much of it did he have to take into account? How much of it found reflection in his voting record?

Secchia: When I first got to know Ford, I was afraid he wouldn’t get reelected. That’s how I came to know him. I had met him at a few events and told him I thought we ought to talk. I reminded him that when he was home, he was only seeing people his own age and nobody was developing any contacts with the 30+ year old set which was the decade of people in their 30s that I knew. He was listening to that and said, “You know, I hadn’t thought about that.” I watched him make some adjustments in his campaigning, but I think that you have to understand that as he has changed and his personality has changed, and Grand Rapids has changed, but you still have the same old problem.

Grand Rapids is a Democrat city; it is not a Republican city. It has been voting Democrat in most elections for many years. But it was a part of the 5th District then, (the 3rd Congressional District now), and it is part of Kent
County which is Republican. We have had as many as a 18 to 3 majority on the county commission. When Jerry ran for office, it was about 17 to 4 and now there’s only 19 commissioners because they’ve changed the structure. The county is still a Republican county, but it’s an entrepreneurial region. And there’s an inherent respect, I mean, there is a story in today’s Grand Rapids Press where I’m quoted as saying, “You’ve got 300 greedy bastards in New York who give a bad name to the CEOs of America and in West Michigan, I don’t know a West Michigan CEO who would fall into the category they are criticizing on Wall Street.” (2008)

That’s a point of pride we’ve always had here. I think Jerry Ford had an admiration for the Sandy Weill’s and the local corporate leaders because he wasn’t one and he always had respect for successful business people. He thought that success was an admirable quality and I think he had the same respect for the competent legislator who did his homework, was prepared, didn’t only come to a hearing because there were television cameras, but came to make comments on certain provisions in the legislation.

Smith: You have to believe that those values were implanted early.

Secchia: Yes, and you see them with the young Scouts who were lined up at his funeral procession. You see their pride. I was at the recent scout fundraiser and that hasn’t changed. So, you know, you hear that derogatory comment every once in awhile that “They’re nothing but a bunch of Boy Scouts,” and it’s sort of like it has become a negative because there are those who don’t want to see the values of that. It’s like a child holding hands with a parent. When I grew up, that wasn’t very macho. And I can remember when National Geographic came to Grand Rapids back in Ford’s early days as President (1974-75) and they wanted to know “why Grand Rapids was different.” They talked to a lot of people, but one of the quotes they had in the article, I remember (it was from me) and I said, “Well, I’m in the restaurant business and it’s not unusual here to see a teenage boy come here holding hands with his mother and nobody laughs at them. They respect that parent-child relationship.” And Ford having had the early problems in his childhood watched and admired everybody else who had a business and principles like his stepfather - a good
businessman, a proud businessman, an honest businessman - that was very important to Jerry Ford.

Smith: Do you think, again it’s speculative, maybe he talked about it, maybe he didn’t, I heard a little about it from time to time, but do you think that the circumstances of his early days gave him a particular empathy with not only broken families, but some other… I mean, you’re looking for this counterintuitive, fiscally conservative as orthodox as they get, he was tight, fiscally.

Secchia: Personally… Also…” tight fiscally.”

Smith: Do you have any stories to illustrate that?

Secchia: Well, I mean, I would kid him that he was “tighter than a second coat of paint.” I used to kid him, but I’ll tell you one funny story. We were out in California for a board meeting and I took Governor Engler by to say hello to then 90 year old Jerry Ford. We met President Ford in the office and we were sitting there chatting. It was getting dark. And when people get elderly they start to keep the lights down in their office, and there’s piles of crap and newspapers everywhere, and stacks of things, letters to sign, and autographs to sign. I realized that University of Michigan was playing basketball at that time, and I knew he never had the specialized signal cable because back then you had to pay extra to get these basketball games. I knew he wouldn’t pay for that. And I said, “You know, too bad you don’t have…” He said, “Oh, I do! I do!” He said, “Well, let’s go.”

So he got up so fast he forgot his cane and he started to head for the door. Well, Judy at the time was working and Penny Circle or someone came running out, “Mr. President! Mr. President, you forgot your cane!” She gives him the cane. We get to the house, he’s got the TV and this special hook-up and I said, “Jerry, I can’t believe you pay for this.” He just smiled at me.

He loved his University of Michigan sports. He knew the players name, who could dribble, drive, _________ a perimeter shoot. Well, later on, we say goodbye, we’re going through his office and I said to Penny, “I can’t believe he bought that.” She says, “He didn’t. Somebody gave it to him.”
Smith: How much did he talk about money? I mean, he took some hits for particularly the early days of his ex-presidency. We’ve had occasion now to talk to a number of people who were on boards with him, and it was very clear he took it very seriously and he never just lent his name to something. But nevertheless, he was going to come home because he had no money and he was going to practice law and was going to make a little bit of money for his family. Was he proud of his success?

Secchia: On his board service?

Smith: Yeah, and just as someone economically successful?

Secchia: I think he was dedicated to being a good board member, just as he was dedicated to being a good Scout, a good lawyer, or a good legislator. He studied for meetings and he told me a few times about the trip out east would give him a few hours and a plane where he could read, but he was said to be an excellent board member. I heard that from several people.

Smith: Do you think he was sensitive to the criticism on public speaking?

Secchia: No.

Smith: No?

Secchia: I tried to get him to be more sensitive to this criticism because of what he did. He just evolved into a “Well, if you want to pay me 50 grand, fine, but put 25 in the Ford Foundation,” and then, “Do this and this.” This minimizes the actual fees reported, but, you know, he was only out of office four years and, I guess it was eight years before anybody started selling their time for big money. Let’s see, Carter lost after four years to Reagan, so it was twelve years then, because, you know, the big dollars weren’t made until Reagan and Clinton and Bush ‘41.

Smith: But you know Ford took heat for being the first.

Secchia: Yes, he did, but I don’t think he was sensitive to it. I don’t think he did much of it then. It didn’t take a lot of money for Jerry Ford to feel wealthy. I mean, he’d never had any wealth at all.
Smith: Do you have any idea what Jerry Ford was worth when he died?

Secchia: Nope, and he wouldn’t talk about it.

Smith: He wouldn’t.

Secchia: He had a chunk of stock from Sandy Weil, the early Traveler’s Insurance, the early parts of CitiCorp Building that empire was exciting to him. I mean, today he’d be mortified at the CitiCorp fiasco, but he was a good board member, dedicated to that group. He had “Founders Stock.” I mean, he referred to it as “Founders Stock.” I don’t know what founders stock is other than maybe back in the 70s you were able to give a certain class of stock to people that could be converted or split or had special dividends, I don’t know.

Smith: What would be a luxury to Jerry Ford?

Secchia: Watching his University of Michigan football team or basketball team or visiting the campus and talking to the players. That would be a luxury. Private jets, I don’t think so much.

Smith: It is astonishing and it became a matter of discussion internally that, at least as long as I was here, I was appalled that he was flying commercially and subsequently Rich said of course he could use their plane.

Secchia: I helped put that deal together.

Smith: I wish it had been done earlier, but he kept up.

Secchia: But you know how this came about? Rich said to me, “You know I’ll always be happy to send a jet to pick him up.” But I hated to ask Richard because somebody else might’ve asked him last week. He said, “Anytime he wants to go anywhere, I will have a plane there.” I said, “You mean, anytime, anywhere?” He said, “Yep.” I went to the president with it, and he still didn’t use it very much.

Smith: That’s fascinating. Tell me about the relationship between the president and Rich DeVos. Was it any different between Rich DeVos and Van Andel? Was it closer to Rich? What’s your reading?
Secchia: I think when they were both alive, it was similar. There was a mutual respect. Jerry had that consistent admiration of successful business people who did it the right way. Jay’s been gone for awhile now, so the DeVos side is certainly closer, but when Jay was still alive and active in the business Jay and Rich were both friends and conservatives GRF admired, but not close friends. Jerry was still wrapped up in Washington. The early friends, the Jack Stiles days, were the old-fashioned “congressional hometown politics begins at home” crowd.

Smith: Is there anyone left from those days?

Secchia: Maury DeJonge or John Malinowski. You know the family, the guy that was his chief of staff who ended up a judge. I just read a book written by one of the Malinowski family members (about the family) and I forget some the names now, but he had run his office here in town…By the way, I think Bill Gill got fired from his TV station… he lost his job, let’s just say that was for fabrications and self delusions, I think.

Smith: Tell me about the kids. What was your relationship? Maybe it’s a large subject, but what was your role?

Secchia: My role was whatever he wanted it to be. You know, one time he called me up and asked me to come out and talk to Steve. “What for?” He says, “Well, I can’t afford to send him to Duke and that’s where he wants to go.” Or University of Virginia or some expensive school.

Smith: Now, this was when he was in Congress?

Smith: He was vice president because I think the day I arrived, he flew out on Air Force Two. It was then a prop Conair.

Smith: With all due respect, why would he have you talk to Steve?

Secchia: He had a hard time talking to his kids about tough issues and money issues, I think for the same reason he admired people who had done well in business. He was a bit embarrassed that he hadn’t done well. This is just my own personal judgment.
Smith: Yeah, makes perfect sense.

Secchia: It was nice to have someone else who had done well in business to come talk to Steven. He had arranged for Steve to work at a dude ranch, (Brown’s?), out in Utah somewhere. And that’s how Steve ended riding horses and now he’s still raising them and he was breeding them for awhile, so that was one. I also remember the 1976 bicentennial dinner, my job was to watch Jack, make sure he didn’t get into trouble. That evening I had to talk to him. But they were just kids. You know, Susan was dancing with some people she shouldn’t be dancing with. He wanted me to talk about that. I don’t think he had a close relationship with his kids in the early days. I don’t think they paid much attention to anything he did and he didn’t pay that much attention to things they did.

Smith: Was part of that just because he was away physically a lot?

Secchia: I think he was just dedicated to doing what he did.

Smith: Wrapped up in his work.

Secchia: And, we’re all guilty of that. I went through my younger days of my children and I was busy building my business and just hope you catch a hold of the life raft before you sink.

Smith: Did he ever say anything in those later years to lead you to believe he felt that and/or felt any degree of guilt either toward the kids or toward Mrs. Ford for all those years when he was either physically absent or emotionally absent because of work?

Secchia: I think he had some guilt for not spending more time with Betty and not spending more time with the kids. But you know, when you have a friend who is president of the United States or “former president” of the United States, or minority leader, you don’t just sit down and say, “Why aren’t you treating your kids better?” or “Why aren’t you treating your wife better?”

Smith: But if he, you know, had earlier involved you in these kinds of family discussions, I just wonder if in later years, that continued.
Secchia: Later, he didn’t involve me in family issues. He asked me to deliver a message or to watch or talk to someone. He didn’t have many family discussions. I don’t think as a unit they did a lot. Betty ran the house and ran the kids and took care of everybody and kept it all going. And he was busy. He had that old-fashioned model that his father, Ford, had. I go to work in the morning and when I come home at night, I want my slippers and I want to eat and I want to sit down and read the paper and I don’t want to be bothered. He had that slipper and pipe kind of “unwinding” culture.

Smith: Sure. And in one way he did evolve. I mean we talked about a change and evolution. I mean, certainly, he was so proud of her and her feminist credentials. You know, he certainly didn’t need to put himself, for reasons of ego, at the center of attention. When she got the Medal of Freedom, when she got recognition, it was almost better than when he did. One sensed that in those later years.

Secchia: It was always, “Betty is more popular than I am.” His self-deprecating humor wasn’t as fine-tuned as some others, but he used it effectively and he was fair to her and he cared about her and he’s the one guy I’ve met in my life who I’d say without a doubt was always faithful.

Smith: When was the last time you talked with her?

Secchia: I talked to her a few months ago. I don’t like to call, but Jan (her assistant) says, I don’t know how the staff works, because the staff says, “Call me” and then they filter everything through staff. Steve says, “Why don’t you call Mom?” And he says, “She says you don’t call very much?” And I don’t want to go through staff. I had that problem with Barrett for awhile and I’ve been through lots of staff.

Smith: Did he put up walls?

Secchia: Well, everybody does when you’re the gatekeeper. You have to. Because, in your judgment, “He doesn’t need to talk to Pete Secchia right now, he’s got to focus on that speech” or “He’s got to get ready for this interview.” And that’s your job, I mean, that’s the gatekeeper (the chief of staff). I respect that because I know how difficult that is. I occasionally would hear from some of
them when they were down and out and disappointed and it was easy to work for Jerry Ford and easy to think he didn’t love you because he didn’t spend a lot of time giving hugs or telling you that he really cared about you. But when it got right down to the nitty-gritty, you knew that he loved you because he wouldn’t put up with your crap if he didn’t. He just had a way about him that said, “I accept you.”

Smith: Did you read, in part or in whole, Tom DeFrank’s book?

Secchia: Yes.

Smith: What’s your reaction?

Secchia: Well, after I read it, I had two or three facts I challenged. I didn’t think it was a Pulitzer Prize book and I don’t think he knew him as well as he claimed to have known him. I chaired that Jerry Ford’s Hometown Downtown celebration. He said he still has the badge from that. I got to believe that wasn’t, as he said it was. It was not a cold winter day, it was outdoors at the Calder Plaza and I remember we gave him cookies from this African-American lady friend of my family who used to make cookies for him at the store where he worked. We gave him the cookies. I’d have to go back and research, but I can’t believe we were outside in January in Grand Rapids. There were a couple of little __________- there were a few revelations that I wasn’t aware of.

Smith: You wonder what the president’s motive was. There are people we’ve talked to that believe absolutely he knew exactly what was going on and he was saying all this because it was going on the record and this was part of his legacy. And there were other people who felt that to some degree he was almost used. And I emphasize, not just by Tom, who really did care about the president and who is a good reporter. But it raises the question about whether it’s a good idea for former presidents to have that kind of…

Secchia: I think, knowing Jerry Ford, I think he might have done the former and just figured, “Well, it will come out after I’m dead and I’d like to set the record straight and this is how it really happened.” Because he’s reading other columnist’s stories on how it happened.
Smith: Did you ever hear him talk about the second Bush or Iraq? What was his take?

Secchia: He thought there’d been some mistakes made. He told me he told the president that, too. You’re talking about ‘43?

Smith: Yes.

Secchia: Yeah, he said, “He doesn’t call me very often, but when he did, I told him.” And I said, “How’d he handle it?” And he said, “Fine” and he thought that ‘43 was pretty good about taking that criticism. But GRF was always quick to tell you that he doesn’t know everything the current president knows.

Smith: But it must have been awkward - forget Bush, forget the policy, look at the personalities, with Cheney and Rumsfeld and Paul O’Neill, all those folks - I mean, that must have been difficult for him.

Secchia: It was very difficult for him because he didn’t know where to put his shoe down there, which path to walk.

Smith: I presume it didn’t undermine in any way his respect for O’Neill.

Secchia: No, not at all. And that’s why Jerry Ford was still Jack Stiles friend in the end when other people were saying Jack was useless, or often drunk and saying things about people that they shouldn’t say, but it gets them in the gossip columns, the potpourri columns. People talk.

Smith: That’s one of the remarkable things about Ford. He was often a victim of that. He doesn’t seem to have harbored any particular resentment. He often laughed it off. Did he have an enemy?

Secchia: Oh, he had quite a few back in the early days.

Smith: Did he think he had?

Secchia: Yes, he had a few people that he didn’t like and he was pretty sure they didn’t like him. But I don’t think he had an enemy or he would have been paranoid about Rockefeller. He didn’t have that conspiracy theory deal. You know, to this day he felt on the Warren Commission they did the research they had to
do. That’s why I can’t believe some of these things I’m hearing about what really happened with him. I think he was a pretty basic guy. And, if you’re a basic guy, you don’t have a lot of devious plans and plots.

Smith: He certainly didn’t waste any time nurturing enmities, unlike Richard Nixon who almost drew strength from them.

Secchia: You know, some of us have strange personalities, some of us know what we’re going to say is going to anger. You know, Jerry Ford and I used to debate the ’76 primary where he would get pissed off at Reagan and the Reagan people and I would remind him that, we made a dozen mistakes that each cost us a quarter of a point. There was no one mistake; there were just the little ones. And had he not gone out and campaigned in the primary in Minnesota and some of those small states, he would’ve lost worse because they didn’t know him. He thought he could just stay in Washington and be the good Doobie all his life that he was and the Rose Garden Strategy kind of feel. It wasn’t going to work that way.

I miss him. I proudly tell you, I miss him. I sit here looking out the window (here in his office) and I remember building this museum and trying to get the cash appropriated. I was often talking to him about raising money and the guy he was, in the sense he wouldn’t bother a friend. I said, “Call Max Fischer, we’ve got to get this money.” “Okay, Peter, I’ll get to it.” And he delayed it too long. Max passed away without getting the “big ask.”

Smith: Great.
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Smith: We talked yesterday with Bill Gill and got some great stories, some of them understandably embargoed probably during the president’s lifetime. He talked about this little - he didn’t use the phrase “kitchen cabinet” - but this little advisory group of four people who met with him from time to time, particularly during the vice presidency. When he would come back here they’d meet at some coffee shop. Two of them are gone which means two of them are still around. One of them is a Republican leader of some sort whom he didn’t identify, and himself. Are you the fourth? (Could be Walt Russell?)

Secchia: I have no idea. One of Jerry Ford’s unique talents was to meet with little groups of people and each one of them thought they were the only group, you’ll find as you get through all these interviews. Well, “there was one special group and I was part of that.”

Smith: It’s interesting, though, ego aside, he walked us through the conversation in a way that sounded pretty credible. These folks - this was about two months before Nixon quit - basically, they were beating up on Ford. They were pressing him to put more distance between himself and the White House.

Secchia: Local people?

Smith: Yes. And he was in, I don’t think it’s too strong to say, some degree of anguish, caught between his loyalty and what might be in his own, and for that matter, the country’s interest. Clearly, this conversation took for granted that the time was coming when he would be in the Oval Office, which is why, according to Bill, it was off the record, at least during his lifetime. But at one point he quoted Ford as saying, almost his head in his hands, “But, you don’t understand. No one else is defending this guy.” And their sort of collective response was, “That’s admirable as a human trait, a personal trait, but you’ve got to look beyond that at this point. You have larger obligations.” Does that sound credible to you?
I suspect he was getting that advice from other sources as well.

Secchia: Let’s work our way back to 1974. I don’t think there were four people in Kent County who understood what was going on in Washington outside of Jerry Ford. So I would doubt that he would put much stock into what four locals had to say about this issue. When the pardon was given, I believe it was on a Sunday night. If I’ve done this interview before, stop me.

He was in Pittsburgh on Monday and the wheels came off the cart, the protestors at the White House, the loud crescendo of boos and harassment just came up out of nowhere from a White House entry honeymoon that had gone fairly well up to that point. Jerry terHorst action totally surprised him. I received a call on that Monday from, I can’t remember who, maybe it was Nell Yates, (his private Oval Office secretary – or Terry ODonnell his scheduler) I don’t remember who it was. They said, “President’s coming back tomorrow,” which would’ve been Tuesday, “after he overnights in Pittsburgh and he wanted to know if you’d come by for dinner on Tuesday.”

So I went to D.C. for dinner that night. He would usually come upstairs for dinner at 7:00, 7:30, sometimes 8:00, but very seldom later than that. And that night it was almost 9:00 and he hadn’t come up yet. He was busy reacting to all of the pressure that he was receiving. When he came up, he pressed the little button on his chair and asked for his martini. That was the only time I ever heard him use the f-word. But he said to me, “Nixon had really f’ed up the pea patch and it had to be done.” And I recall just saying, “Why am I in this conversation, it’s above my pay grade?”

And so I (regretfully today) shut him down to end this high level tone and said, “Why don’t we talk about something else?” And he said, “This will probably cost me the ’76 election.” (The first time I had heard him mention’76.) And I tended to sort of agree with this, but you have to remember at this point in time, I was not a Republican “Leader.” A lot of people think I was born that way, but I was not involved in active party politics in ’75. I was helping Jerry Ford and some like-minded candidates in a very minor way. I was a young, I mean, I still dressed the same as I am, i.e.,
in jeans and a plaid shirt. I was just hanging out at the White House helping him and didn’t deserve to be there, but he kept inviting me.

That night Betty wasn’t feeling well. She was in bed with her neck propped up and her brace on. We talked a little bit, but she wanted to rest and read. So I went out to wait in their sitting area. When the President came upstairs, he picked up the papers and the first thing he did was go to the editorial which was his way of devouring a newspaper. He’d open up the paper and look at the letters to the editor in Grand Rapids, but when he was in Washington, he’d open up the *Washington Post* or *New York Times* and take a peek at the editorial.

This day they were brutally attacking his “pardon” decision and that just made the night go deeper and deeper into the darkness of despair, kind of, “What did I do?” and “Why did I do it?”

But his mind was made up. There was no question in his mind that he did the right thing then. I watched him receive the Congressional Medal of Honor. And the Kennedy Profiles in Courage Award. The pride was abundantly clear.

Smith: The Kennedy Profiles in Courage award?

Secchia: Both, the one from Congress and the “Profiles” award.

Smith: The Congressional Gold Medal.

Secchia: The Congressional Gold Medal. I watched him when he received that and I think that happened after the Kennedy. But he reflected on the fact that “finally I am proven right.” It was like a weight was lifted off his shoulders. I don’t remember him ever mentioning this when I was home. Now I’d ask Jack, remember Jack Stiles, jack was his closest friend that he took to Washington?

Smith: Jack Stiles? Who was Jack Stiles first of all?

Secchia: Jack Stiles, Jerry Ford respected early in his career because Jack got things done for him. It was a funny relationship. (It was sort of the kind of the
relationship I had with him.) He depended on me to get things done for him and I think Jack had filled that void for him in his early congressional years.

Smith: But who was Jack Stiles? Where did he come from?

Secchia: He was a local man. Nobody really knew much about him. The night he died, he was supposed to have dinner with me. He had called me at 4 pm…to say he had arranged a lady friend to meet with him and he went to Grand Haven. On his way home he rolled his car. They found his car the next morning in a ditch in the creek off West River Drive. Jack lived a fast life and was a small problem for the president in Washington. During this negotiation was the Midnight Massacre. All of these things happened fast. I believe President Ford was trying very hard to keep Jack out of the spotlight because there were some strange feelings about him, whether it be here or there. But I had dinner with Jack several times and I have a picture of us having a dinner on Ford’s first trip home at the old Harley Inn. The hotel’s not even there anymore, but I have a picture of that dinner, just the four of us. But I don’t remember anything about Bill Gill’s four-person group, but knowing Jerry Ford, I don’t doubt it.

Smith: One thing Bill said…

Secchia: This is Bill Gill the television guy?

Smith: Yeah. He didn’t say it, critically, he said it almost matter of factly, he said, “Jerry Ford was not without guile.” Now, that obviously runs counter to the popular impression. I don’t take it as criticism. I mean, anyone who wants to be Speaker of the House has more than simply ambition.

Secchia: Well, you know what, there’s good ambition and there’s bad ambition.

Smith: Well, sure. Sure.

Secchia: Jerry Ford wanted to be Speaker of the House because he believed that was the ultimate position for someone who had dedicated many years to legislative reasoning. He’d studied the budget, he understood the administrative
procedures of the House. He was like John Engler as our governor. He understood the insides facts and workings of the government.

Smith: Let me ask you about Jack Stiles. As I may have said earlier, Nelson Rockefeller didn’t age well. There was a streak of, it’s not too much to say, of paranoia. As vice president he saw enemies, and he had convinced himself that Rumsfeld was his ultimate enemy.

Secchia: Rockefeller?

Smith: Yeah, but he had literally also convinced himself that Jack Stiles’ death was no accident.

Secchia: Did he?

Smith: Yeah, he believed that the president was surrounded by people who didn’t want him to get reelected in 1976, and that somehow Stiles’ death factored into - that they started the campaign very late and so forth and so on.

Secchia: If they did a sperm check on Jack’s body, they would have found he was short a few gallons. No one knew at 4 p.m. that evening where he was going. I mean, he was out drinking and rendezvousing. I wouldn’t refute that. But the campaign started late because President Ford had wanted to wait, to no get into the primaries…However, the next day after he received the Kansas City nomination we all met in Vail with Stu Spencer, Cheney and Baker (5-6 of us) to plan the campaign.

Smith: So, he had a local reputation?

Secchia: I don’t know if he had a big reputation because you have to remember that these men were 25 years older than me so I didn’t know about their younger days, (their prowling days). I just knew Jack was a loyal friend of President Ford’s from years gone by.

Smith: What was his professional background?

Secchia: I’m sorry…I forgot.
Smith: But it’s interesting that the president had him for such a close friend and in effect as a political ally given the vulnerabilities that went along with that.

Secchia: And I think those vulnerabilities really approached this risky status when Jerry Ford’s role became more important. When Jerry Ford was a congressman and later, the Minority Leader, nobody really paid attention to who he hung around with, or who he had dinner with when he came back to town. I can remember taking Jerry Ford to an old hotel in D.C. where the piano player (Mark Russell), used to play. It’s the old Sheraton—______, right on the river by the parkway, off of Connecticut Ave. a couple blocks. It’s where Mark Russell used to play in the early ‘70s.

Jerry and I went in there and we had dinner and a few drinks. We were talking and I was proud of my relationship with Jerry. I went over to Mark Russell and said, “Do you realize the Minority Leader of the U.S. Congress is in this room?” Russell played all this political satire and he looked at me like, “No, which one is he?” And I had to point out “The Minority Leader.” Now, if Mark Russell, who is a 24/7 full-time political satirist and humorist and musician, didn’t know who the Minority Leader was, then who was paying any attention to who he was having dinner with, me or Jack Stiles. It just didn’t matter to most.

Rockefeller had this paranoia and he was also involved in a lot of intelligence operations that I wasn’t involved in. I would challenge his thinking. I think Jack was just a party boy whose time had come. Great guy, fun to be with, and maybe drank a little too much, but he didn’t talk a lot and he was loyal to Ford and that was important to Jerry Ford. Now, with your experience you know more about Jerry Ford than anybody and you’ll find that more than half of us think they were Jerry Ford’s best friend.

Smith: That passes for guile. I mean, beyond individual ego, there are successful politicians - all have the ability to make individuals think that they have a unique place in their lives.

Secchia: The good ones.
Smith: The good ones, absolutely.

Secchia: And I don’t think Jerry Ford could be called a manipulator as I would say John Edwards was, or some other people who had issues to hide, but it’s hard to get a good interview out of people like me because I love the guy like a big brother. Do not want to hurt his legacy.

Smith: Tell me how broad a range of friends he had.

Secchia: Well, you could start with Jack Stiles. I think one of the questions you’ll find in Maury DeJonge’s interview that was never shared was one of the questions was, “My editors can’t quite understand it, why do you consider Pete Secchia as one of your closest friends?” And that’s right in the interview.

Smith: Really?

Secchia: Uh-huh. I have a copy of the interview because Maury told me 30 years ago that he would give me a copy some day. He gave me one a few months ago. I don’t know where it is, I think I have it at the office, but you’ll get it eventually. It was because he had this broad range of friends that he knew where to go for answers. Jerry Ford was the consummate politician in the sense that he wasn’t being partisan political, but he knew how to work the halls of Congress. And if the lobby system worked as it did when Jerry Ford was in Congress from late 40s to the 70s, when you needed to know something about airplanes or military aircraft or civilian aircraft, you had to call somebody who knew that product or industry. Someone who could find the answers for you, so you could make a better decision.

So that was Jerry Ford’s way of operating. He could call somebody or ask or tell somebody to get the answer from a person, but he liked to do that himself. He loved to talk to you about what you do and why you do it. So he had different friends from different sectors. I know that Bob Sheiffer (CBS) and Jones and some of those TV guys were his contacts. I remember when GRF hired Ron Nessen and he thought it was sort of neat that he was able to get this national press man to come and be his press secretary. He was a bit naïve in some ways. He was enraptured by certain musicians or entertainers, but we
all are. Wouldn’t you love it if Abraham Lincoln was resurrected and came walking in the room? You’d want to run up and ask him a dozen questions before he disappeared again.

Smith: How much of that was the Eagle Scout in Ford and how much of that was Grand Rapids?

Secchia: I think there’s a lot that has the same values. I don’t think there’s a big difference between Eagle Scouting and the culture of Grand Rapids. There are people who will see us as country bumpkin-ish and there are others who think that our sartorial splendiferousness is lacking. The fact is, that we’re Midwesterners. Scouting teaches kids to have goals, earn them, wear a badge. Always Jerry Ford wore that badge of honor when he was in the legislature. He was our congressman. He defeated an isolationist. He had his points.

Smith: It’s interesting. We spent two fascinating hours yesterday with Dorothy Dowton and it was interesting because she volunteered what others have sort of grudgingly yielded up, which was the extent to which, even when they were in the vice presidency, the Nixon people didn’t want them around, looked down on them, saw them as Grand Rapids. Now, some of that you can understand, some of it’s unavoidable given their roles, but some of it’s cultural condescension. He obviously had to be aware of it.

Secchia: Oh, he was aware of it. He was well aware of it. When he brought Bill Seidman in to the vice president’s office and Phil Buchen who was his attorney, these were people he knew he could depend on and that’s who he wanted around him. If you look at the Nixon White House and you have the California boys and the fast movers, fast talkers, somewhat shifty manipulators and then you bring in Bill Seidman and Phil Buchen and Jack Stiles and Pete Secchia, it was…“Who are those guys?”

Smith: I want to talk about Phil Buchen. One of the things that Bill Gill said yesterday was that part of the burden, Phil Buchen talked to Duncan Littlefair and they both communicated to the President their views on the advisability of a pardon. And I don’t know Duncan Littlefair except from a distance by
reputation. But I would have thought that he was a political liberal who would not necessarily look favorably upon a Nixon pardon. Bill insisted that in this particular case, he did and he communicated those views through Buchen and apparently directly himself to Ford. Does that sound credible?

Secchia: I can’t challenge it nor can I confirm it. Was Buchen in agreement with Littlefair?

Smith: Yes.

Secchia: There’s been so many years gone by…

Smith: You know, it sounds basic, but it’s basic for a reason. Tell us about Phil Buchen.

Secchia: Well, Phil’s relationship with Ford had gone back to the pre-congressional days. Jerry Ford always felt that they had an honorable legal partnership and a good personal relationship. Therefore, when Jerry moved out of the legal business, when he needed legal help, he went right back to where he would’ve been nurtured as an early member of the bar. So they had a quiet but strong relationship. Phil was, I think, wanting to be a little more involved in the exciting side of Washington. But because of Phil’s physical condition, and his health deteriorating quite rapidly towards the final years there, I just think they were very happy to come back and draw down from the deals or D.C.

I can’t say specific incidents I might be reminded of, but when someone, you see it now, too, because you’ve been through several of them, but if someone goes from being your newspaper editor in Grand Rapids, to being a congressman, to being speaker, to being president, or they make their way up any ladder of success, you expect changes and sometimes you don’t get changes. Everybody expected changes. But those who knew the man (or his bride) know there were few changes except the fact that there were more demands on time, more demands on their ability to attend events, more babies to kiss, more funerals to attend. So a lot of people change because their life clock starts ticking faster.
I knew a lot of these people back when we were all nothing. I mean, I’m still a country bumpkin and I’m proud of it. I don’t even like to go to Washington, never did like to go to Washington (even when GRF was president). G.H.W. Bush asked me to be in his administration, I said no. I mean, that’s how I ended up being ambassador to Italy. I didn’t want to go to Washington.

Smith: Did Ford change?

Secchia: No. Where he did change, he changed for the better. He learned, he became more understanding and expansive on issues that I would never claim to understand. I don’t know if I told you this story about, Golda Meir - do you remember reading this one?

I was upstairs with Ford one night in the residence and he said to me, “Peter, what do you think about Golda Meir coming to visit?” It had been in the press that she was going to ask for - in today’s standards it’s probably minor – “million in aid.” And he said, “What do you think?” I said, naively, “Well, you know, we have inflation, we have a big deficit, people don’t like it when the government keeps giving away money to other governments. Maybe you ought not do it.” He said, “Well, that’s specifically why she’s coming.” And he says, “But that’s what you think?”

A few minutes later, a buzzer goes off, I don’t know whether it was in the chair or if the steward came out of the kitchen, but the call comes through and he says, “It’s Henry Kissinger. He’s in Tel Aviv and he’s about to get on the plane with the prime minister.” Then President Ford picks up the phone and says, “Henry, I’ve been talking to Pete and I don’t think we’re going to do it.” And I’m sitting there with this vision that the Mossad is listening in and I’m going to find out that there’s somebody in my hotel room when I get back to the Madison Hotel. I don’t know what I’m talking about, I was just making conversation. But after you get into it, you find out that he’d talked to a dozen other people who’d had similar advice.

Smith: So it wasn’t the fact of doing what the last person who’d advised him to do?
Secchia: No, and he got that bad rap. I don’t think that was the way it was. It was just that he had a great memory. I used to describe him as an administrative genius because everybody thought he was an administrative dum-dum and that he didn’t know the issues. But, this is a guy you can take a whole bunch of papers on different issues, throw them up in the air, and as they float to the ground, he’ll pull the one out of the pack that needs attention. And then he’ll know who to call to ask their thoughts and maybe he won’t agree with you, he’ll just ask your thoughts. And you might think, “Well, I just talked to him and I told him this and that’s what he did.” That’s bullshit. He’d talked to dozens of other people.

Smith: Over time, all those years in Congress…clearly people evolve. They learn. They grow, presumably, the more they’re exposed to what’s unfamiliar. His conservatism: Did that change?

Secchia: I think it diminished. When he first was in Congress, I didn’t know him. I didn’t meet him until later in the 60s, but I don’t think he would’ve ever supported the ERA and some of the issues that Betty was strongly in favor of if he still lived in Grand Rapids. He still talked to all the people here that he talked to back then. I think his conservatism diminished on some of these social issues. I believe if today he was making a decision on civil unions or same sex benefits, he would’ve been a pioneer on that. Too, I think that he’s probably similar to the current governor of Utah on how he would’ve viewed those issues.

Smith: I realize this is speculative, but how much influence did Mrs. Ford have on those kinds of issues? How much was simply being exposed to a broader range of opinion and reality, living longer, which has a way of playing havoc with ideology. Because he did seem to become in some ways more liberal, for lack of a better word, with age.

Secchia: Well, I think America has become more liberal and I think he was a strong barometer of the public sense. So as he became more entrenched and more familiar with the issues facing the country and the world, I mean, I doubt he’d put up with the Republican Party that we have today.
Smith: Could he get nominated in this district today? If he were running for the first
time, if he wasn’t the Jerry Ford of legend, would his kind of conservative - if
you want to call it that.

Secchia: Well, his kind of conservatism probably doesn’t exist today. There are still
conservatives here, but it’s like engineering and computer work. Everything
is now for niche markets and what used to be conservatism was everybody
who was over here who might agree with the majority of these ten issues.
Today you have fiscal conservatives, social conservatives, religious
conservatives, it won’t be the same. If he was running today as the attractive
candidate that he was, you have to remember, in this district, the election is
the primary, the Republican primary. So if you were able to get the
Republican primary vote…

Smith: That’s the question. In today’s Republican Party, would he win a primary?

Secchia: I think so, but I wouldn’t know enough about 1948’s comparison. He ran
against Jonkman who obviously was out of step. There again it is Jerry Ford
the barometer, he read that shift before anybody else read that and he wasn’t
supposed to win. At least those who were entrenched in the leadership here
thought that he didn’t have much of a chance.

Smith: Describe then, if you could kind of encapsulate, when you really began to
know him…give us a sense of the political culture, in this town and then
maybe the broader culture. We’re trying to trace, among other things, impact
of the Christian Reformed Church upon the broader culture of West
Michigan. But also, invariably, spilling over into the political culture. Clearly
it has evolved, but where was it when you first really begin to know Ford?
How much of it did he have to take into account? How much of it found
reflection in his voting record?

Secchia: When I first got to know Ford, I was afraid he wouldn’t get reelected. That’s
how I came to know him. I had met him at a few events and told him I
thought we ought to talk. I reminded him that when he was home, he was only
seeing people his own age and nobody was developing any contacts with the
30+ year old set which was the decade of people in their 30s that I knew. He was listening to that and said, “You know, I hadn’t thought about that.” I watched him make some adjustments in his campaigning, but I think that you have to understand that as he has changed and his personality has changed, and Grand Rapids has changed, but you still have the same old problem.

Grand Rapids is a Democrat city; it is not a Republican city. It has been voting Democrat in most elections for many years. But it was a part of the 5th District then, (the 3rd Congressional District now), and it is part of Kent County which is Republican. We have had as many as a 18 to 3 majority on the county commission. When Jerry ran for office, it was about 17 to 4 and now there’s only 19 commissioners because they’ve changed the structure. The county is still a Republican county, but it’s an entrepreneurial region. And there’s an inherent respect, I mean, there is a story in today’s Grand Rapids Press where I’m quoted as saying, “You’ve got 300 greedy bastards in New York who give a bad name to the CEOs of America and in West Michigan, I don’t know a West Michigan CEO who would fall into the category they are criticizing on Wall Street.” (2008)

That’s a point of pride we’ve always had here. I think Jerry Ford had an admiration for the Sandy Weils and the local corporate leaders because he wasn’t one and he always had respect for successful business people. He thought that success was an admirable quality and I think he had the same respect for the competent legislator who did his homework, was prepared, didn’t only come to a hearing because there were television cameras, but came to make comments on certain provisions in the legislation.

Smith: You have to believe that those values were implanted early.

Secchia: Yes, and you see them with the young Scouts who were lined up at his funeral procession. You see their pride. I was at the recent scout fundraiser and that hasn’t changed. So, you know, you hear that derogatory comment every once in awhile that “They’re nothing but a bunch of Boy Scouts,” and it’s sort of like it has become a negative because there are those who don’t want to see the values of that. It’s like a child holding hands with a parent. When I grew 13
up, that wasn’t very macho. And I can remember when *National Geographic* came to Grand Rapids back in Ford’s early days as President (1974-75) and they wanted to know “why Grand Rapids was different.” They talked to a lot of people, but one of the quotes they had in the article, I remember (it was from me) and I said, “Well, I’m in the restaurant business and it’s not unusual here to see a teenage boy come here holding hands with his mother and nobody laughs at them. They respect that parent-child relationship.” And Ford having had the early problems in his childhood watched and admired everybody else who had a business and principles like his stepfather - a good businessman, a proud businessman, an honest businessman - that was very important to Jerry Ford.

Smith: Do you think, again it’s speculative, maybe he talked about it, maybe he didn’t, I heard a little about it from time to time, but do you think that the circumstances of his early days gave him a particular empathy with not only broken families, but some other… I mean, you’re looking for this counterintuitive, fiscally conservative as orthodox as they get, he was tight, fiscally.

Secchia: Personally…Also…” tight fiscally.”

Smith: Do you have any stories to illustrate that?

Secchia: Well, I mean, I would kid him that he was “tighter than a second coat of paint.” I used to kid him, but I’ll tell you one funny story. We were out in California for a board meeting and I took Governor Engler by to say hello to then 90 year old Jerry Ford. We met President Ford in the office and we were sitting there chatting. It was getting dark. And when people get elderly they start to keep the lights down in their office, and there’s piles of crap and newspapers everywhere, and stacks of things, letters to sign, and autographs to sign. I realized that University of Michigan was playing basketball at that time, and I knew he *never* had the specialized signal cable because back then you had to pay extra to get these basketball games. I knew he wouldn’t pay for that. And I said, “You know, too bad you don’t have…” He said, “Oh, I do! I do!” He said, “Well, let’s go.”
Peter Secchia  August 5, 2008

So he got up so fast he forgot his cane and he started to head for the door. Well, Judy at the time was working and Penny Circle or someone came running out, “Mr. President! Mr. President, you forgot your cane!” She gives him the cane. We get to the house, he’s got the TV and this special hook-up and I said, “Jerry, I can’t believe you pay for this.” He just smiled at me.

He loved his University of Michigan sports. He knew the players name, who could dribble, drive, ________ a perimeter shoot. Well, later on, we say goodbye, we’re going through his office and I said to Penny, “I can’t believe he bought that.” She says, “He didn’t. Somebody gave it to him.”

Smith: How much did he talk about money? I mean, he took some hits for particularly the early days of his ex-presidency. We’ve had occasion now to talk to a number of people who were on boards with him, and it was very clear he took it very seriously and he never just lent his name to something. But nevertheless, he was going to come home because he had no money and he was going to practice law and was going to make a little bit of money for his family. Was he proud of his success?

Secchia: On his board service?

Smith: Yeah, and just as someone economically successful?

Secchia: I think he was dedicated to being a good board member, just as he was dedicated to being a good Scout, a good lawyer, or a good legislator. He studied for meetings and he told me a few times about the trip out east would give him a few hours and a plane where he could read, but he was said to be an excellent board member. I heard that from several people.

Smith: Do you think he was sensitive to the criticism on public speaking?

Secchia: No.

Smith: No?

Secchia: I tried to get him to be more sensitive to this criticism because of what he did. He just evolved into a “Well, if you want to pay me 50 grand, fine, but put 25
in the Ford Foundation,” and then, “Do this and this.” This minimizes the actual fees reported, but, you know, he was only out of office four years and, I guess it was eight years before anybody started selling their time for big money. Let’s see, Carter lost after four years to Reagan, so it was twelve years then, because, you know, the big dollars weren’t made until Reagan and Clinton and Bush ‘41.

Smith: But you know Ford took heat for being the first.

Secchia: Yes, he did, but I don’t think he was sensitive to it. I don’t think he did much of it then. It didn’t take a lot of money for Jerry Ford to feel wealthy. I mean, he’d never had any wealth at all.

Smith: Do you have any idea what Jerry Ford was worth when he died?

Secchia: Nope, and he wouldn’t talk about it.

Smith: He wouldn’t.

Secchia: He had a chunk of stock from Sandy Weil, the early Traveler’s Insurance, the early parts of CitiCorp Building that empire was exciting to him. I mean, today he’d be mortified at the CitiCorp fiasco, but he was a good board member, dedicated to that group. He had “Founders Stock.” I mean, he referred to it as “Founders Stock.” I don’t know what founders stock is other than maybe back in the 70s you were able to give a certain class of stock to people that could be converted or split or had special dividends, I don’t know.

Smith: What would be a luxury to Jerry Ford?

Secchia: Watching his University of Michigan football team or basketball team or visiting the campus and talking to the players. That would be a luxury. Private jets, I don’t think so much.

Smith: It is astonishing and it became a matter of discussion internally that, at least as long as I was here, I was appalled that he was flying commercially and subsequently Rich said of course he could use their plane.

Secchia: I helped put that deal together.
Smith: I wish it had been done earlier, but he kept up.

Secchia: But you know how this came about? Rich said to me, “You know I’ll always be happy to send a jet to pick him up.” But I hated to ask Richard because somebody else might’ve asked him last week. He said, “Anytime he wants to go anywhere, I will have a plane there.” I said, “You mean, anytime, anywhere?” He said, “Yep.” I went to the president with it, and he still didn’t use it very much.

Smith: That’s fascinating. Tell me about the relationship between the president and Rich DeVos. Was it any different between Rich DeVos and Van Andel? Was it closer to Rich? What’s your reading?

Secchia: I think when they were both alive, it was similar. There was a mutual respect. Jerry had that consistent admiration of successful business people who did it the right way. Jay’s been gone for awhile now, so the DeVos side is certainly closer, but when Jay was still alive and active in the business Jay and Rich were both friends and conservatives GRF admired, but not close friends. Jerry was still wrapped up in Washington. The early friends, the Jack Stiles days, were the old-fashioned “congressional hometown politics begins at home” crowd.

Smith: Is there anyone left from those days?

Secchia: Maury DeJonge or John Malinowski. You know the family, the guy that was his chief of staff who ended up a judge. I just read a book written by one of the Malinowski family members (about the family) and I forget some of the names now, but he had run his office here in town…By the way, I think Bill Gill got fired from his TV station… he lost his job, let’s just say that was for fabrications and self delusions, I think.

Smith: Tell me about the kids. What was your relationship? Maybe it’s a large subject, but what was your role?

Secchia: My role was whatever he wanted it to be. You know, one time he called me up and asked me to come out and talk to Steve. “What for?” He says, “Well,
I can’t afford to send him to Duke and that’s where he wants to go.” Or University of Virginia or some expensive school.

Smith: Now, this was when he was in Congress?

Smith: He was vice president because I think the day I arrived, he flew out on Air Force Two. It was then a prop Conair.

Smith: With all due respect, why would he have you talk to Steve?

Secchia: He had a hard time talking to his kids about tough issues and money issues, I think for the same reason he admired people who had done well in business. He was a bit embarrassed that he hadn’t done well. This is just my own personal judgment.

Smith: Yeah, makes perfect sense.

Secchia: It was nice to have someone else who had done well in business to come talk to Steven. He had arranged for Steve to work at a dude ranch, (Brown’s?), out in Utah somewhere. And that’s how Steve ended riding horses and now he’s still raising them and he was breeding them for awhile, so that was one. I also remember the 1976 bicentennial dinner, my job was to watch Jack, make sure he didn’t get into trouble. That evening I had to talk to him. But they were just kids. You know, Susan was dancing with some people she shouldn’t be dancing with. He wanted me to talk about that. I don’t think he had a close relationship with his kids in the early days. I don’t think they paid much attention to anything he did and he didn’t pay that much attention to things they did.

Smith: Was part of that just because he was away physically a lot?

Secchia: I think he was just dedicated to doing what he did.

Smith: Wrapped up in his work.

Secchia: And, we’re all guilty of that. I went through my younger days of my children and I was busy building my business and just hope you catch a hold of the life raft before you sink.
Smith: Did he ever say anything in those later years to lead you to believe he felt that and/or felt any degree of guilt either toward the kids or toward Mrs. Ford for all those years when he was either physically absent or emotionally absent because of work?

Secchia: I think he had some guilt for not spending more time with Betty and not spending more time with the kids. But you know, when you have a friend who is president of the United States or “former president” of the United States, or minority leader, you don’t just sit down and say, “Why aren’t you treating your kids better?” or “Why aren’t you treating your wife better?”

Smith: But if he, you know, had earlier involved you in these kinds of family discussions, I just wonder if in later years, that continued.

Secchia: Later, he didn’t involve me in family issues. He asked me to deliver a message or to watch or talk to someone. He didn’t have many family discussions. I don’t think as a unit they did a lot. Betty ran the house and ran the kids and took care of everybody and kept it all going. And he was busy. He had that old-fashioned model that his father, Ford, had. I go to work in the morning and when I come home at night, I want my slippers and I want to eat and I want to sit down and read the paper and I don’t want to be bothered. He had that slipper and pipe kind of “unwinding” culture.

Smith: Sure. And in one way he did evolve. I mean we talked about a change and evolution. I mean, certainly, he was so proud of her and her feminist credentials. You know, he certainly didn’t need to put himself, for reasons of ego, at the center of attention. When she got the Medal of Freedom, when she got recognition, it was almost better than when he did. One sensed that in those later years.

Secchia: It was always, “Betty is more popular than I am.” His self-deprecatng humor wasn’t as fine-tuned as some others, but he used it effectively and he was fair to her and he cared about her and he’s the one guy I’ve met in my life who I’d say without a doubt was always faithful.

Smith: When was the last time you talked with her?
Secchia: I talked to her a few months ago. I don’t like to call, but Jan (her assistant) says, I don’t know how the staff works, because the staff says, “Call me” and then they filter everything through staff. Steve says, “Why don’t you call Mom?” And he says, “She says you don’t call very much?” And I don’t want to go through staff. I had that problem with Barrett for awhile and I’ve been through lots of staff.

Smith: Did he put up walls?

Secchia: Well, everybody does when you’re the gatekeeper. You have to. Because, in your judgment, “He doesn’t need to talk to Pete Secchia right now, he’s got to focus on that speech” or “He’s got to get ready for this interview.” And that’s your job, I mean, that’s the gatekeeper (the chief of staff). I respect that because I know how difficult that is. I occasionally would hear from some of them when they were down and out and disappointed and it was easy to work for Jerry Ford and easy to think he didn’t love you because he didn’t spend a lot of time giving hugs or telling you that he really cared about you. But when it got right down to the nitty-gritty, you knew that he loved you because he wouldn’t put up with your crap if he didn’t. He just had a way about him that said, “I accept you.”

Smith: Did you read, in part or in whole, Tom DeFrank’s book?

Secchia: Yes.

Smith: What’s your reaction?

Secchia: Well, after I read it, I had two or three facts I challenged. I didn’t think it was a Pulitzer Prize book and I don’t think he knew him as well as he claimed to have known him. I chaired that Jerry Ford’s Hometown Downtown celebration. He said he still has the badge from that. I got to believe that wasn’t, as he said it was. It was not a cold winter day, it was outdoors at the Calder Plaza and I remember we gave him cookies from this African-American lady friend of my family who used to make cookies for him at the store where he worked. We gave him the cookies. I’d have to go back and research, but I can’t believe we were outside in January in Grand Rapids.
There were a couple of little _________ - there were a few revelations that I wasn’t aware of.

Smith: You wonder what the president’s motive was. There are people we’ve talked to that believe absolutely he knew exactly what was going on and he was saying all this because it was going on the record and this was part of his legacy. And there were other people who felt that to some degree he was almost used. And I emphasize, not just by Tom, who really did care about the president and who is a good reporter. But it raises the question about whether it’s a good idea for former presidents to have that kind of...

Secchia: I think, knowing Jerry Ford, I think he might have done the former and just figured, “Well, it will come out after I’m dead and I’d like to set the record straight and this is how it really happened.” Because he’s reading other columnist’s stories on how it happened.

Smith: Did you ever hear him talk about the second Bush or Iraq? What was his take?

Secchia: He thought there’d been some mistakes made. He told me he told the president that, too. You’re talking about ‘43?

Smith: Yes.

Secchia: Yeah, he said, “He doesn’t call me very often, but when he did, I told him.” And I said, “How’d he handle it?” And he said, “Fine” and he thought that ‘43 was pretty good about taking that criticism. But GRF was always quick to tell you that he doesn’t know everything the current president knows.

Smith: But it must have been awkward - forget Bush, forget the policy, look at the personalities, with Cheney and Rumsfeld and Paul O’Neill, all those folks - I mean, that must have been difficult for him.

Secchia: It was very difficult for him because he didn’t know where to put his shoe down there, which path to walk.

Smith: I presume it didn’t undermine in any way his respect for O’Neill.
Secchia: No, not at all. And that’s why Jerry Ford was still Jack Stiles friend in the end when other people were saying Jack was useless, or often drunk and saying things about people that they shouldn’t say, but it gets them in the gossip columns, the potpourri columns. People talk.

Smith: That’s one of the remarkable things about Ford. He was often a victim of that. He doesn’t seem to have harbored any particular resentment. He often laughed it off. Did he have an enemy?

Secchia: Oh, he had quite a few back in the early days.

Smith: Did he think he had?

Secchia: Yes, he had a few people that he didn’t like and he was pretty sure they didn’t like him. But I don’t think he had an enemy or he would have been paranoid about Rockefeller. He didn’t have that conspiracy theory deal. You know, to this day he felt on the Warren Commission they did the research they had to do. That’s why I can’t believe some of these things I’m hearing about what really happened with him. I think he was a pretty basic guy. And, if you’re a basic guy, you don’t have a lot of devious plans and plots.

Smith: He certainly didn’t waste any time nurturing enmities, unlike Richard Nixon who almost drew strength from them.

Secchia: You know, some of us have strange personalities, some of us know what we’re going to say is going to anger. You know, Jerry Ford and I used to debate the ’76 primary where he would get pissed off at Reagan and the Reagan people and I would remind him that, we made a dozen mistakes that each cost us a quarter of a point. There was no one mistake; there were just the little ones. And had he not gone out and campaigned in the primary in Minnesota and some of those small states, he would’ve lost worse because they didn’t know him. He thought he could just stay in Washington and be the good Doobie all his life that he was and the Rose Garden Strategy kind of feel. It wasn’t going to work that way.
I miss him. I proudly tell you, I miss him. I sit here looking out the window (here in his office) and I remember building this museum and trying to get the cash appropriated. I was often talking to him about raising money and the guy he was, in the sense he wouldn’t bother a friend. I said, “Call Max Fischer, we’ve got to get this money.” “Okay, Peter, I’ll get to it.” And he delayed it too long. Max passed away without getting the “big ask.”

Smith: Great.
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this.

Were you in the Nixon White House?

Wallison: In a sense, I was. I worked for something called the President’s Advisory Council on Executive Organization, also known as the Ash Council. And that was during the Nixon period, but I was then a young squirrel, little chipmunk and did a study of the transportation agencies, as I recall, for that group. But it gave me my first entry into that whole scene.

Smith: Even if you’re on the periphery, obviously you could not escape the kind of enveloping mood that presumably Watergate created.

Wallison: I was out before Watergate really hit.

Smith: You were?

Wallison: Yes, I did this in 1969, 1970. I was only three years out of law school at that point so it was really just a nine month period during which I sort of immersed myself in what was going on in Washington. I did get to meet a lot of the people who became important in the Nixon period. I mean, Roy Ash was one and John Connally was another, both of them were on this Ash Council. But I was really just someone’s bag carrier without a bag.

Smith: Do you have a theory as to what it was about John Connally that so impressed Nixon?

Wallison: Affirmative. He’s a very affirmative man. He was charismatic, knew what he wanted, stated what he wanted very clearly. I think Nixon admired people like that. So that was never a mystery to me.

Smith: One of the stories we’ve been told, someone was told to call John Connally, who was Secretary of the Treasury at the time, and indicate to him that the President would like to have him at an event the next day. And as this story
unfolded, Connally made it very clear that if the President wanted him at the event, the President would call. You do wonder if Nixon, for all the talk of the bundle of insecurities that was Nixon, looked at someone like Connally and saw a kind of brass-plated—

Wallison: I think that would be a perfect little paradigm of the relationship between the two of them. And there was a little episode which involved the Ash Council that I thought actually encapsulated this whole thing, because one of the proposals of the Ash Council was to create a domestic council. We’ll talk about that when we talk about Rockefeller. Nixon assembled his entire cabinet. It wasn’t a public meeting, but it was a large meeting. The Cabinet was there and some of the subcabinet people were there and the White House staff and Roy Ash was going to explain to them what this domestic council was all about and, of course, they were not happy. The cabinet was not happy with the fact that there was going to be some intervening body between them and the President.

Roy Ash was not an articulate person. He was probably a very bright person, but he was not articulate. And he stumbled around and stumbled around and Nixon was there sort of in the doorway watching this whole thing. And then John Connally, who was a member of the Ash Council - after Ash had made a mess out of his description of the idea and the Cabinet was even more disturbed that what they originally thought was the problem was actually worse than they thought - John Connally stood up and in about four or five sentences, outlined what it would be, reassured them all, and everything sort of quieted down. And I always thought it was at that point that Nixon really took the measure of Connally and thought to himself, “Hmm, this guy could be a successor to me.” So, that’s what I saw in that little vignette.

Smith: Well, clearly we know that left to his own devices, he would have installed Connally as his successor. Other people at that point were making that decision for him.

How did you come back into the White House?
Wallison: Oh, well, of course through Rockefeller. I came back - actually the Ash Council had something to do with this because one of the people on the Ash Council was a person named Walter Thayer. Walter Thayer was a very well known business person in New York, a close ally of John Hay Whitney.

Smith: The heart and soul of the Eastern Establishment.

Wallison: Right. Exactly, in every respect.

Smith: How would you define the Eastern Establishment by the way at that stage? Did it still exist?

Wallison: Today?

Smith: No, did it exist then?

Wallison: Did it exist? Oh, yes, I think it existed at that point and it was largely a WASP establishment. These were people who ran major businesses or were major investors or very wealthy people like John Hay Whitney, they were movers and shakers in a sort of informal government. I mean they were the people who would be consulted by the people in the government. Not only because they were rich and well known, but simply because they were considered people who were above the usual concerns that the rest of us might have had in our daily lives. You know, they spoke from a different level. They were probably in a sense disinterested, but had a long-term view of things.

Smith: Wise men.

Wallison: Wise men, sort of, yes. I think that would be a good way to put it, and that was a time we actually believed in wise men.

Smith: More hierarchical society.

Wallison: Yes, it was a lot more like that. Of course I’m not a sociologist, but that would be my way of thinking about it, and I think Rockefeller was, in a sense, part of that group for obvious reasons.
Smith: In ’64, the California primary campaign was not going well, so Stu Spencer, who’s just tried everything else, he says, “Governor, it’s time to call in the Eastern establishment.” And Rockefeller says, “You’re looking at it, buddy. I’m all that’s left.” Which is a great line.

Wallison: It doesn’t really sound like Rockefeller, but, yes, he could well have said it and it might have actually been in part true. But in any event, I was working for the Ash Council and we did a study, as I said. And then Rockefeller decided that he wanted to do a study himself called the Modern State in a Changing World. And he consulted Walter Thayer - this is how I understand it - about who should run such a study. And Thayer said, “Well, there was this young kid on the Ash Council who did a pretty good job and he lives right here in New York. In fact, he’s at Jack Wells’ Law Firm.” Jack Wells was the senior partner in the firm I was with and Jack was one of my mentors.

Smith: I don’t mean to throw you off, but this name—

Wallison: Easily done.

Smith: Well, no, it’s just that. Tell me about Jack Wells, because he is important behind the scenes.

Wallison: Well, Jack was not of the Eastern Establishment because Jack was a real New York kid. The only difference was, he was not Italian, he wasn’t Irish, and he wasn’t Jewish. He was, as far as I could tell, a WASP but he had a very thick New York accent. He was very gruff. There were no sanded edges about Jack Wells. He told you what he thought right to your face and he expected you to tell him what you thought right to his face. So, he was a special guy from my perspective. But he was the guy who brought me into his firm. He was running Rockefeller’s gubernatorial campaign in 1966, and I had just graduated from law school. I was in the Ripon Society, one of the founders of the Ripon Society, and the group of us went to see Wells about helping out in the Rockefeller campaign. Ripon and Rockefeller all worked together. And somehow Wells sort of took a liking to me in the course of that meeting and he asked me whether I would like to work on the campaign. I had no job at that point, I’d graduated from law school, but I’d had no association with any
law firm. And I guess you could’ve done that at that time, but I don’t know. I had no particular plans for what I was going to do that year. I probably was hoping for a job, but I didn’t have one. Jack asked me whether I’d like to help out on the Rockefeller campaign, specifically he paid. “I’d like you to go and see a lot of the academics in New York State. The Ripon Society is very interesting to these people and you are a founder of it. They’d like to talk to you and maybe, in talking to these academics, you can convince them that Rockefeller is a worthwhile candidate.”

Smith: It’s interesting that the campaign would care.

Wallison: Yes, I was amazed. Now, I’m amazed. Then it didn’t seem so crazy to me but it showed how much money they had to spend.

Smith: They could worry about academics.

Wallison: They could worry about academics. So they paid me enough so I could buy my wife a wedding ring, which I didn’t have the money to do otherwise. Spent everything they paid me on that ring, which she fortunately still wears. And I traveled around New York State. I first sent out books that the Ripon Society had written called, oh, I forget even the name right now. But we had written a book. I think it was on the 1964 campaign. And I sent copies to all academics whose names I could find. I guess we had mailing lists or something like that and I got a lot of letters back saying, “Gee, I’d like to know more about Ripon. I’d like to know more about Rockefeller.” And so I traveled around New York and met a lot of people and talked to them about it. I don’t know whether I got a single vote for Nelson Rockefeller.

Smith: Did you report to Wells?

Wallison: Yes, I did. I would write him memos every week and he liked my memos. I guess I was able to write clearly enough so that he thought something good about me, and at the end of the campaign he asked me if I’d like to join Rogers & Wells, which I guess was called Royall, Koegel, Rogers & Wells at the time. And I said, “Oh, yes! Oh, absolutely.” Or otherwise be unemployed? And that was the beginning of our relationship.
Smith: Before I forget, was Frank O’Connor really a bad candidate?

Wallison: I don’t remember, frankly.

Smith: I mean, clearly Arthur Goldberg was an atrocious campaigner and Robert Morgenthau wasn’t much better, but in between is the forgotten.

Wallison: That’s right. Rockefeller I think was always pretty lucky with his opponents, but Rockefeller was also a superb politician during those years. He was really an extraordinary guy for a person who couldn’t remember a name – or, maybe more accurately, he had 15 names that he could remember and every time he added one, someone fell off the other side. So he was a guy who could say, “Hiya, fella” and you actually believed that he knew your name, but just was being very friendly to you. And he would eat everything, every ethnic concoction that could be put together and did a wonderful job of making people feel as though he is one of them. So he was really a superb politician. So I thought he probably would’ve beaten anyone in New York at that time.

Smith: I don’t expect you to know the answer to this, but I’m just curious whether you’d heard anything at the time. Remember the Liberals put up Franklin Roosevelt, Jr. and, to this day, there’s uncertainty as to whether that was a put up job, whether he was there to draw votes away from O’Connor.

Wallison: That I don’t know. Rockefeller was not above those things, but I don’t know much about that. And that campaign, as I say, I was very far down in the apparatus and in addition, I traveled the entire time. I was never even in the headquarters except for a weekly or maybe monthly meeting with Jack where I would report to him, give him a memo about who’d I’d seen and what we’d discussed and what these people thought the issues were. That might’ve actually been of some value to him, to know what some of these academics thought about what some of these issues were.

Smith: It’s interesting because I get a sense from all the people I’ve talked to was a policy wonk. Long before the team caught on. And he was always looking, not only for talent, but clearly was also looking for ideas. And I wonder if in fact that this was part of that process.
Wallison: It could’ve been. It really could’ve been that the notion was to bring some more ideas into the campaign but, you know, with all the money that they had available, they could have gotten real academics instead of a kid right out of law school.

Smith: I take it money wasn’t that large of an object.

Wallison: Not that they paid me munificently, but I didn’t notice that there was ever a problem with money. I have to mention one more thing. How did this occur? And I think it was this, exactly in chronological order. After I’d done this campaign work, Wells invited me into his law firm. I worked for two years, really three, then I went down to the Nixon White House, The Ash Council. Then came back to the law firm and then Walter Thayer was asked about who could run this study of a Modern State in a Changing World and he apparently suggested me. I went to Wells and Wells said, “Yes, sure, that’d be great for you. Rockefeller’s a powerful man. He’s going to continue to be a powerful man. It’d be good for someone in our law firm to know him.” I remember this conversation very well. So I said, “Okay, I’ll be happy to sign on to help get this study started.” The idea is I would be a special assistant to the governor, but I’d work out of 22 West 55th Street, which was their office in New York.

Smith: When we said the ‘State’, are we talking about the state in the sense of the diminutive? One of 50 states or as opposed to--?

Wallison: Yes, good question, but not state in general. This was New York State.

Smith: Federalism, in effect.

Wallison: Yes, this is the Modern State, the Modern State, this is what a state like New York would do in a world that is changing. He loved ideas and he wanted to do this study.

Smith: He loved studies.

Wallison: He knew New York State would be paying for it as they were paying my salary and I was supposed to be running it. I mostly worked out of 22 West 55th Street.
Smith: People comment here’s a man with resources and taste and almost a persnickety need to have everything just so. And yet, the stories one hears about the work quarters at both 20 and 22 West 55th suggest almost a rabbit warren.

Wallison: Well, it was, but it was not that bad. I mean, we all had offices, small offices, and the place was cleaned every day and there were sufficient file cabinets and bookcases and things like that. It wasn’t as though papers were strewn around. And his own office was of very large size, very substantial. He had a desk and a big conference table. We used to meet around his conference table. In the back, he had a private office beyond that where he would go to take phone calls, so that the rest of us had no idea what he was talking about or with whom.

Smith: And then across the way was West 54th, the two houses—

Wallison: Yes, that was important. That was probably one of the two reasons he wanted to stay at 22 West 55th Street because behind it, on West 54th, was the original Rockefeller house in New York. And, that, he used as a dining room and that kind of thing. So I said I’d be interested. Rockefeller wanted to meet me, so I went to 22 West 55th, a car picked me up, a limousine, and we drove up, around, and came down 5th Avenue to where his apartment was. But when I got into Rockefeller’s I was a little surprised because there was Louie Lefkowitz, who was the New York attorney general. Again, you can’t imagine how impressed I was by this. I’m four years out of law school and this man was the most important lawyer in New York.

Smith: The people’s attorney.

Wallison: So I get into the car and Rockefeller gets in and he starts the conversation with me. We talked for a while, and I said to him, “You know, our families” - I don’t know why I said this, but this was true - “You know, our families have something in common.” And he says, “What is that?” And I said, “Well, my grandfather was the fumigator at Pocantico Hills,” which was true. And to me, that was always a wonderful example of what this country is really like, because my grandfather, of course, was not of the Eastern Establishment. Far
from it, but he had this little trade, one of his many, many trades that he tried
to earn a living as be a fumigator. He was the fumigator for Pocantico Hills.
Rockefeller got a big kick out of that. And I think it meant the same thing to
him as it meant to me, because the fact that someone who had done this sort
of menial work at Pocantico could now be, et cetera. And that was a
wonderful thing about Rockefeller, he got what America was really about.

Smith: I’m told he was almost corny in his patriotism. I mean, really kind of old-
fashioned, unabashed, almost sentimental love of country. And more than
that, what the country represented.

Wallison: That’s right. Absolutely. That was one of the more attractive things about
Nelson Rockefeller. So, in any event, he did hire me right after that. Then I
went to work at 22 West 55th, and it was interesting. We started on this state-
based program, but he then decided at some point that this was not going to
work, that this whole idea of the Modern State in a Changing World was
really not going to be sufficiently grand or cover sufficient territory, couldn’t
probably figure out how to work in foreign policy, so he decided to resign as
governor and enlarge the study. In order to run this study and he got Brooke
Astor to contribute quite a lot of money to it and he threw in some money and
a few other people threw in some money.

Smith: And that became the Commission on Critical Choices. Is that sort of a step up
from the existing? It became, in fact, what he really wanted it to be.

Wallison: That’s right. Then he was able to bring in all kinds of really major heavy-
weight people to be on the Commission on Critical Choices. And through
that, he met Gerald Ford in a way that he had never had an opportunity to
meet him before. I think Ford was quite impressed with Rockefeller and what
Rockefeller was doing with this project.

Smith: Did you have any sense that this was a springboard for another run?

Wallison: Sure. I mean, not that Rockefeller told me this, but I’m not so naïve as not to
understand what he was doing, because he had and I think the Rockefeller
Brothers Fund—
Smith: Oh, sure, the studies in the late 50’s.

Wallison: Had done studies, exactly. And they had catapulted him to some prominence and so I think he was thinking, “I’m going to be prepared to make a run and show what I have done, the ideas that I have developed here that are important for our nation’s future.”

Smith: There’s something that is in one way touching and in other ways extraordinarily naïve. He thought until the day he died, you know, the way to run for president is the best ideas, the best staff, the most innovative programs. At the very least, he was in the wrong party.

Wallison: I don’t agree with that.

Smith: Really?

Wallison: Of course not. Reagan is the premiere idea man. Reagan really had ideas. And he was in the right party.

Smith: I guess, okay, then—

Wallison: In fact, it’s now Reagan’s party.

Smith: Oh, absolutely. But to the extent that Rockefeller’s second commission was in any way an outgrowth of the first, there is this debate over the extent to which he “moved to the right.” Whether a lot of that was in fact the product of a pragmatist’s experience discovering the limits of power, of government alone - although, the drug program argues against that and the Energy Independence Corporation argues against that. How much of it was an attempt to chase the caboose of conservatism as it headed off to the Right?

Wallison: Well, you know, it wasn’t so clearly defined at that point. The fact is that, until Reagan, we didn’t really know what conservatism was. Conservatism meant something like a strong military and a balanced budget and maybe smaller government, but there wasn’t a tying it all together in an ideology or philosophy. And so Rockefeller probably attempted to make himself look more conservative in certain ways. He had to in order to overcome his liberal reputation as part of the Eastern Establishment.
Smith: There are cynics who believe there’s a connection with Attica. When I set out to do this book, you’re playing head games in terms of, “Okay, what are the subjects that people aren’t going to want to talk about?” And I assumed it would be the women. But what it is, is Attica. They don’t want to talk about Attica. The people who at least believe they were closest to him or fairly close to him find it hard to understand this man who was so inclined to put himself in the middle of events, to put his stamp upon events, why he was so reluctant to go to Attica?

Wallison: To go to Attica?

Smith: To go to Attica. I mean then there’s a whole story of how the thing was bungled and it’s all been conflated into the question of whether Nelson Rockefeller went to Attica or not. And you can debate what impact that might have had. The fact of the matter is the horse was out of the barn long before that became an issue. I’m no apologist, but the question remains what the motive behind it was.

Wallison: I can’t really speak to that. My recollection is that Attica did not turn out to be anything helpful to him unless you thought that what he had to project was an image of a toughness.

Smith: Yes.

Wallison: And so in that sense, maybe that was what he was trying to do. I mean, that’s the way one would look at it. But I always thought Attica was an interesting example of the way Rockefeller’s mind worked. He was willing to go some distance toward a compromise, but if he found the person on the other side still intransigent, he would switch over and then he would take some very radical step. I experienced that in working for him and maybe we’ll get to that when we get a little bit further along in the chronology. But when he was vice president, we had an episode like this. I saw it happen. He could’ve created a catastrophic situation for himself. Do you want me to cover that now?

Smith: Sure.
Wallison: We’re a little bit out of time, but this had to do with the Commission on CIA Activities Within the United States. Rockefeller was the Chairman and there were several major figures at the time on that commission, including Ronald Reagan. That was the first time I’d ever seen Ronald Reagan in action and I became a Reagan person watching that.

Smith: Really?

Wallison: Oh, yes.

Smith: You were impressed?

Wallison: Yes, compared to Rockefeller, yes. I was Rockefeller’s counsel at that time, when he was vice president - I was 34 years old at the time. The CIA’s activities in the United States had become an issue. The so-called Family Jewels had been revealed. Right after Watergate it was revealed that the CIA had been spying on the American people. Rockefeller was appointed Chairman of a commission that was supposed to look into this and there were several congressional hearings going on.

Smith: Was it also designed to some degree at least to head off or at least steal the thunder, say, from the Church Committee?

Wallison: Oh, I think so, yes. Look, that’s standard Washington procedure. I mean, if you can, you get a backfire going in order to see if you can outdo the publicity that those other people are doing and I think that worked. But Rockefeller got a very good group together, and Reagan was one of them. I’m not going to remember all the names. The president of the University of Virginia, the head of the AFLCIO. Doug Dillon from Dillon-Reed. These were really top-notch people. Oh, and Erwin Griswold, who was then I think he was Dean of Harvard Law School. And so, that was the group and they hired someone recommended by Ford named David Belin. David Belin had been on the Warren Commission. Ford was impressed with him and told Rockefeller, “He’s the guy you ought to hire to run this program.” Rockefeller did.

And for some reason, at some point, Rockefeller asked David Belin whether he was going to write a book. I think maybe he had written a book about the
Warren Commission. And he asked Belin whether he was going to write a book about this and Belin said, “Yes, maybe I will.” And Rockefeller said, “Well, you can’t.” Belin said, “Sure, I can. Who are you to tell me I can’t?” That went back and forth. Rockefeller then went to the commission, and he told them it was a terrible idea if this guy was going to be sitting there the entire time and then write a book about what they were doing. They all agreed with him that that couldn’t happen. Rockefeller would press Belin and Belin got more and more intransigent. Pretty soon, he was no longer simply the chief of staff at the commission.

In his view, he was now a tribune for the American people. He just happened to be running this study but he’s actually doing this for the American people. So it got pretty bad at one point. The way we used to work, Rockefeller and I would go home every Friday to New York. Belin would go to Iowa where he lived. At some point, I walked into the office of Rockefeller’s chief of staff, when he was signing some letters and I said, “Well, I’m going to be going, governor.” We all called him ‘governor.’ We didn’t call him vice president. “Governor, I’m going to be going, so I’ll see you Monday” and he said, “Peter, I’m going to fire David Belin this weekend.” And I said, “You’re going to fire David Belin?” And he said, “Yes, I’ve just had enough of this. He won’t agree not to write a book and I don’t think anyone in this position should write a book, so I’m going to fire him.” And I said, “Well, wait a minute. Let’s stop for a second here, because there would be an enormous firestorm if you did that. If you tried to say that you’re muzzling this guy, then he will defend himself and say all the things he said about his being free to say whatever he wanted about what happens in this commission and so forth. It is going to be a disaster.” And he said, “Well, I’m going to do it because I just can’t take this kind of behavior.” So I said, “Well, give me the weekend to see if I can do something about this” and he agreed. “Okay, alright. We’ll talk again on Monday.”

And I don’t know what would’ve happened if I hadn’t walked into his office at that time, but fortunately, I called David Belin and I said, “Look, things have gotten really bad on this business with you and Rockefeller. Could you come in on Sunday?” And then I called Ford’s counsel, Phil Buchen and I
said, “Phil we’ve got a terrible problem here. Belin...” and so forth, “I think this can be worked out but you have to be involved in this in some way.” So Phil said, “Sure, when can we meet?” And I said, “Well, can you come in early on Sunday and Belin will come in from Iowa and I’ll come down from New York and maybe we can talk this out.” We did; we worked it out. We suggested to Belin that he was actually counsel to the commission in addition to being executive director and as counsel he had certain responsibilities as a lawyer, there were certain privileges that his clients had with respect to what he could say. Lawyers are bound by this attorney-client privilege and he agreed that, “Well, okay, Yes, I am a lawyer and I do have to abide by attorney-client privilege and, yes, many of the things I’m going to be hearing are privileged, so I don’t think I can say it.”

Smith: So he was willing to be reasonable?

Wallison: He was willing to be reasonable. And so by Monday morning, we had an agreement. And that averted this problem, but I saw that Rockefeller’s judgment at that point was not of the best, because anyone would have seen, given what had happened during Watergate and how sensitive everyone was to government abuses of various kinds at that point, the idea of firing this guy would have been really catastrophic, I think, politically for Rockefeller and for Ford.

Smith: How did the Domestic Council work?

Wallison: It worked in different ways during different administrations as you might imagine, but once it was established under Nixon, the underlying theory was wrong, I think. The underlying theory is that you could have a Domestic Council that was the analogue of the National Security Council, so that you could have a staff that remained over administrations. When a new administration came in, normally, the files were empty, everything was gone. It was cleaned out. They had to start from scratch. Except in the Security Council. For the National Security Council, probably because politics ended at the water’s edge, you still had a professional staff that was there. You might have a new National Security Advisor, but you had a professional staff with an institutional memory and so forth.
Not so in the domestic area. And the underlying idea was, “Yes, we could have this professional staff in the domestic area.” It doesn’t work. It doesn’t work. In fact, politics would dictate that you can’t have people involved in your domestic policy discussions who are not ultimately loyal to you, completely loyal to you, because the stakes are just too high. And so it never worked, but it started out that way. The person who was head of the Domestic Council during the Nixon administration was John Ehrlichman.

Smith: Ehrlichman?

Wallison: Ehrlichman, that’s right. Ehrlichman became head of the Domestic Council. That’s right. And that was really a serious effort to develop a staff that had specialized skills and would be able to advise the President, take what came in from the cabinet and advise the President about what policies to adopt.

Smith: You mention a name that I just want to stop for a moment. Because you mentioned Rod Hills, he said he came on whenever he came on, about the time Phil Arelda had left following a dispute between him and the Vice President.

Wallison: Well, it wasn’t really a dispute. Here’s what happened. Rockefeller had been told that he would be the vicar of domestic policy, or at least he believed he had been told he would be the vicar of domestic policy. And the question is, when you have this domestic council, what does that really mean? There’s a chairman of the Domestic Council and that could possibly be the vice president. The members of the Domestic Council were all the cabinet members, so it wasn’t a crazy idea that the vice president would be the chairman. Or, you could be in some way much more involved rather than just a chairman, a non-executive chairman. You could actually be involved in the day-to-day development of the policy. Rumsfeld was the Chief of Staff. Rumsfeld was a very clever fellow. And he said, “Well, I can’t have this. I can’t have Nelson Rockefeller in charge of domestic policy and Kissinger in charge of foreign policy. What am I supposed to be doing? And what is the President supposed to be doing?”
And so, he somehow worked it out that he would give Rockefeller a choice. That is, Rockefeller could become the chairman of the Domestic Council or, if he became chairman of the Domestic Council, then Phil Arelda would become the Executive Director of the Domestic Council and he would have his hands directly in everything that was going on.

Smith: Was Arelda seen, correctly or not, as a Rumsfeld person?

Wallison: Oh, yes. Yes. And Rockefeller for some reason thought about that as though the real question was whether the person who was running the Domestic Council was loyal to him or not. You can’t blame him, because he’d always been the executive, right, so he thought the important thing is the staff guy. If the staff guy who’s in charge of it is loyal to me, then I’m in charge.

Smith: Someone to look over his shoulder.

Wallison: Whereas if I’m just the non-executive chairman, that’s a titular position. I don’t really have control of anything and Phil Arelda is going to be in charge. And so, the choice he made was for him to not become chairman of the Domestic Council and Jim Cannon, who was his man, would become Executive Director of the Domestic Council. And the President then became chairman of the Domestic Council. That was the titular role there.

Well, that was a disaster from Rockefeller’s point of view, because even though Jim Cannon was loyal to Rockefeller - Rockefeller’s closest aide without any doubt - when you’re in that position, you understand where your loyalties are going. Your loyalties are not still going to Nelson Rockefeller; they’re going to Gerald Ford. And Jim did exactly what anyone with any sense would do, or any patriotism or anything else, you have to work for the President. And so, Jim’s line of communication ran through Rumsfeld to the President. Rockefeller was outside looking in. So, although he thought he would have control over the Domestic Council, he lost all control over it.

Smith: That raises a question, a large question and maybe an unanswerable question, but a guy who had spent as much time in Washington as he had in different administrations, in different roles, who had demonstrated, particularly in his early days, exactly this kind of ability to read the signals and to see where the
real power locus lay, and to cultivate the right patrons and to work the system. Was it simply that he’d been governor for 15 years and I won’t say it dulled his instincts, but it reprogrammed him in a sense that he brought that self-image into this situation?

Wallison: Yes, I think that’s probably the best hypothesis of all. I think he had been the emperor and he lost track of court politics. I mean, you forgot what court politics is like when you’re the emperor, naturally, because everything revolves around you. He never really got used to the idea that everything revolved around someone else in the Ford White House and that was Ford. So, I think that ultimately was the problem.

Smith: And then there is this huge cultural shift early on. Early in ’75, I guess, it’s announced. We talked to Jim about this, how he told the governor, it’s announced from the White House that there are not going to be any new programs until we get a handle on what we’re doing, budgetary reasons, so forth and so on, you know, for administrative of reasons. And Jim, I guess, flew up to New York and broke the news to the governor who had not heard about this before and who was literally scratching his head because where he came from, it’s not only a test of how you govern - the acid test of getting reelected is new programs, new ideas.

And he literally couldn’t grasp the rationale, the logic behind this. Plus the fact that he wasn’t consulted. And a couple of people have suggested to us that one of the generative factors in at least the timing of this was that the Vice President every week made it his practice to go to lunch with the President with a new idea. Usually with lots of enthusiasm and sometimes paperwork at the same time and that this was at least in part an attempt to send an unmistakable signal that that’s not the road we’re going to travel on this administration.

Wallison: Well, you know, I don’t remember that he went. I know he had lunch with the President every week, but I don’t remember that he had new policy ideas each time. The only new policy idea that I remember was the Energy Independence Authority, which he did get Ford to adopt as an idea.
Smith: There is a story, stop me if you’ve heard this, that this was debated more than once in cabinet meetings and Bill Simon was vociferous in his opposition and I guess somewhat cutting as he could be in some of the remarks he made. And the President indicated, well, that basically the debate was over and he was endorsing Nelson’s proposal. And Simon continued the debate in private and the President said, “Bill, you and I both know Congress is never going to adopt this, but I’m not going to embarrass Nelson.” Does that sound credible?

Wallison: Oh yes, absolutely. Absolutely credible. Rockefeller had done a tremendous amount of work on this and was very, very serious about it.

Smith: And the basic concept was?

Wallison: It was that the government would throw money into the business of developing alternative fuels. Guess what? It was very similar to what our current President is talking about, right? And I thought at the time it wasn’t such a good idea. I don’t think it’s a good idea now.

Smith: Because?

Wallison: Because the other fuels that we already have tend to be cheaper than the fuels that are developed through these artificial processes. What we’re going to do is gasify coal, liquefy coal, so that you could use liquid coal for powering cars. And things like gasified coal could be used for heating homes instead of natural gas. A lot of this stuff came out of the notion, and it was very common at the time that there were limits to natural resources. This was the global warming of that era, the climate change of that era.

Smith: And being the futurist that he is, this is far-sighted—

Wallison: Yes, that we’re soon going to exhaust the natural resources of the earth and so on. We’re never going to discover any new oil, and we’re not going to discover any more natural gas. So we really have to do something about this. Well, it turned out that wasn’t right. And as soon as oil was decontrolled, gas was decontrolled, we had so much of it prices plummeted.

Smith: Could it be argued that he was way ahead of his time?
Wallison: Well, you could argue it, but we still haven’t, maybe at some point in the future, we will come out of this, but if you’ve been reading the newspapers and listening to some of the news, you realize that now we’re going to have a lot of natural gas. They’ve discovered new ways to crack some of this shale that underlies almost all of the eastern United States and much of the western United States and much of Canada. And they can crack that with certain new techniques and produce so much methane, natural gas, that we have hundreds of years of natural gas even at increased use and much cheaper than we’ve had it before. So, yes, he might have been a thousand years ahead of his time, but what use is that?

Smith: I don’t think he would’ve been insulted if he had been told he was a thousand years ahead of his time.

Wallison: Probably not. Actually Carter did finally adopt the Energy Independence Authority. That did get passed, that got adopted by Congress under Carter, a Democratic Congress. No surprise there. Democrats, not only did they like the idea of limits to growth, but in addition, they liked the idea of spending money to create jobs. And Carter liked it because we had the oil embargo and that sort of thing, so we wanted to avoid, if possible, being held hostage to the Middle East. So, it was adopted. It started. Some plants were built, but they were producing this stuff at a cost that was more expensive, and no one wanted it. When Reagan came in and decontrolled everything, it was gone. Those things are probably abandoned right now. Maybe they’re used for shopping malls, but they’re not producing anything.

Smith: Was there an evolution in his relationship with the President, his attitude toward the President during those two years?

Wallison: I didn’t really see that. He always expressed loyalty in my presence to the President. He would sometimes criticize the President in the sense that, “Oh, poor Jerry, he’s not getting good advice from these people.” But that’s true of just about everybody. When I worked for Reagan, you certainly heard that. Every time Reagan made a decision that someone didn’t like it was that he was getting bad advice from somebody, but you had to let Reagan be Reagan.
Smith:  What was he like as a boss in those days?

Wallison:  Difficult. Very, very difficult in that he did not brook disagreement from his staff, in fact. I assume you have interviewed Dick Parsons.

Smith:  Right.

Wallison:  I hope you have interviewed him at length.

Smith:  Yes, I had a lunch discussion with him. I need to go back and do another one.

Wallison:  You should go back and interview Dick Parsons. Not only is he a fabulous guy, a great character and brilliant and perceptive, but Dick was my deputy when I was the Vice President’s counsel. Dick then went over to the Domestic Council as the counsel to the Domestic Council. Dick and I had a running joke and I forgot what we labeled it, but the idea was, if you told Rockefeller what he wanted to hear, he didn’t think you were of any use; and if you told him what he didn’t want to hear, he didn’t want to hear from you anymore. So, either way, you were out in the cold if you ever got into a situation where he actually asked you for straight from the shoulder advice. This guy was not Jack Wells - and if you watched all the people who circled around him, and I did, over many years.

Smith:  Hugh Morrow, for example.

Wallison:  Yes, those people hardly ever, I was not actually thinking specifically of Hugh, but that’s not bad, there was—

Smith:  Bill Ronan.

Wallison:  Bill Ronan, Oscar Reubhausen, and then the guy who was George—

Smith:  Hinman?

Wallison:  No, there was another George who had been head of the World Bank.

Smith:  George Woods?

Wallison:  George Woods.

Smith:  Yes.
Wallison: And I used to sit there in frustration because, you know, Rockefeller would be asking them for a decision on some issue and they would go all over the lot trying to avoid actually telling him what they thought, trying to send signals about what they thought, which Rockefeller, it seemed to me, didn’t seem to pick up. But he never seemed to get straight from the shoulder advice about a lot of things for that reason.

Smith: Do you think part of that, too, is 15 years as a governor of New York?

Wallison: Well, sure. I mean, there is a disease, a CEO’s disease, and that is, after awhile, you believe that your decisions, by and large, are the correct decisions. So you’ve already kind of got some idea of what you want to happen, and then when a person tells you exactly what you want to hear, well, that just reconfirms you in your position. In fact, the best executives are the ones who say, “I have my position. You don’t know what it is and I’m not going to tell you what it is, but I want you to tell me what your position is and why. And I promise you, if you articulate your position well and with reason, you will not be hurt if I don’t agree with you.” That’s the person who really gets good advice.

Smith: Was there a time at the beginning when he first took the job, when you were first down here together, when he sat either you or everyone down or when he sort of outlined how he saw the job and how he envisioned things unfolding?

Wallison: Yes, well, at the very start, we had meetings like that and especially around the question of who was going to head the Domestic Council.

Smith: Was that a defining chapter of his…?

Wallison: That was absolutely the defining chapter. The decision that was made to put Jim Cannon in as executive director, while Rockefeller would not be involved directly in the Domestic Council, was the decision that changed the whole relationship he had with the President and with domestic policy in this country. I’m quite sure of that. And I thought it was the wrong decision at the time, but that’s not how he saw it. And maybe, of course, if he’d made a different decision, Rumsfeld would’ve found another way to go around him if he had actually become Chairman of the Domestic Council. Well, then the
Domestic Council might never meet, or a number of other things might happen and Areeda might be doing what Cannon was later doing, and Rockefeller would’ve been cut out anyway. But I think if he’d had a title of some kind, or convening authority, and messages would have to go through him to get to the President, things would have been different.

Smith: Did he vocalize his unhappiness with Rumsfeld?

Wallison: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Rumsfeld became an enemy and throughout the rest of the administration, even when Rumsfeld went over to the Defense Department. As late as the 1976 campaign, Rockefeller was complaining that we had high unemployment because Rumsfeld was not spending the money that the Defense Department was appropriated for the various defense things and that had caused the economy to be weaker than it needed to be. If he had taken that money and spent it on the things he was supposed to spend it on. The implication was Rumsfeld really didn’t want to see Ford elected.

Smith: Which again gets into this sort of quasi-paranoia on Nelson Rockefeller’s part.

Wallison: Yes, there was that.

Smith: Now, it’s interesting, I’ll tell you quickly a story Bill Seidman told me originally, and I didn’t bring it up per se with Rumsfeld, whose instincts are still very quick. He’s still got a very keen antenna about sensing danger. The story was of Rockefeller as the good soldier. When Reagan was about to take the lead in delegates, Rockefeller made sure that New York and Pennsylvania were in the President’s camp and that’s really what gave Ford the lead. And, according to Seidman, who got the story from Rockefeller, at one of their weekly luncheons, shortly before the convention, Rockefeller told the President he wanted one thing. And that was he didn’t want Rumsfeld at the convention in Kansas City. And that if Rumsfeld was at the convention, he, Rockefeller, could not vouch for the loyalty of the New York and Pennsylvania delegations. And as the story was told to Seidman, Rumsfeld chose to have some elective surgery done that weekend, missed the convention.
When we talked to Rumsfeld it’s as if some sixth sense kicked in, and he detected the story that’s out there somewhere. And so he on his own said, “Oh, another one of Nelson’s paranoid fantasies was…” and he proceeds to tell all this. And it turns out he did have elective surgery, he went to Kansas City. He was there the last day of the convention which was when the President wanted the whole Cabinet there. To me that’s a non-denial denial. But in any event, Rockefeller was utterly convinced that Rumsfeld had been responsible for his removal and for deep-sixing George Bush at the CIA, basically to clear the field in the hopes that lightening would strike and he would be on the ticket. He went to his grave convinced that Rumsfeld was responsible for that.

Wallison: Or that Rumsfeld wanted to see Ford defeated because then he would be the leading candidate or one of the leading candidates in the next election.

Smith: But I’ll tell you how far that went, I mean, you may already know this. There was a guy, Jack, I don’t remember his name, from Grand Rapids, kind of a two-bit local pol who was in the early phases, kind of the exploratory campaign, working on it for his friend Jerry. And he was killed in an auto accident. Rockefeller was convinced that he was murdered. I mean, it’s that level, you know what I mean?

Wallison: I saw that, sure.

Smith: Did you sense that?

Wallison: Yes, I saw it with Bill Colby, having to do with the “family jewels.” Bill Colby, you know, in Rockefeller’s view was a traitor to the country by disclosing this.

Smith: And what was Colby’s explanation or rationale for doing what he did?

Wallison: Oh, I can’t remember, but I think what he said was that this was something that had to be exposed at some point and couldn’t be kept under wraps anymore. We were in a different era and that kind of thing. But, you know, I think a lot of it had already been discovered by the journalist, Seymour Hirsch. And so probably I think Rockefeller actually thought that Colby had
given it to Hirsch for whatever reason. I don’t know what he might have thought was the rationale for this, but he disliked Colby enormously. Thought he was disloyal to the country and so forth. And it was Rumsfeld and then Colby and you just hoped you weren’t third.

Smith: And I take it he really was a Cold Warrior. Stu Spencer said, “Of all the candidates, including Ronald Reagan, Nelson Rockefeller was the hardest line anti-communist of anyone.”

Wallison: Yes, I would think that’s right. He really was. And that was one of his good features as far as I was concerned. He really was a strong person on military matters and could not be moved on that.

Smith: When he was dumped, people always ask was he pushed or did he jump? And he was pushed.

Wallison: Oh, yes.

Smith: Did it come as a surprise?

Wallison: My impression is that it did. I don’t remember how I got that impression. I think maybe just talking with him afterward or having been in the room when he was talking to someone else about it. Or maybe it was just the fact that I was privy to enough of what was going on in his office that at that point late into 1976, that I would’ve heard if he had actually known this was going to happen. So I do think it was a surprise.

Smith: Did his mood change? I mean, in the remaining year, was there a difference?

Wallison: Yes, there was a big difference. Well, I lost track of him, really, because I went to the Dole campaign. I was the liaison between the Dole campaign and the White House staff and the Ford campaign. Right after the Republican convention, when Dole was nominated, he was looking for someone to be the liaison person. And I seemed like, I guess, the ideal candidate from his point of view because I was on Rockefeller’s staff, I wasn’t on the White House staff, but I knew everyone on the White House staff because I used to attend all of the senior staff meetings on behalf of Rockefeller. I was the guy who attended all the senior staff meetings in the morning, the 8 o’clock staff
meeting that was, in fact, presided over by Ford. I was the person who represented Rockefeller on those things, so I knew all those guys.

Smith: That’s interesting, I didn’t know the President himself presided.

Wallison: Yes.

Smith: And how did he preside?

Wallison: He’d go around the room. It wasn’t like under Reagan. In the Reagan administration, Reagan ran the 8 o’clock staff meeting, the major staff meeting in the Reagan White House when I was there. What that focused on was the news of the day. I always thought that was a mistake because you’ve got off-message immediately. You started talking about what the *Washington Post* was saying, what the *New York Times* was saying. Ford didn’t do it that way. He would go around the room, “What is your objective for today?”, “What news do you have to tell me?” and so forth and we’d all sit around the table and if we had something to report, we say it to Ford.

Smith: It’s interesting, one story line of the Ford presidency - a guy who becomes President, in some ways has to outgrow his congressional training, has has to become an executive. It’s been said that, whatever other faults he had, Don Rumsfeld was a very effective coach in some ways about that. One of the poignant aspects is that Ford, I think, himself felt that in ’76 he had just about mastered the job and then he lost it. Did you see an evolution or a growth in the President?

Wallison: I can’t really say that from those contexts, which were just these morning meetings - those were the only ones where I really saw Ford in action - that I saw much change. I was impressed with Ford from the beginning. He was a very serious man and a person that took his job very seriously.

Smith: I assume you saw a dichotomy between some of the public image - you know, whether it was the kind of stumbling around, that as a euphemism for, “You know he’s not intellectually up to the job.”

Wallison: I never saw that. I saw a lot of very interesting issues debated among the senior staff and Ford was a participant in that and knew the facts. He was up
on what the issues were and he raised a lot of the issues himself. I was impressed with Ford as an executive and as a president in a way that I’d never been as impressed by Rockefeller.

Smith: Really?

Wallison: Oh, Yes. Sure. Rockefeller did not have what you would call a critical intelligence. Rockefeller really didn’t know how to analyze a problem and go behind the first order description of it and go back and say, “Well, what if this fact changes or that fact changes?” and so forth. That’s just not the way his mind worked.

Smith: Was he a creature of enthusiasms?

Wallison: Yes, he was enthusiastic. He would’ve been a great salesman. He had that kind of marketing skill, marketing himself, marketing his ideas, but you couldn’t expect him to go back and see the weakness in the things he was talking about.

Smith: I’ve often thought it’s ironic that he’s remembered today for the Rockefeller drug laws. The fact is that was his third attempt to eliminate the scourge of drugs. I mean, the notion there’s no such thing as a problem that can’t be solved.

Wallison: Yes, he certainly believed that, and even though he couldn’t necessarily solve these problems, he could convene people who could solve problems, or at least get them together to talk about it, and out of that discussion would come something. But Nelson Rockefeller had very, very little idea about the basics.

This Commission on Critical Choices was an awful experience because he didn’t really understand how studies are done. When you do a study, you have to start with a hypothesis of some kind, a theory. What do you think the problem is? Let’s attack that problem. Rockefeller seemed to think that if you knew all the facts, the problem would present itself in some way as though you didn’t really have to have any theory. If all the facts were accumulated in front of you, then you’d know everything you had to know. There was no effort on his part to say, “We need relevant facts.” And how do
you make facts relevant? You make facts relevant by saying, “Well, here’s my hypothesis about what has happened or what should happen. Let’s collect the facts that are relevant to that hypothesis.” He would not have a hypothesis. He wanted the facts to be prepared and then for some reason he thought if he just had the facts, he would eventually have a solution. You get a lot of smart people together, but it never worked.

Smith: It’s interesting that you put it that way. Because my sense is also there was never an ideology. I mean it’s one thing to say, “I’m a pragmatic problem-solver,” but there really was no framework that I can discern. I mean there were certainly, it was the cold war era, there were priorities. But again, the drug problem’s a classic example. I mean, he would swing from one extreme to another. “If this didn’t work, we’ll do the opposite.” And in some ways, someone who’d read part of my book in manuscript the other night said to me, “You know, he didn’t leave very much. He didn’t leave much behind.” And I thought about it and, you know, aside from buildings and legends and an example - for some people an example to avoid - he didn’t leave much behind in a philosophical way.

Wallison: Right, because he was very, very pragmatic. That was the phrase at the time.

Smith: I wonder to what extent the dyslexia was a factor. And the reason I mention that is because, clearly, he said to people, “The best way to read a book is to get the author to come in and tell you in 15 minutes.” I mean, he really was absolutely dead serious about this. And he said, “When we ran the reports, the special studies, people would digest the book and the author would come in and in 15 minutes tell you the essence of what the book was.” There is something frightening about that in terms of doing anything in-depth. I wonder whether that is part of this, unwillingness, perhaps an inability, to go deeply beneath the surface, in part because of the dyslexia?

Wallison: That would be my explanation because he was not a person who was deep. He was not deep. And I had a couple of experiences with him that were just amazing. One was, and this doesn’t necessarily talk about depth, but it talks about a guy who, for all his involvement in policy and in current events, seemed to have missed some pretty obvious things. At the time, there was
real concern about a layer in the atmosphere, I’ve now forgotten the name of it, but it was being destroyed by hydro fluorocarbons.

Smith: The ozone?

Wallison: The ozone layer, that’s right. Guy Stever, who was the head of the National Science Foundation, came in one day to brief Rockefeller on this subject. Now, I happened to be Rockefeller’s one substantive person on his staff. I did all the substantive work that there was to be done on the Rockefeller staff and that says something about what involvement Rockefeller really had in policy issues.

Smith: Particularly given his reputation for attracting talent.

Wallison: Right. And so, I was invited to sit in on this meeting with Guy Stever and Stever was telling him about the scientific work that was going on and what the National Science Foundation was doing. They got onto the subject of chlorofluorocarbons and Guy Stever was telling him about how dangerous all these spray cans were. Then Stever left and Rockefeller says to me, “Peter, wait a minute.” I was leaving, too. He says, “Peter, wait a minute.” I said, “Yes, governor.” He said, “How do all those spray cans get up there?” And I thought at first he was making a joke and so I hesitated, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. And I said, “Well, governor, it’s not the cans, it’s the chemical in the cans that floats up there because it’s lighter than the air down below and it goes up and it has an effect on the ozone layer.” He said, “Oh, oh, okay.” Now, either his sense of humor was exceedingly subtle, so he played me on that and later on said, “You know what he said to me?” But I don’t think that was the case.

Smith: You know that answers itself.

Wallison: I don’t think that’s what happened. But another time and when he was still governor, in fact, we were talking about a policy matter and this was completely unbelievable to me. Someone came in and said, “Well, Governor, there are a number of trade-offs in this whole area.” Then the person left and he turned to the rest of us who were there and he said, “This guy kept talking about trade-offs. What are trade-offs?” I thought to myself, “Wow. Here he’s
been involved in policy as governor of the state of New York for all these years. People must have used the word trade-offs before because that’s the essence of policy. One side or the other and you have to find a balance for the consequences of the things that you are doing. How could he not know what the person was talking about when he referred to trade-offs?” And yet, he didn’t appear to.

Smith: Yes, there were strange gaps. Ron Maiorana, who was a press secretary told me this story. One day, he came into the office and Rockefeller was furious, just furious. He had the New York Times. He said, “Do you know what he said about me? Can you believe he did this?” Well, it was Lindsay and the headline was Lindsay Chides Rockefeller. Rockefeller bought that chides was semi-obscene and he didn’t know what chides was. And you know some of it’s cultural. In the ’58 campaign he’d never heard of the term bar mitzvah or take-home pay. Well, that’s kind of almost endearing. You know, it’s a cocoon. But 15 years later, and you begin to say, okay dyslexia goes so far.” But then the other thing it raises and I don’t mean to keep beating this, but I wonder if other people in the office ever, did anyone say anything to lead you to believe that they thought - I use the euphemism he wasn’t aging well - but that he wasn’t what he had been?

Wallison: Well, you know, Richard, it could be that someone did say these things to you, but I just don’t remember anymore. And I don’t remember my having that impression at the time until the Republican convention. At the time of the Republican convention when he put on that terrible show, I thought to myself… Oh, oh, no. I guess that was the beginning. Afterward in the campaign it was really bad, especially that one day when he flipped the bird at all the protestors in an airplane hangar during a rally and then he denied that he had done it until someone produced a photograph. But I came back one day after being on the campaign trail for awhile, I came into his office to say ‘hello’ and he’s signing photographs of himself going like that (flipping the bird). And I said, “Wait a minute. You’re the Vice President of the United States.” Now, of course, the Vice President of the United States can do anything he wants, but in that period, in 1976, we were a little bit more
starchy and that was not something that the vice president would do. And plus, he’s a Rockefeller.

Smith: At the convention, are you referring to the telephone incident?

Wallison: Yes.

Smith: Did he yank the telephone?

Wallison: Yes, he yanked the telephone away from the guy who was the head of the delegation or something like that. Tore down someone’s sign, someone was carrying an anti-Ford sign, maybe a Reagan guy or something like that. A sign was waved in his face and he grabbed it and pulled it off the stick. We were all sitting in the gallery. I and Susan Herter and Dick Allison and a couple of other people and we all looked at one another, “Oh, man, this is terrible. This is really terrible what he’s doing. He’s really acting out.”

Smith: I take there was no one to call that to his attention.

Wallison: Well, I wasn’t one.

Smith: Would Ann Whitman have done it, do you think?

Wallison: She might have. Susan Herter might have done it. Susan Herter was a very out-spoken woman. I’m a little surprised that she wouldn’t participate. Susan was an outspoken, tough bird and if you want to talk about “of Rockefeller’s class,” she was of Rockefeller’s class, and talked the way Rockefeller is accustomed to women talking. I mean she’d talk like this. She was definitely WASP upper-class and the wife of Christian Herter.

Smith: Did you have any contact with Happy?

Wallison: Oh, yes! Oh, yes, she was very nice to me. She was a lovely woman, and I liked her quite a lot, but we were not in any sense friends. But whenever she saw me, she was very effusive and remembered my name and so forth.

Smith: There’s still uncertainty as to whether she really didn’t like politics. She was obviously very devoted to the kids, I mean, that always came first. And he said himself that he’d made his mistakes with his first family and a number of
people said he was much more attentive to the boys than he had been to his first family and all of that.

You had a whole year, in effect, when you knew he wasn’t going to be there after January ’77. Did he talk at all about the future?

Wallison: If he did, I don’t remember at this point whether he talked to me about it or whether in general he passed some remarks. I just don’t remember at this point. Memories do fade. Mine may be faster than others.

Smith: Oh sure.

What was it like to be the liaison of the Dole campaign after the Democrat wars?

Wallison: Oh, that was an amazing experience. Bob Dole is an amazing character himself and we will not probably see his like again, as they say. But fantastic sense of humor, some fantastic timing, but not a morning person. Now, if we had a 24-hour news cycle as we do now, then things wouldn’t have been so bad, but at that time, all the stories in the evening were made in the morning. And Dole was a bear in the morning. And if the news people could possibly throw a question at him and get him to answer, it was a catastrophic answer, because he was always bitter and angry in the morning. And so he played right to type. The narrative about Dole, he was a hatchet man. You’re not doing anything on Dole, here.

Smith: No, but we’ve done a Dole oral history project.

Wallison: Really?

Smith: Because I ran the Dole Institute for a couple of years, put it together.

Wallison: Oh, that’s right.

Smith: So I always am looking for stories.

Wallison: Well, I have a story about “Democrat wars,” because I accompanied him everywhere and we used to go living room meetings with twelve Republicans in someone’s living room in Minnesota. And he would talk and he would
mention Democrat wars. And no one said a word. And I thought, “That’s really bad. I mean, he can’t really be saying this publicly.” And so, the night of the debate, I was in charge of briefing him for the debate. And I didn’t brief him on everything, but I brought in a lot of people like Alan Greenspan and other people to brief him on the things he had to know about the economy and so forth. But there were certain things that I knew that I had to talk to him about as he was being made-up. And I had a long list of things. The campaign wants you to say this, but you shouldn’t say that. He’s listening to me. He doesn’t take advice very easily.

Smith: He’s not easily handled.

Wallison: Not easily handled. I had a long list and he wasn’t reacting particularly well. I came to Democrat wars and I thought to myself, “No, I won’t say this because he’ll never say this in the debate. Naw.” So I skipped over it and I went on to some other things and then, of course, that was the thing that he said.

Smith: Sunday C-SPAN will be airing one of our Dole interviews, they’ll be airing the interview I did with Walter Mondale. And I said to Mondale, “You must have been standing there saying, ‘Oh, thank you, Lord’.” And he laughed, and he said, “Well, you know, Bob had an off night.” He said, “You know, we pols aren’t very bright. We’ve got a few applause lines and if they work, we reuse them.” And he said, “Bob used that line out there and it got applause.” He also said, in his preparation for that night, someone brought up the likelihood that Bob Dole would use that and Mondale said, “Oh, he’d never say that.” He said the same thing. You and Walter Mondale had the exact same reaction.

Wallison: That is fascinating.

Smith: Complete the circle thirty years later.

Wallison: That is fascinating.

Smith: Isn’t it something?

Wallison: Yes. Amazing.
Smith: Was there blowback at all? With the Ford Polish gaff, I mean, clearly we can document that went on for a week because he was so stubborn and wouldn’t concede that he’d screwed up.

Wallison: Uhm, Yes, there was a lot of blowback in the press about that and I think it put us on the defensive for a long time. I mean, Mondale’s response, if it was off the cuff and hadn’t thought about it, was great.

Smith: It was.

Wallison: And Dole really recognized that he shouldn’t have said it. He recognized it was a big mistake to say it. But the Dole campaign was great fun even so. I mean, even though, we travelled.

Smith: Ad hoc?

Wallison: Yes, a lot of it was. And you know we stayed in the worst possible places and we went to the worst possible places.

Smith: There’s a famous story that one day, supposedly, he pointed his finger to somewhere on the map and said, “Let’s go there.” I mean, it was that level of improvisation.

Wallison: It might have been. I don’t know but it was fun because he was so funny. And even the travelling press liked to be with him because he was always funny and kept them amused. And in fact, at one point, he would be giving speeches and there was a certain joke that he would tell every once in awhile and the press loved that. The press would be standing in front of the podium in the little pen that they’d set up for the press and they’d say, “Tell them the bear story! Tell them the bear story!” It was a very funny joke, but he told it in a way that everyone broke up whenever he told it, even though we’d heard him tell it 25 times. It was about a bear that goes into a bar and he puts a five dollar bill down on the bar. And the bartender says, “What can I do for you?” And the bear says, “Give me a beer.” And the bartender says, “I don’t know.” He goes in the back and he talks to the proprietor and he says, “You know, a bear just came into the bar, sat down on the stool, put a five dollar bill there, and said, ‘Give me a beer’ What should I do?” The proprietor says, “Give
him his beer.” So he gives him the beer, takes the five dollar bill and the bear’s sitting there nursing the beer. Finally the bartender can’t resist anymore. He says, “You know, we don’t get many bears in here.” And the bear says, “I don’t wonder why at $5 a bottle.” Now, when I tell the story, no one will fall on the floor, but the press would just break up and, of course, the audience who’d heard it for the first time would break up. He had a way of telling a joke unlike anyone I’ve ever seen.

Smith: I’ve always thought that behind that very dry, sometimes sardonic wit is a very healthy sense of the ridiculous.

Wallison: Oh, Yes. Absolutely.

Smith: And if you don’t have that in this town, you know…

Wallison: He’s very smart, a very smart guy. And he saw the ironies of life but he couldn’t really control his anger; there was an element in him that was very bitter because of some of the things that happened to him. But he was smart enough to see all of the ironies and all of the posturings and everything else. But unfortunately he had that one problem that he couldn’t restrain himself. And if he could’ve done that, he could’ve been a really great pol, he might have been elected President.

Smith: Time, in many ways for both Dole and President Ford, time was good to them. I mean, Dole went on to become the face of the WWII generation and a kind of national grandfather. In a curious sort of way, people voted for Clinton but they admired Dole more.

Wallison: Yes, I think that’s right.

Smith: And Ford lived long enough to see people come around to his way of thinking on the pardon. When the Kennedy Library gave him the Profiles in Courage award, he said, “You know, for 25 years, everywhere I go people ask the same questions. Since then, they don’t ask the questions anymore.” So, you know, he had that. Rockefeller didn’t have that satisfaction in his last years.

Wallison: Well, I’ve always thought that Rockefeller never quite got it. He got that, in order to be president, you have to sacrifice. He was not prepared to sacrifice.
And anyone else who really wanted to be president would not have divorced his first wife. Nowadays you can divorce three wives and be elected president, but Rockefeller thought that he could—

Smith: Happy says, when I interviewed her, she said, “You know, I don’t know how much Nelson really wanted to be president, because every time he got close,” as she put it, “he would go do something stupid like marrying me.”

Wallison: It was an amazing thing. I mean, he wanted it, but he wanted it on his own terms.

Smith: That’s the title of my book - *On His Own Terms*.

Wallison: Really?

Smith: Yes, because it does capture - whether it was art, women, life, death - I think he thought he could take death on his own terms. The last part of the story is more poignant and less sordid than it seems, because I really thought he thought he could control that, too. It’s a sad story in a lot of ways.

Wallison: Oh, Yes, definitely a sad story about this man.

Smith: Did you see him at all after he left the vice presidency?

Wallison: I don’t think so.

Smith: He really did kind of pull up the drawbridge.

Wallison: Well, I mean, I’m sure he saw others. I was just not one of them. I went back to New York. I was practicing law. In fact, I was living in Washington for a year or two. Then I went back to New York and practiced law in New York so, even though he was there, I’d lost touch with him. I don’t remember that there were any reunions or things like that, although I did keep in touch with some people like Jim Cannon and others. This also came up while he was vice president, this business of on his own terms because we were talking before about Rockefeller being interested in ideas, in policy and so forth.

Now, the traditional role of the vice president is to go out and eat the rubber chicken and whipped potatoes and endear himself to county chairmen - raise
funds for them, praise them, keep in touch and send them letters and so forth. Rockefeller would hardly ever do that. He wanted to stay in Washington and have some involvement, whatever that involvement was, in the policy-making in Washington. So, of course, when Reagan started to be a threat to Ford, hardly anyone in the party knew anything about Rockefeller, who he was or what his real views were - what they had in mind was the old Rockefeller.

Smith: Yes, what they remembered from ’64.

Wallison: Right, the guy who just showed up a year before the election with a lot of money and thought he was entitled to get the nomination. He didn’t really help them. He didn’t really show the party how interested he was, and I thought that was always part of the same problem. That is, he thought he could do it on his terms and it didn’t work.

Smith: Did he have enough to keep him busy?

Wallison: I don’t think so. Maybe that’s why he was engaged in a dalliance, as they used to call it. But I don’t think he, I couldn’t imagine what he was doing.

Smith: That art reproduction business, I mean, it was really kind of make-work. He put a lot of money into it. He was in hock to his trust 14 million dollars. So he decided he would write a memoir. So he sat down with Hugh Morrow and he did 1200 pages of oral history which I have. He had very harsh things to say about Eisenhower, for example. And some of them are off the wall.

Wallison: Really?

Smith: Yes. Of course, FDR was his great hero. George Hinman said to Ann Whitman, when they had this discussion about does he really want to be president, Hinman had an interesting take. He said, “It isn’t that he doesn’t think he’s more qualified than Richard Nixon or Jack Kennedy or Hubert Humphrey, but he was raised by FDR. To him, FDR is a model of what the presidency is and Hinman believed that that, among other things, contributed to this on again, off again. It’s one reason why in some ways his legacy is so thin.
Wallison: Well, a lot of talent there, a lot of political talent, but not the full package, as they say. He just didn’t have the full package to be president. And actually I had concluded that he would not be a good president at all, because he had a dangerous quality of being able to convene people, but then not to fully understand what they were saying and what consequences of it would be. And so, he could’ve made a mess out of things.

Smith: Last thing. How do you think, thinking about Gerald Ford historically, how do you think he should be remembered?

Wallison: Ford, in many ways, had the qualities that I so admired in Ronald Reagan without the ideological stuff that I also liked. I am a Reagan person. But Ford had this Midwestern solidity, honesty, straightforwardness, at least as far as I could see, very little ego. Reagan was the same way. And I was just reading something, someone quoted Lincoln as having exactly the same kind of view of himself that Reagan and Ford had. “You know, I’m just an ordinary guy.” I favor, in Reagan’s case, he’d say, “Yes, they say I’m a great communicator but that’s because I communicate great things, it’s not me. It’s the ideas.” And Ford had much of that. I always thought that, this is a little bit of an aside, but Edmund Morris, who was Reagan’s biographer, so to speak, the guy who had the unique opportunity to watch a president operate, never could figure out Ronald Reagan. He couldn’t figure Ronald Reagan because Ronald Reagan was brought up in an era where you didn’t talk about yourself. I heard one about George H.W. Bush that his mother told him, “Not the great I am, you don’t talk about yourself.” I’m sure that was the case.

Smith: Edmund’s a friend, but I’ve often thought Edmund is also a romantic. He’s a great romantic and that’s why he and TR - particularly the first volume. Now the second volume - it’s a very different book because Edmund’s really not very interested in government.

Wallison: Right. Exactly. He’s interested in personality. And TR was perfect because of that.

Smith: And I think he, being a romantic, convinced himself early on that Ronald Reagan was somehow TR’s lineal descendent. And he was bound to be
disappointed given Edmund’s almost Henry Jamesian literary approach. That’s not Ronald Reagan. But the notion that Reagan is unfathomable or so distant, I mean, it’s—

Wallison: It was right on the surface and that is Reagan. Reagan was politics or policy. Reagan was policy and philosophy and that’s what he thought about himself. That’s why he was special because he, from his point of view, had been imbued with wonderful ideas, great ideas for this country. Just like Lincoln didn’t think of himself as a great man but just an ordinary man.

Smith: And both came almost as an instrument of forces larger than themselves.

Wallison: That’s right. And I thought Ford was of that kind. So I’d put Ford with Reagan and with Lincoln, but not with Nixon, not with Clinton and certainly not with the current person.

Smith: I think that’s a perfect note on which to end.
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Smith: First of all, obviously, we’d be interested in knowing about your life before you crossed paths with Gerald Ford. What happens before this story begins?

Jones: Well, in many ways, I was just like Gerald Ford – a Midwestern boy. I lived on a farm in Indiana. Used to milk cows by hand and drove the tractor, and I was a farm-son. When I was on the farm I wanted to be a broadcaster, and I wanted to be a newsman.

Smith: This would be roughly when?


Smith: Was it Murrow who inspired this?

Jones: I don’t know what inspired it. Suddenly I had this desire to do it. The fascinating thing is that, at Fairmont High School, Fairmont, Indiana, a little town of 2,500 people. Just a word on that later – but I had senior cords. All the seniors wore yellow cords – that was a big thing when you were a senior. And then you had them painted with cartoons and names of people and so forth. And I remember taking my yellow cords to the artist up in Marion, which is ten miles away, and telling her that I wanted a leg a trombone player, because I’d been in the high school band playing trombone. And on the other, I wanted a broadcaster. Now I remembered telling her and I wore those yellow cords throughout my senior year. You seldom got them dry cleaned because they might fade. But many years later, after I had ended up at CBS, I still had them, and I took them off the hanger one day and looked. And this broadcaster is standing at the old-time microphone, and on the microphone it says CBS. But anyway, I think being from the Midwest really did help me understand and appreciate President Ford much more. All these Midwesterners tend to stick together.

Smith: And there is a bit of a cultural condescension toward the Midwest, isn’t there?
Jones: Oh yes, and we all have the little – I have the Hoosier twang, and Gerald Ford had all these little things where he used to talk about gar-an-teeing instead of guaranteeing.

Smith: And judg-a-ment.

Jones: And judg-a-ment. And I must say that I have a lot of the same, so I never really it found it too funny to make fun of him. But, anyway, I had that background and I did some years in local television in Terra Haute, Indiana, and then I went on to WCCO in Minneapolis-St. Paul, which was the best CBS affiliate at the time. And I ended up at CBS because I was at WCCO.

Smith: Now that wouldn’t have been, by any chance, the sort of stand in for the Mary Tyler Moore affiliate in Minneapolis?

Jones: Well, I think that part of the history of that TV market, not necessarily WCCO, but the whole market, was a very energized news market and it was so because it was a major-league state. It was major-league – we had a football team – the Vikings – and we had the Minnesota Twins baseball, and we had two major-league politicians, by the name of Hubert Humphrey and Eugene McCarthy. That’s where I really did get accustomed and used to, and enjoy politics – because they were so involved. I said, I really want to do that. But anyway, I ended up at CBS because I was at WCCO.

Smith: And when did you come to the network?

Jones: In 1969. April of 1969. I was one of Cronkite’s kids. CBS was the name of the game – sorry NBC and ABC. That’s where you wanted to be.

Smith: Was it still the house that Murrow built, or had Cronkite made it his own?

Jones: No, I never worked with – I had met Murrow – but he was legend, and Walter moved right in. The transition was seamless. It was where news was done. And not made. And that’s where the networks have all gotten into trouble, because they have become news makers.

Smith: That’s interesting, because one of the criticisms that modern news people make of that generation is that it was supposedly too Washington-centric.
Remember the amount of time – I bet if you went back and looked at the old Cronkite broadcasts – the amount of time that devoted – and NBC with Brinkley was the same way – the amount of time that was devoted to what was happening on the Capitol Hill. Process. Less celebrity journalism and more political journalism, if you will.

Jones: And shorter pieces. Keep in mind, the newscasts started out, at least Huntley-Brinkley at ABC, and Douglas Edwards, started out as fifteen minutes. And so they didn’t have time for a lot of long things. Plus, back then, journalism was all about – much like newswires AP and UPI, and that’s pretty much where we got our news from. It was developed from there, but the first go would be from a wire story. And at CBS, Walter, being an old wire service reporter, he loved process and was not ashamed at all of it. Other correspondents and producers in New York ridiculed him a lot for that, and made fun of the broadcast – “Oh, my God, another Washington piece – another political piece.” But, back then, politics, political stories and government stories got on because Walter Cronkite thought they were important. And in the generations that have passed since then, it’s a superficiality of the producer - who cares about the process – we just want – what’s the bottom line? As a result, they’ve destroyed it.

Smith: I remember the first time I was doing PBS for the convention was in 2000 and I used to gripe that, at that point, the networks were being overly influenced by cable. And now, it’s the internet that in many ways is defining the standards, which is an oxymoron when you are dealing with the internet. Networks have abandoned coverage to cable. But even where they are still covering it, they’ve got an eye over their shoulder at what cable is doing, and to some degree, the web.

Jones: The networks of today, and I’m speaking broadly, there are some exceptions, but they are conceding news to everybody – to the internet, to the local, whatever. And they don’t care anymore. It is all about the bottom line and never in the history of this country, have we needed experienced journalism like we do now. And they are not there because they have either been worn
down and left on their own, or they were making too much money and they were put out to pasture by the networks.

Smith: And also it was a water cooler nation. The fact is that what Cronkite covered one night, people talked about the next morning around the water cooler. That’s really gone. What gets people talking – a celebrity divorce – it’s a much more ephemeral, superficial, in many ways, celebrity journalism - if that’s not an oxymoron.

Jones: No. It’s cable. Cable ought to be the most wonderful thing that’s ever happened to this country. They’ve got time. They’ve got twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. And, again, I’m making a generality here, but what did they do with that 24/7? They don’t cover the news, they talk about the news. And they’ll pay the Lou Dobbs and Bill O’Reilly these enormous amounts of money – but that’s still cheaper than putting together a staff big enough to uncover the news.

Smith: Now there are two things, because I remember at one point during the convention coverage, Judy Woodruff made a very shrewd observation. I’m sure other people have said it, but it’s the first time I’ve heard it said quite this way because it goes to the heart of what’s happened, particularly to the conventions. “Cable needs a new narrative every twenty-four hours.” The dirty little secret is there is not enough news to fill a 24/7 news cycle, but you need a new narrative. You get the story line and you get a new twist which you can debate endlessly until the next twist comes along. Black hats, white hats, it’s much more about opinion than it is about journalism.

Jones: Exactly, and that new narrative, that new lead for the next half hour is determined by some kid just out of journalism school, who is cheap and has no experience, and they hype like you wouldn’t believe. And as a result, I think the major networks have gone a long way to destroy news and their credibility. But right there are the cables, too. And people are not stupid. They’re watching this stuff and they have determined that it’s sort of irrelevant.

Smith: It’s showbiz.
Jones: And they are live and there is not much credibility, and that their lives are swirling around and they have to prioritize. It used to be when they were cutting that pie three ways with ABC, CBS, and NBC. Those days it was appointment television. The evening newscasts were an appointment. You planned your day, and I planned my day, so I would be there to watch the evening news. Why? Because I learned that if I wasn’t [there], I might miss something. The water cooler – that I wouldn’t be able to talk to somebody at the water cooler the next day. Well, once the networks started softening their news with some producers saying, “Well, you know we’ve got to get rid of process stories and politics and government, and all of this, and we’ve got to put more human interest…” Once it started doing that, well, the consumer, the viewer, detected that and said, “Well, after five minutes, why am I watching this? I don’t need it.” And now they don’t need it, and they are not there. It’s really tragic.

Smith: Here’s a segway…because there was never on the planet, a more assiduous newspaper reader than Gerald Ford. As long as he was traveling he had a half dozen newspapers – that was a ritual – that’s how the day began. You didn’t bother him until he was done with his newspapers. How did your paths first cross?

Jones: Well, I had gone to the Washington bureau from Vietnam and Hong Kong. I had been gone for a year in Hong Kong and I was assigned to the legendary Washington news bureau. We had twenty-seven correspondents there.

Smith: Was there jockeying for the post-Cronkite era?

Jones: Oh, yeah, sure. Roger Mudd and Dan Rather. And that was in the Washington area. Of course back then Bob Shieffer thought that he should have been considered, too. He was sort of disappointed at the time that he wasn’t. But he got the last laugh.

Smith: Yes, he did.

Jones: But, anyway, in New York you had Mike Wallace and Harry Reasoner, and these big guns who also thought that they ought to replace Walter. And Walter had to fight all these people all the time. Other names in Washington
were David Schumacher, who really thought that he…anyway, there were a long list of people who said, “I’m the next Walter Cronkite.” And he hung around and he hung around.

Smith: And would have liked to hang around longer?

Jones: He got pushed out. And the real irony of all of this is that he was eased out to make room for Dan Rather. Roone Arledge at ABC had decided he was hiring as many people at CBS as he could. Even at one point, in one of my contract cycles, I was wooed by Roone to go to replace Sam Donaldson at the White House. So it was a big deal. Roone offered Dan the contract – not to anchor their evening news, but as a sort of roving correspondent. Well, CBS panicked and they had their audience research people go out and they determined from that, that they could afford to lose Roger Mudd. No big deal, but they couldn’t afford to lose Dan Rather.

That’s when they made the decision and that’s when they went to Walter and said would you please retire and step aside and we’ll still use you. Walter did it reluctantly. But he also did it because he had been assured that he would continue to be a force on the CBS Evening News. That didn’t work out because, for some reason, Dan thought that the change should be made, the transition should occur, and that Walter hanging around would be nothing but trouble. And once Walter wasn’t used, that’s when he started to get his bitterness over CBS.

But, the tragedy here, again Walter, as part of his enticement to leave, they put him on the CBS board of directors. And he had a big say. When Larry Tisch bought managing control of CBS and did the first slaughter of the CBS news budget, I contend, never could prove that, but I contend that, had Dan Rather and Walter Cronkite gotten along – had Dan treated Walter better, and had they been allies, Larry Tisch would have never been able to pull off that gutting of the CBS News.

Smith: And you stop to think, for Paley – I think there must be nothing worse than to outlive your creation. I mean, here he is convincing himself that Larry Tisch is his white knight and living long enough to see the consequences of that.
Jones: Of course, he was weary. Paley was weary at that point between Jessie Helms and Ted Turner who were trying to…Jessie Helms was running around Washington saying, “I’m going to become Dan Rather’s boss.” So, the whole thing had to be tragic for Paley. These people who replaced him, every one of them hadn’t even been close to the class act that Bill Paley was. And some of them have very specifically done everything they could, to destroy the reputation and name of Bill Paley.

Smith: You don’t hear CBS referred to as the Tiffany Network these days.

Jones: No. It’s somewhere in here (referring to bookshelf) is, “Who killed CBS?” has got a book. But that’s a complicated answer and it would take more than one volume to do that. On the other hand, you can sort of cut to the bottom on who killed CBS. Larry Tisch – I’m sorry, he’s gone now – but he should have been, when he was alive, he should have been taken to Times Square and publicly executed on the *CBS Morning News*.

Smith: Which Mr. Paley would have seen.

Jones: Yes.

Smith: When you were in the Washington bureau, where were you assigned, initially?

Jones: In 1972 I was assigned from Hong Kong to the Washington bureau. And I came as a general assignment reporter. I was at the bottom of the heap. Bill Small was the legendary bureau chief at the time, always made sure that he reminded young upstarts like me of where I stood in that bureau, that I was behind the likes of Eric Sevareid and all these people. And so I did general assignment. One day I was called in by the bureau chief and he said, “We, at CBS, are going to take over the television part of Watergate. We’re going to be the television version of the *Washington Post*. I want you to immerse yourself and I want you to know everything you can about Watergate.”

Smith: Was that something that presumably would have originated with Cronkite at that point, as the managing editor of evening broadcast?
Jones: Oh yes, absolutely. Bill Small and Walter Cronkite were very, very close. Just parenthetically, Katherine Graham, when she was alive, every speech that she would do after Watergate was over, she talked about how CBS had saved the Washington Post, because, at one point, they were, the Washington Post, was under heavy, heavy heat. And we had Deep Throat and Katherine Graham and Ben Bradlee – they were dancing around – they were shaky on it, but they stuck with it. But when the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite and the entire Washington bureau of twenty-seven correspondents, resources, started weighing in every night, it became more of a legitimate story. And in journalism, you always say, you want to be ahead, you want the scoop. And that’s great, but within an hour or two, you’d better hope that somebody is there or you start to get nervous.

Smith: In some ways it’s almost a parallel between the famous story of LBJ saying, “Well, if I’ve lost Walter Cronkite on Vietnam, I’ve lost the country.”

Jones: Yeah. So, anyway, I was assigned to do Watergate. And I arrived in Washington in December, right after Richard Nixon had been re-elected in November of ’72. So this thing was really popping and I spent most of my time at the Federal Court Building – for months, doing that. One day I got a call from the bureau chief to come in and he says, “You know, we really like your work, and we want to see more of you on TV and we want to see more of you on Saturday. Every day, as well as Saturday. So I’m going to change your days. You’re going to be working on Saturday.” Well, I came from Indiana, the heartland, and where I had been taught that if you ever amounted to anything, you had Saturday and Sunday off. And Bill Small says, “How do you feel about that? Changing your days off and you’ll work on Saturday. You’ll have Sunday and Monday off.” And I said, “Well, I really don’t care much about it.” And he said, “Well, what makes you think I care if you care?” I said, “Well, when you put it that way, to start.” So, I said, “Okay.” And that was on a Friday morning, and on Friday night there was a prime time speech by Richard Nixon announcing his choice to be his new vice presidential designate, Gerald R. Ford, replacing Agnew who had gone out in flames.
Smith: Let me interrupt for one second, because we did an interview with Jerry Jones, who was Al Haig’s deputy, who told us something striking. At that point he was, at Haldeman’s behest, reorganizing the personnel office. This is before Haldeman and Ehrlichman leave, so it’s going to be no later than April of ’73. He gets a call from Haldeman, who wants to know how many people report to the vice president, and Jerry does some figuring and he comes up with a number of about fifty. Haldeman says, “Fine. I want letters of resignation from all of them.” Meaning, before Haldeman left, he knew Agnew would be facing some problems significant enough to warrant replacing his entire staff. Now, I’d never heard that before, that’s in April of ’73. What I’m asking is: the Wall Street Journal story in August of ’73 is when the world heard about Agnew’s problem. Had you picked up anything beforehand?

Jones: No. I had not. I mean, I was so focused on the Watergate part of it, and I didn’t get involved in that. The only area where I got into the Agnew story was that I worked in Minnesota for a while, at WCCO, and while there, I became friends with Dick Moe who was Mondale’s chief of staff. Back then, Mondale was attorney general. So now it’s Senator Mondale, one day I get a call from Dick Moe. He says, “Are you aware that they are plea bargaining with Agnew?” And I said, “No.” He said, “Well, long story short: I have a friend who was just at the Justice Department meeting somebody on some business, and this guy was sharing an office with another attorney. And he heard this conversation. The other guy was saying on the phone, ‘There’s no way. Absolutely not.’ And the other attorney said to Moe’s friend, ‘You know what that’s about?’ ‘No.’ ‘Well, that was Henry Peterson of the Justice Department and he was talking to Agnew’s people. He said they are trying to plea bargain.’”

Smith: So what do you do with a tip like that?

Jones: What do I do? I was new in town. I had one very good source, but I couldn’t get the second or third source, and back then you had to have those. It doesn’t happen too much anymore. So I went to the bureau chief and told him what I had and he called in Fred Graham, who was our legal correspondent, and said,
“Tell Fred what you have.” So I told him and Fred worked on it for two days, three days, never could get anything. And then finally on Saturday the Washington Post hit the street, big front page story: Agnew Plea Bargains. So, anyway, that’s as close as I got to the Agnew thing.

But anyway, I’m doing my first Saturday duty with my change of shift for CBS news. And Friday they just announced that Jerry Ford, and I am told, your first assignment for Saturday is go do a day in the life of the new vice president designate. So I showed up like at five-thirty, six o’clock in Alexandria, and stood out there and waited for something to happen with Jerry Ford. And that’s when I first met him. I traveled with him for the next ten months, spent more time with him than I did my own family, and then when he became president, I moved to the White House.

Smith: That period is fascinating. In some ways it’s the dark side of the moon. It’s the part of the story that I think has escaped detection until now. Because, clearly, there was a strategy which was to stay out of town as much as possible – to stay on the road as much as possible. It beggars belief to think that, in the course of those ten months, he, or those around him, did not seriously contemplate the prospect of his becoming president – something that he could never publicly acknowledge, and something that I sensed to the end of his life, he really tended to minimize. But there must have been conversations, off the record, about how this thing was evolving.

Laird says by the spring of ’74 he was talking to Ford about the kinds of people he should have in his cabinet, and taking for granted that this would, in fact, come to pass.

Jones: But, did Laird say that he, Ford, was engaging in this back and forth conversation? See, this is the thing about Gerald Ford. He set the tone. And he had never planned on being president – never dreamed of it. All he wanted to do was to be Speaker of the House. That was his golden light. And then, all of a sudden this thing happened, and all of the intellectual folks, the historians sit back and journalists, and say, how could he not be thinking about that? He might have been thinking about it, but he didn’t focus. He was not focused on
it because his job was to be a good vice president and he liked Dick Nixon. So I don’t think there anything where he was being disingenuous.

I think he honestly did not think it would happen, as it started out. As it progressed and these people started coming to him, I think he probably had to think a little bit more about it. But I don’t think he thought about it. I think a whole lot of the political junkies, and in some ways Ford was a political junkie, and in some ways he wasn’t. Compared to Mel Laird, he’s a novice. And I think – remind me to talk about this later – but as I look back Don Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, and everybody says, “How did they turn out the way they turned out?” And to those of us who were covering the Ford White House, we loved Don Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney. Well, we respected Rumsfeld and we loved Cheney. We all were saying, how could this happen? Well, I think I have a reason for this.

What happened was, they were different people inside that Ford White House, and they were different people because Gerald R. Ford set the tone, and he was a nice guy who believed that democracy was based on compromise. He’d fight like crazy, and the end of the day he was ready to shake Tip O’Neill’s hand or any Democrat and say, “Okay, it was a good fight. I lost.” And get back the next day. Jerry Ford, when he became president, he said, “This is the kind of relationship I want with the Hill and with Democrats.” If he didn’t say, by God, they knew – Rummy and Dick Cheney knew that if they were going to work for Jerry Ford, he’d better not get a call from some Democrat about them running roughshod over. So they had to play that way.

So then, Rumsfeld goes off and into the private sector – Searle Drug, and he’s very successful, and his basic instincts, even when he was at the White House is, to be a bully. He is a bully management guy. And so he has success.

Then Cheney, he leaves after Ford has left, and he’s on the Hill for a while. He’s from Wyoming and those conservative instincts begin to come out, because that’s his constituency. But still, even on the Hill, a guy, a Republican who worked with the Democrat, but he always wanted to be as successful as Rumsfeld. Wanted to make as much money as Rumsfeld. Cheney once told
me, “Rummy has made more money than God.” So then, he goes off and has his big success at Halliburton. And he’s changed – he’s a different guy.

This is what’s happened. Both of these guys were kept in line by Gerald R. Ford, who said, “By gosh, we’re going to get along.” His favorite line always was, “We can disagree without being disagreeable.” And they knew they’d better toe the line. And once he was not there to snap the whip, they reverted to their tendencies. And that’s why. That’s it. And George W. Bush was not Gerald R. Ford.

I don’t know – I went off on something here.

Smith: That’s an important part of the story.

Did you have fun times on the vice presidential plane?

Jones: Fantastic. They called it the slingshot airline. It was a twin engine prop plane, and that’s all the Nixon White House would give him.

Smith: Everyone knows he wasn’t Nixon’s first choice. He wasn’t Nixon’s second choice. There is a story, and I’ve come across it in the Rockefeller research, that supposedly he tells Rockefeller (they are in the Oval Office, Nixon and Rockefeller), and he says, “Can you imagine Jerry Ford sitting in that chair?” Nixon believed, and it tells you volumes about how out of touch Nixon was, Nixon looked at Ford as insurance against his impeachment; whereas in fact, it was exactly the opposite. Did you ever get a sense of Nixon’s attitude toward Ford at that point?

Jones: No. I think everybody had the same attitude on Ford. He was viewed by politicians on the Hill, by Nixon, by Hugh Scott, by all these people, that Ford was a nice guy, but not really smart, too smart, and would sort of do anything that you wanted him to do. And he did do a lot of that stuff. And I think there was a lot of ridicule of him. As Lyndon said, he played football without a helmet too much – which is sort of interesting. Your question – did he feel that?

Smith: Yeah, did he sense that on the part of his own nominal allies?
Jones: You know what? I don’t think he focused on it. It didn’t register with him because his ambitions were somewhat limited. Now you say, he wanted to be Speaker of the House, that’s a pretty big ambition. But he was a celebrity, he’d been a celebrity – all-American football player, and married this beautiful woman who was a dancer, and he was a handsome guy. He was just having fun doing what he…

Smith: And, of course, remember he had already promised Mrs. Ford they were going to go home at the beginning of ’77, so the vice presidency is sort of this unexpected capstone to a career. He realized he was never going to be Speaker, and I’m sure it made perfect sense.

Jones: But I think other people talked about Jerry Ford, worried about him and were more preoccupied with how smart he was or how stupid he was, or whatever, more than he did.

Smith: Over and over, you hear people talk about how comfortable he was in his own skin, which certainly set him apart from Nixon - and probably most recent presidents.

Jones: Yeah, and he was a guy who believed, as I said before, Jerry Ford believed that democracy was the art of compromise. And in the end you had to come together. Oh, he was fiercely partisan on lots of things.

Smith: Did you hear him express regret or not for the whole Douglas impeachment business?

Jones: No.

Smith: One sensed that was a sore subject.

Jones: The only thing I ever heard Jerry Ford express a sense of regret was basically dropping Nelson Rockefeller as his vice president. He told me after he had left the White House. He said, “I am really sad about that. It was a huge mistake, and I have thought about that and wish that I could do it over many times.” Once he became president, he really wanted to stay president.
Smith: There is a sense, too – he said something to the effect that – just as he had learned to do the job was when he lost it.

Jones: Yeah.

Smith: The transition from the Hill to the Oval Office is a big one, and not everyone is Barak Obama. Just as he felt that he kind of mastered the job, he lost it.

Jones: After he had lost the election to Jimmy Carter, as you remember, he had lost his voice in that whirlwind eleven day tour, where he almost pulled it off. I mean, he literally grabbed all of his campaign staff and his White House aides and he said, “Come on, let’s leave Washington. We’re going to go out and win this thing.” And he almost pulled it off, but he lost his voice, couldn’t speak. Betty had to give his concession speech, and after he was able to speak, he’d walk around the White House and he’d say, “I lost to a peanut farmer. A peanut farmer.” He could never, ever get over that. It was, in many ways, sad, because I thought that he was a good president. And I don’t know anyone else who could have done as good a job as he did in healing the country.

At the time of his death, I went back and looked at some of the news conferences and things that he had right when he became president, and he was good. The press, we all portrayed him, I guess, I’m not guilty of that, but he was portrayed as this bumbling, fumbling, inarticulate guy. I looked at his first press conference and he stood up there – he’s six three, six four, stands with great stature, and he spoke of budgets and things like that with great authority. He knew them. That’s what everybody said, well, he was an accidental president. Yeah, he was in a way – but in many ways, the most prepared president that the country has ever had. For years and years he slogged through those budgets that came up there, and intelligence matters, and whatever. He knew what he was talking about and he was just as good as – as I looked at that news conference – and it wasn’t a time for humor during that period – but he was just as good on the facts as the great John Kennedy, or anyone.

Smith: You know, it is interesting you mentioned the press conference. Because it was the triggering event – the first press conference on the 28th of August, and
I think you can accuse him of a certain naiveté. There was a quality, some people said Boy Scout-ish, but he went into that press conference really believing, three weeks after Nixon left, that reporters would want to talk about Cyprus and Turkey and inflation – and of course the only thing they wanted to talk about was Nixon. And he left that press conference angry. Angry at himself as much as at the press corps. And they, as much as anything – who knows when and whether the pardon would have come – but I think he, at least said that that news conference as much as anything else triggered the schedule.

Jones: Absolutely. He told me that. There was no question. He was mad as he could be after that because all the questions were on Nixon. That’s when he went to the office and started the whole process. And he was right. And we have found out just how right he was. Back at the time I was shocked and upset with what he had done, but we found out he was right. Even the Kennedys, the Profiles in Courage [Award], recognized him. Ted Kennedy went to the ceremony.

Smith: Transformed his life. Ford said, after that ceremony, he said, “For twenty years, everywhere I’ve gone, they’ve asked that question. You know what? They don’t ask the question anymore.”

Jones: Exactly.

Smith: The Kennedys, in effect, made it ‘okay’ to move on.

Jones: Now, let me tell you something – what I think is more concrete on why he’s been vindicated. I think we found with President Clinton’s impeachment and trial, exactly what happened to this country and to a president when he is impeached and is then tried. With Nixon we had the luxury of him resigning. With Bill Clinton we had a guy who said, “Well, let’s just go out and win.” No shame, hung in there, [he] should have done what Nixon did, but didn’t. And we went through, the whole country, went through a trial.

Again, you can’t prove this, but I have always wondered if we would have had 9/11, because during that second term, and during that trial, Bill Clinton was totally preoccupied with saving his presidency, and he was not taking
care of things. And we find out that he was, in some of these national security meetings, he would stay up all night and he’d read these books and he was coming down with these off the wall, out of the box, thoughts about Bin Laden, and had he been able to totally focus on that and not worried about saving his presidency, I wonder if it would have happened.

Smith: We know for a fact that now, because people around him have said, he had actually hoped with the mandate that he had from ’96, to use ’98, because he wanted desperately to be a great president, or a near-great president anyway. Short of a war, he was prepared to spend some of his capital to go after entitlements. Which if he’d done it, and brought his party along with him, would have ratcheted him up that much higher in terms of historians, and their assessment of his consequence as a president. And that whole thing disappeared.

Jones: Yeah, I think he would have done it because, look, there was welfare reform. He did get welfare reform. That’s not anything that his liberal Democrats had any interest in. They were mad at him over the whole thing. He had the talent, Clinton had the talent to take on Social Security, welfare reform, entitlements, you name it. He had the smarts, and the gift to have pushed these things through, but he got involved in this and he didn’t have the guts, the sense to resign so he decided to take this country into a trial. We think that we’re so resilient in this country, or we used to before the current crisis, but back then…I don’t think we can ever go through the impeachment trial of a president of the United States.

Smith: That’s fascinating. The Ford aspect of this, and I’ve never really talked about this, but you may remember, it was before the House voted impeachment – it was in October of ’98, a month before the off term elections, and of course, Republicans were – there was hubris on both sides. Ford – I wrote it with him – we wrote an Op-ed that appeared in the Sunday New York Times, which the impeachment managers were furious about, because they thought it pulled the rug out from under them. Gerald Ford proposed a unique punishment for a unique offense. And it wasn’t a censure.
The President of the United States would appear in the well of the House, wouldn’t speak, would accept a formal public rebuke from an unanimous vote of the…and it would be televised and it would be dignified. And when it was over the country could go back to its business and people would have been assured that their elected representatives had risen to the occasion. And he took hell, as you can imagine, from his fellow Republicans.

Now, the White House, at that point, thought this was manna from heaven. And they were actually seriously considering this – until, of course, come the midterm elections. And the Republicans of the House Committee weren’t going to consider it. Then come the midterm elections, and guess what? The shoe’s on the other foot. Lindsey Graham, I know for a fact, said, “Well, maybe we should dust off Jerry Ford’s idea,” and by that time, of course, the Clinton White House had no incentive to do so.

**Jones:** Now, as I understand, President Ford had a telephone conversation with Bill Clinton, with President Clinton, and that Bill Clinton told him, “I can’t do that.” And it was at that point that ex-President Ford said, “Well, good luck.”

**Smith:** My understanding is, you are absolutely right, but part of the problem was that Hillary was in the room. So it was just…but anyway, but he gave him all these reasons why he couldn’t do it. Ford said, “Bill, let me tell you something. I spent twenty-five years up there, and in my experience they can do pretty much anything they want.” But at that point Clinton was feeling his oats because he had come through this and everything was political. And, of course, the great irony is – again, it illustrates these two sides – right after the piece appeared, he got a six page, single-spaced, rant from Tom DeLay, outlining all the reasons why this idea wouldn’t fly. He was echoing everything Bill Clinton said, only from the other side of the political spectrum, and basically lecturing Ford on all the Constitutional impossibilities of this proposal. Two weeks later he got another letter from Tom DeLay, wanting his help in getting into some golf club in Rancho Mirage. Neither letter was answered, which is very unusual for President Ford.

**Jones:** President Ford’s retirement, yes, he got very wealthy. There was some controversy about whether or not he should have done the things he did to
make that money, but I went to visit him constantly because my daughter lives out there and every time I was in California, I’d go over to Rancho Mirage and say hi.

Every time I visited him, it was sort of sad in so many ways because he was such a party man and he believed in Republicanism. He believed in compromise and he believe in treating the Democrats with respect. He watched his party shoot itself in the foot time after time after time. And nobody cared. Which sort of leads me to one observation about the Ford presidency; I watched Ford over his retirement and felt sort of sad about what he must be going through, because he was a guy who believed in Washington, who believed in the political process, who believed in fighting for your partisan way, but believed in compromise in the end. And there he was, sitting out in California…

Smith: And he believed in government, in governing.

Jones: Believed in government, and not big government, but he believed in governing, as you said. And he believed that government had a role. And every time I’d go see him, there was something – Republicans in Congress had just shot themselves in the foot on something else. They were so partisan, and so anti-his motto, “Can’t we disagree without being disagreeable?” And it had to be a real downer for him. But I’ve always said of the Ford presidency, it is the forgotten presidency. And I say that because all the historians, or most of the historians, every time they write, every time they talk on the talk shows or whatever, they jump from Richard Nixon to Jimmy Carter, as though Ford never existed. I thought, at least in his death, that that would change. And it has a little bit, but not really. It will always be the forgotten presidency.

Smith: And I would modify it slightly – they go up to the pardon, and then they skip to Jimmy Carter. The first month - but that’s all Nixon. They see Ford as a coda, Ford’s an add-on, an accidental coda to the Nixon presidency. One of the points I tried to make in the eulogy was, if you step back far enough, you realize that Richard Nixon is the last New Deal president. Because he’s the last president accommodating himself to the Roosevelt consensus. Whatever you think of economic deregulation, it began under Ford. Block grants to the
states – there are a whole host of initiatives. And then you stop to think of the
talents that Ford recruited. Again, it goes to being comfortable in his own skin
– to surround himself with people who were sort of militantly bright,
extravagantly sometimes egotistical, and he was perfectly comfortable. And
he seemed to be particularly comfortable having people argue things in front
of him.

Jones: But did he – I don’t recall any ideologues surrounding him.

Smith: No. And in fact, people who were ideologues, like a Bill Simon, toned it
down.

Jones: They knew they had to. And you know as I was saying with Rumsfeld and
Cheney. Their tendencies were sort of to be bullies and ideologues, but that
wasn’t going to hunt with Jerry Ford.

Smith: Just to finish the vice presidential period…I see the picture of the…

Jones: Well, the travel group with Vice President Ford was interesting. There were
maybe half a dozen of us. And he had two or three aides with him. The travel
group included the three networks. I was for CBS, Ron Nessen was for NBC,
and Bill Zimmerman was a correspondent for ABC. One of Ford’s very
favorite reporters, ever, was Maggie Hunter of the New York Times, a
southern gal. She covered Congress when he was there, and then when he
became vice president, she was out covering him. He loved her, and David
Kennerly, and Bob Leonard from the Voice of America. So those were the
hard core, every trip. It was this slingshot airline and it was part of the
presidential fleet. We would get on first, and then the vice president and his
staff would come on. Well, they had to pass us to get back to the vice
president’s cabin in the back. It was always banter back and forth and we
might have done something that he would needle us about, but it was fun.

Smith: He liked reporters, didn’t he?

Jones: I argue that Gerald R. Ford was the last president who really liked reporters.
I’m not sure about Obama yet. He seems to have some of these tendencies,
but certainly up to Obama, Jerry Ford was proud to say that some of his best
friends were reporters. And he enjoyed having fun with us – poking at us – we felt comfortable poking with him. And I, as a journalist, as a correspondent, always when I worked was very careful to try to put this little distance between the politician and me. I must say that I was never afraid to say publicly that I liked Gerald Ford, and he was my friend. I didn’t worry about some Democrats coming along and saying, “Well, you’re in the tank.” But I could do that – and he was a rarity – the only other politician that got close to that, that I felt that comfort zone with, was Howard Baker, Senator Howard Baker, when he was Majority Leader. But as president, I knew that I could do any story that I had to do. If I were out at some dinner or social event, which I didn’t do a lot, but what I did, I didn’t worry about, because I knew the next day if I had to do a story critical of him, he’d understand because he understood journalists.

Smith: Did he ever go after you on a story?

Jones: Me? No. Would he needle me about something with a smile? Yeah. But ironically, the other person who had that same personality is Ted Kennedy. Now, all the people around Kennedy, all the staff – oh, God, are they sensitive – and a lot of the people around Ford were sensitive, but as far as him being sensitive, no. He knew I had a job to do. I’ve also argued that Jerry Ford was probably the most open vice president/president I have ever known. Without at doubt.

The reason I say that is that, when I started covering him right after he was selected, designated, he went back to Michigan – Grand Rapids for a trip. And while there we were the only crew with him, the CBS crew, and I’m ashamed to tell this story, but I’ll tell it anyway. He had a dental appointment and I asked him if I could bring the crew along. And he says, “Sure, Phil, no problem. Bring them along.” And so we went to his dental appointment with him and we’re in there, and the dentist starts working on him and he’s got him back like this, and he’s got his mouth open like this, and there is this CBS camera shooting into his mouth, and I’m saying, “Oh, my gosh.” Never made the air, but I don’t know any politician who would ever allow something like that. He was open – literally – to us and that’s what got him in a lot of trouble,
too, i.e., his skiing. Probably the best president skier in the history of the country, and he was so comfortable with himself, he would say to the camera crews out in Vail, “Come on. Come on along.” And he’d go, and all skiers fall from time to time.

Smith: And he had the bad knees which were…I don’t think it was well-known at the time. That contributed to the image.

Jones: Yeah, they were tricky, tricky knees and they would go out and so forth. As Ron Nessen, his press secretary made the argument once, he’s the most athletic president in history, and I think he was. He had his golf balls that would hit spectators and things like that, but they could have put up a curtain and said no, no cameras. But he said, “No. Come on.”

When he became vice president, his first Christmas, he went to Vail with the family and they had a condo in Vail, and again, I was the only crew there with him. I really got to know him a lot during this period, and he didn’t have his press secretary with him. I said, “Look, can we bring the crew by on Christmas Eve and shoot pictures?” – because they opened their family gifts. He said, “Sure, sure.” And we went there and shot everything – them having all their gifts. It was great.

I got all sorts of kudos from CBS. This is from Gordon Manning, who was a vice president at CBS News at that time, says, “That was mighty nice going on your part and the part of your crew with Vice President Ford and family in Colorado over the Christmas weekend. The scoops you produced one after the other, greatly enriched our holiday broadcast. We are most grateful for your enterprise for these exclusives.”

And, guess what? I got a letter from Gerald R. Ford on vice presidential stationary and he says, “Dear Phil, a belated thank you note to let you know how much I appreciated the way you and your camera crew handled your assignment in Vail. I particularly appreciated your thoughtfulness in allowing the Ford family so much to enjoy our vacation in privacy. But a lot of people have said they saw it and they liked it a lot.”

Smith: You can’t imagine the Nixons doing that.
Jones: No.

Smith: Or any other president, for that matter.

Jones: And there is also the famous picture of me chasing President Ford.

Smith: Tell me - because that’s a critical moment surrounding the fall of Saigon. You’d been in Vietnam, so you presumably had some strong feelings about what was going on. And let me preface it with something that Mel Laird said yesterday, which I understand - as kind of the architect of Vietnamization – where Laird is coming from. But Laird has never forgiven Ford and the Congress for, in effect, pulling the plug. As if, given the political mood…

Jones: As if Ford could have made a difference.

Smith: Exactly. Yeah. At that point…

Jones: Let me tell you the genesis of this picture. 1975 – Saigon is falling. The Ford White House is shut down. No comment. Ford is really upset because going through his mind is: here I am, presiding over the United States of America losing its first war – and there was nothing he could do. His hands were tied. And the press secretary would say nothing, nobody would have any comment. So he leaves town, he always did that a lot to get away from it. In crisis, he’d leave town, which is what he did during the whole vice presidential thing – stay away from Nixon.

But he leaves town and goes to California on an energy trip, because keep in mind, we were in deep trouble on energy at that point – oil. And he goes to the Bakersfield, California airport, and then he gets off of Air Force One and gets on Marine One, and goes out to an offshore drilling rig. The press corps has left, the pool went along, but the rest of us are left at the Bakersfield airport. I told my crew, “Give me a wireless microphone, and I’m going to go over and stand in line with all the other people who are out there to wave at him,” and all this. “Because my bet is that he is going to come off of that and come directly and walk the proverbial rope line.” So, I’m all set up. I’m in line just like everybody else, but there are no ropes. Security was different back then.
And so he gets off Marine One and goes immediately to the crowd. And there he is, going right down. And he finally gets to me and he says, “Phil, what are you doing here.” And I said, “Well, Mr. President, I wanted to ask you about Vietnam.” And he says, “Ohhh nooo, you don’t,” and he takes off running for Air Force One, which is probably a hundred feet away. And as he takes off running, he looks at me and he says, “Come on!” So we take off and that picture shows my camera, my soundman, you don’t see the camera man because he’s taking the pictures. You see Helen Thomas and the pool that had gone with him – they’re all running, and the Secret Service agents – and we’re all running. It looks like we’re having great fun, all smiles. It was a disastrous thing on television because all the way, I’m asking him questions about the fall of Saigon and he’s not answering. And he looks, on television, like a Vietnamese refugee, running like crazy. Finally he gets to the point where I respectfully stop, and that’s how that whole picture started.

As you look at it now, in these days – that was back in the days before Sam Donaldson yelled at Ronald Reagan – I took after him and he allowed it. It shows the dramatic difference between two presidents. You had Richard Nixon who had used the Secret Service to cut off the White House press corps. Used them as a political tool, really. And you couldn’t get close to Richard Nixon. The pool couldn’t even get that close. So he used the Secret Service, and the Secret Service knew that that was their mission to keep the press away. To a new president just in, and they know that he likes the press, he likes reporters, and so when he said, “Come on!” they were running with us. You couldn’t anymore do that today.

Smith: And it also illustrates – for lack of a better word – naïveté about how this would look on television.

Jones: Never thought about it.

Smith: It would be terrible.

Jones: And the White House got a lot of letters over that. Why was he running, and so forth and so on. But, you know, to all the handlers of future presidents,
yeah, it looked bad, but you know what? It also made him look human. It will make your boss look human. It’s not half as bad as just, “No comment.”

Smith: I thought this week when the president went up to speak to Congress and someone called to do an interview and I said, “I’ll tell you one thing you won’t hear tonight. You won’t hear the president get up and say, as Gerald Ford uniquely did in 1975, ‘The state of the Union is bad.’” Which was, again, politically boneheaded, except, in retrospect, it seems amazingly honest and authentic. And today we would appreciate it in theory, I’m not sure we would, even now, welcome hearing it.

Jones: The interesting thing about Ford and his speeches, of course, the greatest speech he ever gave was, “Our long national nightmare is over.” “The state of the economy is bad.” But these speeches were all done by Bob Hartmann, the late Robert Hartmann, who was a former LA Times newspaper guy.

Smith: And I take it, a rather polarizing figure.

Jones: He could be. He was very protective of Jerry.

Smith: Possessive?

Jones: No more than any presidential aide. They all have those tendencies - that I find. But Hartmann was a newspaper guy who believed in candor. And there was a great struggle over – Hartmann wrote the line “Our long national nightmare is over.” Ford didn’t want to deliver it. He told me this in the final interview, I did with him before the obituary interview. He told about this whole thing. And he said, “I just thought that President Nixon had gone through enough, and I didn’t want to say it. And Bob Hartmann pounded his fist on the table and said, ‘President Ford, you’ve got to say it, because that’s the way the country is feeling right now.’” And so Jerry Ford talked to Betty and they decided, okay, to deliver and he said, “Am I glad I did it. I’m really glad I did it.”

Smith: Tell me about Jerry terHorst, and that brief period that he was press secretary.

Jones: It came and went. He arrived and was three weeks or so, and I think we, in the White House press corps, all liked him. He was a fellow scribe with the
Detroit Press, and he was comfortable with Ford because he had covered Congressman Ford from Grand Rapids. And Jerry was a good personality, so we all liked him. I think those of us in television were a bit frustrated because he knew nothing about television, and the needs of television. So we were going through an education program at the time.

Smith: There has been an argument over the years, a debate – I don’t mean to be critical, but you hear this – there is a school of thought that says, yes, indeed, he was deeply offended by the pardon and the fact that he wasn’t taken into Ford’s confidence. But, at the same time, he also felt that the job was overwhelming, and that this was the perfect way out.

Jones: You know, I’ve never talked to Jerry about that, but I think this is absolutely possible. Keep in mind that Ford’s vice presidential press secretary, Paul Miltich, who had been with Ford when he was in the Congress and when he was Minority Leader, and all that. And Paul was an old press guy and he did not have the tools to deal with a presidential press corps. So he was sort of pushed aside – a little bit rough – he was made communications director, I think at the time. Promoted up. And that’s when they brought in terHorst, and I think that probably Bob Hartmann, who was an old LA Times reporter and had been a colleague of Detroit Press Jerry terHorst – that’s how the name that came. He was a friend, and that’s how that happened. But Jerry terHorst would not have lasted, and did he use this as an excuse to cut his losses? I don’t know. It’s possible – I don’t know.

Smith: Was it a mistake for the White House press secretary to go on Saturday Night Live?

Jones: Yes. You are talking about Ron Nessen?

Smith: Yeah.

Jones: I think Ron was not ready to take the job. He was a network correspondent and he was a bit of a showman. He liked to be in the headlines. So I think that much of what happened was caused by that, by his wanting to be…

Smith: Sure.
Jones: Look, I don’t have any problem with Ron as a person, but I said at the time that he was press secretary, I said, “I think that Ron Nessen, like many press secretaries before him - and he will not be the last - Ron Nessen found it more glamorous to be a senior aide to the president than do the grubby day-to-day press secretary. And that’s the fine. You look at the good press secretaries and they all have managed this. Marlin Fitzwater for Bush, but there are lots of those who have come and gone with a lot of fanfare. They had the same problem: it’s about me.

Smith: Were you with or around the president during the two assassination attempts?

Jones: Yes. In Sacramento I was, oh, about nine-ten feet from him, following right as he was headed to the state capitol. I saw this scruffy looking woman, whom I didn’t recognize at the time – later turned out to be Squeaky Fromme of the Manson clan – I saw her there. And I saw the Secret Service adviser, Larry Buendorf go after her, and I saw her go down. I think I was the first one on the air. I had heard no shots, and rushed off with him as they had her down. As a matter of fact, before I ever knew her name, I ran back to the hotel, which was just off the capitol grounds to the press room and filed a bulletin that there had been an attempted assassination on the president. But I didn’t know her name at the time.

Smith: And the extraordinary thing is, he goes on with his visit to Governor Brown and never mentions what happened outside.

Jones: Exactly. And talks about crime.


Jones: And then in San Francisco, I was outside the hotel when those shots rang out. Having gone through the Sacramento thing, why, it was spooky.

Smith: You ask yourself, of all the people in the world who you wouldn’t think of as an assassination targets, Gerald Ford tops the list.

Jones: I know.

Smith: Two in a month.
Jones: Then he had his presidential motorcade accident, so there were lots of little things.

Smith: Did you know at the time, and/or others know at the time, about Mrs. Ford’s problems, however defined?

Jones: As they say in Washington: “with specificity?” No. I was aware that there was something wrong because, starting in Vail, his first trip out as vice president designate, and we did our Christmas Eve thing there, she was always late. At that particular event, it was half over before she ever appeared. So I knew there was something, and my conclusion was that it was alcohol. Didn’t know about the pills and it was a combination of things. But, you know, after he became president, I got a call one day in the White House press room and it was Mrs. Ford’s secretary and she asked if I would please come up and see Mrs. Ford. I said, “Sure.” So I was cleared and went up in the residence. I’d been in the residence in the White House, and she was looking for suggestions on a press secretary for herself. She had interviewed and was about to hire Sheila Weidenfeld, who became her press secretary. And I spent, oh I’d say a half hour. Had a coke and talked and it was…I didn’t sense any huge problems there.

Smith: Did he feel guilt about all those years when he was away?

Jones: Yeah. He felt guilt, and you could see at times when she was late, or they would be late, his jaw would…

Smith: Because he was such a pro. He was on time, it was almost military precision.

Jones: But he was loyal to her and there was love. Always was. He was a handsome guy, but we’ve all heard stories about the carousing around of other presidents, but I’ve never heard anything.

Smith: There is that wonderful story, I’d heard it before, but I think it’s in Tom DeFrank’s book, of the time of the Frank Gifford affair. They were good friends, and the Fords called the Giffords to let them know they were praying for them. And someone happened to be in talking with the president, who had been in the White House and who made the observation, that of all the people
this person had ever worked for in Washington, Gerald Ford was the only one who would remain faithful to his marital vows. And the president had a wonderful response, because Ford could surprise you. He said, “Well, you know, you have to stop and think. If something like that happens there are nine bad things that could happen and one good thing. And the one good thing you can get taken care of at home.” Which is pretty wise, if you stop and think about it.

Jones: Well, it was a love story, on both their parts. It was sad on Mrs. Ford’s part, though, because there were so many years there that could have been better.

Smith: Then the breast cancer surgery came along and it’s hard to try to make people today understand why it was such a big deal. It’s hard for people to believe that there was time when women didn’t discuss that openly. And the impact that that must have had upon the country.

Jones: Oh, the lives that that saved – who knows? That was history-breaking. And they dealt with it in a public way. For the most part, I never found them afraid to deal with the issues, be they personal or public in the White House – except the one. That was the pills and the addiction. But in the end they handled that spectacularly.

Smith: Yeah. Remember, your network had the *Sixty Minutes* interview, and I go back and I look at that interview and I tell people, Hillary Clinton could not have said, when she was in the White House, what Betty Ford said in ’74 or ’75, whenever it was. But the fascinating thing was what it tells you about her mindset…

Jones: You’re talking about her daughter, Susan?

Smith: Talking about the daughter, talking about marijuana, talking about abortion. Pretty extraordinary stuff. And the fact that it was a Cub Scout den mother from Grand Rapids who was saying this. I’d love to hear your sense of this: my sense is that the initial, the good grey political types of the White House gasped, and thought, oh my God, what has she done? And they hadn’t calculated how the world was changing around them. And particularly post-Vietnam and Watergate, people found her candor refreshing. In many ways,
she actually advanced the Ford agenda of openness and restoring trust to the White House, just by being herself.

Jones: And you know what? She was an extension of him in that neither one of them ever planned, wanted to be, in the White House. That’s what made them different. All the other first ladies and presidents – they were all calculated, and they had changed their lives over the years to get there. And the Fords had not.

Smith: And the kids – we now know that they weren’t quite as vanilla as maybe they appeared to be at the time. They were members of their generation.

Jones: I speak as one White House correspondent, I never paid any attention to the kids. The times were too hectic. There were too many issues that were relevant. So I had nobody at the CBS bureau in Washington saying, “We need to do a story on the kids, and what are they doing? What’s this I hear about so and so?” Susan was young and she was dating and all that kind of stuff. There was no pressure back at the office to do stories on those kids, and those of us who were White House correspondents had too many other issues. I thought about this since all those years, I didn’t know much about the kids. You’d see them at events and say, “Hi, Susan, hi, Jack.”

Smith: Jack Marsh told us a story. That first month when he is getting ready to go out to the Chicago – typical Ford – anyone else would announce a Vietnam amnesty program on a Friday afternoon – but he goes to the VFW convention to make the announcement – knowing that it is going to be less than rapturously received. The day before he goes, Jack Marsh comes into the Oval Office and says, “I’ve got some bad news for you.” And Ford says, “What is it?” Steve hadn’t registered on his eighteen birthday for the draft. And he said his dad look gob smacked, because he thought when the press finds out…here he is out here doing this speech and his own son…Well, anyway, they kept it out of the press. Before the day was over they got the head of Selective Service into the Oval Office – they got Steve signed up, they wrapped it all up. They took care of it. The story never surfaced. But the face that the president’s own son…
Jones: What I’m curious about – I never heard this story – did some reporter get on to it and ask questions?

Smith: No. Ford’s immediate reaction was what the consequences are going to be if and when a reporter does get on to this story in the supercharged climate. And here he is about to go out to the VFW and make this speech. But the fact that it never did – that they could still keep a story like that under wraps…

Jones: Which is interesting. How times have changed, because can you imagine – I’m asking myself – why weren’t we, as reporters back in those days, finding out if all those kids had registered, if they had any deferment? I think it was because there was just a general feeling of our editors that it was not news and the other issues were too big. We’ve had too much time in the end of the Cold War. We’ve had too much time as a journalism headquarters – too much time to fill. So they’ve sent us out, sent their reporters out doing these inane, irrelevant, things.

Smith: Did they underestimate Reagan, both in terms of the likelihood that Reagan really would run, and the seriousness of the threat that Reagan would pose?

Jones: I don’t know whether they underestimated it or not. But I’m on shaky ground when I head into this area because you never want to say anything critical of Ronald Reagan, it seems, within Republican circles. I don’t have much good to say about Ronald Reagan because of what he did to Jerry Ford. Ronald and Nancy Reagan seized on the pardon and ran in the primary, figuring that Ford was vulnerable and this was their chance to get to the White House. And they gutted him. 1976 was the last time that either of the major parties actually nominated their presidential nominee at a convention. That has never happened since 1976. It’s always been chosen by primaries and caucuses and all that stuff. And Reagan almost pulled it off. That convention was wild. But I thought it was just very unfair, what Ronald Reagan did, and I was never able to forgive him for it.

Smith: The counter argument is, without dismissing what you say, that unintentionally Reagan made Ford a better candidate. That Ford was a better campaigner in October of 1976 than he was in October of 1975.
Jones: He wouldn’t have had to be that good if Ronald Reagan hadn’t wounded him. In my obituary interview that I did with President Ford, he talked about Ronald Reagan, and what Ronald Reagan and the Pentagon did in the ’76 campaign. There were high ranking people, inside the Pentagon, who were feeding fodder for criticism to Ronald Reagan so he could use it in his primary campaign. That’s about as scary as Eisenhower leaving and warning about the military industrial complex.

Smith: Was that a factor in the removal of Jim Schlessinger from the Defense Department?

Jones: Frankly, in retrospect, I think the removal of Schlessinger was that he was insubordinate. He was a problem, but I think Ford could have worked that out, had it not been for Rumsfeld. I think Rumsfeld wanted to be Defense secretary.

Smith: You think Rumsfeld also wanted to be vice president?

Jones: Yeah. Absolutely. He was involved in that, too. And I hate to say that because I like Rumsfeld.

Smith: I’ve heard from so many people, they say it in tones of admiration, that Rumsfeld never left his fingerprints – you won’t find his signature. That he was masterful.

Jones: Oh yeah.

Smith: And, again, they sort of admire the skill with which he went about the operation.

Jones: And I think he was probably able to manipulate Ford a little bit. I talked earlier about how Ford set the rules and the tone, and I think he did. But I also think, around the fringes, a guy like Rumsfeld and Cheney, guys like them, were able to maneuver.

Smith: And because Ford famously said he was genuinely surprised that Nixon lied to him. Ford really believed that he was truthful with people and people were
truthful with him. Until he was proven otherwise, which would be a weapon in the hands of skillful couturiers.

Jones: Ford got in the last jab on the Reagan thing. To his death, he was upset with Reagan, and Mrs. Ford, even now, today, can’t tolerate them in many ways. But I thought it was very interesting that in 1980, when Ronald Reagan was the nominee, and Reagan was really fumbling on the campaign trail, and he was losing his momentum, and his nomination was in jeopardy at one point, who was it who came onto the campaign trail with vigor, gusto, and tirelessly campaigning for Ronald Reagan, saying, “We have to get Jimmy Carter out of the White House. It is incumbent that we do that.”

Smith: Did you know at the time how unhappy Rockefeller was as vice president?

Jones: No.

Smith: He was a good soldier.

Jones: He was. And, here again, I think if you talked about – to every White House correspondent during that period, we didn’t have time to do anything except focus on President Ford and the issues. They were so overwhelming. The country was in a crisis. Not only a Constitutional crisis, but we were in an energy crisis and an economic crisis. We’re all caught up with our current problems here in 2009, and holding on for dear life, but in some ways it wasn’t as bad – it’s not a Constitutional crisis right now.

Smith: And, let’s face it, Barak Obama has the legitimacy of the ballot box, which Gerald Ford didn’t have.

Jones: Yeah. But I just think that Jerry Ford had earned the right to be president in his own way.

Smith: Do you think at the end of the campaign, did you think he thought he was going to win?

Jones: Yes, I think he did, because he was seeing big crowds. They went to airports and they got everybody in, and he’d crawl off of Air Force One and do his thing. They looked enthusiastic, and he was enthusiastic, and the stories were
good and the polls were closing. I think he thought it was still a long shot, but I think he thought maybe they just might have done it.

Smith: You have to tell this story before we finish of the poster that you presented to him after the ’76 election, when you went back out to Vail. The conventional notion was that he was kind of down and…

Jones: He was. As we all recall, President Ford had lost his voice because he’d been speaking at all of these rallies, and he’d been going around the White House sort of mumbling and saying to his aides, “I lost to a peanut farmer.” So finally he grabs himself by the bootstraps and we pack up and we go to Vail for his final holiday visit as president. So, one day he was out skiing and I was walking around with a dear friend of mine, Dick Growald, who was with Helen Thomas and his White House correspondent for United Press International. And we go by this store and we see this big poster, and it shows these skis up against an outhouse, and it says, “Ski Poland.” And we said, “Oh my gosh, we’ve got to get this,” because it was his remarks about the freedom of Poland in the debate that had really cost him. Possibly could have been the one last thing that did make the difference. And he had said that basically, that they are free. And of course, the Soviet Union still existed.

So we got this poster and brought it back and where it said, “Ski Poland,” if you look, we have inserted in here, “Free Poland.” So we have this last party with the White House press corps and Mr. and Mrs. Ford, and I present him with this poster. You see in the picture, the guy just breaks into laughter. It’s like it’s almost sort of broken the ice. It was the one image that I will always remember of Gerald R. Ford. Good, decent, hardworking, and who did one hell of a job as president of the United States in a crisis. And I don’t know anyone else who could have done as well, what he accomplished.

Ford was working so hard to try to get the country back on track, and sometimes he was really too serious for his own good. And he had David Kennerly, who was a former photographer for Time Magazine, who he had named his White House photographer. It was David Kennerly and Don Penny who had been hired as a speechwriter, primarily to write funny lines for the president. Don is a short fellow, and Kennerly and Penny decided they needed
to relax the president a little bit. He’d had a day, made a speech one night, and so the next morning, Penny and Kennerly went to the Oval Office and Penny got underneath the president’s desk, right at the knee hole and hid under there. He was a small guy. And Kennerly, of course, is there. At every move that Ford makes, Kennerly is getting pictures of him. So Ford comes down and he’s got his pipe and it’s “Good morning,” and he used to say, “Wide-eyed and bushy-tailed and ready to go.” And, “How you doing, David?” and they have some small talk and the president goes over and sits down in his chair and scoots into the thing, and as he gets just about there, suddenly Don Penny jumps out and goes, “BOO!” Just to make him laugh.

Smith: Did it work?

Jones: It worked. Here again, what president, what aides could do that with any president?

Smith: The great story – when he fell down the steps in Vienna, in the rain, holding an umbrella for Mrs. Ford, and there is a famous photograph of him. And later on people around him, of course, were all lashing out at the photographers, how dare they take his picture? And his response was, “Well, of course they took them. If they hadn’t they would have lost their jobs.” Which again, tells volumes about the guy.

Jones: He understood.
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Smith: What I’d love to do for just a few minutes is get a picture, kind of a local color of what this community, what this area was like when you and Jerry Ford and veterans came back from World War II. What the political climate was. And tell me about Frank McKay. Who was Frank McKay?

Hauenstein: Frank McKay, of course, was a political person who headed up the Republican Party. He had a tremendous influence – he had an organization that was more than just a political party. It seemed that it was a question whether or not it was more political than it was off limits, so to speak.

Smith: Peter Cook was talking about this. A couple of other folks as well, that suggested that if you wanted to do business in this town or this area, you needed to have Frank McKay’s imprimatur.

Hauenstein: Frank McKay had his tentacles all through the state, not only Grand Rapids, but everywhere. He was an extremely powerful man. I might say that he probably was a quasi-organized crime type of organization.

Smith: What was the source of his power?

Hauenstein: The individual. He was the head man who ran everything. He was a hardnosed man and, of course, I think that probably people had rumored, and it was known in the press at times, that charges against him, even for murder cases, were brought about, as you probably have known or read about. But he always got out of things very nicely.

Tape shut off

Smith: You mentioned Arthur Vandenberg. For generations who don’t know anything about him, tell us about Arthur Vandenberg. Who was he, and why was he significant, here and later in the Ford story? What was his significance in Michigan and ultimately the Jerry Ford story?
Hauenstein: Arthur Vandenberg was purely a man who brought himself up virtually by his
bootstraps. He was a newspaperman. He became, as a very young man, I
remember my city desk – he had engraved his name one time – had been city
editor of that newspaper. As had Frank Knox, incidentally, of the Chicago Daily News. Having become editor he really recognized the power of the press and became a hardworking Republican. As you know, he was ultimately appointed to the U.S. Senate and was a great speaker. He was a dynamic type of guy, but he was highly conceited. I remember even as a reporter some years before, he had called the editor of the paper and said, “I’ve got a story, send one of your reporters down.” I went down to his office. Boy, here I go, I’ve got a real one – got a good story this time. So I went down to get the story from him and he had it all typed up. He said, “Here, no changes necessary.” This was the type of man Vandenberg was.

Smith: He was an isolationist in his politics.

Hauenstein: He was pro-American – 100%. But ultimately, after the war, he did become an internationalist. There is no question about that. I remember one time he made a remark after the war that if we didn’t do something pretty soon with Russia - get it solved - we were going to go to war against Russia. He felt that that was a great possibility. I heard him say so. Obviously it didn’t come about.

Smith: What was his relationship to the McKay organization?

Hauenstein: They were friends. We never knew how close, but they were friends and they knew each other and they did communicate. There was no economic link, you might say, or a link above and beyond the possible political link.

Smith: When Ford comes home from the war, he also has undergone this conversion.

Hauenstein: Yes. Jerry came home – do we use the term President Ford rather than Jerry?

Smith: Whatever.

Hauenstein: We called him Jerry. He came home and he went into the law office, but we have to go back to the fact that we had a congressman by the name of Barney Jonkman, and in 1940 Barney really led in the House of Representatives a bill
to defeat what was then known as the Selective Service law. We had had a one year induction, similar to a draft, induction of young men into the service for one year only. The renewal of that law was absolutely essential to the survival of this country from the military point of view and anyone who was in the service knew about it because it was chaotic. We needed that renewed. The man that led the fight against it was Barney Jonkman. He was not going to have this renewed. He was going to allow the OHIO, Over the Hill in October, to take over.

So those of us who came back from the service, I was in the service at the time, but those who were not in the service were cognizant of it certainly. And we decided that Barney Jonkman, who was proclaiming himself to be a great hero and savior of the world - we were going to put him down where he belonged. There was a man, he had been a former judge here, but he was also a retired adjutant general colonel out of the service...and we organized the Army-Navy officers, and we had some meetings and we decided we were going to get this guy, Jonkman, out of office. We had very, very well organized men who went out and made speeches because all of us in those days were asked to make speeches, everyone who was in the war, of course. And we pushed for Jerry Ford very heavily, and of course we had the backing of Arthur Vandenberg. Arthur was for Jerry Ford because we wanted Jerry Ford. We selected him because he’d be the best man for the job.

Smith: Now were there other candidates examined?

Hauenstein: No.

Smith: What was it about Ford? Did he come to you and say I’m interested in this?

Hauenstein: No, he was a member of our organization, so to speak. He was very popular, very popular in Grand Rapids before the war. Everybody knew him – he was a friendly sort of person, which was unusual - to find a bunch of Army officers and Navy officers who were very friendly in those days. His father, of course, had a great deal of influence because he was the chairman of the Republican Party – Kent County Republican Party.

Smith: His dad was?
Hauenstein: His dad was.

Smith: Although he and his dad were no friend of McKay’s.

Hauenstein: No, none at all. Not a bit. No, he was as clean as a whistle. He owned a paint shop here and he was a very fine man. He was really a decent guy, as was Jerry that type of person.

Smith: How much of this, because clearly it’s driven by this idea – the internationalist idea – but how much of this was a generational thing? The younger generation taking on the old guard?

Hauenstein: I think it was acceptable. I remember Frank Sparks, editor of the Herald, and Lee Woodruff with the Press. They supported Jerry one hundred percent - he was a popular guy - and I don’t think there was any question but to beat Barney. To beat Barney Jonkman was not particularly easy because, as I said before, five terms and he had also been the prosecuting attorney before that in Grand Rapids. We were a little nervous about it. But the job was done.

Smith: How conservative was this district? Culturally conservative? The story is that early that year he proposed to Betty – but he really couldn’t tell her when they were going to get married and he couldn’t tell her why. And it’s pretty clear that the real reason was – the story over the years was that he wanted to take Jonkman by surprise, at the last minute, and there is something to that. But it’s pretty clear that there was real concern in his camp that his marrying a divorcee would have damaged his prospects in the Republican primary.

Hauenstein: It was an era in which a divorce was not particularly acceptable in this area. That was very true. It was a highly conservative area, highly religious people, and the ethic background of the old school in Europe. It was a factor to be considered. But he was popular enough to carry it.

Smith: Clearly Ford out-campaigned Jonkman.

Hauenstein: Oh he worked day and night. He had a little, I’ve forgotten what we call that, automobile, whatever it was, going from town to town. And it didn’t make any difference whether he was up in Cedar Springs with the red underwear - he was a popular guy. Everybody remembered him from his days of being
such a football star. Even I remembered because I played football against him in high school. He weighed 190 pounds and I weighed 135 wet. I was a half back and he was the center. He clobbered me.

Smith: But I assume he played fair. I assume he clobbered you fair.

Hauenstein: Oh yes. Well, in those days, playing center for a football team was different than it is today. You’d play offense and defense both. He was the guy that ran the team because the center could also catch passes – he could do everything. He could play both ways and Jerry was in every play there was. 190 pounds in high school in those days was a mountain man – and he carried on in Michigan and Yale.

Smith: Did you know Betty back then?

Hauenstein: I’d met her but I didn’t know her. She was kind of in the background a great deal. She stayed in the background very much.

Smith: Were you surprised when he beat Jonkman in the primary?

Hauenstein: No. I think he would have beaten Jonkman other ways, we were so fed up with him. Particularly when we came back. I remember, it was right after the war, it was one of the big first meetings and we asked Barney to speak to us. He told us about how he flew over Alaska and the beautiful sight of Alaska and how they had done when the war was over. We could hardly stand it. So he wasn’t a very popular guy. We had him. I don’t think there was a club in Grand Rapids that some of us didn’t speak to – I don’t care how low down or high it was, but we did the job pretty well.

Smith: What happened, in the end, to Frank McKay?

Hauenstein: I don’t know.

Smith: Was his political power broken?

Hauenstein: Yes. They started going after him, indeed they did. But I don’t remember how he died, exactly. Don’t remember that because I was traveling internationally pretty heavily in those days and I wasn’t around too much.
Smith: So your friendship with Ford obviously evolved over the years?

Hauenstein: Well, actually, we didn’t live too far apart in early days. But the dividing line was such that I went to Central and he went to South, went to a different school.

Smith: Was South as diverse as people make it out to be? The story is that South was a place where, a little bit on the wrong side of the tracks, but you got a lot more diverse student body than maybe you did at Central.

Hauenstein: Much more so. It was diverse – you are exactly correct on that. Central was elite – I was thinking about that the other day because I think we had only one colored man in the whole class at school at that time. His parents were servants across the street to people over there. Today I guess it’s 90% black, but South was somewhat of a mixture.

Smith: Do you remember the Depression in Grand Rapids?

Hauenstein: Very well.

Smith: How bad was it?

Hauenstein: Terrible. It was really very, very bad. Even those who had something, had nothing, so to speak. I remember, I worked for the Press, in the early days, I remember the great big cop on the corner of Sheldon and Fulton. His job was traffic and it would be winter time – ten below zero and he had to go out there. All they had in those days – there were two traffic lights – only a little signal – he’d have to turn it “Go” – “Stop” – “Go” – “Stop” in freezing weather. The guy would come into the office as a place to get warm and back and forth. He’d say, “I just can’t wait to retire, can’t wait to retire.” I said, “What’s your retire pay?” He said, “My retire pay is going to be $50 a month!” Big stuff – that was big money to be able to retire with $50 a month. But during the Depression things were bad, we had riots. We had people marching on city hall, they turned over automobiles, they burned them.

Smith: Really?

Hauenstein: It was a very serious matter. It was indeed.
Smith: And the main employers in town – I assume at that point were the furniture makers?

Hauenstein: Furniture was the main industry.

Smith: And that suffered along with everyone else?

Hauenstein: Absolutely did. We were identified as the furniture capital of America, as you well know, at the time. No one was buying expensive furniture. It really was very bad. Then it’s about the time the unions decided to organize and they came into Grand Rapids to organize. Then there would be people against them and riots would carry on. Some of the union people would get smashed up and go back to Detroit and Lansing and so forth.

Smith: Has there always been a kind of east versus west rivalry in Michigan? Kind of a cultural divide?

Hauenstein: It’s a very minor degree now, but indeed, there was. Yes, you are quite right. There was, yes.

Smith: And this was always sort of a Republican town?

Hauenstein: Always, although I understand that sometimes we get a few Democrats once in a while – personalities. Yes. The Dutch have had a great influence in the development of the city in every major…

Smith: That would be great, Ralph, if you could describe for people, people who don’t know west Michigan, they’re a little confused to hear about the Dutch and they really don’t know what that means. Describe for someone who doesn’t know this area - who the Dutch are and what their impact on this place has been?

Hauenstein: You can’t say the Dutch without saying the religious – the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church. They were two branches – most of them came over, actually from the first settlement. They were in New Jersey and they came back into Grand Rapids, and then some later came directly from what they called the Old Country. It was not unusual on the streets to hear Dutch spoken with a great deal of frequency. I don’t know
exactly the proportions of their populations overall, but it was a pretty good percentage in any event. They carried their influence religiously to a great extent. And the laws of the city sometimes were predicated on exactly how the religious aspect might be from the religious point of view.

Smith: And that was carried into politics?

Hauenstein: Absolutely carried into politics. It was indeed.

Smith: For example, you couldn’t find anything open on a Sunday?

Hauenstein: No. I can’t put this in here because he was here the other day. I remember when I was having dinner years ago with Pete Cook and he was so mad at this guy Fred Meijer. I said, “What?” And he said, “He’s opening his stores on Sunday.” Today Fred Meijer and Peter Cook are very good friends. I remember when that happened.

Smith: So how did Ford in his political career adapt himself to that?

Hauenstein: Fortunately he could kind of be above the whole thing. You couldn’t say anything bad about Ford because he didn’t do anything bad. He was Episcopalian of course, but he went to church on Sunday and Ford was a political wartime hero. He was a star of great fame and we didn’t have many in those days.

Smith: Did you know Phil Buchen?

Hauenstein: I know Phil, yeah. Not well, but knew him. His partner in law – they started law together.

Smith: Did you ever think that Jerry Ford would wind up in the White House?

Hauenstein: Oh, no. Nor did he. Absolutely not. That was the furthest from his thoughts, I’m sure. It’s always been published that he always wanted to be the leader of the House of Representatives.

Smith: When he was in Congress, did you every lobby him over anything? Ask for anything? The story is told that folks here in Grand Rapids, there was group that wanted a military base and he politely, but firmly discouraged them,
saying that that wasn’t a stable enough element from which to build an economy. I suspect he probably upset a few people. They were thinking, here was Jerry Ford on the Appropriations Committee, with all of his connections with the military.

Hauenstein: I do remember that during the Arab-Israeli war that great factor there. Of course we couldn’t get gasoline – we’d line up for gasoline for miles because the Arabs had shut us off for six months from any fuel. And at that time I remember Jerry proposed a great thing – history has recorded that – I suppose you have that some place – but how many nuclear plants, a couple of hundred, or something like that and drill for oil and a lot of other proposals that he had to make us self-sufficient. Had his suggestions or requirements at that time been fulfilled, we’d be exporting it today. We’d be exporting oil. But that’s how far ahead he was in thinking, so to speak, of the present generation, of people we have now in Washington.

Smith: Let me ask you something, when he was in the White House, he was seen as the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge. And yet, long before he died, he’d go to convention after convention and he and Mrs. Ford were increasingly almost marooned – pro-choice, sympathetic to gay rights. A whole host of things… the rest of the party went this way, and they went this way. And you wonder whether it was just the party that changed, did they change, how much of an influence was she on him? He seemed like a more, dare I say liberal, at least culturally, socially.

Hauenstein: I probably would give him the identity of being an independent individual. More independent, irrespective of liberal or conservative. He was an independent. He had his own thoughts, of his own mind, of what he wanted to do. He always talked in terms of what would be better, not for himself so much for but for the country. That’s reflected in all the things he did.

Smith: Did you see him in the White House at all? Did you visit?

Hauenstein: Oh yeah.

Smith: You obviously saw him, I assume, after the presidency he came back here a lot.
Hauenstein: He came back here a lot. You have to realize that Jerry hadn’t spent a lot of time here in Grand Rapids. He didn’t have much chance. From high school he went on Yale, and then he got out and he had less than a year I guess and he went into the service, then into the House of Representatives. So he wasn’t in Grand Rapids that much, really.

Smith: How much resentment was there when it was announced that he was going to California, when he was going to live in California after the presidency? Were there people here in Grand Rapids who thought that that was some sort of betrayal?

Hauenstein: Some people did comment on it, but I don’t think it became a major issue. I don’t think so. Some people felt badly about it because he could have carried his influence from here into Washington, and probably to a greater extent that he could from California.

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

Hauenstein: I hadn’t thought about that, no. Betty, of course, after the funeral. I was one of the military honor guards in Washington, Betty sent us some discharged caissons from the 75 mm gun – beautifully engraved stuff. Very thoughtful of her, very nice of her to do that.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction to his death, here and elsewhere? The numbers of people and the media coverage.

Hauenstein: Yeah, I was surprised. I remember, of course, the campaign when he was running for office, and the presidency, and I remember Barbara Walters, she was number one of all television at the time. I remember watching, she was interviewing somebody and the individual said he was going to vote for Ford and she said, “How could you vote for Ford? How could anybody vote for Ford?” And she raked him over the coals. Now, Ford was the greatest that ever was to hold the presidency. That’s how things changed so much.

Smith: Of course, in the White House Mrs. Ford was pretty outspoken

Hauenstein: Oh, yes.
Smith: She got into trouble with the *Sixty Minutes* interview and all that. How did that go over – her comments about Susan having an affair or the children using marijuana or her own support for pro-choice?

Hauenstein: I think it followed very much the trend of the city itself. Once we were so conservative, as I spoke about before, but we’re no longer that type of people. We’re far more liberal, far more acceptable of things as they exist and accepting them as they are. I think virtually everything has taken that vein today.

Smith: Which was much less provincial a place – west Michigan has opened up to the world.

Hauenstein: Very much so.

Smith: If you were going to tell people something about Jerry Ford that maybe they didn’t know, for someone who didn’t know him, what would you say – how would you describe him?

Hauenstein: You have to take it to a different context. As a friend, you could say “Jerry” to him. If he’s not the friend you have to say, “Mr. President.”

Smith: Did you call him Jerry?

Hauenstein: Yes, I called him Jerry. Ralph and Jerry. As a matter of fact, he signed his letters to me, always “Jerry.” Never president and so forth. He appreciated that – he liked that. He said he knew immediately where he was when somebody said “Jerry.” If he was in a crowd of people, then Mr. President. Somebody would say “Hi, Jerry,” he knew they were from Grand Rapids. His old football team or something like that. He knew exactly where he was. He appreciated it. There was nothing highly sophisticated about Jerry Ford. Nothing.

Smith: That’s just what we’re looking for, Ralph, thank you.
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Smith: First of all, thank you so much for doing this. Would you tell us a little bit about your life before you crossed paths with the Ford White House?

Cavaney: I guess I would say my beginnings of interest in public policy -- and the politics that are necessary to implement it -- started in high school and college. It was then that I got involved in service organizations and the governance of student bodies. I went to the University of Southern California and a lot of my college friends and fraternity brothers were all involved in campus politics.

Smith: Was that Haldeman’s group?

Cavaney: Yes, Dwight Chapin directly and, yes, Haldeman’s group. I could probably give you a dozen names and they could be recalled by anybody who was familiar with the Nixon administration. And, so when we all graduated, I went off to serve three combat tours in Vietnam to satisfy my NROTC commitment. So, from ’64 to ’69, I was not a part of this group. Many of them, went into the Nixon gubernatorial race in California, which proved to be a political loss.

Smith: Which was reluctantly undertaken?

Cavaney: Yes. But they were around for the makeover and the campaign drive in ’68. When I finally left the Navy and took a civilian job, it was in Orange County, CA. Nixon had bought the Western White House in San Clemente, which was just down the road from where I was working in Orange County. So, my relationship with many of these former colleagues was started anew. I sort of panhandled around and became a volunteer advance person, which I did for four years, while working for Security Pacific Bank.

Smith: Was this for both the first and second terms?
Cavaney: In the first term, yes. And then I went on the White House Staff full-time for the second term, following the 1972 election. And that is where a most interesting thing happened. I got to know Jerry Ford when he replaced Spiro Agnew as Vice President. Jerry Ford never really had to campaign for himself, in the truest sense of the word except his first run for congress. So he didn’t have a campaign mechanism, campaign apparatus, or anything like that. The White House got an agreement with the RNC for Dean Burch and Jerry Ford to be referred to us for logistical support in the advance office, which I was in charge of at that time. Their charter was, “Okay, you’ve got to go on the road and you’ve got to take care of all the Republicans who are nervous about what’s going on.” So that was my first exposure to Jerry Ford and it was during that time that I got to see the large differences between the personalities of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. And, I sort of fell in love with Jerry Ford the person and would’ve walked around the world, if he’d asked me to.

Smith: It’s fascinating that you say that because it opens a number of questions. It also reminds me of one thing Rex Scouten said. Rex, of course, had been with the Secret Service and accompanied Vice President Nixon on a number of trips. The family had a room for him out in California. I mean he literally became that close to the Vice President. Rex, who is appropriately discreet given his position, was very candid in drawing a distinction between the Nixon he had known in the 50s and the Nixon he saw in the White House. He said something that absolutely dumbfounded me. He volunteered the observation, “I can’t tell you how many times we’d be on a plane, sometimes just the two of us, and out of the blue this he just sort of pounded his fists and he said, ‘I’m not tough enough. I’ve got to make myself toughen up,’” which is a fascinating window on a surprising side of Nixon. And implicit in what Rex had said was that he had succeeded by the time he’d became President, perhaps to the detriment of his presidency.

Cavaney: His force of will and his self-discipline was extraordinary. An example - I think he always wanted to be one of the boys; that high school and college athlete; the person who was recognized as being part of the “in crowd”. His
persona, presumably, wasn’t quite that in his younger days. He worked hard and went out of his way to be seen with so and so or wanting to do this or that, which did not necessarily come natural to him. You could almost see him say to himself, “I want to make myself more like this and therefore I’m going to do it,” “I want to make myself tougher,” or “I’m going to dedicate myself to making sure that nobody out-studies me in terms of things that are really important.” And, he was incredible in that regard.

Smith: He famously said, “I’m an introvert in an extrovert’s profession,” which suggests a degree of self knowledge that you wish in some ways had extended beyond that observation.

Cavaney: And the other thing then that was so interesting from this perspective where I was, is watching Jerry Ford come into play. Nixon enjoyed thoroughly the idea of studying through books and research papers and having materials brought to him as he’s evolved before he engaged heavily in discussions.

Smith: He’s been called a closet intellectual.

Cavaney: Yes. I think he was. I even heard him say once something to the effect that, “Nobody’s going to out study me on things that are important to me.” So he took great pride in knowing all the details. And then you see Jerry Ford come in and employ his method of learning; that was totally different. He would look to people who he respected, as experts in certain areas, and have group discussions with them, and he would absorb unbelievable amounts of knowledge, principally through the give and take of discussion and interaction. And then, of course, you see the papers and all, but it’s sort of almost the polar opposite of Richard Nixon in terms of how you acquired your knowledge about what you were going to do in leadership. The style suited the man.

Smith: Think what else that reveals, too. One is, basically a loner, inner-directed, solitary in his pursuit of knowledge and as in most things. The other is a much more gregarious “people person.”

Cavaney: Extroverted guy.
Smith: Yeah.

Cavaney: Yes, it was quite interesting to see that contrast.

Smith: It’s interesting because, this period was so awkward, obviously, for everyone. We’ve picked up on a number of people who suggested that there were those in the Nixon White House who looked at the Vice President - who was out of town more than he was in town, who was really walking a tightrope - and perhaps resented what they thought was a less than full throated defense of an embattled president. Did you sense those tensions?

Cavaney: There were some. There were clearly people that didn’t understand what the strategy was. And the strategy, having sat there through all this - and we made many trips with Dean Burch on the plane - it was to give people a sense of reassurance and confidence that everything was coming along okay. Well, if you are in a purely defense mode, that may not necessarily be the messages you would want to be delivering to people. It’s almost by design the reverse side of that. So, as the President would want to do, he would give an order and he was very good at doing that. So it really was not fair for people to criticize unless it was to advance another agenda, or they just clearly didn’t understand what was being asked of Jerry Ford at one time and what that role was supposed to be at that period of time.

Smith: We talked to Benton Becker. There’s this wonderful little anecdote that I’d never heard before that says volumes about both men. Earl Warren died during that period and Benton, who politically was to the left of both Nixon and Ford - nevertheless, Benton said to the Vice President, “You know, it might be a really nice gesture for you to go up to the court and pay your respects.” And Ford sort of mulled that over and said, “It probably wouldn’t sit well with the White House, but I’ll think about it.” And Becker learned later on, that the Vice President on his own had gone up to the court and had placed a wreath at Earl Warren’s casket. And sure enough, he was chewed up by Nixon. It was a nether world he was in. We’ve been told by a number of people he really did not enjoy the vice presidency.
Cavaney: He didn’t. I think as we later got to see him in his element, as the very relaxed individual when he was around people; he just loved people, he loved it all and you would see it in him. In that period of time, as I said, it was his duty to do this, and it wasn’t a role I think he was fully comfortable in. However, he did it and he did it I think reasonably well given the times. But you’re absolutely right, he was not the same person, and he had to feel a little bit awkward about that, and a lot of times he would say, “Glad that’s over,” kind of thing. In a sense that one would say “duty done.”

Smith: And a later consequence of that was that Jerry Ford probably tended to be a little bit more understanding of Vice President Rockefeller’s travails in office than a different President would have. During that period of his vice presidency, Tom DeFrank in his book made a great deal out of a slip of the tongue. Putting that aside, did you ever hear him say anything that even by inference – I mean, look, he’s a pro and he can read the papers. At some point, he’s got to be weighing the possibilities. Was that in the background? Was it ever discussed?

Cavaney: The best thing I can say about that is that other people would mention it in his presence, and he would sometimes give a slight wince or something. Clearly, you could detect his sensitivity was heightened. And then he would try and move off that topic as fast as he could through a joke or something like that. Clearly, thought had been given, clues were there, and he had concluded that there was nothing he could really say that was going to help. And I saw that repeated time and again. It was almost like being able to see into his soul.

Smith: And presumably that would include, when you were out in the field, Republican candidates?

Cavaney: Absolutely, yeah. Because, of course, coming and speaking on behalf of the party, as he was doing in being the vice president, people assumed he knew everything. So people came up, I mean I heard it brought up a number of times, but sort of almost the “Gee, you’d be great!” type of comment.
Smith: For a guy who was by nature pretty open, that must have been one of the things he didn’t like about the job. I mean, having to be artificial, or closed mouth, in that sense.

Cavaney: He was a man who enjoyed the give and take. You could see, he’d get four or five of his old friends like he used to do up in the House and they’d talk, and you just knew he’d keep going. I can remember when we were doing the trips we went on, you had to pull him out of events because he just relished the give and take and would stay long past the scheduled conclusion.

Smith: He loved the House, didn’t he?

Cavaney: Absolutely.

Smith: That was his real home.

Cavaney: That was so great at his funeral that The House returned that love by letting him have that very special treatment that nobody else had gotten. And I think it was just evident in everything about him. You heard him talk about old friends, he would see somebody who he’d served with but had been out of office for three or four terms or something like that, and we’d go to a town and that person would be there, and about ten minutes after he’d be there giving a speech. And he’d go, “So and so’s out there” and “Go get him. I want to talk to him!” Always that embodiment of camaraderie and good will.

Smith: It really was bipartisan.

Cavaney: It was, back in those days, no question. That’s the shame of what’s happening nowadays. It used to be there were as many people in the political middle as there were on the ends, and even more so, and you worked around in the middle, requiring you to be bipartisan. But now our political process has changed so that the extremes, shall we say, the ends of the ideological spectrum, these groups have all the weight, and there’s nobody in the center. And now if you try to occupy the center, you tend to get demonized from both directions. So it’s really a very challenging political environment.

Smith: You’d know this better than most. I often think of Ronald Reagan, certainly a principled conservative, yet people forget Reagan was going to put Dick
Schweiker on his ticket in ’76. And in the White House, the old union boss always said, “If I get 80%, I call it a victory.” I mean, he may have been fixed in his principles, but he was certainly pragmatic in how he went about realizing them.

Cavaney: I think what he learned was that one classic: If you’re going to be successful in politics, you’ve got to have wins. You’ve got to keep restoring that political capital that you use up, and the only way you can restore it is to use it again and prove it. And I think he had that view up here. I marvel at how certainly in those first two years with him -- watching him, who I didn’t know as well as I’d known the other two presidents -- to see what a master he was of being able to understand the geopolitics of what was going on, just like this! It was incredible.

Smith: Yet in many ways still a mysterious figure, an elusive figure.

Cavaney: Very much was his own man, he and Nixon. And think both of them are from California. California always prides itself as sort of hanging out there in public and doing this and I’m from California. And they both kept their own counsel to an extent much greater than any other president we’ve seen in this modern era, so to speak. And yet they were very different in how they exercised power and the like.

Smith: You’re absolutely right. You know a Freudian could have a field day with Reagan’s boyhood, and yet there’s a security about Reagan and an optimism about Reagan and he just liked people.

Cavaney: He knew who he was. Yeah, and at times, you can see both of those two. They would be against some piece of legislation that was purported to help some disadvantaged folks, and the Administration would be against it because it obviously pragmatically wasn’t going to work. But then one of those people from that impacted group would run into him and they’d tell them a story and both of them would tear up and they’d write the check or go back and tell their staff “Let’s be sure they’re taken care of.” So they did have that basic connection with the human condition.
Smith: I’ve often thought - and in some ways it was unavoidable, ambition made it unavoidable, a lot of things made it unavoidable - but that Ford and Reagan had more in common than the public ever guessed or even the party pros suspected.

Cavaney: I think yes. I think its root is in this understanding of the human condition and a simpatico nature towards that. And both of them went through that full circle from starting with not much, having worked hard, been scoffed at on occasion for various kinds of things and finally, they could see if you follow your precepts, both of them could see how you could be successful working in the system. I think that connection was the bond you’re talking about and I would agree.

Smith: It’s interesting. We talked to reporters who were on that vice presidential plane and it’s funny because, while he may not have been having a whole lot of fun, it sure sounds like they were having a ball. What was the mood like on Slingshot Airlines?

Cavaney: The Vice President, he was one of those who just loved people and he liked making people feel at ease. I think he probably had difficulty, although I can remember a few occasions of him really coming down strong on somebody. Just because that really wasn’t his nature, you would see him later joke with the recipient - with the idea of making them feel at ease and that they have a new chance. Whether it was on the plane or it was in the car or at the hotel, the overnight or whatever it was. I just think that was part of his persona - to create an environment around him where people felt comfortable, would speak their mind, and have fun, even when you’re working hard.

Smith: I’d love to have an example or two. We’ve asked people about his temper, which was a lifelong thing, and it is to his credit that most of the time he controlled it. One of the gals who worked at the office out in Rancho Mirage said they could tell if it was a two god damn it day or a five god damn it day.

Cavaney: I’ve got a Jerry Ford temper story that Dick Cheney tells a lot on the stump, but we actually saw it happen. We happened to be at this event. It was going to be staged as you typically do in smaller towns in a big, huge room, like a
gymnasium. And, the people were in there for 2 hours, in wait for a series of reasons, notably a long motorcade instead of a helo ride. So, all these people are jam-packed to the gills, in this gritty environment. But what happens, of course, is the room just heats up and then the humidity does weird things. So, we arrive finally, he goes into the gym and the people are going nuts and they’re yelling and screaming and doing this and that and he was in his element, at his very best – very glad to be out of this motorcade and on to this thing. As he finishes his speech and starts to leave the stage, we did the balloon drop. Well, the humidity and the long time with the heat created static electricity and all the balloons stuck together. So, it’s now referred to as the famous balloon “plop” – coming down, huge, all massed together. You can’t see the President because all of these are six to eight feet tall and he’s fighting his way to the crowd and the exit, where he just ripped Dick Cheney. “That’s the last balloon drop we’re ever going to have at any event.” I can never forget the embarrassment because Dick reminds me often of it when he’s out speaking.

Smith: People say it was like a summer thunderstorm; it happened and it would be over.

Cavaney: Absolutely, which is again a very nice attribute, because you can’t be nice to everybody all the time and be an effective leader. You’ve got to set conditions and tell people what the boundaries are and hold them to it.

Smith: What about the people who say he was too nice? I think that’s maybe a euphemism for a certain element of naiveté. On the one hand, we admire the fact that in this cynical town he wanted to believe the best of everyone and was inclined to do so. Is that a luxury a president can afford? In some ways that’s another parallel with Reagan.

Cavaney: I think that that was the skill set, or the approach, that was very appropriate for the times. If you were a politician, you played in the middle. That’s how things were made to happen, by playing in the middle. You, by definition, wanted to be friendly with everyone. You wanted them to feel easy coming to you and being with you. So, I don’t find that as a shortcoming or a liability. I think that would be a great frustration in today’s political environment,
because it is very hard to go off line, I think, and continue to think the best of everybody when the next moment they’re up there delivering their caucus’ line, which can be very brutal and over-personal. So, it would’ve been different if he’d have grown up in one of his sons’ or daughter’s generation and been playing in that same arena right now.

Smith: That’s interesting. Was there a moment when you concluded or you sensed that he concluded that Nixon wasn’t going to make it? The so-called smoking gun tape, or the Supreme Court ruling about turning over the tapes - there were obvious kinds of milestones along the way.

Cavaney: I think, for all of us who were there at that time, it began to take a toll on you, these various, as you say, judicial decisions, this sentencing decision, this/that, and it did monopolize you some what. I’ll give you an example from an advance office perspective. President Nixon would get really down in the dumps. He’d say, “I’ve got to get out there and see the people. I’ve got to get out there. They give me energy.” And so the call would come in, “The President wants to go on the road. Let’s go do that.”

Well, there was only about four or five states where we could guarantee that he would get a hugely receptive crowd and that the demonstrators couldn’t overwhelm you. And so the last year we did a fair number of events, but they were always to the same geographical locales where he actually had contact with people. And we went to a lot of fixed forums where the audiences were selected.

Smith: Largely in the South?

Cavaney: Yes, largely in the South. Kentucky was about as far north as he went and one in West Virginia, but down South. And there really wasn’t a whole lot of what I thought there should’ve been of a “tomorrow focus”. And, you knew this is just not fully sustainable. This is not going to go on. And I don’t think any of us had any idea when or exactly how or when or what or however it was, but [we] definitely had that sense of “this course will not run its full term.”

Smith: Were you in the White House on the 9th of August?
Cavaney: I wasn’t. As a good advance man, I was on the road, so I missed that.

Smith: We’ve been told by a number of folks - again it’s understandable - after the swearing in, there was a receiving line and then a reception in the State Dining Room. And more than one person has said that you could watch the Nixon people kind of peel away rather than – and again, in the context of the time, it’s perfectly understandable. What was your sense in terms of melding these sort of disparate elements together? One senses that the first year of the Ford presidency was overhung by these unaddressed personnel issues.

Cavaney: No question that the people that were not part of the Nixon White House and key administration slots - they came in with President Ford - wanted to put everything they could behind them. And therefore anybody who was a carryover really needed to move on. There was an awful lot of that. And, of course, because many of those folks had never served in these roles in government, the flip side of that is, well, trains have to run on time and somebody’s got to manage the process. So that tension, and I was not privy to the President’s decisions per se on these things, but that had to be a constant play in those personnel selections about how far we’re going to go.

I can remember it was Dick Cheney who called me in and talked to me as they were going through those various personnel considerations. I assumed like so many of those Nixon folks, I was going to be gone. And Dick appropriately asked me a lot of tough questions about things I’d done and where I was and all. And, I think I was helped by the fact that we had President Ford so much in our office and because of the advance and the travel and all that contact, you got a chance for him to know you.

So I was asked to stay and I was very, very grateful. But there were a lot of friends that weren’t in a similar situation. And, it’s interesting, we actually saw this thing play out. If you fast forward to George Bush 41, when he finally won his own election in his right, you had that same sense of – “Is it all new, or is it some mix of people?” It would be interesting if somebody who was part of that process could write about the perspective of how those people made those decisions, how they selected the mix and how they went about it.
Smith: Contrary to what people would assume, there’s nothing harder I think internally than taking over for a president of your own party, particularly if you’re thought of as a protégé with obligations.

Cavaney: Yeah, that’s right. Your future is basically tied to this decision made in your favor.

Smith: And yet people elected you in part to represent at least a modest course correction - the kinder, gentler business. I’m sure it created problems.

Cavaney: Yeah, it was always tough and that’s some of the funny little things we were joking about before about the ghost speechwriting team. And the little thing about, “Well, don’t distribute the seating chart of Air Force One around here until the last minute because then you’ll spend all your time deciding who sits next to who and all.” It’s just all these little manifestations of the fact that the problem didn’t really settle in until later in the term.

Smith: And I assume Ford found that a source of frustration.

Cavaney: He didn’t want to hear about it and appropriately so. He shouldn’t be bothered about it. But on occasion, somebody would come up with one of those, “Well, I’m supposed to be going to such and such.” “Talk to Dick” or “Talk to Red” or something like that. And I couldn’t blame him.

Smith: Why was Hartmann a polarizing figure? Let me rephrase that. Isn’t it possible to look at Hartmann and see a guy who in effect was overly - but also maybe usefully - protective, but also possessive?

Cavaney: I think if you look at his role that he tried to shape for himself, it was essentially to protect the president and preserve all the best of what made Jerry Ford who he was politically. And Bob Hartmann was the kingpin when Jerry Ford was at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue. I think it is just natural, when you try and fit yourself into an extraordinarily complex environment - where you go from an almost bottoms up kind of process, which is Congress - particularly the House, to the White House where it’s definitely got to be organized. And I think he just had difficulty understanding why you needed all these systems and all these aides and why you had to talk
to all these people. And the people on the other side just couldn’t see why he
had to be so free wheeling and why people would do the other. So I think it
was a conflict of those two worlds coming together, and I think Bob
Hartmann probably was very frustrated. I know he was frustrated by it, but he
probably hurt himself like Don Quixote by just tilting a little too often at some
windmill and then it became sort of a drag or a problem. But there’s no
question that it had to be painful. Anybody in that position, I think, would
have encountered that same thing.

Smith: You’ve been in several White Houses. How would you characterize the level,
for lack of a better word, of intrigue? I won’t say backbiting, but clearly
jockeying for position is a polite term. It’s just part of the process. But how
would you characterize the Ford White House in relation to the others that
you’ve either been in or observed closely?

Cavaney: There’s always the transition part. If you take out the sort of mixing bowl that
always happens at the beginning of service because it doesn’t involve a
change from the same party, it isn’t clean cut. You’re starting anew but the
transition takes time. I would say with the Ford White House, if you took
anything after the first year, you saw a very, very different environment than
you saw before. By then, those that had come new, those from the Hill,
everybody understood how the President liked things, and he’d settled into
this framework. He and Dick had worked out a methodology for all this stuff.
And, then there was the serious policy differences. But in terms of getting
along and doing what it does to make the trains run on time and to make
people look good and doing all that, I think that the Ford White House’s last
year and a half, and maybe a little bit more than that, behaved and played with
the very best of them.

Smith: Think what was unique about the beginning about the Ford presidency. You
had no transition, you had no preparation, you couldn’t even acknowledge the
possibility that you might need a transition. So you were literally starting
cold.

Cavaney: Yep, it hadn’t been done before.
Smith: No model at all, yeah. This is not to criticize Rumsfeld, but a number of people have suggested that it was somehow - relaxed is a loaded term - comfortable, maybe, that there was a notable difference between the kinds of environments.

Cavaney: There was, yeah. We oftentimes forget that Don Rumsfeld was a very powerful political figure in his own right and a very close friend of Jerry Ford’s and a comrade in arms, shall we say, in many of the battles that took place up on Capitol Hill. So when he was chief of staff, he just had that bravado - his style and his mannerisms of leadership and what he wanted to do - his force of personality. It may have created a bit more friction at the margins than otherwise would’ve been the case, but the trains ran on time and things got done.

On the other hand, Dick at the time was the able, willing, and a very, very superb #2, if you will, just beginning to sort of make his mark. And he calls them as he sees them. So it’s very easy to see Dick, but he doesn’t do it in a harsh public way. So I think what happened was, Don was - the transition enabler. I would say he would be about as close to somebody that understood the essence of the presidency, because of his experience, because of his demeanor, and because he’d been battle tested time and again at the polls. All those things. He just managed in a different kind of way, and he instructed in a different kind of way, and he was a masterful leader in getting the “new” up to speed.

Smith: I’ll be careful about how I phrase this, but I think Ford would be the first to say this, but he had to learn to be president. I mean, 25 years in the House is one kind of education and it served him well in many ways, but it’s not the same as being president. In some ways, Rumsfeld’s singular contribution was to be part of that instructional process.

Cavaney: Yes, I think Don was very directive. “We’re going to do it this way.” “We’re going to do it that way.” I think that kind of discipline was very helpful in those early years because so few knew what it was going to be like. Dick’s style was more the collaborative “This is what I need, and I trust you’re going to do it right” kind of thing. And those are two very different styles of
leadership. And I think by then, the President himself had pretty much settled into how he liked it to work. I think that coming together of Dick’s style and where the President was, turned out to be an easy effective mesh. It was just different from before, but it worked, likely beyond many’s expectations.

Smith: And, let’s face it, Congressmen don’t manage anything bigger than an office staff. The sort of hidden story about the Ford presidency was that I think he himself said, “Just as I learned how to do the job, I lost it.” There’s the sense that he was in fact, as Rumsfeld said, “Every day he was becoming a better executive.” Could you see that?

Cavaney: Yes, absolutely. And, again, I think Don provided an incredible service to the President in those early times where nobody really had a template on how we were going to manage this. He was forthright and strong and gave guidance, and people took that. And I think that, as you’ve mentioned, it helped the President because things were getting fixed around him, and he was learning and observing things that worked and didn’t work. And I think that was probably one of the President’s best decisions, putting Don in that position, because, when I think back on it, who else really could’ve done that job at that time?

And that’s the interesting thing I’ve learned over my times of watching politics. Its incredible how many times either the voters or people who get elected to office end up putting the right person in the right spot at the right time, even though there may be a lot of critics about such a choice. Don Rumsfeld and then Dick Cheney provide good leadership team regarding the office of the Presidency, as the perfect metaphor. This was needed at that time to get the President to where he needed to be. And the thing I hear from my friends, Democrats and Republicans, enemies and friends, is that there probably is no greater example of love and people hanging together than the Jerry Ford alumni group. We still have a fabulous get together every year; every June. It has to do with the bright strong people that were brought in. They all saw exactly how this all worked, and it worked on the collaborative model. The kind of thing that “We’re all in this together.”

Smith: Which must have added to the pain of losing in ’76.
Cavaney: Oh, to be so far behind, for good and sufficient reason, and yet to come that close. I remember that last weekend when the polls actually went Bing! And, Ford was ahead. It just didn’t hold. But I think the other part, sad as that was, is that I am so happy for Betty and the Ford family and all the people who worked so hard and selflessly. The pinnacle of Jerry Ford was embodied at his funeral. But you could see the re-evaluation beginning ten years before that, the acknowledgment of the right person in the right job at the right time for what Jerry Ford did. In that two and a half years, took America from one of its worst leadership moments back to normalcy. We had a real election horse race – our country had survived in a healthy manner.

Smith: I’ve often said, by the time of the Bicentennial, there was something to celebrate more than just the calendar. Contrast the mood in the summer of ’74 and in ’76. I’m jumping ahead, but there’s a wonderful Rex Scouten comment on election night, about two in the morning and it wasn’t over but it was not looking good. And the President finally said, “I’m going to turn in.” It was not a concession, but people could all read the body language. So Rex was up there on the second floor with the family and he went across the hall into the President’s room because he wanted to say something consoling. And, you know, what do you say? He said, “You know, Mr. President, just stop and think. You have devoted your entire life in service to this country, the war, and 25 years on the Hill and what you’ve done as president, it’s really a shame. You really deserved to win, but you know, Mr. President, maybe it’s just time for you to take a well earned rest.” And Ford said, “I don’t think so.”

Cavaney: I’ve never heard that. How beautiful. Perfect!

Smith: “I’m willing to make the sacrifice.”

Cavaney: “Try me!”

Smith: He really was down for awhile wasn’t he?

Cavaney: It was tough.

Smith: Can you talk about your observations?
Cavaney: Yeah, it’s sort of like the wind went out of your sails. I mean, he was there, of course, but all the things that filled the room, his laughter, his jokes, his easy demeanor, they just weren’t there.

Smith: He was in mourning?

Cavaney: Very much so. I think, again it goes to that point, if you’re a practiced politician, in almost every case, you’ve got to love being around people, you love the adulation, not so much from an ego perspective per se, but in the validation that what you’re doing is the right thing to be doing. And then all of a sudden to have that - even though by the smallest of margins - pulled away from you is almost like a repudiation. So, many internalize it all, as opposed to saying that there were forces greater than me that were out there; the forces that he had to face in going through that campaign. I’ve never heard anybody say that the pardon of Nixon didn’t cost him the election. Even if it was the smallest of all those estimates, he would’ve been president, had it otherwise been the case.

And then to think, coming out of a bitterly fought and contested convention, 33 points behind and close the gap in of a couple of months. Unprecedented, even to this day. That’s something you don’t see. And almost to pull it out. And, so there’s a part of you that says, I think, he had a greater appreciation for it, as time went on. A real pride. I think he did a great service for the country. If you think of where we would’ve been if we had not had that 1976 Bicentennial – during which President Ford’s leadership and poise brought back a sense of pride. The people were now going to vote for what they thought was the right thing for the times, and they did. It just didn’t quite come together for Jerry Ford. But I think it’s a huge, huge accomplishment. Probably the singular, stellar thing that he did for the country.

Smith: Did he bounce back before the inauguration?

Cavaney: I think there was still some essence of that disappointing feeling hanging around. I remember we were on the helicopter after the “changing to the guard” up on the Capitol – the Inaugural swearing in of Jimmy Carter. We got on the helicopter and we’re flying out to Andrews, and President Ford was
commenting, Dick [Cheney] was sitting next to him, and they were just looking down. He couldn’t take his eyes off that crowd, that place up there on the Capitol where he’d spent much of his life, and then flew over the White House on the way out to Andrews Air Force Base. So I think there was that nostalgia. That sort of “letting go” was actually happening. But I did not go out on Air Force Two with him after that, so I’m not sure how they worked through that withdrawal process. But I’m sure he had to be reflecting on some of those memories because that looked to me like a very personal moment.

Smith: What was Mrs. Ford’s demeanor after that point?

Cavaney: I think she was, I’m sure a lot of people would say, the “rock” in that marriage. She held firm when firmness was needed. I think she was trying to make it a little bit light, but you could see that she wasn’t quite there herself. She was just very gracious and endearing to him. She gave him a little pat when we came on the helicopter, and a few of those little touches that say, “I hurt for you.”

Smith: Non-verbal.

Cavaney: People would understand if they’ve been with somebody for a time that they’d know that “I feel your pain” or “I understand where you are” sentiment. You know the mood, when it’s not appropriate to say something, but “I get it.” And you know all those little gestures they had as well as that wonderful capacity to do what was needed with one another, and joke and laugh.

Smith: They had almost a bantering relationship.

Cavaney: Yes, exactly. She could give him as good as she got. It was to her credit. She’s was a great lady.

Smith: She would be the first to admit that punctuality was not her defining characteristic. How much of an issue that? How did they deal with that? How did you deal with it?

Cavaney: One of the things the President would do when the wait got a little long was “Well, I guess I’ll have to have a second drink,” because he would be out and
ready to go and he would be sitting down, relaxed, and every so often he would make a little comment about that. “Well, it was a two drink wait.” Some little thing like that, in his own little way, he would give her a little verbal “poke”. But not very often did he ever get mad.

Smith: But it was the norm. I mean, you factored that in?

Cavaney: Yes. exactly. And I think after that long period of time you’ve been married, you just kind of say to yourself and act it out as though, “It ain’t worth falling on my sword for this one.”

Smith: Were you aware that she had a problem, however defined? Was it something people knew about? Suspected?

Cavaney: Not really. I mean, people that are under that much pressure and having been there and seen the Nixon group and all, you are different than you are otherwise. Speaking for myself, I thought a lot of it was attributable to the pressure, the loss of privacy and all the little things that you take for granted that you don’t have anymore. But then it’s always at the back of your mind even though you try and put it away. It’s not something you’d dwell on. The thing that I think put her at such incredible standing with the American public was the way she handled the alcohol issue and then her cancer in a public, “teaching” moment. To this day I get, “You worked with Jerry Ford? Ah, what she did!” Women say this to you, my wife and my mother-in-law being classic examples of working tirelessly for “the cure”. And I’m amazed at how many thousands and thousands of people that I’ve been able to meet would say, “Had she not done that, I wouldn’t have been concerned” or “I wouldn’t have gone” and “It made a difference in my life.” And it’s just…wow! Talk about transformative!

Smith: It’s hard to explain to a younger generation that, not so long ago, breast cancer was a subject that you literally didn’t discuss. And she made it possible to do so.

Cavaney: Yeah, she did.
Smith: It’s funny because when she did the famous *60 Minutes* interview, one senses that the immediate reaction - because people always fight the last war - was, “Oh my God, what has she done?” And it took a little bit of time, there was a little bit of disconnect, until the polls started coming in and the mail came in. And all of sudden you discovered that, yes, some people were P.O.ed, although a lot of them weren’t going to vote for Ford anyway. But there was this audience out there that perhaps hadn’t been identified before – what later might be called soccer moms or whatever - for whom she was giving voice to their innermost feelings.

Cavaney: Yeah, she’s a silent champion to a lot of things that occupied their minds. As I say, I hear that mentioned so many times, I couldn’t even begin to count it the mentions. Whether it was her independence - you know, here’s the most powerful person in the world as president and here she is doing her own thing right next to him, even though sometimes he’d give a little look like “oh, there goes Betty”. This empowers people to think in ways they didn’t before and speak out about how, “Wow, what a great role model she was for the times.”

Smith: And people did sense that, for them, she was totally genuine. He wasn’t simply resigned to her doing things the way she was; but that’s the way it had always been. That’s part of what he always loved about her, and he wasn’t going to try to change her.

Cavaney: That’s love. And, I think it worked the other way. One of the great stories I told on a number of occasions is we were down in the primaries fighting “tooth and nail” in Texas in every little town we could get to, and in this instance in East Texas. We were at a “small” football stadium. We got the idea that “Geez, if we can go there, then we can go to Tyler and Longview and all the towns. We can engage the Kilgore Rangerettes.” And, each little town had their own wonderful, fabulous 250 Rangerettes.

The first time we got to the one of these “Rangerette Rallies”, the President said, “Oh, I didn’t realize quite what Texas…” He didn’t realize the massive crowd and all these people. So he’s going along, and they’re doing all these acrobatic moves and the President is throwing kisses in appreciation and, well, by the time we get to the second and the third town, the “Rangerettes”
were collapsing in on him and giving him these big red kisses on the cheek. And, of course, click, click, click! All that’s making the wires are the “kiss” photos. And then Lee Domina, the Marine aide to the President, and a few other people, started as we got back on the Marine One helicopter to head back, “Oh, Mr. President, I’m already hearing stories back in the White House. Betty wasn’t exactly sure what you were doing out here.”

And, of course, all of us were picking on him which was routine. Next thing you know an aide has a big bouquet of flowers ready for the President, so when he came off the helicopter on the South Lawn, he had the flowers to give Betty and it was so funny. He just felt like the young kid that had been caught doing something he shouldn’t have been doing, or maybe, should’ve used better judgment. And the President just knew he was going to get it. Again, you saw that little magic between the two of them - the sort of unspoken love they had for one another.

Smith: And then there’s the famous Vickie Carr story.

Cavaney: Oh, yes.

Smith: Did you have much contact with the kids?

Cavaney: Yes, a fair amount. They’d come and go on their own. I think that was another thing that made the Fords so human was they had at that time what could be called a typical American family. Where you had all these kids doing something, somebody wanted to do this; somebody else is doing that. Very different kind of White House occupants. They didn’t try and hide who they were or make it anything it wasn’t. And, I think, people appreciated the honesty and the earnestness with which they didn’t go out and take political advantage of the children or try and use them for anything. They just let them do their own thing, and I think that was pretty well handled. I remember Susan probably had the roughest transition. Because she was going through that year becoming a woman right in front of our eyes, and that’s got to be a difficult process for anybody, let alone have Secret Service agents following you and people around you constantly, setting up expectations.
Smith: What a transformation. I mean, here’s somebody who said, “I’ll go to the White House but only if I can wear my blue jeans.”

Cavaney: Yeah.

Smith: To that extraordinary scene where her mother has her cancer operation and Susan puts on white gloves for the first time and stands in for her mother at a diplomatic event.

Cavaney: Yeah, she’s become quite a lady and then a real leader in the Ford Foundation effort and all that’s been going on there. As you watch all this, I think of how all those kids have turned out to the point that I’m sure the President’s told them a number of times how proud he was of them. Often you watch your kids go through different stages. You know you have to push yourself away from your parents in order to find who you are. And then, if the system has worked well, you’ve been brought up well, you tend to return once you got to where you were going, then you move back in and you get close to family again. And, I think that not only inside the White House we were able to observe that, but the public got to see touches of that as well. And again, it’s so humanizing, I think. Maybe back in the FDR days, you learn about some of the things when he started to use the radio to an extent that others hadn’t done before. Maybe you were reaching masses with a little slice of it, but certainly with the Ford family, you were very much seeing that out in front in ways you hadn’t seen it before. With Jack Kennedy, as brief as his White House tenure was, you were able to see perspectives in ways that we hadn’t seen much before either.

Smith: Everyone’s heard the term ‘advance man.’ But they have only a vague idea of what they do. Walk us through - if you were putting together an event for President Ford. Obviously there’s a wide variety of those, maybe what you do depends upon the venue and everything else, but it’d be interesting to hear you talk about what you do as an advance man and what are the pitfalls and the satisfactions?

Cavaney: Well, the first thing you want to do is ask, “Okay, where are we going to?” either very specifically or generally, and “What’s the objective?” That gets
you going. And then there’s the step, if you have the time, to do some assessment - travel, shall we say, going out and looking for those two pieces of information at an area to say “Well, here’s a place where two or three options might work.” And then you would come back and take that raw data and say, “Okay, I’ve put these things in the four quadrants and slated four possibilities. One of them has really too high a risk element to it, so let’s eliminate that. That leaves us with three and, if I had to rank order the three, ‘We’d do this one and here’s why and the advantages and here’s this one.’” And you methodically go through this process. Now, if you’ve been in advance for awhile, you’ve been to many of these places and you don’t even need to do this special pre-advance trip to develop the options. You can assess pretty well from your own experience. So, you capture what you’re going to do.

Smith: Now, there’s an element of political judgment as well as logistics.

Cavaney: Exactly. What you want to do is you want to be able to go in to an environment, have a successful event by the standards that you are asked to achieve, either on policy message or a special occasion -- a dedication or something of that nature that’s significant. You want to leave the people, elected officials locally and the Congressional members that are from those districts or those states, you want to leave them feeling good about the experience, feeling that they and the people who are their constituents are the better for it. So, by definition, you’re playing politics with a lower case P, not necessarily a political party P, balancing off and trying to optimize what 1.) you wanted to get out of your objectives, 2.) what the local folks wanted to get out of their objectives; and then, of course, how do you execute it? I would say you spend about equal time between working all these various elements in measuring the value of the experience.

Smith: And egos.

Cavaney: And egos. Setting up conditions and setting up the site. We’ve done some unbelievable things “over” in advance work, because you want to be creative and you want that one picture to tell the story, even if without a headline or a tag line. And, if you can get that and leave town, and the people were happy
you were there, you’ve achieved the “A.” for your grade. You also have to meld in locally the institution of the President, so you’ve got to deal with the Secret Service and their needs and demands. You’ve got to deal with the White House Communications Agency and their needs. You’ve got to deal with White House press corps as well as the local press corps, which don’t always see eye to eye on how they ought to be covering the event. And then you’ve got to deal with the Congressional Delegation that’s around from there, as well as state and local officials. So you spend a lot of time, and one of the skills you have to be pretty good at is empathy.

To be a good advance man, you’ve got to have a big dose of empathy, because you need to get a feel for where the sensitivities are and what they are early on enough that you can get the local contacts to buy into being a part of the process rather than come in to them and say “Well, here’s what we’re going to do.”

Smith: Which also presupposes checking your own ego or agenda at the door?

Cavaney: Absolutely!

Smith: You’re an instrument.

Cavaney: Yeah. Your ego is that “I want to do an “A” event and if I do an “A” event, and I meet the other objectives, that’s all I need.” And so you really do, you are the bottom man on the totem pole when you’re working through who gets taken care of and what gets done. And the secret to an advance man back in the old days, it’s a little less so now today, is that you should take none of the credit for anything and you shouldn’t be seen around because it’s not about you. You’re the facilitator. It’s all about the people who are the “set pieces in this play”, if you will, that should be on the camera, should be the ones that get to do the handshaking and get the kudos.

In the advance annals, if you go back a long time ago, there were times when people with strong personalities tried to play in that role and you could, to a degree be successful. But one of the things that President Ford stressed is that “I don’t ever want to hear that we went some place and that we caused a
lot of damage or we left a lot of people with broken hearts or felt we were heavy-handed.”

This goes back to the model he was comfortable with. In the Nixon administration, you had very detailed, very, very precise and to the minute schedules. Most everything was signed off at a higher level. It’s the model that they used. That was the Nixon and Haldeman approach; it worked for them.

Jerry Ford, going back to the Congressional experience is, “This is what I need and I trust you’ll do this and so make it happen.” So you never really had to go back and get all the details approved, once you knew what was going down, except for some rare cases or for an individual who wasn’t going to quite fit in, but was going to be a problem if he didn’t get it taken care of properly. But by and large, that’s what made the President so loved by folks -- he had this view of inclusiveness, this idea that we’re all part of this. And another thing that’s interesting as an advance man is that Nixon and Reagan, to a degree, always wanted some private time, always wanted “Give me two hours right in here. I want to work.” Well, we started this approach with President Ford, and it didn’t take long until where he’d take fifteen minutes off this and off that and when you were in the last year in office, you couldn’t put private time on the schedule or in the holding room. He’d invite people in. He just was so charged up – he got his energy from being with folks.

Some of the best events that I did as an advance person, having done it for both presidents, were the Jerry Ford events because they just turned out exactly right. And some of them were done a little more on the fly than one would like to admit. Some of the Nixon highly measured events turned out less successful for me because you can’t control everything. So it really is this idea of facilitating and making happen what the objective is for taking the trip in the first place. And there are certain kinds of things that are more poignant, better understood, if they’re done in the White House because you want the mantel of the Presidency to add to the significance of the event. And then there are other things, because of the symbolism, become bigger than they might otherwise be, if the President was there and you did something
“on site” so to speak.

Smith: One event sticks out, because nobody except Gerald Ford thought it could be done, including Dick Cheney. The event in Russell, Kansas. Were you part of that?

Cavaney: Absolutely. Wasn’t that a great thing?

Smith: Describe that improbable homecoming because, clearly, Cheney said they’d been through this incredibly difficult process and all were exhausted. Russell’s in the middle of nowhere. How are you going to get a crowd? And from there, what happened?

Cavaney: As soon as they started to talk about it, we sent somebody out there because you needed every single moment of time. So that’s the way we got started. And then we got calls, “Well, we can go over here” and “We can do this.” And so, we’d get on the phone and say, “Well, you can’t really do this because that house was moved about two years ago,” or something. So there were all these little things that had changed or were changing that weren’t quite what was envisioned. and there wasn’t time for people go out, and not many people had made a pilgrimage to Russell, Kansas to have any idea what was there.

I remember the guys that were there, all of a sudden, they were getting overwhelmed because the phone lines were just burning up. The old farm phones, you know, seven people, ten people on a party line, you know. “Guess what, we think the President’s going to be coming!” And the town just went crazy. It just went nuts. And I remember driving around to the back door of this one place and Dole saying, “Oh, come on, we’ve got to go do this and that.” Again, it was one of those kinds of things that I think if you went through it you thought, “Wow. This is real, and this is good.” And I think they left after the bruising convention, after the tension-filled period of time when we were in K.C., and still a lot of hard feelings were felt as you left. I think the call on that trip to Russell ended up being perfect because it just worked. And it worked because the people that were there, and their view of
the honor being bestowed upon them by having this stop, was wonderful beyond words.

Smith: And, remember they went to Dole’s mother’s house?

Cavaney: Yeah, to the back door, literally.

Smith: Because the key wasn’t there.

Cavaney: Yeah, that’s what I’m saying. It just sort of all played itself out, because there wasn’t time to structure it and the goodness of the people that were there and the President’s not being an uptight person and just sort of going with the flow. It worked perfectly

Smith: It’s hard to imagine with Lyndon Johnson. It wouldn’t be quite the same reaction to the unexpected.

Cavaney: That’s true. Very, very true.

Smith: Were you thanked after great events? Was there acknowledgement of what you’d done?

Cavaney: Yes. The President was very gracious to everybody, and he always went out of his way to thank folks. I know one of the things that we were always asked to do is have the senior leaders of the police and the fire and the local event organizational leadership come by and be at the steps of Air Force One at the end of the trip, so he could come by and say thank you. Their job was done at that point, yet he always would do that. He would go down there and thank the speechwriter if they went along on the trip. It was just his nature. It was very good.

Smith: Painful as it may be, can you think of an event that didn’t really go well?

Cavaney: Well, the balloon plop that I referred to earlier, that was one. It was a great event except for the damn balloons, which I will never forget. Another cute incident from the Japan trip. The President, was the first American president to go to Japan – significantly very, very big recognition for the Japanese, very much planned. There are two little events that stick in my mind that occurred there. The first one was when we went to Kyoto to enable Jerry Ford to see
some of the precious treasures and Japanese antiquities there. We were staying in a certain hotel and we’d practice everything that you were to do, and there was this cute little Japanese girl in a kimono who was going to be the operator of the elevator when the President got on. So, she’s standing, she can’t be more than four feet tall at most, and here’s the President with his pipe in hand and he just walked in to the elevator. And, of course, when you get in the elevator, everyone backs away, and there’s already one agent in there and the President comes in. And this little girl says in broken English and shaking her finger at President Ford, “No smoking! No smoking! No smoking!” And he looks around and just taps his pipe in his palm and puts the pipe in his pocket. It was just one of those little things that captures you in a special moment.

And, of course, the other one is the famous “short pants” episode. We’d gone over the formal greeting and what made it bigger than anybody really fully understood is the advance people were going to do that. That’s our job, working with the valets and having all that attire always there and proper. Ambassador Cato, who was the Chief of Protocol at that time, insisted that he was going to do it because in the Japanese culture it was the right thing to do, and he wouldn’t share that or let anybody do it. And I can just remember, “Damn, you just can’t. You’ve got to have it done right.” In our own minds, we check it two or three or four times. Well, it didn’t happen with this, because he kept the formal attire and, for whatever reason, either it didn’t arrive quite on time or something. “Let’s see it. We want to take a look at it. Does it need to be pressed?” So it arrived at the 11th hour with only minutes to spare. There was nothing, nothing you could really do at that stage to fix it. And the rest is history. The president was none too happy at that, nor was anyone else around him about that. That was an interesting time in so many words. Ambassador Cato, in his function of a Chief of Protocol changed that day. And, the advance office, we inherited all the international trips and took over the role of negotiating logistics and protocols with all the governments visited, because of what had transpired. And, luckily, the rest of the international trips worked out. We didn’t have any other problems like that.
Smith: It tells you so much about the change in media culture. The enormity of the trip itself, the historical significance of the trip was overshadowed by a photo.

Cavaney: Yep, that’s right. That’s what the essence of what advance work is all about. You want the “A” photo, and the “A” photo ought to, without words, say what this whole trip was about. And the whole thing was, not ruined in a sense, but the opportunity to tee up that relationship and the incredible historic significance of the trip was diminished hugely by a faux pas.

Smith: What are your memories of the ’76 convention, because we keep hearing from people that it was bitter? It was tough.

Cavaney: It was. When we first heard about it, we thought, “Well, how are we going to take the advantages that the President had against somebody who was one hell of a campaigner, which Ronald Reagan was.” So we came up with an idea, and we talked to Dick Cheney about it, and he talked to the President about it. And it was “Let us replicate the Oval Office in this suite in the Hyatt there at the Hallmark Center.” And so, what we did is we went and put the flags and the pictures. You got the same kind of desk, and the only difference in the setting “feel” was an orange colored rug. You ushered people in like you would to the Oval Office and they felt almost as though it was the Oval Office. However, you’re still going back and chasing each individual delegate. And “How many are undecided?” and “Which delegations are there with us?”

President Ford spent several days bringing these people in. They’d get ushered in like they would get into the Oval Office. There’d be a photographer there to take pictures. They’d sit down like they would in the Oval Office. And so what we were trying to do there was to gain a comparative advantage, let’s say. It was tough. People were working very hard. There was a lot at stake. Working around the clock trying to gain intelligence as to what was going on over at the Reagan side. What should you be doing here in terms of where you stage people? What delegations did you think you could control and, therefore, you’d have a positive outcome?
Smith: And then you have those dueling entrances of the candidates’ wives which touched off strong emotions.

Cavaney: Yeah. I mean, as we later learned, those emotions had been there for a long time, they were sort of teed up in a fish bowl for the American public, world-wide to see. And after it was over, the political fissures between the sides never would dissipate to the extent that they never fully went away. I mean, we all recall Texas sat on its hands, so to speak, and a few other places like that where you just couldn’t make the breakthrough, possibly costing the election.

Smith: That raises an interesting question. Jim Baker’s the classic illustration, but you also… was there any awkwardness initially in demonstrating to the Reagan people your bonafides? Having been a Ford person, was there a period of transition of proving yourself?

Cavaney: At what time?

Smith: When you went to the White House, obviously they hired you, so they were comfortable. But over the years, maybe it’s an urban legend, but there were a lot of people in the Reagan White House who, let’s just say, didn’t always return calls from the Ford office. Lingering sentiments.

Cavaney: I’m sure there was some of that.

Smith: How did you view it?

Cavaney: Interestingly just the way I was hired by Jim Baker. I was the Deputy to Elizabeth Dole, so both of those people had incredibly close ties to President Ford. So I was, in my daily work, somewhat sheltered a bit from some of that. But at that point, having won, it really was all about moving on and doing things, and I think the calibration was “What do we need going forward?” Not necessarily, “what do we need going backwards?” So, I wouldn’t say there was a widespread view that “We won’t learn anything from the Ford group, let’s just go forward.” Again, it was more, “Look, we think we’ve got the right people in the right place and we’re only going to get
this opportunity once. Let’s go for it.” And that’s what they did. But any lingering was transitional.

Smith: Were you on either or both of the California trips with the assassination attempts?

Cavaney: I was at both of them, yes.

Smith: What do you remember of those?

Cavaney: I still have it to this day; we drew a map, a walking map from the hotel that we stayed at across the street from the Capitol. The map covered the grounds where the President was to go in Sacramento where Squeaky Fromme was. And where just for the sake of, literally, Larry Buendorf and that little small piece of skin that fits between those two fingers, got his hand down there at the critical moment, so that the hammer basically couldn’t fire.

Smith: You could clear up something. Was that a spontaneous decision by the President to just walk over?

Cavaney: Yes.

Smith: It wasn’t something planned?

Cavaney: Well, we talked about it as a contingency, and we had said dependent upon how things are; it would be a nice thing to do.

Smith: You, the advance planners, not the President?

Cavaney: No, not the President. We told him, “Look, we’re all set. We could go either way and here’s sort of a drop dead time where you’ve got to be at this side, to take the car,” and it was a beautiful day. The Secret Service obviously were not all that comfortable, but it wasn’t a predetermined route. There was no evidence of where it was going to go, so you didn’t have those concerns.

Smith: As spontaneous as a modern President could have it.

Cavaney: Yes, absolutely. Again, because there were obviously demonstrators still around and doing things that were still in vogue a bit, not hugely, but still in vogue. Obviously, you picked up some people like that and Squeaky Fromme
among them, who sort of trailed in and then obviously innocent people trying
to go to work and walking through the park, they came along. To this day, I
feel terrible about, you know, I say, “Gee, if I hadn’t had made that decision
to go that way and recommend that President Ford could do it if he wanted,
and it’s a nice day and a good photo,” it’s something that really, dramatically
happened badly. And I really felt terrible about it. That was a burden it took
me a while to get away from.

Smith: So, I take it that a sort of impromptu crowd assembled? Was that it?

Cavaney: No, we were walking about people; they would flow into the crowd. We
weren’t going to stop and work the crowd. He was walking across, and
people would flow in. Then you’d walk up and then there’d be a few people,
and we would move into those and they would sort of, obviously, say on
recognition, “It’s the President!” You know how all that goes. So it was
clearly a moving kind of a group and that’s why I say that the fact that they
were able to stop anything happening is a tremendous credit to the role that
the Secret Service plays. They are good at what they do.

Smith: Did you see her?

Cavaney: I didn’t recognize or know who she was when she was moving around, but we
could see people moving in. You could see the agents moving to provide the
wedge that was their best security, since they didn’t have a lot of sight angles.
And as I said, it was when she started moving close, and it became obvious
and Larry Buendorf, the lead agent, made his reach and got this little piece of
skin wedged between the hammer and the firing pin of that gun. And that
stopped what would’ve been a shot.

Smith: Did you see that?

Cavaney: I could see something going on. I probably conjured I saw something happen.

Smith: Was she wearing a red dress?

Cavaney: Yes, some colored dress, very clear, because you could see the movement, a
very quick movement because you’re always attuned to seeing something like
that, but its advance or Secret Service or whatever. We then just, you know, moved like crazy to get out of there and inside the Capitol.

Smith: On foot?

Cavaney: On foot. That’s the way you did it, yes.

Smith: And then a great follow up to that question of course is when he went in to see Jerry Brown, he never mentioned it.

Cavaney: Yeah, I know, I know. The other thing to show you how incredible he was; he took one of those maps that showed the route he was going to walk on and he signed it and he says, “Here, give this to Red.” So, I still have that map of that almost tragic walk around there and there he is, you know, right after almost being assassinated, moving on. I mean, just quite a person. Quite a person.

Smith: And then, three weeks later, in San Francisco.

Cavaney: We were out at the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco. At the St. Francis, there’s a side street - a pickup entrance where you park the limos along the curb, and the crowd is held on the sidewalk across the street. Well, it’s a very narrow side street, very narrow. And, obviously, with the car there, it’s pretty evident to people who want to cause mischief what’s going to happen and where the President’s going to be. And the agents, you could see them. When you came out you always looked around, and they obviously are doing that a lot more than we are and you could see all these people in the crowd and [they’re] doing what they do best. There didn’t appear to be anything that looked strange and there’s nothing that would’ve been. We were moving fast, because I think we were five or ten minutes late at that time, so we’re moving really fast and then he stepped down.

You came out the door and then you had to go down a bit before you actually could get into the door of the car and away. It happened so fast, I literally was right in the line of fire because I had gone out in the street, to make sure I could see the end of the motorcade, and all the rest of the people get in their cars. The President was always taken care of at these moments. And, all I
remember is hearing this crack over there and you could see almost the instantaneous move of pushing the president in the car. One wonders, had that shot been done a few seconds earlier when he was a few steps away from the car and at a slightly higher elevation. But, it’s very hard, as most people know, for somebody particularly one not trained to fire a gun at that range and in those particular circumstances.

Smith: Also, she had been deflected by someone.

Cavaney: Yes, somebody who saw what was happening and all. It was interesting. I remember warnings and discussions with the Secret Service about potential problems, but in all the things that he did and the many, many, many campaigns that he had to go through and expose himself so much, I don’t remember any other instances at all that even came close to those two. And they both happened in California, in the northern part of the state.

Smith: Did he wear a bullet proof vest?

Cavaney: Later.

Smith: Later.

Cavaney: Yeah, I think he may have had one on for that event because the first one had already happened. He didn’t care for that. There were a few discussions about the vest issue.

Smith: Really?

Cavaney: Yeah. But I think it was Kevlar, it was very modern, and so it wasn’t too bad, hardly visible.

Smith: It might as well have been a hair shirt.

Cavaney: Exactly.

Smith: And, of course, Mrs. Ford got back on the plane and knew nothing about it.

Cavaney: Yeah. Because she’d been off doing her part of the trip. Again, you think of the significance of those kinds of things and how, but for a small split second
of time, like in the Reagan experience, they had early on. Again, but for half of a split second, it could’ve been a totally different world.

Smith: A couple of quick things and we’ll let you go. In the campaign, the famous Polish gaffe.

Cavaney: Yeah, that hurt.

Smith: Where were you that night?

Cavaney: I was there, right at the spot, and that was my alma mater of all places, which really hurt - a place I’d been to many a time. We had also had later that night the captain of the Mayaguez, the President thought this guy had become a great and heroic soul and he wanted to meet him and said, “Have him over at the place afterwards, and have him come in, and I’ll see him and have a chance to have a drink” and all that. But… it happened and right away you could see what was going on. We picked up and traveled. And we headed back out to the house to make sure everything was all set there. So, we arrived there, and the trip colleagues are all there. And President comes in feeling “Alright!” and then in comes Scowcroft and then they had to tell him and of course it didn’t sit well with him because that wasn’t what he meant, and he wasn’t going to say so. We went through that - I guess it was seven or eight days, where the polls had been going up before all that happened and then they just laid flat for 10 long days and then they went back up. But it just froze everything for a time, too long a time as history is our judge.

Smith: He had a stubborn streak.

Cavaney: Oh! I can remember Dick would come back and go, “Nope!” You didn’t need to say any more than this because you always went in with, “Here’s a great opportunity where you can go ahead and do this…”

Smith: It’s interesting to hear Stu Spencer talk about all that because he thought he was going to get fired and then Dick thought at one point he was going to get fired.

Cavaney: Oh, absolutely, this was a matter of principle to the President and if there was one thing he felt strongly about, it was his principles. Yeah, it was tough and
go. That poor captain of the *Mayaguez*, he just couldn’t believe it. We finally had to just tell him what was going on. A whole new world took over, and we finished off that trip trying to do that. The other thing I think – you’ve probably heard this from other folks – but I thought one of the great cameo stories which made his homecoming to Grand Rapids so poignant was the deal that was worked out between Dick Cheney and the political people and the President. The President, of course, wanted to go out 24/7 and loved to campaign. So in his mind’s eye, he ought to get out, but what the polls showed of course was the more he stayed in and acted Presidential, the better it was. So it was this constant tension, the back and forth, and finally they worked out that deal where, “Okay, I’ll do what you do, but with two weeks left, we’re closing the doors, shutting off the lights and not coming back until we win!” And he went off and did that two weeks constant on the road, and that’s when he really put the talking car into motion. He loved the talking car!

Smith: Describe that.

Cavaney: There had always been speakers in the grillwork of the limousine, that you can’t see. Of course, that’s just like a lot of police cars and other kinds of emergency vehicles but the White House Communications Agency worked out this system - there was a microphone in the car and they said, “Mr. President, sometimes we can go to these spots that we couldn’t otherwise get to because there isn’t a stage or anything and you could just stand up in the car and talk from there.” And he went, “Really?!” God, he just thought that was the greatest thing in the world. And I can’t tell you how many towns he went to and that’s what he did. And then sometimes he’d get all fired up, we’re on a long ride and then these farmers along the side of the road or something and he’d go, “Hey there! How are you?” And it was like a whole new toy, and he was this perpetual motion machine at the campaign’s end.

And what it ultimately cost him, of course, was his voice. And it really was painful and the doctor took care of him all the time, but the President was able to get through it all. But, as I said, I think it really made poignant that night that I’ll never forget, that night that he finally went home to Grand Rapids. To
go through all that, and he came in at night. The place was absolutely jammed, and he really couldn’t say a thing. Jerry or Betty wouldn’t come out to greet the massive crowd, as he’d break down in tears because of both the significance of what was happening as well as the frustration of that I’m sure was welling up. And, he just can’t tell these people how much he loves them and how much they mean to him. Later on, he talked about it, but it was quite a deal to see somebody on a sustained basis at the Presidential level to just go out and show no let-up. You could not have a blank spot in that schedule that he did not fill. He got up early in the morning and started and stayed up late at night.

Smith: We’ve heard it from a couple of people - there were those who wanted him to go to Ohio at the very end of the campaign, particularly southern Ohio, which is where in the end he lost the state, barely. And for whatever reason, the decision was made to go to Grand Rapids rather than Ohio. Does that ring a bell?

Cavaney: Yes. We actually had some people in Ohio just in case, again, it was pulled out of the bag. Having seen Grand Rapids, it’s very difficult to think of what Ohio was going to be like and then make the case to do Ohio. From my standpoint, you would’ve had to explain to the President that your Grand Rapids homecoming would be even better and that meant, how you were going to do it. It wouldn’t be at night. It wouldn’t be in the candlelight. It wouldn’t be all those things.

Smith: So it was never a question of not ending in Grand Rapids. In other words, one way or other, the President and Betty were going to go home to Grand Rapids.

Cavaney: Yes. Yes. He wanted to go home, and they wanted to go to this favorite breakfast place where they always went when they were there, which we did and that was sort of their way. So, I was not a part of what was a pure political discussion about Ohio. We got wind of it and had some people on the ground, but that’s all we could have really done. So I’m not sure how viable it would’ve been had we done it, and what would’ve changed. But obviously those were key stops.
Smith: And I’ll never forget the election eve broadcast, which had obviously been taped. It was on Air Force One with Pearl Bailey and Joe Garagiola and the President, which is really thinking outside the box.

Cavaney: Yes, it is.

Smith: One senses that those two people, he really enjoyed. They brought out the best in him.

Cavaney: They did. Garagiola was the old jock and the two of them and, of course, Joe can tell stories like very few can and then the President was always “Ha ha ha” while puffing on his pipe, and he would sit there and just be regaled by Garagiola. And then Garagiola did a lot of rallies and things for the President, and the President just loved the man. So it was just a wonderful, wonderful circumstance that they came together, because I think they both so enjoyed one another that it was one of those nice little relief moments. You know, campaigning is really hard work when you’re out there. Not only just being in the limelight all the time, but it is hard on the body. And you can see the President, when he would get that time to be around somebody -- it was a little bit of a lift and somebody that he wanted to be with, it was like pumping a whole new shot of adrenaline into him.

Smith: Again, the difference between him and Nixon.

Cavaney: Yes, he [Nixon] enjoyed being by himself. That’s what made him feel comfortable, being by himself. And again, Ford just enjoyed hearing things and being with others.

Smith: And Pearl Bailey was a real friend of the family, wasn’t she?

Cavaney: Yes, she was, and she was also one who had a sense of humor and could poke fun at the President and he’d go “Ha ha ha”. I mean, people who were like those two must have thought Jerry Ford was one of the best audiences you could ever have because he didn’t ask for much. He would just sit there puffing away at the pipe or just sit there with a drink and always react laughingly to whatever one had the punch line or a funny comment or
something like that. He’d give you feedback. He’d let you know that he got it and he appreciated it.

Smith: And obviously he and [Bob] Hope were good friends.

Cavaney: Oh, yes. Yes, very much so. He was like a lot of lifelong politicians in those days who didn’t have to “protect” his district so to speak. And, he was moving into the leadership, he obviously spent a hell of a lot of time on the road. And you just can’t help but run into all these different kinds of people, including celebrities. And so when you finally get elevated to this job, and go to a town, like when he was vice president, we were advancing him and the advance guy would go, “Geez, I got 70 phone calls from people that say they’re Jerry Ford’s best friend here.” We’d always joke about the 340 men who were on the University of Michigan football team, because there was always “another” classmate of Jerry’s that was on the team with him. But they were just people he’d touched or knew in one way or other over the years, and they remembered him, of course.

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

Cavaney: I do. I do. The saddest day I’ve had in years and years and years. I had hoped the last time I saw him was going to be at his funeral. And I had been part of the group that put together the ceremony and everything like that -- and all the planning that had been going on for several years. My first wife had passed away from a stroke a few years before, and I was going to get remarried. The day of the funeral was the day of my wedding ceremony. But Betty told me I belonged at my wedding and Jerry would have had it no other way. It was the right choice, and I’m sure the President would’ve appreciated that, but I wanted to say ‘goodbye,’ that one last time like everybody else did, and I didn’t get that chance.

Smith: Were you at all surprised – I mean, I was wearing two hats –with ABC for part of the week and then with the family. And I can tell you the media were surprised at the extent of the public response, which seemed to build as the week went on.
Cavaney: Well, the whole thing that we had talked about was this frustration that he was there for only a short window of time, but accomplished a great deal. Then we went through tough times, and then Reagan became a bigger than life person. The Ford history had occurred and was pretty spectacular. So, the whole thought of how do we do things that capture the essence of what Jerry Ford was to remind people that he wasn’t a Reagan, but he was the right person at the right place at the right time and did extraordinary things? And I think having seen tons of historical references and whatnot; you didn’t have to do a lot of prompting to see that. It just sort of came out, and I know from the family and conversations we still have about that experience, the way the country reacted to who Jerry Ford was and what he meant in his service as President couldn’t have been written better. It didn’t happen by chance; or saying, “Gee, he wasn’t elected and he didn’t get to do much. Why are we doing this?” There were two big extremes, and I think, in part, it was because many of the old line media who’d been around for a while and served with him, in talking to some of them, they would talk about these stories with the new generation of press – you know, the media role had changed, we were covering different kinds of things in different ways. But I think a lot of that treatment that Jerry gave to the press, never feeling any animus towards them or anything at all, but treating them as equals. And, I think that treatment redounded to his benefit as those people talked about their days with Jerry Ford. And they said, “Whoa”, and gave him back credit. Because, we’ve been through a lot of different presidents since then and he served his country well.

Smith: One thing I want to ask you about at the time of the fall of Saigon, there was a trip to Tulane where the president in effect said our role in this war is over. Apparently, there’d been a real tug of war about that speech with Dr. Kissinger. What do you recall about that trip and the reaction?

Cavaney: I remember the to-ing and fro-ing about how it was going to go, but it became pretty evident to us that that was going to be “the war is over speech” kind of a thing. And we tried to do all that we could to create a serious environment. We had some demonstrator problems and a few other things like that. What we were trying to do was to have him walk in the building with a feeling that this
is a special moment without telescoping it - but not the dancing bands and all those kinds of things. And I can remember people after that. The impact was so great that afterwards people went “Oh my God, did I really hear what I heard?”

And so, in that regard, he hit the right chord. I think he didn’t overplay or over make it by trying to do something big and sensational, which goes to the point that we talked about earlier. It was the right place to begin to heal the wound and do it in a way that it wasn’t so hyped up and so built up that no body felt happy with the way that it ended. I think it’s one of those things that actually turned out better than anybody could’ve hoped, when you really thought about how we were going to do this and what the significance of it was. So, again, just a touch about who Jerry Ford is and his capacity to capture the essence of the moment, be very empathetic, himself, and realize what needed to be done and how to do it.

Smith: You know, the flip side of that is he is the least self-dramatizing of presidents and in the short term that hurt him. In the long term that did redound to his benefit.

Cavaney: It did serve him well. I think it did. And he was very conscious about that. He would say, “Oh, we don’t need to be doing that. That’s not me.” Just very much a regular person. And, I think by the time he was in the campaign mode and proved himself through some number of things, that’s what attracted people to him. He was a regular person, and I think that, again, the few amount of votes, the pardon, and where we ended up going - I think a lot of people wish they could’ve taken that vote back again. I’ve heard that said many, many times.

Smith: I’ve often thought if there’d been a full term, then we’d be looking at this man with almost a Trumanesque cult because there were those similarities, the plain-spoken, unflashy, Midwesterner with solid values who knew who he was.

Cavaney: I think he was a person who wore better with time, and I think he could’ve successfully done another four years during a challenging period. To your
point, I think we would’ve had no less luster and probably a good deal more accolades for what he was able to achieve during that really short time.

Smith: Perfect.
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Smith: One of the things we’re trying to do with this series is to get a sense of the context of the times and the culture, political and otherwise, that produced Gerald Ford. And we’ve heard some wonderful stories about West Michigan 40, 50 years ago - how it was then as opposed to how it is now, as I say, politically, culturally, maybe even spiritually. Where do you begin in all of this? Where are your roots?

DeVos: My roots are right here in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I was born on the East end of Grand Rapids near Diamond and Fulton Streets on Helen Street in a little dinky house in 1926. My grandparents lived a couple of houses away and this was an area of Grand Rapids known as the Brickyard. I never knew that until recently, but I’ve always heard them talk about it. But the other day I saw a plot map of the section and it was all 30 foot lots, I think. Nothing bigger than that. And all these little houses all stacked together. And the reason for that is that right near there was the area where most of the immigrants went to work. They worked in the brickyard making bricks. They had no skills, they didn’t speak the language and so there was a good old Polish element and a Dutch element nearby, but both working in the brickyard.

Smith: So the Dutch were working in the brickyard as well.

DeVos: Oh, yes. Absolutely. We were the poor Dutch. The Dutch didn’t come over here with money, they were fugitives like everybody else. The Holland culture was that the oldest son got everything. It wasn’t split because if you split a farm, it couldn’t survive. So the oldest boy got it and everybody else understood that. So they would move away. Many of them picked up and left and came to America. They just said, “That’s the only chance I have.” So they’d pack up and they’d come over here. So there was the beginning of the whole period of transplantation of people.
Smith: What was it about West Michigan that proved so attractive?

DeVos: It was a religious thing. Just like the city of Holland here was settled by Van Raalte. He had taken a whole bunch of Dutch of his church, literally transplanted a whole church group who all wanted to come to America. And they came together as a unit and they traveled on a boat down Lake Michigan and they saw the Holland area and they thought that would be a good spot to start a town and a community. And so they came and settled Holland, Michigan as a religious group and that whole college was a breakout from that because of the church group. They needed a school and Calvin College and Hope College were transplanted here that same way. And that ended up being the Reformed Church in Holland and ended up being the Christian Reform Church in Grand Rapids. There ended up being no real theological difference.

Smith: I was going to ask you what it was.

DeVos: But there were cultural differences. They argued in those days over unions, whether one church would allow it and the other church, if you joined the union would not, because you were pledging your loyalty to something besides God.

Smith: But you could use that argument for the Jaycees or the Kiwanis or almost any other fraternal organization, couldn’t you?

DeVos: It was like the Temple of Saladin group. You had to take an oath to that organization, and to some that was wrong. And those were the kind of arguments, but all those arguments have disappeared and they’re not important. But they’re not really theological arguments. Everybody tried to make them theological, but they were not. I’ve been working to try and combine those two denominations of late. I decided it was foolish in a lot of ways to keep them apart and the powers that be finally convinced me to let it gradually go together. They started to worship together. The cultural differences disappear and so it’s all kind of washing together anyway.

Smith: As a boy, were you very aware of the ethnic diversity around you?
DeVos: You’re very aware of the fact that there’s the Dutch and the Polish. The
Protestants and the Catholics. And Catholicism was very close by with the
Polish group and there was a, “If you aren’t Dutch, you aren’t much,” was our
slogan and they had some other ones that were worse. But there was a lot of
tension between the Polish and the Dutch, just competitiveness amongst them.
They lived right almost across the street from each other in the East end of
town where I lived, but we played with them and worked with them and
everything else, but we always fought with them a little bit, too.

Smith: What school did you go to?

DeVos: I went to Christian schools all my life, all parochial schools, all parentally
controlled schools. The difference in our schools here is that they’re all run
by the parents and not by the church. And it is still true to this day. Our
whole Christian school system here is parentally controlled. It is not
controlled by the pastors. The Christian Reform Church endorsed the
Christian school, but did not run the Christian school. There was a lot of
closeness in working together, but the controlling factor was with the parents.
The parents were on the board, the parents saw to the money, they managed
the system and everything. That’s still true to this day.

Smith: There’s been over the years, at least I know in the context of the Ford story, a
lot said about the different character, if you will, of South and Central. Is that
exaggerated or was there a time when in fact they were very culturally
distinct?

DeVos: The South always had a distinct, a different culture, a little tougher culture, I
thought, a little roughness about it. And that, again, was a little bit farther out
of the Dutch area as we would think of it, and a little mixed group and a lot of
Catholic into that group as well. But, you see, the Christian group, therefore,
many of them were in Christian schools, so it was not just between Catholic
and Central. Central was up in what probably was considered a little better
area, closer to the city. The other was kind of a union type area of town. I
lived right near Central and there was always a split between all of us against
South. South, there was nothing classy about the South, at least we never
thought. And Central would’ve thought themselves as a little bit better. I didn’t go there, but it would probably be that way.

Smith: I get it. Do you have any memories of the Depression?

DeVos: Yes, I have very clear ones because, although I was born in ’26 and the Depression hit in ’29. From four years on, you’re growing up in that period. My father and mother had to move out of their home that they had built; out of probably a $4,000 house in those days, but they couldn’t afford the $25 a month payments and had to rent the house to save the house, which they did. We stayed out of that house for five or more years. My father was unemployed for many of those years. We lived back on Helen Street, the street I was born on, with my grandparents in an attic upstairs.

I remember at one time they wanted to put me in the Horatio Alger and they said, “Well, you aren’t poor enough.” So finally somebody made them realize we were pretty poor. We were poor enough so therefore we qualified from rags to riches. But we lived upstairs in an attic and got along. They were tough days but they were good days. From a kid’s standpoint, you didn’t know the difference. Everybody around was in the same state. A big deal was to exchange Sunday’s puzzles with your cousins. You would bring a puzzle over and they would give you a puzzle back so you had something new to play with or work on. Getting a penny for candy was a big event. I remember a night when somebody came to my grandparent’s house and tried to sell them a Liberty magazine for 10 cents and the kid said he couldn’t go home until he sold it. It was dark and he was weeping on the porch and our grandparents said, “We don’t have 10 cents.” And I presume that’s true.

Smith: President Ford was a real fiscal conservative, I mean a real traditional balance the budget, don’t spend what you don’t have conservative. And you wonder whether a lot of that came from the personal experiences that he had during the Depression, particularly going off to the U of M and on occasion selling his blood and, you know, borrowing. I think he had an aunt or uncle who helped him out. He obviously didn’t get anything from his birth father. there has to be a whole generation who was poor.
DeVos: There was. Just like now, some banks are closing, but here all the banks closed except one, Old Kent. Old Kent survived. Forever after that it was known as the bank that hadn’t closed. So when you went into your savings account and you have ten dollars, you could get the ten dollars out. But all the other banks closed and your money was lost and it was never regained. And so the loss in the banking system and keeping the money close and staying current. But you didn’t have the facilities of borrowing you have today. There was no offer to you, so we all think we’re really good people, but you really didn’t have the option. Even when I built my first home, it was a 50% down and a very careful check on your credit and whether you paid your bills and so forth. And it was accepted at 50%, but that was the standards of the day and it all was born out of those Depression years. But it was also part of the Dutch Christian culture of paying your bills and being worthy citizens and thriftiness is next to godliness or something.

Smith: We were talking to, I think, it was Seymour Padnos who told us about the prevailing Dutch Christian culture in and around Holland. illustrated by THOSE WHO would buy a Sunday paper on Saturday night, but wouldn’t read it until Sunday.

DeVos: That’s right. That was true. We would run down Saturday night if we could afford a paper to buy it. Yeah, you wouldn’t buy it on Sunday because every store was closed. You couldn’t find it. If you went to Holland, you’d better be careful because there were no restaurants to eat in. even many years later in my life, when you come to Holland, there was nothing to eat in. But Grand Rapids was closed up pretty tight and respect for the Sabbath day was serious and real and arguments as to whether you could even use scissors on Sunday was part of the joke of the day. You certainly could not go out and throw a football around. You could not go swimming, but it might be okay to roll up your trousers and wade, but you could not go swimming on Sunday. That was recreation. Sunday was set aside to go to church and to prayerfully think about your life and go home and play games with your family, if you wanted to. But you didn’t go out and do things other than maybe take a ride if you had a car.
Smith: Well, let me jump ahead because that’s fascinating as a background. For years, the story has been sort of muddled regarding the sequence of events in 1948 when Jerry Ford decides he wants to run for Congress. He wants to take on Bartel Jonkman. He also wants to marry Betty Bloomer and he tells her in the spring he wants to get married, but he can’t say when, and he can’t really tell her why he can’t tell her. The consensus is that, given the prevailing climate of the time, for him to publically announce his intention to marry a divorcée would have been politically very disadvantageous.

DeVos: I never thought of that, but I could see why.

Smith: Yeah.

DeVos: That would’ve been almost scandalous to marry somebody who’d been divorced in those days. He obviously got elected despite the fact he married her, though.

Smith: But he did wait until after the primary.

DeVos: Yeah, well, the general wasn’t as tough, once he got through the primary, it was okay. She was a pretty lady and everybody accepted that.

Smith: Did you know Jonkman at all?

DeVos: I did not know Jonkman. I was just turning 20. You see, in ’48, I would’ve been 22, having been born in ’26. So I was just of voting age, really. We were all just coming home from the war, just starting our first businesses, trying to get going, totally uninvolved in politics. Bill Seidman is the man who got me involved in politics. Bill was our accountant and when President Ford asked him when he became President if he would come to serve in the White House, Bill acknowledged he would and I went and saw him in the office. He was our accountant at that time and we had just started Amway and it was a very little company. We started Amway when I was 23, so we were really young and Seidman was our accountant. And he said, “Yes, I am and it’s something you should think about and you should certainly become politically active and involved. They have the ability to make you or break you.” And he said, “So you ought to start paying attention. Your business is
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growing, so you’d better pay attention on what is going on down there.” And so we started and never stopped. Got involved, as you know, in many ways through President Ford.

Smith: Was this starting in his congressional days?

DeVos: We weren’t involved in his congressional days, but when Seidman talked was when he went to the White House. But we had been involved with the President before that as a congressman, and, you know, talking contributions to him, but not nationally involved.

Smith: What made him a good congressman?

DeVos: He was known. He was good-looking. And he was a man of integrity and in this community that’s all it would take. He was honest and they respected him and respected him all the years. There’s never any question about his ethics and in those days, you never found him coming home with big money from Washington to help the city or help the city build something. He said that wasn’t the ethical thing to do, to take advantage of his position.

Smith: There’s also a story - at one point, he had risen in the Armed Services Committee and was not yet Minority Leader, but he was on his way up. And a group from Grand Rapids approached him about getting some sort of military installation for West Michigan. And he argued against it, saying that that’s really not a firm foundation on which to build your long-term economy. That it’s subject to boom and bust and in effect could be yanked at any time. Which is, you know, a politically courageous position because it would’ve been an easy thing for him to have done.

DeVos: We did have a weather training station in our hotels. The Pantlind Hotel was a training [station] for weathermen and so forth but that was during the war. But that’s as close as we ever came to it. And there was never a base per se. They took over the whole hotel and ran a weather training school there.

Smith: Did you know Frank McKay at all?

DeVos: No.
Smith: Known by reputation.

DeVos: Only knew that he was considered to be unethical, but never knew the details of it. Knew George Welch pretty well as the Mayor at that time.

Smith: Now, was he part of the McKay organization?

DeVos: Well, nobody ever quite knew. Assuming he was because my wife remembers the days when she went out and got signatures signed to get George Welch thrown out of office and they did.

Smith: For what?

DeVos: I don’t know. I’m not sure my wife knows why. It was just he was seemingly crooked. George lived out near Ada and he used to come over to my office when Amway was young. And he’d sit and chat, developed a very nice relationship in his later years. But I never found out, I never probed him on the rest of it. But he was fun and he had good ideas and he was encouraging.

He built the Civic Auditorium which is now DeVos place on that site. But that was all done by George Welch and he built the pipeline to Grand Rapids from Lake Michigan. He got that done. He was a forward thinking guy and he was moving the city ahead. I think he contributed a lot even though a lot of the people wonder how he did certain things. But that was a part of the era.

Smith: Desperate times call for desperate measures.

DeVos: We ended with an auditorium ahead of a lot of cities and used it. I went there as a child to go to lectures on milk and the importance of drinking milk and we’d all get a bottle of milk when we left. We had many Amway conventions there.

Smith: It’s funny, you know, just sort of parenthetically, why did it take so long for the city to discover the river?

DeVos: I have no idea. When we built the DeVos Performance Hall and what’s expanded beyond the Civic Auditorium, our slogan was that all paths lead down to the river. The stories were of how the Indians came down to the river from Ada and Cascade, those cities were outposts for Indians. That’s why
Lake Drive runs down like it does because they followed the easy way downtown. Ada came down sort of that track into Grand Rapids from that direction. Nobody ever made anything of the river, but it had been used industrially. Right where the Ford museum is were flour mills and furniture plants [they] were located all along the river.

Smith: Your personal friendship with President Ford, did it precede his presidency?

DeVos: Oh yes, but not in any personal way beyond he would come out to Amway - I remember we put a new line in to make cans like shaving cans, pressurized containers. He came out and it was a big deal. We opened the Center of Free Enterprise – that was a big day and he came out and celebrated with us. That’s probably when we took the most pictures and made a big deal out of that building and his presence there.

Smith: Well, I would think that would be something close to his heart.

DeVos: He was very cordial and hung around and would visit with people; so that’s how our relationship really began. Guy Vander Jagt was a congressman from Holland, got me involved in helping raise money for Congress and so we formed the Republican Congressional Leadership Club. And I would fly in an airplane load of people here and pretty soon we had four or five hundred people giving $2500 a year for Congress. That’s the first efforts of bigger fundraising efforts that we were doing.

Smith: When he becomes House Minority Leader, let alone vice president and president, there must have been people around here who thought, “This is great for us. I mean, there’s going to be something in this for us.”

DeVos: I didn’t get any of that feeling. I didn’t have any feeling of anybody around here saying, “This is going to be good for us,” other than the honor it would bring to us and how proud we were of having our famous congressman become the Leader of the House. When he became vice president, we said, “Wow.” We threw a party for him.

Smith: Tell us about it.
DeVos: I called him up one day and I said, “Mr. Vice President, anyone throw a party for you?” It happened kind of quick, you know. He said, “No.” I said, “Well, can we throw a party for you?” And he said, “Yeah, that’d be okay.” And I said, “You invite 25 people and I’ll bring 25 people down from Grand Rapids.” Our airplane would hold 25 at that time, so it worked good. So we got a room and set it all up and that was the night the story broke on the tapes and it became quite obvious he might go from vice president to president overnight. And in fact, I talked to him about that that night. And he said, “We really can’t talk about that at this time.” But it was the night that he was late coming to his own party because he had been detained in the White House because of this break on the tapes. Betty was there and our wives were there.

Smith: And how was she?

DeVos: She was fine. She was doing good at that time.

Smith: By the way - did you know, did people around here have any idea about her problem however defined?

DeVos: No. It was never an issue. The only time I came onto it once when we held an event at the White House with Billy Zeoli with Gospel Films, because Billy was pretty close to Ford and would go in and be kind of a spiritual encourager. Never written about, but would go regularly and Ford always would welcome him. And he was involved in athletics and so we had a big pro sports, a lunch at the White House to get these people to get behind him and support him. Planned to get him a little more political at that time - for that next reelection phase. And we had a nice deal and Betty came down to say ‘hello’, but she was a little shaky and that was my first time of wondering if she had a problem of some type.

Smith: Tell us about Billy Zeoli. Who was he and how did he fit into the Ford story?

DeVos: Billy ran Gospel Films in Muskegon. A good Italian who had a lot of flair and was a good leader. They would make films and rent them to churches. We would raise money to make a new Christian film. So we would make them and then we would loan them out and rent them to churches which
produced the revenue to keep that going. Later on, we got around to where we shipped them for free to high schools all over America.

That was the kind of stuff he did. I don’t know how he got close to Ford other than through the sports side of it, I think. And we used to hold prayer breakfasts with ball teams and one time we were holding one, I think when he was still a congressman in Washington and he came to it with the Washington Redskins. And at that point he acknowledged his Christian faith. Billy felt that when he could, he would ask the players, “If you want to be a Christian, or you believe you’d like to accept Christ, put your hand up.” And he said President Ford put his hand up that he believed. So Billy continued the relationship with him beyond that and then he would go to the White House very regularly. And he was always cordial with him. Sometimes Billy would stay overnight. Rumsfeld never liked him very much, because he didn’t like anybody who got closer to the President, than he did, as you know.

Smith: It’s interesting you say that; you know I’ve been working for years on this biography of Nelson Rockefeller and Nelson went to his grave convinced that Rumsfeld did him in.

DeVos: Yeah.

Smith: And not only Rockefeller, but, of course, George H.W. Bush felt that he’d been deep-sixed at the CIA at the same time. But one of the remarkable things about Rumsfeld, his reputation is you’ll never find his fingerprints on anything. He doesn’t sign things, you know.

DeVos: He was careful.

Smith: He was very careful.

DeVos: He was a pretty crafty guy. I don’t know if he ever aspired to be president, but everybody aspires to be president. I know and they all are pulling whatever angle they can. It’s a vicious disease when you get close to that throne.

Smith: That’s interesting. It seemed, once Ford became president, he decided, “I like this job and I’d like to keep this job.” And Lord knows he worked his heart
out, but unlike most presidents, he’s not someone who was defined all his adult life by the drive to be president. That set him apart. In some ways Reagan had that same—although Reagan wanted to be president, it didn’t distort his—

DeVos: He got involved with Goldwater and that tempted his interest in it. Then, of course, he decided to run for governor and succeeded and so he gradually got into it. Reagan wasn’t hanging around Washington where he got the fever as the other hangers-on. Cheney never seemed to have a strong hankering to become president. He was a real faithful servant, I always thought, in serving Ford and Bush as well. He wasn’t afraid to tell the President his views on things and that’s what you have him there for, though, he was criticized severely for it, but he never had a big yank to move ahead. He served well and he eventually would have loved to be one if fate had brought it to him.

Smith: People tend to forget that it was really Jimmy Carter in 1976 who sort of brought evangelical Christians into the process in a major way. And I’ll bet you there are people who still don’t know what Gerald Ford’s religious convictions were.

DeVos: I’m sure.

Smith: But I take it they were genuine.

DeVos: They were genuine, but they were private and kept that way. And Billy working with him swore to him that he would never talk about it and never did. He finally wrote a book with the President’s permission on some of the things about it, but it was long after he was out of the White House and had left there.

Smith: Did you have a discussion with the President about faith?

DeVos: I never did personally. When we had him on the boat, he was on the boat with us for a trip. We had Bill Simon, Admiral Owen, who was the head of the Navy in Italy came with us on that trip. That was the first time with the Admiral. Also Peter and Joan Secchia was his ambassador to Italy.

Smith: Was this as a former President?
DeVos: No.

Smith: He was in the White House?

DeVos: After he was out of the White House.

But then he was very much a part of the devotional periods at dinnertime and so forth. And when it was time to have prayer, he would offer prayer. Simon was a very open Catholic and was one of the few people who could offer communion. Did you ever know that he could give the Eucharist right in the prisons?

Smith: Really.

DeVos: Bill Simon would spend almost every Sunday in the prisons talking to the people on death row, offering them the Eucharist for the forgiveness of their sins. It’s an amazing story, you know. It’s unknown about that guy.

Smith: Absolutely. And it runs so counter to the popular image that he had.

DeVos: But he was a very devoted guy. So, Simon, we became big friends with Bill Simon and his wife. His second wife, as well. You speak of uniqueness about people, Simon, if you go to his house, we went to his house once for lunch, we were chartering his yacht, so he says, “You’ve got to come over and talk. We’ve got to talk about it. You’re the only guy I’ve ever lent my boat out to.” I said, “Well, okay.” He said, “Come over to the house. We’ll talk about where you’re going to go.” And so we had a nice lunch and his wife served a nice lunch, soup and everything, and he put his food on the table and it was a peanut butter sandwich, peanut butter and jelly. And I kind of commented and I laughed a little bit about it. "Yeah," she said, “that’s all he eats.” And so then we were cruising with him in the islands in the Greek Islands and we’d go out for dinner. And he’d carry a paper bag with him and he’d have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. And he’d sit at the table with everybody and when it came time to eat, he’d eat his peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Smith: A wonderful ending.
DeVos: Not an adventuresome eater and yet a guy who’d serve Eucharist. One of the few people given that. Was very religious, very faithful in his service. Personally, Ford, I think was faithful in his devotions, just very private.

Smith: He was in many ways, a private person.

DeVos: Well, he didn’t want to use those things for good or for evil. Carter used it publically. I don’t know if he meant it for good, for his advantage probably, and it served him, I think, well. But it took away for some his credibility of serving all Americans. And I think Ford understood that when you get in the White House you serve everybody. I think our present President lost that completely. He never understood the importance of the office of saying, “I’m here. I serve you all.” He says that, but he doesn’t do that.

Smith: Did you ever ask President Ford for a favor?

DeVos: Not that I know of.

Section edited out.

Smith: This is out of sequence, but I cannot let it go without thanking you. One of the frustrations that I felt, I’ll phrase this carefully, when I was at the Museum. I always thought it was, to put it mildly, unfortunate that, particularly as he aged, he was forced to fly commercial. And I, and so many others of his friends, are grateful to you and those around you who particularly those last few years eased the rigors of travel.

DeVos: Absolutely.

Smith: It never should’ve come to that in my opinion.

Section edited out

Smith: You know, President Ford took a lot of heat after he left the presidency for going on boards and making some money, of which he didn’t have any.

DeVos: That’s right, he needed it.
Smith: Of course he originally intended to retire to Grand Rapids and make a little bit of money for Betty and the kids. Now, subsequent to that, presidents make a lot more money for speaking and serving on boards and the like.

DeVos: But in those days, they were criticized pretty much for speaking fees.

Smith: Yeah. Speaking fees and the boards.

DeVos: Oh, yeah, the board thing was a hot issue for him when he went on American Express and of course Bill Seidman was there. See, I knew how poor he was and Seidman tells this story of when he first went to the White House, maybe you know the story. The first question was, “When do I get paid?” He said, “I’ve got a son going to college and I don’t have the payment to send him off to college. And so I need to know when I get paid so I can write a check.” Seidman said, “The ethics of the man, after all those years of public service, he never put any money in his pocket.” And Seidman says, “When he left the White House he still didn’t have any money so he had to do all these things.” It’s a lesson people should know - that the real devoted people in government don’t come out of there with anything. And Al Haig said to me, “I was in charge of 5 million troops and I ran this huge operation, but I made $150,000 a year,” he says, “and you’ve got to pay for your own bread and butter, practically.” You’re surprised when you finally go to the White House you’ve got to pay for your meals. It’s always a shocker to them.

Section edited out.

Smith: Did you see Ford at all during the ’76 campaign? For example, were you at the convention in Kansas City?

DeVos: No, I was not at that convention. No.

Smith: He wound up the campaign back here in Grand Rapids. Were you around then?

DeVos: Yes.

Smith: What was that like?
DeVos: Well, it was an exciting event in Grand Rapids. I’m trying to remember the timing, whether we had the hotel then or not.

Smith: I don’t think you did. I think that was just a few years before.

DeVos: Yes, before we stepped into that role. Grand Rapids was a sad city in those days. Secchia tells stories that the Secret Service would not allow the parade down Monroe Avenue because all the stores were closed and it would be such an opportunity for people to sit and get lined up to shoot him and they didn’t want a parade because of the vacant stores in our community. Our downtown was - a lot of little cities like Grand Rapids were hurting in those days. But, you know, after WWII, the euphoria in our country was so great when Ford decided to run for office for the first time, I’m sure, it was such a positive time. You guys are all young and you missed all that, but after serving in the military and being gone for several years, the pent up excitement and belief in ourselves was so overwhelming that we could do anything. And those were great days. You know, we had our glory days, that was when Jay and I started our first little flying school and our first business after WWII. They were good days, but they were nice, simple, less regulatory, less complicated days.

Smith: Well, there’s got to be a joy in the sheer act of creating.

DeVos: Yes.

Smith: I mean, you were creating something.

DeVos: Yeah, but, you know, we fought every government in the world, but nevertheless, that was part of the joy of prevailing in those conditions, whether you’re dealing with the Chinese government, with Russia, with the Indian authorities which we fight now. (section edited out)

Smith: Gerald Ford when he was in the White House was considered the most conservative president since Coolidge. Yet he lived to be seen by many within his own party as some kind of liberal. In part because of his views on some social issues. But that tells you less about him than it does about how the party evolved. Particularly under Ronald Reagan, but post-Reagan as well. What kind of conservative was Gerald Ford?
DeVos: He was what we would call a fiscal conservative and a more social liberal. More a liberal status on the social issues, that’s all. Tolerated today much more so than tolerated in the days he was there. The difference was, there weren’t as many other big issues. I mean, you don’t have big issues, you focus on the small issues, so abortion and those issues became huge. Today, Afghanistan and wars and things are the issues, but in Ford’s day, we fought over little things that were important to a lot of people.

Smith: Well, it’s interesting, the older I get the more I come to the conclusion that ideology, philosophy – I’m not dismissing them for a moment - but that the biggest single factor in political change is generational.

DeVos: Yes.

Smith: And each generation has its own outlook, its own set of conventions, its own set of issues. And Ford, it seems to me, is someone with a very Midwestern sensibility, a profound decency, a real fiscal conservativism, but that co-existed with compassion toward people who were victims, genuine victims, in life. And as far as most social issues, he sort of came of age in a culture that basically didn’t talk about, I mean, that viewed these things as intensely personal. And certainly not subject for government action or even political debate. And all that changed almost on his watch. John Paul Stevens told us that when he was nominated for the court in 1975, no one asked him the question about abortion.

DeVos: Really?

Smith: Not a single question.

DeVos: In ’75?

Smith: In ’75, late in ’75, which is probably the last time that would ever happen. This is two and a half years after Roe v. Wade and yet no one asked him a question. But, by 1980, it was clearly a significant issue and a defining issue for conservatives.

DeVos: Well, it still is, isn’t it?
Smith: Well, sure.

DeVos: It’s one of those issues that will probably stay alive for forever and probably should stay alive because I’m opposed to it, you know. The casualness with which you take a life - argue when it starts if you want to - but it is life and especially when you get into late term abortions when they kill them as they’re practically born and you stab them to death. I mean, it’s just staggering the extent to which they go today. The casualness with which they treat life, and that begins to extend all the way over after awhile and we’re seeing that today. And that’s what I think a lot of us will always fight against.

You see the fear that Obama brings today isn’t just one issue, it’s all the people he’s got around him and as you evaluate it and you see the string of it, you wonder where it leads us. And so you might not fight quite as hard on the health issue, but it’s only one big step in controlling a huge chunk of the economy. But the crowd that’s in the streets are really talking about capping trade and they’re really talking about the union issues and forcing unionism on America. And it’s all the issue of government takeover. The historical issues - they talked about it, they all talked about it a long time ago that that was the normal progress of society. But it just seems like it’s happening in front of our eyes.

Smith: It seems as if the traditional economic issues have yielded to cultural issues and to many people, moral issues. It’s not surprising that that should give rise to a more intense debate, perhaps an angrier debate because you’re not talking about dollars and cents, you’re talking about what many people hold absolute as their core moral convictions. It’s a differential between the two and that maybe helps to explain the ferocity of the modern political back and forth. People feel with an intensity that goes beyond purely economic issues.

DeVos: Would the dismissal of the Nixon thing that Ford did, giving him a pardon, would that be an issue today?

Smith: Do you mean, if we went through a Watergate today and the president pardoned his predecessor? I’ll tell you why in some ways it would be more intense. Because of cable TV and the internet. I mean, nothing has done
more to coarsen the political discourse or to oversimplify. Cable TV is the classic example. You have a 24/7 news cycle. Every day you need a new story. You need a new twist to the narrative. It’s all black hats and white hats. It’s all about conflict. Conflict sells, which is why you have a liberal channel and a conservative channel. And then the internet, which obviously can be wonderful and does many wonderful things, but it also provides a cloak of anonymity for on-going character assassination which has really poisoned the well, in some ways. So in that sense, I think it would be an even bigger story.

DeVos: Would that be because people know less?

Smith: Well, that is very interesting. If you stop and think, in theory, people said this when television was new. They said it when cable was new. They said it when the internet was new. In theory, we have access to more information than ever before.

DeVos: Than we should have?

Smith: Well, there’s free will and if we’re concerned citizens, we make it our business to continually educate ourselves. But the point is, does anyone really believe that this is a more informed electorate than in the past?

DeVos: No, maybe not.

Smith: I doubt it.

DeVos: But the issues seem to be a lot more fierce, as you say, and maybe a lot more complex.

Smith: That’s interesting. You’re absolutely right. They are more complex and so much about our lives and particularly the media all drive in the direction of simplifying, oversimplifying. I mean, it’s red and blue.

DeVos: And the government is so driven to complicate, complicate, complicate. I just talked to a physical therapist and she said, “You know, I used to get a new patient and now it takes me two unpaid hours just to get a new PT patient
registered in the system. It’s a 50 page thing I’ve got to document, sign, and read, and study and find out.” Just silliness.

Smith: That’s the kind of thing, we go back to Ford as a conservative. He really began the deregulatory movement. And although it’s funny, you know, he didn’t like the phrase deregulation. He liked regulatory reform much better. Which, when you stop and think about it is politically smart. It doesn’t sound like we’re taking away protections; we’re reforming a system that’s gone awry. But certainly he was the kind of conservative who found excessive government and regulation objectionable.

DeVos: Well, the corporate cost today in trying to keep up with it is - any one of us can be charged with a crime today and that means you as well as me. There is something, some law you’re breaking that you’re not even aware of. And if they want to find you and hang you when somebody gets mad at you, they can dig up something on you. And so a little bit of a fear that lives in all of us that the lawyers are bad and good today.

But I tell you, the ones who are vindictive and they want to hang you, this guy on Wall Street going after the AIG people and all that stuff, all for his glory to become governor is the total abuse of all this little nitty-gritty crap. And so we dealt with AIG as a company and successfully and positively, they were a good organization and Greenberg was considered a good, honest guy. But this other guy got mad at him for some reason and maybe it’s because he wouldn’t support him and he was a big player, but the abuse of the regulatory process by the government has become bad. But we’re not here to talk about that. We’re talking about the changes that happened during the Ford time. You’re talking about the transition. He was in that period, I think. You’re a historian, so you look at that as a sequential thing in how that occurred. But our country has certainly become - and in those days, Ford and O’Neill would get together and have a beer or whatever after they’d argued, but like good lawyers would, they’d fight over it and knowing there were different viewpoints on it, but there are contrasting viewpoints that you can argue on today, fiercely, but they don’t have a beer afterwards.
Smith: How right you are. There’s a wonderful story. Someone had just joined the White House staff. The President and Tip had had a meeting in the Oval Office. It went very well, and then Tip went down into the driveway and proceeded to lambast his host and this guy, of course, is very literal. He sees the contrast between the two and he goes back in and tells the President, “You won’t believe what the Speaker is saying,” he goes on, chapter and verse. Ford has his pipe in his mouth and he says, “Oh, Don, that’s just politics.”

DeVos: Well that was because he and O’Neill had that relationship. They could laugh about it and didn’t carry the bitterness over into a lingering hatred. O’Neill was a good Irishman, you know, a little bit of Reagan in him.

Smith: You’re absolutely right. Yeah.

DeVos: But President Ford, you know, I can only reference it from our experiences with him, but he was also a man able and willing to listen. Bill Nicholson, if I was in Washington, I’d call him up and say, “Hey, I’m in town. Just wondering if the President’s in town. I’d like to come over and say ‘hello’.” Now, that compared to today didn’t seem to be a challenge for me. I knew Bush better in a lot of ways, but I would never do that with him. But I felt comfortable enough to just inquire. I had no idea who the other people were, but I knew Bill and what’s his name over there and I’d call up and I look back today and say, “What a lot of guts you had to even try that.” And their answer would always be, “He’d like to see you.” He liked to see somebody who didn’t want anything. He just wanted to see someone from Grand Rapids to say hello. And usually he’s say, “Oh, he’s got 10 minutes here, so why don’t you drop in.” So I would come on in and they seemed to be easy to get in, in those days. I don’t know why it seemed easy, but it was. And you just go in and spend a few minutes and then I’d say, “Time’s up. I’ve got to get out of here.” If we were on something interesting, he’d say, “No, sit down a minute. I want to hear more about that.”

And one of the things that I’d get into with him is I talked about how to get him reelected. I said, “You’re not the greatest speaker in the world. You
don’t have time to go out and tend to the business of speaking and then running right now. And I have an idea for you. I want you to set the 200th anniversary of America. I want you to appoint 200 Americans to become ambassadors to America. From all walks of life, you can get union people, you can get whatever leaders you can find, doctors, lawyers, everything, a mix of people. And they’re going to be your advocates for the next time until the election or whatever. But it isn’t for the election. It’s just to help inspire Americans to celebrate on the 200th anniversary.

And give these people half a dozen speeches and when the White House gets a request for speaking, say, ‘The President can’t come, but I have an advocate, I have my ambassador from that area who’d love to come and he’ll present my latest views to you and he will speak on my behalf.’ And tell this person to say, ‘On behalf of the President of the United States, as his ambassador, representative, I’d like to present to you his latest message which I just got today from the White House and try to fill you in as best you can.’ And you can do new speeches as fast as you want or whatever.

Whatever message you want to get out, all 200 of us are delivering speeches all over the country in every little two-bit rotary club and every little place. 200 people, you’d never think would take the time to go to and we can go and advocate for you all the time and you can do away with the campaign issue. Have nothing to do with the campaign issue. Just give us all a nice little kit, simple speeches, and give us a button and send us on our way.”

He said, “That’s a great idea. Write it up for me, will you?” So I was flying to Australia and writing it up, I remember it well, sending it in. And I didn’t hear anything for a while. Next thing I got a letter from the White House saying, “We already have a speaker’s bureau. Thanks.” And they totally missed the significance of having these laypeople, these citizens out advocating every day, in little places, you know. I said, “If you want 2,000, take 2,000, but it’s the 200th anniversary and you have 200 people speaking for you.”

Smith: He was well aware of the fact that he was not a great communicator.
DeVos: I told him, “You can win if you just start the campaign right now. You’re just in here, let’s get the campaign started and this would be my view of how you get it started. Celebrate the 200th anniversary.”

Smith: It’s interesting, because there was criticism internally that he waited a long time. That first of all, they didn’t take Reagan as seriously as they should, but that he just waited a long time to get the campaign started.

DeVos: Well, he was afraid to get too political too quick. But I said, “This will be non-political. This is just the 200th anniversary of America and this is your way of celebrating it.” I said, “You’ve appointed ambassadors all over the world to represent you. Why can’t you appoint 200 ambassadors to America?” And, later on, I kidded him, I said, “If you’d listened to me, you’d be President by now.” He laughed and all that. Who knows? But he could’ve got a jump on the game.

Smith: Did he talk about what might have been? He struck me as someone who really lived pretty much for the future. I mean, he would reminisce if you’d bring things up.

DeVos: He never dwelled on what might have been, but you got that when he lost how serious it was and what a hurt it was. But when my son lost the governorship, it was a hurt. But not that kind of hurt. In fact, said, “Come over this morning, Dick. Let’s have a cup of coffee and see how you’re doing.” He said, “I’m doing okay.” He said, “I never had so much fun. All of you are worried about me but I had a ball. I met the nicest people. I traveled this state. I’ve been to every county in this state. I’ve done every little prayer breakfast, every little county GOP meeting you can imagine. So I’ve been there. I’ve met the people. I’ve listened to them.”

In fact, the people running has campaign got mad at him because he’d take too long listening. They’d say, “Come on, Dick. Move along, Dick. Shake some more hands.” And he said Dick would always take his time and listen. Ford had a great ability to listen. At least he’d listen to me if I came in and I was nothing, I was this little business guy, but he was always respectful and listened and very cordial.
Smith: I want to ask you because it’s almost as if you were teaming up to revitalize Grand Rapids. He was, as the story goes, offered a site outside of town for the Museum and made it very clear that he wanted to put it downtown. I think, in hopes of sparking some renewal. And then, of course, you refurbished the Pantlind.

DeVos: At the same time, it was all coming together.

Smith: Was it all coordinated?

DeVos: It was not as coordinated as it might have been, but Fred Meijer wanted to get it out of town. That’s what it came down to. In any case, Fred’s a great guy and a good friend, but he really wanted to get the Museum and his planned garden out there. He thought that would be neat. It would’ve been. There would’ve been nothing wrong with it. It would’ve been just fine, but Fred finally said, “Okay, let’s get it downtown

Smith: Now, what lead you to buy the hotel?

DeVos: That fundraising for that music hall. That lead me to being involved in the new convention center expansion at the same time. The city was doing the convention center expansion. The hall had to be done privately. They wanted it to be done privately. So we raised the money for the hall. So then I got to working on trying to get a hotel downtown. I said, “If we’re going to have a new convention center we ought to have a new and expanded hotel.” Well, we couldn’t find anybody. I went to Hyatt and Hilton and I talked personally to all those people about bringing a hotel to Grand Rapids. They all said, “No, we don’t do hotels in cities like that. We aren’t going to put a hotel on an old city like that.” So we were directly turned down. And then Marv DeWinter, who designed the Ford Museum, came to me one day and said, “I’ve got an idea. Let’s put a hotel right in the river.

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We had hired a research firm to look at it and they said, “Well, putting up 200 or 300 rooms, it might break even.” But we got caught up with working with
the mayor of Grand Rapids at that time and we were using the Pantlind Hotel fairly good for our conventions.

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Well, I don’t think we paid that much for it, but they told us we could fix it up for six million. They said, “For six million, you could restore this hotel and make it really nice.” And we accepted on that basis but that was not accurate. Twenty million dollars later, we got it done. After closing the place up and really going at it; getting in the basement and finding out how bad it was. It was bad. But we restored the whole place and made it a beautiful hotel. But we were holding back the tower which is the tower end of that hotel. That was the next step if we were comfortable with the first step, and we were comfortable with the first step.

Conventions were beginning to come back, the city had a nice hotel and I guess our vanity got to us, “Aw, let’s finish it up. We’re this far. See what happens.” So, we did it. It was a turning point for the city and the President was there when we opened it. I said everything that is important is going to happen in this place. But we did the hotel, the Ford Museum came on, the art museum came on, new buildings happened up around us. We have a beautiful city today.

Smith: He was so proud of what had been done and he was so interested. You know, the night before the funeral, I went out like everyone else and just walked around the crowds and went back and rewrote the end of my eulogy. And this quote which actually came from Tom DeFrank that, you know, in the last months of his life, when he couldn’t sleep at night, he would say, “I go back to Grand Rapids.” That wasn’t just a figure of speech. I mean, in some ways, he never left. And I think, well you would know much better than I, I’m sure there was criticism at the time when he left the White House and didn’t come back here, but he came back often.

DeVos: He was so faithful to Grand Rapids, it was unbelievable. He did so much more for Grand Rapids than was expected or whatever. Whenever we asked him for anything at the hotel, he came.
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Smith: Did you see him at all out in California? Did you visit with him on Rancho Mirage?

DeVos: Oh, we’d stop in there occasionally. We’d land in there and go to the house and have a cup of coffee and visit with him periodically. I think we did it three or four times coming through there. Or if we had a meeting or something in that area, we’d stop by.

Smith: They seemed happy out there.

DeVos: They seemed to enjoy it out there and he loved his golf, but, why not? It was a beautiful set up and it was much better than coming back to Grand Rapids. The criticism about not coming back was momentary.

Smith: Oh, no, absolutely. And I know as long as I was down there at the museum, just as you said, he would come back. The 25th anniversary, remember when we had Billy Graham in town?

DeVos: Wasn’t that a great event?

Smith: I just thought this is the perfect event for Grand Rapids and what a wonderful tribute to President Ford if we can get Reverend Graham to do it. And he rearranged his schedule and he was spectacular. When he’d get behind that podium, it was like God was speaking to him. It was just extraordinary the transformation that took place. And to see the two of them together, it was a once in a lifetime event. But, you know, it was a lot easier not to do anything than to do something that might be criticized.

DeVos: That’s what keeps most people from progressing in life, in my opinion. Fear of doing something is what stops them. In Amway when I’d start with people, maybe a truck driver or worker in a factory and I’d try to get him in Amway, they can’t get over the fact of just going out and asking somebody to buy a bottle of soap. That fear of what they will say, fear of being criticized for being in Amway, for example. None of that was true around the rest of
the world. I was just on the phone this morning with Billy Graham’s grandson. He’s a preacher at a church I go to in Florida. He’s a young guy, just 37, but he’s a nice young guy. But we were fairly close to Graham, that was a great move.

Smith: But that year, we had a number of people in conjunction with the 25th anniversary of the presidency. One of them was Justice Stevens and President Ford came all the way from California to introduce Justice Stevens. Which he didn’t have to do, but he did that for everyone who came in that series. Alan Greenspan and others. Anyway, I remember asking him, “Mr. President, when was the last time you remember talking to Justice Stevens?” He said, “When I appointed him.” I said, “Really?” And it turned out that Justice Stevens had always dreamed of playing golf with President Ford. So that afternoon, after the event, they went out and they played golf. Which was just a wonderful—

DeVos: He knew he was President but it never went to his head. He remained true to himself all through those years.

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

DeVos: No, I don’t. Saw him a couple times in Colorado.

Smith: They loved it there, didn’t they?

DeVos: That was a nice house they had there.

Smith: Yeah.

DeVos: That was a nice view for them. But, you know, Firestone helped him and took care of him nicely. You know, that was just a grand thing of Firestone to do. To help him because he didn’t have any money, you know, when he came out of there. And where does an ex-President go? To rent a garage? He didn’t have all the back-up all the other guys had, the years of money-making and so he needed a guy like that. I was just glad to be there on the airplane thing. You mentioned the airplane thing and I’m glad you did because I was honored to. You just realized they were struggling and he didn’t have the money to just go out and do big things. And so Firestone I’m sure helped him
with his house and so we threw an airplane in. You know, it’s nothing. It’s not a big deal, but it is a big deal for them.

Smith: Yeah, it meant a lot to him.

DeVos: And so it was one of those things you look back at with fond memories. I would have to sit and just recollect my schedule a little bit as to when I saw him the last time.

Smith: Were you surprised at the time of his death at the amount of the public reaction? Not just here but around the country?

DeVos: I think so. You know, as the years went by, he looked better and better as a president. People came to appreciate what he did and his courage and the fact that he saved this country at that time from what could’ve been a real disintegration. And people didn’t appreciate it at the time, but as time goes by, they realize his courage and his integrity. Even like having a little party for us for him, he and Betty came and just like old shoes, you know, and he’d sit and he’d laugh about things and do things.

Smith: He was very comfortable to be around.

DeVos: Yeah.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

DeVos: About as we are talking about. As a really, truly great American. One of our greatest presidents if for no other reason than his ability to do what had to be done, knowing it would cost him the presidency. There aren’t any I know of who would do if they knew what they were going to do would cost them the presidency, they would not do it. But he did. And so I think as people look back at that history, they’re going to say, “This is a man who loved America and served it at the highest level” for him. And that sort of went from I seen him gone downhill. I didn’t respect Reagan or like [?] Reagan, but after that it was all, “What’s in it for me?” and “How can I help my buddies?” and “How can I get my agenda through?” Ford didn’t come with an agenda. See, everybody else has an agenda. Present guy especially. It seemed like somebody wrote the book for him before he came, in some
ways, I think to destroy but to move it to a socialistic, an evening, which is his dedication, to even out everybody.

Smith: The great thing for President Ford - I mean, poor LBJ, whatever you think of him, but God, he died the day before they announced the Vietnam peace agreement? Ford lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his way of thinking on the pardon. And when the Profiles of Courage award - when the Kennedy Library made that award - he said, “For twenty years, everywhere I go people used to always ask the same questions. Now they don’t ask them anymore.” It’s almost as if having the Kennedy imprimatur absolved him of the old allegations. Life was good. Physically it got tough at the end.

DeVos: They had a nice life afterwards, didn’t they? They seemed to have. And he enjoyed doing the public things he did. He enjoyed coming to Grand Rapids.

Smith: And I’m told really right up until the end, the last time he came back here, he would tell the agents, “Drive me through this neighborhood.” And he would go back to where he used to live or went to school. Or just to drive around downtown to see the latest buildings under construction. He never lost his interest in his own congressional district.

DeVos: It was more than living, he lived here. It was the beginning of his career. And so I’m glad he’s buried here. This is a special place and the people treated him admirably when the end came. But he was one of us. Yeah, he was just one of us. He didn’t put on airs. Today, that’s it made out of a kingdom cloth [?] and I don’t know, he must have a nice airplane to fly but it wasn’t put up at the level today of the airplanes they fly. And Pelosi and her demands for an airplane, the lack of quality in the person of favored treatment for her. And Reid’s latest effort to finagle the health bill so it would exempt Nevada of certain tax penalties. I mean that is gross abuse of privilege. That, Ford would never do.

Smith: That is a perfect note on which to end. That is great.
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Smith: Thank you so much for doing this. I want to get into your pre-Ford history, but I’d like to ask you first, something that I ask a lot of people upfront. Can you tell us something about Gerald Ford that might surprise people?

Keiser: I don’t know people’s perception of President Ford. I found him to be very gregarious, pleasant. My contacts with him led me to believe that he was very self-confident. He was very happy with who he was, and I’ll tell you why. I think that getting into the stories a little earlier, when Mrs. Ford had her surgery at Bethesda, cancer surgery, there was a photograph of President Ford and I coming out of Bethesda Hospital and it was just us – the two of us. Some reporters looked at that – “Look how Keiser looks like Jerry Ford. Keiser’s a decoy.” Obviously the Secret Service has assigned a decoy to Jerry Ford. I was there before he came and stayed after he left, but nonetheless that came out in the Washington Post.

And I remember vividly when I read it in the paper we were at Camp David and I thought, uh-oh, this is going to be a problem because most politicians, most famous people would not want someone around them who was getting some publicity as well. Especially an outside staff-type person who they did not necessarily hire or choose. And so I really thought this was going to be a problem for myself and the Secret Service. I heard on the radio that he was out taking a walk in Camp David. So I purposely went out to encounter him – I knew where he was. I said, “Good morning sir.” He said, “You seen the papers?” I said, “Yes, sir. I have.” He said, “Well, what did you think?” I said, “More importantly, sir, what did you think?” He said, “I thought it was funny.” Didn’t bother him a bit. He was so self-confident and happy with himself that it didn’t threaten him in any way and it was lost between he and I.

Through the months there were times when it could have become an issue. I remember in Japan, we arrived and I got off Air Force One first and you could
hear the cameras clicking, clicking, clicking. Threatening, but it was just something that didn’t bother him a bit, and I think it would have other people who were less secure, or something about their personality would not have accepted that. I always respected him a great deal; still do.

Smith: Did you ever see his temper?

Keiser: Yes.

Smith: It’s been described to us as akin to a summer thunderstorm. Something that would erupt out of nowhere and very quickly subside.

Keiser: The only place I would see it is on the golf course.

Smith: Was it verbal?

Keiser: Yeah.

Smith: He never wrapped a club around a tree or anything?

Keiser: No, not the times that I remember. But you knew it was coming. The back of his neck would get red, and the more senior staff members would suddenly disappear. And all of a sudden, it starts. Yeah, I remember vividly several times at Burning Tree. We had a little caddy one time; it was a neighborhood boy who was very aggressive about clubbing for the President, he was going to be a good caddy. And he [Ford] was having a bad round – I think he was in the sand probably about seven out of the first eight or nine holes, and he hit a shot that was obviously going in the sand again, and he exploded. And you had to push this little caddy up to him, “Go, go, go.” He said, “No, he’s mad.” I said, “Well, no idea. Yeah, I saw it. In my mind, it would have been inappropriate.

Smith: It was directed as much against himself rather than other people.

Keiser: Oh, yes. Right.
Smith: Penny Circle tells wonderful stories about how out in Rancho Mirage they could tell if it was a three “God damn it” day, or a four “God damn it.” That was the worst.

Keiser: My experience with President Ford was just the White House – just his two years in the White House. When he left for California, I stayed in the White House and moved on in my job to President Carter.

Smith: Let’s back up. Tell us about the world that led you to cross paths with Gerald Ford. Because obviously, you’d been in this very responsible position before he ever showed up.

Keiser: Yes. I was assigned to widow Jackie Kennedy in 1963. She moved to Georgetown after ten months. Then she moved to New York. I didn’t have to go to New York. I went over to the White House, LBJ’s time, as a very junior agent. I spent two and half years traveling at that time with Lynda Bird Johnson, the eldest daughter. Then I moved off of that assignment.

Smith: That was before she was married to Chuck Robb?

Keiser: Indeed, yes.

Smith: That must pose unique challenges.

Keiser: Historically, well, that’s when she was dating.

Smith: Her and George Hamilton.

Keiser: You’ve done a lot of research, haven’t you? Not fair. And, yes, went on their honeymoon – she and Chuck. Still friends. And I moved off of that assignment and to President Johnson. Moved through several promotions within the Secret Service at the Presidential Protective Division. And President Nixon came in – I continued to move through several positions, without being specific on what they are, because of my seniority. And in 1973, I think it was, I was promoted to Special Agent in charge of the Presidential Protective Division. That was under President Nixon, and in terms of that assignment, it was just about a year before he resigned. And so I
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held that position all through the height of Watergate and saw pretty vividly the impact that it was having on President Nixon.

Smith: Did the wheels of government, at least at that level, grind to a halt:

Keiser: I’m going to say the contrary. I was impressed. I saw the continuity so close that I remember the day that President Nixon resigned. I came to work that day, to protect the President. I saw him get on the helicopter, I heard his speech, I saw him get on the helicopter and fly out. I went to the Oval Office to see President Ford sworn in. I’m still protecting the President of the United States – it’s just a different president. The transition to me, within the White House, is remarkable. You come to work in the morning and there are people in the West Wing; phones are ringing, people are sitting at their desks that you are familiar with. You come in the next morning, the phones are still ringing, the desks are there, but there are all different people. It literally happens that quickly.

Smith: Let me ask you because on that morning, you had these two extraordinary, historic events. Each took place in the East Room a couple of hours apart. One was the farewell; the other was the swearing in. What was the mood?

Keiser: My personal mood was very emotional. When it’s happening, it’s just happening today. That is what today is bringing. Now, you reflect on history – it’s amazing what happened that day. I felt what you were seeing was one man’s life and career crashing, and another man’s life and career changing completely, beyond perhaps what he even imagined. But for me, it’s just – you’ve got to keep them safe.

Smith: Because of the incredibly emotional feelings around the country, the polarization, the animosity, the crowds outside the gate and all that – did Watergate and particularly the end of the Nixon presidency pose unique challenges in terms of protecting the President?

Keiser: It’s hard for me to say. More reclusive, less public - in that sense it made it easier. At times I feel as though he was willing to take greater chances security-wise than I was totally comfortable with.
Smith: The trip to Egypt – were you on that?

Keiser: I was, indeed. He and I had words about that. The way those things happen is – I knew it was going to happen. My advance agent in Egypt told me it was going to happen, so we’re trying to fight it back at this level, back in Washington. At that time General Haig was the chief of staff and was my main point of contact, day to day. You don’t go to the president every time, you just don’t do that for a lot of reasons – staff reasons. You start to threaten the staff – who was this guy – we didn’t hire him. So there was a sense of relationship you have within the staff. If you let the staff think that you think you are staff, then you’ve made a mistake in my impression – because you are not. And for them to accept you – they can push you aside, you could miss meetings, you could miss information you were going to get. You want them to accept you, but not as a peer. I don’t think I’m a staff member, he didn’t pick me.

But anyway, I had several discussions with General Haig and literally, on the flight over there, again – I went to General Haig and said, “You know, this is really a very bad situation for us to be in. There are going to be a million people – this is going to be an open car. It’s going to be like we’re sitting in the inside of a beehive, and there is something that we consider – he is sitting side by side with President Sadat – and it may not be our president who is the target.” He said, “I agree with you, Dick, I agree with you. But the President is the court of last resort.” So General Haig and I went in and we talked to President Nixon. And my best recollection of some thirty years is, “You’ve got to understand this,” he said, “This trip is good for your president. And I’ll do anything, I’ll do anything, to make it a success.” And your comment is, “Yes, sir.” And you do the best you can, and we came through it. That whole trip was one of great concern. So much so, that he sensed our tension so that we didn’t have words beyond the other stops.

But on the plane coming back, returning home, he came back to the section where we sat and made a point to say, “Gentlemen, thank you very much. I
appreciate what you did for your president. And I appreciate how you felt and I felt very safe and I thank you very much.”

Smith: That was Haig or Nixon?

Keiser: No, that was Nixon who came back to our area. So it was obvious he knew it was tense between us. And I think, knowing President Nixon, I think that was the best he could do on an apology.

Smith: Do you think he was a shy man?

Keiser: Yes.

Smith: He once said, famously, that he was an introvert in an extrovert’s profession. Which suggests a degree of self-knowledge that is not universal among politicians. I’ve often thought the most remarkable thing about the Nixon presidency, given that temperament, was not how it ended, but that it happened at all. There are those who think he really was a closet intellectual who didn’t want people to think of him in those terms. But the whole retreat to Camp David, even the funeral…his hero was Charles De Gaulle. And I thought in so many ways he patterned himself after De Gaulle. Vietnamization was Algeria, Camp David was Colombay. Even the funeral with limited official participation, replicated De Gaulle’s.

Keiser: I’m not a professional analyst, but during the height of Watergate, the last several months, he spent a lot of time in San Clemente or Key Biscayne. And an interesting relationship that I saw was between he and Beebe Rebozo. Beebe could play President Nixon like a piano. I’m not comfortable putting this out, but what would be normal – President Nixon would call for a car. He’d say, “Bring the car around, Beebe and I are going to take a ride.” We’d bring the car around and I’d say, “Where would you like to go?” He’d say, “I just want to be back in an hour.” Which meant he didn’t care – about thirty minutes wandering, turn around and come back. Now, there would be times in that car when he and Beebe would sit there for an hour and wouldn’t say a word. There would be other times and they would sit and talk continuously. I don’t know how Beebe knew that – how to do that. On the houseboat that
Beebe had, on Key Biscayne, the same thing. They’d go for a cruise, President Nixon sometimes would go up on the flying bridge and sit by himself and Beebe would be down. Other times, they would be together. I don’t know how Beebe was able to sense that relationship. It was mysterious to me.

Again, it would not be uncommon for the President to say, “Keiser,” President Nixon never called anybody that I remember by first name. Haldeman, Erlichman, more privately he may call him Bob, something like that. But always out, it was, “Hey, Bull.” And he’d say, “Get the music on the radio, you know what I like, see what you can find.” And we’d say, “Yes, sir.” We find something. “That’s fine, that’s great. I like that a lot. That’s good music. Now, listen you, when the news comes on, you turn that radio off. Do you hear me?” I said, “Yes, sir.” He said, “I mean it, not one word.” “Yes, sir.” So therefore, I think he had isolated himself from the news.

Smith: Let me ask you - the portrait, and particularly the one Woodward and Bernstein created in The Final Days – I don’t know if you ever saw the Oliver Stone movie, which was over the top, even by Oliver Stone standards. The caricature of the barely functioning and semi-alcoholic president - is that, in fact, a caricature?

Keiser: I’m not sure what their caricature was, to be honest with you, Richard. The only movie I allowed myself to see was Nixon-Frost. I wanted to see just how they portrayed him, and I thought they did a fairly good job. They picked up some aspects of his personality that I thought were unique to him. He appeared uncomfortable with people, okay? And I think the way he tried to make himself friendly to people is small talk.

Smith: And he really didn’t excel at small talk.

Keiser: No, that’s right. And sometimes it was inappropriate. But that’s the way he dealt with people, and I sensed they picked that up in that film. The fact that he was trying to make himself –

Smith: One of the boys –
Keiser: With Frost.

Smith: Exactly. Trying to make an instant connection.

Keiser: That’s it. And bring himself into his world. And I think, frankly – we’re getting way beyond President Ford – but I think frankly, that explains some of the profanity. “Expletives deleted.” My memory is that he did talk like that, but it was not hardcore. Never in public. I thought well maybe that’s the way he thinks men talk to each other.

Smith: Exactly.

Keiser: And he’s trying to do that. That was my analysis of it, and as I say, I have no training and no right to say that other than just observing it.

Smith: Did you see him happy? I mean, he doesn’t seem to be someone who…

Keiser: No, I don’t know how to assess that. The thing that amazed me is that the relationship between he and Mrs. Nixon; very respectful of each other, but I don’t remember seeing a great deal of emotion between the two. And yet he broke up at her funeral. He just couldn’t handle it. I was sorry to see it, but I was glad to see it. Because they obviously did have a relationship.

Smith: Let me ask you, in those final months [of the Nixon presidency], Gerald Ford is in this situation, an almost impossible situation where he’s walking a tightrope, wanting to defend the president, and yet not totally sacrifice his own reputation in the process. He can’t overtly prepare for what he hopes won’t happen. Informally, was there speculation? When you go off duty and you see what’s going on, do you allow yourselves to imagine where this may be going?

Keiser: That’s an individual thing. I did. There is an inevitability about it. You knew it was going to happen; you just didn’t know when or how. The one thing I do remember is during the hearings, some of the staff members, Mr. Haldeman – I never had any problem with Mr. Haldeman or Mr. Erlichman – but they were not warm and fuzzy. And my dealings with them were - I never had a problem. But during the hearings – and you understand, the agents are
But you can hear behind the doors – so all the TV sets were on and you could get a sense of if the hearing, if Mr. Haldeman was doing well – “Hey, that’s it, this is great.” Cheering.

Smith: Almost like an athletic event.

Keiser: And so our people were starting to get involved in that. And I had a meeting – I remember vividly – I said, “Hey, gentlemen, we don’t have a dog in this fight. We don’t care how it’s going. Our responsibility is to protect the president. These people behind these doors are now very, very sensitive, and the world is dividing us as who is with us and who is against us? And we are neither. So you keep any comments you have to yourselves.”

Smith: That raises a huge issue that obviously affects every agent at some point. How do you define and maintain that relationship? To outsiders, you appear to be almost part of the family – but you are not part of the family. And that’s important.

Keiser: Yes it is.

Smith: But you have this unique bond that is developed. Yet there are lines that you do not overstep. Is that something taught? Is it something you are trained in? Is it just a question of judgment and experience?

Keiser: That would be my answer. There is no manual.

Smith: And presumably, it is somewhat different with each president.

Keiser: It is.

Smith: Depending on their temperament.

Keiser: What I touched upon earlier, what I was trying to say is – first of all, you don’t want to be their friend. You want their respect. And how you get that is just by being professional because they don’t select you. Interesting – one time I was a very young agent and I was being criticized very harshly by someone that I was protecting, and my boss, at that time, heard the same
discussion. I had made a decision that they didn’t approve of. And after it was all over, my boss came to me and he said, “Dick, here’s the situation. You work for me, not them. And I say you made the right decisions. That’s all you have to worry about. And if you are going to be in this business for very long, you just have to understand that. And there will be times when you may think you are being criticized harshly or unfairly – that’s the job. That’s the job – protect them.”

President Ford, when he became president, he had vice presidential detail agents with him, and when the transition was made, they stayed with the new vice president, Rockefeller, and the Nixon people just went around President Ford. That’s just the way it happened. No one even asked why it’s happening, it just happened. When President Carter came in it was the same thing. Now it might be perceived publicly to be more critical because there was a political – there was the Republican-Democrat issue. That’s not an issue to the Secret Service. That is no issue at all. It should never be. And that’s the reason they make the transitions the way they try to make them, so you are not identified with an individual or a party.

Smith: Let me ask you: you are right, once he became vice president he had agents, but he was unique in not having spent a life trying to become president. With Did it take time for the family to get used to this relatively new transforming presence in their lives?

Keiser: I don’t know. You’d have to ask them. I didn’t sense any friction or tension between he and I, or he and the Secret Service. He was the sort of individual, I think, that handled our presence. And you have to understand, the presence of the Secret Service is sometimes relatively negative. We’re the last people who see him at night, and the first people to see him in the morning, other than the house staff. And obviously, our presence could be considered morbid. “The only reason they are here is because someone is going to try to hurt me today.” And that’s a perhaps “morbid” reminder. But if you are going around perhaps “apologizing” for that presence, that’s not good either.
Smith: Let’s face it, having been on the Warren Commission, he had a keen appreciation…

Keiser: Oh, he and I…

Smith: Did he talk about…?

Keiser: Yeah, we got along very well. I liked President Ford a great deal; very easy to get along with.

Smith: I was going to say: what did you like about him?

Keiser: I’m not saying I disliked the others – he was just a gregarious fellow. And I think he was very easy to meet and a lot of people were intimidated by the fact that he was president. But if he was in a room with one person who he didn’t know – one agent, he would walk up to the agent and say, “I’m Jerry Ford.” I think that is his way of dealing with people’s presence. I feel it made him uncomfortable to be in someone’s presence he didn’t know. Just a simple handshaking. Other people could deal with our presence more abstractly. Nixon – he didn’t do that.

Smith: He liked people.

Keiser: Oh, he did, and he showed it very, very visibly. And therefore, you like him – you felt very comfortable in his presence, beyond the relationship of agent/president. Yeah, several times we’d be out on the road or something like this, and the Secret Service would get in his way, or something we were doing he didn’t like, and I’d say, “Mr. President, that’s a recommendation of the Warren Commission.” And he’d say, “Really?” And I’d say, “Yes, sir. That’s our bible.” When I did that – I mentioned that about two or three times one day and he said, “Dick, are you sure?” He said, “I don’t remember that.” I said, “I dipped into that well.” That was the end of it.

My great memory of President Ford – you know, we had the two assassination attempts – I was not there, at either one of them. The first one, Squeaky Fromme, I was on annual leave. Came back and he went to Sacramento, and at that time I was at the Federal Executive Institute, going
through a schooling. I felt very bad I was not there. The Secret Service – nobody ever understood that – to this day. Why President Ford? He was the good guy, he was vanilla ice cream, an Eagle Scout, going to make us feel better about ourselves. Why women; why President Ford; why California?

Smith: Well, maybe, in retrospect, it was just the radical climate of the times and a couple of kooks, who, if it hadn’t been him, then it might have been someone else.

Keiser: Well, you don’t know. But why he became a focal point, comparing his image to President Nixon’s, you wonder why President Ford became the focal point. No one can ever explain that to my satisfaction. I remember – you have a lot of conversations with the president – and I remember the inaugural day, an interesting thing – the right rear seat of the limousine is the seat of protocol. That’s where the president always sits. I don’t know who decided that, I don’t know why, but that’s the way it is. It could be changed if anyone wanted to, but it doesn’t seem as though it ever has. And so you know how the ceremony takes place; the incoming president comes to the White House around eleven, eleven-thirty, they have tea, coffee, this sort of thing and then they come out the front – the North Portico – which is the formal entrance.

And by this time the press and everybody are there and the two presidents and their ladies walk to the limousine, where the limousine is sitting with its door open, agents standing there. There are these two presidents, the outgoing and the incoming, and President Ford turned to me and he says, “Dick, where do I sit?” And I said, “You’re still president, you sit here.” And he said, “That’s right. Jimmy, you walk around.” I thought, I’m glad I came up with that answer – that is the answer, but there is nothing that trains you for that.

Smith: We’ve been told one of the most emotional moments in any presidency is on the morning of the 20th – or in some cases, it may be the day before – when the president and first lady say goodbye to the permanent staff. Did you witness that?

Keiser: Oh yes. I rode in the limousine with the two to the Capitol.
Smith: Did they talk?

Keiser: Yeah, nothing…

Smith: Small talk?

Keiser: Yeah, I don’t remember anything significant. It was only a five or ten minute drive up there. I walked. I made a point to walk with President Ford to the helicopter, knowing full well that I was going to go back to President Carter and make the inaugural. But I made a point to walk with him and tell him goodbye and wish him well and thank him for everything. He did not like losing, and from what I remember, from the outside on election day, the anticipation was that he would win. That seemed to be the way the emotion was going.

Smith: He had all the momentum.

Keiser: At least in his presence. Because you know he voted in Grand Rapids and flew back. So I sensed that the emotion with everybody was, this is going to be great. And I’m not saying he was a bad loser, I’m saying he did not like to lose. And if you look through his life pattern, he did not lose that much.

Smith: We’ve been told by more than one person that he said afterwards, “I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer.”

Keiser: I don’t know that, I don’t remember hearing that.

Smith: It’s been suggested that it took him a while to bounce back.

Keiser: I think that – that’s my impression – although I didn’t see him. I don’t think I saw President Ford after that day, from my memory. Mrs. Ford I saw some time later. But President Ford – oh, I’m sorry – I saw him when he came out to the Crosby Golf Tournament in California. I did come out there a time or two to see him play golf and renew the friendship.

Smith: But the period between the election and the inauguration, you were with him, just as you had been. Was that a rough time? We sensed that it was harder for him than it was for her.
Keiser: I was not with him as intensely as I was before the election. The day after the election, myself and the director of the Secret Service flew down to Plains to meet President Carter. And the transition, as far as the Secret Service was concerned, took place that day. “This is Dick Keiser. From now on, he and his people will be responsible for your protection. He will start to move his people into your detail.” In essence, he has to share his people between President Ford – the transition was not made – everybody moved to Carter – we moved in slowly and filled in from the top down. And the presidential White House people would move in for short periods of time and go home. So, in that time, to answer your question, my mind was focused on President Carter, still watching President Ford – but I mean, it was not as intense. But it was very emotional telling him goodbye. It really was.

Smith: And how did he acknowledge that?

Keiser: He just said thank you for everything. But he is very sensitive. My wife could tell you – shortly before he did leave, he said, “Dick, I would like to meet your family. Would you bring them in? I took you away on a lot of holidays and I’d like to say thank you.” And so, yes, the family came in and he spent a very nice time with them and gave me a football that his boys had had and gave it to my boys. So, yeah, very personable fellow.

Smith: We were told that the Fords on holidays and especially Christmas time, when they’d go out to Vail, would try to be as sensitive as possible to the fact that their agents had lives of their own and families, and would try to minimize the demands.

Keiser: That’s true. As a matter of fact, every president that I remember had a similar sort of concerns. The last thing I felt we could do is to show in any way that we felt that way, too. We are here because we want to be, it’s our assignment, and you don’t owe us that. But you try to be humble and say thank you very much. I’ll tell you a famous story about President Ford skiing. The first trip we made to Vail as president we were en route flying to Colorado and he calls me up to his compartment, and he says, “Dick, I really like skiing.” I said, “Yes, sir, I understand that.” He said, “I’ve skied there for a lot of years and I
really, really enjoy it.” Now I know what is coming. And I said, “Yes, sir, I understand that.” And I said the agents have a ski team and they are all agents who can ski, better than you. They will be around you, we’re going to ski patrol every morning. Every morning the agents in the ski patrol are going to go out and they are going to choose the lift and they are going to choose the run. There will be a different one every day; we’ll choose it, you just go.

“Fine. Oh, that’s a good idea.” And I said, “Another thing I would like you to do, if you can, if you have the chance, change your outfit. Don’t wear the same clothing every day. Change with the boys – jackets and all that.” “Oh, that’s a good idea. Good idea.” So Larry Buendorf was the skier – very good skier – and he had bought a brand new ski outfit. I’ll never forget, it was a bright yellow jacket – canary - and he wore that every day. So on the way back, we were flying home after vacation and President Ford called me up to the compartment and he said, “Dick, I really, really enjoyed skiing. I felt very safe. I thought the guys did a great job. I really appreciate that. It was just great.” He said, “I do have one question.” “What’s that?” “Well, you know, Larry wore this yellow coat.” And I said, “Yes, sir.” And he said, “Well, it was a good idea that I change mind periodically, but all you had to do was see the guy in the yellow jacket and you’d know I was the guy next to him.” And I said, “Yes, sir.”

My point is, they are watching. They are sensitive to what you are doing.

Smith: We heard there were lots of agents who really liked Vail. Vail was a popular destination.

Keiser: Oh, sure. Just like Key Biscayne or San Clemente. I would say that Plains…

Smith: Had its shortcomings.

Keiser: But, yeah, every place has its charm.

Smith: Did you know about the pardon before it happened?

Keiser: No, I don’t think I did. I don’t remember that I did. You kind of tune out. That’s one way to make your presence acceptable is this fact that you are not
listening. You are not hearing a lot of things in the back of the car and this sort of thing. I don’t remember hearing stuff like that or thinking it was significant or anything of it. It didn’t affect my ability to perform my job.

Smith: And the reaction?

Keiser: I don’t remember there was one. I just don’t remember. You know, the people around him were so professional – I really liked Mr. Jim Baker and Dick Cheney. Dick Cheney is still one of my favorite, favorite people. And I’ll say that to anybody at any time and defend it.

Smith: And when you think he was only thirty-four.

Keiser: I know.

Smith: When he became chief of staff.

Keiser: Oh, yes. But very bright and very self-confident. Again, as I said, he was my daily point of contact for any issues that I had, and despite the youth, Dick, we won’t do it that way, or Dick, we won’t do it this way, or that’s not a good idea. “Okay.” Now you have to understand, there are times, there are ways that I can get alone with the president, very easily. Very easily I can walk him home at night to the colonnade to his room. You’ve got him alone there, to his apartment, you can pick him up in the morning, walk him to the office, you’ve got him one on one there, you’ve got him in the car – nine times out of the ten, you’re pretty much alone unless he’s got a staff member with him. If the staff perceives that you are taking advantage of that time alone, then it threatens them because there is a system that they want to impose for their way for you to deal with them.

Smith: What about the other side of the coin though? Some people are just kind of, as you say, gregarious. And “good morning” and chit chat on the way to the office. If he initiates – and again, I don’t know whether he did or didn’t…

Keiser: I remember vividly with President Ford, he was living in Alexandria and it was several weeks before he actually moved into the White House. And the first couple of nights that he was in the White House, I walked purposely, to
make myself present - if there were any issues that he was having, make myself available - I’d walk with him to the living quarters, that short distance. And I remember several times when he said, “Dick, come upstairs, let’s have a drink.” And I said, “No, sir. Thank you very much, but I’ve got to get home,” or something, and after several times the invitations stopped. But that, in my perception, would have been improper. That’s too close. That’s closer than I want to be with him. And that’s closer than I want other people to see me with him.

Smith: Interesting. Because we’ve been told on weekends he’d tell the butlers to come on in and watch the football game. That kind of thing. He was just that way.

Keiser: That’s right. And I’m sure had I gone upstairs it wouldn’t have meant anything at all between he and I. But to the people who were aware of it – that’s not normal. That’s not the relationship that the agents had with the people they protect.

Smith: What do you think is the largest public misconception about the relationship between agents and those that they protect?

Keiser: I’m not sure I know.

Smith: I think the public is fascinated by the Secret Service.

Keiser: I think probably the biggest perception is, in thirty years I’ve made talks, I talk about going to Lynda’s wedding. You see an awful lot and you hear an awful lot. And you become aware of these people’s warts, so to speak. But that’s yours. And I think sometimes agents coming out and talking about presidents who are dead, they’ve still got children, they’ve still got grandchildren. I do not want to be part of that. I don’t know of any warts. But I think the biggest perception that the public may have is that the Secret Service is a violation of their privacy. How could these people…

Smith: Particularly teenage children.
Keiser: But when you are part of that circle and you see how Americans treat their politicians and their famous people, if it were not for the Secret Service, beyond the safety thing, there is the fact of privacy. You ensure by your presence that the president is going to be handled in a certain way. He is not available for just every Tom, Dick, and Harry to come up and shake hands with him. If he wants to, fine; we can control that. But I think we are a privacy fence, if nothing else, around him.

Smith: That’s fascinating. The trip in Sacramento, he was given the option that it was a nice day, do you want to walk through the park? And he did.

Keiser: He started it.

Smith: Exactly. After the second attempt, I’m curious as to what, if any, changes were made – would they have been less likely to give him that option?

Keiser: Yeah, right. And he became…

Smith: Did he become more conscious of…

Keiser: Not outwardly. We were in Ohio during the campaign at a university which I don’t remember, but it was a gymnasium with seating up above the gymnasium floor. And after the talk the students just kind of crowded around him. Suddenly I remember some of the coeds jumped up on their boyfriend’s shoulders and were taking pictures. He standing at the podium, very casual, and all of a sudden – POP – and something hit me in the face and I saw him kind of flinch. And I turned my body in front of him and pushed him down. He went down relatively easy. In the meantime, someone said on the radio, “It’s okay, it’s okay. It was not a shot.” So I said, “Mr. President, it’s okay. There’s no problem but we want to leave right now.” He said, “Okay.”

What it was is some girl had a camera, these magic cubes, this plastic thing had exploded and some of it had caught me in the face and caught him, but it was a very sharp “POP,” and I do remember that. Every day you are concerned, you want to bring him home. I remember that. But I don’t
remember that he ever, ever showed any sense that he didn’t trust us and that we weren’t doing our best. He was not fearful.

Smith: We’ve been told that he would sometimes, not uniformly, wear a bulletproof vest.

Keiser: Sometimes. This was before the magnetometer and some of the aids that we have now.

Smith: But in terms of the agency, were there any changes implemented as a result of…or was there just a kind of general ratcheting up one’s sensitivity, for lack of a better word?

Keiser: I think, internally, we had to do some things because there was a Congressional investigation, [Peter] Rodino. You had to say you were doing something, I’m sure from the active White House division, where I was, there was not a great deal that we had to change. We might have worked closer, we might have kept him out of the crowd more often. At campaign times they get hyper. If you’re behind you try harder, and therefore are willing to take more chances. And that part of the relationship - no, they reviewed their intelligence gathering, they reviewed their intelligence analysis.

Smith: I guess Sara Jane Moore’s name was at least in somebody’s file.

Keiser: Yeah. She was interviewed by an agent the night before, who decided she was not of interest. Which was determined by the Secret Service at that time; not of interest, not of protective interest. And you look at the profile – she was in her fifties, married to a doctor – externally, she didn’t fit the profile. However, after she acted, then you say, well, wait a minute, she does have some problems that we didn’t know about. And that’s the pattern of the people we dealt with through those years. They are the grey people, the people that you walk by in the street and don’t notice.

Smith: Yeah, exactly.

Keiser: And they function marginally in society. But you can’t go around arresting everybody who is like that. And after they’ve done something – there’s the
pattern right there – this is obvious. But no, I found in my relationships with all the presidents, I don’t know whether they know this, but you need to test the temperature of the relationship between you and he. How do you do that? I don’t know. Again, there’s no manual. I know how I did it; he would ask to do something and I would, in some cases, say, “No, sir.” Now, you have to understand the environment when you are out in public. You’ve got the president, you’ve got the White House staff, you’ve got the White House press. If you’re out in public, you’ve got the local press, you’ve got the VIPs, the people that he’s greeting, you’ve got the police, you’ve got the agents.

So if he says, “Dick, I want to go over and shake hands with those people.” And I say, “No,” and he acquiesces, he can’t do that – I mean, the press knows he’s weak. The White House staff is going to say, “What is he doing?” The locals say, “They let the Secret Service push this guy around.” So, no, you don’t do that. You try to set it up to where he asks you to do that. “Dick, can I go do this, can I go do that?” And if it is extemporaneous, that’s what you want. I don’t remember any time where I wasn’t asked. And it’s not “Can I?” It’s, “Dick, that’s a nice looking crowd over there, some nice people over there.” “Yes, sir,” or you say, “Well, no sir, Mr. President,” this is where I’m trying to apply my test of the relationship. “No, sir, we’re behind schedule,” or, “This is a very small police department and we don’t really have enough security there with that crowd.” It’s giving him any reason to acquiesce to my request and still save face and not appear weak. It’s “Okay, Dick, I understand.”

Smith: It’s diplomacy, it’s tact. Let me ask you just to make sure. I think I know what the answer is, but is it accurate to say that Larry Buendorf, at the very least, prevented Squeaky Fromme from getting off a volley?

Keiser: Oh, indeed. I was leader of that detail at that time, but I was not present. But I will tell you this, in both cases, the agents reacted exactly the way they should have. If you look at Sara Jane Moore, in San Francisco, they got him down in the armored car. The agents that were with him didn’t leave. They didn’t go across the street and attack her. That’s somebody else’s responsibility. The
agents with him, cover and evacuate, evacuate, evacuate. Get out. So you look at him standing on the car and as soon as he was in, they were gone.

Smith: And then, is it safe to say, that the bystander who saw Sara Jane Moore, saw the gun, in some ways played the role of Larry Buendorf in deflecting – I mean, he got to her physically?

Keiser: Yeah, you can say that. That’s the way it happened. But in terms of the agents who were with the President, the inner circle, that’s another issue. That’s for someone else, very frankly, to deal with. Their responsibility is the body; cover and evacuate. Get him in and go with him. And they reacted just as they should have. The question I think can’t be answered is why was Squeaky Fromme in that area with this gun? Did she have an idea of his itinerary, and she was going to attack him in front of the statehouse when he got out of the car? Was that her intention? Or did she hang out in that park and always had that gun and she had no intention? Or did we smoke her out by him walking, changing his schedule and surprising her to where she couldn’t react as she wanted to?

Smith: It’s the classic coincidence versus conspiracy.

Keiser: And of course, she’s not going to say. No one knows the answer to that.

Smith: I remember seeing Sara Jane Moore on the Today Show. I guess she is harmless at this stage in life – but I was struck that no one ever asked about the Ford family. The questions were all about her and where she was coming from. And no one ever asked, “Have you ever written to the Ford family?” or “What would you say to the Ford family?”

Keiser: Yeah, I don’t think – it’s been so long that I was out – I don’t look for a pound of flesh. I’m sorry, I don’t understand why those women did that to President Ford. There’s nothing in my knowledge of President Ford’s life or conduct that would have…

Smith: And that’s it. I think it was just that randomness. And to try to construct a logical theory…
Keiser: There is none.

Smith: Let’s back up. Let me ask you: I take it that it’s safe to say that he was a pretty even tempered guy.

Keiser: Oh, my daily contact with him? Oh, he never lost his temper to me.

Smith: But I mean in terms of highs and lows. I would think Lyndon Johnson would be a very mercurial figure.

Keiser: What would make you say that?

Smith: And I would think they would be very different temperaments.

Keiser: President Ford from my aspect – I’m sure he had good days and bad days – and I know that politically there were issues he was dealing with that were emotional to him and very difficult.

Smith: The fall of Saigon – that must have permeated the White House.

Keiser: Yeah.

Smith: Do you have general memories of that period?

Keiser: What I remember more is him flying out to – where was it, someplace – meeting an airplane of orphans that they brought back.

Smith: In San Francisco.

Keiser: Oh, gosh. Yeah, stuff like that, even as an outsider, is very emotional to me.

Smith: Was it for him?

Keiser: Yeah, I’m sure it was. Things like that I remember more than anything.

Smith: Remember, after Saigon fell, Congress wanted to pull the plug. I think everyone wanted to try to forget that we’d ever been there. And he put together this crazy quilt coalition and said we have a moral obligation, as a nation of immigrants and refugees, to open our arms. And they brought out
the first wave of 100,000 or so of Vietnam refugees. And part of that was Operation Baby Lift, I think it was called.

Keiser: Oh, yeah, I remember that. I remember getting on that plane. I didn’t involve myself with politics that much in that sense of what he was doing. It was just another day that I came to work in that sense. Do you understand what I mean? You’re not in all those meetings that were taking place. In that sense, anything you hear about that you might have heard in the car, or picked up from talking to staff members, or something like that. But you are not in those meetings where that’s really taking place.

Smith: You must have observed that because he was a jock and really enjoyed being around athletes - meeting athletes, that sort of thing.

Keiser: His old teammates – he’d have them back. And I think that’s one thing – I had through the years, I think, overheard some conversation – things that did bother him. Number one: I think that there were inferences made publicly that he wasn’t very smart, and that he was clumsy. And his retort, not publicly, but around his _________, he said, “I’m a graduate from Yale. I’ve got a law degree from Yale. And I was an all-American football player.” The criticism that he was getting, he obviously thought was unfair. But he was not going to come out publicly and say that. He was too great for that.

Smith: The whole Chevy Chase caricature – the stumbling, and all that kind of thing. Were you with him in, I think it was Austria, where he…

Keiser: Yes.

Smith: Can you describe that? It was raining, wasn’t it?

Keiser: Right. I do remember it. Larry Buendorf, Larry was the advance agent in Austria, so I got off the plane first. Got down and I’m talking to Larry – what’s going on, what do you have going, this sort of thing. Right at the base of the steps – and we’re talking. And all of a sudden I could tell that Larry’s not looking at me, he’s looking over my shoulder, and he goes, “Holy, Christ.” And I turn around and there’s President Ford, and he got up. What
happened was he tore the heel off his shoe, kind of stepped down on the step and the heel came off. So he tried to maintain some dignity, and we’re all kind of thinking, this didn’t happen….And he went through reviewing the troops with his heel. And the thing I do remember is trying not to make a big deal about this thing. We get him in the limousine and we start to move and this German police officer comes up to me with his heel – his shoe heel. Awww – and I said, “Get out! Get out of here. We don’t need it.” This thing will just go away. But that’s the memory of it. I don’t understand it.

Smith: Well, part of it was he was holding an umbrella over Mrs. Ford.

Keiser: Right, yeah. He just mis-stepped, which we’ve all done and the steel caught the heel and literally tore the heel off his shoe. But I felt bad that I didn’t see it and wasn’t there. He probably would have knocked us both down. But it was just one of those awkward, awkward situations that you wish didn’t happen. Yeah, I do remember Larry going “Ohhhh.” He couldn’t believe his eyes. It was not funny at the time.

Smith: Was he grim? Was his mood affected in the immediate aftermath of that?

Keiser: We didn’t have words about it. We never talked about it, and nobody else did.

Smith: I’m sure. Did you have much contact with Mrs. Ford?

Keiser: Then? Well, just daily – well, not daily, but when they were together. She had her own detail of agents and I supervised – those people reported to me.

Smith: They gave her a flag for a car – the Bloomer flag?

Keiser: Oh, I don’t remember that.

Smith: She had once, joshingly, complained, “How come he gets a flag and I don’t?”

Keiser: She was a very lovely person, and I respect her to this day and I wish everyday that she does well and feels well. And the whole family; Michael and Jack and Steve and Susan were nice people. Maybe it’s the Midwestern in them. I’m Midwestern.
Smith: And you had the sense – if he was ever tempted to forget where he came from, he was surrounded by people to remind him.

Keiser: Very nice people and pleasant to be around. I don’t remember – he and I never had words, angry words. And he’s a very humble man, I think – Midwestern, I guess.

Smith: Would you accompany them to church?

Keiser: Yeah, if I was working. I didn’t work every day. You talk about flags – President Carter – you went through his campaign. He did not like the imperial presidency; didn’t like big black limousines. President Ford never questioned anything about that environment. On Air Force One he just took it in, accepted it. But the inaugural night – I’d been with him [Carter] eight-ten hours, personally. And in those days we had a little Lincoln street car that was armored. But we brought that up for the limousine – no big black Lincolns or Cadillacs – and had the flags on the fender. We hadn’t even left the south grounds yet. “Mr. President, I need your guidance on the flags.” “What do you mean?” “Well,” I said, “they are symbols of your authority and your office, but it’s your option whether or not you fly them. I just need your intent, your desires.” What did President Ford do? “President Ford flew those flags every time he left the White House.” He said, “I won’t need them after tonight.” “Fine.”

So the first trip we make out of town some weeks later, he’s got a local politician with him – I don’t remember who – but it was the first time as president that he’d been out. We got in the same car, were driving it, we got a motorcade, no flags. Schools were coming out, intersections, and it’s in crowds and shopping centers, and this politician says, “__________” I said, “Mr. President, they’re not waving at you. They’re waving at the police car and the Secret Service car,” and he said, “But they aren’t waving at you.” And President Carter said, “You know, that’s a shame. I bet some of those people have been out here an hour to see their president go by, and I’ve disappointed them.” He said, “Dick, they don’t seem to see me in this car.” I said, “Yes, sir.” He said, “Well, what can I do?” I said, “Well, let’s try the flags, sir.” So,
we used the flags every time after that. It was never discussed, but I have an idea in my memory of President Carter; President Carter flew those out of humility. “I don’t really want to do it, but the president ______. President Ford might have flown his out of arrogance.” Nothing was ever said, but that was my analysis.

Smith: Well, that’s the way it was done.

Keiser: That was my analysis of the situation – that’s how he rationalized doing something that President Ford had done.

Smith: That’s funny. A couple things and we’ll wrap up. The ’76 campaign - were you at the convention?

Keiser: Oh, yes.

Smith: I realize you aren’t political, but going into that convention, they were not sure that they had it nailed down.

Keiser: My memory was that it was one state, wasn’t it? If one state went one way…

Smith: I know Mississippi became very important.

Keiser: One thing I remember; one night, one of the first nights, I remember Governor Reagan coming to meet – they met, they had a meeting.

Smith: That’s right - that was after the nomination.

Keiser: Was it? Okay. They had a meeting and my memory of it was kind of intense. I think President Ford’s staff was a little bit edgy. I don’t know – but my feeling was that it was not all that good old boy feeling. But it all took place in a room out of my presence.

Smith: I think that is a very accurate rendition. Reagan’s people had made it absolutely clear that the condition of meeting was that he not be offered the vice presidency.

Keiser: Oh really? That’s not a dimension that I was aware of. But I just sensed that between the two staffs and that sort of thing – you stand back.
Smith: That was a bitter convention. A hard-fought convention.

Keiser: Yes it was – I guess. I guess it was – from the outside. I’d been through several other conventions and you don’t pick up on that.

Smith: So you really are divorced from the political currents.

Keiser: You try to be. And as a matter of fact, when I met President Carter the first time, we were told that from then on – he said, “I know Dick. Oh, I know you from the debates.” He knew I had been with Ford. He knew that. And the debates were kind of an interesting thing because you’ve got Ford coming and his staff, and you’ve got Carter coming and his staff. But both of them have Secret Service agents who all know each other. We’re friends – “Hi, how you doing?” Our rooms are down the same hall. These two staff are really staring down the aisle and the agents are saying, “How you doing? Good to see you. How’s it going?” And I think sometimes that through the years the Secret Service was accused of passing on the schedules and that sort of thing. I guess it’s not a good idea to be too friendly with guys you see.

Smith: That’s interesting.

Keiser: Again, an interesting environment.

Smith: It was the second debate, of course, where the famous Polish gaffe occurred.

Keiser: I do remember that, and I remember afterwards, even amongst his staff he was trying to explain what he meant.

Smith: I want to get your reaction to this, because instantly there were some people, Brent Scowcroft, Jim Baker, and others who knew “we had a problem.”

Keiser: Yeah.

Smith: But Kissinger called him and told him he was wonderful, just kind of laid it on thick. And I’m sure that’s what you want to hear. But a week went by with this increasingly strenuous effort on the part of – Cheney became involved. He told us, “I was thrown out of the compartment of Air Force One.” Stu
Spencer from the campaign was trying. There was that stubborn streak in Ford’s makeup. What is your memory of that period?

Keiser: From an outsider, I was of the impression that he really didn’t think he had made that big a mistake. In other words, in his own mind, what he was trying to say – he might have said it poorly, but from his point of view, it was not that wrong.

Smith: He knew what he intended through those words.

Keiser: Yeah, exactly. And the frustration was that it was misunderstood. But in the time – from the memory of hearing him say that – that was his impression. I understand, this is what I was trying to say.

Smith: Could you see that stubbornness in his makeup?

Keiser: Yeah. But he had a very professional staff. He really did. There were some people that were superstars, yeah. Still are.

Smith: And he had a particularly impressive Cabinet.

Keiser: He did, I think, as an outsider. You talked about this transition – there was a time in our history when we had three presidents in two years. Transitions in terms of our constitution and the United States of America, never once during those transitions were we considered weak or disorganized, or worthy of attack. It just happens. It’s a marvelous thing to see.

Smith: The Bicentennial takes place the summer of ’76. He was incredibly busy around the Fourth and all that. He went to New York, went to Monticello or a ceremony…

Keiser: And he started in Boston at the church, then he went up to – I forget, but he made a speech…

Smith: Well, actually, it was ’75 because I actually was there. He went to the Old North Church and then Concord. It sort of kicked off the whole celebration. Did he enjoy that?
Keiser: I think so. I don’t know, but I think so. Those were long days. I have something I want to say – way out of context. Including President Ford, people at that level, at that degree of professional politics, feed on crowds. The campaigns, be it when Nixon was campaigning or be it when President Ford was campaigning or Johnson – those are long, long days. And sometimes, as an agent, you get caught up to where you were there the whole day. And we are exhausted at the end of the day. But if they have a good rally at night, they feed off of it. They are ready to go. It is amazing to me where they find that.

Smith: You have the classic definition of an extrovert who feeds off of others; wherein an introvert feels that they are being drained by others.

Keiser: That’s one thing unique about President Ford – he could catnap.

Smith: Really?

Keiser: Oh, yeah. In the back of the car, he could catnap five-ten minutes.

Smith: That’s a blessing.

Keiser: Oh, I think so, yeah. He could do that and be awake. You’d look in the rearview mirror something like that. He usually brought papers with him or autographs, pictures to sign. He was always doing something. Yeah, he’d catnap very easily.

Smith: We’ve been told a semi-famous story where he was down in Texas and I think they had the Kilgore Rangerettes, or whatever, all lined up – all these pretty girls. And he got kissed by all these pretty girls. And I think he sent flowers to Mrs. Ford that day. Because he said, “Betty is going to see this in the news.”

Keiser: Well, the only think I remember in Texas was eating the tamale.

Smith: Tell us.

Keiser: I never thought it was a big deal. It was Mexican food and he ate a tamale. And I guess he didn’t take the shell – they made a big deal about that. Again,
that’s just clumsy stuff. God, give the guy a break. Things like that I felt were very unfair. I felt sorry for him.

Erik: Were you with him on the day - Donald Rumsfeld told the story about being in the limo driving somewhere, and some kids crashed through a barrier and hit the presidential car?

Keiser: No.

Smith: That’s right, that was up in Boston.


Smith: Hartford, that’s right.

Keiser: Again, I was in school.

Erik: He had to go face down on the floor with somebody on top of him. It was a funny story when he told it.

Keiser: My deputy was with him. No, those things happen.

Smith: Those things seem to happen to President Ford.

Keiser: Indeed. It’s not funny. To the Service, it was a very serious thing. Yeah, it crashed through, came through an intersection.

Erik: He said they were kids, and when you looked out the window, he said you were face to face with these kids and their eyes were big as saucers when they realized what they’d done.

Keiser: This is not good. To the Secret Service it’s why have they done it and what’s next?

Smith: Oh, sure. Can you imagine in today’s security climate?

Keiser: Well, strategically, the Service made some changes. The limousine that was behind him as a spare was moved up in front, as a result of that accident. Had they needed the spare car, it could not have gotten around the curb.
Smith: He had a sense of humor?

Keiser: Oh, yeah, I think so. Not that he went around telling jokes, but he was just a gregarious fellow that would think it impolite if he didn’t laugh. But he met my father one time at Notre Dame and was so, so gracious to my dad. My dad was a Mason and my home town is near Notre Dame, and I called and said there might be a chance to meet President Ford. So he was telling my mom, “I’m going to give him the secret handshake, Masonic handshake.” My mom says, “Don’t do that. He may not remember, or you may get it wrong. Just don’t do that.” But he spent a good thirty minutes with my folks that were just priceless. And my father is Midwestern, and my father, every summer, they own a cabin up on a lake in Michigan – President Ford’s Michigan. “Do you know such and such lake?” Of course, Ford, being a politician, “Yeah, I know that Mr. Keiser, great lake.” At any rate, they got along well. And so the parting comment to my dad was, “If you are ever in Washington visiting Dick, come by and see me.” Now, that is very President Ford.

And so several months later my folks are visiting. I’m getting dressed and I’m at the breakfast table going to work, and my dad says, “You going to work today?” I said, “Yes, sir.” He said, “I may go upstairs and put on a tie. I may go downtown with you and see the President.” I said, “Well, Dad, you have to understand, their schedule is all organized weeks in advance.” And he said, “Well, he told me to.” And I said, “I understand that, and he meant it. But it takes some time.” And finally my mother said, “Leave Dick alone. You stay here.” That’s the way he felt comfortable with President Ford, in just that thirty minutes they were together.

Smith: Next to last question. Maybe one way of beginning to know Jerry Ford is, above all, as a Midwesterner. What does that mean, in your mind? What it is about the Midwest that is distinctive, defining?

Keiser: That you are gracious to people, you’re glad to meet people, you have basically simple needs. Simple things are important to you – church, family. And all the things that he did – the football, the college, Boy Scouts – those are things that I grew up with and that’s important. That’s not to say that
President Nixon was not that sort of thing. But I do think that where you come from does change you a little bit. President Carter was southern. That was pointed out to me; I was very comfortable with him.

Smith: I’ve often thought there is an unspoken bias on the part of people against Midwesterners. Because talk slow it’s assumed that they think slow. Whereas, in fact, they are being deliberate.

Keiser: And we’re simple people that don’t really, really know what the real world is like. And we need to be told.

Smith: I think he suffered from some of that bias.

Keiser: Well, that’s what I said. I think, in his own mind, it bothered him, the fact that: hey, I got a law degree from Yale. Now he wouldn’t say that publicly, but I heard him say it. “I was an all-American football player.” A pretty superior individual in every respect.

Smith: Last thing: how do you think he should be remembered?

Keiser: As a good man, as a good president, a good American. And the right man at the right time. I think he was perfect for that time. I’m personally sorry that it only lasted a short period of time, but I think that’s part of fate, too. I think he came and did what he had to offer, and I think he’d have been a good president if he’d won. That’s not the point, but I think it would have been a different presidency. I think he would be remembered for some really great things, decisions that he made. Hard decisions.

Smith: I have to ask you because there are some famous stories grown up around it, and that is the night when Queen Elizabeth came and the dinner at the White House, and the Marine Band played The Lady is a Tramp when they went out to dance. And I think there were repercussions afterwards. And again, counter to this image – because I think she suffered from it worse than he did. Initially there was this patronizing view - this Cub Scout den mother from Grand Rapids, a Sunday schoolteacher - and all of a sudden she is welcoming the world for the Bicentennial. And by all accounts, she rose to the challenge
admirably. But when you saw them in that role, did they seem perfectly comfortable?

Keiser: Yeah. And I think if that were the case, they had strong staff members that were giving them day to day good advice. That’s beyond my mandate. But by appearance they were a very good couple, a very loving couple, got along very well.

Smith: You mentioned at the very beginning, about at the time of her cancer surgery.

Keiser: Oh that bothered him. He was frightened. Oh yeah. In those days, what I remember – it may still be – but in those days, if you had that type of surgery, you didn’t know if you were going to wake up in the morning with a mastectomy or not.

Smith: And it was a subject that wasn’t discussed.

Keiser: But he was very attentive and very concerned. Oh, yes, from what I remember.

Erik: Were you in the helicopter coming back when he had to speak at the Economic Summit?

Keiser: I don’t remember the incident. That photograph, I told you, with he and I, we’re coming out of Bethesda just after he had visited with her. So, I remember those times, I don’t remember a particular helicopter incident, no. Oh, I know he was very concerned, as was the whole family. The kids showed up.

Smith: It’s been great.
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Secret Service
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Smith: Back us up to how your life’s path first crossed that of Gerald Ford.

Wennekamp: Well, it was really pure coincidence and nothing I can take credit for as far as a plan. I had gone back to Washington, DC; accepted a political appointment in the summer of ’74 when President Nixon was still in office. And I can’t take credit envisioning anything interesting happening.

Smith: What was the appointment?

Wennekamp: The appointment was a political appointment in the Office of the Secretary of Commerce doing some management consulting work, really.

Smith: Who was secretary then?

Wennekamp: Secretary Dent. At the time, as I mentioned, President Nixon was still in office and I didn’t envision an impeachment or resignation, but I saw that the Democrats would probably win the White House in ’76. So I thought two years back there would be good experience; learn about the legislative process and everything and then come back to California.

Smith: California was home?

Wennekamp: Yes. And interestingly enough, I accepted the job and then ten days before reporting to work, President Ford was sworn in as president. And so my resume, if you will, has always been connected with the Ford administration. I wasn’t back there very long and happened to meet some people who worked at the White House, Warren Rustand for example, was the President’s appointment secretary. And he suggested that I start – I did some part-time work with the White House advance office, and seemed to have a knack for that. It went very well.

Smith: And what did that entail?
Wennekamp: That entailed domestic events arrangements, advancing for the President’s attendance at a conference or meeting. And being a junior person, I assisted White House staff advance people; you’ve probably have met some of them, Red Cavaney and Frank Ursomarso, and Bob Goodwin and others.

Smith: Is Frank still around?

Wennekamp: Yes. Frank’s still around. He’s back east. As a matter of fact, I saw he’s a trustee now on the Foundation.

Smith: Good. Remember that name: Frank Ursomarso.

Wennekamp: He was around there a long time.

Smith: One of the people we talked to, who I think was even more junior than you, was Mary Fisher. She told wonderful stories about of course being the first and only woman. And if there was a place below the bottom of the totem pole, she occupied it.

Wennekamp: Yeah, Mary and I worked a lot together. With the passage of time I was offered a full-time position at the White House, and a commission as staff assistant to the President and started working over in the OEM, next door in the Advance Office. I got involved in a lot of the international trips, fortunately. A very, very wonderful experience.

Smith: For people who have heard the term but don’t know what it is, what does an advance man do?

Wennekamp: An advance man is, in essence, the President’s personal representative in coordinating all the details associated with his visit. And what you would do once a particular site was selected – a good example, I think, would be, he’s going to meet with President Sadat in Salzburg, Austria. And so you go over there and you are the President’s representative in negotiating everything. When it comes to toasting, who toasts first and in what language and in what room? Who enters first? Who’s last? And you coordinate this with the press, the Secret Service, the White House communications, local media, the embassy. And so you are responsible for coordinating all of these details and making sure that everything goes off to the minute. You are faxing back – we
didn’t have faxes - but telexing back communications and memos to the
White House with diagrams of what’s going to happen, when it’s happening,
etc. So it’s literally thinking of every minute detail that could affect the
President’s visit and making sure that it runs smoothly.

Smith: And then, of course, ironically, at the end it was the rain slicked staircase.

Wennekamp: Well, interesting you bring that one up because I happened to have been, and
maybe in President Ford’s eyes, maybe responsible for that. But Air Force
One had just pulled up and it was an exterior arrival – no gates or anything.
So he came down the steps, but before the steps – most of the steps were put
in place, the red carpet was rolled out, and I escorted the Chancellor and the
Bürgermeister from Salzburg out; put them in position and then stepped back
at the end behind them with the military aide and watched President and Mrs.
Ford come down.

As you probably know, as the nation knows, the mistake he made was, he’s
holding an umbrella with one hand and her arm with the other and not the rail.
He came down and his foot slipped; it tore off the heel of his shoe and he
went down on hands and knees. When he went down and he got up, he looked
at me and he’s just red as a beet. He is so frustrated, so embarrassed, but it
was like he was looking at me like, “Why did you allow this to happen?”
There was nothing I could do. But he recovered; kind of limped down,
greeting everyone and went on to the press conference.

But I will say that that was the beginning of the clumsy reputation because
that was an international event and the whole world sees it - the President
planting on all fours. He was really irritated.

Smith: Was there any sequel? I mean, did you hear from anyone?

Wennekamp: No one – because it was obvious what had happened when you saw his heel
still sitting there on the steps of the ramp and it’s all wet.

Smith: He was carrying the umbrella over Mrs. Ford?

Wennekamp: He was holding it up for both of them, and then holding her arm as they came
down. And I still have that picture.
Smith:  Do you think he got a bum rap?

Wennekamp:  Oh, absolutely. When it comes to his clumsy reputation – the guy was an athlete. He was a jock and took great pride in that, as he always had. And so that really bothered him. But like in so many other things, he shrugged it off, like water on a duck. There were a few times when he would get irritated. We were down in Texas and a reporter tried to report that President Ford had raised the wrong two fingers for the football team.

Smith:  The hook ‘em horns?

Wennekamp:  Yeah. And he heard that and he was really irritated, to the point that he would not talk to that particular reporter again.

Smith:  He had a temper he spent a lifetime controlling, and pretty effectively for the most part. We asked Mary and she had a couple of amusing examples. Did you ever see his temper?

Wennekamp:  Oh, yes. He had a temper like any CEO would have a temper. The worst time that I had with him from a temper perspective was – this was when he was a former president – jumping ahead in the sequence. But when he was a former president, we were on one of his infamous trips. We were on the road about twenty out of thirty days a month. We were in, I think it was Kansas City and we had to fly to Chicago for a speech. We’d put the trips together so that they were a mixture of his participating in a charity golf tournament, doing something political, doing an honorarium speech, and that honorarium speech would usually be the vehicle that would provide the transportation. And then he would usually try to do as many times as possible, an academic visit to one of the universities.

So you’d put this combo together, but transportation is provided by the association or the corporation who he is doing the honorarium speech for. And so we were leaving for breakfast, going over the day’s schedule, and he happened to ask me what kind of aircraft do we have going to Chicago? I told him that we had a Learjet, which to me is a nice aircraft. And he went ballistic. He said, “That’s ridiculous. I can’t even stand up in that plane. If they want me to speak there, they should give me a plane that’s decent, good
transportation.” He was really angry and I was really disappointed and angry, too, that he could be that spoiled. And so we stopped talking and it was silence – like a husband and wife. We get to Chicago and we get in a limo and we’re driving into downtown from Midway, and like a husband and wife, he breaks the silence by some innocuous comment about the weather. Just to break it, and then everything came back to normal. But, yeah, he had a temper, but I didn’t see it that often. He had great control.

Smith: When you started at the White House – let’s see, you started at the beginning of the Ford presidency?

Wennekamp: Yeah, I started working over there in ’75.

Smith: In ’75 – so this is post-pardon?

Wennekamp: Exactly.

Smith: Where were you when the pardon – were you still at the Commerce Department?

Wennekamp: Yes, I was still at Commerce.

Smith: Were you surprised?

Wennekamp: Absolutely. But at the time – my only question was why he didn’t do it sooner? But then I realized why he couldn’t. Then over the years of listening to him answer the question over and over and over again, I became so thoroughly convinced that what he did was the right thing. And not in his personal best interests at all and he knew that.

Smith: Contrast him with poor Lyndon Johnson, who died the day before the Vietnam peace agreement was announced – at least Gerald Ford lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his way of thinking. And the real tipping point, or maybe it was just a cherry on the sundae, was the Profiles in Courage Award from the Kennedy Library. He said, “Everywhere I’ve gone for twenty years, people ask the same question. They don’t ask it anymore.” It’s as if the Kennedy imprimatur made it go away.
Wennekamp: Yeah, it’s interesting, I hadn’t thought about the timing, but you are right. You are very right.

Smith: The first several months of the Ford presidency you were at the Commerce Department. Like everyone else, you watched him from a distance and presumably formed some opinions about the man and his approach to the job. Once you actually became part of the White House and saw it up close, were any of those assumptions challenged?

Wennekamp: To the contrary. I found that he was as real and as down to earth and as engaging as he came across in press conferences or in meetings, etc. Almost to point that you had to be careful that you didn’t become too familiar.

Smith: Really?

Wennekamp: Yeah, because he made it so easy to be his friend, you had to remember what your job was, and that you were dealing with the President of the United States. But he made it so comfortable. And that, I think, gave rise to an environment, an association, a cadre of people that worked for him that were of like-mind. Very, very decent, hardworking, highly ethical, great morals and values – that thread just ran through.

We had the annual meetings back in Washington, the reunions, if you will, and we often reflect on that. What a great group of people that happened to come together. I’m not saying that he did it, because he didn’t handpick, but just by association of the type of people. It was a phenomenal, phenomenal experience.

Smith: Everyone knows he loved to be on the road. What was it about that experience that he found so enjoyable?

Wennekamp: Yeah, I know. But you’re right, it was back when he was a congressman. He was on the road all the time. He just loved the mobility. I think his family paid a price for that. But again, as a former president, I would travel with him and ask him, “Why do you need to do this?” The honorariums, the corporate boards, everything. He’d just built the house there in Rancho Mirage, and he had a mortgage on it, and he said, “I want to pay the house off.” It was a
Depression mentality there, and I talked to him at one time about the tax
advantages of a mortgage, the investing, the funds. “Nope, I’ve got to pay this
house off.”

Smith: He must have enjoyed the process of going to those events and talking, I
suppose, to local pols, and eating rubber chicken – just the whole ritual of life
on the road. He really traveled until around his 90th birthday, and then his
doctors told him basically to lay off. And one senses, without being
melodramatic, that part of him died before he died, because he was denied
that which gave him such pleasure.

Wennekamp: Exactly. And you could see it when he would give a speech. If he stumbled
he’d be angry with himself afterwards. Penny was good at building it back up,
if you will. But when he had the ceremony for the anniversary for his
inauguration in Statuary Hall, he stumbled a little bit there, and I could tell
that he was angry with himself; he was frustrated.

Smith: Let me add a sequel because I wrote that speech.

Wennekamp: Is that right?

Smith: Yeah. He said afterwards, “That’s the last time I’m speaking in public.”

Wennekamp: Yeah, you could see it.

Smith: And the only time I ever saw a temper was exactly that. He wouldn’t wear
glasses. He’d come up with something like the lighting angle was wrong, or
the placement of the speech on podium was off, or something. But I know
exactly what you mean. He had standards.

Wennekamp: Exactly, high standards. He was funny because, like a lot of politicians, I
guess, and a lot of celebrities - comedians particularly, he could turn it on. He
loved people. He could be engaging, a man’s man. It’s like he never met
someone that wasn’t a friend. But when he was alone, he liked to be alone. He
wasn’t this bubbly gregarious kind of guy. He made it very down to earth,
very serious, and you see that in a lot of people. I find that interesting, how
that works.
Smith: That is interesting. When you were in the White House, were there particular foreign trips that you remember? Were you on the trip to Japan?

Wennekamp: No, I was not.

Smith: So you had nothing to do with his short pants?

Wennekamp: No. I went to Japan with him later, as a former president. I think the Salzburg trip, primarily because he took such great pride in that, in dealing with President Sadat. He had a great respect for President Sadat, as a lot of us do. But he hit it off so well with the President in negotiating the Sinai II agreement.

Smith: Why do you think that was? They would seem to be two very different kinds of people.

Wennekamp: I don’t know. I think they were both true statesmen. They didn’t have hidden agendas. President Ford never did – that was obvious, anyway. He was very shrewd.

Smith: I assume Ford, whether you agreed with him or not, did instill a sense of trust.

Wennekamp: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: And that’s probably not universally the case among public figures. But when you stop to think about the people he became very close to - Giscard D’Estaing seems to be a temperamental opposite. Lord Callaghan was an old line Labor Party Socialist, and yet they seemed to have become very good friends.

Wennekamp: Exactly.

Smith: Even Jimmy Carter in later years.

Wennekamp: Particularly interesting to me because if you’re looking at anecdotal situations, after the campaign, after the ’76 campaign, you know as everyone, how truly disappointed President Ford was that we didn’t pull it off. And it was so close, none of us expected that outcome. We thought it was a great possibility, but our expectations had risen to the point that we thought it was
really going to be President Ford’s election. And he was very, very disappointed.

Smith: Was he down?

Wennekamp: He was down. At first I could see he resented who he lost to, an outsider.

Smith: We’ve been told he went around the day after, and for some time saying, “I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer.”

Wennekamp: Exactly right. But at the same time, this is one of those things that rank way up there relative to what impresses me about President Ford, given that feeling, given the disappointment and resentment etc., the first time President Carter calls and asks for President Ford, President Ford takes the phone, and without missing a beat, says, “Yes, Mr. President.” The respect, he’s gracious, he’s kind, and he’s professional. He listens to President Carter and then says, “Okay, this is what you do, call Tip O’Neill…..,” and goes through A, B, C, D, giving guidance on how to deal with the situation, or move this particular issue.

Smith: Is it your sense this was still early in the Carter presidency?

Wennekamp: Oh, yes. This was right after President Ford became a former president. And I had such respect for him for that reason. Knowing how he felt personally, and then to step back and divorce himself from that and deal with the President of the United States as he should be dealt with.

Smith: Now the story always has been that the professional relationship began during the Carter presidency when President Ford helped out lobbying senators on the Panama Canal treaties, which was something he didn’t have to do. And probably didn’t win him a whole lot of points among some in his party. But supposedly, the personal relationship really began on that long trip to and from the Sadat funeral.

Wennekamp: That’s what I understand. And that was after I had moved on. I’d left in late 1980 and they were not, at that time, good friends. But like you said, he was fully supportive on Panama, which didn’t win him a lot of friends in the Republican Party; and then the recognition of China versus Taiwan was the
other thing that a number of people in his own administration, like Dr. Kissinger, wasn’t real happy about.

Smith: Really?

Wennekamp: And I think that maybe the most challenging intellectual exercise I ever had was that he walked in the office and told me what he had just committed to do relative to Panama, for example, with President Carter. And I didn’t personally agree with his taking that position, but my task was to write up the response to the letters that would be coming in the next day of why did you do this? What are talking about? How could you do this? So I had to write up the letter, if you will, that would be used in correspondence to explain.

Smith: Did he have input into that?

Wennekamp: Oh I drafted it and had him look at it and we were good to go. But it’s an interesting exercise that I’ve used several times with people – you can have your own convictions, but you have to be open minded. And I had to be very open minded.

Smith: Were you at the Kansas City convention?

Wennekamp: Yes, I was.

Smith: What are your memories of that?

Wennekamp: Oh that was phenomenal. The backroom shenanigans, if you will, relative to Ford and Reagan and the caucuses and the delegates.

Smith: And because it was still not nailed down…

Wennekamp: No, it was not. It was not nailed down at all. So it was really very, very interesting to watch that and be a part of it. His winning the nomination was absolutely great. His selection of Senator Dole surprised a lot of us. Surprised me. As a matter of fact, I remember, I mentioned Frank Ursomarso earlier, but one of the things that Frank and I had to do was go over and get Senator and Elizabeth Dole and sneak them into the Crown Plaza Hotel. And it was not easy because the media was all over everything, and we had these cars that were like bubbles, an old Pacer. There were big windows all around the thing
and we drive over to the Crown Plaza and there’s a long queue to get down to
the parking lot. I couldn’t wait in the queue so I just drove down the ramp and
waited for the car that was waiting for the gate to go up and just slip right
through with it. The media saw that and they are running down the ramp and
we spirit the Doles out and into the hotel. Some of them had gotten the clue.

Smith: Who else was on the list, because various names have been bandied about
over the years in terms of people who were seriously considered? Howard
Baker, being one. There is some debate over whether Anne Armstrong’s name
ever was actually tossed around.

Wennekamp: I’m not sure. I do know, relative to the Vice President, I know that he was
very disappointed to have to drop Nelson Rockefeller.

Smith: I don’t know if he told you, but I’ve been working for nine years on a
biography of Nelson Rockefeller.

Wennekamp: Oh, I saw that, yes.

Smith: I’m always interested in anything that anyone can add. I mean, was he
disappointed at the time, or was he disappointed after the fact?

Wennekamp: Disappointed at the time. Particularly when he had to tell Nelson that they
were not going to be able to be on the ticket together. And it was so painfully
obvious that it was the conservative wing of the party. But it was very hard
for him, because he had great respect for Mr. Rockefeller.

Smith: Did you see Rockefeller at that time?

Wennekamp: No, I did not. No.

Smith: You wonder if the White House waited too long to take Reagan seriously.
Either thinking he might not run at all or underestimating just how potent a
challenger he would be.

Wennekamp: In ’76?

Smith: In ’76.
Wennekamp: Okay. Yeah, I think so. I know a number of them did in 1980. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard the stories about President Ford’s scenario, if you will, relative to 1980.

Smith: I’d like to. I know that there were those on the outside who were urging him to run in 1980.

Wennekamp: Yeah, and he was doing a lot of traveling, which was done for exposure and charity and personal gain, but in essence, he was in Rancho Mirage. And now this is somewhat my personal interpretation – he really thought that the party would come down Sand Dune Road and give him an invitation to be the nominee. And so he kind of laid back. Carter was still doing very well in the polls. The economy was still doing well in early ’80. Reagan was throwing his name around and a number of President Ford’s friends on the Hill advised him, “Look, don’t muddy the waters right now. Carter’s doing very well. Let Reagan run around and do the primary things kind of be beneath you, as a former president – get out there in New Hampshire in the snow, etc.” So he listened to that. Well, then with the passage of time, he had the confluence of a couple of events, like the economy and the Iranian hostage situation; Carter’s popularity dropped severely, Reagan started picking up in the polls, and now President Ford is watching this and saying, “Wait a minute.” He goes back to his friends and they, in essence, told him now it would be divisive of the Party for you to come in, so just wait. And so he saw this come and go, and it really bothered him. It really did.

Smith: But the bell rings and the old warhorse responds. I assume there must have been a complex series of layers because Mrs. Ford had only recently had her intervention, and there is good reason to believe that she would not have encouraged him to do this.

Wennekamp: That’s right.

Smith: What was your sense of that?

Wennekamp: I would totally agree with that. As you know, better than I, their intention was to go back to Michigan and she was happy with that. And then moving out to Rancho Mirage after that stint as First Lady and President was a total course
change. It was a sea change for them to their personal lives. And she wasn’t real happy out there.

Smith: Really?

Wennekamp: No, because she didn’t really have a lot of friends there. And like I said, he was traveling 20-30 days a month and she was pretty much alone.

Smith: Because by that time the kids were pretty much grown up. And I don’t mean to put words in her mouth, but one can imagine her thinking, the one good thing about losing the election is, I’m going to get my husband back. Only to discover that it really wasn’t very different from what it had been before he was president.

Wennekamp: No, because he didn’t change. Exactly right. And he wasn’t going to change.

Smith: Were you aware that she had a problem, however defined?

Wennekamp: Yeah. It was painfully obvious. I think it’s unfortunate that it went on so long. It dates way back to when he was in the House. It’s unfortunate.

Smith: Was it an issue during the White House years?

Wennekamp: Not as much as it was when you got into Rancho Mirage. And again, I think that’s in large part because of the loneliness, the absence of responsible activities and things like that. That can get everybody up. And when you have really nothing to look forward to, you can let yourself go a little bit more. But it was unfortunate that it took as long as it did. But I personally was pleasantly surprised that the intervention worked as effectively as it did.

Smith: Was this something that was sort of sprung on everyone. We’ve heard that Susan was instrumental in trying to organize things. Was her dad on the road, or was this planned in advance?

Wennekamp: He had been on the road. I can’t remember how many days he was back before that. I think it was on a Sunday. But we hadn’t been back a long time. I know he was on one trip – everything that really brought it to a head – he was on a trip back east. I was not with him on this trip. And Secret Service notified me that Mrs. Ford was very upset and wanted to leave the residence
and they were not allowing it. And so we contacted the President and he changed his trip. As a matter of fact, he got Dr. Kissinger to take his speech in Virginia, I think, and flew directly home. And then from that it really developed. Which thank God that happened.

Smith: What was the mood while all of this was unfolding? For those of you who were on the outside but close observers, and in some ways participants in their lives?

Wennekamp: Of great, great concern. Because if they weren’t able to pull off the intervention, what next? How do you deal with this without getting so terribly public that it would be counterproductive?

Smith: I can imagine her feelings at the time – what are people going to say? Just that sort of natural reaction. Was there concern about that on the part of all of you who were really, first and foremost, concerned about her well-being?

Wennekamp: Foremost, absolutely. And with her, I think there was a degree of denial, as there usually is.

Smith: Denial that a problem existed.

Wennekamp: Exactly – to the depths of what it was. But it was challenging. I sometimes wondered if – just personal reflection off-record, if you will – he wasn’t escaping with his travels and his trips.

Smith: That’s an interesting observation. Over the years it’s been suggested that he felt a certain degree of guilt for being away as much as he was, and perhaps inadvertently contributing to the situation. But that’s a valid theory.

In the immediate aftermath, did it take a while for this to be judged a success? She went to Long Beach for X amount of time.

Wennekamp: The Naval Hospital in Long Beach. Right, which is a very difficult time, because, even when that happened, as I’m sure you’ve heard from Susan and others, that everyone underestimated the severity of the problem. When they put her on detox, it wasn’t right because they made some calculations that were wrong and it was nearly disastrous. They had to unwind that and start
over. But I think the family - I think it really brought the family a lot closer
because they were off all doing their own thing. Now Susan was young and
she’d just gotten married. But I was proud of them and I was proud of him.
He really did everything that was necessary.

Smith: People talk, understandably, about the courage she displayed at the time of the
breast cancer surgery.

Wennekamp: I was just thinking of that myself.

Smith: But I was thinking, just as she set an example for countless women, so did he,
for husbands. How to respond to this, and likewise with the drinking issue,
because he stopped.

Wennekamp: Oh, yeah. Stopped cold. And he loved to have a drink just like most of us,
whether it is a martini or Jack Daniels or something. But he went cold turkey
because he knew it wasn’t the right thing to do – wasn’t fair.

Smith: One sense he was a man of great self-discipline.

Wennekamp: Yes.

Smith: Because I know later on he was upbraiding Susan for smoking. And she sort
of threw it back in his face with his pipes. And he got rid of the pipes – sent
them off to the Library, I think. All the ceremonial pipes, the gift pipes, he
just – cold turkey again.

Wennekamp: He was disciplined. Very much so. Yeah.

Smith: And what about the relationship with the kids? How did that evolve over
time?

Wennekamp: You know, I don’t know. I wasn’t that involved with the kids – to the degree
they came around the compound, if you will, in Rancho Mirage. But not that
much involved, not as much as Greg Willard who worked with them during
the campaign and became personal friends with the kids. I dealt really
primarily with the President and Mrs. Ford.
Smith: Let’s go back to right after the election. There are a number of things going on: wanting to have a successful transition; smooth handover; and at a certain time, to get on with your own life. Was there ever any doubt that on January 20th they would be going anywhere other than Southern California? By then was that decision pretty well taken?

Wennekamp: I think it was pretty much taken. I remember right afterward a lot of us going out to Palm Springs where they had been spending the winters, if you will, when they weren’t at Vail. And they had a place there. We all got a bunch of places to stay and started working on our resumes because we hadn’t anticipated the fact that we were going to be unemployed, and none of us had a clue what we were going to do. But the fact that he was going to end up out there was pretty much concluded. The disadvantage he had, unlike so many other former presidents, is that he didn’t anticipate being a former president, and therefore had not set himself up, if you will. Hadn’t got his house built and all the security issues taken care of. As you look back, in more contemporary times, all the presidents knew – President Nixon had himself all set up in San Clemente and Johnson – everyone had pretty much set it up.

Smith: And let’s face it, some of the criticism he took for “commercializing” the former presidency - he didn’t have much money when he left office.

Wennekamp: Oh, no, as a matter of fact – I think it’s been written that he didn’t have a savings account until he was a former president. As a congressman, they lived hand to mouth, and the presidency was such a short period of time, and so then he became former president and had the benefit of the pensions and the honorariums and stuff like that. And finally, financially, he got it together.

Smith: Now, when they went out there initially, where did they live?

Wennekamp: They rented a house up in the hills by Palm Springs near Rancho Mirage. And we rented another house for offices, etc. And then, as you probably know, he was able to work out a deal with Ambassador Firestone, who owned part of a lot right next to his place on the 13th green at Thunderbird. And he was able to buy that lot and then friends of Ford, if you will, bought the house next to that
and had it converted into facilities that would accommodate the office for

Smith: Was that the Ginger Rogers house?

Wennekamp: That was the Ginger Rogers house, right. Ginger Rogers bought that for her
mother, I think.

Smith: Which is now the office complex.

Wennekamp: And then she owned half a lot next door, so Ford bought half a lot from
Ambassador Firestone and half a lot from Ginger Rogers and put that together
for his residence, and then that became the compound.

Smith: So they built their house there?

Wennekamp: Yes.

Smith: And presumably were involved in its design and layout and everything else.

Wennekamp: Oh yeah, very much so. The interior design and everything, yeah. That was a
full time job for Mrs. Ford, too.

Smith: Is it more his house or her house?

Wennekamp: It’s more her house. Yeah. But it turned out beautifully.

Smith: It must have been fun to design a house after all those years.

Wennekamp: You have the pool and the dog run; Ambassador Firestone had the tennis
courts, so they didn’t have to worry about that. But it was nice, it was very
nice.

Smith: I take it Leonard Firestone was a very pivotal figure in that his story and Mrs.
Ford’s become enmeshed - that they are almost co-founders of the Betty Ford
Center.

Wennekamp: Oh, yeah. The financial support that he provided for the Betty Ford Center
was phenomenal. Very gracious, a true gentleman.

Smith: That’s what I’ve heard.
Wennekamp: I really admired him.

Smith: In those early days, would the kids come back for visits or were they at that point pretty well on their own?

Wennekamp: They were pretty much out on their own. I think the biggest time the family got together would be during the winter time up in Vail and then subsequently Beaver Creek.

Smith: Tell us about the house in Vail, because I’ve never been in it.

Wennekamp: They built that and now I’m gone again. In Vail they always rented the Bass residence and then they built in Beaver Creek, and I’ve never been in Beaver Creek.

Smith: I’m told they loved Vail, but I’m also told they were beloved in Vail.

Wennekamp: Oh, yes. Matter of fact, one of the runs up at Beaver Creek now is named after President Ford. They couldn’t do enough for him, the community as a whole. It was beautiful, it really was.

Smith: Did you ever have the feeling that you wished more people could know them as you knew them?

Wennekamp: Oh, absolutely. Even today when I talk about what kind of a person he was, particularly him, people are just amazed that he was so real. So touchable, if you will. He was stubborn, but he was still open-minded. He would listen if the two of you were doing the pros and cons on something, he was very open-minded and he loved to listen to the debate, and hear the exchange and the advantages and disadvantages. And then make the decision. Stubborn and tenacious.

Smith: And fiscally conservative, is it safe to say?

Wennekamp: Yes. And I remember when we would be traveling and he’d get off the plane and the press would be there and he’d make comments. He’d want to go to the mike and make some comments, and then he’d go to the event that evening, and it would be the same comments. So we were at one stop – as a matter of fact it was in this hotel, I remember, we were in the suite - and I told him,
“You may or may not appreciate this but, I think that you would be better off if you’d reserve your comments for the dinner, because you are saying the same thing at the airport. So everybody has already heard your one liners, your bullet points, etc. And so you could cut down on that…” And he said, “No. I have something to say and I’m going to say it. I’m going to get the point across.” I said, “Okay. Go for it.”

Smith: As time went by, the party moved further and further to the right, particularly on social issues. And it wasn’t just abortion; it was a number of issues where they [the Fords] really were at variance with where the party was going. I’ve often wondered whether that was simply the party moving as he stayed the same; how much of that was that my imagination, how much it was her influence; or was it just him growing, listening to different sides, whatever. For example, he’s the only president ever to sign a petition on gay rights. And that’s not what you would have thought of Gerald Ford in the White House. In the White House he was the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge. Well, then came Ronald Reagan and it sort of smashed all those records. But he just seemed, as he got older, to become more open, more…

Wennekamp: Broadminded.

Smith: More broadminded is a very good way of putting it.

Wennekamp: My own personal speculation is that as he got out of Washington, got away from the Beltway – he had a juxtaposition of exposure to corporate America through the boards, academia, charities, and the combination. I think it was a broadening experience. Because he heard a different perspective than I think he had. Yes, you have economic councils, and you have summit meetings and everything, but for him as an individual to be exposed and have those interchanges, I think was a broadening experience for him.

Smith: But you first have to have a mind open enough to hear that and not reject it a priori.

Wennekamp: And that goes back to the comment I made about him loving the debate. He really had an insatiable appetite for information.
Smith: And the newspapers - my experience was, you never traveled anywhere without…


Smith: How so?

Wennekamp: You think of him as this big jock, but then you have this law student and you have this coach and you’ve got this politician, and you have this gregarious guy that could work the crowds, but still intellectual when it came to his curiosity. And I think the thing that disappointed me the most was the bad rap he got for his intellectual capacity, because he was so much brighter than people gave him credit for. And his instincts were phenomenal on what to pursue and what not to pursue.

Smith: How would you illustrate that?

Wennekamp: Well, something would come up, I think it had something to do with the Warren Commission, but something hit the news and we were getting calls from AP and everybody for a comment. I can’t remember all the details, but he suggested that I call Kelly, who was the director of the FBI at the time, ask Kelley a question. I apologize, I can’t remember the details, but I responded and President Ford said, “Okay, no comment. It will die.” And he was right on. Great instincts and the advice that he would give – like I said with President Carter and how to handle things. His instincts on how to deal with the Hill.

Smith: And the irony is, at that point in his life his relationship with Tip O’Neill was undoubtedly much closer than Jimmy Carter’s ever was.

Wennekamp: Oh yeah. Absolutely.

Smith: You mentioned the Warren Commission; again, that must have been another question that dogged him wherever he went. He did an oral history with someone at the Kennedy Library about the Warren Commission, and he said something quite remarkable. One of the theories that was discussed among the commissioners was that Lee Harvey Oswald was sexually impotent, and he
was going to show Marina, who apparently had been taunting him, just how much of a man he was. And it was apparently discussed seriously among the commission members, but it wasn’t put into the report, I think for reasons of taste.

Wennekamp: Yeah, I can understand that. It’s interesting you say that because when I look back, we talked about the pardon and how that was such an issue that dogged him. When I look back at the correspondence, there were things that just never went away. Not that they were the most voluminous, but just consistently over the years - the pardon, of course, the Warren Commission, and Roswell, Arizona and the aliens and whether or not he knew. Is this what they look like? It just went on and on.

Smith: What did he think about the alien question?

Wennekamp: Finally I couldn’t resist it. I said, “Could you just do me the favor – is this true or not?” And he said, “Aw, there’s nothing to it.” But the little twinkle in his eye…made me still wonder.

Smith: You know, for all of his openness there are people who think he took some secrets with him.

Wennekamp: I believe so, and maybe for good reason.

Smith: It probably goes back to that self-disciplined nature. He was capable of keeping a secret.

Wennekamp: Exactly. And I’ll tell people today that people complain about not knowing enough, or not understanding, or the media not giving enough information, etc., that from the time I started with him, I came to the personal realization that most of us are better off not knowing everything. I had the good fortune of reading the security briefings that would be brought out to him on a weekly basis – the military would bring them out literally handcuffed to a briefcase, and you’d get the briefing and then he’d read it and then I’d have to literally burn it and flush the ashes down the toilet.

Smith: Really?
Wennekamp: Because there weren’t shredding machines and stuff like that. But what I read told me that there are a lot of things that we don’t need to know because a lot of it is speculation and why scare people? But to your point, I think that’s the case, he probably did.

Smith: I assume he appreciated the fact that President Carter took pains to keep him informed.

Wennekamp: Oh, yeah. Which was obviously to President Carter’s advantage, to keep him so. Keep him abreast of what’s happening.

Smith: When did you move into the offices? Was it a while?

Wennekamp: Yes, it took a good nine months to reconfigure everything. I stayed in Washington for the first six months following the inauguration and managed the office across the street in Jefferson Square, where we put together a small staff of about thirty-nine people.

Smith: And how did that work?

Wennekamp: We literally had a mini White House, if you will. There was a correspondence office, a scheduling office, a legal, a press. The former president’s budget runs for six months and then it significantly drops down. So what we had to do was, once we were in a position of doing it, would be to hire people at significantly less salary than the executive secretary was getting at the White House. Take the executive secretary out, have her train the individual in Palm Springs or Rancho Mirage, bring this one back, let her go and then move forward with a significantly reduced staff at a reduced overhead relative to salary. And then in six months close the office.

Smith: What would you say to people who think “the imperialist presidency” - they get all this money, they get all these staffs – and what are they doing to earn it?

Wennekamp: From the contribution that I saw him make, it was money well-spent. I remember in the budgetary discussions on the budget for the former President after the transition, I’d get calls from senators asking questions about the volume of correspondence, etc. Trying for justification of why do we need to
continue to have this staff and this much of an expense? And everyone is amazed at how many of the citizens of this country were communicating, not because they wanted to make him wealthy, but because they had questions, they wanted his opinion. Of course, there was scheduling, there were invitations, and things, but the number of people who wanted a card for their mother turning 100 years old - it’s a position that goes on. That’s why he’s still called President Ford. I mean, that’s why he was. That’s a position that goes on.

Smith: I assume as a former congressman, for whom answering the mail promptly was the *sine quo non* of official success - that carried over to his post-White House days. The mail was your tyrant.

Wennekamp: Exactly right. And we had a great staff handling all of that.

Smith: In those early days, how was the operation organized?

Wennekamp: Basically scheduling and correspondence were the two key functions.

Smith: Now, Bob Barrett was chief of staff?

Wennekamp: Yeah, Bob Barrett was chief of staff. He was involved a lot in the negotiations for the NBC contract and the book and things like that. And I did a lot of the traveling, a lot of the scheduling – the details – the old advance work, if you will, and pretty much managed the office. But it worked very effectively, it really did. President Ford had his personal secretary. Now Mrs. Ford was not happy that the former President’s budget did not include anything for the former First Lady. And so she resented the fact that there was nothing in there for an office for her, stationary and all this kind of stuff. Which does make sense, because she was highly regarded and respected and she got a lot of correspondence. And so we were able to design the offices in such a way that she had an office right next to his, and we got stationary, which he paid for, but appeased her, too. She had her office, but she kept busy in that regard, too.

Smith: Was there such a thing as a typical day there in those early years right after he had come out there? *If* he was there?
Wennekamp: If he was there, a typical day: he’d eat breakfast, go for a swim, and come over to the office, probably around nine; read; and then go into the correspondence. Then go into answering phone calls and meeting on the schedule and planning events, planning the next trip, if you will. But he was good at maintaining contact with people, much better than I am. He was on the phone or writing to people all the time. I don’t think he ever got into emailing. I don’t think so.

Smith: Penny said apparently he learned to play solitaire on the computer. And people could email him, and he understood that; he just didn’t understand responding in kind. And he was famously not adept with phones?

Wennekamp: No.

Smith: They were technologically and mechanically beyond his…

Wennekamp: He’s like me and a lot of guys that, if it weren’t for my wife, the VCR would still flash twelve. He was like that.

Smith: There was a large volume of mail?

Wennekamp: Oh, yes, tons of mail. It really, really kept us busy. We developed what I thought was good boilerplate responses that you can personalize. But again, that was before computers, so it was on an old mag card, IBM typewriters. It seems so antiquated now.

Smith: I’ve heard that as the staff became progressively more populated with females that the word went out from on high - “I don’t want gossiping, I don’t want backbiting.” I assume he’d seen it on the Hill and he just didn’t want a staff that was wasting its energies in that kind of back and forth.

Wennekamp: When you talk about the staff, and this is not anything of profound record, but given how personable, how engaging he was, he wasn’t comfortable walking around and talking with the staff. You know how a very effective way to manage is to manage by walking around, but he stayed in his office. He wasn’t comfortable, and I don’t know why.
Smith: As you know, most politicians love gossip, it’s a second language. And I don’t mean just political gossip, I mean just gossip. And my sense is he was visibly uncomfortable, to the point where he would find a way to change the subject. A waste of time, or sometimes bordered on malicious. I don’t know how to describe it, but he was just visibly uncomfortable.

Wennekamp: I think in large part because he knew how damaging malicious rumors can be in the political environment, and he had no use for rumor and innuendo and hearsay.

Smith: And Oliver Stone.

Wennekamp: Yeah, exactly. True. He took life very seriously, but could have a good time. Golfing, and as a matter of fact, I’ve got to share with you one of the funniest visions I ever had in my life, and I can still see it today. He was in a golf tournament, and he had this bad reputation for hitting people. He was in a foursome, probably with Arnold Palmer, or somebody like that at the Riviera, and got up to first tee off. I remember I was standing back off of the first tee, and they were announcing the players, and you look down the gallery and it’s just tight. You can’t imagine. Being a golfer myself, I can’t imagine hitting a ball down that. And so they announce the golfers and then they announce President Ford to the tee, and I look down the gallery and the fairway, and the whole gallery just whewwwww, just like the water opening.

Smith: The Red Sea parting

Wennekamp: It was beautiful.

Erik: Did he see it?

Wennekamp: Yeah, he did.

Smith: Non-verbal communication.

Wennekamp: Funniest thing I’ve ever seen.

Smith: What is it about the game of golf that you derive such pleasure from? I’m told that you empty your mind of anything else, so it’s a form of mental relaxation.
Wennekamp: Yeah. It is truly an escape in such a beautiful environment. The combination of those two things, particularly like here. You go up and play golf at Palos Verdes, looking out over the ocean. I mean, it’s just breathtaking and it’s just so peaceful – if you don’t let it get to you.

Smith: That’s it. And yet at the same time, my sense is that he was a pretty competitive guy.

Wennekamp: Oh yeah. He got irritated with himself, as we were talking earlier.

Smith: A couple quick things. Autograph seekers must have been more or less constant wherever you go.

Wennekamp: Yeah.

Smith: And during this time, too, we had the rise of the commercial dealer. These were not all eight year old kids spontaneously wanting an autograph. How did he deal with those demands of celebrity?

Wennekamp: Pretty well. He wasn’t really excited about it, but he would accommodate it. Most of the time it would be people sending in pictures that they happened to get of him, or of them in the picture with him, or them shaking his hand or something. When you’re in the White House, the staff automatically takes care of that. If you meet him, that’s logged, and its recorded and the whole thing. But as a former – you don’t have that official photographer following you around and somebody taking notes. And so a lot of pictures would come in. But he was accommodating. He’d usually keep it to just a signature as opposed to a note or annotation or something.

Smith: You know what Ronald Reagan did to frustrate dealers was to personalize. Which when you stop to think about it, is pretty shrewd.

Wennekamp: Oh, yeah. To Jane…

Smith: Exactly. Most people have no idea that a former president would spend as much time as he did on such things. He would set aside an afternoon every week. Say it’s Tuesday afternoon, and there’s that long table in the conference room, and there would be two piles of stuff, one for her, and one for him. He
was her goad. He would say, “Now come on Mother,” so they would sit down and they would sign together. But he was the one imposing his discipline in terms of carrying out their responsibilities.

Wennekamp: Yeah, I can see that.

Smith: When they went to a restaurant – they must have had favorite restaurants – were they left alone?

Wennekamp: In the two communities, yes, generally speaking, they were just respected residents. It was quite nice in that regard. It really was. It’s visiting Ames, Iowa or someplace – for good reason, people would take advantage of the opportunity. But he respected their right, if you will.

Smith: It goes with the territory.

Wennekamp: Yeah, exactly.

Smith: Did he enjoy the campus visits? He did a lot of them, didn’t he?

Wennekamp: Oh, my gosh. He really did.

Smith: People talked about commercializing the presidency – some things were left out of that discussion, one was the charity work that he did; three things, really. The second was all of the campus visits that he did, and third, which apparently was one of the things that brought he and Jimmy Carter together, comparing notes the fact that they had to raise all this money to build their presidential libraries - and to Gerald Ford, nine million dollars or whatever it was, was Mt. Everest.

Wennekamp: Yeah, it really, truly was. But you’re right. The academic experience was exciting and interesting, for everybody. For him, he loved it. He loved going in and teaching a law class or a political science class or just a lecture, doing a Q&A. He just thrived on it. And with the American Enterprise Institute, putting that together and supporting that, he just absolutely thrived on it. I remember when he was at UCLA, the mixture of events. He taught for a couple of days and then went over and played the Glenn Campbell Open, and then came back and did some more teaching, and then we flew out on the
Friday night after a reception with the trustees, and flew to Florida and did the Jackie Gleason. It was just – the mixture.

Smith: How I would have loved to see he and Gleason together. Did they hit it off?

Wennekamp: Yeah. Gleason was a piece of work.

Smith: Was he? How so?

Wennekamp: The way he’d play golf. He would be in this cart, and he’d hit the ball and get in his cart – no practice swings or anything – drive up the cart, get out, click, get back in the cart.

Smith: It was not an exercise in exercise.

Wennekamp: No.

Smith: Who were his friends? Who were the people that President Ford really enjoyed being around?

Wennekamp: Oh, my gosh.

Smith: The thing with Hope was real. They were genuinely buddies.

Wennekamp: Yeah. To my surprise, because President Ford is such a real honest guy and Bob Hope was not so real and honest.

Smith: I think I know exactly what you are saying. To know him was not necessarily to buy the public image.

Wennekamp: But people like Firestone, I think, a true friend. And then he had friends in Vail. No one comes to mind, really. Not that I recall.

Smith: And the corporate boards, was it exaggerated the number of boards that he was on, or were they sort of rotated over time? Were there things that he did for many, many years?

Wennekamp: He tried to maintain those for many, many years. And like I said, even though it was reported as a lot of boards, he was selective and he played a role I’ll never forget the fact that when I talked to representatives at the corporations, like American Express or something, they, to a board, were always amazed at
how prepared he was. You get the board books – I’m on a board and I have
trouble getting ready for the board meeting – getting through the board book.
But he was always prepared and had input, he wasn’t there just for the
monetary ride, if you will. Or the exposure. He took great pride in those
responsibilities.

Smith: That dovetails with what we’ve been told by a number of other people. Do
you think he was sensitive to the charge that he was cashing in?

Wennekamp: Not too. I don’t think he was too sensitive to it because he knew that he was
contributing, that he wasn’t just prostituting himself, if you will. And the fact
that people didn’t understand, he’d just say, “Well, that’s their problem.”

Smith: And obviously people had no idea of all the things that he turned down.

Wennekamp: No, that’s right, oh absolutely.

Smith: When was the last time you saw him?

Wennekamp: The last time I spoke with him would have been probably the spring of ’06
when I was down there working on the plans for his possible demise. I had
responsibility for everything that took place here in California, prior to going
back to the cathedral. That was the last time I spoke with him. And he was
doing fine.

Smith: He was?

Wennekamp: Yeah. He had aged, but he was still the same guy.

Smith: There is a wonderful story one of the agents told us, I guess it was the last
time that he came out of the hospital. He got in the car and the agents were
going to drive home, and he said, “No, we’re going to In and Out Burger.”
And not only did he insist they were going to In and Out Burger - they park
there, he gets out of the car and he goes and stands in line to get his In and
Out Burger.

Wennekamp: But, it’s like he loved to drive people crazy because people over at
Eisenhower Medical Center, they went to great pains to have code names and
numbers and everything. So after the President came over, they’d basically
slip him in the side door, have a different name so they don’t have to register, announce and have the media pick up on the fact that he’d checked in. But what would President Ford do? With all these plans, he’d grab Secret Service, “Let’s go over to the hospital,” and he’d walk right in the front door and everybody would see him. He knew what he was doing. He was playing with people.

Smith: Was it frustrating to have, in effect, a death watch going on? Anytime he was in the hospital. My sense was that Mrs. Ford, and he both valued their privacy. But in some ways that’s almost naïve. You can say I’m no long President of the United States, but the fact is, you once were President of the United States.

Wennekamp: I think the family probably handled that very well in curbing that feeding frenzy of the media, when he’d go into the hospital – Walter Reed or whatever – and just basically maintain a radio silence, just say no comment; as opposed to playing it up. When it got toward the end, it was difficult because there was a death watch and there were people trying to rent houses in the gated community that’s right over the wall, so that they could put their satellites up on the roofs and stuff like that. But the community there handled it. Law enforcement, in coordination with Secret Service, really did a great job, just a phenomenal job.

Smith: Were you surprised at all by the degree of public response when he did die, because he’d been out of the public eye for a while? Whether it was here, out at St. Margaret’s where people would line up by the thousands, or back east. You’d expect it in Grand Rapids, but not necessarily on New Year’s weekend in Washington, DC.

Wennekamp: Oh, I know. I was truly taken aback, not only from the tributes and the accolades and the positive response that you heard over the airwaves, but like you said, the people that came out. The public repose that went on all night. I’ll never forget; I went over about three in the morning to see what the experience was like for the people that had gone to Indian Wells to park to get the bus to come down to the church, go through the sanctuary. Two things,
one I’ll share with you real quickly was in planning, it’s like doing advance work on a party you hope you never have. And you’re taking it from zero.

And so I didn’t know what to anticipate relative to the necessity of ushers, controlling people and the public repose – putting ropes and stanchions up to keep the pews closed so people wouldn’t sit down and linger, etc. I was truly amazed. People were so respectful. I hardly needed anyone. Just show them the way and people came in. I went over there at three in the morning and everybody was smiling and saying, “Nah, it’s no problem. It took us about three hours to park and get over here. But no problem.” And one couple came through with their about nine year old son. He’s dressed in his coat and tie at four in the morning. Just beautiful. The respect and admiration was just phenomenal.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered? More appropriately, how do you remember him?

Wennekamp: No, I think your first question is probably the same. But for me, what he was able to do in coming in and healing a nation. I was very, very fortunate to find myself in DC at that point in our history, and to see what was happening and be part of that, if you will. But to see how effectively he took the reins and guided the country in such a way, so obviously not for his own personal gain, and what he was able to accomplish, I think was just phenomenal. To bring us back from the depths of where we were in ’74, to where we found ourselves in ’76, was just phenomenal. I don’t think he gets nearly the credit that he should, and he did it only because of the kind of guy, the kind of person, the kind of man that he was.
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Smith: First thing. Did you come into the Justice Department at the beginning of the Nixon administration?


Smith: Oh gosh. Okay.

Bork: I was just in time for the explosions.

Smith: What were you doing before?

Bork: I was teaching at Yale. And when Nixon offered me the job as Solicitor General he said, “The politicians have had their turn. Now we’re going to let the professors have their turn.”

Smith: Really.

Bork: Yeah.

Smith: Now, who was attorney general at that point?

Bork: Well, Richardson was attorney general. He’d just become attorney general and I don’t think he was too pleased about it.

Smith: Really?

Bork: He might’ve preferred to be the secretary of defense.

Smith: That’s an interesting observation. Let me back up. We did an interview with a man named Jerry Jones who, early in ’73, was fixing the personnel office at the White House for Haldeman. He got a call one day from Haldeman saying, “The President wants to know how many people work for the Vice President.” And Jones did some mental arithmetic and said, “About 50.” Haldeman said, “Fine. We want undated letters of resignation from all of them.” Now, this was before Haldeman left, obviously, so it’d be before April of ’73. It raises
the question: Did the White House know in advance, could they have known that early, that there was an investigation of the Vice President going on in Maryland? When you arrived at the department was it public knowledge yet?

Bork: Oh, no. No, no. The first I heard of it was when Al Haig called me and asked me to resign as solicitor general and become Nixon’s chief defense attorney. And, as part of his persuasive pitch, he told me the Vice President was on the take, which was kind of a shock, I might say. But I had just enough sense to ask for twenty-four hours to think it over and after twenty-four hours, I knew I didn’t want the job. I began talking about it. I had to see the tapes and listen to the tapes and Haig said, “You can’t.” He said, “This President feels so strongly about the institution of the presidency that before he hands the tapes over to anybody, he’d burn them first and then resign.” I started to say, “Well, in that case, why doesn’t he burn them right now?”, but I had a vision of him burning the tapes in the Rose Garden, saying, “We’re doing this on the legal advice of the solicitor general.” So, I did not make that statement.

Smith: That’d be quite a niche in history.

Bork: But, anyway, that’s how I first heard about Agnew. But, you don’t want my history.

Smith: Well, the background to Ford’s becoming vice president is really significant because the Wall Street Journal went with the story; I think they broke the story. It was in August of ’73, so it would’ve come very shortly after you began work at the department?

Bork: Well, yeah, I wrote the brief against Agnew. He claimed he was immune from prosecution.

Smith: As vice president.

Bork: Yeah, and I wrote the brief with two assistants against him and he quit. On this timeline business, when did I write that brief?

[Off camera]: I’m not sure. It might be in the book.
Bork: It is in the book. I’m just not sure. Certainly it was not public knowledge when I heard about it.

Smith: Did Richardson like the job even less once that landed on his lap?

Bork: Oh, sure. Who wants that? Agnew, of course, was a character who had made enemies everywhere as part of his job as a hatchet man for Nixon.

Smith: Right.

Bork: See, Agnew said he wanted to see me at the reception line the day of the inauguration. As I went through, Agnew was there and he said, “I want to see you.” I didn’t know the man. I figured out, and I’m pretty sure it was accurate, that he was trying to put together a team for his own run for the presidency. But then, when the time came to meet with him, I still didn’t know about his being on the take, but I went to the meeting and he had nothing to say. Seemed a bland meeting in which, I think, the exciting part was when he handed me a photograph they’d just taken of the two of us sitting at his desk. It’s amazing what they quiet the troops with.

Smith: Publically, at least, it seemed to be this was the norm in Maryland. This was how politics operated.

Bork: Well, sure, but they got ____ Max and if you look at the pay scale, you can see why they did it. I think the governor made $12,000 per year or something like that.

Smith: Yeah.

Bork: So, you’re forced into graft if you’re going to keep the job.

Smith: And, was he continuing to take money as vice president?

Bork: Yeah. He wasn’t earning the money, but he was getting paid what was due to him under the bribe. It was being handed to him in his office in the White House. And there was some discussion about whether or not to indict him because the claim of immunity was taken seriously by some people. Richardson and I went over and argued with the President about it. There’s no need to go into that because it has nothing to do with Gerald Ford.
Bork: Well, but there should be a date at the end of the brief.

Smith: I’m just curious. Was Nixon genuinely surprised, appalled?

Bork: He seemed surprised. I wouldn’t say he was appalled. I mean, how can you be appalled in this town? He seemed surprised and felt sorry for Agnew because he said, “He always did everything I asked him to do.” But he finally agreed that he had to indict him.

Smith: Really?

Bork: Well, there was really no choice. For one thing, if you didn’t indict Agnew, and everybody’s sworn to silence about it, it wouldn’t do any good because they’re going to try those contractors in Baltimore who paid the bribes. So Agnew’s name would be all over the front page of the papers whether or not he was indicted. So, there was political damage to the administration either way.

Smith: So, did Richardson handle the negotiations, for lack of a better word, with the vice president?

Bork: I’m not sure whether it was Richardson or Haig. They both spoke as if they had done it. Haig spoke of a need to decouple the proceedings against Nixon in the Senate impeachment from the criminal charges against Agnew. Elliot did, too, because he said that the country wasn’t ready to have him as president be on trial in the Senate for impeachment and a vice president be on trial in the criminal courts simultaneously. It would leave a bad impression.

Smith: Was there any dissent within the department? Or feeling that Agnew was let off?

Bork: I don’t know. My initial feeling was that he was let off, but when they explained to me this scenario with the two proceedings going forward simultaneously, I began to see their point.

Smith: So Agnew is gone, and very shortly after that; I mean, it’s astonishing when you look back, it was, I think, within two days that Ford is nominated to become vice president. Had you had any contact with him at all before then?
Bork: Yeah, but it was casual, nothing substantive. I was acting attorney general when he was nominated and people in the Senate committee wanted all the papers. They always do. And I was reluctant to turn them over, but I was dealing from a weak hand. They had every right to get the papers and I didn’t have any reason to stop it. But I turned them over and one of the senators called me up and said, “You needn’t worry. It’s the dullest reading you’ve ever seen.”

Smith: Was this the FBI investigatory material? What papers were we talking about?

Bork: I think these were Ford’s papers. But he said he couldn’t stay awake reading the thing. There wasn’t a scandal in sight.

Smith: Pretty squeaky clean. By the way, I’d be interested in your opinion, I realize you weren’t involved in it, but you certainly were more than an informed observer. His attempt to impeach or at least start impeachment proceedings against Justice Douglas, which many people interpreted as pay back for the rejections of Hainsworth and Carswell. Would a Supreme Court Justice today be able to conduct himself as Justice Douglas did then and not have a problem?

Bork: Yeah, you mean having a bad temper and so forth?

Smith: Well, I mean, the consulting fees, I think, that he was receiving from the foundation—?

Bork: That was to fire Cox.

Smith: But Douglas had a relationship, I thought, with another—

Bork: Maybe he did, but I’m not aware of it.

Smith: But I think what offended Ford, to be honest, was the articles that he [Douglas] wrote for *Evergreen*. I mean, that is what offended Ford. He thought it was an inappropriate, quasi-pornographic venue for a justice of the Supreme Court.
Bork: Well, he was right about that, but the political reality is, you can’t get them out of office on those grounds. I used to say that the case for impeaching Douglas was impeccable, but you couldn’t make it.

Smith: That answers my question perfectly. Let me ask you. Let’s jump ahead to the Saturday Night Massacre because we’ve been told by people who were in the department that one person said point blank that you’d never forgiven Elliot Richardson for how he conducted himself.

Bork: I had never?

Smith: Someone said that and I just wanted to give you an opportunity to respond to that.

Bork: I wouldn’t say that in those terms. I was disappointed in him for awhile, because he, for awhile, didn’t mention the fact that he and Ruckelshaus agreed I should do it. And, I remember Elliot called me us and asked me if he could use the department’s auditorium. It seemed kind of silly because I was acting attorney general and he was out. So, I said, “Yeah, but would you mind mentioning that you and Ruckelshaus thought I should do this?” He said, “I will if it comes up.” Well, it never came up. I was a little irritated by it, but then later on he became much more helpful. I think once his presidential ambitions were shot—

Bork: He had presidential ambitions?

Bork: Oh, God, yes. Who doesn’t in this town?

Smith: Yeah.

Bork: He did, but I think he testified in the Senate in my confirmation hearing. He said he had asked me to do it, to fire Cox, and stay on.

Smith: The White House at least believed, I mean, Haig said this very publicly - to back up - they believed that they had an understanding with Richardson to fire Cox. Were there discussions about this before it transpired?

Bork: Elliot came back from the White House that night just before I went over and said the one thing he was sorry about was perhaps he hadn’t made it plain to
the President that he couldn’t fire Cox. And, indeed, he couldn’t. He was sworn on that charter he gave Cox to fire him only for cause and there was no cause. A little bad taste here and there, but no cause. But Richardson seemed to recognize he’d let Nixon get caught by surprise and Haig, of course, insists that it was Richardson’s idea to give Cox an order. And somebody asked him, “What will Cox do?” “He’ll resign.” Why he would resign? I don’t know. I wish I’d been at that meeting as I was at the Agnew meeting because I would’ve asked that question, “What happens if Cox doesn’t resign?” Nobody thought of that.

Smith: Was the White House guilty of wishful thinking in convincing itself that Richardson would go ahead and fire Cox?

Bork: I don’t know. Maybe so to some degree, but Haig’s version of it was that Richardson said that Cox would be fired if he didn’t do something. But Richardson denied that. And I don’t have any way of judging the thing except my estimate of the two men.

Smith: What would that lead you to conclude?

Bork: I owe each of them something I don’t want to talk about.

Smith: Okay. Fair enough. Where was Ruckelshaus in all of this?

Bork: He was involved in all of the discussions, but did not take a strong position except when Haig tried to get him to fire Cox. He said he wouldn’t do it.

Smith: Which leaves you.

Bork: Yeah, I was third in line by department of regulations, but there’s nobody after me in succession. So, if I left, the department would’ve been headless and I think there would’ve been mass resignations, because who in the hell in the department is going to take that job after three resignations?

Smith: Right.

Bork: One of the senior section heads said, not to me, but said to somebody else that I had saved the Department of Justice that night because it would’ve flown apart. I think what would’ve happened if I hadn’t done it would be that Nixon
would have to appoint somebody from outside as acting attorney general and
the most likely candidate would be Fred Buzhardt.

Smith: Really?

Bork: A knife fighter if ever there was one.

Smith: And the guy who had been listening to the tapes.

Bork: Yeah.

Smith: Mel Laird told us that when Laird came into the White House, rather
reluctantly, to lend a hand to the defense - Fred Buzhardt had been his legal
counsel at the Pentagon - and Fred Buzhardt called Laird about a month after
he started back at the White House and cautioned him to be very careful
because Buzhardt had been listening to the tapes. And he said, “The
President’s in this up to his neck.” That is Laird’s version of what he was told
by Buzhardt. Haig told us, because I assumed Haig had listened to the
smoking gun tape, and Haig said, no, he never did. He said, “Fred Buzhardt
gave me some very good advice, which was never be alone in a room with a
tape.” So, there you have it. But all roads lead back to Fred Buzhardt.

Bork: Well, Buzhardt was rather odd. I remember he said at one point, “What’s all
the fuss about? People leave the federal service every day.” So, Cox left the
federal service.

Smith: Ford becomes vice president. Did you have any contact with him during that
period before he became president?

Bork: Yeah, I had contact with him in the sense that you know the guy and you sort
of say ‘hi’ when you pass, but that was about it. And then, of course, when he
was up for vice president and the question of his papers came up, I think I
cleared that with him. But I had more to do with him when he was president
than I did when he was vice president.

Smith: Quick question before we get to the presidency. When the Supreme Court
came down with the unanimous ruling on the tapes, was that the death knell of
the Nixon presidency?
Bork: Well, there’s so many knells going off around there that it’s hard to say which one was the death knell.

Smith: We’ve been told by a couple sources who were with the President at the time that the initial reaction was, can we defy the Court?

Bork: Haig called me up at that point and said, “We’re thinking about not obeying the order,” and I said, “That is instant impeachment if you do that.” And they didn’t do it. I don’t know why they didn’t do it. Whether my opinion had any influence or not, I don’t know. But I was convinced that you don’t defy the Supreme Court, particularly you don’t defy it when the Supreme Court is riding high and your fortunes are pretty low.

Smith: Right. Ford becomes president August 9th. What was the first contact you had with him?

Bork: I don’t remember.

Smith: Was there any discussions of the pardon? Were you part of any discussion with anyone before the Nixon pardon?

Bork: The Nixon pardon caught me by surprise.

Smith: It did?

Bork: I thought it was the right thing to do, but I thought he could’ve led up to it in a way to prepare the public for it. As it was, he dropped it like a bomb on them.

Smith: In the supercharged climate of the time, how could he have prepared the public and the political community for it?

Bork: Well, I think he’d have to get people to engage in an argument as to whether the president should or shouldn’t be pardoned. But, as it was, there had been no discussion, I don’t think, outside the White House maybe. And I was driving in a car up in New Haven going to visit a friend of mine who was dying, and when the news came on over the radio, I damn near ran the car into a ditch. It caught me by complete surprise. And you don’t want to do that. It may have cost Ford the presidency.
Smith: It’s interesting. Mel Laird told us he had a plan. He loves Ford, but he said the same thing. Laird thought he could bring a bipartisan delegation from both houses of Congress at the right time to, in effect, petition the President to grant a pardon. It’s an interesting theory. I just wonder whether, again, in the atmosphere of the time—

Bork: Whether you could get five people from each party.

Smith: Yeah.

Bork: I think if I were a congressman and were asked to participate in that thing, I’d say, “I’m terribly busy. I’ll see you around.”

Smith: You have a new attorney general. Bill Saxbe becomes attorney general. He was a bit of a character, wasn’t he?

Bork: I like to believe he was a character and a half. I first met him when I guess I went over to his Senate office. My recollection of that is not too clear, but he came over to the Department of Justice to be shown around and I was the senior guy, so I showed him around. And I quickly decided I didn’t want to spend too much time in his presence because he kept a coffee can with the lid removed on the floor between his feet and he chewed tobacco and spat into the can. Actually, he drooled into the can and once you see that, you didn’t really want to go back. I was in there sitting to his left and then we brought in the division heads to meet him, I was a senior man, I was supposed to be going first. I wouldn’t go in first, because if I went in first, I’d end up sitting where I could see this vision of loveliness. So, I didn’t. I went in last and I watched the guy who was sitting where he got a good view of the tobacco drooling episode and he was not happy.

Smith: Presumably, that was not a custom that Ed Levi continued.

Bork: No, not at all. Saxbe, I don’t think, had much to do with anything. I remember Larry Silverman claimed that when he was deputy attorney general - you could never get a hold of Saxbe because he was off someplace - and when it came to a tough decision, he’d said, “This is a call the attorney general has to make.” And he would go out of the office and down the hall.
and into the bay for the elevators and smoke a cigarette and come back and say, “The attorney general says...” and he went with it.

Smith: What kind of contact did you have with Ford during his presidency?

Bork: Well, a couple that were substantive. One was Levi wanted to clean up the practice of surveillance of US citizens and he put me in charge of that. So I spent a lot of time with the CIA and the NSA and so forth. NASA. But that was warrantless wiretapping, you understand.

[Break in conversation, taping stopped; when it resumes, the subject is the Saturday Night Massacre.]

Smith: Did you go to the White House that night?

Bork: Yeah. Talked to Nixon.

Smith: What was his mood? I mean, was he business-like?

Bork: He was very wistful. He hadn’t planned on losing his deputy attorney general.

Smith: Was there anger?

Bork: No. Well, he was angry with Ruckelshaus.

Smith: You were talking about the wiretapping.

Bork: Yeah.

Smith: Did it come as news to you how extensive it was?

Bork: Yeah, in fact, shortly after I became acting attorney general, my secretary rang through and said, “Two men from the FBI are here to see you.” I thought, “Oh, my God. What have I overlooked?” All my free floating anxieties came to a point, but they came in and they explained about this warrantless wiretapping. They’d broken into buildings and placed bugs, all without a warrant. And I asked them why they didn’t even get a warrant. He said, “Well, you’d have to get one for each of the areas where they’re taping Somebody.” They just described to me the district court judge to whom they
handed the classified documents - some of some real sensitivity, and this guy, to show what a big deal he was, read them aloud in a courtroom. So they were disinclined to rely upon district court judges after that.

Smith: Did it make you uncomfortable?

Bork: Oh, yeah. It made every attorney general who came up against it uncomfortable.

Smith: Including Richardson?

Bork: Yeah, and Levi. Anyway, when Ford was president, we wanted to protect him from God knows what because of the warrantless wiretaps, we hit on the strategy of controlling strictly the access to the wiretap products, so that only people with a real need to know could see it. Before that, those transcripts were just floating around the administration. I remember one of the Soviet ones. Our folks were wiretapping the Russian Embassy and at night there’d be blips which was a small message, so condensed that it had to be unraveled. That worried us in a way, because we didn’t know what on those blips, that it could be Senator Kennedy told us he says to do this and that and the other thing to do with the Ford administration or something, I don’t know. In effect, we were listening to Americans who weren’t targets in any usual sense. That made us nervous, so we had gone on with the wiretaps and surveillance. We didn’t like it and me and Levi talked to Ford about it and arranged that Ford would not see anything of that sort, which was the best we could do. And it worked pretty well. The ACLU, of course, raised a stink that we were invading citizen’s privacy by listening to the Russians. But that didn’t catch on very much.

Smith: What kind of attorney general was Ed Levi?

Bork: I don’t know if you know that I go back a long way with Levi.

Smith: I did not know that.

Bork: Well, he was my first law school professor and my last attorney general. But, he was a very thoughtful guy who sweated over decisions. For my taste, he was a bit too timid, but only a bit, and I’d prefer that to the alternative. For
example, the Socialist Labor Party had a platform that specifically called for violence in the service of revolution and I thought that was worth having somebody listen to them, but he didn’t think so.

Smith: He and Ford would appear at first blush to be very different.

Bork: They were. Levi was a very fast mind and a very subtle mind and Ford was a straight ahead, off tackle type of guy. But Ford was always terribly honest with Levi and Levi admired him for that. They got along beautifully.

Smith: Was part of Levi’s job to basically make certain that the Justice Department was out of politics?

Bork: Yeah.

Smith: And that the public perceived it to be out of politics?

Bork: That’s right. But he was a little more subtle than that. That is, he could’ve come in and started firing people right and left for having confrontations and he didn’t. He sat down with Clarence Kelly from the FBI and chewed over the problems and he got what he wanted by process of reasoning. And he had sort of a special panel consisting of Dick Thornburgh, because he was head of the criminal division, Scalia, and me. They had a tough case about whether to put a hearing device into a Russian photocopier. He called and asked us together for an opinion. And indeed one of the things I most admired about him is he refused to indict a guy who had been in the CIA and had done everything we expected the CIA to do in that era, but now mores were changing. Thornburgh kept saying, “We can indict him. We have the evidence to indict him,” but that wasn’t quite enough for Levi and he called his group together, plus a friend, old law school professor from Columbia, and had a long discussion and decided not to indict him because the guy was doing what we expected him to do. And, as I said at the time, “One way to establish a new standard of conduct is to burn somebody who was living by the old standard.”

Smith: In this town, a very popular method, too.

Bork: Well, yeah, but I was advocating burning people.
Smith: Understood. How would you characterize the different relationship between the Nixon White House and the Justice Department and the Ford White House and the Justice Department? I mean, is Ed Levi the answer to that question?

Bork: No, not entirely. Elliot deserves some credit for resisting some of the worst impulses of the Buzhardt types. And I deserve some credit in my own mind, at least, for the two and a half months I was acting attorney general and before that. No, before, it was a rough, tough crowd who took pride in being hard and that no longer worked when they were replaced.

Smith: The replacement for Justice Douglas was, of course, John Paul Stevens. Were you involved in that process?

Bork: Yeah, but more as a spectator. I think one night about five or six of us were invited to the White House with our spouses and Ford was to show up. Well, he came in a little bit late because he had a private plane and Betty Ford was kind of out of her mind. She wasn’t out of her mind. She looked doped. But, what it was, I finally figured out, was a chance for Ford to meet all the people - to meet all the nominees - to take Douglas’ place. And one of my happiest memories of that evening is watching Ford dance to the tune of “Bad, bad, Leroy Brown, baddest man in the whole damn town. Meaner than a junkyard dog,” and that was the President bounding around to that music. You’ve been over the fact that he was athletic, but due to one misstep on an airplane, he got the reputation from the comics for being a dodo, which is unfair.

Smith: How would you characterize his intelligence?

Bork: Above average.

Smith: I spent time enough in the Midwest to know, there are people on both coasts who think that because Midwesterners talk slow, they think slow. I wonder whether there’s a little bit of cultural bias. Ford was seen as this vanilla congressman from West Michigan who’d never really been a national player, and who certainly wasn’t an eloquent speaker.

Bork: I think there was some of that. Although he seemed to be somewhat slow, oddly enough that served him well because it gave a certain feeling of solidity
and you tended to think that when you’re dealing with him, you’d better deal correctly without chicanery.

Smith: I take it from what you said, reading between the lines, that your name was among those bandied about for the vacancy?

Bork: Oh, yeah. Nixon was going to put me on the court when suddenly that got derailed. No, I’d been bandied about in every administration, including Jimmy Carter’s. It’s the funniest thing because Everett Bennett Williams wrote Jimmy Carter to put me on the Supreme Court. It was one of the silliest notes ever. No Democrat would put me on the Supreme Court. I don’t know why Williams thought he might, but he did.

Smith: Didn’t President Ford appear with you at your confirmation?

Bork: Yeah.

Smith: How did that come about?

Bork: I don’t know. Somebody said, “Would you introduce me?” and it was on Ford.

Smith: Wasn’t he involved with AEI at that point? Was that a point of contact at all?

Bork: No, I don’t think so. I don’t recall that the relationship was all that close, but somebody asked him to do it and he agreed to do it. And, who else was there? There were four people who introduced me.

Smith: Was the theory in the White House that, having Ford do it, would in effect take away the aura of the Saturday Night Massacre? Was that the reasoning?

Bork: I don’t know. When I was up for the court, I never had any impression that there was any theory.

Smith: Okay. Did you stay at Justice through the Ford administration?

Bork: Yeah.

Smith: After this evening, were you surprised, first of all, that Stevens was a nominee?
Bork: Yeah, I was, but somebody told me that the meeting at which Stevens’ name surfaced and people discussed him, Ford said, “That’s great. There won’t be a single vote against him.” And Senator Pat Buchanan walked out in a fury for choosing people for their blandness.

Smith: That’s interesting. Stevens, then and to the end of his career, regarded himself as a moderate. Would you accept that characterization?

Bork: He was a moderate left-winger. No, it’s very odd. See, I knew Stevens in Chicago and we were on a case together. What he became when he came to Washington was a total surprise to me.

Smith: So he was, in fact, at the time of his nomination, seen as a moderate - however you define that - and he moved to the left after he joined the court?

Bork: Yeah. Initially, it wasn’t clear it was left he was moving to, but he was beginning to spin out jurisprudence theories that had nothing much to do with anything. And then, gradually, it became a left-ward trend. I was going to say on the surveillance business that was taken care of by Ford except that our solution. (?) Then there was the Boston busing case. And that was a pistol. I don’t know how much you know about that.

Smith: I was in Boston at the time.

Bork: Well, that judge who was running everything—

Smith: Judge Garrity.

Bork: I hope he’s retired. Yeah. It’d be very good for American jurisprudence if he retired. He was terrible. You know, the object of a remedy in a case is to set things back where they would’ve been but for the violation. But he didn’t see it that way. He took the fact of the violation, which was not too clear anyway, as a warrant to run the Boston school system. He was doing things like choosing the basketballs that they bought and overseeing the purchase of supplies and so forth. I don’t know what was wrong with him, but he became a little dictator on matters that had nothing to do with the busing case.

Smith: And the administration’s position?
Bork: Well, when the case came up again, going to the district court first or maybe it was on appeal, I worked out a remedy that would address the violation and not just tell the judges to run wild with it. And, initially, Levi agreed with it. I went and told him. I rarely had occasion to talk to the attorney general about a case, but if there were political ramifications, I would. I did this with Levi and he initially went along with the idea, but then the heat became intense. William Coleman, for one, came storming over there and was going to resign and make it known that we were all racist or some God damn thing.

Smith: And this was the whole debate over busing and what the administration’s position should be?

Bork: Yeah. So, Levi said to me after all the shooting that was going on, he said, “Bob, this isn’t the case. No matter how reasonably you go in, it’ll be you and the Department of Justice against a long-beleaguered judge.” I had to agree it would happen that way. So, we went over to see Ford and tell him that. He was not happy. He wanted a face-off about busing, but he respected Levi’s judgment and didn’t push it.

Smith: Did you have a sense or did he say anything that led you to conclude what it was that made him want this confrontation? Was it his personal conviction? Was there politics at work? Some combination?

Bork: No, I think he thought it was good politics to resist the judge, but that it would play terribly in the intellectual class, though everyone else would think it was fine. It was politics in the sense that any politician has to think about politics.

Smith: He said at one point, and I think Coleman may have said this to us, that Ford’s position was, “Look, you know how I feel about busing. I don’t think any kid should be bussed.” It was geography, not race, per se. He didn’t think it was good. That every child ought to be able to go to the nearest school. Period. And he saw busing through that very practical, neighborhood lens.

Bork: He may have, but he would’ve enjoyed seeing us bring the case. I remember when Levi said to me, “Bob, this is not the case.” I said, “It’s the case God gave us.” He thought that was so funny, he went and told Ford.
Smith: But apparently on this occasion, God’s judgment was set aside.

Bork: Well, God didn’t make a judgment exactly. He just left us out there with a case.

Smith: What have we overlooked? Is there anything in terms of your contact with Ford?

Bork: Let me see. I dictated some things.

Smith: Great. I saw Bill Saxbe just died, this week, I guess?

Bork: Yeah.

Smith: 94.

Bork: He didn’t check out from overwork.

Smith: I rather gathered that’s the consensus.

Bork: That’s right. He was always out of town some place and giving speeches and being entertained. People would say, “Bill, you’ve got to pay some attention to this stuff,” and he’d say, “I’m out there job-hunting for justice.”

Smith: We’ve been given the impression that he thought this rather a nice way to end a political career. A cabinet position. That justice was a nice place to retire to.

Bork: There’s a weekly meeting in the attorney general’s conference room in which the heads of the divisions and the bureaus were brought together, maybe twenty people. And it was kind of indicative of the personalities. When Richardson was attorney general, he always thought up something worth discussing. When Levi was attorney general, after a couple of discussions, he said, “These are worthless” and he quit having them. When Saxbe was attorney general, he tried once to have a discussion. It didn’t go well. But after that, we’d all get together and he’d stand up and say, “The bar is open” and we got the bootsky.

Smith: Sounds like a throwback to the Truman era.

Bork: No, it’s a throwback to Jim Eastland.
Smith: Well, yeah. How do you think Gerald Ford should be remembered?

Bork: Kindly. A man of integrity. Not of great talents, but of integrity. And sufficient talents. Who was important in the transition phase after Nixon. I never saw a man so thoroughly destroy himself as Nixon did. Anyway… I was about to go into my discussion of the fact that Nixon, while he pulled some really bad stuff, also pulled some good stuff.

Smith: Yeah. I think one of the real challenges that obviously Ford had was meshing the Nixon staff with his own people. Rumsfeld told him, for example, “Immediately clean house.” Ford was reluctant to do that in part because he did not want to impute blame to the vast majority of holdovers, I think, in the White House and elsewhere, who had nothing to do with Watergate.

Bork: No.

Smith: I mean, was there a sense at the department of, “Are we going to have jobs?”

Bork: There was a sense maybe heads would roll, but no specific indicators that that was about to happen. I don’t think it would’ve been wise. You said Rumsfeld said that to whom?

Smith: To Ford. Rumsfeld advised Ford very early on, “Clean house. Make this your own administration. Make a clean break and bring in your own people.”

Bork: Well, he brought in Levi in the case of the Department of Justice and Levi managed to settle and ride that wild beast. So I don’t know how cleaning house would’ve been.

Smith: It’s interesting to hear your observations about Levi, President Ford, in his eulogy at Levi’s memorial service, said he thought he was the attorney general against whom all others should be measured.

Bork: Well, I think that’s true, although, I was there for that service or part of it. My wife and I were there for part of it, at least. We had to get a plane back, but the part that shot me into the air was when Ford said he appointed John Paul Stevens to the Supreme Court because of his knowledge of Chicago
jurisprudence, which he was practicing on the Supreme Court every day. Well, in the first place, there is no Chicago jurisprudence.

Smith: The Chicago school? The notion—

Bork: The Chicago school, they were talking about anti-trust and economics. It was not a generalized thing. I thought we could’ve sued Ford for implying that Stevens was doing Chicago jurisprudence.

Smith: That’s a perfect note. That’s perfect. Thank you.
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Smith: Thank you for doing this. How did your path cross with Gerald Ford?

DuPont: I was there when he arrived.

Smith: Okay. How did you get to the White House?

DuPont: Well, that’s a longer story. I left my medical training and got my first job outside of training on July 1st, 1968. I had gone to Harvard Medical School and took my training in psychiatry there. I’d gone then to NIH to do two years of service in the public health service. And I was interested in a mission. I was inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr. and by John Kennedy and I was just captured by the idea of making a contribution. So, the question in my mind was how could I possibly do that? I’d graduated from medical school, I’d had my training, but the rubber’s not on the road anywhere. Where could I put it on the road? And, one day a week, in my residency, I worked in the state prison in Massachusetts, a very famous prison that was the prison that—

Smith: Was that in Waltham?

DuPont: No, it was Norfolk Prison.

Smith: Norfolk.

DuPont: It’s right next door. That’s right. It’s the prison that Malcolm X had done six years on a burglary charge. He went as Detroit Red and came out as Malcolm X from that prison. So, it was quite a historic prison. One day a week, I talked to those prisoners. I was just fascinated by them. I was fascinated by crime. I was fascinated by the issue of crime. I was fascinated by the people.

Smith: Were you surprised by anything they told you?

DuPont: Well, I was surprised that they seemed a lot more normal than I’d thought. Somehow I had them maybe more demonized in my mind. And they were
regular people. And, I guess, what really captured me were their stories. I’ve
been a practicing psychiatrist all these years and what brought me to
psychiatry was the stories. I don’t think anybody other than a psychiatrist or a
therapist hears these stories of people’s lives the way you do, week in and
week out. I really just was fascinated by these stories, so I decided, “Okay,
here I’m leaving NIH, I’m going to make a contribution,” and I was going to
do this in crime. So I looked around the country and ended up settling on the
District of Columbia. I ended up working for the District of Columbia
Department of Corrections.

Now, that was very propitious because crime was rapidly rising at that time in
the District of Columbia and Lyndon Johnson had established a crime
commission to study crime in the District of Columbia. I’d gotten all caught
up in that in the Department of Corrections. But the big event in my life was
that Richard Nixon, in his campaign, made crime in Washington a major
issue. He called it the Crime Capital of the Nation. So when he came in on
January 20th, 1969, he was distracted by all kinds of other things and some
local citizens, including Edward Bennett Williams and Katherine Graham,
marched on the White House, literally, and said, “We’re going to hold a press
conference every week until you do something about crime in the city.” And
he then turned to his assistant named Bud Krogh, and asked him to take over
and fix the problem of crime in Washington, D.C.

I was then at the Department of Corrections in January of ’69 and had lots of
ideas for things to do in community corrections, which were going nowhere in
the Johnson administration - were just in a file cabinet. And, all of a sudden,
there was an interest in it and, by May of ’69, all of my ideas were funded.
Never mind waiting for things, it was just done. Bang.

Smith: That’s interesting because it flies in the face of the notion that Nixon didn’t
care about domestic policy.

DuPont: Oh, absolutely. It was huge.

Smith: I wonder, at that point, how much of the local crime problem was drug
related.
DuPont: Well, we’re going to get to that. That’s exactly where we go with this.

Smith: Okay.

DuPont: So, at that point, I don’t do anything with drugs. I’m just thinking about the crime issue at that point. Then, there were a couple of things in the newspaper about drugs in relationship, particularly heroin. And we had a senator in charge of the Senate District Committee named Joseph Tidings, who was holding hearings on this. And I get interested in what was this connection. Some college students did a study in the D.C. jail taking urine samples of people coming in and seeing what kind of drugs we’d find in there and asking a couple questions. Well, what we found was some 44% of them were positive for heroin and when we looked at the question of when did they first use heroin, we could show that it started, this epidemic, in the mid-60s and was rising through this period of time.

If you laid that against the crime rate, you got an exact parallel to when the crime rate started up and what the slope of that curve was. It was very dramatic. This was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. It was a historic paper that defined that connection. Well, the next step was, okay, if you make that connection, what do you do about it? And, so, I became a sudden student of addiction treatment and captured what was the best going around in the country, including a program in Chicago with Jerome Jaffee, and in New York with Vincent Dole, and Marie Nyswander (Dole’s wife) methadone program. So, on September 15th I started the first methadone program in the city in the Department of Corrections. By February 18th of 1970, we had been funded, with White House support, a massive program to treat heroin addiction in the district. Over the next three years, we treated 15,000 heroin addicts in Washington, D.C. in forty centers.

Smith: Had that been done in New York?

DuPont: Never in the scale in relationship to this city. They had a big program, but not on a scale we had in Washington. This is the first time anybody had ever done it on a scale for the whole city. And, not coincidentally, by 1973 the crime rate in the District of Columbia was cut in half, the serious crime. I
mean it was a huge change that went on. And to say that it got the attention of
the White House would be an understatement. As a result, I quickly
established a relationship with Bud Krogh and with the Nixon administration.

Then off to the side another issue came up and that was heroin addiction in
Vietnam. You’ll recall that in 1970, Vietnam was kind of a serious issue in
this country, politically and otherwise. And, all of a sudden, heroin addiction
was a huge problem among American service men in Vietnam. And Nixon
needed to do something about that. So, now he had two problems. He had
crime in the cities and he had heroin addiction in Vietnam that was really
threatening the war effort. I mean it was a huge problem. So, at that point,
the White House came to me and said, “What can we do to get somebody in
here to do something about this issue?” So, I had contact with a White House
person named John Dunfeld whose distinction was he was dating Tricia
Nixon.

But he is a wonderful guy and did a great job, but that’s how he got there.
He’d been president of USC, the university’s student body president, and
gotten the attention of the President and was just a twenty-five-year old
attorney from California. Anyhow, I put him in contact with the leaders of
this field and got him hooked up with Jerry Jaffee. So, on June 17th of 1970,
again this sequence is so rapid to think about this, Nixon declared a war on
drugs and started the first White House drug office with Jerome Jaffee as the
head of it. That began the commitment of the White House. And that all
grew out of the program that I’d started in the district which had demonstrated
that, with treatment on a massive scale, you could change the dynamic of this
epidemic.

It wasn’t as if that was the only thing that happened, because Nixon did a lot
of other things that reinforced that. He increased the police in the District of
Columbia at that same time, dramatically increased the police department, and
through the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs in international
activities blocked the French connection and Turkey from raising poppies,
which was the main source of heroin coming, particularly to the east coast of
the United States. So, it was a coordinated effort. But the new element in it
was treatment. That had never been in it before. For the fifty years prior to that, American drug policy was just law enforcement. There was no treatment investment at all. Certainly not from the federal government, but very little treatment anywhere really.

Smith: Wasn’t there a political downside? As I recall, the idea of the government providing a substitute, if you will—

DuPont: Oh, methadone was extremely controversial. Oh my gosh, absolutely. And it was a weird politics because methadone has become a liberal icon now. But at the time, it was seen as a conservative move because of the Nixon presidency, and was seen as this conservative man who hated blacks and the underclass. You were going to narcotize the inner city young men with this methadone. So, it sparked a tremendous controversy and there was a pushback that was just tremendous to this. But it was working. And, I mentioned Joseph Tidings who was the senator from Maryland who was the chairman of the Senate District Committee. He was a Kennedy Democrat. He was as liberal as you can get and he was totally behind this. So, we had complete support from the left and the right in terms of the political class. There was very little opposition to that. But, in the media, it was just tremendous. And the racial politics, then the District of Columbia was dominated by race, and I was then, and am now, white, and that was a serious liability in terms of—

Smith: Was this when Marion Berry was just rising to prominence?

DuPont: Absolutely. Marion and I came to Washington the same year and we’re the same age. He had an organization called PRIDE and so I was very much involved throughout all this. It’s interesting in that in the time in 1970, there was another organization called The Black Man’s Development Center. The leader was this self-styled colonel, Colonel Hussan, who was a bigger force in politics in Washington than Marion Berry was at that time. But, he ran aground early.

Smith: It is such a challenge - I mentioned the Rockefeller book – writing about Attica. It is such a challenge to recreate for us forty years later the radical politics that existed—
DuPont: In 1970. That was the peak of it.

Smith: Yeah. It was just another planet.

DuPont: It is. And, you know, you mentioned about Nelson Rockefeller. One of my exchanges with Rockefeller that was very interesting was that he was offended by the fact that Richard Nixon, who he had very low regard for, had gotten so much positive reaction about his drug policy. Well, Nelson had taken nothing but grief on drugs and he just thought this was terrible and unfair and he couldn’t understand why. And it’s interesting, and I’ve done some thinking about why that was and I didn’t see it, but now I have a pretty clear idea what happened. And that is, prior to 1970, there were only two states that had a significant infrastructure in drug abuse, where you had experts in the state, where you had a substantial investment going on, and that was New York and California. And, both of those states at the same time, in the late 60s, made big investments in civil commitment and nobody else did.

The federal government got into it in 1967, in civil commitment, but just put a toe in the water. The places that really developed in expertise [were New York and California]. So when this drug issue crested in the early 70s, Nelson Rockefeller had a deep bench, he had a lot of experts. Nixon had none. And, what happened was, Nixon turned to people like me and Jerry Jaffee, who were newcomers, not encumbered by what was going on. And Rockefeller had all these people who were taking him down, let’s say, a path that didn’t lead where he wanted to go.

Smith: That’s fascinating because one of the real ball and chain issues that he drags historically—

DuPont: Oh, the Rockefeller laws.

Smith: Exactly. I think *The Times* has a key, you just push and it out comes “the Rockefeller drug laws.” The irony is, that was his third drug program.

DuPont: I understand that.

Smith: And he was someone who believed that there was no such thing as a problem that couldn’t be solved.
DuPont: Yeah.

Smith: And the first two, which had been much more ‘conventional,’ hadn’t worked. Had he stayed on for another term, there would’ve been a fourth program, because the third one wasn’t working. Was it simply frustration that everything else he tried hadn’t worked, so he would try this draconian approach?

DuPont: Let’s remember that methadone, which was what Nixon really did, was from New York. Rockefeller had overlooked that. It was right under his nose the entire time. And the reason he didn’t go for it is because his experts didn’t like it. It was contrary to their vision. And I tell you this now that we’ve got forty years to think about what happened at that point, so I’m now talking from this perspective rather than that, but the things Rockefeller was doing were not wrong. They were not dumb. All of his things - civil commitment - tough laws. All of those things were actually good moves. The problem was that the epidemic just swamped him. They had worked previously, they were good ideas, but they could not respond to what was going on, so they overwhelmed him with just the scale of it. And that was because we were in what I called ‘the modern drug use epidemic.’ And that epidemic is as new as the computer. People will say, “Well, drugs have been around.” Well, yes, but what happened in the late ‘60s has never happened before.

What happened was we had whole populations exposed to a wide variety of drugs in a political environment and a demographic tender that was coming from the Baby Boom. Because that’s when the baby boomers got to the teenage and early 20s, and they hit right at that same time. So the culture changed. The demographics changed. The drug use pattern changed. Timothy Leary set the stage that it was desirable to use drugs. There was something good about - fit with the kind of do it now value system that was going on. And that just exploded. So, what happened, in contrast with Nixon’s idea was voluntary methadone. Rockefeller’s idea was involuntary civil commitment. So, it was much easier to manage a voluntary open season in the epidemic. Nixon didn’t have all the problems that Rockefeller had with his civil commitment in running that thing. Rockefeller had to get all those
prisons. He had to hire all those people. He couldn’t manage the people coming. There was too many of them going on. So, it wasn’t really that he had bad ideas. They just weren’t scalable in the timeframe to what was going on, whereas Nixon’s were. And, again, it had to do with the fact that Nixon turned to a whole new generation of people who had new ideas, who weren’t stuck with what had been before.

Smith: When did you sense that the Nixon presidency was going to end prematurely? Was it a dawning realization?

DuPont: Well, remember that I’m a fairly narrow-gauged participant in the Nixon administration. I’m the drug guy. So, there’s a lot of things going on. I had an experience one time talking to Bud Krogh in his office. Then he went to jail around those issues himself, and he was very close to Chuck Colson. He was the guy who Gordon Liddy reported to in the White House, for example.

Smith: Was Colson a legendary figure?

DuPont: Oh, yes. Oh my gosh, he was very big in terms of all of the stuff that was going on.

Smith: I mean at the time.

DuPont: Oh yes, he was the big figure.

Smith: Notorious?


Smith: Okay.

DuPont: He wanted to talk to Krogh, and Krogh asked me to step out of the office so he could talk to him. And later, he said, “I did that to protect you.” And I thought, “Whoa.” That had never occurred to me to think about that at the time. This is an aside, but a personal thing. I was with Bud Krogh the night before he was sentenced. Now, he’s already pleaded guilty. His role had to do with the break-in of Daniel Ellsberg’s psychiatrist with Gordon Liddy. He didn’t go to jail for exactly the Watergate thing, but for that break-in. And he said to me, “If I don’t go to jail, I think I’ll kill myself. If I don’t go to jail.”
And I said, “What are you talking about?” And he said, “I’m guilty and I need to take my punishment.” And I said, “But you’ve got two little kids, two boys. How are they going to handle this?” He said, “I’ve talked to them already about this and I said, ‘When you do something wrong, you have to take the consequences’ and that’s what I’m doing. And they’re comfortable with that and I’m comfortable with that.” And I was just stunned.

Smith: That’s fascinating because you do sense out of all that crew, he’s one of the very few who have emerged with their honor intact.

DuPont: Enhanced to my point of view. But he was an extraordinary guy from the beginning. I mean, his contributions to the Nixon drug policy were immense. He was completely non-ideological. I was and am a Democrat. That didn’t matter to the Nixon White House. They couldn’t care less about that. I didn’t care that I was working for a Republican president. I was thrilled to work for him and that had to do with Bud Krogh. He was a guy who had just tremendous integrity, but he also was a man of action. He knew he had to move right now. He wasn’t interested in studying it. We had to have a program that was happening now and that was very wonderful to me.

Smith: I don’t know what you’ve read, but the subsequent accounts that suggested that the President in the final days, however you define that, was acting oddly.

DuPont: Crazy.

Smith: Yeah. Was there scuttlebutt at the time?

DuPont: Not about me. Again, you’ve got to remember that I’m not a big player. I’m a small player. So, my time with either Nixon or Ford was very limited. A few visits and that’s it.

Smith: But in terms of picking up from colleagues - you know there’s an atmosphere and it must’ve been rather grim toward the end.

DuPont: My experience wasn’t like that. It goes like this. I was right there at the beginning of the Nixon White House and we got something happening and it had a good effect. Jerry Jaffee became the first drug czar. I said he started June 17th, it actually was ’71, not ’70, as the drug czar. But that was going on.
We had a law that was passed in ’72 that established that office. It created the National Institute on Drug Abuse. It established that office and the National Institute of Drug Abuse, and it passed the Senate and the House without a dissenting vote. Now, how many laws is that true about? So, that was the environment that I was in.

Now, what happened was, and you were talking about the pushback, what I had done or we had done in the District of Columbia was focus on heroin addiction and it relied on methadone. When the program went national, you couldn’t do that. You had to deal with drugs. Methadone was only a part of what was going on. And we were using a system of delivering treatment services that was unmanageable. In the district, I could manage the money. I could make sure we had real patients. I could make sure they were getting services. I could target who the patients were. That was measureable. At the federal level, it was nothing like that. It was much more like the joke is you put the money on a stump and people run away with it. It was much more like that. The drug money would go to a treatment program and God only knows what they were going to do with that and who they were going to consider a drug user and what they were going to consider treatment. It was like pushing on a noodle to try to get it to go.

So, the focus was gone from that and the pushback in terms of a heroin focus on methadone was tremendous. So, when it rolled out as a national program, it lost its power. And, also, the pushback that Nixon was getting, he declared in ’73 that we’d turned the corner on heroin addiction. Boy, the people who were committed to that not being the case - this was another manipulation by the dishonest Nixon - conservative manipulation – it was all this sort of thing. And then, of course, Nixon was distracted. He had been focused on this because it was about crime in the district. He had taken care of that problem. And so, what happened before Ford came in, at the end of Nixon’s first term, Krogh was gone. He went to Transportation. The new people there didn’t have that same kind of zeal about it. So the issue had already lost its traction. The excitement was way down, not because of any problem with Nixon or necessarily with our program. You’re not going to hold that kind of attention for very long. That just doesn’t happen in the real world.
So, by the time Ford came, the objective was much more to hang on, to consolidate, than it was to extend, expand, whatever else. You know, I’m looking forward to talking to you about what happened in the Ford administration. But just in the general sense – you were talking about the Nixon administration – I think that before Watergate really pulled the plug on the Nixon administration, the bloom was off the rose in terms of the drug issue.

Smith: Plus, isn’t it, by its very nature, a chronic program, a plague? However you want to describe it that isn’t going to go away.

DuPont: Well, but the president has got three or four issues that he can deal with. That’s it. You lost the media, what they’re dealing with. They’re going to focus on three or four things that are going on right now and you’re not going to be on that list for very long with pretty much anything like that.

Smith: I just wonder if there isn’t over time a tendency to throw up one’s hands as a society and just say, “This has always been with us. This is almost part of human nature for whatever reason. It’s going to be with us.” And to begin to erode public support or public confidence that government can address this problem in a significant way. That as long as the appetites are there, it’s hard to imagine them being—

DuPont: That’s true. The other side of that, though, is people very much underestimate the potential threat of drug abuse. We have 8.7% today of America’s 12 and over have used an illegal drug in the last month. So, that’s what our number is. The actual risk is more like 60% and the potential for that is just phenomenal. People are underestimating the power of the drugs in terms of taking over the brain, their thinking and the behavior of individuals. It’s not like alcohol and tobacco. These drugs are much more powerful and you can see this in the lab in terms of what it does to people. And those two drugs have created immense social costs in this society.

But go back to the Ford administration, because the Ford administration went through exactly the kind of thought process and maybe we should spend a few minutes talking about how that was, defining what the Ford period did in the
drug field. In the context of this downplaying of the priority from really an unsustainable height that it had achieved early in the Nixon administration, not late in the Nixon administration, but early in the Nixon administration, there was an effort that was taken away from me and what I was doing and taken to the domestic council where Jim Cannon was in charge of it, Dick Parsons was the person put in charge, and a fellow named Ed Johnson was the guy who did the spear carrying, the heavy lifting. They did what was called the ‘White Paper on Drug Abuse.’

That was their review, the Ford administration review, and I say ‘they’ because I contributed to it, but I have to say that I did not have any great vision at that time that I was trying to present. I was personally still reeling from the fact that we’d done such a great job in the district and we were having such a difficult time carrying it into the federal role and thinking about, okay, where do we need to go? If somebody comes to me and says, “Where do you want to go?” What is that? And mostly I could get my head to not losing the ground we had as opposed to saying where you want to plant that flag next. Anyhow, the ‘White Paper’ comes in and what it did is exactly what you just said. It essentially said, “Okay, we’ve got this problem. It’s going to be here for a long time. We have to be realistic about what we’re doing. Scale down the rhetoric. Scale down the commitment of energy to it. Manage our resources more carefully. And focus on the more serious drugs.”

Because off to the side of this heroin issue was the marijuana problem. And, go all the way back to 1970, Congress had established a Marijuana Commission with Governor Schaeffer of Pennsylvania in charge, and that had produced reports in ’72 and ’73 that were talking about sort of making peace with marijuana use. Decriminalizing it. Accommodating to this. When I took office, Nixon said to me, “Bob, I want you to be in charge of drugs and to take the lead in this, but, if you say one word in support of decriminalization, you’re gone, because that is the line you cannot cross. It’s the only one. But that one you can’t cross.” So, even a hint would be your demise in terms of this administration.

Smith: Did Ford have a position similar to that?
DuPont: I’m going to tell you what happened with this. I, being the heroin guy, sort of dismissed the marijuana problem. It seemed unworthy to me as an issue.

Smith: It’s what musicians do at two in the morning.

DuPont: Something like that. You didn’t have the bodies piling up the way we did with heroin. We had a lot of overdose deaths. We don’t have a big connection with crime the way with heroin. And the ‘White Paper’ reinforced that. I mean, it focused away from marijuana also. But there’s this other process going on, this sort of rethinking this. I’ve got resonating in my mind, Nixon says, “Don’t support decriminalization.” Now, in August of ’74, Nixon is gone. I’ve got a new president now. Okay, I have been thinking about this issue and think that decriminalization is not such a bad idea. In November of ’74, I speak out as the Ford administration White House person at the Norml convention and support decriminalization. So, I supported it. In Ford’s final strategy in 1976, it says we need to seriously look at decriminalization as a response to the marijuana issue. So, to the extent that there was a Ford position on decriminalization, it was sympathetic.

Smith: Was that something you ever discussed with him?

DuPont: Never.

Smith: So, basically, you were acting on your own -

DuPont: I was, but it was very visible and anybody could’ve stepped on my chain and nobody did. I didn’t have any negative repercussions from that at all. And the speech itself was pretty interesting, because I spent 90% of it saying that marijuana was a dangerous drug, should be discouraged, was very undesirable to smoke it, legalization was a terrible idea. But, I said, I don’t want to send people to jail for smoking marijuana. And that became the headline.

Smith: Did you clear that speech in advance?

DuPont: Never. I don’t remember it ever being cleared. I don’t remember that process.

Smith: And what response did you get?
DuPont: Nobody said anything. It was okay. I never talked to Ford about it, but Dick Parsons was my handler and he had no problem stepping on my chain on other issues. He could’ve done that, but he didn’t care.

Smith: I realize this is speculative and therefore maybe unfair, and I want to be careful how I phrase this.

DuPont: Since you’re being recorded, too.

Smith: Exactly. The Fords had children of an age where Mrs. Ford herself was famously asked about this in the 60 Minutes interview, and she certainly didn’t express astonishment. In fact, she said they probably tried it. In a larger sense, the youth culture that they represented and that they exposed their parents to - do you think that’s a factor at all in this?

DuPont: Oh, sure. Absolutely. And I definitely think it had to. If you think about the different personalities of Nixon and Ford. I mean, Nixon was very strict on this stuff, sort of rigid, black and white. Ford was not a black and white guy. He just didn’t do that sort of thing. Now, an incredibly to me rich irony is, during those years, and not by accident, there was a phenomenal escalation in marijuana use going on. The first state to decriminalize was Oregon in ’73. And decriminalization was marching across the country during the Ford administration and it looked like the future was going in this way. And, by the end of the Ford administration, 1976 and early ’77, I was deeply troubled by the increase in marijuana use.

Smith: Was there a direct link between decriminalization and the increase in use?

DuPont: Oh, absolutely, because what it did was it removed the sense of fear of using and when you do that, you get an awful lot of young people using the drug. So, it was a slope that went up like that - what was going on with marijuana use during the mid-70s. It scared me and I got a letter from a woman in Atlanta named Keith Schuchard who said I was part of the problem because of my positions about marijuana, and invited me down to Atlanta to meet with a group of parents who were dealing with this problem. And I went down there and I became convinced that I was part of the problem.
The sort of defining moment for me was when I gave a speech at the meeting there in Atlanta, a big drug prevention speech, and I was talking in support of decriminalization to this group. And my father, who was very interested in the news, but not terribly intellectually thinking about these things, watching my tongue as he was driving me back because my family lived in Atlanta, he said, “You know, I wish you just weren’t so pro-marijuana.” And I thought, “I have been so studious to say I’m anti-marijuana, but don’t want to put people in prison, that for my father to say I was pro-marijuana, was appalling to me.” And I realized that, with respect to this issue, there were only two positions, yes and no. There was no nuance. You could not say ‘but,’ ‘and’—

Smith: Particularly if you’re a parent with teenage kids who were vulnerable.

DuPont: Anybody. Or the head of the National Institute of Drug Abuse or the White House drug person. So, at that point, I wanted to change my mind. Now, the irony is that Jimmy Carter became president and I stayed on through the first two years of that administration and, there, Jimmy Carter supported decriminalization, so I couldn’t oppose it. So, under Nixon, I couldn’t support it. Under Carter, I couldn’t oppose it. And under Ford, I was left to my own devices. And, the regret I have in the whole thing was the Ford years, because I think I was wrong. I don’t think I did the right thing. I think I was going in the wrong direction and it had to do with my underestimating the importance of this. Think about this number. In 1978, 11% of high school seniors in this country were smoking marijuana every day and that number had doubled in four years. Now, you think about that trend. 11%, that’s 1 in 9 high school seniors is an every day smoker of marijuana.

Smith: We’ve often heard the argument that the worst thing about marijuana is that it’s the gateway to stronger drugs. Would you accept that as a broad assertion?

DuPont: Yeah, my 1985 book is called *Gateway Drugs*. It focuses on exactly that point. It’s interesting the argument against it, because it’s created a furor. The ‘gateway drug hypothesis’ as it’s called is one of the defining controversies in the addiction field. And it goes like this. The people who don’t like that term point out that, “Well, everybody who smoked marijuana
drank milk first, so you can say milk really is a bigger gateway drug to heroin addiction than to marijuana.” That’s one thing they’ll say is, “Well, most people who smoke marijuana don’t use heroin.” And that’s true, too. But I like to say, “Now, wait a minute, let’s take something very simple and that’s the relationship of cigarette smoking and lung cancer. Do you know what the risk of lung cancer for a two pack per day smoker? It’s less than 5%. But, it’s 100 times more than for a non-smoker. Now, does that mean it’s not a cause?” Come on. To be a cause, it doesn’t mean everybody has it and that’s the issue. But what you find is that the people who haven’t used marijuana just don’t use these other drugs. But it also is true that cigarettes and alcohol are gateway drugs.

Smith: This is off the wall, but I can’t let it go without asking. I remember when the President died and Newsweek had a great cover photo of him with the pipe. Someone wrote in to complain about the pipe. Was that an issue at all? Did people raise the fact that the President smoked?

DuPont: No, I don’t recall about Ford. But I’ll tell you, I was in the Oval Office one time talking to Ford and he stepped out or something. Anyway, I was left there alone for a little period of time and he was just getting ready to get on of the helicopter to go to Camp David. So, his briefcase was sitting on the desk of the Oval Office open. I couldn’t resist. What is in his briefcase as he’s about to get on this plane? And I walk over there and look in there and there in this briefcase were only two things, a copy of Time Magazine and his pipe and tobacco. And I thought, “Now, that’s Gerald Ford. That is really just tremendous to think that’s what he’s taking to Camp David.”

Smith: How would you describe his intelligence?

DuPont: Oh, gosh, he was just a very smart guy and very open. I’ll tell you a couple things, Gerald Ford stories. These both come from meeting him in 1992 when there was a dedication of DuPont Hall at the Betty Ford Center. You know, it’s got a building there with my name on it and this was its ten-year anniversary of the founding of the Betty Ford Center. And he and Betty were there and we had a nice little gathering for this dedication, thirty people. It wasn’t a big group of people. But he wanted to make some remarks. He
made several, but the one that just absolutely amazed me, he said, for the first forty years of their marriage, Betty had spent most of the time supporting his career and he was very grateful for that. Since he left the White House, he spent a lot of his time supporting her career, as he was doing at that dedication. And, he said, “I think when history is written and the two contributions are compared, hers will be seen as more important than mine.” And I was just stunned. I was just stunned. It was so much the kind of guy he was, the generosity of that was just breathtaking to me.

Another thing, I had lunch with him and Betty that day in their home and he didn’t really get much into the drug issue, but he knew I was a doctor and he had something on his mind that he wanted to ask me as a doctor. He had apparently not supported a VA hospital in Grand Rapids and had been criticized for not bringing home this pork and wanted to know what I thought of the VA hospitals, and whether he’d done the wrong thing for Grand Rapids. I mean, it was amazing to me that that would be on his mind. It’s funny, what I said to him, because that was 1992 and the VA hospitals were not distinguished in their medical care. They actually became pretty good over the next couple of decades. So, what I said to him then would not be what I’d say to him if we talked about it now. But I was just touched by the fact that he was troubled by that.

Smith: Is there a disparity between the Ford that you saw over time and the public image? And, I mean, to the extent that the public image—

DuPont: That he’s a bumbler.

Smith: Yeah, that he’s a Chevy Chase. People forget, ‘Saturday Night Live’ went on the air in ’75 just at the turning point - the drug issue, the whole popular culture, obviously fed by Vietnam and Watergate. Reverence was out the door and he became caricatured. I’m trying to get a sense of whether it bothered him.

DuPont: Well, let me tell you a little bit about that, because this again goes back to that exchange in ’92 when I was with him. I asked him a simple question. I said, “Okay, in the history of the American presidency, who would you think has
been the best athlete who’s ever served in the White House?” It seems like a fairly straightforward question. He thought about it and then he says, “George Bush.” I said, “Really? George Bush?” He said, “Yes, he was the captain of the Yale baseball team and played first base.” And I said, “But you were an all-American football player at Michigan.” He said, “Well, I was, but what you don’t know is in my senior year, we only won two games.” And, I thought, you know, that is so Gerald Ford, that he wouldn’t even accept that.

Smith: Of course, the flip side of it is that, as the presidency became more and more theatrical, I always said he was the least self-dramatizing of public figures.

DuPont: Absolutely.

Smith: And it became in some ways detrimental.

DuPont: He’s the only one who never ran for national office until his final time. I had the feeling during the campaign, in the beginning of it, that he wasn’t even trying very hard to get elected. He was trying at the end, but at the beginning, he was too busy trying to do the right thing for the country. But, also, you know, what were the right moves? I mean, people make fun of him about the WIN program, the Whip Inflation Now, but what were the good moves? And, also, his antipathy for Reagan was very striking to me in talking to him. I mean, Reagan wasn’t a good Republican because of those deficits. That was unforgiveable. Republicans don’t run deficits like that. And I thought, “You know, now that is very interesting. He was a non-ideological president. He was a practical president.”

Smith: And you look at his selection of Justice Stevens. Classic illustration.

DuPont: And he supported it until his death. He never regretted it. That was another thing that was very interesting. The conservatives couldn’t forgive him for that. And he supported Stevens right through to the end.

Smith: I made the observation in my eulogy that, you know, the cliché is we get more conservative as we get older because we have more to conserve.

DuPont: We have something to conserve, never mind more.
Smith: Yeah, hopefully. He, in a lot of ways, seemed to run counter to that. I wondered how much of an influence she was, how much of an influence having kids and then grandchildren and being open to that whole culture. How much of it was, quite frankly, an acute awareness of what he called ‘the hard Right’ which had after all come after him in the mid-70’s. It wasn’t just abortion. I mean, that was the most obvious, but he was outspokenly pro-gay rights. We’ve talked to someone who quoted him as saying ten years before he died that gay marriage was coming and society should adapt itself. I mean, things that don’t fit the stereotype of the white bread west Michigan Republican Party. And I’m wondering how much of it was an outgrowth of his work with the Betty Ford Center. where he saw these people in his circle - good, decent people, who had a weakness - and whether that was a factor in broadening his horizons.

DuPont: To me, though, I would say the core of Ford was the sense of duty, a sense of responsibility, a sense of wanting to do the right thing and not promote his ego, but to fulfill the obligation to the public interest that came with his position. And, as his position became more prominent, it became more national and more international, and I think that that broadened him beyond Grand Rapids in terms of his role. And he grew with that, is the way I would see it. But, also, I think the parties at that time did not have an ideological litmus test. So, think about the fact that the Democratic Party through all those years, the Congress was led by the South. Those were Democrats, you know, and that was so different from what has happened now where you get this very sharp ideological divide that is going on.

Smith: Let me ask you, because you might be Exhibit A in this. How difficult was it in the early phase of the Ford presidency in terms of meshing the Nixon holdovers, who were clearly the majority of the staff—

DuPont: That’s what I was.

Smith: Exactly. With the Grand Rapids crowd and others that he brought in. Was there tension between those groups?
DuPont: I don’t think so. I think the people from the Nixon team, I speak for myself, were ready to go on. Dick Parsons was my handler and I just thought he was wonderful.

Smith: Were you also ready to go?

DuPont: No, I was going to stay. I wanted to stay. Absolutely, I didn’t want to go. But Parsons was very inspiring. I mean, he was a wonderful guy to work for. I couldn’t ask for anything better than Dick Parsons.

Smith: Could you have predicted at that point that he was headed for big things?

DuPont: I never knew anybody who didn’t think he was wonderful. You know, I mean, no one had the sense that he’s gotten this job because he’s black and he’s somehow not up to the job and he’s a token.

Smith: A Rockefeller guy.

DuPont: Well, I was going to say about Rockefeller guys, my perception was - and Jim Cannon doesn’t entirely agree with this -, is Ford was a legislative branch guy. Well, legislative people don’t have any staff to speak of. There’s nobody there. Rockefeller was an executive branch guy. He had a very deep bench. I mean, he had expertise in every direction that was tremendously deep. So, when the Ford presidency comes, where did they turn to fill the positions? It’s Rockefeller people.

Smith: That’s interesting. Did you see or sense the tension between Rumsfeld and Rockefeller?

DuPont: No, I never saw any of that. I wouldn’t know that. I can imagine that, but I didn’t ever see anything like that.

Smith: Was there a different feel at all about how Rumsfeld ran the White House and how Cheney ran the White House?

DuPont: I didn’t see any of that because I was just related to Parsons throughout that whole experience and I wouldn’t even know.

Smith: Did you have direct conversations with the President about your field?
DuPont: No, I met him several times, but no real conversations. It would be a formal kind of thing, a presentation to a cabinet committee we had, but it would be very formal.

Smith: So, really, it was in later years, when you worked with Mrs. Ford—

DuPont: Yes, that got me in contact with him.

Smith: And how did that come about?

DuPont: The question is how did I get my name on a building at the Betty Ford Center; and the answer is that I had a patient in this office who I referred, as I have many patients, to the Betty Ford Center. This guy had a good bit of money. Is a wonderful man. He flew out there in his own airplane. He went into the Betty Ford Center and they put him in a double room and his first assignment was to clean up the bathrooms. This was, let’s say, not the way he lived his life at that point. His reaction to it was to be delighted. He had grown up as an orphan. He had been turned out at the age of 18 from the orphanage with $5 and a toothbrush and told, “It’s a world of opportunity. Go out there and seize it.” And so he was perfectly prepared to clean bathrooms.

He was very attracted to the Betty Ford Center and wanted to do something to help them. And at that point in his life his purpose, if you can imagine, was to honor the people who’d helped him. So, he went to Betty Ford and said, “I want to name a building after my doctor who sent me here.” So, they did and John Schwarzlose, who’s the Executive Director out there, commented to me about this. He said, “Bob, I don’t want you to take this too serious. For a million dollars, we would’ve called it the Mickey Mouse Center.” That’s how that happened.

Smith: When she was setting up this thing, had she talked to you?

DuPont: No. Where she got the things were from the Navy and from Hazelden. It’s a direct connection. Hazelden was the pioneer of the modern treatment program, and all the really classy programs have their lineage traced back to what Hazelden was doing with the so-called Minnesota Model. Betty Ford Center and John Schwarzlose are not comfortable, really, with that. They
want to be themselves and not one to a program in the Hazelden shadow. And that’s right, they are different. And, one of the things that I really give a lot of credit to, John and the Betty Ford Center, they have not gone the way Hazelden did to expand. Instead, what they’ve done is tried to extend their influence by promotion of ideas that can be used by everybody. So, what they created is the Betty Ford Institute to develop ideas that can grow everywhere and I think that’s a brilliant move and that’s very different from Hazelden.

Smith: Two quick things. In the White House, for lack of a better word, were there rumors, was there talk about her ‘problem’?

DuPont: No. Well, maybe a little, but not much and it wasn’t anything that I saw. I want to say one other thing about the Ford presidency since I’m worried we’re coming to an end here. While I was serving in the White House, Congress refused the money to continue the war in Vietnam. So, Ford had all the White House appointees in the East Room for a meeting in which he spoke and Kissinger spoke about that. So, there must have been about 200 White House appointees and I was there at that meeting in this room. Ford introduced Kissinger. He got up and Kissinger said, “This is the darkest day in American history and what’s ahead of us is disaster because of what Congress has done. They have undermined the presidency. They have undermined a ten year effort in this war. It is awful.” And I was shaking my head and thinking, “Who is this guy? What is he saying? Either he’s nuts or there’s something terrible is going on in this country.” I’ve never heard anybody give a speech like that. Now, that was never in the press that I remember. But, boy, it was unvarnished what he was saying at that point. And Ford introduced him, “This is my guy” at that thing. It was a stunning moment to me.

Smith: But, about the same time, remember, there was a big controversy within the administration. Ford goes to Tulane and gives the speech that Kissinger didn’t want him to give in which he said, basically, the war is over as far as the United States is concerned.

DuPont: And let’s move on.

Smith: Yeah.
DuPont: Which is what he did with the Nixon presidency. And I think that he put that behind him by pardoning Nixon. Otherwise, it would’ve gone on. And I think that was just the same way. That was the right thing to do. That’s what Jerry Ford was.

Smith: Were you surprised when the pardon occurred?

DuPont: No, I think that was wonderful. I had no hesitancy about that at all. Just the idea of stringing Nixon up at that point would do no good and would set a precedent that would be horrible. Whatever Nixon did, he was doing it in his view in the public interest. I really think so. And that’s true of Bud Krogh, too. Somebody said he didn’t pay a high enough price. Please. He was the only president to resign. That’s not a high enough price? I think that’s plenty high.

Smith: How would you characterize Betty Ford’s historical contributions? How should she be remembered?

DuPont: As a saint and a hero. She gave a face to addiction of dignity, of class, but also of compassion, of intelligence. I mean, it was a face that no one else had ever done or has done so well since. All the celebrities in the world don’t do what she did. And her contribution with the Betty Ford Center also is just remarkable. It’s a great gift that has been a gift to lots of patients, lots of families, but to the whole country. It’s an inspiration to our field.

Smith: It’s been suggested that she was equally important, maybe more important, gave a face to recovery.

DuPont: Well, that’s what I meant. That’s true. She didn’t give a face to the fact that continuing to use drugs was a good thing. She gave a face to the fact that recovery is not only possible, but is achievable for everyone who follows the program. He stopped drinking and when I was with him the question was what did he think about that and what he said was he didn’t want to drink anymore. She wanted him to go ahead and drink and he told me, “I don’t want to drink. I’m not doing this for her. I really just don’t want to drink.” And I think that that’s right because of what he’d seen it do. He didn’t want
to do that. And I think his stopping drinking also was a statement that was pretty powerful and, I thought, very laudable.
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Meijer: Had you been active in politics before that year in Traverse City?

Griffin: Somewhat.

Mrs. Griffin: Oh yes. You were county chairman, Republican chairman. Bill Milliken had been the…

Griffin: Bill Milliken and I were good friends from the time we first came to Traverse City. In fact, he had been the local chairman of the Republican Party and then I got to know him. Then he needed somebody to take over, and I took over and got into it.

Meijer: When would you have met President Ford for the first time, or I should say, Congressman Ford for the first time?

Mrs. Griffin: During that campaign in 1956.

Griffin: Was Jerry in then?

Mrs. Griffin: Oh yeah.

Meijer: Yes, he’d been in since ’48.

Griffin: That’s when we would have first met him.

Meijer: Did he come up here, do you recall?

Griffin: Yeah, that’s right. Didn’t we get Nixon up…?

Mrs. Griffin: I think we went down to Grand Rapids. I don’t remember him coming to our district.

Griffin: I guess that’s when I first met Nixon and Ford was running.

Meijer: Nixon would have been vice president then, of course.
Griffin: Yeah.

Meijer: What was your impression of Jerry when you first met him?

Griffin: Well. Great. I knew him in Congress, we were good friends. Everybody liked Jerry Ford.

Mrs. Griffin: We really didn’t know him until we got to Washington. We knew of him, but not personally, until we became very good friends in Washington.

Griffin: But in Washington we were good friends, and I was pretty instrumental in getting behind him when we made him the leader.

Meijer: Absolutely. If I’m remembering right - and maybe you could talk a little bit about – you were part of a group of young Congressmen with Charles Goodell and Mel Laird and Don Rumsfeld.

Mrs. Griffin: And they met in our living room and decided on Jerry Ford – to back Jerry for the leadership.

Griffin: Who was the other guy that we pushed aside?

Meijer: Hovan from Iowa?

Griffin: No.

Meijer: He was a Republican conference committee.

Griffin: He’s not the one I’m thinking. Do you know who I’m thinking of?

Mrs. Griffin: Mel Laird.

Griffin: Mel Laird, I think it was.

Mrs. Griffin: I think it came down to – Mel wasn’t part of our group.

Griffin: It was between Mel Laird and Jerry Ford.

Mrs. Griffin: And Ford was very, very popular and Mel had some people who didn’t like him, and so this little gang of four or five, whatever it was, in our living room decided to go after Jerry Ford and ask if he would run. He was a little reluctant at first. But he agreed.
Meijer: Why was he reluctant?

Griffin: He hadn’t been a leader before that, at least in Congress.

Mrs. Griffin: And to run against Charlie Halleck, who was the good old boy.

Griffin: We were unseating a guy from Indiana, Charlie Halleck.

Mrs. Griffin: And these were Young Turks who were quite new in the Washington scene.

Meijer: You were taking quite a risk to mount that challenge.

Griffin: Right. It was kind of a revolt, a revolution. And we put up Jerry Ford. Everybody liked Jerry.

Meijer: And you were successful.

Griffin: Yeah.

Meijer: And then you survived the LBJ landslide in ’64, and it was time to put him up again. Well, that was when you went after Halleck.

Mrs. Griffin: Then Bob was the floor manager when Jerry came up for the nomination for president in ’76.

Griffin: ’76.

Mrs. Griffin: In Kansas City?

Meijer: That’s right.

Mrs. Griffin: So he was the floor manager and that was when Reagan put forth an effort against Ford in the convention. We maintained Ford’s…

Meijer: And that, obviously, was a very serious challenge for Ford, as a sitting president. What was Ford’s feeling? Did you think he was going to survive and that you were going succeed?

Mrs. Griffin: Sure.

Griffin: Sure. We were determined. We worked hard at it.
Meijer: Had you known Reagan at all before that?

Griffin: Oh, not really.

Meijer: What did you think of him?

Griffin: He was the governor of California, wasn’t he?

Meijer: Yes.

Griffin: He came into Washington – we all had to get acquainted with him. It took a long time for me to know him. We were much more interested in Jerry Ford.

Mrs. Griffin: We never felt as close than we did to Ford with his Michigan – and Jerry was always very active and very considerate of the Michigan Republican congressmen. The four who were elected when Bob was elected, they were all in the 40s, under 40, in their 30s, and so when we went to Washington we had this little group of Michigan congressmen, headed by Jerry Ford, of course. And all his life he was very, very supportive of this little group of Michigan congressional people.

Meijer: Did you become friends as couples, also?

Mrs. Griffin: You know like El Cederberg, Charley Chamberlain, Bill Broomfield, and Jack McIntosh was the other one.

Meijer: And then would you have seen a lot of each other socially as well? Did you spend time with Betty as well and Jerry?

Mrs. Griffin: Yes.

Griffin: Yes, honey. Socially, we didn’t go out a lot with them.

Mrs. Griffin: Well, no, but we went to the White House for Jerry’s birthday party upstairs. We went to the Kennedy Center with them.

Meijer: I was thinking, too, when you were back in Congress, though, as young…

Mrs. Griffin: That’s when we were in Congress.
Meijer: Okay. And what was Betty like back then? What was your first impression of her?

Griffin: Very nice.

Mrs. Griffin: Oh, wonderful. And she was very active in the Republican wives club, and so we were quite close.

Griffin: Because she was very active, too.

Mrs. Griffin: But they lived in Virginia and we lived over in Maryland, so we didn’t see each other day by day.

Meijer: And you were both raising children at that time.

Mrs. Griffin: And we were both busy with our families. But very congenial, and back and forth on the telephone.

Meijer: When you were setting up your Congressional office, Jerry was still a relatively new Congressman, too. He was only what, four terms in when you arrived.

Griffin: A couple of terms, yeah.

Meijer: How did your offices compare? Did you get any ideas or thoughts from him on how to set things up?

Griffin: Oh yeah. When Congress was in session, we sat next to each other quite often, and had lots of time to talk. And we talked about Michigan politics or anything else. Of course when Jerry was put up for leader, I worked very hard for that. He was easy to work for because everybody liked him, he didn’t have any enemies. Democrats liked him as well.

Meijer: He always said all he wanted to be was Speaker of the House. Was that an ambition that he would have shared with you, as you talked?

Griffin: We didn’t talk about it. I don’t think so.

Mrs. Griffin: We were aware of it, though.

Griffin: But I don’t think that was something – that was just kind of in the future.
Meijer: What were your own, as you went to Washington as a young Congressman, had you thought ahead? Did you ever imagine you’d be going to the Senate, or coming back to the Supreme Court? What did you think your life would look like in 1956?

Mrs. Griffin: I thought he was crazy. We had a new baby and two other children, a six and a four year old, and a new baby and he came home and said he was going to run for Congress. We were quite new in Traverse City in the law business, and I thought he was absolutely out of his mind. But then you get into it, and of course you want to win, and you work hard. I think a lot of the Michigan delegation who were elected at that time…

Griffin: There were four of us. New Congressmen – Republicans from Michigan at that time – we were all in our 40s.

Mrs. Griffin: They didn’t intend to make it a lifetime job. They thought they would go and serve a few terms and do the best they could.

Griffin: Let’s see, there was McIntosh…

Mrs. Griffin: And Cederberg and Broomfield.

Griffin: Okay.

Mrs. Griffin: And Jerry was sort of our elder advisor.

Meijer: And so you help him become Minority Leader, and then how was he as a Minority Leader?


Meijer: I think you’re right. And there must have been a much greater sense – I see this in my own work, too – in research on Vandenberg of being able to have friends across the aisle much more easily than you hear about. Could you talk a little bit about how Democrats and Republicans got along then?

Mrs. Griffin: Well, for instance, Danny Inouye was one of your good friends. And, in fact, that went way, way back. They were two of the outstanding young men of the
nation way back – I can’t even remember the year now – but you’ve always been friends with Danny.

Griffin: A Democrat.

Mrs. Griffin: I’m sure there are others.

Griffin: I feel like I was in that category, too – getting along with Democrats. But Jerry did shine better – everybody liked Jerry.

Meijer: And some people say it has more to do with the fact that the Fords and the Griffin’s would have lived in Washington and raised their families there, where so often today people are flying back and forth every weekend and there isn’t the sense of sharing the same community as much.

Mrs. Griffin: It’s true, although we came home in the beginning – we came home every summer, and the children would start school in Traverse City in September and go until Christmas. Then we moved down, first to Virginia, and then to Maryland. And I think the Fords did the same – I’m not positive.

Meijer: I don’t know – that’s a good question. Now we talked about 1964 and Ford becoming Minority Leader, then in 1966 and 1968 George Romney is coming on strong as our favorite son candidate for president. What was your relationship with Governor Romney as he was becoming a candidate for president?

Mrs. Griffin: Well, he nominated him for president at the convention, for one thing.

Meijer: Now was Ford – did he work hard on Governor Romney’s behalf, too? Or what was their relationship?

Mrs. Griffin: I don’t know.

Griffin: I can’t remember too much about it. I’m sure they got along well. Jerry got along with everybody. He was always that way, I think. Everybody liked him.

Mrs. Griffin: We were very much involved with Romney and Milliken during that campaign. I don’t know how much Ford got involved.
Meijer: Of course, at that point he would have had a longer relationship with Nixon, being in Washington over the years.

Griffin: Yes. Oh, yeah. Yeah, he was pretty close to Dick Nixon.

Meijer: How often were you and Congressman Minority Leader Ford seeing each other?

Griffin: Well, everyday on the House floor we would see each other.

Mrs. Griffin: And you went to the White House after he became president a lot.

Meijer: One of the things that I hear people talk about was his command of the budget process. Besides being such a good guy that everybody liked, what particular skills do you remember that he had as a Congressman?

Griffin: Well, I think he watched the dollars pretty closely and I’m trying to think – didn’t he veto some of the bills when he was president? I think he did.

Meijer: Yeah.

Griffin: He was pretty strict looking after the dollars, as I recall.

Meijer: He seemed to have just a real knowledge of the budget – a lot more than a lot of people have.

Griffin: Oh, yeah. He did.

Meijer: With Agnew’s resignation, and Nixon’s decision to appoint Ford, is that something that took you by surprise, or were you involved in discussions about that?

Griffin: I think I was a little bit involved.

Meijer: I bet you were. How did that come about?

Griffin: I don’t know how much I can remember about it, but…

Meijer: But this is where, as you try to remember, if you remember differently, you can read the transcript and change or delete anything. So please feel free to…

Griffin: What do you remember about it?
Mrs. Griffin: Well, I was just trying to remember.

Meijer: Nixon would have had a decision to make. You would have had powerful feelings.

Griffin: Nixon had a decision to make. What was it?

Meijer: Who should be vice president.

Griffin: Oh, okay.

Meijer: Agnew’s gone.

Griffin: Okay. Yeah, I do remember that, although and I worked hard for Jerry on that. It wasn’t hard, though, because Jerry was so popular. He really was.

Mrs. Griffin: You keep coming back to that.

Griffin: Well, it’s true.

Meijer: Well, it’s a theme.

Mrs. Griffin: You know, that was his really strong…

Griffin: They were looking for somebody that would be not too…

Mrs. Griffin: Controversial.

Griffin: Controversial. And that was Jerry Ford.

Mrs. Griffin: As clean as a whistle and as honest as could be.

Griffin: And was real good friends with the Democrats.

Mrs. Griffin: And well qualified, and you couldn’t do any better.

Griffin: Yeah.

Meijer: Now, would you have had a meeting with Nixon at all to talk about this?

Griffin: Yeah. Sure.

Meijer: Who would have been with you?
Griffin: Charlie Goodell and, who else?

Mrs. Griffin: Was Hugh Scott still in the leadership?

Griffin: Hugh Scott a little bit. It really was Goodell and I. We were kind of a twosome.

Mrs. Griffin: That was to get Jerry into the leadership position.

Griffin: Right.

Mrs. Griffin: But to get to be vice president…

Griffin: I can’t remember.

Mrs. Griffin: I can’t remember, except you must have lobbied very hard for Ford.

Meijer: I bet you did. And you were successful. You accomplished it. And now, all of a sudden, here he’s been a Congressman for most of his career and now he’s part of the administration. That must have been…

Mrs. Griffin: It was hard to remember to call him Mr. President and not Jerry, publicly. We tried very hard not to – to remember that he was the president of the United States. I remember one instance, one party at the Capitol Hill Club where I came in and patted the president on the back, and the Secret Service grabbed my hand and said, “You do not touch a President.” And Jerry turned around and kissed me.

Meijer: Ah, that’s great.

Mrs. Griffin: I mean, that was the type of thing that Jerry Ford would do that made him beloved.

Meijer: It must have been awfully hard on him then to become vice president, and now he’s in the position of defending the administration and defending Nixon when all his friends are growing more and more skeptical and uncomfortable with the situation.

Mrs. Griffin: Right.

Griffin: I think there was quite a bit to that.
Meijer: And how soon after he became vice president did you have a sense that maybe he was going to be president – that Nixon would have to go?

Griffin: I can’t remember any particular mark of time or anything, but that gradually did develop. It’s pretty hard for me to say it.

Mrs. Griffin: One interesting sideline is that when he was vice president, he was going to move into the vice president’s house. They didn’t have a home for the vice president before.

Griffin: So somebody had to do something about that, and I did.

Meijer: Oh you did? Was that the Naval Observatory – was that your work?

Mrs. Griffin: Yeah. He was driving down Pennsylvania Avenue one morning and Admiral Zumwalt was retiring who had lived in this house. It was a very, very nice old house up on Pennsylvania Avenue. Anyway, Bob thought, well, this is a perfect time to appropriate it for the vice president because it is already owned by the government. Hubert Humphrey used to complain and Jerry complained, that when they became vice president, they had to come in and redo the windows and do all kinds of renovations on their own house – and it disrupted the neighborhood and everything else, and that they really needed a residence for the vice president. And so here was the opportunity. The house was there. Zumwalt was leaving and Jerry was the vice president, and so Bob went down to Congress and talked to Mansfield and some of the others and got them all aboard, and they made that the official residence.

So, let me see – how did it go – Betty was up in New York buying dishes or drapes or whatever it was for the new vice president’s house.

Griffin: Drapes, I think it was.

Mrs. Griffin: When suddenly, he became the president and Nelson Rockefeller moved into the house. The only trouble was, Nelson had a beautiful home of his own in Fox Hall Road, and so he never really moved into the new vice president’s house. So the first people who lived there were the Mondales.

Meijer: Oh my goodness. Okay.
Mrs. Griffin: Which is just sort of a sideline.

Meijer: No, that’s fascinating.

Mrs. Griffin: So Ford never got to move into the vice president’s house.

Meijer: So you thought you were finding a home for him, but…

Griffin: It’s still there as a vice president’s house.

Mrs. Griffin: It is perfect. It’s up on this hill and it’s all surrounded with fences, and well protected. A beautiful old house.

Meijer: So, Betty is picking out drapes and you’re getting the house approved and at some point, were you part of the delegation with Hugh Scott and Barry Goldwater calling on Nixon?

Griffin: Yes.

Mrs. Griffin: Oh, yes.

Meijer: That must have been quite a meeting.

Mrs. Griffin: Yup. Right.

Meijer: How did he receive you?

Griffin: Actually, I was in a group that met and, I’m trying to think who went with Scott. I didn’t go with him to the White House. But somebody else did.

Meijer: I was thinking – did Barry Goldwater go?

Mrs. Griffin: I think he’s talking about the night when he went on television and Nixon said he was resigning. You had been at a meeting with Hugh Scott and you came home and said that he had gone to pieces and that you didn’t think he could possibly go on television in an hour’s time. But he did – and announced that he was leaving.

Meijer: Had he gone to pieces in front of you?

Griffin: Yeah.
Meijer: Wow. That had to be a moving moment.

Griffin: It was.


Meijer: How many of you were in the room?

Griffin: Oh about a dozen. Can’t remember – it was some kind of a meeting that we had.

Meijer: Would President Nixon have looked at you as - in some ways because you were so close to Jerry Ford - would Nixon have seen you as kind of Ford’s agent a little bit?

Mrs. Griffin: A traitor.

Meijer: In trying to…

Griffin: I suppose. Yeah.

Mrs. Griffin: I think so.

Griffin: To some extent, anyway.

Meijer: When you say, “Fall to pieces,” just in tears? President Nixon.

Mrs. Griffin: That’s what you said.

Griffin: Yeah.

Meijer: And then Jerry Ford becomes president. How soon after he was sworn in did you chat with him or did you hear from him? That must have just been such a whirlwind.

Griffin: I can remember the day when that happened, that’s for sure.

Meijer: Did he call you, or you call him?

Mrs. Griffin: Well, you were on the transition team, weren’t you?

Griffin: Yeah.
Mrs. Griffin: That Ford…

Griffin: When he went into the White House, he had a lot of things he had to do. And I was on a small group that was finding and making suggestions about who could do what. When he needed help on something.

Mrs. Griffin: Change of staff.

Meijer: Do you recall what were you suggesting, or what kinds of things would have come up?

Mrs. Griffin: Well, when Rumsfeld came in as chief of staff…

Griffin: Yeah. That was one of our recommendations.

Mrs. Griffin: And Rummy had been one of the Young Turks who had helped to get Jerry into the leadership and he was quite new in Congress, Rumsfeld at that point.

Meijer: Did you recommend him to President Ford?

Griffin: The little group that we had did. But I think he already knew Rumsfeld, anyway. I’m not sure how much we had to do with it.

Meijer: But President Ford must have felt very comfortable having you work so closely with him.

Mrs. Griffin: All I can remember is that it seemed like Bob was at the White House very, very often during those days.

Meijer: And there were some people like Kissinger and Connally who were around after Ford left, weren’t they? You were having to deal with making decisions about new people, but also about keeping some of the other folks around during the transition.

Mrs. Griffin: It was a very interesting time.

Griffin: Yeah.

Meijer: Never been another quite like it. I’ve heard some people talk as though there were almost a kitchen cabinet that you would have been a part of in that kind of tough transition time with the president.
How did Betty adjust? Here she is, a Congressman’s wife for many years and then…

Mrs. Griffin: Oh Betty was wonderful. She was just herself, as always, and I think the press loved her because she was genuine.

Meijer: Were you surprised at all with that famous 60 Minutes interview that got her in a little bit of hot water, I guess, but that everybody loved?

Mrs. Griffin: I think we wives were very supportive of her when she was having some of her problems and we all liked her very, very much. What else can you say?

Meijer: Some people criticized President Ford because he’d been a Congressman, he’d only represented one Michigan district his whole life, that he didn’t have a broad enough scope to be president. A leading question, but, some people said it took him too long to outgrow Grand Rapids. How did you feel about that?

Griffin: I would say that that would be very unusual and limited people that would say that. No, I think Jerry had a broad support.

Mrs. Griffin: Grasp of world affairs.

Griffin: From Democrats as well as Republicans.

Mrs. Griffin: He was underestimated, I am sure, by the press and by some other people. But not by people who knew him.

Griffin: That’s right.

Meijer: In the same way that people would say, well, he’d spent too long in Congress. That he was a creature of the Congress.

Mrs. Griffin: Just like saying when he stumbled, and here he was the best athlete they probably ever had in the White House, but…

Meijer: When it came time to pardon Nixon, did Jerry talk about that with you?

Griffin: No, he didn’t. And that was a little bit of a surprise.

Meijer: How did you feel when you heard the news?
Griffin: I had mixed feelings, but I went along with it.

Meijer: And part of that same time was when he granted the amnesty program, too, to the draft dodgers. That didn’t go down well with some people in the party, either. Did you talk with him at all about that?

Griffin: No, I can’t say I was part of that.

Meijer: And I can’t remember, were there occasions like that when you would have publicly disagreed with him at all on his decision?

Griffin: No. I don’t recall any.

Mrs. Griffin: No, I don’t think so.

Griffin: I may not have said anything, but I don’t recall being out there fighting him or anything like that.

Meijer: Now, Richard Norton Smith was mentioning that with the amnesty, some of the other Republicans publicly denounced it, but kind of privately – both with the pardon and the amnesty – signaled to President Ford, you probably did the right thing. Did that go on, do you think?

Griffin: I think so. Yeah, it’s pretty much a good description of it.

Meijer: One of the moving moments I’ve heard President Ford talk about was the fall of Saigon and just having to preside over all the evacuation and everything. I’m curious if that is something that you talked about with him or had an impression of how that would have affected him.

Griffin: I can’t say that I did, but I remember that period of time and how I thought he did such a great job. Doing the best he could with a very difficult situation. But, no, I wasn’t very close to the decision making or anything like that.

Meijer: You talked about, Mrs. Griffin, about when he turned around and kissed you and he always had that wonderful sense of humor, and did the presidency change any of that?

Mrs. Griffin: No, I don’t think so.
Meijer: What do you remember about his sense of humor?

Mrs. Griffin: What do I remember about his sense of humor? Well, I don’t remember him being particularly funny, but he was fun to be with, and an interesting acquaintance, but I don’t remember him being funny, particularly. Serious. One of my fond memories of the Fords was spending the last weekend at Camp David before he left office. He had invited two other couples and the Griffins up to Camp David. We had a wonderful weekend up there with the dogs and just relaxing and talking about old times and so forth. Kind of nostalgic because it was their last trip to Camp David.

Meijer: Oh sure. Who else was with you?

Mrs. Griffin: Cederbergs and Wrights – what was his first name? Some old friends from long, long ago.

Meijer: When he lost the election to President Carter, what did he say to you? How do you think that affect him?

Mrs. Griffin: I think he was hurt, and unhappy.

Griffin: I don’t think we were close to him right after…

Mrs. Griffin: I thought we were.

Griffin: Well, do you?

Mrs. Griffin: I remember at Camp David – bemoaning the fact that Carter was going to take over and be the next residents up there.

Meijer: Did he resent Reagan, do you think, for not campaigning harder for him?

Mrs. Griffin: We did. I don’t think he did.

Griffin: At least we don’t know that he did.

Mrs. Griffin: At least he didn’t vocalize it.

Meijer: But you had a sense of that?
Mrs. Griffin: His friends, his close friends never really got over that. But then we weren’t close to the Reagans.

Meijer: I recall President Ford saying that if Reagan had campaigned a little harder in a couple of districts in southern Ohio, in Cincinnati or something, that might have made all the difference.

Mrs. Griffin: Or if the election had been a couple weeks later, maybe. If they’d had just a little bit more time.

Meijer: Well, after he left office, and I’ve just got a couple more here, he said that raising money for the Foundation, which you were also very involved in, was about the hardest thing he’d ever done. Do you recall talking to him about plans for the museum and the library?

Mrs. Griffin: Oh, you organized the first…

Griffin: I was the first chairman of the Foundation.

Mrs. Griffin: You worked very hard at setting it all up. You were a lawyer then.

Griffin: I did the legal work of organizing it and getting it going.

Mrs. Griffin: Bob was out of Congress then and he was associated with a firm in Detroit. It was before he went on the Court.

Meijer: I was trying to remember, when did you go to the Senate?

Mrs. Griffin: ’66.

Griffin: See how she’s got all that on her mind?

Meijer: Well, that’s very helpful.

Mrs. Griffin: Pat McNamara died, and George Romney - Bob was already running. He had announced that he was going to run for the Senate, so George Romney appointed him when Pat McNamara died. And so he was in the – but he had to run for the election again in November.

Meijer: That’s right. When did you first go to the Senate then?
Mrs. Griffin: '66.

Meijer: That was in the spring?

Mrs. Griffin: That would be about January, wasn’t it?

Griffin: Yeah, I think so.

Mrs. Griffin: So he was there from January – so he did have the Senate designation when he ran in November, and he ran against Soapy Williams and defeated him. Which is quite something.

Meijer: You bet.

Mrs. Griffin: Because he was a formidable, formidable candidate.

Meijer: That was a special time for Western Michigan when Jerry was Minority Leader and you were in the Senate. Did you ever campaign – well, he probably didn’t need you to campaign for him in the Fifth District, but did he ever campaign for you in any of your elections?

Griffin: Oh, I’m sure he did. We would have big events, and he would be there. It wasn’t day after day or anything like that.

Mrs. Griffin: Coming up to Travers City in ’75 and being in the Cherry Festival Parade and they rode together and waved at the crowds.

Griffin: He came out here at that time. We had a big…

Mrs. Griffin: If you mean that kind of campaigning, yes. I don’t remember him going door to door with you.

Meijer: No, I didn’t mean that.

Mrs. Griffin: He was always supportive.

Meijer: When was the last time you saw him?

Tape ends
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Smith: Thank you for welcoming us into your lovely home.

Hartmann: Well, you are more than welcome.

Smith: Where did you meet Bob?

Hartmann: You don’t know that story?

Smith: No.

Hartmann: Well, let’s see. Remember the beginning of the war, December 7th?

Smith: Sure. Pearl Harbor.

Hartmann: Alright. I was teaching school in Venice Boulevard School in Los Angeles and he was an ensign in the Navy. My friend teaching with me, her husband was an ensign; he’d already signed up and was in. And she said to me one day, “Roberta, it’s time you get a new boyfriend,” or something like that. “We have somebody we want you to meet. He’s an ensign and I think you’d like him, and so I’ve invited him to dinner next Sunday night and I would like for you to come.” I said, “Okay, fine.”

Well, the next day, Sunday, after church my parents and I went to our favorite place at the beach on the waterfront in Long Beach for lunch. And the radio was playing music, and we had just finished and started to get up from the table when “Flash – Bulletin. Pearl Harbor’s been bombed.” And I got home and my friend called me and she said, “The boys are restricted to the base tonight, so we’re going to do it next Sunday night, if it’s okay, if they can.”

So I met him the next Sunday night and started going out with him. And we were married that year and I sent him off to the war and I said, “I want a baby before you go. If anything happens to you, I’d like to have a baby.” So I got a baby at the end of November, 11th of November, and my mother said, “I hope
nobody’s counting.” But that’s how we met and that’s how we stayed together for 65 years.

Smith: Now, when he came back from the war, how did he get into journalism?

Hartmann: Oh, well, he was with the Los Angeles Times as a political reporter for them and he opened the Washington bureau here in 1954.

Smith: Oh, really?

Hartmann: Oh, yeah. And later he opened the bureau in Rome. We lived in Italy.

Smith: When was that? In the ‘50s?

Hartmann: No, 1963. Kennedy was assassinated while we were there.

Smith: Was Pope Pius still pope?

Hartmann: Yes.

Smith: Did you enjoy Rome?

Hartmann: Oh, I loved it. That’s my home away from home, and God willing, my son is going to take me next summer.

Smith: Wonderful.

Hartmann: I hope I make it. I’ve been on a crazy – I broke my hip and then Daddy died, and then everything happened. I don’t know where it’s going to end.

Smith: Well, it’s nice to have Rome to look forward to.

Hartmann: Yes, I really do have that.

Smith: Now you mention that being a LA Times reporter and then being in the bureau here, he would have had an association with Richard Nixon?

Hartmann: Oh yes.

Smith: So Nixon didn’t hate all reporters?
Hartmann: No, many a time Richard brought him home at the end of the day – being a morning paper he had to work late, you know, and lots of times Nixon was busy and he’d send his driver to bring him home. Sometimes he came himself, I can see him standing in there in front of the fireplace.

Smith: Really?

Hartmann: When I went to the hospital he sent a beautiful present. Yes, we were good friends.

Smith: So that’s a different side of Nixon from the public Nixon.

Hartmann: Yes. He was such a nice guy.

Smith: Personable?

Hartmann: Oh, yes, he really was.

Smith: Why do you think that didn’t come across?

Hartmann: I don’t know. Well, part of it I would say that he had that devil Haig around him.

Smith: It’s clear that there was no love lost between Bob and Al Haig.

Hartmann: Oh, he just met him head-on. And Bob can hold his own with somebody like that. And that made Haig even madder.

Smith: Let me ask you. Where did Bob’s path first cross with Gerald Ford?

Hartmann: He had met him here as a newspaperman, and when we went to Rome, we were there two years and he was coming home and Mel Laird and Glenn Lipscomb, from California, wrote Bob and said, “Come on home. We want you to be head of the House Republican Conference. Then he became Ford’s LA.

Smith: Was Ford a Republican leader at that point – the Minority Leader of the House?

Hartmann: Yes, Minority Leader. And what his ambition was, was to be the head one.
Smith: Speaker of the House.

Hartmann: Yes. He never talked about being vice president or president, or anything. His goal was to be Speaker of the House.

Smith: Tell me, as someone who knows better than anyone else, what were the qualities that bonded your husband and Gerald Ford? Because, clearly it was a relationship much closer than that of the traditional speechwriter.

Hartmann: Oh, yes. Well, in the first place, they were both devout Christians, which is a good basis. And family men – good family men. He helped people and everything he did was on the good side. He was very personable, very friendly, honest.

Smith: And very loyal.

Hartmann: Very loyal, very loyal.

Smith: But it’s interesting: a loyalty that was not afraid from time to time…

Hartmann: … to speak his peace.

Smith: Yeah. Tell us about that, because that’s a rare loyalty.

Hartmann: Well, like when he said he didn’t want to say what Bob said about Nixon – the final words – because Ford thought it would be too strong against Nixon.

Smith: Oh, that’s right – “The long national nightmare is over.” Ford wanted to remove that from the speech.

Hartmann: Yes. Now, had it been any other two people, it probably would have been. But Bob said, “This is it. This is what you are doing. It’s not just family, it’s the whole world. And this is what’s going to be remembered – that you have saved the country.” And so forth. Oh, and at the convention, just before that. I think it was in Chicago.

Smith: The ’72 convention or the ’76 convention? Before Ford became vice president?

Hartmann: He just was, and he had made his speech – what year was that?
Smith: The speech when he became president – ’74.

Hartmann: That’s right – ’74. Well, he made this speech and we were up there somewhere – Chicago – and they flashed it on the screen – the big screen, and we watched it. We came down and we were walking across an empty ballroom or something and the thing was still up there on the screen – our long national nightmare is over – and Barbara Walters – gave him credit that night on television. And Daddy didn’t like that. Daddy said, “That’s his speech.”

Smith: I used to be a speechwriter, and people who don’t do it, don’t understand it. It’s a very singular relationship of trust. Tell me about that relationship between those two men. Obviously Ford was comfortable with the words that your husband was writing for him. How did your husband go about becoming Jerry Ford’s voice in some ways?

Hartmann: He had a knack with words – a wonderful way with words. And they would talk about things and he would say something that he thought Ford should think about putting that in, and they would just talk back and forth, and then Bob would write the speech. But they had this thing in common, whatever you want to call it.

Smith: It’s almost a sixth sense.

Hartmann: They were both wired the same way.

Smith: That’s very well put. Now, let me ask you because, clearly, there’s almost a year from Agnew’s resignation and Ford’s confirmation as vice president – there is obviously an extended period between him becoming vice president and Nixon’s resignation. And that had to have been an incredibly awkward period in some ways for Ford, and for those around him.

Hartmann: You mean like the last year of Nixon being president?

Smith: Yes, exactly. Because on the one hand, as vice president, he was expected to defend the president; but at the same time, not knowing what shoes might still drop, and the possibility that he might wind up there himself, he couldn’t
sacrifice his own credibility. And one senses that no one was closer to him in those days, or a more valued counselor, than your husband.

Hartmann: That’s why some people disliked him so much.

Smith: Tell me about that.

Hartmann: Well, I don’t know. I don’t understand it. But, I guess if you’re hungry for attention to be on yourself, it’s hard for you to let the person who should have it, receive it. And there were some people that were really not very nice to Daddy. But he held his own.

Smith: Before Ford becomes president, when he was vice president, was there friction between the Ford staff and people in the White House about the Vice President’s role – his defense or lack of defense? I’m not trying to put words in your mouth.

Hartmann: Before he was president…

Smith: Before he became president, while he’s still vice president, was there any friction between…

Hartmann: …Nixon’s people…

Smith: And your husband and his people, or Ford’s people?

Hartmann: In all honesty, I really don’t know about that. But I do know we were certainly friendly with him. And Nixon called him Bob. They were that close. Daddy didn’t condone what he had done, but he felt sorry and said in his book, he said that Nixon did a lot for this country before that happened.

Smith: Ford couldn’t have a transition for obvious reasons, he couldn’t even acknowledge that he might become president, and yet, no one was closer to him than your husband. Did you discuss the possibility during that period that Ford might become president? Did he discuss it with Ford?

Hartmann: I don’t know. I just remember when he called me on the phone and told me that Ford asked him to be with him.

Smith: This is as vice president?
Hartmann: Yeah.

Smith: The famous speech – the inaugural address – was that something done, in effect, at the last minute?

Hartmann: Writing that?

Smith: Yeah.

Hartmann: In a way, because he just waited, and then he’d sit down and pound it out. He didn’t do a little at a time or anything. And so it really came like an explosion.

Smith: Really? Was that how he worked, generally?

Hartmann: He worked his head off.

Smith: What are your memories when Nixon leaves and Ford becomes president? Were you at the White House for the swearing in, for example?

Hartmann: Oh, yes. And that’s another thing Haig did. He filled the front row of seats with all Nixon people. And except for Susan and Jack and Mike. And then I and our two kids sat in the row in back of the Nixon people. And we saw them go out on the plane.

Smith: Did you sense discomfort between the Nixon people and the Ford people? We’ve been told, for example, that that morning there was a receiving line and then I think there were refreshments or reception down in the State Dining Room. And some people have said you could see the Nixon people kind of peel off and go back to their offices.

Hartmann: Well, I don’t think I was present at that. I don’t remember that. I just remember where we sat and listening to them speak, and watching it because Bob walked out with the Fords. And was the last to say – he was the last person that Nixon talked to – wished Bob well.

Smith: Really?

Hartmann: Yeah. Held his hand and talked to him and wished him well.
Smith: So then, they are in the White House, and the famous issue of the pardon comes up. By most accounts, your husband really maybe saved Gerald Ford from, at least leaving the impression that could have been very damaging. What’s your recollection of that?

Hartmann: I just know that he spent a lot of time talking to him and writing what he did. It was very personable, and it was really a very meaningful part of life, what happened then. And I think that he saved Ford by getting those…

Smith: Was Ford too trusting? There is a view of Ford as kind of an Eagle Scout, and a guy who saw the good in everyone.

Hartmann: Bob was an Eagle Scout, too.

Smith: Was he really? Well, that’s another thing they had in common.

Hartmann: Yes. And another thing before I forget: Bob’s father had the same birthday as Jerry. Betty had the same birthday as Bob.

Smith: Really?

Hartmann: In that foursome now, two of them have the same birthdays. And when Bob introduced the President to his father, and said, “And, you know, both of you have the same birthday.” And grandfather Hartmann said, “I had it first.”

Smith: Was Ford inclined to trust people maybe too much?

Hartmann: Yes, he did. I know that there were a couple of people, I won’t say names, that he felt he was taken in a little by, that weren’t working for Ford – were working against him.

Smith: Right. Now, that brings us to Al Haig. Had they met before?

Hartmann: Yeah, they had met.

Smith: Where did the confrontation, or where did the clash come – what was it over?

Hartmann: Well, Haig, as I said, he announced to everybody, “I am the President.” That’s what he said, hear my words. And he had all these people who were working for him that were really cowed into believing him because I think he could get
kind of mean. He wanted to be in charge, he definitely wanted to be in charge and he started them picking up their – well, one of the things that Bob and terHorst was it?

Smith: Jerry terHorst?

Hartmann: Bob said, “We don’t want anything carried away from the White House.” And Haig was having them pack up things and carting them out, and that’s when Bob called Benton Becker and Benton came on the next plane and came up here. He’s a wonderful person.

Smith: And they obviously had known each other from Benton’s earlier work with the Ford office.

Hartmann: But that was a Haig deal. He wanted to take charge. He wanted to run it. And if there was going to be a new one, he wanted to still be the president. Egotistic, I don’t know. I think you’re kind of screwed up upstairs when you have that kind of an attitude. But Bob was too smart for him.

Smith: How did it manifest – their conflict? Did they have words?

Hartmann: I don’t know. Bob would tell me what was going on, but I don’t know whether they ever – I’m sure they had words together, but whether there was anything bad said, I doubt it.

Smith: Did Haig try to have him fired?

Hartmann: Oh, I’m sure he did. Bob was his worst enemy.

Smith: Because, in effect, he prevented him from controlling Ford in the White House.

Hartmann: Yes, that’s right. He really wanted to control that whole thing.

Smith: When Rumsfeld came onto the scene, was that awkward in any way? How did that work? Because, let’s face it, on Capitol Hill, I guess Bob had been chief of staff himself, and now he’s in this very different environment. Was that awkward at all?
Hartmann: He and Rummy got along. There was an awful lot of talk about them not getting along, but there could be some incidents. But as far as Rummy – he came to Bob’s service – he flew up here. He was down south someplace. He came up at his service. I like him.

Smith: Yeah. And Cheney? Did they get along?

Hartmann: Daddy did not like Cheney. Daddy was the first person who found out Cheney wasn’t the good guy.

Smith: Really?

Hartmann: Oh, yes.

Smith: That’s interesting.

Hartmann: He did not like Cheney, he did not like what he did.

Smith: What was it that he objected to, or what did he find?

Hartmann: Well, I can’t say. You could probably go back and read in here. As far as he was concerned, Cheney was not doing him any good.

Smith: Now, I’m told, and I know this because of the work I’ve been doing, that Bob was actually one of Nelson Rockefeller’s friends and allies in the administration. That the Vice President felt a little bit left out, and I know he regarded Bob as a friend.

Hartmann: We liked Nelson.

Smith: What do you remember about Nelson?

Hartmann: Well, I’ll tell you. I liked him. I remember one night at a party – was it at the White House? We were dancing, it was a big party, and when the dancing started Nelson asked me to dance. And we had our picture taken – and it was just a lovely picture of us – and down at the bottom he wrote on there, “I hope Bob couldn’t tell what I was saying to you,” or something like that.

Smith: Was he a good dancer?
Hartmann: Yeah. When we lived in St. Croix, you know Nelson’s family owned Caneel Bay on St. John and Nelson called and invited us to come over for lunch. He sent a plane over for us. A little plane – I sat up in front – I thought I had my Volkswagen up in the air – and flew over there and landed – not on the strip – landed on the beach. We landed and a car picked us up. Then we went to the resort and had lunch. And Nelson had just had a birthday and he’d been given a camera. Nelson was out shooting pictures of everybody. Everybody else was taking pictures of Nelson taking pictures.

Smith: He was a lifelong photographer. That’s interesting.

Hartmann: That was fun. They had been to our house to parties. In those days we had a million parties. I liked Happy very much. She was very nice. I remember one party they came a little early because they knew they were going to have to leave. I said I was so sorry and she said, “Oh, Roberta, you know, my two children are up in New York and I have to see them.” And I said, “Yes, I certainly understand.” It was kind of too bad the way he went out of life, but he was a nice guy.

Smith: Were there other people in the administration that Bob was close to? People on the White House staff or Cabinet or people that he did work for? Did he write any for Mrs. Ford?

Hartmann: No. He didn’t write anything for her.

Smith: Were there other people you can think of as friends in the administration?

Hartmann: Well, Arthur Burns and Jack Marsh, Jim Lynn, and Secretary Diddendorf(?) and Kissinger. Kissinger used to tease me. He has been a very good friend.

Smith: Really?

Hartmann: You know, he gave my son’s hospital $1,000 in Bob’s name?

Smith: That’s nice.

Hartmann: The teasing came from a picture in the paper – I don’t know what it was – and underneath it, it said I was Mrs. Rumsfeld instead of Mrs. Hartmann. And Kissinger saw that and from then on he would say to me, “And how are you,
Mrs. Rumsfeld?” He’d just lean over and say it, and I said to Bob, “What am I going to do to stop Henry from saying that?” Well, he said, “The next time he says that, you say, ‘And how are you Secretary Richardson?” Henry just howled. He said, “You know how to hurt a guy.”

Smith: Let me make a note of it to follow up on that.

Smith: The speechwriter’s life, particularly at the White House, has got to be consuming. Obviously, it’s not a nine-to-five job. Certainly not a 40 hour a week job. Any stories or anything come to mind? It must be pretty consuming to do that job, being on call, presumably, constantly.

Hartmann: I don’t remember. I just remember he would talk to me about what he was writing.

Smith: Were there kinds of speeches he liked to write better than others? There’s always Lincoln Day addresses, and there’s commencement addresses. Were there things that he enjoyed more than others about the job?

Hartmann: He just enjoyed writing.

Smith: He did?

Hartmann: Yes. Like that publisher says, “This reads like a novel.” He likes to write, he has a way with words. And he didn’t have to go over in his mind forty times how am I going to say this. He thought about and put down some words and then he put it together. He loved writing.

Smith: Do you have any remembrances of the Bicentennial year? There were all sorts of State Dinners and of course the campaign was going on at that point. Was there every any doubt about Ford running in ’76? Was there ever any question?

Hartmann: I don’t think so. Of course, I think Ronald Reagan is responsible for him losing the election. You don’t take on an incumbent president of your own party. But Nancy was going to be first lady or break a leg.

Smith: I assume Bob was involved in the writing of the acceptance speech at the convention?
Hartmann: Yes.

Smith: Do you know if a victory speech was written for election night if they won?

Hartmann: No, I don’t know. I bet you they were thinking of everything else besides what they’d write.

Smith: Was he busy in the campaign?

Hartmann: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Did he travel with the President?

Hartmann: Yes.

Smith: Abroad?

Hartmann: He went with him practically every place he went.

Smith: Did he enjoy that?

Hartmann: Yeah. I remember riding in the plane with them. They were going to Myrtle Beach – is that down in the Carolinas or something?

Smith: Yes.

Hartmann: This is a story that never got in the paper. We went down there and we stayed there and we were going on to – where would we be going? What’s the next big town?

Smith: Going south – down to Savannah? Or Charleston?

Hartmann: Well, I’m not sure, but I know we stopped at Myrtle Beach. And General Westmoreland, I think it was he and his wife, we had a setting of little cottages and the Fords had one and we had one, and they invited Westmoreland and his wife to dinner at their place. The next morning they came over and told Bob – Ford ate some fish and he got a little bone stuck on the uvula back there, you know, and fortunately they got it out. And that never was in the paper.

Smith: The President got the bone in his throat?
Hartmann: Yeah.

Smith: What did you like about President Ford?

Hartmann: Well, he was so real. You know, we had lots of close association. Bob got him to put in a swimming pool at his home and later Bob got the pool in the White House donated.

Smith: Did he?

Hartmann: We had a lot of things to talk about other than politics. We could visit and spend the evening. We’d be there at their house in Virginia to dinner, they’d be here. All this camaraderie was good, was nice, easy.

Smith: The kids – did you have much contact with the kids?

Hartmann: Yes. We met the kids, we saw them. When I saw Steve this last time, I said, “You have forgotten what you used to do.” He’d used to come up and kiss me on the back of the neck. I said, “You haven’t done that. I’ve missed that.” But, that Ford family – now nothing ever that I know of was ever said about the children? Was there anything?

Smith: No.

Hartmann: What a family! It was unbelievable that a man of this importance could have such a lovely wife and lovely children that knew how to behave. And she did a lot for the world with her openness about drinking, about having breast cancer. That shows what a family can do if a family works together. Susan said, “We’ve got to tell Mother we know what’s going on, and it has to stop.” And they all worked. And sometime after that we were at dinner at their place in Palm Springs, and we’d all had a drink and she asked Bob, “You want another drink?” And he said, “No, I guess not.” She says, “What’s the matter, you think you’ll end up in my place?” She had a great sense of humor.

Smith: The Betty Ford Center. So she had a sense of humor?

Hartmann: Oh, yes, she did. But she was great. She was kind of tardy sometimes. We were out in California before a speech, and they said to me, they knew I was close to her, “You’ve got to get Betty on time because she is going to receive
an award.” And she was always kind of late. Everybody knew that. But who cares. But this time she was going to receive an award. She was in her dining room but she had lost an eyelash and she was looking for it on the floor. I said, “What are you looking for?” “Well, I lost an eyelash, do you see it anywhere down there?” And we looked and we didn’t find it, she said, “I’ll just take the other one off.” And I said, “Betty, you have to be there on time. I’m going to stay here and I’m going to walk you to there and you’re going to go.” And one of the other girls came flying out and said, “How do you like being her control person” or something. And I said, “I’m not. I’m her friend helping her.”

Smith: Being late was always a trademark wasn’t it?

Hartmann: Yes.

Smith: It’s funny, because the President was so punctual. The ’76 campaign – at the end – did you think you were going to win?

Hartmann: No. It just looked too bad.

Smith: How rough was that on the President? Because it took him a while to digest.

Hartmann: Yes, well, wouldn’t it? Of course, it would. But I don’t ever remember him ranting and raving or anything. He’s not that kind of a person. But I’m sure it was difficult. It had to be.

Smith: They enjoyed their new life out in California.

Hartmann: Yeah. Bob was a pallbearer at his funeral.

Smith: When was the last time you saw him?

Hartmann: Betty didn’t come to the dinner this summer, the four kids were there. The last time I saw him was the last dinner he came every June or July – end of June. He came every summer for this dinner and of course I was there at the last one.

Smith: Did he and Bob keep in touch?

Hartmann: Yes.
Smith: Talk by phone?

Hartmann: Oh, yes. They talked often.

Smith: Did Bob do any work for him after he left the White House?

Hartmann: No.

Smith: How do you think Ford should be remembered? Maybe I can make it more personal. How will you remember him?

Hartmann: As a very caring, responsible person, who did his best for his country, for his friends, for everybody. Just a God-given person to help us out. He was.

Smith: And Bob passed away – when?

Hartmann: A year ago this last April 11, three days after his 92nd birthday. I will give you a program of his service which took place at the Metropolitan United Methodist Church in Washington, DC. It has Bob’s picture on the cover.

Smith: Yes.

Hartmann: I thought I’d give you that.

Smith: Oh, thank you. But you say he was a honorary pallbearer at the Ford funeral?

Hartmann: Oh, yes, but because Bob was in a wheelchair he didn’t walk with the others when they arrived at the cathedral. We sat to the right of the speaker and then followed the pall bearers out. Our son, Rob, was invited and he helped his father. At Bob’s funeral, my son spoke and read letters from President Bush ’41 and ’43, and Kissinger and Cheney ______ it or not. But the most beautiful was a letter from Betty. Our grandchildren talked and our daughter did, and Bob Orben spoke.

Smith: We had a great talk with Bob. We interviewed Bob and he was singing Bob’s praises. He was a great admirer of your husband.

Hartmann: Yes, and he was always very, very loyal, and I’m sure that he probably kept other little things down level, because he knew they weren’t so and not important so don’t get disturbed about it. He’s a very nice man.
Smith: He is.

Hartmann: And Benton Becker is a doll.

Smith: Well, we’ll tell them we talked. Thank you so much. This was fun.
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Smith: Thank you for doing this. Tell us what you were doing that led you to the Ford White House.

Hills: Well, I was commuting, for one thing, from Los Angeles. As you may know, I had accepted a job with Elliott Richardson as assistant secretary of defense. But I couldn’t get free of that in time, and so Elliott hired Charles Freeman as the assistant secretary of international security affairs, and then he quit. At which I was doing the job of chairman of the company and I couldn’t quite get free of it. I wanted the job very much. So Elliott went to the attorney general and he quickly found Carla. I like to claim he found her in my resume, but I think he probably found her all by himself. And she came back and we had a lovely evening with Elliott and Ann Richardson in their home in Crestlane. And Carla accepted the job. We got up the next morning and bought the house we bought before when I thought I was going to be assistant secretary of defense, and flew home and that was the day that Nixon fired Richardson.

So there was a hiatus where we kind of sulked, and a number of people convinced Carla to take the job, including the chief justice, who had been the assistant attorney general.

Smith: Chief Justice Berger?

Hills: Yes. Chief Justice Berger had been the assistant attorney general for civil, and he called her and said, “Miss Hills, no woman has had a job as important in Washington, and nobody is better qualified than you are. So take the job. Forget who the president is, forget the attorney general. It’s a job that’s made for you. You should do it.”

Smith: That’s interesting. That flies a little bit in the face of Berger’s public image.
Hills:  No, he was very good about this. He was interested. And then the White House, Peter Flanagan, in particular, offered me a couple of jobs. At one time would I be interested in becoming the chairman of the SEC. Ray Garrett had turned it down because of his wife’s illness, and I actually played some role in convincing him to take the job. I was also sounded out on becoming chair of the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, and to run the Bicentennial, things that didn’t seem all that exciting. I even interviewed Henry Kissinger to be undersecretary of state for economic affairs. I doubt he’d of offered it to me anyway, but before he could decide, Nixon quit and all the people that he’d offered the job to before flocked in.

I then talked with Bill Seidman and others about jobs, and then John Dunlap asked me to be his undersecretary of labor. I’d taught with John, I thought I’d take that job because Carla was here anyway. And then, literally, the week that I was about to accept with John, Carla became secretary of HUD. And those two jobs don’t go together very well. The White House asked me to do this or that, including international economic affairs, and then Phil Areda quit. Got mad at the vice president and went back to Harvard. And so the job of counsel to the president opened.

The president, who I’d not met yet - Carla had not yet been sworn in as secretary of housing - the president and others sent the word that they’d like me to consider the job. And then, literally during Carla’s swearing in ceremony, I was thinking about it and the vice president came to me and said he knew me through his lawyer Oscar Reubhausen. Oscar and I had been on a board together, and he said that he knew that I was interested in political economics – that’s what I taught at Harvard – and if I would take this counsel job that he knew I had been offered, that the president and he wanted to emphasize the need for regulatory reform. And would I do that?

It was very exciting. I don’t know that I said anything, but in the ceremony after Carla’s swearing in, the band was playing, the kids were there, and the president and the vice president assumed I’d accepted. So that’s how I became counsel to the president.
Smith: Let me go back. You mention Phil Areda(?) left, I assume he got mad at Vice President Rockefeller?

Hills: Yes.

Smith: What was the gist of that?

Hills: I’m not exactly sure what job it was. But he had assumed he was going to get a job, probably as head of the domestic council. Nobody has ever said that to me directly, but I think that was it. And I had actually been helping Phil. Phil and I had played bridge together when I was a law clerk back here in 1955, and so I’d come into Phil’s office occasionally. He had a card table in his office for me, so I could tell him things about the business world. And so, I took Phil’s position and became counsel to the president. I was excited about the idea of political economics and the idea that the president was really willing to consider rolling back the heavy hand of government.

Smith: That’s interesting because I have said on a number of occasions, in my personal opinion, it’s a mistake to see the Ford presidency as a coda - as the last chapter of the Nixon presidency. That, in many ways, you can see Richard Nixon as the last New Deal president, someone who felt as a politician to his fingertips, the need to accommodate himself to that consensus. Whereas, Ford, in some ways, is more conservative than Nixon. And that the Ford presidency really represents a fresh start in a number of ways. It’s more about foreshadowing what would become conventional wisdom, than it is about tying up loose ends of the past. And deregulation is a classic case of that.

Hills: I think that’s fair, but he didn’t like the word deregulation. He really didn’t, and I didn’t, either. It was bad regulation. It was regulatory reform. He didn’t want to touch environmental matters. He didn’t want to touch things that dealt with that. When we talked about it, he didn’t think that we had a scientific basis before making major changes and environmental reform – at that time. But he was interested in the monopolization of business by the government. In other words, by the elimination of competition.
So I would not put him down as part of this deregulation issue. None of the things he did, did any more than stop the fixing of prices. Trucks, planes, and trains. That’s where he had great success. He was interested in communications. He supported the case against AT&T, which was – he didn’t bring it – but he was supportive of the idea that we need not fix telephone rates. It’s hard to imagine – he made this speech in late 1974, and the speech basically was in Chicago saying that he wanted to pull back the heavy hand of government.

I think people, editorials, treated it as kind of a polemic. Just sort of another little political speech. But literally, when I got to the White House, and had early meetings with him, he echoed what the vice president said, and said, “I want to see what we can do.” And what he said is that, “I want to find the bipartisan limits, and I want you to test them.” He sent me over to see Senator Kennedy, Senator Cannon. He said he called the Senators. “I want you to talk to the Senator about what we could do in this era.”

Steve Bryer, fortunately, was Kennedy’s executive assistant, and as luck would have it, the year Carla and I were visiting professors at Harvard law school, Steve rented the attic of the house we were given to live in. So we had a wonderful friendship. Steve was interested in airline deregulation. Howard Cannon was interested in trucking and train deregulation. With the president’s complete support we literally formed a group of twenty Congressmen and Senators. Imagine this – both parties – a formal group, with whom the president met in the Cabinet Room to talk about his interest, the places he wanted to go. It was really dramatic. We came out and briefed the press afterwards with Senator Pastore for the Democrats, and I was asked what the president hoped to accomplish, and I said, “We hoped to begin a consensus, find a consensus, on reform of price fixing by the federal government.” And they asked Senator Pastore. He said, in words to the effect, “Oh, Mr. Hills is wrong. We have a consensus.” It was a very nice time.

Then we formed a group again, with the president’s approval, of people within the government. Paul O’Neill and John Snow were on my committee; Paul MacAvoy was my co-chair for the council of economic advisers; Tom
Kauper from Justice Department; about twelve people. We met every Wednesday in the Roosevelt Room, to talk about what we were doing. And we organized a group from the Congress of staff people to do the same. And with their approval, the president gathered in the East Room a classic picture of, I think, fourteen regulatory agency heads, with all the press, and with me as just a moderator, and Paul MacAvoy there to be the expert, but the president didn’t need much of Paul. He talked to every one of the regulatory heads and talked to them about what he wanted them to consider. Not what he ordered them to do. It was really quite dramatic. He said to Richard Wiley, chair of the BCC, words to the effect, “Richard, I don’t think you get my drift.” Richard was talking about fewer pages, shorter times, what have you, and he said, “I’m asking the question: do phone rates have to be regulated?” And when the ICC came up he said, “I don’t understand why we have an Interstate Commerce Commission.” Pretty dramatic.

And, of course, we went from there. While Jimmy Carter, President Carter, gets due credit for passing the airline deregulation bill, it was the president’s initiative. The bill that the president, Howard Baker – I think it was Howard Baker – and Senator Kennedy, introduced that deregulated airlines. Planes and trucks got done during his term. When he announced his opposition to trucking regulations, there was a holy whazoo from the Teamsters Union, which was a Republican supporter in those days, and equally from the Trucking Association. The airlines, with the exception of United Airlines and Frontier Airlines, were deadly opposed to deregulation. The manufacturers were deadly opposed.

Smith: And on what grounds did they oppose?

Hills: Well, it had worked just fine for them.

Smith: The status quo.

Hills: The status quo worked fine, and he was going to destroy successful industries. The remarkable political will he had in doing that, his confidence that notwithstanding the public uproar, that the Congress would support him. And
they did. It was an enormous time. It was an extraordinary time. It was unusual.

Smith: This just confirms our interview with Carla, I was telling her when we talked about Bill Coleman, it’s amazing to think today, in that relatively brief period of time, just in his field, everything from the 55 mph speed limit, to airbags, to the Metro in D.C., to finishing the Interstate Highway System…

Hills: Oh, well, but wait a minute. The only president who had the courage to put a tax on imported oil. Mileage standards for cars. Strategic oil reserve. Those were not small things. And the force that he did that with. Political advisors were saying, “Now hold up.”

I hope Don doesn’t mind me telling this story, but as I was leaving the White House to go to the SEC, we had the president’s order, announcement, on airline deregulation ready to go. I was leaving the next day or two, and Bill Coleman and Ed Levi and I came over to the White House for that little ceremony, and we understood that it had been taken off the calendar. I think that Don thought these things were really politically not good things to do. I said, “Well, I guess we’ll have to put off my swearing in ceremony.” Ed Levi objected. And so the president signed that and it went forward.

One session is worth talking about. That is, the president of the union, the Teamsters Union, Fitzsimmons, and the head of the American Truckers Association, who came from Grand Rapids, came in to see the president in the Cabinet Room. I think Bill Coleman was there, and as I recall, maybe a couple of others. Fitzsimmons could hardly speak, he was so mad. He was just furious. But the president’s friend, who liked to call him Jerry, was talking very nicely. He said, “You have to understand that this is a complicated world we’re in. We, who want to ship transcontinental, we don’t really necessarily want to take milk to the schools of Grand Rapids.” And the president looked up and said, I forget the fellow’s name, “Are you telling me that the country that walked across the continent in covered wagons can’t get milk to Grand Rapids unless we regulate it?” He was really something.

Smith: Do you often think in retrospect, gee I wish the public could have seen this?
Hills: Oh, yes. I wish they could have seen him talking in a session. Because of regulatory reform, because it was dealing with anti-trust concepts, Ed Levi and Bill Coleman and I spent a lot of time with the president. Now those are two people of enormous intellects, and boy, the president is right there with them. Anybody who thinks that man was slow is crazy. He understood it, and he understood the politics of it. By that I mean, he understood how when you did this, it would cause that.

You may recall we had White Houses around the country, and we had a White House in St. Louis – a day in St. Louis for the White House. He briefed the press there on the budget, as though he were in the press. He was asked why he had cut the job training bill money, something specific about, something out of left field. And he looked at it and he said, “No, you’ve misread the budget. Yes, we took this money out of this program, because this program was sending people to Mickey Mouse schools that did nothing but take money and give nothing. We put more money into on-the-job training. I believe in training a person for a job that exists, not for a job that doesn’t exist.” Jim Lynn was sitting there and he said, “I didn’t know the president could do that.” So he was a president that this country – this country didn’t know what they had.

Smith: Broder said, I think it was after the election, he said, “People are just sort of realizing that Gerald Ford, in fact, is the president that they always said they wanted, but didn’t perhaps appreciate at the time.”

Hills: They didn’t see it. Carla and I were at a party in Sun Valley. By accident, we were there, some people we knew were having a party – mostly Democratic friends. We got kidded a little bit about the fact we were the only Republicans present. Tip O’Neill was there and after a while, with that wonderful voice of his, he said, “My friends, I mean no disrespect for President Carter, but in your lifetime you’ll never have a president as good as Jerry Ford.” Just marvelous.

Smith: Don Penny tells the story. He was in the Oval Office and the president just had a meeting with Tip, very jovial and very constructive. Then, of course, Tip went out on the North Lawn, and proceeded to unload in front of the
press. Don saw this and he rushed back in and he said, “You won’t believe what Tip O’Neill is saying.” And he proceeds to recount all of these horror stories. The president is smoking his pipe, and he says, “Oh, Don, that’s just politics.”

Hills: When we came back from this session with all the regulatory heads, and Paul and I went back with the president to the Oval Office, the president was quite pleased, as he should have been. This, by the way, was a huge story on the front page of the *New York Times*. It was well publicized, but the public didn’t catch it. The president was excited about it and Paul McElroy told the story. He said, “Mr. President, you’re right. We’ve accomplished a lot, but you’ve got to remember that a regulatory agency is like a turtle. It’s got a very thick hide. You can put a little lettuce in front of it, it will quicken its pace ever so imperceptibly, but only imperceptibly.”

Later, I got a message from the chairman of the CAB, John Robson, who was basically for deregulation. I’d given a flamboyant speech about what we were going to do, and he made up a poem about the deregulatory turtle and the last line was: And the son of a bitch can bite.

Smith: Did you see the president’s sense of humor?

Hills: Oh, yeah. He loved it. I told that joke which was really Paul McElroy’s joke, but the president just loved it. He liked to tell it. He liked to tell it so much that when I went to the SEC, with many other commission heads, we formed the Order of the Turtle. And we found a crystal ashtray in the shape of a turtle that only worked when it was on its back, of course. And we gave that turtle to whomever had done something with regulatory reform in a given period.

Smith: His decision making – clearly he was very comfortable with having high powered, in some cases, large ego’d, very brainy, very assertive, people engage in intellectual fisticuffs. And then he’d make the decision.

Hills: To a degree. As you know, he was irritated one day and several people changed jobs. I was gone by that time.
Smith: As you know, I’m working on this Rockefeller biography and part of that is trying to track down – the president always insisted that really it originated with him – this whole enterprise. There is something about Don Rumsfeld - people just insist that Rumsfeld had to be behind this. Something about Rumsfeld, I guess, that, even when he’s not responsible, there is a school of thought that says he must have been pulling wires behind the scenes. Because Rockefeller is gone, and he is over at the Pentagon, and Bush is, in effect, deep-sixed at the CIA. Anyway, people read into that political ambition.

Hills: Well, I can’t deal with motives, but I think it’s pretty clear that he was responsible for George Bush going to the CIA. The president had other people in mind. I think it’s fair for me to say that he was interested in having Edward Bennett Williams take the job. He actually sent me to talk to Ed. He asked me to read all the things that Ed had written and done and summarize it for him very quietly. And after a week or two of looking at Ed’s background, he said, “Go see if Ed would do it.” Ed was flattered and sent a note to the president to that effect, but said that he loved his firm too much, that he couldn’t do that.

One curious time – actually in my last days at the White House – the vice president had this plan for synthetic fuel, as you may recall.

Smith: The Energy Independence Corporation.

Hills: Right. I can’t tell you how much we all admired Nelson Rockefeller. Many of us met with him every Tuesday for lunch, and he would talk to us about what he cared about. Bill Donaldson was there at the time. Bill was counselor. Dick Parsons was there. Paul O’Neill usually came to those. Frank Zarb came to those. Dick Cheney usually came to those Tuesday lunches. But a number of us had some concern about the bill – that it was too large.

At one lunch – I had not been heard from on the bill – he asked my view on it. It wasn’t so much a legal matter as an economic matter, although I sat in on the Senior Staff meetings. And I expressed my view to him. I said I thought that it would smother the issue. He said, “Well, look, we’re going to have this session. You come to it. You express yourself.” Alan Greenspan had been pushing me to do it also. So we came and we had a discussion. Don got very
upset by the fact that anybody was trying to reopen an issue that he felt was closed. Some harsh words were said. The president said, “Will you boys quit scrapping? You’re all going to California with me. Go get dressed and get packed. We’re leaving in about three hours.”

We spent a week on the airplane. Well, more than that; I spent about ten days. We dedicated a law school at Oklahoma, Pepperdine law school in Los Angeles, went up and dedicated a new Stanford law school building, and went down and spent a weekend playing golf with Dee Keaton and Leonard Firestone.

That was when the lady took a shot at the president after he gave the speech. That was anticlimactic. He gave the speech for Nelson’s program at the Building Trades annual convention in San Francisco, walked out of the building, the shot was taken. Nobody ever heard anything about the Nelson Rockefeller plan again. It was just wiped off the face of the earth.

Smith: Yeah. There is a story I told Carla that I heard from Bill Simon who may or may not have exaggerated. But as I understood it, there was a heated, probably more than one, pretty heated Cabinet discussion about the Energy Independence Corporation.

Hills: Oh, yes.

Smith: And at some point, Bill said to the president, words to the effect of, “Don’t let him do to the country what he did to New York.” And the president – it’s revealing – indicated that he was going to support this. Simon went up and renewed the argument because he felt very strongly about this. The president said, “Bill, you and I both know there is no way the Congress is ever going to buy into this, but I’m not going to embarrass Nelson.” Does that sound credible to you?

Hills: It could be. There is another part to it. You didn’t mention this, but one of his first acts when he came to the presidency was to reverse Nixon’s position on South Africa.

Smith: Tell us about that.
Hills: Well, it came before I got there. He simply went along with the sanctions.

Smith: Sanctions from Congress?

Hills: No, no. The world.

Smith: UN?

Hills: Well, there were all kinds of sanctions that countries had put on, and President Nixon had chosen not to do that. It was very early on that the president did. Another time that was even more dramatic to me – you may recall that there was a brief flurry when a number of Saudi banks had bond issues in the United States and excluded the Jewish houses – Goldman Sachs, Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers, Solomon Brothers – and the president was just furious at this thing. He read it in the newspaper, or I suppose in the briefing. He called me in and said, “I called for Bill Simon. This will not happen again. This will not happen again.” He told Bill and myself, “See that it does never again.”

Bill and I spoke to each of the houses, White Weld Merrill Lynch, I think was one of the houses. I want to be careful here. A couple of other houses that had been in the syndicate that had excluded the Jewish houses. We basically, either in my office or Bill’s office, we alternated, we would say to these gentlemen, “The president of the United States has said that if it should happen again, he will do everything in his power to see that they are no longer in the business.” Bill said, “Can we do that?” I had no idea, of course.

We did the same thing with the embassies. I was instructed to go to each one of the embassies and meet with the ambassador and say to them the same thing – that the United States is not going to allow them access to our capital markets if that happens again. Just that strongly. He felt very strongly about it.

Smith: What kind of a response did you get?

Hills: It never happened again. Happened about three or four times in a small period of time. Never again. He had that force.

Smith: Now, you started as counsel – when?
Hills: I started in March of ’75. Of course, what I got was the headlines of being the CIA’s czar. Because the day before I’d accepted, there was a rumor that I was going to be the CIA’s czar. And I said, “Come on, be serious. I am interested in the counsel’s job.” And then later, of course, I had taken it the next day, and I said the CIA thing is one part of it. Nick Hurrier of the New York Times confirmed something to the effect that HUD’s Hills husband to be CIA czar. So that was a large part of our effort.

Smith: So you came on in time for the fall of Saigon?

Hills: I was there, yeah.

Smith: What was that all like?

Hills: Well, I was new. I knew I could eat in the dining room and I knew I could have all those perks of the White House, but I didn’t know much about it. Brent called me in the Situation Room and we sat there several days in a row, determining the fate of thousands of human beings. To me – Brent became a hero, if not that day, a few days later. It was terrific the way he handled it.

Smith: What was he doing?

Hills: Well, he was deciding how to get people out – save people, save human lives. Move resources – and he went to great lengths. The president was very concerned about this. It was enormous. And [he] brought them into the United States – brought them in by the tens of thousands.

Smith: And that’s a huge story because, of course, Congress wanted to pull the plug as soon as we were out. Sort of forget we had ever been there. And certainly forget any moral obligation we had. And as I understand it, the president felt very strongly, was angry about this, and put together this crazy quilt coalition. George Meany was involved and the American Jewish Congress and other groups. Were you involved in that effort?

Hills: Well, in the sense that I was a lawyer overseeing it. Overseeing is the wrong word. I mean, are we doing anything wrong here? Back and forth.
Smith: And the effort was basically to go to the American people and, in effect, shame Congress into reversing itself.

Hills: Right. It was the same thing he did when he pardoned the people that were in Canada. He pardoned Nixon and then he pardoned them. They said he healed the nation. He did it in so many ways, it wasn’t that he just sat there and was a nice guy. He did all kinds of things to make it a better place.

Smith: I’ve always thought that people make a mistake in overlooking the proximity of those two pardons. To me, they were always part of the same effort.

Hills: Oh, I think so. They both happened before I got there, but it was certainly in the DNA, if you will, of the place. This was the president, this was his doing.

Smith: On one level, the political foolhardiness of deciding, I’m going to go to Chicago and tell the VFW this - we’ve been told that it wasn’t in the original speech – that he had Hartmann draft a page and a half that wasn’t staffed out – that he inserted himself. It was very much his initiative. I mean, to walk into the lions’ den and tell them what they really didn’t want to hear.

Hills: You saw it almost every day. Carla may have told you the stories about her bouts with Jim Lynn. The president would listen and decide. I had a bout with Jim when I got to the SEC. I got there and found out we didn’t have any economists in the place. Not one economist in the entire SEC. And I said, “Come on, now. We’ve got to do something about this.” So I went around and kind of worked on my budget, and figured out a way to get it done and proposed that we create this position.

OMB opposed it. We cut back, cut back. I said, “Look, I’ve adjusted it in the budget.” They said, “If you can lower your budget, fine. You don’t need to do something else.” So I asked for a meeting with the president. I had sent over a memo the day of how I was paying for it. So he sat there and listened to the argument of whether or not lawyers could run the SEC or whether you needed an economist. Alan Greenspan was there to support me if I needed it. The president looked up. Looked at Jim and looked at me. He said, “Well, Jim, Rod’s trading three lawyers and two automatic typewriters. That’s not so bad,
is it? At least we get rid of the lawyers.” And that was him. But there was no
doubt about what he was going to do.

Another one. You’ll know the names better than I do, but late in my time
Doug Bennett, I think was the head of the recruiting, personnel office. And he
had promised the head of the Ways and Means Committee, Democratic head
of the Ways and Means Committee, that his son could be on the Consumer
Product Commission. They announced their intention to appoint him, and the
uproar was so big that the president never nominated him. Of course, the
chairman was upset. So Doug told him that the next opening would be his
son’s, and he said, “Well, what’s that going to be?”

The only reason that Doug Bennett knew the next opening was going to be at
the SEC is because I told him that Al Summers wanted to step down, and that
would be opening pretty soon. And so he promised him that job. Well, when it
was leaked, as he did, that this would be the appointment, all hell broke loose.
The Consumer Product Commission is one thing, but put this guy on the SEC,
you’ve got to be kidding.

And so I trudged over to the White House. The president puffed on his pipe
and listened to Doug Bennett and listened to the political people saying boom,
boom, boom. He said nothing. I was agitated a little bit and said words to the
effect that life is tough enough over there, that if I don’t think I have your
support – I wasn’t quite that bad. He showed me the door and he said, “I don’t
think the name has been formally nominated, has it?” It never came up. Six
months went by and no nomination went. He was a good person.

Smith: Everything you say is consistent with what a number of people have said who
talked about him as a calming force.

Hills: “Don’t get upset boys.”

Smith: But he had a temper. Did you see his temper?

Hills: Oh, yeah. He hated the squabbles between Jim Schlesinger and Bill Clements,
the undersecretary. He just hated that. He’d send me over and say, “Can you
keep those boys from scrapping?” He hated scrapping between the thing that
ultimately caused those people to leave. I think he lost his temper a little bit at – who was the head of AT&T? – John – he was in a wheelchair at the time. He came in screaming at the president because of the AT&T case, saying terrible words. And the president got upset and looked at John and said, “John, I assume your health has something to do with your lack of civility, but this office is not used to that and will not tolerate it. Excuse me.” He was no patsy.

Smith: Again, if only the public could have seen him. There is such a dichotomy. I always thought that if there had been a second, a full Ford term, that there would be this sort of Trumanesque - not a cult - but a following. That Ford had many of those qualities – the plainspoken, Midwestern decency, decisiveness – that don’t lend themselves to television. But over the long haul…

Hills: He knew enough about government to know that in his view – let me say it differently. In his view, which I share, that the big job of the president is to make it work better. The issue of, “it isn’t working very well,” and, “how do you work it?” – I don’t know that he used the term, but I always, in thinking back, I want to say, “Well, the president wanted to fix the plumbing. He wanted to make it work.” And in almost every problem it was, “We can make it work better.”

Smith: Not abolish it.

Hills: No, no, not at all. Like the job training; move it from here to there. Make it work. And that was such a huge task – that you didn’t need pie in the sky stuff. He was prepared – he was open to anything, and he was able to understand it. He was able to understand whatever the subject was. He could understand it. Keep it in mind the people he was talking to everyday. They were Bill Coleman, Eliot Richardson, Ed Levi, John Dunlop, the dean of the Harvard faculty, David Matthews, president of the university. Those were no shrinking violets.

Smith: What led Dunlop to leave?
Hills: Oh, it was a sad thing. John didn’t want to be the secretary for very long. And one of the things he wanted to accomplish was to make a grand deal with the Teamsters Union, and in that grand deal – it’s been so long, I used to be a labor lawyer – I don’t think I can restate it, but basically, he had a grand idea for labor peace in the construction industry - and one important part was to allow common-situs picketing.

Smith: And explain that term.

Hills: Well, it was to allow the union to picket the whole site if there was a dispute with one union. So the Teamsters Union, which is a powerful force at any construction site, was critical to the Plumbers Union. You could always get by without a plumber for a day or two, or you can find a plumber or two. You can replace them. But this common-situs picketing, and it wasn’t just this…it was something that John had worked at for years.

You may remember that he co-chaired, or chaired, I guess, a group of businessmen and labor leaders. Enormous importance of the head of the union, AFL-CIO – George Meany and his deputy Lane Kirkland…at any rate, George Meany. This was part of it. And the chairman of General Electric, Walter Wriston from Citibank, about ten businessmen and ten labor leaders and they met with John regularly to deal with these major issues. Labor-management relations were – it was an interesting time. Then you had people like George Schultz, John Dunlop, of course, as secretary of labor, and John.

The president came to understand that if he endorsed the common-situs picketing, that would be it. Reagan would be nominated. There was no chance, whatever you thought about the Rockefeller issue, this was the headlines. And so he sadly told John, he said, “John, what good will I do to you if I’m not re-elected?” - because it won’t last beyond the week. But John felt he had to resign over that. It was too bad. He was a good man.

Smith: And then Bill Usery replaced him?

Hills: Bill Usery replaced him, right. And Bill was a good man. We’ve had a lot good people in as secretary of labor, but, none of the classic people recently.
Smith: Tell me about Ed Levi.

Hills: Oh, he was just a Rock of Gibraltar. He would suffer no mincing around about what the law was. I had one run in with him which was kind of fun. For example, I’m told that he would not stay as attorney general, and would not take the job in the first place unless he was comfortable that the counsel’s office was well staffed in the White House. He cared about that.

I’m sure he knew Phil Areeda, my predecessor, and I knew Ed pretty well. I’d been chairman of the American Bar Foundation research committee where Ed sat on it, so we knew him pretty well. But during the CIA investigation, you may recall the case, they had fed LSD to one of their fellow colleagues who jumped out the window and killed himself. I had the sad pleasure in telling the president about it when it came to my attention.

Smith: Was he shocked?

Hills: Outraged. Absolutely outraged. He said, “I want you to make sure that that family is taken care of. The family of this man.” And so I went back to get the records and found out that the Justice Department had settled the case sometime earlier – long before they knew that he had been intentionally given this drug. I went over to see – Carla’s successor at the civil division – Rex Lee. I said, “Rex, the president wants to know,” we always said that – the president wants to know, but the fact is, he did want to know, “The president wants to know what this tort will be treated like.” Rex said, “Well, we’ve settled the case. It’s done.” [I said,] “Let’s say it’s not settled.” We got into an argument. I said, “Look, Rex, tell me what the money is you would pay if it had not been settled, and it’s up to the president to get the bill passed to pay that amount. I want to know the best your people – what’s the amount of money that we would normally pay for this wrongful death.” Ed called me and said, “Rod, the memories of the Justice Department of having the White House beat up on them is still too fresh. Be calm, I’ll take care of it.” So that’s how we proceeded.

The President did another thing that was interesting. When I early got there, he said, “I think we ought to have a discussion of the Constitution. We’ve got
Ed Levi over there, and we’ve got Scalia over there, we’ve got Bork over there. Rod, you probably want to put some more moderate mix into that and let’s have at it. And so Jerry Gunther at Stanford, who I’d known - he came to Stanford after I’d left, of course, but he and I overlapped as law clerks in the Court - I called Jerry, and Jerry came back and we had several sessions with the president. Several amongst ourselves. We talked about various things like the one-House veto, just kind of a discussion and the president enjoyed that. He cared about that. The Mayaguez incident, he cared about that. He worried about the War Powers Act.

Smith: But he wasn’t prepared to frontally challenge it? We talked to Jack Marsh earlier this week at some length about this.

Hills: Tony Lewis, Anthony Lewis, called me and said he wanted to talk about it. The president authorized me to talk to him. Lewis wrote a column which was very complimentary to the president, which said he understood the subtleties of saying that here was an act and both parties would be better off not challenging it. He was good about that. He liked to talk about things that – no law pushed to extreme is a good law. I can’t say those are his words, but that was certainly his philosophy.

Smith: Let me back up because you talked about this LSD incident. Was this the fallout from the Seymour Hersh articles that supposedly revealed some of the worst of the CIA abuses and touched off the subsequent investigations?

Hills: It began this way. As I got to the White House, the Rockefeller Commission investigation of the alleged abuses of the CIA was about to come out. It was in the works. The Church Committee had been appointed. My recollection is the Rockefeller thing began first, the Church Committee happened and…

Smith: The cynics, of course, saw the Rockefeller Commission as an attempt to forestall more damaging revelations on the Hill.

Hills: Well, they did. But on the other hand, they were very anxious to get it. Early in my time they sent over – the vice president’s staff – sent me the thing that they were going to produce in a couple or three days. I read it through the night until fairly early in the morning. I went in to see the president the next
day and I said, “This is not a complete report. There are names in here about things that allegedly happened, and it’s just not correct that this report should be published. It’s not done.”

Smith: In what way? In terms of verifying the information?

Hills: Well, they said so and so is alleged to have been involved with this. And it was quite clear there were more investigations to be done to see whether it was correct or incorrect. There were just a lot of them. I gave the president some examples and he said, “You’re right. This can’t come out.” I went over to see Fritz Schwarz, Church’s chief counsel, or called him. He was at once furious when I said we were not going to release it at that time, and I was told that Church was upset. It was causing a furious public reaction we all sat there: what do we do about it? I don’t know who did this. Who was the – at Brookings now, the press guy?

Smith: Ron Nessen.

Hills: Ron Nessen. I think it was Ron I knew. I’d only been there for maybe two weeks, and he said, “Why don’t you send Rod out and have him answer their questions until they get tired?” So I went out and the first question was from somebody: Is this embargoed? I didn’t know what he was talking about. Tom Brokaw, an old friend, called me, he said, “Rod,” he said, “it means, when can we release it publicly?” Then Ron took over. Then we talked back and forth, back and forth, for a long time. And finally, Tom asked a question, he said, “Is this investigation of the CIA, is this a wild goose chase, or is this something that needs to be done?” And I said, as previously authorized to say, “There is substantial reason to believe this is an appropriate activity.” So they then had a half an hour of wait. Then the president came out. The front page of the paper was “The press had thrown out all the fast balls, had nothing left for the president.”

Smith: Now out of that effort came the executive order prohibiting assassination?

Hills: Later on. Phil did a good job working with them. We had a number of episodes with the Church Committee. But the president was steadfast in it and...
Smith: What was the relationship between the White House and the Senate Church Committee? Was it difficult?

Hills: I was the go-between. It actually worked out pretty well, mostly because John Tower, salty figure that he was, figured out that when things got really tough, if something was really bad, he would say something that would make Frank Church mad. Frank was a wonderful man, but it was easy to get him mad. And when he got him mad, Church would then have to recuse himself and John Tower, and the matter would be turned over to his number two, Walter Mondale, and Howard Baker. Whenever that happened, the three of us would retreat and discuss it.

The first one was classic, it was a matter involving important people being threatened. We had said that the president said we could tell the Senate that we would let any member of the Senate committee selected by John Tower and Senator Church look at whatever they were trying to get – just one person, no staff – and that person could decide whether or not to recommend a subpoena. But one person only.

Church wouldn’t do that. He said no, that can’t be. Everybody’s good. And so, when we had a fight we retreated to the Situation Room with this box. This tells you about a Washington that doesn’t exist. Walter Mondale said, “Rod, would you characterize again what’s in the box as you did yesterday?” I did, and Fritz looked over at Howard and said, “Howard, do you believe him?” Howard said, “Yeah, I believe him. Fritz, do you want to look at that box.” “I don’t want to look at that box. Howard, do you want to look at that box.”

We went back and told the chairman that we had solved the matter. As I say, that’s a Washington that doesn’t exist anymore. And that was a comity between them.

Smith: It’s doubly interesting because, of course, Fritz Mondale was being groomed as a candidate in ’76, and Frank Church, of course, was a candidate in ’76. So, factor in political aspirations and it makes it even more extraordinary.
Roderick Hills  March 18, 2009

Hills: But there was a time when, at least from my naïve view, the stalwarts of the Congress knew what things had to be resolved, and wouldn’t let those go away. I can’t say they fixed every one of them, but you didn’t get a whole lot of nonsense.

Smith: But you get a sense – and I realize you came in after this – that with the ’74 election and that whole group of so-called Watergate babies, came a more aggressive stance on the part of Congress.

Hills: I was a delegate from California to the ’76 convention when Reagan took over. As you may know, the people supporting Reagan way outnumbered the people supporting Nixon at that convention. And that’s when they changed the voting, you may recall, so that they enhanced the power of people in states that lost. So you really had – it was part of the move to the South.

Smith: I was referring to the mid-term ’74 elections which bring in a whole lot of so-called Watergate babies, and they come here loaded for bear with a more antagonistic, or at least suspicious, view of the executive based upon Vietnam, Watergate and the like. That must have had an impact on relations between the White House and the Hill.

Hills: Well, you’d have thought so, but let me tell/remind you of the story I told you about the twenty congress people and senators from both parties that sat down with the president of the United States and agreed upon a major strategy. That was enormous. And I’m sure you talked with Carla about the number of vetoes that were upheld. Extraordinary. With a veto-proof Congress.

Smith: It is interesting because I think that people did have short memories. He was the fiscal conservative, and some of those who laid claim to that title were much less willing than he to expend political capital on vetoes.

Hills: But the difference is, he was not blind to anything. He would not cut everything at any cost. He was always able to make an argument, “This is important.” He could sort that out. I don’t know that there has been a president since that had that capacity. I should say that differently, there hasn’t been a president since that had that capacity.
Smith: He was also a conservative who did not intrinsically see government as the enemy.

Hills: That’s exactly right.

Smith: He had a healthy skepticism about social engineering. But he was a constructive conservative.

Hills: I think conservative in the British concept. In a sense he was a liberal in the English sense, also. Not a libertarian so much, but just a – you take the stories about South Africa and the Jewish boycott. These things are of moral consequence to him.

Smith: There is that remarkable instance on the eve of the Texas primary – a critical primary. Henry Kissinger is supposed to be going to Africa to, in effect, enforce this new American policy. The trip could have been put off. It certainly wasn’t going to get Ford any votes in the Texas primary. And they went ahead with it and the commitment to black majority rule in southern Africa. Whatever the short-term consequences were.

Hills: The Helsinki Accord. He was laughed at for that. It’s chilling to hear people now. I spent some time in that part of the world, and how important people my age, at the time, thought the Helsinki Accord was to them. Especially in Poland.

Smith: Really? And that’s the great irony. It’s funny, when you go back, people remember the Polish gaffe in the debate. He’d just been to Poland – Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia, but he’d been to three of the satellites, and he’d seen the outpouring. If he had just made reference to what I’ve seen with my own eyes…

Hills: Well, I just learned just recently that certainly during the time that President Ford was in office, Poles could travel freely. They had no trouble getting a visa. They could leave Poland. That was not true of any of the other Iron Curtain countries. They could get up and walk out. That fact alone would cause the president to see Poland differently.

Smith: When did you leave the counsel’s job to go to SEC?
Hills: In October – November, October, I think.

Smith: Of ’75?

Hills: Yeah. It was a short time – nine months.

Smith: And what were the pressing issues at SEC at that point?

Hills: Well, I thought it was to maintain the deregulation of fixed commission rates. On May 1, 1975 the SEC changed the longstanding policy of fixing commission rates. Now the great credit for that goes, of course, to the commissioners themselves. Ray Garrett, who was chair, but the president, and Alan Greenspan, felt very strongly about that. And so when Ray – as I think I told you, Ray was off of the job, turned it down because of his wife, we all persuaded him to take the job.

When I came to the job as counsel, one of my first meetings was with Ray to talk about unfixing commission rates. The press – it was not a secret meeting – I went to talk to the Senate, Pete Williams, and tell them I was going to see the chairman about this issue. And there was a lot of controversy about it. So I thought that was a big issue. I also thought, and Alan thought this, that derivative trading was a big issue. Options were not organized in those days to trade. They were much like the various types of derivatives now that are the sub-prime stuff that’s scattered. As you know, there is a major, constructive effort to organize trading them so that the derivative contract is spelled out just like an options contract is spelled out. But in those days there was no organized option trading.

The SEC had authorized, reluctantly, an experiment with twenty-five call options. But to be traded as an option, you had to have a positive net worth of a very large amount. You had to have made money for the prior three years, and you could only have call options. You only have an option of the price going up. I brought Fischer Black, Myron Schoels at Alan’s suggestion, and we were able to get organized trading started.

I say those were the issues that I thought were important, but we all also had all the foreign bribery cases on our watch. Ely Black jumped out of the Pan
American building just about the time I got to the SEC because he’d been bribing people in Central America when he was running the United Fruit. Then American Airlines, and depending on how they count, several hundred American companies had been embarrassed to reveal questionable payments to foreign officials. That got the headlines just like the Church Committee got the headlines when we were doing regulatory reform work in the White House.

And so the things that we were doing which we thought were important, were kind of put aside. The president – you probably won’t recall this – but there was an element in the country that thought we were crazy, off our rocker. That this was no business of the SEC. If American business had to bribe somebody, so be it. That was good for business. Where did we find the charge to do that? So they appointed a commission of all kinds of Cabinet people with Elliott Richardson as chair, I was asked to testify before Elliott. Carla had taken people at HUD – I think that’s correct – out for a session at Camp David. Ford was great about that. He told them he would let us use the – he let me use the boat, the *Sequoia* for the regulatory heads, just to get them together. We had to pay for it, but it cost very little.

The commission report came out when I was with Carla at Camp David that was very critical of our anti-bribery work. It happened that I had laryngitis. I couldn’t talk. And so I worked very hard on a draft, a really critical letter that was fairly critical of my friend, Elliott. I felt bad about it. Elliott had not even considered the damn letter. He wrote back immediately and said the letter was ill considered and he was recommitting it to the commission. Somebody told the president about it and he called me to say, “Well done.”

Smith: You mentioned the word derivatives and I know the deregulation of financial services was part of this package.

Hills: The only deregulation that occurred was: just let them compete for commission rates. Once you did that, then, as Alan Greenspan said, - I didn’t understand this, as Alan would say – “If you make Wall Street compete on commission rates, they will be competing with the banks. And the banks will
have to compete and you’ll get rid of all those damn regulations. You won’t fix the interest every place.” So that was that deregulation.

Smith: Okay, so that deregulation is totally different from what has since become a pejorative in terms of…

Hills: No, not in that sense. Because, again, Alan, and I think the president, understood far better than I did, that once you did this, these separate silos of insurance, of commercial banks, of investment banks, of savings and loan banks, of credit unions – seven or eight different groups of money gathered and didn’t compete with each other. And there was no question that as you made them compete, they would come together.

And so my recollection is that we all knew back in those days that you had to have a new push for regulation. You had to decide which kind of regulatory function you wanted. Somebody had to be responsible for the safety of an institution. That’s called systematic risk. Somebody had to be responsible for the behavior of institutions. SEC was good at behavior. But unlike poor Chris Cox [who] is getting blamed for something that is not his fault. The SEC has no business telling somebody they shouldn’t do something. You don’t want government saying you can make that loan, you can’t make that loan. But something like the fed, or some organization set up that way, to look at systematic risk. But in that sense it’s different, but certainly it was recognized forty years ago that as they came together, you’d need to have a different form of regulation. Different form, not necessarily more draconian.

Smith: The criticism has been voiced that the White House was slow to realize the threat that Reagan posed. Either that he was serious about running, and/or that if he ran he could be a formidable opponent; and that certainly the re-elect campaign was slow in getting off the ground, and that reflected a disinclination to take the Reagan challenge as seriously as it merited.

Hills: Of course the challenge became more serious after I left, but because of friendships I heard of it. After all, losing John Dunlop was not a small problem. Losing Nelson Rockefeller was not a small problem. So certainly the president was aware of the challenger.
Smith: Did the vice president – who was a proud man, and I know privately how he reacted – but I’m interesting in knowing, was there a change in his demeanor at all?

Hills: Well, keep in mind, I had left the White House and I saw the vice president only socially after that. Every time I saw him he was that same fellow. The first time you met him, you were his best friend. “Hey, fella.” I came into that room, we were there in, whatever, the Green Room or the Red Room, with the Marine Band playing, and we were waiting to go in and have Carla sworn in, several hundred people out there. It was a very exciting time for us. He walked into the room and came over, put his hand on my shoulder and says, “Fella, gosh it’s good to meet you. And Oscar tells me about you…” By God, this guy is really something! He was something. He was a man that surely should have been president. Would he have been a good president? Who knows?

Smith: Yeah. But it is interesting that he was such a champion of regulatory reform himself.

Hills: Yeah, I think so. He went out of his way to support the young people there when we were all young. Bill Donaldson and I had known each other before he’d come to the…and Dick Parsons. They’re good people. Jim – they were all good people. He inspired a lot of loyalty. He inspired thinking. I think that if we’d had another week on the Energy Independence Act, we could have sized it down. But it was gone. And you’re probably right. I think this was something that the vice president cared about. It was obviously a topic of interest. It still is.

Smith: Do you remember where you were election night in ’76? And did you go to Kansas City, did you go to the convention?

Hills: Yeah. We did and Carla went up and down the stairs talking about the vice presidential thing. So, I was there.

Smith: Talk about the vice presidential thing.

Hills: Oh, I can’t. The rumors are too huge.
Smith: Well, I mean, was her name in? Obviously, there was talk at the time of the Supreme Court vacancy.

Hills: There had been a lot, a whole lot of California business people, all close to the president, had signed a petition saying to make her the vice president. But there wasn’t any talk that evening about it.

Smith: But from what she said, it was very clear that at that point, the split between the two camps was very wide and very personal.

Hills: The two camps being?

Smith: The Reagan and Ford camps. That it was not a happy convention in the sense that…

Hills: I have a view, I guess. It’s a modest one, but I believed that evening, and I believe today that, handled right, correctly, that Reagan would have accepted the vice presidency. I believe that. And I had a discussion with William French Smith, Bill Smith was a dear friend from California – I had run several statewide campaigns in California for moderate Republicans. I was Tom Kuchel’s last campaign chairman. The last one because we lost in the primary. But the whole state Republican Party gathered behind a fellow by the name of Hugh Flournoy - professor of political science, and the state controller - to run for governor, interesting enough. I think Hugh clearly would have won but for the fact that the president visited Richard Nixon in San Clemente a few weeks before the election.

Smith: It was actually a few days.

Hills: He was ahead in the polls before that and never caught up again. But Bill Smith came back to me a couple of times when I was at the counsel’s office and complained about the fact that the Ford campaign had chosen one of Reagan’s people to be their campaign chairman in California, the fellow that became president of Pepperdine. Banowsky, Bill Banowsky, and what Bill had said to me is, “Why did he do that? It’s like sticking a finger in his eye?” This young man was a Reagan person. Why couldn’t he have come to all of us? We would have all come together. He said, “I can’t know that.” I would
have. The Firestones, the Keatons, the Packards, they would have all come together and supported the sitting president. I was also at Detroit four years later.

Smith: Yes.

Hills: It happened that I was at a board meeting. The company that I was on the board, and it was during the convention, and so the president invited me to come up and sit with them that evening. Henry Kissinger went back and forth trying to make the president a vice president. And it was interesting.

Smith: What are your recollections of that? Was he seriously engaged in that?

Hills: Well, people like Bill Seidman and Henry would have the pulse better than I did. My view was the president thought it couldn’t possibly happen. It was probably like many of us; we want something, we would be willing to do something, [but] we know it doesn’t make any sense. We went out on a cruise for a couple hours and came back and in the meantime it had evaporated. But it was interesting to see him.

Smith: And one also wonders - by that point Mrs. Ford’s wishes would have been taken into account pretty seriously. You can’t imagine that she would have wanted to return to Washington.

Hills: I suspect that’s right. After we all left it happened that the president came on the board of a company with me, Santa Fe International Drilling Company. Santa Fe was not a huge company, but the president was interested in it. We brought Brent Scowcroft on, also. A couple of years later the company was sold to Kuwait Oil. Emiral Kuwait asked the three of us if we would stay on the board because we did have some engineering capacity that was of some strategic concern to our government. And we said we would stay for several years.

But, just to tell you something about Gerald Ford, we had the first board meeting at the home of the president of Santa Fe. The Kuwait oil minister, came out and talked to us and said that since we were no longer a public company, he thought there was no reason to have twelve meetings a year and
four meetings would be sufficient. Of course, that’s fine, we’re not a public company.

And he said that I understand our fees are $25,000 a year. Well, he said, “We think that is not sufficient. We’d like to make the fees $100,000 a year.” The president grinned and said, “Before anybody else says something, Ali, let me say that if we’re going to cut the meetings from twelve to four, it’s hardly the time to raise our income. Probably we should reduce it, but I understand you want us to come to Kuwait City for one of our meetings and it takes a little more time, so if my colleagues don’t object (looking at me as his former counsel – I was chairman of the audit committee), we will accept $25,000.” But that was another little vignette of Gerald Ford.

Smith: You know, he took some heat as an ex-president for supposedly commercializing the office and going on boards and doing some of these things.

Hills: He went on a few boards, but only on boards he knew the people who were friends.

Smith: By all accounts, he took those very seriously.

Hills: Absolutely.

Smith: Did his homework, was an active participant.

Hills: He did nothing like they do now. Speeches at $50,000, $100,000. He was a very interesting man. Of course, those Beaver Creek sessions every year.


Hills: Yeah. AEI. Year after year Schmidt from Germany, Giscard d'Estaing, and Callaghan from England.

Smith: Explain – two men politically more polar or opposites than Callaghan and Ford, and yet, by all accounts, they were very close.

Hills: Those four people liked each other. Those four people – the G-7 or whatever you call it – they started it. They worked together, they cared about each
other. Giscard, that wonderful ego – he came year after year. He loved to be there. They respected him. Henry came every year. Dick Cheney came every year. In fact, Don was the only one that never came. I always missed him. I don’t know why.

Smith: It is remarkable that the Ford people have continued, year after year to…

Hills: Even now. Carla spent three hours on the telephone yesterday with a Ford Executive Committee. I’ve got an audit committee meeting of the Ford Foundation day after tomorrow, Monday. It is interesting also because all the people on his board, of his foundation, are people he worked with in government. Not all, but are friends. Well, you’ve seen them, you were there. And that’s not true of any other presidential library. We’re not the richest one at all, but we do a decent job – thanks to you, in many respects.

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him? Carla thought it was at that next to the last meeting of the group – the one that was held out west, where I think Mrs. Ford received the medal.

Hills: I think that’s probably right. We haven’t seen him since.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction when he died – here was someone who had been out of the public eye for quite a while. I was wearing two hats that week. I was with ABC the first part of the week, and then with the family the second part, and I can tell you, in the media, people were surprised. And it seemed to build as the week went by. A lot of people were being introduced to this guy for the first time. And they are comparing him with current politics and he looks awfully good. The number of young people that you saw out who couldn’t have been alive when Ford was in the White House. It was very touching.

Hills: I thought he was a good president. The most touching moment I recall was in the Old Senate Office Building when he was invited to speak as a former President of the Senate. He was introduced by Senator Kennedy, who was proud of the fact that the Kennedy institution had given him the Profiles in Courage award. And he sat there – were you there that night? – He said with
such feeling how much he wanted to apologize for criticizing the president for his pardoning of Richard Nixon.

Smith: Ford said after that, he said, “For twenty years, everywhere I go, people have asked me the same question. They don’t ask anymore.” It was as if, with the imprimatur of the Kennedy Library, the issue went away.

Hills: I’ll tell you two cute stories. You may recall that there was an effort by some Republican governors to have Ford run again against Reagan. And he called a number of people – we had one conference call – he said, “Well, I’ve commissioned Teeter to do a poll.” He said, “I’m doing it only because of my friends, the governors. This makes no sense, but I’m doing it.” And a week or so later he called back – I forget whether anybody else was on the call or not – I think a couple of us were – and he said, “The poll came back with predictable results. People do not want me to run for president. In part, it’s because I pardoned Richard Nixon. In part, because they’re afraid I might pardon Jimmy Carter.”

Smith: That’s a great story.

Hills: Sometime, if you’ll remind me, I’ll tell you a story after this.

Smith: For people to whom he’s a name in a textbook, how do you think Gerald Ford ought to be remembered? What would you tell someone who knew nothing about him, particularly a young person today?

Hills: Gerald Ford was a statesman who understood the significance of his office. Who had, unlike – I can’t think of any easy comparisons – unlike almost anybody, he was qualified and prepared to do that job. And did it very well. And of course, he was the only second(?) president who didn’t want to be president. Which tells you maybe what the qualifications ought to be.

A statesman who understood the job and was prepared to do it.

Smith: That’s perfect.
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Smith: First of all, thank you very much for doing this. Now, let’s see, you were mayor of Vail twice?

Slifer: Twice.

Smith: So, I guess that put you in the pecking order locally above the mere former President.

Slifer: Well, I have a letter from President Ford that I framed and it’s very brief, but it said that he enjoyed meeting people in high places. It’s addressed to me as the mayor.

Smith: That could have a double meaning.

Slifer: Here, yeah.

Smith: Exactly. How did Vail come to be?

Slifer: Well, Vail opened for skiing in December of 1962. A fellow by the name of Pete Seibert, along with another fellow named Earl Eaton, were really the two that founded it. Earl, being a local growing up near here, knew this part of the world and Pete was a New Englander who always dreamed of building a ski area. He had gone to school in Switzerland and Lusanne and when Earl said, “I think I found the place for you,” he came and looked. And, sure enough, it was what he was looking for.

What set it apart was not only that the front side of the mountain is north facing and retains its snow and its perfect slope for skiing, but the real difference was the back side of the mountain which were two large bowls, really now three large bowls. Wide open, no trees. A lot of sunshine, a lot of good snow. And, he said, “This is the place.” So, he went out and raised some money initially to buy the core area from a farmer or rancher. I think then he did a second round of a $1.2 (million) and, with that small amount of
money, they were able to really open the ski area with a gondola and a chair four, which goes to the top of the mountain, and then the chair five, which is the services backside. In one year, they were able to open a good share of the mountain on what today would be a tiny amount of money.

Smith: Could Vail happen today?

Slifer: You know, I don’t think so. It would be very difficult. I was fortunate enough to be here when all this went on. Pete and myself and a couple of others went to the county and they didn’t even have a planning commission. So, the attorney that we dragged along helped them form the process so that they could approve what Vail is today. You know, today, a $1.2 would probably be the water study or the environmental study or something and the process would take forever. So it’d be very difficult with the environmental concerns and so on.

Smith: Now, the Fords started coming here fairly early, didn’t they?

Slifer: They did.

Smith: He was still in Congress?

Slifer: When I first met him, he was still in Congress. They really came here because of a guy named Ted Kendall. Ted Kendall was from Grand Rapids and he built the Christiania Lodge. He was the first mayor of Vail and his father was Jerry Ford’s scout master. So they were close family friends. Ted brought him here when he was a congressman. He had been in public life his whole life, so he really didn’t have much money because he hadn’t been entrepreneurial. They bought an apartment in the lodge at Vail shortly after they came, maybe a year or two later. That’s a great story. He borrowed the down payment from his children’s life insurance policies and that was what his source was, which he never told them, by the way, until much later.

Smith: Well, they liked skiing too.

Slifer: They love it.
Smith: That is a wonderful story. Obviously he didn’t stay there forever, just as he didn’t stay in Congress forever. By the time he’s vice president and even president, it has been suggested to us that the Fords were a major factor in putting this place on the map, particularly as a summer destination.

Slifer: Yes. You know, up until then it’d really been a winter ski resort. First of all, a man named Dick Bass gave him his house, which was a better location and was a single family residence which was much more secure. And that’s where the, if you want to call it, summer White House was. That really brought a lot of focus on Vail. And he was an avid golfer, so you could see pictures of him playing golf and being in Vail in the summertime, and that was a great boost to Vail.

Smith: When he was here as president, what was it like?

Slifer: Well, there was always press, there was always Secret Service. We were bopping along fairly successful, very successful as a ski area, but no notoriety about summer. So, with him being here in the summer and all these people coming in, the news media, we just got terrific coverage of how pretty it was here and all the things you could do. And he was very active. I mean, he wasn’t sedentary, he was playing golf and, I think he was playing tennis in those days, too. So it really brought a lot of focus to Vail.

Smith: And clearly they were very involved in a number of activities in the community.

Slifer: Yes. He was on the board of the Vail Valley Foundation, which is an entity which not only brought in ski racing on an international level, but he was very important in bringing in foreign countries and letting us use him as sort of our spokesperson. Also, he started the conference in the summer.


Slifer: The World Forum, which was bringing world leaders to Vail. And his position as president and even as a former president, he was able to bring the leaders of all the free countries to Vail and Beaver Creek and they would be here for a week or ten days and hold very meaningful meetings which, I think,
played a role in international politics. So that was a huge benefit to the community. You know, on a local note, he and a very close friend of his from California, Leonard Firestone, were very instrumental in raising the money to build the interfaith chapel at Beaver Creek. So he touched many parts of the community.

Smith: What about Mrs. Ford?

Slifer: Well, she was also very available. She participated whenever she was asked to speak or to meet with people. And we have the Gerald R. Ford Amphitheater, which is named after him, which is a great asset. But to recognize her - next to that is the Betty Ford Alpine Gardens, which is a very popular place where people can go and see all the flowers and flora and fauna of mountain regions.

Smith: We were out there the other day and it’s a beautiful spot and the amphitheater is gorgeous.

Slifer: So, she was very active and just a wonderful woman.

Smith: And I take it they were very visible?

Slifer: They were very visible. We’re in ___ Gramshammer ____ one of their favorite places to eat lunch or dinner was right here. They would eat out on the porch and people would stop by and want to have photographs and they were very accommodating. He always had time for anyone. So, yes, they were very, very visible.

Smith: We’ve also been told that one of the things they found appealing about this place was at least the natives tended to leave them alone.

Slifer: Everyone did. Really gave them space. And they appreciated it and its one of the reasons, I think, that they stayed and this became a very big part of their life was they didn’t have people bothering them all the time. People were very good about that, even the visitors, not just the locals.

Smith: And he would maybe not preside over, because I imagine you, as mayor, would do that, but I guess every year there was a Christmas tree lighting?
Slifer: Yes, we always invited him and he was very accommodating. And it was really fun to get great crowds. Very often we’d have a celebrity of some sort that we’d ask or I would ask in my role as mayor for a couple or three years. At one time, he had Jack Nicklaus with him. Mayor Bloomberg has an apartment here, though we haven’t seen him lately since he’s been busy, but he helped at least one year, maybe two, lighting our Christmas tree.

Smith: And then there’s the Fourth of July parade?

Slifer: The Fourth of July parade, and where we are, again, the parade came right by the hotel and the Gramshammers would have President Ford up on their balcony. He was the Grand Marshall or whatever title you want to give him and everyone went by and the band stopped and played. The Fourth of July was maybe the best day in Vail all year.

Smith: The place has obviously grown and evolved. For the better? Do you worry at all about too much of a good thing?

Slifer: Well, I think it’s much for the better. You know, when Vail started, there was nothing. We now have great medical facilities, a great hospital. We even have a really wonderful cancer center just down the valley. We have a library, we have culture, and we have so much more to offer rather than in the early days just skiing. And the one good thing about Vail is we’re located in a valley and the hillsides surrounding us are national forests, so they can never be developed. The skiing and so on is on national forests and is permitted and controlled and so on, but we’re like an island. This is all you’re going to see. Everything is really now built out. Any new development is maybe tearing down a house that was built in 1962 and building a more modern, newer house. So, its growth is pretty limited. The growth down valley, particularly to the west where there’s more land and so on, there’s been substantial development.

Smith: Did that include Beaver Creek?

Slifer: Sure, Beaver Creek, but, again, we’re surrounded by national forests and if you drive west, what you see is about what’s going to be there. There’s not going to be much more.
Smith: I wonder if he ever thought about staying here in Vail. I mean, of course they built the place in Beaver Creek, but I wonder if there was discussion at all about it.

Slifer: Well, I don’t know the whole story, but I think that Vail Resorts at that time made a very favorable arrangement for them to build in Beaver Creek. It was a new community, a new resort, and his building a house there along with his friends Leonard Firestone and Dee Keaton that built next to him was just a jump start for people to say, Beaver Creek is a great place to be.

Smith: Sure. Who was Dee Keaton, because we keep hearing the name?

Slifer: Well, you know, I’m not sure I can tell you. He was a close friend of Firestone’s. They were at one time involved in a company called Charter Oil and I think were on the board and so on and had other business arrangements. And I think at that time President Ford was congressman and was involved with them in some business ventures. So when he built his house in Beaver Creek, they built on either side of him, he was surrounded by close friends.

Smith: They were very close to the Firestones weren’t they?

Slifer: Very close, very close. And to Dee Keaton, too, as well. Yeah.

Smith: Did you ever see his temper?

Slifer: Once I saw a little bit of it. I’d said that I thought his selection of his vice presidential running mate was the reason he didn’t get elected.

Smith: Bob Dole?

Slifer: No.

Smith: Nelson Rockefeller? He picked Dole in ’76 to run with, but originally he’d picked Nelson Rockefeller to fill his vacancy as vice president.

Slifer: Wasn’t it Agnew?

Smith: No, that was Nixon.
Slifer: That was Nixon. You’re right. But anyway, I guess it was Dole that I thought dragged him down and he just kind of ripped my head off. He said, “Nobody votes for the vice president, they vote for the president.” And that was the end of the discussion.

Smith: You think maybe he was sensitive about the issue?

Slifer: No, I think he just felt strongly that, you know, you vote for the president of the United States. You don’t vote for the vice president of the United States. And that he hadn’t won the election and it wasn’t anybody else’s doing.

Smith: Did he talk politics?

Slifer: Yeah, I loved to talk politics with him and he loved to talk politics. He loved to talk about Michigan football and sports and some of these other things, but being a life long politician, he loved to talk. And, always, there was a subject or crisis or an issue and at dinner or something you could throw a bone out there and he would love to get into that discussion. And, of course, he had tremendous insight.

Smith: He worked very hard at staying abreast of events.

Slifer: Even after he was out of office, he was in constant contact with Carter and with subsequent leaders and I think they used him as a sounding board and advisor. I don’t think you saw anything of that, but he would say that, you know, “I talked to President Carter” and so on.

Smith: Were you surprised that they became such good friends?

Slifer: I was, but my wife was a Democrat in the Carter administration. So, he came to visit and we had the opportunity to have lunch or something with the Fords and with the Carters and went for a walk up a little trail in Beaver Creek. That was delightful. And he and the president, President Ford, became very good friends and I thought that was great.

Smith: I’ve often wondered if one of the things that brought them together was the fact that they’d both run against Ronald Reagan.
Slifer: Well, that could be. I’ve never thought of that. I just think that if you’re President of the United States, there aren’t too many of those and these two men were both really nice people and they recognized the qualities each had and became great friends.

Smith: Did he ever talk about Nixon and the pardon?

Slifer: No. No. I guess that’s what I blamed for him not getting elected was Nixon’s pardon when he disagreed. No, he never did.

Smith: Did you ever sense that there were some things that you sort of avoided?

Slifer: No, you could talk about anything with him. You know, there are certain subjects you couldn’t talk about. You might ask about a certain crisis or are we going to do something, be aggressive, and he would avoid, if he knew, which I assumed he did, he would just say he couldn’t comment on that.

Smith: I wondered if he ever talked about towards the end of his life, when he had all those people who were in his administration that were in the second Bush presidency. I think he had some discomfort with some of the policies being pursued, particularly the Iraq war. Did that ever come up?

Slifer: That never came up, but I think he was proud that the people he had selected were so qualified that they again were selected in very important roles.

Smith: Did he have a sense of humor?

Slifer: Yes, he did have a sense of humor. It was pretty dry. I think you’d see it mostly playing golf. He was an avid golfer and his real personality would come out.

Smith: How so?

Slifer: Well, you know, like all golfers, when he missed. He was very competitive. All-American football player. If he missed a shot, he’d be grumpy and very excited and happy when things went well.

Smith: Never wrapped a club around a tree?

Slifer: No, no, no, he did not.
Smith: He got one hole in one?

Slifer: One hole in one, it was here. I was not with him, but he was very proud of it.

Smith: What course was that at?

Slifer: I can’t remember. I think it might’ve been here at Vail, but I’m not positive.

Smith: Do you think he was sensitive at all about the public caricature, the almost cartoon image, that Chevy Chase did? I mean, here’s a guy who really is a naturally gifted athlete and who was portrayed as the opposite of that. Do you think it bothered him?

Slifer: I think it must’ve. He never mentioned it. I was always sort of angered by that caricature which, in my mind, came from when he stumbled getting off an airplane coming down the stairs. I mean, he was an athlete. He was not clumsy or anything. He had terrible knees from his football playing days and that gave him a lot of discomfort. He didn’t complain about it, but he did have trouble at times going up and down stairs. Very difficult.

Smith: My hunch is that it may have bothered Mrs. Ford more than it bothered him.

Slifer: Yeah, I think not many things bothered President Ford. He got along just fine.

Smith: They had a good life. And this was a large part of it. I mean, poor Lyndon Johnson who died a day before the Vietnam peace agreement was announced. President Ford lived long enough to see most people come around to his way of thinking on the pardon and to honor him for what they had criticized him for.

Slifer: Yes, and I think after he was out of office, people realized he had been very good. He was a very stable influence at a very critical time. And it was a tough time.

Smith: He was a real fiscal conservative.

Slifer: Yes. Very. I liked that.
Smith: I mean, he really was the last President to use the veto exclusively to contain Congress’ spending habits.

Slifer: Sure, that hasn’t happened since. You’re right.

Smith: The last couple of years must’ve been kind of rough. I mean, his health was great until he was about 90, but clearly they both insisted on coming up here, including that last summer when the doctors and everyone else said he really shouldn’t be doing it. Do you remember the last time you saw him?

Slifer: I think the last time we saw him, we had dinner at our house and he and Betty came to dinner. I believe that was the last time. I can’t tell you how many months that was, but that was the last time.

Smith: Was that the last year that they came up?

Slifer: Yes.

Smith: And how were they?

Slifer: Well, you know, he was a big man and very strong, but he was starting to get more frail, as you would at that age. And Betty has always been a small woman and she’s a very strong woman, but was frail. I mean, she is not a big woman. But she was still there and still very active.

Smith: The altitude, I take it, was an issue.

Slifer: That was an issue for her, yes. That bothered her a lot. They told her not to come and she came, but, yes, that was an issue.

Smith: They both had a certain stubbornness. One might call it resolve.

Slifer: Yes, if he wanted to do something, he did it. Or a belief that, if you disagreed with him, he would be very strong about his opinions. And she was as well, but in a much gentler way.

Smith: Do you think she influenced him at all? It’s funny, because as most of us get older, we get more conservative. And yet on a number of issues, the Republican Party went further and further to the Right, particularly on social issues. By the end of his life, by Republican standards, he was sort of a
liberal. And I wonder whether that was just him, whether she had an influence on it, or whether having gone through, for example, the intervention with her and bringing the compassion to bear that her situation and that of many other people called for, whether that same compassion applied to other issues as well.

Slifer: Well, I think you’re right. I think he became more compassionate and understood that there were two sides to every issue and he became more compromising and more willing to listen to the other side. And, you know, he didn’t have the presidency anymore, so he didn’t have to be the way you’d need to be as the President of the United States. So, he didn’t soften, but I think your word ‘compassionate’ is what he became.

Smith: Plus, I assume, having kids and grandchildren will bring a certain degree of youthfulness to anyone. It exposes you to a different viewpoint.

Slifer: Yeah, and they were a very close family. They just spent as much time together as they could and the kids all turned out to be great and loved the grandchildren.

Smith: When he passed away, what transpired here in Vail?

Slifer: They had a service here and that was normal. Several people, including ourselves, went to Washington and to California. It was very sad.

Smith: Were you surprised at the amount of public response?

Slifer: I was. And both sides of the aisle honored him and it was very emotional.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Slifer: Well, I would remember him as just a good man. He should not be remembered for that alone, because I think he saved this country a lot of anguish. When he pardoned Nixon, he put his political career at risk. And if we’d have had Nixon trials that would’ve drug on for a long time. He took the heat, made a decision, and that to me is the one issue that he should be remembered for above others.

Smith: That’s perfect. Thank you.
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Smith: We often start off asking people to say something about Gerald Ford that might be surprising. And I gather when you first met him, you had something of a surprising encounter.

Porter: One thing that might surprise people about Gerald Ford is how skillful he was as an interviewer. He was vice president. I had been selected as a White House Fellow. The White House Fellows, after they are selected, interview across the government for their job assignment. Eight White House Fellows had interviewed with his office. There were fifteen in the class and eight ended up interviewing with his office, various people in his office. They narrowed it down to two and two of us ended up having one on one interviews with Vice President Ford. I was fortunate to be one of them.

It lasted about half an hour and he asked an interesting set of questions, although not a highly unusual set of questions - trying to probe a little more about my background. In particular, I had studied at Brigham Young and Oxford and at Harvard and he was very interested in the comparisons between the different institutions. One of his sons, Jack, was studying at Utah State University at the time, so he was quite familiar with the major universities in Utah. Obviously, he knew about Harvard and Oxford. So, he was quite interested in the comparisons and what I had learned.

About midway through the interview, he asked me if I had any questions of him. I thought that was quite striking for a vice president of the United States to invite a young twenty-something year old being interviewed and ask him questions. And I posed a set of questions to him that I was curious about, including how he thought about the composition of his staff and what kind of people sought for his staff. Did he want people who were loyal or people who had a lot of experience or people who were full of ideas and had a lot of energy. He gave a fascinating answer that revealed to me that he had given some thought to this before just simply shooting off the cuff. He recognized
some of the strengths and limitations of individuals on his staff and believed that a combination of skills was really crucial and important. Without naming names, I later discovered when I saw these characteristics in person, his capacity to mesh his staff. He went way up in my estimation. My estimation of him before our interview had been based what I’d read. Nothing negative, but I did not have the impression that he was someone who is quite reflective and thoughtful, and, in a one on one interview, very articulate. His speaking style was not one that would compare favorably with a John Kennedy or Ronald Reagan or Barack Obama or Bill Clinton, but in a one on one interview, he was actually remarkably impressive.

Smith: Tell me about your time in the White House during the Nixon administration.

Porter: Well, I did not arrive to begin my White House fellowship - the fellowship year starts on September 1. You get your job assignment in the summer. And Vice President Ford asked if I would come early. By sheer coincidence, I arrived the morning of August the 9th. So, I was technically in the Nixon administration for about three and a half hours.

Smith: What was it like around the White House on the morning of August 9th?

Porter: It was very somber. You could tell that something important was happening. It was not chaotic, although, I did manage to walk in without a White House pass and without being on any clearance list. I had been around for interviews before, so I was not a totally unfamiliar face. I just walked past the guards, waved, and I guess they assumed I had a pass. There was a fair amount of relief that this chapter had finally ended. I think a lot of people, since it unfolded very slowly, had had time to prepare for it, so it was not like the shock of an assassination.

Smith: You wonder if Gerald Ford had had time to prepare. Or whether there had been any sub-rosa effort at preparation.

Porter: If there was, there was not much, because he always struck me as an extraordinarily circumspect person. He was ambitious as most people are and certainly most elected officials are or they wouldn’t run for office. He was not grasping and I don’t think he ever expected to be in the executive branch,
ever seriously considered running for president himself. His big ambition, as you are well aware, was to become Speaker of the House. As he saw that chance fading, he had made a commitment to his wife that he was not going to run for reelection. The vice presidency came as something of a surprise because Spiro Agnew’s resignation was a little unexpected. More than a little unexpected and Nixon, obviously, wanted to appoint John Connally and was thwarted in that.

So, Vice President Ford, I think, did not see this as a great opportunity. At his essence, he’s an extraordinarily loyal individual. I mean, when you think about it, he was as loyal to a president as I think any vice president has been with less reason to do so, because, by the time he become vice president, Watergate is well down the path and in the back of his mind, he would have been justified, well justified, in posing the question, ‘Has this person been telling me and others the truth?’ and, ‘If this movement toward impeachment takes hold, I may become president.’ But he wasn’t grasping for this.

I’m told there was a fair amount of tension between the Nixon White House staff and the Ford vice presidential staff because the Nixon White House staff wanted him to be even more publicly vocal with respect to his support for the president. I think he went as far as he felt he could. At no point did he signal that he was disloyal in any way. But, he had to have at least in the back of his mind the idea that it could happen. Most human beings have the capacity to throw themselves into their job and most of us do that when we’re under a lot of pressure because that’s one thing we can control. And that deflects us from spending too much time mulling and thinking about what might happen. So, he threw himself into the job. I talked to his scheduler. He was holding 11.7 meetings per day on average in comparison with Spiro Agnew who averaged less than two meetings a day. And he did a great deal of travel during his period of time as vice president. Lining up my interview with him was actually quite complicated once they narrowed it down to the two of us. Because I had to fly down and they said “Well, he’s travelling then” and “He’s travelling here and there.” So, he was throwing himself into the job of being vice president and I think that was good for the country, but I think it was also good for him to keep his mind off of what was going on.
Smith: We’ve been told by several people - and it’s relevant, for example, because of
his later relationship with Rockefeller - that he really didn’t enjoy the job. He
really didn’t enjoy being vice president. He was walking such a tightrope and
there were those who thought he was out of town too much. I also wonder
whether, in the back of his mind, he knew that although he might not be
consciously worrying about how far he could go, there were people like Bob
Hartmann on his staff who were worrying about it regularly.

Porter: They are not here to be able to give their accounts, but my understanding is
that the one person in whom Gerald Ford did confide somewhat earlier was
Phil Buchen who had been his law partner and was serving as his counsel and
would later become his White House counsel. Gerald Ford recognized that
there was a fair amount of tension within his vice presidential staff
surrounding Bob Hartmann, who was a wonderful speechwriter,
extraordinarily loyal to the Vice President, but who was one that I think Ford
kept at a bit of a distance.

I never heard him once disparage Bob Hartmann and that was in the face of
many other people making comments that were less than flattering. Ford was
very loyal to Bob Hartmann. But I am told by someone who was in the
meeting when they were discussing which of the White House Fellows to take
of the two that had interviewed - Bob Hartmann was making the argument
that they should not take me because I was from Harvard and, therefore, could
not be trusted. And Vice President Ford said, “No, he’s from Utah and he can
be trusted.” And the individual who reported this to me said that this was the
first time he had seen Ford in a meeting - and he said, “By the way, that’s who
I want” – run counter to the advice of Hartmann.

I am not surprised that the person that he confided in, at least a little, was Phil
Buchen because they had this long-standing relationship, but even there, there
was only a very limited discussion and my understanding is that it was
Buchen who went to the Vice President and suggested to him that he ought to
do some planning and there ought to be some preparation and thinking. And
Vice President Ford was very reluctant to do that for the obvious reason that,
once you start, the word that something is going on is very high. Vice
President Ford was a very careful person who saw that the upside was very low and the downside was very high and he was not going to engage in it.

Smith: Again, it’s fascinating when you talk about this circumspection. A number of people have speculated what secrets he might’ve taken with him to the grave. I’m sure there are things that we don’t know about. When you talk about Phil Buchen, he became symbolic of “the Grand Rapids crowd.” A lot of pot shots were taken at these folks - that they weren’t quite ready for prime time. What was your sense of that?

Porter: Well, Gerald Ford, I think, was remarkably skillful in selecting people and figuring out how they could best serve. Bob Hartmann very much wanted to be his White House chief of staff. He’d been his chief of staff on the Hill. He’d been his chief of staff as vice president. It would seem like a very logical move and Hartmann could legitimately claim that he had been enormously loyal to Ford. And, he could make the argument that he could and would serve him well. Hartmann was crushed when Haig was kept on for six weeks and then when he decided to bring in Don Rumsfeld as - the first title he had was – Coordinator.

Smith: That’s right. He didn’t want a chief of staff, did he?

Porter: His initial instinct was not, although it was quickly apparent that Rumsfeld was in fact the equivalent to the chief of staff and in many respects did a very good job as White House chief of staff. I was impressed with how he handled what was a challenging situation at a relatively young age. He was in his forties at the time and did a terrific job.

Smith: He told us that his advice to the President was clean house early. Ford was resistant to that for a number of reasons. One, he didn’t want to tar all the Nixon people with Watergate, that was unfair. And, two, there was an element of continuity involved. I’m wondering how these disparate elements meshed.

Porter: If you look, he didn’t clean house, but he made some significant changes. Let’s look at what some of them are. He had a change in the chief of staff. Haig was gone after six weeks.
Smith: Did Haig really expect to stay on longer than that?

Porter: I do not think he expected to stay on longer than that. I only had three or four occasions to have much interaction with him over the first two or three weeks, but he was exhausted. He had basically been there day and night for the previous eighteen months and I think he recognized that he was exhausted, he needed a change, and that the President needed to have a change there. Gerald Ford admired Haig a great deal and he did not view Haig in the same way that he viewed some of the other Nixon people. At the same time he made that change and Rumsfeld brought in with him his deputy, Dick Cheney, who was also a new face and played an important, significant role. He changed his assistant for economic affairs. The economy was a huge issue. Nixon had had Ken Rush there and Rush went off to Paris to be Ambassador to France and Ford brought in Bill Seidman. That was another big change.

Smith: And a Grand Rapids guy.

Porter: And a Grand Rapids guy, but very capable. He turned out to be one of the best people who’s ever been in that position. He did make a change in the White House Counsel’s office giving the post to Phil Buchen. He made a change at OMB. Roy Ash was leaving. And Ford did not discourage him from leaving, and brought Jim Lynn in. Herb Stein was leaving as chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors and Alan Greenspan came in who Ford picked. Nixon had tapped Alan Greenspan, but Ford went to Bill Seidman and asked him what he thought and Bill actually had me do some checking as well and came back that Greenspan would be a great choice. So, if you look with respect to economic policy, Seidman, Lynn, and Greenspan. He kept Bill Simon at the Treasury, but other than that, it was a very clean sweep.

If you look in the White House, he changed the press secretary on day one and Ron Ziegler moved on to California to work with Nixon on his memoirs. And he brought in Jerald terHorst and then later Ron Nessen. But that was a change. He changed the Counsel’s office. Change in the Chief of Staff’s office, and his Economic Policy assessment. He kept Kissinger in place on the foreign policy side. And of course he brought into counselor positions
Bob Hartmann and Jack Marsh. If you look at the people around him, he actually had in his White House circle a lot of fresh faces. When Rumsfeld says he urged him to make a lot of changes, I think one needs to remember – he did make a lot of changes. It was not like, ‘I urged him to make a lot of changes and he didn’t.’ President Ford did it quite subtly and very gracefully and not in one fell swoop.

Smith: Almost quietly.

Porter: And very quietly.

Smith: Rumsfeld wanted a public hanging, in a sense.

Porter: But that was never Gerald Ford’s style.

Smith: Yeah.

Porter: In part because he didn’t want Nixon people, many of whom - and I’m not going to name names - wanted to stay on and were encouraged to move on. But he didn’t want to do anything to damage them. But, above and beyond that, it just wasn’t his style. He did not have a vindictive, mean bone in his body. He was involved in the rough and tumble of politics. People sometimes say things they don’t really mean. But I never had the sense that he carried with him any grudges or animus or ill will toward people, even people who didn’t respond in kind to him.

Smith: I only heard him disparage two people and the worst epithet he could come up with was, “He’s a bad man.” That’s the worst he could say. One was Gordon Liddy and one was John Dean. Interesting choices. Clearly, for some reason, he and Jim Schlesinger did not get along. One senses it was chemistry. The reason I’m bringing it up is because of the whole question of his intelligence, and how sensitive he may have been.

He’d been on the Defense Appropriations Committee. He knew as much if not more about the operations of the military than Jim Schlesinger. People would say, “Oh, he’s like that with everyone.” But there was a kind of condescension that Ford sensed. And, for some reason, it rubbed him sufficiently the wrong way to do what he did.
Porter: He did not change Jim Schlesinger for over a year, so it wasn’t until October 31st of 1975. Ford came in August 9th of 1974. I believe that he felt that he gave Schlesinger ample opportunity to develop a good relationship with him. I think he felt that he went as far as he could to develop a good relationship with Schlesinger. And, I’m not sure how well they knew one another before, but he kept him on much longer than several of the other Cabinet officers whom he replaced. In part, I think it was the chemistry between the two of them. In part, I think it’s because Schlesinger did not consult him on a number of issues that he thought, given his interest and expertise, he would be consulted on. And, not least, because of reports that he was getting from off the Hill from George Mahon and others who did not have as good a relationship with Schlesinger as they had with several of his predecessors. So, I think it was actually a whole combination of things.

Smith: One specific incident which I’ve never known about before – someone told us not long ago that the secretary had sent over someone on his staff, not particularly high up on his staff – to causally inform the White House that the Pentagon had no intention of being involved in the refugee resettlement efforts after Saigon fell. And it was made very clear that was not an acceptable position. Clearly, the President had taken such a moral stand there, seeing the desire on the part of Congress to pull the plug once we were out of there, was shameful. And, he’d put together this kind of crazy quilt coalition and shamed Congress into putting up funds. As you know, while president, he visited some of the resettlement camps. A lot of people would’ve run away from that issue.

Porter: I’ve never been in the military and I’ve never worked in the Defense Department, although, if I had not gotten the offer from the vice president’s office, the other place I had a firm offer was from the Defense Department. But, I’ve never been in the military. I have spent a fair amount of time during my years in the White House with three different presidents interacting with the Defense Department and I do know that many people in the Defense Department feel like they have a supreme, superbly trained organization, that they have earned the respect of the American people, and that one of the reasons they are as good at doing what they’re doing is because they have a
very clear mission and they train people for that. They see it as a problem that the rest of the government, seeing this tremendous asset in hand is always wanting to deploy it. We were thinking about, at certain points, “Gee, these guys are terrific. Could we get them helping in the schools?” I had a conversation with Colin Powell who said, “Look, we have a job to do and that job is to defend the country and we can’t be adding all these other things.” The message that they were sending on here, I think, was not a Schlesinger-inspired, or idiosyncratic to him. It’s almost a gut response.

Smith: The means, though – it’s almost as if the message was less offensive than –

Porter: If I was counseling them, I would have said, “Sending somebody over to the White House? Are you out of your mind? This is the silliest thing you could possibly do. Wait until you are asked. Don’t try preempting it. And then, when they ask, explain, ‘Well, if we were to do that, it would mean x and y. Do you really want to go ahead and do it?’ and think about it that way.” But sending somebody over and preemptively informing them that “We are not going to be doing this” just strikes me as really ham-handed. I don’t know if Schlesinger was involved, or knew about it at all, but it had the predictable response and reaction which was exactly the opposite of what they were hoping for.

Smith: Ford was genuinely shocked that Nixon lied to him. At the end of August he has his first press conference and he believes - this man who’s been in Washington for twenty-five years – that reporters are going to want to talk about Cypress and Greece and Turkey and inflation and everything except what they all want to talk about. And, he was angry with himself afterwards because he didn’t handle some of the questions very well. I think there would’ve been a pardon anyway, but I’ve often thought that was, in some ways, the triggering event. Was he naïve? Wanting to think the best of people is a hugely admirable trait. Is it something a president can afford?

Porter: I don’t have any firsthand knowledge that would enable me to shed much insight on this. It occurred thirty days into office, the pardon.

Smith: Were you surprised?
I was surprised and the people who I knew that were much closer to him than I was were surprised. What prompted it, I am not certain. I do believe that he felt two things quite keenly. One, that there had been a lot of discussion during the final year of the Nixon administration that the presidency had gotten too big and that the best sort of way you could paint a picture for Richard Nixon is that he delegated the reelection to somebody else because he was concentrating on the presidency and the presidency was a really big job. You have to worry about foreign affairs, you have to worry about domestic affairs and if you look at the kind of relationship that Ford was hoping to establish with Rockefeller and what he led Rockefeller to believe he wanted him to do as vice president, there’s a bit of that in there, that ‘I want to delegate.’ Ultimately he discovered you can’t delegate it. But, ‘I want to delegate a chunk of this because I want to concentrate on that.’ So, I think there’s part of it that is sort of, ‘Well, Nixon was really concentrating on governing and he had outsourced the campaign to others and didn’t really understand what was going on.’

There’s a part of that in Ford’s mind that cuts Nixon a little bit of a break. More importantly, I don’t think anyone who has not been president can fully appreciate all the strains and stresses of that office. One needs to remember that the country was in a very unhappy mood, not just because of Watergate and the lack of trust, but Vietnam was not going well. It was clear that we were going to need to get out of there, probably sooner rather than later. We had never really lost a war before. The economy was in real difficulty. We had had the energy embargo the year before. There was a huge number of things that were on his plate and I think in part, Ford looked at the situation and the fact that it was not that he was just getting lots of questions on this at the first press conference and that he didn’t handle those as well as he might have, but that a lot of his time was being consumed dealing with the issue on the papers and stuff like that. And, that he did not want to personally be distracted and he did not want the country to be distracted. I think he thought, ‘Well, once this is brought to a conclusion, people will move on to something else.’ I’m not sure he properly calculated, I think even he was surprised a bit
at the sharp initial reaction. He had to expect some of that, but I don’t think he was fully prepared for all he got.

Smith: Mel Laird loves Ford, but he’s never quite forgiven him for not following Mel’s scheme, which was, ‘Give me time, Jerry. I’ll bring a bipartisan congressional delegation down to the White House and they will petition you to grant a pardon.’ Now, my question is: given the extraordinarily bitter climate at that point, is it realistic to believe that you could send a trial balloon up without it being shot down? Was there any way to ‘prepare’ the country? If you’re going to do a pardon, was there another way of doing it in that climate?

Porter: People who advocate sending up trial balloons need to remember that you are always going to be held accountable for what you do with the information you receive when you send the trial balloon up. Had he sent up the trial balloon and it received a highly negative response, to then go ahead and do a pardon, would look like ‘I really am indifferent to and contemptuous of public opinion.’ And I suspect that he thought in his own mind ‘There’s a fairly good chance that I may get’ – How many people are going to say ‘Oh, my gosh. What a great idea! Pardon him just as quickly as you can’? The likelihood of it is a very low probability. The likelihood that the sense of ‘Look, he deserves the same kind of justice that everybody else got. He needs to be willing to stand up and be tried for anything that he may have done’, that would probably be much greater. Then he would be in the position of saying, ‘Well, okay, I’ve consulted you and I realize where you are, but I’m going to make a different judgment. I’m going to go ahead and do this.’ So, I think he properly dismissed sending up a trial balloon initially. And the Mel Laird solution, which, maybe Mel Laird would be one of the few people on earth who could do that because he’s an enormously talented, capable man. He might have been able to do that, but he could not have done it quietly. So, that would have been like sending up a trial balloon and I think that’s why Ford deflected that.
Smith: There’s a theory that the pardon and the Vietnam clemency board, both of which occurred in the first month, are really part of the same overall plan of trying to heal the country.

Porter: Well, the clemency came before the pardon.

Smith: Right.

Porter: I’m not sure how much successive planning Ford was doing at that time. I didn’t hear anything about that just in terms of office conversation. The idea of a pardon was never there. I remember the whole notion was that we’ve got to get Vietnam behind us, it’s been dividing the country and that’s why we ought to go ahead and do this earned amnesty. He did it at the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in Chicago. That was a very gutsy thing to do. I think he was still struggling at that time with what he was going to do on the Nixon pardon.

Smith: You’ve written about him and his energy policy. I don’t know how a crisis can remain a crisis for thirty-five years. It does sort of redefine the term. But it’s entered the lexicon. So, in a nutshell tell us what Ford wanted to do and it’s relevance to what hasn’t been done in the years since.

Porter: Gerald Ford became convinced that there were really two things that had to be done to deal with the energy problem or crisis that we had at the time. I prefer the term ‘problem’ rather than crisis. And one was on the supply side and one was on the demand side. On the supply side, he was for expanding drilling and drilling on some federal reserves that we had at Elk Hills in California, as well as he was in favor of drilling in Alaska and other places. ‘We have some proven, known oil reserves. We need to continue to explore, but we need to maximize and use what we have got.’

On the demand side, he was in favor of raising prices and getting the predictable consumer response. If you raise the price of something, you’ll consume less of it. I can remember him spending a good deal of time in our discussions about how a rebate scheme could work so that people who were on the lower end of the economic spectrum would not be damaged because they would be in less of a position to insulate themselves from higher prices.
For people with middle and upper incomes, they were going to have to make some adjustments. This looked like raising taxes and in a very real respect it was raising taxes because the federal government would be the conduit for this revenue increase. Ford was comfortable with that.

It’s interesting that thirty-five years later, a fairly large number of people have come to the same conclusion of how to deal with what is a much larger problem. At that point, we had about eight percent of the world’s oil reserves. And instead of importing at that time about forty-five to fifty percent of our oil; we’re now importing about sixty percent. If you look at the dimensions of the problem, it’s actually larger today than it was then. Many people have come to the notion that a two-pronged effort is needed.

Smith: On the economic front, inflation was identified as the train coming down the track and then almost overnight – I mean, you had this unique phenomenon, ‘stagflation’ - but clearly unemployment became the most pressing concern.

Porter: When he came in, inflation was very high and unemployment was rising from relatively modest levels and continued to do so, largely because of a huge swing in inventories. The way in which we measured inventories at that time, as Alan Greenspan would remind you, had masked a lot of what was going on in the economy in the last quarter of ’74 and the first quarter of ’75 when we had about a ten percent drop in GDP at that period of time. It was just a very sharp, severe downturn. He did feel, I suspect, as anyone would with the advice coming in, whipsawed between these two twin objectives. Everybody had memorized the Philips curve which basically says there’s an inverse relationship between inflation and unemployment. Now we had to throw out that thinking because it obviously didn’t apply in this situation.

He, I think, reluctantly came to recognize that he had to try to deal with two problems simultaneously. And that many of the things that would work for one would not work well for the other and, in fact, undermine it. So, he tried in the very conventional way that most people do to find a good balance. I think that he was as skillful as any president could be under those circumstances in finding the balance, because I think Gerald Ford was instinctively, intuitively a very balanced person. He did not cascade to one
extreme or another. He had not done that in foreign policy. He had not done that in defense policy. He had not done that in economic policy. If you look at his whole career, with a couple of exceptions, maybe, with a couple of comments he made on Supreme Court justices, but for the most part his was a very balanced kind of approach. He was very good at seeing arguments on both sides, seeing the merits and arguments on both sides, weighing them in one way or another.

This is not to say that he couldn’t be decisive, as he was with respect to financial assistance to New York City. And he heard lots on both sides and he would come down firmly, but his whole approach was a very balanced one. I think that came out very strongly in this episode of how you’re going to deal with a faltering economy that was experiencing high inflation, which is what he inherited.

Smith: The whole Ford/Rockefeller relationship - in retrospect, you wonder if the President might not wish he could’ve taken back some of the things he said. I mean, Rockefeller was either led to believe or convinced himself that he would be a kind of domestic Kissinger; he would have a measure of, if not control, then certainly influence over domestic policy that paralleled Kissinger’s in the foreign field. And I wonder how much of that is Gerald Ford the congressman saying that. You can look at the trajectory of the whole Ford presidency as not necessarily unlearning congressional skills, but learning to be an executive, learning to be a president. And, maybe at the end of two years, he wouldn’t have had that conversation with Rockefeller.

Porter: I think there are a series of factors that influenced this. The first is that Gerald Ford had had a very unhappy time as vice president in terms of what he was given to do. And I think his response to that was ‘I’m going to give my vice president a different opportunity to do something meaningful in this job.’ Secondly, I think he thought that his strong suit was foreign policy and defense policy. He recognized that he was going to have to deal with economic policy, but there was this third realm, which, for want of a better term, we call domestic policy, which is sort of everything else that is not
foreign and not economic. And here Rockefeller had interest, had expertise, had experience.

I think Ford viewed a lot of this as the relationship between the federal government and state governments and Rockefeller knew the other governors well. This would be, in his mind, a great portfolio and he was trying to get Rockefeller to get enthusiastic about the job and ‘This is my vision.’ What he quickly discovered was that these three are all intertwined. The notion that you can segment them is a fiction of people’s imagination. And, secondly, you can not have two people in charge. You can’t say ‘This part of the government someone’s going to run and this part of the government someone else is going to run.’ And, it quickly became apparent to him that that simply was not in the cards and I think it became apparent to Rockefeller as well. As a result, the way it turned out was a disappointment to Rockefeller because, I think he had hoped – although, the initial issue was over who was going to be the assistant to the president for domestic affairs. Rumsfeld wanted Phil Areeda and Rockefeller wanted Jim Cannon. They went to the mat and Ford went with Rockefeller. And I think that was showing him ‘Look, I’m prepared to make good on this’ and Jim Cannon was a terrific individual, is a terrific individual. I enjoyed working with him enormously. We were actually in the same suite - Bill Seidman and I were with Jim Cannon and Jim Cavanaugh.

Smith: Rockefeller, of course, went to his grave convinced that Rumsfeld did him in, that the deep-sixing of George Bush at the CIA was all part of the same nefarious scheme. Of course the president in the end was the one who signed off on all of those changes.

Porter: That is true.

Smith: I find it fascinating because Ford always said he regretted it and I think he did. But he also said, “You know, I don’t think Nelson would’ve been happy in a second term as vice president.” Because he had come to see all these limitations that you described and he knew Rockefeller’s temperament, and he didn’t see how it would get any better. And, again, there may have been an
element of rationalization in that, justifying what he did, but there’s also a lot of truth to it.

Porter: This is an inherent problem with the vice presidency. John Adams felt it acutely because it became apparent to him we can only have one president at a time. And, here’s the problem, you want to select people as vice presidents who can, if necessary, step into the job. You want to have people who are talented, you want people who are good decision makers, and you want to have people who are leaders. At the same time, if you select people who are talented, good decision makers, and leaders, they don’t enjoy – they may be willing to abide it – but they don’t really enjoy it.

Who was the last vice president that you would say really enjoyed the job? It’s hard because you are totally at the beck and call of what the president wants you to do and he may or may not give you assignments that you can really enjoy. But it is very clear to him, to you, and to everyone else that we can only have one president at a time. If Ford were to get reelected, presumably, he could run yet another time under the Constitution. As a result, the only chance Rockefeller had to become President was if Ford died for some reason or got impeached. Given Ford’s health – he did go through two assassination attempts, but that’s not the way anybody wants to become president – so I think Rockefeller recognizes ‘This is my last job.’ And when you have had his career, his family, his background, and his aspirations, that’s not an easy thing to take.

Smith: Two last things. By election day ’76, the polls suggested you’d caught up. What was the mood? Did you think you actually—

Porter: He started from so far behind – everyone points to the time of the Democratic convention – that it always seemed like a long shot. Many of us, as we saw him moving up in the polls, got genuinely enthusiastic. ‘Maybe he can do it.’ I personally think that, if the election had been a month later, possibly even two weeks later, and there had been one round of good economic news, which came out afterward – you need a catalytic event and you need a reason for people to say ‘Well, okay.’ Unfortunately, the timing of the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November did not permit that. So, Ford never quite
caught it. But, you know, hope springs eternal in the midst of campaigning. I thought at the time it’s going to be something of a miracle if we’re able to catch Carter. You look at all the polls that come in from various states and you think of how you can do it and, yes, mathematically, there was a shot at it. It was a real disappointment, but it was a long shot just because of how far back he had started.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Porter: I think that he should be remembered as one of the most decent, honorable, dignified, and honest men that we have had as president. And we have had many good ones and I think he fits in that category.

Smith: Character counts?

Porter: Character counts. I think he should be remembered as someone who inherited a very difficult situation, both in terms of the mood of the country, the trust in government, the challenges of how we were going to extract ourselves from Vietnam, the relationship with the Soviet Union which was tense at that time, and China, and with a very difficult economy. And if you’d look at the two and a half years he was President and ask “Did we make progress in all those areas?” The answer to that in my view is an unequivocal yes. If you use as a measuring rod how someone transforms the situation that they inherit, then I think he deservedly should be considered as one of our most remarkable presidents.

The length of time he was President, the way he came into office, his style was not such that he’s going to be remembered in the way a John Kennedy is, who was very charismatic and died very tragically and was in office roughly the same amount of time. But if you look at what actually happened and what was done, I think Gerald Ford actually stacks up remarkably well. Personally, it was a great privilege to work for somebody who was as kind and thoughtful and decent and impressive as he was, but I think if you actually look at the record of accomplishment and not simply his personal qualities, I think he deserves to be very favorably treated.

Smith: That’s great.
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Smith: Talking about newspapers, Gerald Ford was omnivorous in his devouring of newspapers. Until the end of his life it was five or six newspapers a day with your morning coffee.

Nessen: Well, he had the Post and the Times and the Wall Street Journal, but he also had the Grand Rapids Press and, I think, the Detroit News, maybe, and one other paper. He had six newspapers a day that he would…

Smith: And woe to those who interrupted him while he was reading.

Nessen: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Off the wall, tell us something about Gerald Ford that might surprise people.

Nessen: I think the thing about Jerry Ford that might surprise people that I really didn’t learn until he made a visit back to his hometown of Grand Rapids, Michigan. The people there really loved him. They knew him better than anybody else, and they really loved him. He stood in the city hall and the people who wanted to shake hands and say hello to him lined up. Well, the line was enormous – out the door and up the block. He stood there and the people came through. The thing that surprised me was how many of those people he knew personally. Knew their names, knew their families, and he’d say, “Oh, hi. How are you Ed? Are you still working out there at the automobile plant?” Somebody else come up and he’d say, “Oh, hi, Sally. How are those two kids of yours? Is your son still going to the University?” It was amazing how many people he knew on a personal basis. They had been his constituents, but he’s President of the United States, and he’s asking some guy, are you still on the line? That was surprising to me.

Smith: There is a wonderful story which I only found out fairly recently. As you know, he commuted that first week. But the first day that he was going to work as a resident, he walked up to the entrance to the West Wing, and the
Marine guard held the door open and saluted. And the president sticks out his hand and says, “Hi, my name is Jerry Ford. I’m going to be living here. What’s yours?”

Nessen: Wow. Well, I was a reporter for NBC, and I had covered Agnew, who resigned. So NBC, with a certain lack of imagination, thought well, you can cover the new vice president, too. So I covered him. It wasn’t a year, but it was eight or nine months as vice president, and then I became the White House correspondent for the first month of his administration. Well, it took the Nixons a few days to move out of the White House, so here is the President of the United States living in a – I can’t remember if it was a rambler or a split level or what – on Crown View Drive in Alexandria, Virginia, and I thought, isn’t that symbolic of this guy? The “president next door.” He’s just a guy who lives in the house next door, and he’s President of the United States.

Smith: Of course, you can argue, he suffered from that at times.

Nessen: Why?

Smith: I mean in the sense of the public perception. We had this very bifurcated notion – we love Harry Truman thirty years after he left office – and we appreciate Jimmy Carter when he was carrying his bags – but in the White House we didn’t cotton to, no pun intended, but…

Nessen: But don’t forget – this came after the imperial presidency, and I think people were looking for that. One of the stories that you may or may not know about Jerry Ford was, he had a dog, Liberty. Liberty has an accident on the rug in the Oval Office and one of the Navy stewards rushes in to clean it up. Jerry Ford says, “I’ll do that. Get out of the way, I’ll do that. No man ought to have to clean up after another man’s dog.” Now that was about as symbolic of Jerry Ford as anything I know. I mean, living on Crown View Drive when you are President of the United States, and cleaning up after your own dog in the Oval Office…

Smith: It’s also a metaphor for the task that history assigned to him.
Nessen: You’d better believe it. But, you know, look, you’re a historian, one of the things that Kissinger says that I’m a big believer in is, that you cannot understand historic events and people except through the perspective of thirty years of subsequent history. Okay, now, we’re looking back at Vietnam a little bit through that perspective of thirty years, and we’re looking back at Jerry Ford very much so, and that’s why his reputation, I think, is so much different – why he’s so beloved now, as compared to when he was in the White House, or when he had just left the White House. You see, in the long run of history and what the outcome of some of the things he did was, and you’re away from that day to day heat of politics. So, I believe that thirty years of subsequent history theory, and I think he has benefited from it.

Smith: Let me go back in time, because when we were talking to Jerry Jones earlier this week, one of the startling things he told us was that he, at that point, had sort of reorganized the personnel office for Haldeman. Haldeman calls him up – now Haldeman, of course, and Erlichman leave in April of ’73 – Haldeman calls him while he is still there, and wants to know how many jobs report to the vice president. Jerry does some quick thinking and comes back with a number of about fifty. He said, “Fine. I want every one of them to write a letter of resignation, and get them to me.” They knew that early that Agnew was going to be history. Does that ring true with you…

Nessen: I was totally on the outside then. I live out just off of Massachusetts Avenue in Bethesda, and about three blocks from where Spiro Agnew lived then. There was no vice president’s house in those days. I’m with NBC. About six o’clock in the morning I get awakened by a phone call. It’s the Today Show. They’re saying, “Get up, get up. Run out to Agnew’s house, we’ll send a camera crew to meet you out there. The Wall Street Journal has a story this morning saying he’s under investigation for corruption as governor of Maryland, and maybe as VP.” So, that’s my connection to Agnew, and I spent that whole summer of ’73, I guess it was, on the Agnew case. I’d go down to Annapolis and over to Baltimore and so forth. And then when he resigned, as I say, NBC with a lack of imagination says, “Okay, now you cover the new vice president.” But I didn’t really get into that part of the Agnew story.
Smith: Of course, he led the charge against network news. On the personal level, was he that hostile to reporters?

Nessen: He was totally unapproachable. Most public figures - whether it’s natural, or whether it’s put on - they try to be buddies with the reporters. But he never did. My most vivid memory of him was he brought charges against nine reporters. The Agnew Nine. Did you ever hear of the Agnew Nine?

Smith: No.

Nessen: I was one of the Agnew Nine. And I can’t remember exactly what the charge was, but it had to do with receiving leaked information that was used to expose him. Now, that’s really general, and not specific, but that was the charge. Well, we have a hearing over in the federal courthouse in Baltimore and they hired this New York First Amendment lawyer for me and for some of the other Nine. And so we go to our hearing…

Smith: Was that Floyd Abrams?

Nessen: Yeah. And we go over to our hearing in Baltimore and Agnew walks into the courtroom. And it was so still. In those days you couldn’t have cameras in the courtroom, so there were two sketch artists, one for CBS, one for NBC - they were sisters, and I actually have the sketch at home that she did that day - and she’s drawing this picture of Agnew. He’s very tall, and very stately, and has no expression on his face at all. He walks into the courtroom – dead silence – the only sound you could hear were these sketch artists, and he pleads nolo, no defense, and announced that he was going to resign. The last thing the judge did was pound his gavel and dismiss the charges against the Agnew Nine.

Smith: Of course, it was a very short period of time – it is amazing today, you stop and think of the Fords being at home and getting a call, and being told basically, “Get dressed. In two hours we want you in the East Room for a nationally televised ceremony.” It happened very fast.

Nessen: Well, I think there was a little bit of an advance – I think somebody – I don’t remember the story, you probably know it better than I do – somebody was
delegated to sort of sound him out, “If you were asked to do…would you?” It was something like that. I don’t remember all the details.

Smith: And remember, he had that surreal meeting with Nixon in the EOB, where Nixon never brought up the subject, and Ford goes back to the Hill and is told that Agnew has just resigned.

Nessen: But you see, I think one of the things that makes Ford the guy he was, the president he was, the now historic figure that he is – is, you look at the people who have become president: Nixon is a perfect example of it, but many others, including Obama. You don’t get to be president unless you have this hunger for it and you do all the things that you have to do to get up that ladder and take that top rung. It distorts your personality, I think. This is more about beliefs than personality. It distorts your personality, this craving to be president.

Smith: It defines you and your life.

Nessen: Yes, right. Jerry Ford never had that. His plan, as you probably know, he’d told Betty he was going to serve one more term in the House and then he was going to retire and they were going to go to Palm Springs and he was going to play golf and they’d spend time together. I mean, he’d spent thirty years traveling, week after week after week. She raised the kids. They never spent much time together.

Smith: Do you think he felt guilt about that?

Nessen: That’s something I never heard him talk about. I don’t know whether he did or not, but I know that he must have recognized it because that was the promise that he made to her – that he was going to serve one more term in the House. So then, all of a sudden he’s vice president and president, without ever running for it. So he didn’t have that distortion of his personality that I think people get when they just lust after that office.

Smith: Let me ask you, in terms of following him as vice president, did you enter into that assignment with the assumption that Nixon was a short-timer?
Nessen: I didn’t. I thought it was an interesting, challenging assignment, but I certainly didn’t imagine that in eight or nine months, whatever it was, that he was going to be president. I just didn’t put all those pieces together.

Smith: Did you sense, at any point in that time, that Ford, although he might never say it, was internally, at least, preparing himself for it?

Nessen: Toward the end of that period, after he had become vice president, and as Watergate was unfolding more and more, I did then begin to sense that maybe he was sort of preparing himself. If you say, well, how did you know that? I can’t give you a specific example.

Smith: He never said anything overtly that – you know, Tom DeFrank’s story about…

Nessen: What was DeFrank’s story?

Smith: The DeFrank story was that there was some personnel action, as I recall – something like that – and Ford had said something critical of it, sort of let it slip, “Well, we’ll take care of that when I’m in there.”

Nessen: Oh, yeah, I think I heard DeFrank talk about that.

Smith: And you wonder whether Tom - I have to be careful here because Tom’s a good guy and a good friend - sort of made more of that than it warranted.

Nessen: I’m a huge fan of DeFrank, and I think there were five reporters who covered Ford when he was vice president, DeFrank and me and Phil Jones of CBS, Maggie Hunter of the New York Times, and I forget who the other one was. I guess Lou Cannon maybe from the Post. So I’m a huge fan of Tommy and we stay in touch. I’ve got a note on my desk, we’re supposed to have lunch now that the inauguration is over.

As you know, he had a very special relationship with Ford, lasting until up to the time of Ford’s death. He has a lot of stuff that he promised Ford that he’d never talk about until after Ford had died. So if he said that, then I have no reason to doubt him.
Smith: It’s revealing in another sense, of how comfortable Ford felt around him. It
was no accident that in planning the funeral – that there was a journalist. That
was there very deliberately to make the point, that there was a time in this
town when you could hew to the adversarial relationship and still be friends.

Nessen: Well, you know, there’s this one other factor, and I don’t want to make more
of this, and I’m sure you’ve heard it from other people, but in those days,
Ford liked to have a drink or two before dinner. I never saw him drunk or
anything even approaching drunk, but I do think that he maybe spoke more
freely in the evenings a couple of times. You know the story, because I think
it’s been publicized, about Ford goes down to make a speech at Tulane
University in New Orleans.

Smith: Was this as vice president or president?

Nessen: As president.

Smith: Around the fall of Vietnam?

Nessen: Yeah. You know that story?

Smith: No, go ahead.

Nessen: He has two appearances that day. In the afternoon he speaks to the Navy
League, I guess it was, and in the evening to a bunch of students in the
gymnasium of Tulane. So in the afternoon, the speech was written by
Kissinger, of course, and it was reaffirmation of America’s determination to
help South Vietnam fight the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. Well,
meanwhile, Hartmann, and a few others had written the evening speech for
Tulane without showing it to Kissinger. And that’s the one that has the line in
it: “For us, the war is over.” And of course, the audience went crazy. I mean,
these young people, “For us the war is over.”

Well, we were riding down the elevator from the hotel. He had the afternoon
event, then he had some kind of Republican reception where he had a couple
[of drinks]. And I’m thinking, oh God, this is the most important speech he’s
ever made, so we’re riding down on the elevator and I’m saying to him,
“Now, Mr. President, just take your time. Read the speech carefully and just
keep it right there in front of you. It’s very important.” And Kennerly, who was you know, was like a son to him and could say things to him that nobody else could, Kennerly says, “Mr. President, what he’s trying to tell ‘you is, don’t fuck it up.’” And he didn’t.

Smith: Was Kissinger upset?

Nessen: I don’t know whether he was upset or not. I mean, one of the things that marked the Ford White House, somewhat to its detriment, I think, you had a lot factions that were always pulling and tugging. You had the leftover Nixon people, including Haig.

Smith: Let me ask you about that, because that’s a great place to pause for a moment. Leon Parma told the story, and you can see the visual, on the morning of August 9th, was shuffled into the East Room at the last minute with some folks from the Hill. After the ceremony was over, there was a receiving line and everyone was invited down to, I think, the State Dining Room for a reception. He said you could watch the Nixon people peel off and go back to their offices. That may be over dramatic, but it does raise this large issue of how did you deal with the fact that most of your White House staff were Nixon people?

Nessen: There are two or three things. Number one, Ford’s overall theory was, if you didn’t have anything to do with Watergate, there is no reason why you should be booted out of the White House just because you worked for Nixon.

Smith: That’s generous.

Nessen: Yes, it was.

Smith: Politically, given the mood of the country, that’s very generous, maybe too generous.

Nessen: Absolutely. Well, I think what people like Hartmann and Rumsfeld were telling him is that that was too generous. It’s not that you are being unfair to them, you have to do some symbolic things so the public says, and “Oh, well Nixon and his people are gone. We’ve got a new guy and there’re new people there.” And some of it was that kind of larger picture issue, some of it was
just simply ambition. So you had the Nixon people, the leftover Nixon people, and what Ford said was, “Unless they did something wrong, there’s no reason to boot them out just because they were Nixon people.”

Smith: It was guilt by association.

Nessen: The Nixon White House was apparently organized in a way where they had floaters, they didn’t report to anybody. So one of the things that Rumsfeld – he was chief of staff then - did was, there were eight senior White House West Wing people, the NSC, the press secretary, the Congressional relations guy, the eight senior people. Everybody had to report to one of those eight senior people. What Rumsfeld said was, “Okay, here are the leftover Nixon staff people who report to you. If you want to keep them, keep them. If you want to get rid of them, it’s your responsibility to tell them they’re done.” So the two people I had on my staff were Father McLaughlin, John McLaughlin, and Ken Clawson, the former *Washington Post* guy. I didn’t want to keep either one of them on my staff, so I had to tell them. Father McLaughlin didn’t want to go, and he said he only takes his orders from the president. I said, “John, I need your resignation this afternoon, or else I’m going to announce it in my briefing tomorrow that you’re leaving.” So I had his letter. Clawson, it was very strange. His reaction was, “How am I going to pay my mortgage?” But anyhow, that’s how it worked.

Now, what you were left with was a White House that was, first of all, full of factions. You had these leftover Nixon people; you had people who had worked for Ford in his Congressional staff; you had people who had come aboard in his vice presidential year. You had new people who he had just hired, or needed to hire, and was hiring for the presidential thing. And you had some people who had never worked for him before. You had all these different factions and there were a lot of rivalries, and gone were personal rivalries. You had Kissinger and Rumsfeld, you had Bob Hartmann and practically everybody else.

Smith: How polarizing was Hartmann?

Nessen: Very, very polarizing. Very polarizing.
Smith: What was the basis of that? Was it a jealousy that only he was really protecting the president, or really understood the president, or…

Nessen: I think it was much more personal than that. I think Hartmann had been Ford’s chief of staff in Congress and he’d been like the number one guy. And all of a sudden, you had people who are at least equal, maybe more than equal. He was my neighbor out in Bethesda, and Ford was constantly traveling when he was vice president, so we’d get back to Andrews Air Force Base at two o’clock in the morning and he would say, “Come on, I’ll give you a ride home.” So that’s how we really got to be friends. But he was a difficult man.

Smith: Prickly?

Nessen: Very much so.

Smith: It leads again to this large question, this notion you talked about seeing Ford in his element, in Grand Rapids. Or that story about the [West Wing] guard, that’s what you would in some ways expect of a Congressman. How difficult was it for Ford to grow out of the Congressional mindset, into what I think most people would agree, is a very different set of job skills.

Nessen: Yeah.

Smith: There are those who think that the story of the Ford presidency is that evolution. And the tragedy was, just about the time he’d made the transformation, he lost the job.

Nessen: It was time to go. Right.

Smith: The whole spokes of the wheel, for example. Not only was it a reaction against the Haldeman/Erlichman imperial presidency, but it also feels very much like a Capitol Hill office.

Nessen: Well, I remember the first time I ever heard about spokes of the wheel, but that was part of this debate about organizing the White House. And Ford’s original idea was spokes of the wheel - that the president was in the middle and all these senior staff people would report directly to him. Well, that’s
impractical, you can’t do that. And so, I think that’s when Rumsfeld began to steer him away from the spokes of the wheel idea.

There was, at one point, and you’ve probably heard about these, the so-called peeking privileges. This meant you could go to the door of the Oval Office, open it a crack, peek in, and if the president was not on the phone, or if he was just reading the paper, or looking at papers and so forth, you could go in and get your questions answered or whatever. Spokes of the wheel. It wasn’t going to work and it didn’t work. But the spokes of the wheel was - at one point what was happening with the White House. I’m trying to think of where/when this spokes of the wheel idea changed.

Smith: It was pretty early. I think when Rumsfeld really showed up. We’ve been led to believe that, in fact, one of Rumsfeld’s conditions for taking the job was…that spokes of the wheel would be replaced.

Nessen: Really? I can believe that. But I think Hartmann, Rumsfeld and I’m trying to think of who else might have been involved – and Kissinger. Those were the three great rivals.

Smith: Let me go back a little bit before Nixon resigned, For people who weren’t around, can you recreate what the mood was in this town?

Nessen: Well, Nixon was not a very popular figure. And I don’t think he was very good at explaining himself and so forth. He was also a Republican and you know Republicans are not necessarily popular – and he was a difficult person. When you think back to him, and what it takes to become the president, and he had none of those skills and abilities - I mean, compared to Obama? But compared to anybody.

Smith: I’ve said the remarkable thing about the Nixon presidency was not how it ended, but that it happened at all.

Nessen: I could not agree with you more. That’s totally right. I mean, how did this guy get to be president when he lacked those skills you would think were needed for it?
Smith: I realize this is speculative – there was this story was kicked around that Nixon would have preferred another vice president, but he really was given no choice by Congress.

Nessen: Right.

Smith: That said, he is said to have regarded Ford as his insurance against impeachment.

Nessen: Yeah. Right.

Smith: Which tells you something about his….

Nessen: Bad judgment.

Smith: Well, but also his view of Ford.

Nessen: Well, yes, I think that’s true, but I think people who knew Ford and people who were in Congress with Ford, I think they felt pretty comfortable having Ford move up to that position. I think they did.

Smith: When the smoking gun was released – did you see Ford at that time? You were covering him. Was there any discernable change in his demeanor, or was there a poker face that he was deploying?

Nessen: Look, he’d been around Washington for almost thirty years, I think he knew what was happening. He knew how this was likely to end. He knew what this was likely to involve, and I just think he tightened up and did not want to react publicly to that. But I think he knew what was coming. Did I, as a reporter, sense that he knew what was coming, that he acted as if he knew what was coming? I don’t have that recollection.

Smith: He was in an impossible position.

Nessen: Oh yeah.

Smith: I mean, he’s basically supposed to be out there defending the president. But he can’t defend the president to the point where he loses his own credibility. And at the same time, no one wants to admit the reason he can’t lose his own credibility is because he may replace the president.
Nessen: Yeah.

Smith: Plus, he can’t have a transition. He can’t even acknowledge the possibility of a transition.

Nessen: You are absolutely right. That’s a very tough position to be in. But, he was. I saw part of it from the outside, and he’d already become president, of course, by the time I joined the White House.

Smith: On the 9th of August, were you in the East Room?

Nessen: Was that when he…

Smith: When Nixon left and then a few hours later he was sworn in.

Nessen: Yes, I was. What happened was, I had been White House correspondent under Johnson and then I came back as White House correspondent during the first month of Ford. So when Nixon gave his farewell speech, they herded us out onto the South Lawn – I’ve got a picture of this somewhere – and, of course, they walked out to the helicopter. You’ve probably seen this picture. Ford looked stricken and Betty looked stricken and of course, Nixon looked stricken.

Smith: She said it was the worst day of her life.

Nessen: And, so I’m over there with the crowd and they walk to the helicopter, and the helicopter goes away. Then we go back into the White House for Ford’s little talk. So I was there that day.

Smith: What was the mood?

Nessen: Oh, God, it’s hard to – you know, everything that was happening was like in some incredible melodrama that you never thought you would see, and you could see Nixon’s staff people crying and you’d see people like Hartmann, who were probably secretly celebrating already. But I do think that there was this sense of, “Oh my gosh, this is one of the most historic moments in America, ever.” There was so much happening and so much high drama and so much emotion – it was just overflowing.
Smith: Can you imagine how cable TV would over-hype?

Nessen: Oh my Lord.

Smith: The thing you didn’t need was hype. You needed to just get out of the way and let the story play itself out.

Nessen: My great mentor at NBC was Ruben Frank, who you probably know. The great lesson Ruben taught me, and I tried to follow it, and every time I watch cable television I realize they didn’t have any Ruben Frank: “Shut up and let the pictures tell the story.”

Smith: That’s what television is all about, isn’t it?

Nessen: Yeah. Right.

Smith: Supposed to be. Go to the radio if you want to hear endless talk and chatter. Tell me about Jerry terHorst.

Nessen: Well, I didn’t know terHorst very well before he became the press secretary. Then he became the press secretary, obviously because he’d known Ford, covered Ford’s first Congressional campaign, if I’m not mistaken, in Michigan. And he was obviously close to Ford. In those days, reporters covered the president when he would go to church – either at St. John’s just across Lafayette Square, or over here where there is a big office building now – used to be the National Presbyterian, which has now moved up to Nebraska Avenue. I and the other reporters would go to church with the president and of course, when he was going to National Presbyterian you had Rev. Elson, who thought it was his role to instruct the president, and he would say, “And Mr. President, the Bible teaches us that when you visit with Khrushchev next week…” We’d be scribbling all this down, go back to the office and pretend it was a story. So anyhow, we used to go to church with the president. One month after he becomes president, Ford goes across Lafayette Square. He goes to St. John’s and comes back, and normally what happens is, the press secretary then says, “Okay, that’s a lid. See you tomorrow morning.” Meaning, no more news today, see you tomorrow morning. But one Sunday, terHorst says, “You know, if I were you, I’d stick around a little bit.” So that’s
when the pardon was announced, on that Sunday morning. Pardon of Nixon. I’m sure you’ve heard the story, Ford later said that he was spending 25% of his time and the staff was spending 25% of its time on leftover Nixon stuff and he just had to get that off his plate so he could concentrate.

Smith: Actually, there’s even more than that. He talked about the first press conference, which I think was on the 28th of August, and I think is a quality about Ford which is, again, the flip side of this genuine, kind of Boy Scout niceness, which can only be called naiveté. It’s hugely admirable in everything but a president. But he went into that press conference believing that everyone would want to talk about inflation and Cyprus, or at least he convinced himself. And he came out of that angry, partly at himself for not expressing himself terribly well.

Nessen: For letting it go this long. Yeah.

Smith: And angry, in a sense, at the press corps for being obsessed with this subject.

Nessen: Well, what happened was that we went back to the White House. He announced the pardon, terHorst announced the pardon, and he also said he was leaving, that he was resigning. The assumption was that he was resigning because he didn’t agree with the pardon. You probably have talked to other people, who will tell you that the reason he really resigned was that it was just overwhelming. The job was overwhelming, there was a fifty-five person staff to manage, it was a job where you got there in time for the seven o’clock staff meeting in the morning, and if you were like me and you tried to answer all your reporters’ calls before you went home, you left there at 9:30-10:00 or later at night. He was just overwhelmed by it, and this gave him an opportunity to gracefully leave. I don’t know what the truth is. I never had the conversation, one on one with terHorst.

Smith: Is he still around?

Nessen: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Where is he?

Nessen: He’s over in Virginia. I will look in my Rolodex, if you want his number.
Smith: Wonderful. Yes, because, obviously we want to talk to him. We’d love to.

Nessen: Anyhow, I don’t know the combination of reasons that persuaded terHorst to resign, but he did. I guess Jack Hushen, he was a deputy left over from Nixon, filled in for a while. terHorst never really explained to me why he was leaving, and as I say, there is this disagreement about why he left. I do think that Bob Hartmann, who was my neighbor, maybe was an advocate for me to replace terHorst. I’d been a journalist, I’d gone to UPI in ’56, went to NBC in ’62, this was ’74, so I’d been a journalist all that time. And I think, like most journalists, you know that what you are seeing, and are allowed to see, and what you’re told, is maybe 10% of what is really going on. I just had the itch to see what was happening on the inside. The book I wrote, *It Sure Looks Different from the Inside*, was a perfect summation of why I wanted to do that, but I don’t think I had exactly the right personality for that job. I was short-tempered, sort of full of myself, I didn’t suffer fools easily, and it was a difficult time. I don’t know if you care about any of the media issues – the fact of the matter was…”

Smith: Sure. I assume they all saw themselves as Woodward and Bernstein.

Nessen: No, but you see, it’s the opposite of that. Two guys who never went inside the White House gate brought down a president. You are a White House reporter, you’re in the press room, twenty feet down the hall there is the President of the United States. Every day you come to the White House, you never got a whiff of that story. Two guys outside of the White House, who never went into the White House, broke the story. You are really frustrated, and some of that, I think, was taken out on me, and on Ford. And also, terHorst, at least was perceived of as having resigned as a matter of honor, because he couldn’t agree with the pardon, and that, again, put some further pressure on me. Now, my view of the job was different from his because who gives a damn what the press secretary thinks? You’re not a policymaker. You’re not a political figure. You’re a spokesman, literally. The president can’t come out there every day and answer questions at the briefing, so I thought my job was to answer questions as the president would answer them if he were there.

Smith: You carry whatever the press corps has in mind back to the president.
Nessen: Yes, and also, along that line, I tried to do everything that Ziegler didn’t do, and not do the things that Ziegler did. One of the things I tried to do was to get more reporters in to see Ford on a one on one basis. He liked that. I think I told you on the phone about bringing in Newsweek and Times correspondents on Saturdays, which were a little slower time…and they need a lot of color. What color was the necktie he was wearing when he signed that bill? All those little details.

Smith: Did he understand that?

Nessen: Yeah. He did. He’d been in Washington all these years, you know. So that was one of the changes I tried to bring about. The other thing that I did which was naïve, in hindsight, was, I thought, well, I’ve been a reporter, now I’m still a reporter, I’m going on the inside, though, and I’m getting even more details and I’m coming out, I’m like a pool reporter. And I’m going to report to the others. Well, that’s very naïve, I think, to think that was the job. I did say I would never lie, and never cover up, and I think I kept that promise. I think I probably delayed announcing some things every once in a while for what seemed like good reasons. But, I think the combination of – terHorst saying he was resigning because he disagreed with the pardon – I was on a program with McClellan at George Washington University a couple of months ago, and he talked about, and he talks about in his book and also in all of his interviews, all the things that he disagreed with Bush about. Who cares? Who cares? We’ve only got one president and nobody gives a damn – I don’t, in my view – what the press secretary thinks. But anyhow, that’s what I brought to the job, and some of the attitudes I brought to the job.

Smith: How did the Saturday Night Live appearance come about?

Nessen: Ford had three teenage kids living in the White House, and they all watched Saturday Night Live. We had this big White House…

Smith: Did they think Chevy Chase was funny?

Nessen: I don’t know about that. But I do know that every year we have the White House Correspondents Association dinner, and in ’75 – ’74 or ’75 – fall of ’74, I think, the entertainment was Chevy Chase. And it’s up here at the
Hilton Hotel on the hill, up Connecticut Avenue. I think it is the biggest ballroom in Washington, and there are literally, like 2,000 people there. The tradition is, there is an entertainer, and then the president does his speech. So they introduce Chevy Chase and he comes in, in the far door, and he comes through the tables, and he stumbling and bumping into things and knocking over things, and he gets up there and he does his whole Ford shtick. And, of course, Ford is sitting right there. Then it is the president’s turn. And Ford had this Hollywood joke writer named Don Penny on his staff, and Penny had prepared him for this. Ford gets up and he pretends to pull the placemat off. Then he gets up and he puts his speech on the podium and pretends all the pages fall off. Well, self-deprecating humor is the only kind of humor that goes over in Washington, and that’s what this was. And he won everybody over.

Smith: Do you think he resented – I know what you’re saying – but did he resent it?

Nessen: Yeah, he did. He never showed it very much.

Smith: How do you know that he did?

Nessen: I sensed that he did. He never said anything, but I just sensed that he thought that he was being parodied unjustifiably. He had a good sense of humor. He could make fun of himself.

Smith: I think it was in Vienna when Ford slipped on the steps coming down from Air Force One. And later on everyone around Ford was – I think they thought they were sort of bucking him up, or at least buttering him up, by going after the photographers for capturing him in such a pose. And he said, “Well, of course they did. They would have lost their jobs if they didn’t.” Which just tells you… I can’t imagine Lyndon Johnson saying that.

Nessen: Oh, no. You sure can’t. Well, he hit it off with Chevy Chase, and Chevy Chase comes from a wealthy family. His father was Ned Chase, the publisher, and his mother came from the Crane plumbing fortune and so forth. He loved to play tennis and Ford loved to play tennis, so Ford invited him to come to the White House and play tennis the next day. And he came.
Loren Michael, the producer, had been after me to get Ford to come on the show, and I wasn’t about to do that. Well, when I saw that Chevy Chase hit it off with Ford, and that he could take part in the fun, I started talking to them and Ford agreed to tape these two bits. He didn’t want to go on the show in person, but he would tape these two things. He said, “I’m Jerry Ford and you’re not.” And, “Live from New York, it’s Saturday Night.” And then they asked me to be the host. I’d been at NBC for twelve years as a news correspondent. The only live programming then was news and *Saturday Night Live*, so I knew a lot of the crew and so forth.

I think, looking back on it, and reading some of the books that have been written by the cast and by others, that it wasn’t in all good, clean fun. They felt, I think, an opportunity to really take a crack at Ford. I think he felt a little bit used, because look, he is used to Washington, where self-deprécatimg is the only kind of humor. You don’t make fun of your opponents, or you don’t make fun of people you don’t like, so I don’t think it was a happy experience for him. He didn’t get outraged by it, but…

Smith: Did he talk to you about it?

Nessen: Not really. And it shows he had a good sense of humor, or that he could make fun of himself. I only remember one time when he complained. He was skiing at Vail, and all the TV news shows used film of him falling while skiing. And Ford said to me, “Those reporters, the one exercise they get is sitting on a bar stool.”

Smith: Take us back to April of ’75 and the events surrounding the fall of Saigon.

Nessen: Well, I have to tell you this to start with. I did five tours in Vietnam as a NBC correspondent. I got wounded there. I thought I was going to die. I had a huge emotional attachment to it. I saw reporters I knew who were killed. I saw friends killed, I saw things that you should…I’m walking down a road one day and there is a pile of charcoal on the roadside and I ask some soldier, “What’s that?” And that was two little babies who had burned to death in a house. I had an enormous emotional involvement in Vietnam. So here I am in
the White House, and I’m going to have to be the one who announces the end of the war. You could see it coming for a while, clearly.

Ford was on his way to Palm Springs when he gets handed this note from the radio operator on the plane, that DaNang had fallen, and that the North Vietnamese were kind of sweeping southward toward Saigon. Well, here again, Ford’s got all these parties and stuff he’s supposed to go to in Palm Springs. This was the famous picture of Ford – he has to go up to Bakersfield to make a speech, and of course, all the reporters wanted to ask him about the impending fall of Saigon. He gets off the plane, and you know this, and he starts running.

Smith: With Helen Thomas in hot pursuit.

Nessen: Everybody trailing him. The next day at my briefing, of course, I’m asked about this and some reporter says, “He ran almost as fast as the South Vietnamese army did, didn’t he, Ron?” That was a terrible time. The actual end came, and I’ve been doing a little research on this myself because I want to do a little bit of writing about that period. They are in some kind of relatively routine economic meeting, and Scowcroft gives him a note saying that the North Vietnamese had reached the airport in Saigon, or are closing in on the airport in Saigon. So Ford gives the order to load up all the C130s and take the rest of the Americans out. And by then Tan Son Nhat airport has fallen, so they have to do it by helicopter.

It was supposed to take two hours, because I think by that point there were five hundred Americans left in Saigon. Two hundred or five hundred. Well, somebody made the decision that they had to take out two thousand Vietnamese who had worked for the Americans or in some way were associated with the Americans, because they were going to be killed. So this helicopter lift lasts for sixteen hours, and we all sort of stood around the Oval Office. What do you say? What do you do? It was late at night, about eleven o’clock, and Ford said he was going to go up and wait for further word in the residence. And so it was Rumsfeld who was the chief of staff, Cheney who was his deputy, and me and David Kennerly, the White House photographer. Somebody said, “Sleep well, Mr. President.” And he walked out and I said,
sort of under my breath, “If you can.” We didn’t know what to do. I slept in my office that night I don’t know about the others.

The next day the helicopters were taking the refugees out to these aircraft carriers in the Gulf there, the South China Sea, and the helicopters were beginning to suffer all kinds of mechanical breakdowns because they’d been flying for sixteen hours. So Ford says, “Okay, tell Graham Martin (the U.S. ambassador) to get on the next helicopter and get all the Americans out of there and it’s over.” So Kissinger sends Graham Martin that message, and Graham Martin sends a message and you can imagine the pressure he was under. He says, “I don’t take my orders from you, I only take my orders from the president.” So Ford had to sign something, so Martin gets on the next helicopter with the rest of the staff and as many of the Vietnamese as they can get out, and that’s the picture that you’ve seen.

We had a prepared statement and I read the prepared statement, and then Kissinger and I went over to the Old Executive Office Building for a briefing. This was like 4:30-5:00 in the afternoon, and there were amazingly few reporters there, because everybody was back in their offices watching it on television and writing their stories for the morning papers and the evening newscasts. So there were very few reporters there. The briefing was sort of desultory. So we come off the stage and Brent Scowcroft is standing there. The first thing I said at the briefing was, “All the Americans are out of Saigon. The evacuation is complete.”

Scowcroft was waiting off stage. He said, “I have bad news for you. There are still 135 Marines in the embassy compound.” They weren’t forgotten. They were kind of a rear guard to protect, and to keep all these Vietnamese from climbing over the fence. The helicopters were going to come back, the Marines would be gone in two hours. But I had said all the Americans are out of Saigon, the evacuation is complete, and now 135 Marines are still there. So, we had this little meeting with Rumsfeld and Cheney and me and Scowcroft, I guess, and maybe his deputy. What should we do? I tell you, I’m not proud of it, but my suggestion was to – they are going to be gone in two hours – we were premature, but let’s let it go. And Rumsfeld, of all people,
given his reputation today, said something like, “This war has been marked by so many lies, let’s not let it end on one last lie.” And, of course, I realized instantly that he was right. So we called the reporters back into the briefing room and said, “Oops, there are still 135 Marines. They are going to be out in two hours, but I didn’t want to mislead you,” and so forth. And they sort of shrugged and so forth.

I’ll tell you one footnote to this in a minute, one postscript to this. There was a lot of black humor that night. What do you do? Kennerly and I had both been in Vietnam as journalists. This was a lost war by America, there was a tremendous amount of emotion there. What do you do, what do you say? And a lot of it was black humor. Kennerly said something like, “I have good news, and I have bad news. The good news is that the war is over. The bad news is we lost.” Kissinger, even Kissinger, he said two things. One thing I’ll tell you in a second, the humorous thing was he said, “I have lost two wars in two weeks, give me another week and I’ll lose another war,” because Cambodia had been evacuated, now Saigon. Everybody was so emotional, so there was that black humor. Kissinger, when he found out that the Marines were still in the compound, he blew up, and I had never seen him blow up. He was always self-contained, and he said, “God damn it, those sons of bitches, can’t they get anything right!” He was really angry.

Smith: And who was he referring to?

Nessen: Whoever was in charge of the evacuation or sending back information about the evacuation. The other thing he said, which I’m sure can be misconstrued, but what he said was essentially something like, “I hope that these last throes of the war are not dragged out,” because it would just make it worse and worse. He hoped that they would surrender quickly, or something like that. It was an incredibly emotional day, and the sequel to that was, that we did get a lot of Vietnamese refugees out. They were in two refugee camps: one in Arkansas and one in Florida. There was a bill to appropriate, I don’t know, $435,000,000 – millions were a lot of money in those days, it wasn’t a rounding era in those days. The House of Representatives defeated the money for refugees.
I took the AP wire copy into the Oval Office and gave it to Ford. I’d never heard him curse all the time I’d known him – three or four years by then. He said, “Those sons of bitches.” And what he did was, he went out and he campaigned for that money for Vietnamese refugees, and it was, to me, one of the greatest examples of moral leadership of his administration. And he got the money for the refugees. We went to the refugee camps in Arkansas and Florida to visit.

Smith: Some of the most touching tributes when he died, I remember reading stories, I think there were columns, Oped pieces in both the Times and the Post from Vietnamese refugees who looked upon him as their president. In some ways, their savior.

Nessen: He saved them. He really saved them. The interesting little sidebar is: everyday at my briefing, I was getting pounded, “Ron, what authority does the president have to take Vietnamese out. Isn’t his authority to just use those helicopters for Americans? Congress hasn’t given…” Pounding, pounding, pounding. I’d go back to my office, the phone would be ringing. It would be network executives begging me to help them get their Vietnamese camera crews and so forth, out. Hypocrisy is the number one product of Washington, as you probably know.

Smith: One of the things that I’ll never forget was, later on, we got the staircase from that embassy [for the Ford Museum]. And there was a big debate among the trustees. There is a great story…

Nessen: That fire escape where…

Smith: We got the staircase from the roof of the embassy.

Nessen: Oh my God.

Smith: Very quickly, I’ll tell you how we got it, because it’s a great story. At the time of the rededication in ’97, the Clinton administration sent Madeline Albright out as their representative. She took part in a program with several secretaries of state. Well, what was going on, they wanted the chemical weapons treaty passed, and I will never forget, in the kitchen of the Ford Museum, Gerald
Ford and George H.W. Bush are on the phones, calling Republican Senators to lobby on the chemical weapons treaty, which they got. And what we got in return was, we got the staircase from the embassy in Saigon. Madame Secretary guaranteed it. We brought it back, and there are all these people, beginning with Kissinger, who said, “Why in the world would you want to remind people of that?” But Ford, to his eternal credit, said two things: one, it’s a part of history, we can’t forget it; and two, with an imagination that I don’t think people often credited him with, he looked at that staircase and he saw it every bit as much of a symbol of a desire to be free as the big piece of the Berlin Wall out on the front lawn.

So, we got it, and he came back from California. There is a large Vietnamese-American community in West Michigan – we invited them in to dedicate that staircase.

Nessen: Oh my God.

Smith: And, talk about bittersweet…

Nessen: Wow. Well, everybody has got so many stories about that day. There was this *Time Magazine* photographer, Dick Swanson, and he was married to a Vietnamese woman, they got married inside Saigon, actually, and she opened this very, very well known Vietnamese restaurant in Georgetown, and they got married there. They left Vietnam before the end of the war. But she had a lot of relatives there, and when the end was getting near, he went back to Saigon, this photographer, on the last commercial flight into Tan Son Nhuit he hijacked a truck. He went around and he collected seventeen of her relatives, there was one uncle he couldn’t find – seventeen relatives, and took them out to Tan Son Nhuit got them on an evacuation plane and got them out of there.

Smith: And remember, then there was Operation Baby Lift.

Nessen: Oh my God. I went with Ford. I will never, ever forget that. They came to San Francisco – well, first of all, the first one crashed. This was like a horror show on top of a horror show. You had the evacuation of Saigon, and I knew people – my friends were not going to get out and so forth – and then this evacuation
plane load of hundreds of babies crashes. So then they have another baby lift plane coming. This was a C141, I think, and you know how big they are, landing in San Francisco, and Ford goes out to welcome the plane back. It lands and we climb aboard. Well, I will never forget that. There were hundreds of babies on this plane. They’d been flying across the ocean for like seventeen hours. There were hundreds of dirty diapers on that plane. It was like a nerve gas attack. But I thought that was an important thing for him to go and welcome that plane back. Now, the Vietnamese being what they are, this was supposed to be the Orphan Lift, which I think was the original name of it. Well, as you know, the South Vietnamese officials paid bribes and got their own children on this plane.

Smith: The assassination attempts. Two - improbable.

Nessen: In a couple of weeks.

Smith: In less than a month. Both in California. You were quoted after the second one as saying, “We’re never going back to California.”

Nessen: Well, let’s see, you’re going to have to help me remember here. Now the first one…

Smith: The first one was in Sacramento, with Squeaky Fromme.

Nessen: In Sacramento. That’s right. Okay. So he goes out to see Jerry Brown, who is the governor. And he’s staying at a hotel right on that park that’s in front of the capitol building. So it’s a nice day, so he decides to walk from his hotel across the park, up this little path, and then into see Jerry Brown. Right? So, he’s on the path. The Secret Services agents are on the path, and then there are spectators lining both sides of the path, and I’m walking sort of parallel to him, but behind the spectators. And all of a sudden, this woman raises her hand and there is a gun in her hand.

Smith: Did you see that?

Nessen: Yeah. And the Secret Service agent grabs the gun like this, so the firing pin is there, so the firing pin can’t go down. Meanwhile, the other Secret Service agents grab Ford and they rush him inside the state building, the state capitol.
So, Rumsfeld and I are in this room, and he goes into this meeting with Jerry Brown, and my understanding is, he never said anything to Jerry Brown. He’d just escaped an assassination attempt and he’s sitting there making small talk with the governor. Anyhow, meanwhile, the press is gone…

Smith: His line afterwards was, because I remember asking him, he said, “Well, I didn’t think it would be very nice to go in and say some lady just tried to shoot me while I was coming in to see you.”

Nessen: Anyhow, Rumsfeld and I went into a holding room or something, and we had to try and get as much information as we could, as quickly as we could, because the press was going bonkers. Most of them hadn’t seen it. So, then we had this briefing, and one of the interesting things to me was, Rumsfeld wanted to do the briefing – and he did the briefing. But anyhow, that was that. So that was Sacramento.

The second was in San Francisco.

Smith: Outside the St. Francis…

Nessen: Behind the St. Francis Hotel. Ford comes out of the back door of the hotel and I think we were going to the airport. [He] comes out and the motorcade is lined up there. His limo is right here, and there are people on the other side of the street waving and so forth. He comes out and he waves like this, and this is when the other woman actually got a shot off, and the Secret Service grabs Ford, throws him into the backseat, covers him up with their own bodies, and I’m sort of putting all this together in my mind. I’m walking next to Dr. Lukash, and boy, they got him in the backseat and that motorcade is starting to pull away and I thought, “Oh my God, if we don’t get in the car, we’re going to be left here.” So Lukash and I run and jump into the first car we come to, which is the press pool, and we race out to the airport. We race out to the airport. Meanwhile, Mrs. Ford has her own schedule and she’s down the Peninsula somewhere and we have to wait for her to get back to Air Force One. Of course, they pulled the limo right up to the plane. You step out the door and stairs are right there. They don’t want him to walk across any open space.
So we get on the plane, we’re waiting for her. She finally comes, and I’m up in the president’s compartment when she arrives. She sits down, and on other side of this table from the president, and she says, “Hello, dear. How are you? How did everything go?” I’m looking at Rumsfeld, and he’s looking at me and we’re both looking at Ford. Nobody has told her. Somebody, and I guess it was Rumsfeld, said, “You mean you don’t know?” And she says, “Know what?” I think it was Rumsfeld who said, “Somebody took a shot at your husband.” Well, I was looking right at her face. There wasn’t any horror – she’d been in public life all this time – a lot of things had happened, and she just accepted it.

But I have to tell you, in the back of the plane with the staff and the press, there was an awful lot of drinking on that flight home. The follow up to that is, the guy who hit her arm, as you know was a gay guy…

Smith: Yeah, Oliver Sipe, I think was his name.

Nessen: Oliver Sipple.

Smith: Okay. A veteran?

Nessen: Yeah, a veteran, and, as you know, there was a controversy and why they did this, I don’t have any idea. I guess times were different then maybe. But they did not invite him to the White House. I think it was wrong. I thought it wrong then, but times were different then.

But I’ll tell you one other thing, the next week *Time Magazine*, of course gave extensive coverage to this, and they had a replica showing the path of the bullet, and, as you know, the bullet hit the façade of the hotel, ricocheted down, hit the curb, and then sort of shattered into pieces. Well, looking at the chart in “Time” I figured out where Lukash and I were, and that bullet went just like that in front of us.

Smith: It is interesting that in later years, I think he is the only president to this day, who has actually put his name on a petition for gay rights.

Nessen: Yeah.
Smith: And you wonder whether he changed, whether it was just the political constraints of the time, and – it was a different culture.

Nessen: I just think that, again, you have to look at the influence that Betty had over him, and the fact that he had four kids, three of them young and living in the White House at the time, so he was exposed to popular culture, and so forth.

Smith: Did you know she had a problem? And what was the problem?

Nessen: Yeah. Well, I think everyone, including the Fords, was in denial. And you see, at the end of the day, a travel day or whatever, she obviously had a problem. And I don’t know whether anybody really knew precisely what the problem was, but you could not escape it - that she had a problem.

Smith: Did she enjoy life in the White House?

Nessen: In many ways, it was a better life because she got to see Ford more. When he was a Republican leader, was in the House, he was literally, always traveling. So now, when he came home, he just went upstairs and there he was, and I think she saw a lot more of him. And you’ve got people to help you, and so forth. I was not that intimate with the inner workings of the family, but my sense is that she did enjoy that period.

Smith: Were you on the job when she had her breast cancer surgery?

Nessen: Yes, I was.

Smith: That must have been a shock.

Nessen: Lukash called me on a Friday night, I think it was, and said, “Mrs. Ford is going to go into Bethesda Naval in the morning for a biopsy,” or whatever you call it. So I notified the press and we had a pool to go with us and arranged a press room out there and so forth. So she goes in and they discover that she has a malignant tumor and they are going to do a mastectomy. Now she sent word that she wanted this to be announced while she was still on the operating table. And that’s what we did. Now, that’s candor. That’s really candor, and it was her own decision. So we went out there into the briefing room they had set up and I said, “Mrs. Ford is undergoing a mastectomy now.
They discovered a malignancy.” That kind of candor, I think, is extraordinary, but that was her own decision. She sent word herself.

Smith: It’s hard, from this vantage point, all these years later, to realize what a forbidden subject that was.

Nessen: No kidding. And let me tell you how many people, how many women saw that and said, “I think I’d better go for a checkup.” Happy Rockefeller did and discovered she had a malignant tumor, as you know. My mother went and had an examination, and found she had breast cancer, and she had a mastectomy. She is still living at 97, I might add. But you can’t imagine how many women took that as a signal that maybe they’d better go and get a checkup, too. And many women found they had breast cancer. That was really the birth of the awareness of breast cancer, and willingness to talk about it in public.

Smith: That leads into this larger question about her candor. There was the controversy surrounding the *Sixty Minutes* interview. The sense I have is that the immediate reaction goes back to what we were talking about earlier, the one fighting the last war. The instant reaction from the white males was, “Oh my God!” And then it took a while, but within days came in polling data that suggested that, in fact, a lot of people found her candor very refreshing.

Nessen: You bet.

Smith: It probably was a real problem, particularly on the Right, when you were already facing a challenge. But by 1976 there are all these buttons, “Betty’s Husband for President.”

Nessen: I’ve got one of those at home, incidentally. See, I think this is more an example of the common wisdom is always wrong, than anything else. There was sort of a unified media conclusion and you say, “Well, how do you know that?” And the response is, “Well, everybody knows that.” It’s the common wisdom.

Smith: It’s always been that way.
Nessen: Well, having been a journalist for a long time - and then on the other side, the common wisdom is almost always wrong. This was a case where the common wisdom was wrong, I think. I really believe that.

Smith: It’s amazing, when you look at that interview, even now. She said things in 1975 that I can’t imagine Hillary Clinton saying.

Nessen: Remember, that was 1975. That’s thirty-three years ago, preceded by Patricia Nixon, Pat Nixon. She never talked about anything. She only stood there and smiled, right? Then you had Lady Bird. Now, Lady Bird had as her issue planting beautiful flowers all over Washington. At that time that was an acceptable First Lady’s job, and so forth. You never had a First Lady – it was not traditional for the First Lady to get into policy issues or serious issues.

Smith: So you could understand why that conventional wisdom existed.

Nessen: Yes, but looking back at it from hindsight, you thought, “Oh my God.” In a way that’s a kind of discrimination all by itself – where you think of the First Lady doing anything except planting flowers or having teas, as being, “Oh my God, what’s happening here?” That’s a kind of bigotry, I think. Look, she was who she was. I think of both Ford and Mrs. Ford and the great things they brought to the White House. Again, this just comes back to my saying, he didn’t undergo all those character changes that happens when you lust after the presidency for twenty years. They were just normal people living over in Alexandria. They were going to retire to Palm Springs in two years. She was the same way as he was. They were just ordinary people.

Smith: And isn’t it interesting, it almost took his death for people to see just what an incredible love match that was.

Nessen: Yeah. Well, I’ve seen a lot of first couples, and so forth, and I believe that was a really genuine, deep, abiding love affair. And he used to like to flirt.

Smith: Vicki Carr? Remember the Vicki Carr story?

Nessen: Vicki Carr. Yeah. And I’ve got a picture of that night, actually. That White House thing where she was the singer, and of course, you know the Mrs. Ford quote, which was, “That woman is never coming into my house again.” Well,
I mean, sure, he liked to flirt, but, boy, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing beyond flirting. I went to the Ford funeral at the National Cathedral, and when she came up the aisle, she looked devastated. When I looked at her, I thought, “I can’t imagine how she’s going to get through this day.” You could just see it on her face and in her body, and so forth. She was devastated, because they had been together for so long.

Smith: At the very end, when she had that last long walk down to the gravesite, and she got out of the wheelchair and managed it…someone said to her the next week, “I don’t know how you did that.” And she said, “That’s what my husband would have wanted.”

Nessen: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Were Ford people naïve in not preparing earlier for the Reagan challenge? Because one senses that either they didn’t really take it seriously, or thought maybe it wouldn’t happen, or he could be bought off. Really, it was pretty late into ’75 before people got serious.

Nessen: Yeah. I don’t know a lot of the personal details, but I think it surprised everybody that a Republican would challenge a sitting Republican president of his own party. And I think there was, perhaps, a little bit of underestimation of Reagan. I think you know what happened was that they went through that primary season, and here’s the mistake, just from a personal point of view, that I think was made. Ford won the primary in New Hampshire, he won it in Illinois, and Florida. So he got a New England state, a Midwestern state and a Southern state. Now, I’m not a politician or a strategist, but, at that point he should have said, “Okay, I have proven that I can win outside of the Congressional district of Michigan. We’re facing a lot of problems in this country right now. You’re going to elect me based on whether I’m a good president, not whether I’m a good candidate. So I’m going to go back to the White House and do my job.” That’s my own personal feeling. But, you know, he had a little bit of the old fire horse in him.

Smith: There’s a wonderful story, a semi-famous Stu Spencer story, which we, thank God, got on camera. He’d [Ford] go out there and the numbers would go
down – a lot of people have blamed the speechwriting operation, that really was never very good – and Ford wasn’t a charismatic campaigner. Anyway, they are in the Oval Office, just him and Cheney and the president. Stu is trying to come up with a euphemism, and the president doesn’t understand what he is saying, because he wants to get out there and campaign. And Stu finally says, “Mr. President, you’re a great president, but you are a fucking lousy campaigner.”

Nessen: That sounds like Stu.

Smith: And Ford just sat there and took it. Now, the sequel is what makes the story, because the story appeared in Jules Whitcover’s book, and Stu went ballistic. He called Cheney and really let him have it. Just chewed him out. And Cheney let it run down, and then he says, “Stu, there was a third person in that room.” It had never occurred to Stu that Ford would tell the story on himself. But it does tell you volumes about the guy.

Nessen: So Ford won the first three primaries, and I, and I think others, felt he should have then gone back to the White House and said, “I’m going to run as president, not as a candidate.” But Reagan challenged him week after week after week, and Reagan won some and Ford won some. The convention was in Kansas City that year, the Republican Convention. And Reagan and Ford got there and neither one of them had enough delegates to win the nomination. Ford was staying at the old Muehlebach Hotel, which hadn’t been remodeled then, and Reagan was at the big, modern, I forget which one that is, like a Westin, or something like that. Anyhow, they were meeting with all the delegates, trying to – and Haley Barber, I guess – wasn’t he from Mississippi?

Smith: Clarke Reed.

Nessen: Clarke Reed, was it?

Smith: Clarke Reed was the Mississippi guy, who was famously bought and rebought and doesn’t stay bought, or whatever.
Nessen: I guess it was him, then, that brought the Mississippi delegation over to Ford. That put Ford over the top. So they had a deal, and Ford’s guy was Cheney and Reagan’s guy was – the guy who used to have the PR firm over here on 17th or 19th street – the guy had been with him for ages. Anyhow…

Smith: Lyn Nofziger?

Nessen: No, not Lyn. But Lyn was there. I’ll tell you a Lyn Nofziger story. The deal that they had made ahead of time was that the winner would go to the loser’s hotel as a show of unity. So we go to the hotel and we ride up on the elevator, and they have like the whole floor for the Reagan staff. We walk down this corridor toward the big conference room, and I’m looking in all the doors of these hotel rooms and they’re open, and people are in there crying, crying, crying. Reagan staff people crying.

So anyhow, we get to the conference room and Ford and Reagan sit on this sofa, I guess it’s like a big living room for the suite or for the floor. They sit way down at the far end and talk and you can’t really hear what they are saying. And so, I’m standing there and Nofziger is standing there, sort of shifting from one foot to the other. It’s very, very uncomfortable. And finally, Nofziger says, “You want a drink?” And before I could realize what I was saying, I said, “Lyn, that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said.” I thought, oh wait a minute, I didn’t mean that.

But anyhow, I’ve always felt two things: one, that Reagan really cost Ford the election by dragging out this primary season for so long. And the second thing he did was, he didn’t campaign for Ford, really, in that year. He just went back to California and that was it.

Smith: It is still being debated by some people in terms of the ground rules for that meeting, because my understanding is that the Reagan people made it abundantly clear, early on, don’t ask him to be on the ticket. And after the fact, there were members of the Reagan Kitchen Cabinet…

Nessen: Who said, “How come he didn’t ask him to be on the ticket?” Yeah, I’ve heard that same story. To my knowledge, Ford didn’t ask Reagan to be on the ticket. There was a promise, and he kept the promise. Ford didn’t ask him to
be on the ticket. And then the Reagan people complained about how come they didn’t…and if he’d been on the ticket, you would have won.

Smith: Rockefeller went to his grave convinced that Don Rumsfeld did him in.

Nessen: I’m not sure who did him in. Somebody did him in. But, again, there were all these feuds, these internal, endless fights among Ford’s staff people - whether you were with Ford when he was in Congress, or you just joined when he was vice president, or you’d never been with Ford before, and so forth and so on.

I’ve heard all kinds of stories about that, and I guess the story that sounds rightest to me is, somebody, and maybe you know who it was, came to Ford and said, “You can’t win the Southern states if you have Rockefeller on the ticket.”

Smith: Now is that a reference to the convention? In other words, you won’t be nominated if Rockefeller is on…

Nessen: Right, I think that’s right. And Ford wanted to win, and so he – Rockefeller was very gracious about it.

Smith: Probably he wasn’t, privately.

Nessen: I can imagine. And who did he blame? Did he blame Rumsfeld?

Smith: He blamed Rumsfeld. He went to his grave blaming Rumsfeld

Nessen: You know, Rumsfeld was so competitive with so many people, and I’m sure you know this, that at least one theory is that the reason he opposed Rockefeller is because he wanted to be the vice presidential candidate himself.

Smith: Right. And he had a reputation of being an extraordinarily skilled in-fighter, who never left fingerprints.

Nessen: Absolutely.

Smith: Didn’t sign things.
Nessen: Correct. That’s the Rumsfeld that I saw. Look, I’m a fan of Rumsfeld because I think, given what he inherited, the mess he inherited there, he got the Ford White House up and running. He sorted out the whole thing about leftover Nixon people, and so forth. I am a fan of Rumsfeld. But, on the other hand, I think during that period, at least, he was looking out in part for Don Rumsfeld.

Smith: I also think Rockefeller, though, was naïve. I don’t think Rockefeller was completely honest with himself about why he took the job. Someone who knew him very well and spent fifteen minutes on the phone trying to talk him out of it, finally exhausted all the intellectual arguments, and Rockefeller said, “But you don’t understand. This is my last chance.”

Nessen: Well, you don’t go into politics unless you’ve got a healthy ego, do you?

Smith: Did you sense, there was Greenspan, Simon, the whole New York City bailout – that was also a flashpoint where at least an effort was made to portray the vice president as being off the reservation. I talked to Bill Seidman who said that at the speech at the Press Club, there was a tug of war, and that one draft would go to the president, and basically it was Greenspan and Simon who were trying to, in effect, beat up on New York. And then Seidman would rewrite it and…

Nessen: I’m a huge fan of Seidman, and I think he was one of the most clear headed people – he was the least competitive of people. He was the part of the Ford staff that had come with him from Grand Rapids.

Smith: Do you think he suffered from the “Grand Rapids” connotation?

Nessen: I don’t know, I think in many ways the best people were – Phil Buchen, terrific guy, I think, and Seidman, who I’m a huge fan of. You can make the argument that the best people were the Grand Rapids people.

Smith: The debate and the Polish gaffe. How bad was that? Did you know instantly that you had a problem?

Nessen: Here’s what happened. Ford was anticipating a question about the Sonnenfeldt Doctrine. Hal Sonnenfeldt is here at Brookings now. We have
lunch often and talk about this. The Sonnenfeldt Doctrine was: we ought to let up some of the pressure on the Soviet Union along the Iron Curtain. And if we kind of eased up on the pressure, the Soviets would be more accommodating, and less stringent on how they ruled the satellite countries. So that was the Sonnenfeldt Doctrine.

Smith: And Helsinki was part of all this, in effect?

Nessen: Well, Helsinki was – what was the timing of Helsinki?

Smith: Helsinki was the fall of ’75.

Nessen: Okay, so that was before the debates.

Smith: Yes.

Nessen: Here’s how the Helsinki Accords came in – that the Helsinki Accords talked about easing up on the Iron Curtain countries. But what happened with the debate was that Ford was primed to say, “We don’t recognize the Soviet Union’s right to dominate these countries. We don’t recognize the Iron Curtain as being legitimate,” or whatever. That was what he was supposed to say. The New York Times guy asked the question in a slightly different form than Ford had anticipated, so Ford got kind of thrown off. You know how the practices and rehearsals for these go – you get all kinds of questions thrown at you and then you sort of shape your answers. So the question was asked in a slightly different form, and the way it turned out, instead of saying, “We don’t recognize Soviet domination of Eastern Europe,” he said, “the Soviet Union does not dominate Eastern Europe.” Okay, ok, this was in San Francisco at the Cow Palace – no, not at the Cow Palace, I forget where the hell the thing was.

But any case, after the debate we would always have a press briefing, as they do now. They’re called spin rooms now, but we called it a briefing, in which you’d say, “Oh my God, Ford just wiped up the floor with him!” So, of course the staff had a little huddle in the lobby of the hotel – it was in the Holiday Inn before we went into this briefing. And I think it was Scowcroft who said, “Look, before we start talking about how to spin this thing, let’s make sure we
understand, the president made a mistake, and we ought to acknowledge that. Tell them “it was a slip of the tongue, of course, he knows…” Well, we didn’t do that. And so, overnight, this was a huge thing.

Smith: Could you have done that without getting his permission?

Nessen: No, but here’s what happened. The next day, Cheney and I, when he was on the road, would have the equivalent of a staff meeting with him in the morning. So Cheney and I go into see him the morning after the debate and I don’t know if it was me or Cheney, who said to Ford, “You know, you made a little mistake last night, you said the Soviet Union doesn’t dominate Eastern Europe, and what we’re going to do is, we’re going to put out a statement saying, ‘He didn’t exactly word that correctly. Obviously, he knows that the Soviet Union…’ And Ford, as I know you must know from talking to other people, he could have a little bit of a stubborn streak. And I can hear this in my head to this day, he says, “I’m not inclined to do that.” If the president doesn’t want you to do that, you can’t do that.

Well the story went on for a week, it totally dominated the news. No matter what we did or said, that was the story. And so finally, after a week, I was authorized to go out there and say, “Of course, the president knows that the Soviet Union dominates Eastern Europe. It was a slip of the tongue.” But by then the damage had been done, and the damage was: Ford didn’t know what was going on. It reinforced – this is why gaffes and so forth can be dangerous in Washington, if they reinforce a stereotype. And the stereotype of Ford was, he wasn’t too bright. So this reinforced that idea.

Smith: Tell me about his intelligence.

Nessen: Well, look, there are all kinds of intelligence, right? And I just don’t see how you can serve for thirty years in Washington, have the responsible positions he had, and by history’s judgment, thirty years later, turn out to be a pretty damn good president in difficult times. What kind of intelligence does it take? Who was, arguably, the smartest president we ever had? Jimmy Carter. Was he a good president? He was certainly the best educated. Smartest, highest IQ president we had, but was he the best?
At the other end of the scale, I don’t know. Who do you want to pick? Ronald Reagan? Pretty damn good president. He had the kind of intelligence that you need to be president, and I think – I have no idea what Ford’s IQ was, I know he went to the University of Michigan, he went to the Yale law school. You can’t exactly be a dummy and go to the Yale law school.

He was chosen as a leader by his colleagues in Congress. I remember one of the early decisions that Ford made was, if he was having a news conference or something like that, the White House tradition had been, he sits at his desk, and the senior staff sits around him, and you fire questions at him that he’s likely to get asked, and see how well he can answer them. That’s the rehearsal. He didn’t want that. He wanted a written list of probable questions and he wanted a briefing book – not with the answers, but with all the background information, so he could absorb it and craft his answers. So, intelligence, he had the kind of intelligence that it takes to be a good president.

Smith: And, the last president to brief the budget.

Nessen: Exactly. And this was part of the strategy. Because all these stories: Ford’s too dumb, Ford’s too dumb, Ford’s too dumb…and so the decision was; who knows the budget better than he? Been on the appropriations committee all those years. Dealt with the budget every single year. And he went out there and he was masterful. It was over in the State Department auditorium, if I remember correctly. I had actually forgotten that until you just reminded me. But that was part of the effort to show that he certainly was smart.

Smith: After the election, did it take him a while to bounce back?

Nessen: Ford had never lost an election in his life. He won, what, fifteen terms in the House? He became vice president of the United States without ever running for it, president of the United States without ever running. Never wanted to be, never anticipated being, but he never lost an election. When he and Betty came out to the press room, I guess it was eleven o’clock at night or whatever, to concede the election to Carter, his face was unbelievable. I mean, it was stricken. And I’d forgotten this until I did some research for my own book, he
couldn’t read the concession speech himself. He asked Betty to read it for him. He was just stricken. It was the first time that he had ever lost an election. He’d thought he’d done a good job and he had been rejected in favor of this one term peanut farmer from Georgia. He was stricken, but I think he bounced back and found useful things to do in his life. He wrote a pretty good book.

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

Nessen: I’m trying to think whether it was – he used to come to Washington once a year in the spring for a staff reunion, and I guess he had meetings of the Gerald Ford Foundation, or whatever. So I can’t remember if it was at one of the Ford dinners, or whether I was out in California and I drove down to Palm Springs to visit with them. I guess the last time I saw him in person, I think, was at one of the staff reunion dinners. For the last two or three years of his life, he couldn’t really travel, and he and Betty would appear on closed circuit television. But, he got old and…

Smith: But he had the satisfaction of knowing that…

Nessen: You know, this is the great thing, and when, you think about the Kissinger theory – that it takes 30 years of subsequent history before you can accurately assess presidents and events, there are not many presidents who live to get to that point where history reappraises them. And I think the magic moment must have come when the Kennedy family gave Ford the award, the public service award.

Smith: Yeah, it was.

Nessen: And I just think it’s wonderful that he did live to see it.

Smith: And then a month before he dies, Rumsfeld tells him about the aircraft carrier that’s going to be named – a new class, too. So it rounds it out almost…you could write it.

Nessen: So many presidents have left office broken hearted, and didn’t live to see their reputations restored.
Smith: Think about LBJ.

Nessen: I know. I covered the Johnson administration and, I’m sure you’ve heard the Johnson tapes, and the thing that comes through in those tapes was, to me – when Lady Bird asked Beschloss to listen to those tapes and tell her – because Johnson had said you can’t release these tapes for fifty years, and historians were beginning to criticize him and write books about how bad he was and so forth. So she wanted to release the tapes early and she asked Beschloss’ advice. He knew I had covered the White House and we had been friends. He said, “Would you listen to these and just let me know if anything is there?”

So I took them home with me one night. And I thought, well, I’ll listen to five minutes and another five minutes and…three hours later, Richard, I’m sitting here, riveted. The thing that comes through is, this big, tough, rough, Texan was full of self-doubts and I think the most amazing tape is the one where he calls Lady Bird up in the mansion, and he says, “Oh, Bird, I’m having this event out here on the South Lawn. Can you just come and stand next to me?” And she says, “Oh, Lyndon, I’ve got a dentist appointment. I just can’t do it.” And he begs her, he begs her. He needed her support. He was a very, very complex man.
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this.

Donaldson: No, I’m delighted.

Smith: First thing I’d love to ask you is, for people who were not around, take us back and give us a sense of what the mood was like in this town after the ’72 election, as Watergate began to be more than a blip on the horizon.

Donaldson: I think when the burglary occurred people were perplexed. What were these Cubans doing there in the office of the DNC chairman, etc., etc. As the story developed, more and more people began to suspect that the president of the United States might somehow be involved. A terrible thing. We watched the Erwin hearing. We had previously not seen John Sirica, the maximum penalty judge, extract from one of the defendants in that initial trial, that there were higher ups involved. And then we watched the impeachment investigation of the House Judiciary Committee. And by the time it came to the crux in the summer of 1974, the country was just convinced that Richard Nixon was a terrible man. His famous phrase of, “The country needs to know whether their president’s a crook. I am not a crook.” We all thought, yes you are, you are a crook.

And then when he resigned, of course, it was just a breathtaking event.

Smith: Where were you during this period? What were you doing?

Donaldson: I was the Watergate correspondent for *ABC News*. Not the White House correspondent, but I covered the trial, I covered the Sam Erwin hearings, I covered the impeachment investigation in the House. And when it all started, I thought – well, I had my view of Richard Nixon as a real sharpie when it came to politics. He came to power first in the House by accusing his Democratic opponent of being a Communist sympathizer, and all during the
way we all kind of knew what he was. But I thought he can’t possibly be involved in this. That’s just too horrendous.

Smith: And too stupid?

Donaldson: Too stupid? Of course, stupid. But Nixon, of course, saw enemies everywhere and his Golden Rule, if there was one, “Do unto them before they have a chance to do unto you.” Rather than the one that we think of as the Golden Rule. Yes, it was stupid. His defense, as we know, in listening to the Frost interviews and in the things he wrote, was basically, he was protecting his men. He was being loyal to his people. But if we listen to his tapes in the Oval Office, ultimately, he was protecting himself, and that’s quite clear.

Smith: I guess it’s safe to say, we still don’t know who ordered the break in or why. Do you have a theory?

Donaldson: Well, I accept the fact that the break in was the work of what’s his name – help me out Richard – been on radio, he’s the tough guy –

Smith: Gordon Liddy.

Donaldson: Gordon Liddy. I still believe that Gordon Liddy came up with the idea. No one said come up with an idea of how we can find out what Larry O’Brien is up to. We suspect there is something going on there we should know. He came up with the idea of breaking into the office. Did John Mitchell know? There’s no great evidence. Jeff Magruder? That’s a different case. And whether Richard Nixon, in fact, ordered it, or whether it was just a case of “will someone rid me of this meddlesome priest?” I’ve seen no evidence that says he ordered it.

Smith: We did an interview recently with Jerry Jones, who was Al Haig’s chief deputy. It was fascinating. Very candid. And he has come to the conclusion, just as theory, that Nixon did know about the break in – that it was all about the old Howard Hughes loans to Nixon’s brother and Larry O’Brien supposedly had evidence of this.

Donaldson: That’s right.
Smith: But, just one more theory.

Donaldson: Well, but here’s the thing: Nixon was a strategist, not a tactician, necessarily. He may have said to the right people, “We’ve got to find out what Larry O’Brien has, we can’t be surprised by something. We’ve got to know what he knows. See if you can find it out.” But that Richard would sit there and say, “Look, here’s my idea: we’ll find some people who are trustworthy, and we’ll have them break in to O’Brien’s office in the Watergate complex. Well, could it be done?” I just don’t think that he, personally…but we don’t know. I don’t know.

Smith: Do you think we ever will? Is there someone out there, or is there a tape we haven’t heard?

Donaldson: That’s like the same thing as saying that I’d like to be at Fidel’s bedside when he draws his last, and say, “Fidel, you’re drawing your last. Did you do it to John Kennedy?” And listen for the answer. I don’t know that there is any witness now who could have spoken, and who would have spoken, who will now speak, or who has in his will or in his memoirs to be published twenty-five years after his death, give us the answer to that.

Smith: Do you think John Mitchell took some secrets with him to the grave?

Donaldson: Probably. Yes. I think Mitchell was basically loyal to the end. There were some anomalies there that were – I mean, thieves fall out - but I think he did, yes.

Smith: This is a little off to the side, but, the competition between, clearly this was seen at the time, as Woodward and Bernstein’s story. You were working for a different organization, and the networks were obviously trying to make this story. What kind of competition was going on within the journalistic community?

Donaldson: Well, I’m ashamed to say that from the standpoint of my efforts, they were basically following the newspaper’s stories. Oh, yes, I would try to do a little something on them, but I don’t think any of us – now there were other newspaper reporters who deserve some credit - not just Woodward and
Bernstein. *LA Times* did some yeoman work, for instance. Even the *New York Times*, but I think most of us during that period were simply following the stories that appeared in the newspapers, and trying to do what we could to enlarge on them. But I didn’t ever successfully break a big part of the Watergate story.

Smith: In today’s media climate where newspapers are closing their Washington bureaus and cutting back, do you think Watergate could happen again? Do you think the way that the story unraveled and played itself out over those two years could happen?

Donaldson: Well, I think the ultimate outcome might be the same. But there might not be a Woodward and Bernstein – two kids who had no right to be given this huge story – and their senior correspondents, once they saw what they were on to tried get it away from them, [if it wasn’t for] Ben Bradlee that kept the boys in the story, as he said. And the reason I think the ultimate outcome would be the same, is that I know you know, it was the establishment that brought Richard Nixon down. The newspapers and the press did some work, but even without those kinds of stories, I think John J. Sirica, being a man of some intelligence - I got to know him pretty well – would have said, “It can’t just be these guys. There’s got to be someone and I’m going to put the screws to them.” As he did. And McCord then came forward, would have come forward with a letter and the rest would have been history.

Smith: Do you think Sirica is one of the unsung heroes of Watergate?

Donaldson: Oh, absolutely. He’d taken this as a routine burglary, and had the prosecution handled it that way, and they – let us say – would have been convicted, of course, and given them a light sentence, the normal sentence for something like that. That would have been the end of it.

Smith: And then, of course, in the middle of all this, you have a vice president who gets into trouble. One of the remarkable things Jones told us was that, before Haldeman and Erlichman left, which would have been April of ’73.

Donaldson: Two of the finest public servants I’ve ever known…
Smith: He called Jones, who was then running the personnel office at Haldeman’s behalf – reorganized it – asked him how many jobs reported directly to the vice president, and Jones did some figuring and came back with about fifty. He said, “Good. I want letters of resignation from everyone on the staff.” Which meant they knew before they left that Agnew could be in trouble. This in April and the story broke, I think, in the *Wall Street Journal* in August, which is pretty remarkable if you stop and think about it.

Donaldson: Attorney General Richardson had been investigating for some time, and it led to Agnew. I got to know Spiro Agnew when he was running for governor of Maryland, county executive of Baltimore County, and I don’t know of any evidence that has been uncovered that when he was county executive, it was pay for play or it was this, that, and the other. It may have been there. And when he became governor of Maryland, he was the reform governor. He saved Maryland from George P. Mahoney – “Your Home is Your Castle – Protect It,” said George P. Mahoney. And clearly it was a racial thing he was playing on. And Agnew was a good, progressive governor – reformed the income tax system and all of that.

My theory is, that when he got in power as governor, he learned that what some governors do in Maryland is – do this, do that, and what have you – and, why not? It’s like Illinois today. That’s the way we do it! And, of course, he wanted Rockefeller to be the Republican nominee until Rocky embarrassed him by not telling him – I was there in the room. He calls in reporters together to watch Rockefeller to announce that he was going to run for president. And Rockefeller announced he was not going to run for president. Spiro Agnew’s face just turned red as a beet in his governor’s office in Annapolis. Later then, of course Rocky changed his mind, but by this time Louise Gore has introduced Governor Agnew to Richard Nixon, and the rest is history there.

Smith: As you know, I’m working on a biography of Rockefeller, and it’s still a mystery as to whether he was supposed to be called that morning. And it’s one more of those things that, frankly, for all of their numbers and money and resources, they couldn’t elect a president, they couldn’t nominate a president.

Donaldson: They don’t claim that they called Agnew, do they?
Smith: They don’t. The best story that I can get is, that – and this again testifies to, in some ways, their ineptitude – they decided not to call him because he would leak the news.

Donaldson: Oh, it might have leaked, it probably would have leaked.

Smith: And at that point they figured they weren’t going to run so…

Donaldson: Agnew was the kind of person that that kind of insult, that kind of slight, he took it very personally, really. The Greek in him, I suppose. And then when Louise Gore introduced him to Nixon, they got along famously.

Smith: Now, she was the Republican power? She was the National Committee Woman from Maryland?

Donaldson: Yes, and a distant relation to Al Gore.

Smith: That’s right.

Donaldson: And she was very important in Maryland politics on the conservative Republican side, obviously.

Smith: Were you surprised – did you pick up rumors that Agnew was in trouble before, for example, the Wall Street Journal story ran?

Donaldson: Oh, there was a little gossip, but nothing you could hang your hat on. And I guess the short answer is, no, I wasn’t onto the story, or I would have tried to do it.

Smith: When Agnew resigns, we now know it’s pretty clear that Nixon would have liked to have appointed John Connally, and it was made pretty clear that that wouldn’t fly up on the Hill.

Donaldson: He had to listen to the Republican Party chiefs who just said to him, “We’ll never accept this. It won’t work.”

Smith: Rockefeller and Reagan, each for their own reasons, sort of cancelled each other out. And, as I understand it, Carl Albert and others made it clear that, if you want someone who’s confirmable, pick Jerry Ford. Had you had contact with Ford at that point?
Donaldson: Yes.

Smith: Tell me when you first…

Donaldson: I first met Jerry Ford when the Ev and Charlie Show fell apart because Charlie, Charles Halleck, the Republican Leader of the House, was upended by Gerald Ford and the Young Turks. And so, Everett McKinley Dirksen, and now Gerald Ford, would hold weekly news conferences and we’d all go – I was covering the Congress to some extent at that time. I don’t remember a thing that happened, except that they both talked about the Republican line and legislation and answered our questions. And then, one of my profound memories was, I guess, 1970, when Gerald Ford had the task of trying to impeach Justice Douglas. And I believe, and I think I can demonstrate that, that the White House asked him to – other people asked him to. I do not think it was his original idea, but he fell to it with a will. Justice Douglas maybe had been a Communist sympathizer to some extent, no one on that side of the aisle liked his decisions. He kept marrying young women, 30 and 40 years younger than he was, and terrible…

Smith: I actually think what offended Ford more than any of his decisions, remember – people have forgotten, remember the Justice ran articles in the Evergreen Review.

Donaldson: The Evergreen Magazine! The article, I recall, was on forestry or something, but the Evergreen was a magazine - a little titillating. Today we’d think it was just common, family fare almost, but not in those days. And I agree with you, I’m not saying that Ford didn’t believe in what he was doing, but I think there were other forces involved.

In anticipation of talking to you today, because I thought I remembered something when Douglas resigned from the court, and, sure enough, I remembered the letter that President Ford then wrote back to Justice Douglas and it is the most warm and salutary letter, warm admiration for your valiant effort to carry on…nation’s gratitude for service…distinguished years of service…a lifetime of dedicated public service matched by few Americans…on and on. I thought, as I read the letter, Gerald Ford was saying,
in effect, you know, I really didn’t think you were *that* bad a guy. Plus the fact that if you know Gerald Ford, he was not a mean man.

Smith: He also invited Justice Douglas to the White House for dinner. And he made sure they shook hands.

Donaldson: I think in retrospect, he was a little embarrassed, maybe. Maybe he thought he’d gone over the top.

Smith: It wasn’t his style.

Donaldson: It wasn’t his style, that’s exactly right.

Smith: What was his style?

Donaldson: Well, to see him, very affable, that great big grin, that smile and laughter and all of this. Now he was a very strong conservative, no question about it, when I knew him in the House of Representatives. But I must tell you, by the standards of the strongest conservatives of his party today, he was a moderate, even showing maybe a liberal tendency now and then. It was a different day, it wasn’t quite live and let live, there was great partisanship and he was a partisan. And yet, he, like other leaders on both sides in that day, understood that in the final analysis, you move legislation forward after you’ve gotten as many concessions from the dominant Democratic Party as you could. Then, unless you really had a matter of principle there, you understood that – I couldn’t tell you, but left to his own devises with no whip ordered – he would have voted for the stimulus bill – not really thinking it was the right way to go, but understanding that you’ve got to do something. Standing here is not an option, and that apparently is the best deal you could get with the Democrats in charge, so he’d signed off.

Smith: I’m jumping ahead here, but I remember at the time of his death, being a little surprised by the degree of surprise that some journalists showed toward the response. Which, as the week went on, only seemed to build, and I think it was in large measure, the fact that a lot of people who weren’t even alive when he was in the White House, were being introduced to this guy for the first time, and they were comparing him with the tone of politics in this town.
And he looked pretty good. And beyond that, that was a time when the country desperately needed to feel good about itself.

Donaldson: That’s the thing. I think history, and we see all the historians, you among them, placing presidents and all of that, I think as time goes by, there will be a greater appreciation of what he did for this country in just about two and a half years.

First of all, with Nixon’s resignation at a time when it was clear that we’d lost the Vietnam War, with tails between our legs, according to many people who still, to this day won’t understand what happened, desperately needed something to pull us out of this feeling about ourselves. This is America – we never felt this way after World War II, of course. And it was Gerald Ford, this warm, considerate, affable, but not weak man at all – I’ll never forget his line, “I am a Ford, not a Lincoln.” Alright – playing on the name, but what he said was, “I’m going to do a good job here. I may not be Abraham Lincoln, but I’m someone who knows how to do it.” And he did know how to do it.

I think his place in history will be much larger than it is today, because he really held the country together. It was his greatest accomplishment to me that in a time of great national upset and questioning, he was reassuring that we are still a good people and a great country, and we went forward.

Smith: You’re right. It’s funny, if you just look at the difference in the mood in America between the summer of ’74 and the Bicentennial summer of ’76. We weren’t just going through the motions of celebrating in ’76 – there was the sense that there was something to celebrate. Ironically, we’d tested our Constitutional institutions and found that they worked.

Donaldson: And I had never heard, then or since, really, a president deliver a State of Union message and say, “The State of the Union is not good.” Well, it’s true! And he detailed unemployment, he buttressed his statement with the facts. Presidents that try to pretend that the rest of us don’t know the facts are kidding themselves.

Smith: You are absolutely right. But you haven’t heard a president say it since, have you?
Donaldson: No. Of course, I haven’t heard a president until this time say, “I screwed up,” so I’m prepared.

Smith: Plus, wow, a budget with real numbers! The war is, all of a sudden, on budget, and...

Donaldson: Amazing.

Smith: Ford would have approved so much of Obama’s effort to reach across the aisle. And to restore some degree of civility to this town.

Donaldson: And that’s what I’m saying. I think Ford, in the House of Representatives, would have responded. Oh, no - give up all the principles – I’m not saying he would have rolled over for an Obama and all of his programs – of course not. But he would have responded in a tone, and you would have gotten that from him. And I think they could have done deals.

Smith: Where were you on August 8th and 9th of ’74?

Donaldson: Oh, well, I was up on Capitol Hill. We all knew what was in store by then. Everybody knew, but it hadn’t quite been on the record and said. And I was in John Rhodes office earlier the evening of the resignation speech. Now everyone knew I was a reporter, there were no deals made, whatsoever, but Rhodes just sat there and said, “Well, you know, it’s been a long year or two,” or whatever he said, “It’s over now, he’s going to resign tonight, and I regret it but it’s necessary.”

So I excused myself and I went out and I told Frank Reynolds – I think was our anchor, maybe or Howard K. Smith – that I’ve just learned authoritatively that the president will, in fact, resign tonight. Jay Smith, who was one of Rhodes’ great press people, told me later, and I think maybe Rhodes may have even written in his book, that he thought somehow that I had – he didn’t quite say violated ground rules – because he was a smart guy – he knew that there was not ground rules that prevented me from doing that. And we were friends after that. I admire John Rhodes greatly.

Smith: When Nixon said his farewell in the East Room, were you up on the Hill?
Donaldson: I watched. I wasn’t in the East Room.

Smith: Were you up on the Hill?

Donaldson: I watched it on television, I can’t remember where I was. It could have been here in old building, the east building. It was a remarkable speech, of course. Richard Nixon, self-pitying, the business about his mother. I’m sure she was a great lady, but…and then talking about having – when I get to the mountaintop, the valley and all of that. And this enduring symbol of him at the helicopter lives on and on.

Smith: That’s why, whenever we get to anniversary, August 9th is always seen as the anniversary of Richard Nixon’s departure. It’s never seen as the anniversary of Gerald Ford’s presidency. Nixon owns the images.

Donaldson: It had to be. Here was the ‘Trick’ – leaving town. I use the nickname his critics gave him. Here was the Evil One. Remember, Richard, in the streets – people honk, “Jail to the Chief,” honk if you want him to go to jail. All of that. This was a really grim time. His support fell. I was amazed the other day to see valid polls say that George W. Bush had the highest negative rating, not the lowest approval, but the highest negative rating when he left office. I would have thought it would have been Richard Nixon.

Smith: So Ford becomes president and there’s this sort of palpable lifting from the shoulders?

Donaldson: Well, Ford was not well-known in the country. He was well-known in Republican and political circles, but he was not a household name. And I think the majority of Americans probably said, who is this guy? But I think from the very first speech he made – wasn’t it in the East Room? – the very first, people began to say, well we like that tone. We like that. Of course, deeds more than words. But I think that very quickly the country thought this is going to be fine. This is going to be okay. There is someone there that we like.

Smith: I came to the conclusion a long time ago that he was much more sophisticated that he let on. That, in a lot of ways, he was perfectly willing to let people
underestimate him. It was almost a Reaganesque quality in that sense. And one evidence of that is, for example, he knew by instinct what he had to do those first few days - that symbolism was substance - and so who does he invite into the White House? He invites the Congressional Black Caucus, he asks George Meany – all of these people who had been basically shut out of the White House. And that’s just says something about – maybe it’s Congress, I don’t know. Maybe it’s that Congressional mindset that you get everyone into the room.

Donaldson: And maybe I am reflecting the ‘inside the Beltway’ mentality that is so reviled, and to some extent properly so, in the rest of the country. But I’ve always thought that when people come to presidency who don’t know Washington, who don’t know how it works here, they have one hand tied behind their backs – and you know the ones I’m talking about. Jimmy Carter, whom I covered, and even Bill Clinton, his first two years were disasters partially because he didn’t know how to make the system work. Gerald Ford, George Herbert Walker Bush, and I think again, history will treat him pretty kindly – or Richard Nixon, but in a more malevolent way, and certainly Lyndon Johnson – these people know how to get it done. And one way of getting it done is reaching across aisle, trying to be ecumenical, at least in tone, if not in spirit.

May I divest? Because you reminded me of something – Ford being underestimated and more sophisticated than people thought. Yes, that’s true, but he also was someone who – you got what you saw. There was not a lot of guile in him, and he was comfortable, so that he didn’t mind not putting on airs. My personal example was when I was working for the local television station here, he was the leader of the Republicans in the House, and I was running a Sunday program and there was not much news, and I got the bright idea that I’d get the Minority Leader. And it was easy to reach him on the phone down here in Alexandria. I got him on the phone and I said, “Congressman, may I come out and interview you for our news night program here on WTLP TV?” Well, he said, “What time do you want to come?” and I said, “Well, this afternoon.” He said, “Well, alright, but you have come
during half time of the football game. I’m not going to miss the football
game.”

So we showed up, we sat up. Sure enough, the first half ended, he came in, he
answered all the questions, and I was watching the watch, he went back to
watch the football game. He didn’t mind doing that. If I wanted to go on the
air and say, this man will only talk to me at half time, he’d thought it would
be fine. He’d probably be right as far as the country was concerned.

Smith: Well, you know what – it carried over into the White House. There are stories
of people on Saturdays interrupting a game – a college game or whatever –
you didn’t do that. That’s funny. But it’s interesting that he was that
accessible.

Donaldson: Oh, very accessible. I was not great shakes – then or now – but the point is, I
ran this little program, it was a CBS station, people watched it. Real cable.
But on the other hand, I wasn’t going to do it live. He was really busy, and I
wasn’t going to do a lot for the Republican leader of the House.

Smith: There was this notion that there is a Congressional mindset and an executive
mindset. That they are two different things. We don’t tend to elect members
of Congress, obviously we’ve broken that, and there are a whole bunch of
reasons why. Which, presumably affect how they perform when they are in
office. Do you have theories as to why?

Donaldson: There is a congressional mindset versus an executive mindset. First of all,
there are five hundred and thirty five of them and they realize – although
some of them don’t understand this – that one person up there cannot equal
one person down at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. And so, collectively, they
want to guard their camp. This one other guy wants to say, “I’m the chief,”
and their objectives, many times, are different. He now, she someday maybe,
represents the whole country, and if they are doing their job properly looks at
it from that perspective. And you know, better than I, or certainly as well as I,
that these people up there represent their constituents, and their narrow,
selfish interests, a lot of the time. And to say to them, “No, you should always
think of the whole country,” is unrealistic and is not what our founding fathers
set up. The safeguard is that they have to be responsible to their individual constituents.

So I think there is always this tug of war. But I remind people, I’m not the historian that you are, Richard, but our founding fathers said that Article One was the legislature, not the executive. They wanted the legislature to be, if there was going to be, a more powerful of the three branches. They wanted it to be the legislature.

Smith: I would agree with you. But you know, one of the differences – I remember asking Walter Mondale this question, and I liked his response because he agreed with me – but the notion, forty years ago, if you arrived in this town, it didn’t matter if you were Republican or Democrat, you found yourself in a party that had a left and a right wing. Now there were obviously different proportions, but each party, in some ways, was a reflection of the whole country, ideologically. Now they are much more homogenized, and people who say we should have a liberal party or a conservative party, they basically have their wish, although in theory the Democrats now actually have a “conservative” wing. The point being, forty years ago, when you arrived in this town, before you could even hope to pass a bill…

Donaldson: Forty-seven years ago – I worked for the local station.

Smith: Okay, forty-seven years ago – you had to first internally learn how to deal with people who you might not agree with on a lot of things. I remember Bob Dole saying he was advised when he came to town, be sure to sit down with Senator Stennis.

Donaldson: Right.

Smith: Talk to Stennis. Ted Kennedy said when he arrived here, be sure and spend time with Dick Russell. Those people don’t exist anymore.

Donaldson: No, they don’t. And the mindset has changed, of course. I was talking to Cokie last night and a bunch of other people, and we were talking about those days, when her father was Majority Leader, or working up to be Majority Leader in the House, and the ecumenical way that people got together – fight
all day, it’s the old cliché, over some issue or something, and then sit down, break bread, tell jokes, like each other’s families. People say, and Cokie agrees, that one of the problem is, today they don’t move their families to Washington. They hang out with four other guys in a rooming house someplace or their office, sometimes – there isn’t this kind of association. I don’t think that’s the strongest thing that makes a difference – I think the strongest thing in this kind of tone that we’re talking about, is the warfare, politics as war, not just as partisan contention that began, I think in the Seventies. And, frankly, I think toward the Eighties, it was the Republicans. Now both sides did it, but it was the Republicans – Newt Gingrich and his backbenchers who wanted to get rid of this go-along Bob Michael and do it by just torching the place, term limits if they could get it. Get the Speaker, Jim Wright, who gave them the sword, I understand that. Destroy the Democrats and do it in the most bitter, partisan way, all things being fair. Well, I don’t think all things are fair in love or war. Certainly not politics.

Smith: Hale Boggs and Gerald Ford used to debate at the National Press Club and the story is, they would drive down together from the Hill, would decide on the way what are we going to debate today; they’d get down there and have their little debate; then they’d go have lunch and a drink and go back to the Hill.

Donaldson: I was at one of those debates. Don’t ask me, again, can you remember who said what – I don’t remember who said what – it was very civil, but strong from the standpoint of each having a point of view. But I tell people, you mentioned Richard Russell – I watched that great debate in the Senate in 1964. I can see Russell now standing in the center aisle – he would move in the center aisle and clap his hands like this when he debated. The leaders of the Southerners’ last stand, with some Republican support to keep segregation, but I never heard anyone call him a name.

I never heard, frankly, although there were moral issues, and people would talk about the moral issues involved, no one ever said, “The Lord’s on my side, and you are Satan.” Which is so commonplace and almost in so many words today. Politics they say is the art of the possible. To me, politics and the way we’re talking about it is making deals. Everyone makes deals. I might
make a deal with my wife, I want to stay home, she wants to go out, we reach an accommodation or something. And the people in the country who have been led to believe by some of the people I’ve talked about, that it is so wrong to make any compromise or deal, are helping destroy the political process that moves us ahead.

Smith: People have forgotten, at least at the presidential level – it was the Carter campaign that brought the Evangelical Christians, not the right, but Evangelicals in a major way into political arena.

Donaldson: Yes, in a major way, but they were not – Evangelicals – I covered the Carter campaign – were not in a driver’s seat as far as their desire to turn this nation into, in fact, the Christian nation, not in just the majority of the inhabitants, but in the way government…I mean, I’m convinced that a lot of the Evangelicals don’t want a separation between church and state. They want Italy – only not Catholic.

Smith: What are your memories surrounding the pardon – the Nixon pardon? Did it come as a thunderclap?

Donaldson: Yes. It ought not to have. It was a Sunday that Gerald Ford announced it?

Smith: Let me back up because Ford always said, and there is a touch of, you’re right, he had no guile, the other side of that was, for someone who had been around as long as he had, there was a touch of naiveté about Ford.

Donaldson: Thinking the country would accept it immediately and understand his reasoning?

Smith: Well, he went into his first press conference, and I think it was August 28th and he believed that people were going to want to talk about Cyprus and Greece and the economy and he was taken aback and angry, partly at himself because he didn’t handle it well.

Donaldson: All the questions were Nixon.

Smith: They were all Nixon questions, yeah. And that seems to have been a catalyst – that he told himself, if that’s going to be the experience I have every time I go
out and talk to the press…he was obviously getting a lot of information. My understanding is that Leon Jaworski’s office was saying it could take up to two years to bring Nixon to trial.

Donaldson: I sincerely believe that Ford sincerely believed that the business of the country would be harmed if Nixon was pursued. I believe that was his motive. I do not believe there was a deal before he became president at all. I accept that he was naïve. I was one of those at the time that was furious, not at Gerald Ford, but furious at the fact that Nixon had escaped because I think that the majority of the country wanted to pursue him. The majority of country, the reason there were questions, all of them or most of them at that press conference was that we, I wasn’t there, but the reporters were reflecting the majority country view – “We’re going to get the man, he has to pay!” And if you say, well, losing the presidency, the only one in our history, isn’t that…No! that’s not enough. A jury of his peers? Jail! Alright.

Of course Jerry terHorst resigned on principle. Maybe because also he hadn’t been notified far enough in advance about these things. But it was a thunderclap. And I also believe, although there were many factors that cost Ford his election in 1976, and you can say it was this one, it was this one, it was this one, this one – if you had to pick one, it was the Ford pardon.

Smith: I don’t disagree with a thing you say, but then you sort of spool out this kind of counterintuitive school; if there hadn’t been a pardon and Nixon had continued to dominate for two years…

Donaldson: His presidency might have been ruined by that – I understand.

Smith: It’s a no-win situation.

Donaldson: This fork or that fork, since we didn’t take that other fork, we can’t ever know.

Smith: It is understandable, everyone is right now dwelling on the incredible challenges that this president confronts, but we all have such short memories. At least this guy was elected – here you have Gerald Ford, who comes in office, there’s no transition, there’s no honeymoon, there’s not even a real
inaugural. He’s got Vietnam, he’s got Nixon, he’s got the severest economic downturn since World War II. In fact, whiplash, because first everyone told him, no, inflation is the problem, and then a few months later everyone said the bottom is falling out of the job market.

Donaldson: WIN!

Smith: Yes. Which actually was concocted in the speechwriting shop of the White House. Alan Greenspan told us all about that. Ford really was dealt a pretty lousy hand.

Donaldson: Yeah, and the State of the Union is not good, let me just enumerate here. He was, he was. That’s just the breaks, uh?

Smith: Oh, sure.

Donaldson: He wouldn’t have been president if there hadn’t been a lousy situation.

Smith: The fall of Saigon. How traumatizing was that?

Donaldson: Oh, for the country, very traumatizing. Again, when we pulled out troops out, Nixon said peace…well, first Kissinger, peace is at hand, before the election – just kind of the icing on the election cake. And then, “Peace with honor,” said Nixon. I can’t speak for the country, I didn’t buy that. You knew what was going to happen. The Vietnamese wanted to live together and we could not stop them from living together and the North had prevailed. And now we know the famous, after a decent interval phrase, I think Kissinger understood very well what he’d done with Le Duc Tho, and when Le Duc Tho didn’t show up to get his peace prize I thought, well the man has got some integrity there. He knows full well that they are going to take over the South.

But when they did it with those awful pictures of the helicopter and Graham Martin with the American flag, the ambassador coming out. And later, Nixon, of course, kind of snidely suggested, well, we had a deal with the South Vietnamese to come to their aid. Thank goodness, Gerald Ford didn’t try to reintroduce Americans…it would have been impossible. The country would have revolted.
Smith: He said that was the worst day of his life as president, and you could understand that. But in some ways – it’s forgotten today – the best chapter was right after the fall of Saigon. Everyone wanted to walk away from this fiasco and forget we ever got mired there. Congress cut the money for resettling refugees, and Ford went through the roof and said, we have this long tradition in America of offering asylum to victims of persecution. And he put together this crazy quilt coalition, the American Jewish Congress, and the AFLCIO, and basically shamed Congress into forking over enough money – they brought 120,000, boatpeople…

Donaldson: But particularly people who we’d let down in so many senses. It wasn’t just someone from ________________, thank goodness we would help them out. We had been an instrument here – we thought for good at first, that’s true. But we’d been an instrument of these people’s plight. We had an obligation to them, I thought.

Smith: The Carter campaign – now when did you join? Was it the fall campaign or were you with him during the spring?

Donaldson: Oh, no, there were people, I guess before me in January of ’76, which now seems very late. But in those days, there were three or four of us still with Governor Carter, who still was thought to have almost no chance.

Smith: What’s the biggest misapprehension about Jimmy Carter?

Donaldson: Oh, I think there are several. One of the misapprehensions is that he was a rabbit – because of the killer rabbit, he was a wimp, in other words. That he was timid, or something like that. Far from it. This guy was going to do it with Sadat and Begin. This guy was going to try to do it. But I think people got it right. He was not a good national politician. He had, I’m told, the engineer’s mind, and you could see that in the small ways from the tennis court, to other ways. He wasn’t a good delegator, which again - put engineers in charge of products and they want to do it themselves and check all of the schematics and the designs.

But he surprised me to some extent, Richard. During the primaries he was pretty good as a primary politician, pressing the flesh, meeting people. We
caught on early that he didn’t like small talk, but he could do it, and his
message, I can repeat now: “I will never lie to you, I’ll never mislead you, I’ll
never dodge a controversial issue.” You see that’s the antidote to Vietnam and
Watergate and the CIA investigations that were getting under way. Watergate
didn’t hurt us, Vietnam didn’t hurt us, CIA didn’t hurt us, we can prove to the
rest of the world, but more importantly to ourselves, that we are a great
people. Today it was change for Obama, for him it was, we are a great people.
Don’t feel bad about us.

Smith: Yeah.

Donaldson: And it sold brilliantly, although he had to struggle through those primaries,
and on the last day in June there were three big ones: California, New Jersey
and Ohio. He lost California and New Jersey. He won Ohio by 7,000 votes
and Richard Daley said, “You’re the nominee,” and George Wallace said,
“You’re the nominee,” and so therefore, he was. It was a close thing.

Smith: Can you put an ideological label on him?

Donaldson: No, he didn’t have a firm Reagan-like, or Ford-like philosophy. On the other
hand, he was not a situationalist. If he had a philosophy it came from his
Baptist church and his feeling about morality and that spilled over to public
policy also. But you couldn’t – he didn’t win the presidency because he was
an ideologue. He wasn’t an ideologue.

Smith: They went into that campaign – obviously the Carter campaign was leading
very significantly.

Donaldson: Oh, 18 points and maybe by some polls more after the convention.

Smith: Yeah. And Ford began to chip away at that lead.

Donaldson: Oh, yeah.

Smith: In fact, Mark Shields says the Ford television campaign in ’76 was as good as
anything he’s ever seen.

Donaldson: And the Rose Garden Strategy also.
Smith: Yeah.

Donaldson: “I’m the president. I’m tending the public business. Here I am at the White House…” He never quite said, “I don’t have time to go out,” but we got the idea. Jim Baker and others, and Gerald Ford. But remember there’s always push-pull. Ford was doing things right that fall, but Carter was more and more doing things wrong.

So the gap being closed wasn’t Jimmy Carter really making an impression, but Gerald Ford, the faster horse coming up. Ford started speeding up, but Carter started slowing down. And I subscribe, whether it’s one week or two, sometimes we argue the idea, another week or two, and Ford would have been narrowly elected.

I also subscribe, and I told you, the Nixon pardon to me, Ford’s gaffe in the second debate, which he wouldn’t come off of, and that, too, was quintessential Gerald Ford. He thought he was right. I did at least two interviews with him over his lifetime after that, and he once again would tell me what he meant, and in the last one – because I’d gotten to know him pretty well – I said, “Well, President Ford, why did you put it that way? Why didn’t you say that? The way you said it made it sound to a lot of people who didn’t know you, that you didn’t realize that the Soviet tanks were in the street.” And when Kissinger, that night, came and said to him, “Mr. President, you’ve got to now correct this. We have to put out an addendum,” and you said, “No, I meant what I said, Henry.” That cost him five days.

Smith: Yeah. You saw him after he left office?

Donaldson: Oh yes. Not regularly, but on several occasions.

Smith: I wonder, here is a Republican president who would go to the convention every four years, and it’s as if every four years the party had moved further and further away. And I don’t know whether he moved to the left, I don’t know if Mrs. Ford had some impact, but you know, long before he died he was outspokenly pro-choice.

Donaldson: Right.
Smith: He’s the only president yet to put his name on a gay rights petition. I mean, there is this whole host of things…

Donaldson: I didn’t realize that. The pro-choice I knew.

Smith: Yeah. He was very, very outspoken.

Donaldson: I remember, Richard. Barry Goldwater was pro-choice, because he, who wrote *The Conscience of a Conservative*, and I think Gerald Ford also, believed that government really didn’t have right to interfere with individual liberties like that, even if they thought it was the wrong thing to do.

Smith: And that’s it. There’s the conservatism that says, “I want government out of the board room, I want it out of the school room, I want it out of bedroom.” There is a whole range of issues that frankly, we’re not even comfortable talking about. But if we have to talk about them, we certainly don’t want government to play a role in them. Now you have, particularly social conservatives, who hate government until they can use it to enforce their agenda.

Donaldson: Of course. And there is the hypocrisy of it. And I often wonder, depending on the person, do they understand this dichotomy in their reasoning? Or do they not even see it – do not see what they are doing? Depends on the person. I admire people like Goldwater. Because of a fluke, it’s known that I voted for him. The only vote of mine that I ever been, even to my wife, disclosed. And I admire Gerald Ford, and other people. And Democrats who feel strongly about something, but to thy own self be true, I admire them, too – whether I agree with them or not. These are the leaders who you were talking about. It’s hard to see that they are here today. And I ask myself, is it because I’m older and just thinking of the glory days? Or, in fact, have public leaders changed some?

Smith: Finally, and talking about being in contact with President Ford, you came out to Grand Rapids that day for our conference with the president.

Donaldson: I remember it well.

Smith: What do you remember? We laughed a lot, I know that.
Donaldson: We laughed a lot and I remember some of the people on the panel who were there. And I think wasn’t that the day that he told the wonderful story about running into Richard Nixon at an airport someplace after the ’60 election, and he shook hands and all, and Leno said, “Nixon said to me, ‘You know that inaugural was just wonderful. I would have like to have given it myself.’” And Leno said to him, according to Leno, “You mean the part about ‘ask not…’” “No, no. The part about I, Richard Nixon, do solemnly swear that…” I think he may have made that up.

I remember we also talked about the issues of the day. But I remember basically Gerald Ford being there, and I interviewed him then for my little webcast I had at the time. It was one of the times he repeated again, about how “Don’t you understand what I meant.” And also, once again, talked about the pardon, which I think he was always comfortable with. And I came to believe, long before this moment, that he did the right thing. It’s just in the ferocity of the moment, in the passion of the moment, I was very upset.

Smith: Poor Lyndon Johnson, of course, died four years after leaving office. Ford was fortunate to live long enough to see most people had changed their minds. But what really did it for him was when the Kennedy Library gave him the Profiles in Courage Award. He said afterwards, “You know, for twenty years, everywhere I go people have been asking the same question. They don’t ask anymore.” After the Kennedy Library…

Donaldson: Well, when the Kennedys said that was courageous to do…

Smith: You know a funny story? He wasn’t even going to go. He wasn’t going to go to the event. I got a call from Ken Duberstein on behalf of the family saying, “Can you talk to President Ford and make him understand how important this is?” He was getting on in years and it was across the country, and so forth and so on. There was no one less self-dramatizing than Gerald Ford, and no one who was less inclined to lay awake at night wondering what history was going to say about him. It finally took Mrs. Ford to make him understand that this is a big deal. This is the honor of a lifetime. And they went and they had the time of their lives.
Donaldson: Of all the tributes during the week of the funerals, and I was at the cathedral here, I was not out in Grand Rapids, the one that impressed me the most was Jimmy Carter’s because of where it came from, and also because of the words. Again, not a guile in Jimmy Carter. And you could tell when he was heartfelt, when he really meant something, or whether they’d convinced him he had to go through something. I thought that was remarkable. And the relationship that grew up between the two of them – it was a testament to both of them.

Smith: It was amazing because I did the very last eulogy after President Carter, and sitting in the front row…

Donaldson: You were good, but you hadn’t been a president of the United States.

Smith: No, I hadn’t.


Smith: And you know what? In planning the funeral, there was one thing he was adamant about, only one thing: he didn’t want a caisson in the streets of Washington. And then, we made sure that Jimmy Carter was a eulogist, and we wanted a journalist to be a eulogist. It originally was going to be Hugh Sidey, but he passed away, so Tom Brokaw did it. But the point being, to show people today that there was a time not so long ago when presidents and journalists could be friends…

Donaldson: But there is something else about that relationship. Remember the picture just a few days or weeks ago? Five presidents; four of them standing together, and one guy off to the side – Jimmy Carter. He never really fit in, in that way of the club. But it was Gerald Ford that did it. He loved Gerald Ford as he went on. He thought he fit there. And Ford brought him in. Carter ___________ beat Ford. It wasn’t Carter that really reached out and brought Ford in. It was Ford who brought Carter in. What a thing.

Smith: What hit home to me – it was all a fog, when you are up there doing that - but the one thing I’ll never forget, Rosalyn was weeping in the front pew. Which said it all. You can’t fake that.
Donaldson: No, you can’t fake it, see.

Smith: And, clearly, those two families had become very close. Air Force One flew back to Grand Rapids from here, and I could see President Carter picked up one of President Ford’s great grandkids, a little baby really, put him over his shoulder. It was a side of Jimmy Carter I’ve never seen. And was walking up and down the aisle of Air Force One with this infant.

Donaldson: As you can tell from our brief discussion, I liked Jimmy Carter, also. Not so sure his place will rise much in history, though. And I think I see the warts, and saw them at the time, but he was basically, too, a good man who wanted to do good.

Smith: You were talking about the engineer’s mind. There are more parallels between Herbert Hoover and Jimmy Carter. Both very distinguished ex-presidents. Before the Carter Center there was the Hoover Institution.

Donaldson: The relief work that Hoover had done.

Smith: Humanitarian work.

Donaldson: After Hoover left the presidency he was called on in later years, not for economics, but to head commissions.

Smith: He told Harry Truman he’d added ten years to his life. He and Truman became the best of friends. It’s like Carter and Ford – this very odd couple, in some ways.

How do you think Ford should be remembered?

Donaldson: Oh, he’s going to be remembered as someone who really gave the country the lift it needed at a time of grimness, at a time the country didn’t feel good about itself. And someone who did a good job as president, and also as a human being, someone that you liked. I think all those qualities will be there.

Smith: It is interesting though, he went to his grave convinced that he had adversaries, but no enemies. He literally believed he had no enemies. I only heard him speak disparagingly about two people. The worst thing he could say was, that’s a bad man. You know who the two people were?
Donaldson: No, tell me.

Smith: One was Gordon Liddy and the other was John Dean.

Donaldson: Gandhi. I understand Liddy…

Smith: Oh, no! John Dean.

Donaldson: Shewww. I thought you said Gandhi and I almost dropped my teeth!

Smith: It’s ironic you mentioned Gandhi because, you know what? Well, I said in the eulogy, when *Time Magazine* wanted the greatest man of the century, they asked all these people, and they had two choices. And I thought Ford would say Churchill or Eisenhower, you know. He said, Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi, the greatest man of the century.

Donaldson: Oh, okay. John Dean. We’re seeing even more evidence that John, a very smart guy, said, “Well, I’m going to have to save myself here. This ship is going down. So, let’s just see how I can do that.” And I imagine, now that you’ve told me this, that was the basis of what Jerry Ford’s dislike for Dean was. He wasn’t turning on Nixon for the good of the country. He was turning on him for his own good, he thought.

Smith: Thank you.
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Smith: I believe – correct me if I’m wrong – that the President came on to the Citigroup board in 1998?

Weill: The answer is different than that. I met President Ford in 1980 when he decided not to run against Ronald Reagan for the Republican nomination, and he decided at that point in time to look around at a few companies and probably go on some corporate boards. Which he didn’t want to do if he was going to go back to Washington.

Smith: Did he discuss with you the degree of seriousness with which he had considered running in 1980?

Weill: I met him after he decided not to run.

Smith: Okay.

Weill: So he wouldn’t have discussed the seriousness, or lack of that because I didn’t know him then. And I was told to call him up and he would like to meet with me when he comes to New York. He came to New York in a couple of weeks. And I remember I called him up before he was coming, called him from my house in Greenwich, Connecticut and I remember writing in big print – DO NOT CALL HIM JERRY. CALL HIM MR. PRESIDENT. Because I’d not had too much experience speaking to ex-presidents at that point in time. So I spoke to him, and he was staying at the Waldorf and he agreed to meet. We hit it off pretty well and I invited him to come on the board of my company, which then was called Shearson Loeb Rhoades, which was right before we merged with American Express. And he agreed to do that. So that was the beginning of a business relationship, which became a very important friendship relationship with both he and Betty and members of their family over the next nearly thirty years.
Smith: He took some heat, as you know, for “commercializing” the ex-presidency. And a lot of that was directed at the fact that he served on a number of boards. How would you counter that assertion?

Weill: I would counter it in a major way. I don’t think that he ever sold the fact that he was on boards. Basically, here was somebody that had a unique experience that could be of great advantage to how a company operates. And you’re talking about a person that had the highest ethical standards and moral standards, and an enormous amount of common sense. So I think that he was a major contributor. I don’t think he was commercializing anything, at least as how it related to my company. And my company evolved over time where he came on the board of Shearson Loeb Rhoades in the latter part of 1980. In 1981 we sold our company to American Express, a year later he went on the American Express board, which he stayed on for the next twenty-some odd years.

I left American Express and started a new company called Commercial Credit in ’86. Which in 1998 became Citigroup. So he was on the board of Commercial Credit, which through its name change to Primerica, through its name change to Travelers, to its name change to Citigroup. And stayed on that until a couple of years ago. And we had rules for directors that directors had to retire from the board, first at age 75, then we changed it to 72. Except if you were President of the United States. And if you happened to be President of the United States before you came on the board, you chose when you would leave.

Smith: A nice exception. I’m sure one he appreciated.

Weill: And one that was unique to one person.

Smith: There was this caricature that was built up, between Chevy Chase and some people in the press. Tell me about Gerald Ford’s intelligence.

Weill: I’d be happy to. I think that he was very smart, really with unbelievable common sense that could look at things and come to a conclusion. In a way he was a mentor to me in a lot of things because I learned a lot from him.
Smith: What did you learn from him?

Weill: One of the most important things that I learned from him is to have enough confidence in yourself that you are not afraid to hire people smarter than yourself. I think if you look at Gerald Ford’s presidency – at one time he had working for him Henry Kissinger and Alan Greenspan, just to speak of a few. And you can add Cheney and you can add Rumsfeld, and you can go on down the line. But that didn’t bother him. He knew how to handle them. And if you speak to Greenspan or you speak to Kissinger, of which I’m friendly with both, they will tell you that President Ford knew how to manage them. And so that was a very, very good lesson that I learned from him. And also just his common sense. He was always able to come to the point so that if we were talking about board issues, he was very, very helpful in the conversation.

He had a unique experience in dealing with leaders around the world. One of the things I was incredibly happy about – a couple of things – one of them was that he was able to see, before he died, that the world changed its mind about his pardoning Nixon. Everybody now thought that he did the right thing. And that was so important for America healing. And he knew that that was changed. And I think another thing that was terrific was that my wife and I had the opportunity to be helpful when he was having a hard time in raising the incremental money to build the new building for the Ford school. That we were able to step in and get that done, and he was still able to go to Michigan and see the groundbreaking and know that that was going to be one of his legacies that last into the future.

I remember one of the things that happened that was really funny when he was up there., It happened to be the day of a football game, and he had been an All-American center for Michigan when he played, and he met the current center of Michigan, who weighed 50% more than what President Ford, who we all thought was a big person, weighed when he had that same position.

Smith: How large was your board?

Weill: Our board varied in size from at one point ten or twelve, to as much as eighteen people,— after the merger with Citigroup.
Smith: And for people who don’t know much about corporate governments, what kinds of functions, what kinds of contributions would someone like him make?

Weill: In the 25 years, when he was feeling okay, he just never missed meetings. He never missed phone calls. I mean, one of the contributions that one can make is that you take seriously the fact that this is part of what you are doing. And he was great at that and that was a good example to other people – that this was an important job that you have. He always read the materials, and he added to our conversations, as I’ve said in a very, very important way.

My relationship with he and Betty went to their business thing, but we also traveled around the world together. We were in Asia together in several of the countries. We were in Singapore, we were in Hong Kong. Together we traveled to Hawaii and a lot of cities around the country when we were having events and President Ford would stay there. It was always interesting when Betty, who I think also a great example to women and to Americans in how she discussed her addiction problem. And how nobody would believe her when she was crying out for help. And how she discussed her medical problems, which are things that affect lots of people and women, especially. But we all can relate to it in different ways. And how she can share those things to make the world a better place, and what she went on to build in the Betty Ford Center to help people. Whenever we traveled someplace she always looked for the local AA and made sure she went to that meeting.

Smith: Really?

Weill: Absolutely. Whether it was Hawaii or Scottsdale, or this place or that place, that was the first thing that she did. Betty’s relationship with the President was really one of a lot of love and when the President gave up his pipe, he gave up his gin, and then he finally gave up the white wine. He did all these things which I know, having smoked a pipe and smoked cigars and drank the gin and still drink the wine – it’s not an easy thing to do. I remember once we went snorkeling with them in Hawaii and Betty loved it. For Christmas he called up and said, “Where do you get this kind of gear?” And what should he
buy her. And I remember he bought her snorkeling equipment for her birthday to be able to continue doing something like that.

Smith: So it sounds like they were up for the adventurous elements of travel. They were open to new experiences.

Weill: Oh, yeah. And when you say adventurous, when we were in Singapore, which is, I think ’82, Lee Kuan Yew had a dinner for President Ford and Betty. I was fortunate enough to sit at the head table with LKY and his wife, who is a lawyer. I think she just recently died. But it was terrific to be able to participate in that kind of a conversation. And I think we were their first house guests when they built their house in Beaver Creek. I remember when we got invited, Joan, who is my wife, called her mother and said, “Mother, I’m invited to the house of the President of the United States. What do I do?” And her mother said, “Make your bed.”

So we had a very, very important relationship. And when he asked for help with what they were doing at the University of Michigan, to really get this building going, Joan and I said, they were really good friends, we’ll never know another president of the United States like we knew them, we should really go in and make this thing happen so he can see it.

Smith: I know he was enormously grateful. The University of Michigan was really his second home.

Weill: Right, I know. And to see the school flourishing now, I mean, we not only helped with the building, but we endowed the deanship, and there is a terrific dean there now, Susan Collins. She was in Washington and so we’re in contact all the time and how to really do things together with the Ford School to give it the kind of exposure. We’re trying to get people to go out and speak there. We’ve spoken to Frank Zarb about doing some teaching there, and brought Harold Ford out there to give a lecture. So we are involved, not just with a onetime thing in raising money, but in working with them to try and make this the kind of institution that he’d really be proud of.

Smith: Did he have a sense of humor?
Weill: Oh, yes. Absolutely. I remember once we were playing golf together in the old Crosby tournament in Pebble Beach. And it was a par 3, and the President, he shanked it on this Par 3 and the ball went up in the air and into the woods and we heard a clunk. I was praying it was a tree, but it wasn’t a tree, it was a lady’s head. And he went over to apologize, and I thought it was a little funny. And he said to me as we walked up to the green with the ball in his pocket, he said, “Sandy, you’re not going to think this is so funny. You are my insurance carrier.”

Smith: Did he ever say anything that made you think that he was sensitive to the whole Chevy Chase caricature. Here was a guy who was a great natural athlete, yet who had been stereotyped as a bit of a bumbler. Was he sensitive?

Weill: Do you have bad knees? I mean, he really had bad knees. He had both of his knees operated on. I remember his going into sand traps when he had the first one done, and those are pretty hard things to get out of, some of them, when you have two good knees. He had banged himself up, obviously, pretty much as a young man. So to say that somebody is a bumbler for that - I think he was a pretty good athlete and hit the ball strong, and hit the ball far. It didn’t always go in the right direction, and I played a lot of golf with him, so you always stood behind him when he was hitting the ball.

Smith: Did you ever see his temper?

Weill: I’ve seen a controlled part of his temper. I don’t think I ever saw his temper out of control. I’m sure there were plenty of occasions.

Smith: Was it on the golf course?

Weill: Not really. He was a gentleman on the golf course. We played with people that showed their temper on the golf course. Some of them were supposedly professionals.

Smith: He strikes me extraordinarily self-disciplined. Even into his nineties, even up there at Beaver Creek with the altitude being what it was, he swam every day. He really took care of himself.
Weill: That was another thing. My wife is a swimmer and she went swimming in his pool in Beaver Creek. And from that, we ended up building an indoor pool in our home in the Adirondacks in New York State where she could swim all the time in the cool weather. He worked at it all the time. I think he was a pretty good swimmer.

Smith: Did he talk politics much?

Weill: Yeah, not necessarily because he wanted to. But I wanted him to talk politics about why are we doing something like this, or why are we doing something like that? Why can’t people just come together and think, “What is in the interest of our country?” rather than what is in their interest or what is in their party’s interest. And how these parties were migrating away from the system of conventions electing the candidates, and you can get three states like Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and when you get beyond that they’re forgotten. And it’s always chosen by the activists who are at the extreme of both of the parties.

Smith: Most of us as we get older tend to become a little more conservative. There are a number of reasons for that. He seemed to be the opposite in some ways. He was always a fiscal conservative, but I wondered whether it was simply because the Republican Party had moved so much further to the right, or whether Mrs. Ford influenced his views.

Weill: I think she influenced him a lot, as you would expect in people that had a relationship like they did, which was really beautiful. I was speaking to one of their sons, Steve, a few weeks ago. And I asked him how his mother was doing, and he said, “She really missed her best friend.” The only way a person becomes a best friend is a two-way conversation. So I think he listened, plus, he’d had great exposure. And I think he always wanted to learn, and he was in a learning mode through his nineties, really.

Smith: That’s interesting. I also wonder, he was very involved with her in the life of the Betty Ford Center. And to be exposed over and over again to people, good people, friends, successful people, who happened to have a weakness…

Weill: Who is not touched by people that have a weakness like that?
Smith: But I think that quality of compassion really flowered, and maybe that was a factor.

Weill: But one of the things, I think, that Betty taught us all is, you’re better off talking about it than internalizing it and having it churn inside you, so that you also become a victim of that process, rather than being able to speak about it. Maybe you can help somebody else, and in talking about it, you are also helping yourself. And you are getting to think about what you can do that can make it better. And she thought about that a lot and I think it’s terrific that now her daughter has taken over for her at the Betty Ford Center, which is great.

Smith: My sense is that they both really looked forward to their trips to New York.

Weill: Yes.

Smith: This city was a magical place for them. Did you sense that as well?

Weill: Oh, yeah. And Betty loved it, and the President, except for a few days when he was running for president liked it. But this is an exciting city and they had a lot of friends here and it was a chance to get together. Madison Avenue was a great place.

Smith: And they were theatergoers.

Weill: They were theater goers. They always were treated great at the Waldorf, so they felt like New York was like a second or third home for them. When he was on the board of American Express and then what became Citigroup, those are no-slouch companies, or were not no-slouch companies that were really an important part of the American establishment.

Smith: Somewhere I’ve read that he and Secretary Rubin were asked to be involved in a lobbying effort concerning some existing legislation. Is there anything to that?

Weill: There is something to it, but not what you say. I asked President Ford – he was friendly with Phil Gramm who was the Republican leader in the Senate Finance Committee, which is the committee that looked after financial
regulation. And I asked him if he could speak to Phil Gramm about why this would make sense – which he did. But Phil Gramm had his own agenda as it related to what President Clinton was doing, and he did not like this program where banks were forced to lend money in the inner cities to clients who were not very good. It was the Community Reinvestment Act. And he wanted that changed in the legislation.

But that was between he and I, and not President Ford. Bob Rubin was a hundred percent against repealing Glass Steagall, for a completely different reason, in that he felt the elected person, the President of the United States, should be appointing the person that’s in charge of how banks operate, because how could they be responsible for an economy if they can’t have something to say about bank lending and what banks are doing to either help the country expand or not.

And so he was okay with repealing Glass-Steagall, as long as the treasury, which is a part that’s appointed - the secretary is appointed by the president - so the Comptroller of the Currency would control what banks do. Whereas Greenspan felt that this should be out of the political arena, and be something that the feds should do because they are not so connected to the presidency. And lots of time they overlap, as a matter of fact. So Greenspan and Rubin couldn’t agree, and when Bob decided to leave Washington, and Larry Summers took his place, Larry didn’t think that this was his biggest issue. And within months, he agreed with Greenspan, and the disagreement ended. And my issues at the end was with Phil Gramm, who told me, if I don’t get the President to move in the next twenty-four hours, he is going to shoot his cannons and this thing is going to be done. And I couldn’t get the President to move, but his cannons didn’t go off.

Smith: You mention about New York City. I’ll never forget, Hugh Carey told me once that he thought President Ford had never gotten the credit he deserved because, in Carey’s opinion, it was a sort of tough love approach with the Beame administration that actually forced the city into making some very difficult, but necessary, decisions.
Weill: That’s correct. And that’s when the watchdog of Big Mac came into being, which helped the city get back on its feet. And listen, we’re all having that very same lesson today in just about every state and municipality in our country. We all have choices, and you can’t spend what you don’t have. So I think we are seeing our President today move closer to that position, and I think President Ford would be happy with seeing a little bit of our working together rather than the tough stuff on both sides, which is not what the people want.

Smith: Can you imagine what he’d think about the deficits? A trillion dollar deficit.

Weill: It got to numbers that were unbelievable. That clock doesn’t work anymore they had in New York which tells you what’s happening to the deficit by the second. But maybe we’re getting our act together. You can’t really cut back on everything when the economy is as weak as this. Personally, I think Europe is making some mistakes in being too tough. But as soon as we stabilize our economy and get it growing again, we’ve got to face these issues, both in the states and in the cities and in our country. Because this is unsustainable.

Smith: So he left the board – when?

Weill: I would say he left it about two years before he died.

Smith: And I assume that was a source of real regret for him?

Weill: But he couldn’t travel anymore, so he wasn’t able to come to the meetings. And it’s hard to keep up with something that is a dynamic process on the telephone. The meetings a lot of times are boring when you are there in person, but they are deadly when you are on the telephone. And to have to sit and listen to three or four hours of a meeting without the screens in front of you and everybody is doing PowerPoint and he didn’t have Skype.

Smith: Oh, well. He was not technologically adept.

Weill: I think adept is the wrong word. I think he ran the country pretty darn good without technology. I could relate to him a lot because to this day, I don’t know how to use a computer, I’ve never had a Blackberry, I never sent
emails, which saved me maybe, and I don’t know how to use a calculator. I know how to do modern math and I know how to do something on the back of an envelope. And I think, like him, you communicate when you don’t know how to use all these things. It means you have to communicate with people directly. And that’s how you really find out what’s going on. I don’t think it’s not-adept. We each have to operate in how we think we can do it best, in the most comfortable way for ourselves.

Smith: He learned to play Solitaire on the computer. And he could get email, he just couldn’t reciprocate. Mrs. Ford, on the other hand, apparently was pretty computer literate.

Weill: Well, that’s helpful. Yeah, my wife can do it. And my secretary.

Smith: A perfect division of labor.

Weill: Exactly.

Smith: Did you have a conversation in which he said, “Well, Sandy, I guess I’m going to have to step aside?”

Weill: Yeah. In the last few years we talked about it a little bit. I retired as CEO of the company in September of ’03, and as chairman in April of ’06. And we were talking about it in that period when I was chairman, and then after I had left the company and I think he probably…when did he die?

Smith: He died in December of ’06.

Weill: Then maybe it was in the period when I was still there in ’05 or something like that. But I remember one time when I got a call from Steve, and he said I want to talk to you about my father’s funeral. I said, “What’s the matter? Don’t tell me.” And he said, “We have to plan for his funeral and update it every six months, and this is what the government wants. And Dad wants you to be one of his pallbearers.” And I said, “You don’t have to talk to me about that. How’s his weight?”

Smith: Were you surprised when he died, the amount of public response that there was?
Weill: It was phenomenal.

Smith: Wasn’t it?

Weill: It was really, really terrific.

Smith: Because he’d been out of the public eye for a while.

Weill: But it was happening because the discussions about what he did were more and more about the pardon of Nixon, and about his following up, and the people that he had, and the quality of the staff work that was taking place in that administration. I went to his 90th birthday party, which President Bush had for him at the White House. It was a pretty small party, about 80 or 90 people, and this is the younger Bush. And Bush was pretty funny and the President was very funny, but all of the people from his previous administrations and the ones he worked with in Washington. Even the ones that don’t speak to each other anymore, and are mad at each other, they came.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Weill: I think that he has a unique place in how he became the president; and that he started as a representative from Grand Rapids, Michigan, and worked all the time, and learned a lot as to how the government operated. And then when Agnew resigned, it was really his friend Mel Laird, I think, that helped that process get going and really was working toward having President Ford become the vice president. Then the President had to resign and he became the president. He was somebody that was really, I think, a person of the people, that represented incredible integrity that had been vetted over and over and over again by all kinds of people through a whole history of the United States for a long, long time. And he was a person that I think was pretty misunderstood, but if you look again…

Smith: How so?

Weill: Because people thought that nothing was happening, and yet he took the best of what Nixon had, and got them all to work together in a much more transparent way, so that they were able to accomplish a heck of a lot more. And I think it was unfortunate in my mind who he picked as a running mate,
which really didn’t work that well at that point in time. And especially what happened in New York with his Treasury secretary who ate apples every day.

Smith: Oh, Bill Simon.

Weill: Secretary of the Treasury, Bill Simon, who was very adamant. The thing that framed this, “Ford to New York: Drop Dead,” in the *Daily News*, when really, I think, as Carey said, it was really Ford to New York: This is what you have to do. And if you do that, we’ll work with you. Which is really what ended up happening. But it didn’t happen in time for that election. That election was very close, and New York was not a runaway.

Smith: Do you think – and I realize it is totally speculative – but I’m fascinated to know what you think: Had he kept Rockefeller on the ticket, do you think it might have made the difference in New York? Or in other states?

Weill: Yeah, it’s not something that I like to speculate upon because it’s hard and no real purpose is ever served by “jeez, if I’d wanted this person to be my successor in X city, rather than the person that we ended up choosing, the company might have done a lot better.” What good does that do? That was not the choice, and that was not what happened.

Smith: Right.

Weill: So, recognizing all that, my answer is yes.

Smith: One last thing. If you were going to tell people something surprising, something that maybe most people never really thought about Gerald Ford. Something that maybe went counter to the image, or something that you uniquely, because of your relationship, had an opportunity to learn about the man. What would you say?

Weill: He was a real person. I think if I say something more it takes away from what I just said. Because I think so many of them get carried away with what they are. Bill Clinton said this to me just the other night – that he didn’t know any president, he can’t imagine a person being prepared to be the president; doesn’t care what their experience was. He was a governor of a state for eight years, and he ran something. And he said when he became the president, he
had not a clue and the first couple of years showed that. So we now have a
president who really didn’t have much experience at all. So it’s on the job
training, and even if you’ve had a ton of experience, it’s on the job training.
So President Ford had those two years, but it was a tumultuous time in the
country and, listen, could the country have done much better if he was re-
elected rather than Jimmy Carter being elected for the next four years. Again,
I don’t want to speculate, but the answer is yes.

Smith: It’s interesting because President Ford felt he had just mastered the job, when
he lost it.

Weill: I think that’s probably true. Just think of the people he had.

Smith: No one would have imagined that these two men would become very good
friends, which is a wonderful tribute.


Smith: And in fact, members of the former presidents club never quite understood
how they could be friends.

Weill: And they each said they were going to go to each other’s funeral. I remember
Betty telling me that.

Smith: Right after the election Ford was down, and we’ve been told by more than one
person in the White House, he said, “I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer.”
He summed it up. A competitive guy.

Weill: Well, you obviously don’t get to be in that position without being
competitive. But I think history will have President Ford being one of our
very good presidents, although short.

Smith: Perfect. Thank you.
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Smith: You were a minority.

Padnos: Yes. A very distinct minority. And it wasn’t easy because I never really felt fully accepted in the community of activity. In other words, we didn’t go to church, I didn’t belong to CE, I didn’t go to catechism, you know, where the other kids went. And, in spite of the welcome that I always received, there wasn’t any feeling of not being equal.

Smith: Let’s go way back to the beginning. Have you always lived in west Michigan?

Padnos: Yes.

Smith: In Holland?

Padnos: Actually, my mother was from Grand Rapids and chose to have me born in Grand Rapids, but the residence was in Holland. She chose Grand Rapids because she didn’t like the looks of the Holland hospital.

Smith: Tell me, because this is obviously very much a part of our effort to paint in the background of Gerald Ford’s west Michigan. How dominant, shall we say, culturally and otherwise, was the Calvinist tradition in west Michigan?

Padnos: I don’t know about necessarily Calvinist. I guess you’d have to include Reform movement in with the Calvinist movement, but in my lifetime there was a distinction between what we call the auf scheiden, which were the Christian reform movement or the scheiden, which were the more liberal Reform movement of which Hope College was a part as differentiated from Calvin College.

There’s a slightly different mentality of acceptance, and to the degree that there’s the very traditional ultra conservatives who pull their shades down in their stores on Sunday, there was no theater, there was no drug store. You couldn’t buy a Sunday paper. You had to go to a more distant location if you
wanted a Sunday paper. That sort of thing. So, it was a rather – I’m not saying Grand Rapids was that, but that was my experience in Holland. I think Grand Rapids was ___________ for the fact that the furniture industry brought in a lot of other ethnic peoples, particularly west side Polish peoples. I think the Bissell Carpet Company brought in a lot of hog-tying, bristle-tying people, many of whom were Jewish - brought an immigrant community into Grand Rapids. They gave it a more dynamic cultural exposure.

Smith: That’s fascinating because one of the things we really want to do is try to get a sense of the Grand Rapids that produced Ford. If someone who’d never been to west Michigan before were coming here and they said, “What’s this about the Dutch?”

Padnos: Well, it was a pretty closed society in that cousins, everyone, seemed to be related. It wasn’t that they were intermarried, but they were all from a unique area in the Netherlands, a unique area of the Netherlands that was cloistered and rather controlling and as an outsider you didn’t always… It’s not the nature of the Dutch people to not be hospitable, but hospitality and friendliness are a couple different things.

Smith: Yeah, sort of the difference between courtesy and true acceptance.

Padnos: Yes. My father, for instance, in Holland had no affiliations other than the fact that he was a Legionnaire from World War I and a Mason and those were his two social activities. Obviously he wasn’t comfortable going to church although oftentimes I went to church with neighbors and things like that, but it was not… You were welcome, but not accepted.

Smith: Was there a synagogue anywhere around?

Padnos: Grand Rapids.

Smith: In Grand Rapids?

Padnos: Yeah. My father was a member of the Grand Rapids synagogue, but in those days, to drive 25 miles from Holland to Grand Rapids was a chore. He was not a regular attendant. Maybe that has something to do with my fact that I went to Hope College, in that we weren’t particularly religious people. While
my father came from orthodox origin, he wasn’t a religiously practicing Jew. He worked on Sabbath because of necessity. So as a consequence, when I chose to go to Hope College, it was no great event in our life.

Smith: Now, you clearly from a very early age had some interest in politics.

Padnos: Well, that’s true. When I was in high school, I was selected by the American Legion to go to Wolverine Boys State, which was an introduction to politics and to the Detroit School of Politics, which was pretty rough. And I learned how the machine operated.

Smith: In that case, a Democratic machine.

Padnos: Yes, definitely and how they controlled the way things were done. Subsequently, when I went to Hope, I had a political science/history prof by the name of Bruce Raymond who was an activist in the Republican Party. In those days, if you wanted to be a delegate to the Republican Party convention, all you had to do was announce yourself and Bruce Raymond made it possible. Early on, I was a delegate to the Republican Party convention while in college and I used to be the ferry for a number of local Republicans. I drove the car to the conventions in Detroit.

Smith: Let me ask you about one of those because you have talked about a Democratic machine. Legendarily, there was a Republican machine here.

Padnos: Oh definitely.

Smith: Tell us about Frank McKay and that organization.

Padnos: Well, you know, what I know about Frank McKay is hearsay. I know that Frank, I think his name was McCloskey(?) or something like that, and he was a machine politician from the old school. On this side of the state, you wasted your efforts if you were a Democrat, so he pretty much controlled Republican politics. And if you wanted a liquor license or anything like that, you went to see Frank McKay and bought insurance from his company and that’s the way the system operated.

Smith: He had, in effect, a hammerlock on the party.
Padnos: Oh, yes, he did. And Mayor Welsh and people like that were a product of that system. As I understand, Jerry Ford’s dad was a chairman of the Republican Party here in Grand Rapids and he had ancillary groups over in Holland, men whom I got to know. One man in particular was the president of the Holland-Racine Shoe Company who was a political activist and his name was…oh shoot, age gives me a problem there. And one of his associates was Henry Marntz who was also one of my mentors; who was the president of the First National Bank in Holland. Karel Andriessen was the name of the man at the shoe company. Between Karel Andriessen and Henry Marntz, they mentored me in the Republican Party and introduced me to Jerry Ford.

Smith: As I understand it, President Ford’s father was part of a sort of rebellious group of Republicans who were...

Padnos: Obviously must have been.

Smith: …were kind of tired of the McKay…

Padnos: Fight the system.

Smith: Now, that’s interesting. Did you know his father at all?

Padnos: No, I did not. No, that’s where I wondered where my participation… Because Jerry Ford and I were never personal friends. We were good acquaintances. He never ever failed to recognize me whether it be in a large group or whatever, he’d single me out and say “Hello” and that sort of thing, which I treasured. But when he was campaigning…

Smith: Set the scene: In ’48, obviously, he comes back from the war and decides, at some point, he’s going to run for Congress. I’m wondering, that couldn’t have been an overnight decision.

Padnos: You’ve got to know that my brother and I had come out of the service. He appealed to us as a bright, young guy who was going to change things and we’d talk about change and we were trying to change things. We were opposed to the system.

Smith: Including the machine.
Padnos: To the machine, yes. So, we were going to disrupt the machine politics and when Jerry came to western Michigan, he came as an acquaintance of Karel Andriessen and Henry Marntz who introduced us to Jerry, my brother Stuart and I.

Smith: What was he like?

Padnos: Just a nice young guy. A plain, ordinary person that you didn’t feel awkward at all about being with. And so, we took it upon ourselves to introduce Ford to the people whom we knew in the Junior Chamber and places like that where we thought it might make a difference.

Smith: Now, by this point, he was openly running against Jonkman.

Padnos: Well, Jonkman was the incumbent.

Smith: Right.

Padnos: If you’re going to run for Congress, you’re going to run against the incumbent and Jonkman, who I only casually met, struck me as being one of the old school kind of politicians that didn’t appeal to young people.

Smith: It’s interesting. In some ways, that first race is almost a generational contest as much as anything else.

Padnos: Well, very much so. And he represented the conservative, Dutch lineage that – I don’t know that we found objectionable, but that represented the old school. Here we were, young guys and looking for a new fresh breath of air and so he appealed to us. Jerry Ford appealed to us. And so, young people, aggressive young people, we got behind it and tried to do whatever we could to motivate.

Smith: And clearly there was a significant issue in that campaign that divided, in addition to generational differences…

Padnos: In our scenario, did I mention Arthur Vandenberg? Arthur Vandenberg had chosen to leave isolationism and to become international in his aspects. That appealed to us. We were, if you want to reflect back, free traders, that sort of
thing. We lived in the international community of existence. And, to the isolationists, that was an anathema.

Smith: How provincial were they in terms of – not looking at the world, the Marshall Plan, and all of these post-war issues?

Padnos: Innovations.

Smith: Right.

Padnos: They weren’t capable of conceptualizing that. It was contrary to everything that they believed in. I mean really believed in. It wasn’t just a – I don’t know how to identify it, I’m at a loss for words, really. But it was a different ideology.

Smith: And a different life experience.

Padnos: Yeah, right. Exactly. It was not within their life experience.

Smith: Whereas you and a whole generation of...

Padnos: Well, my brother Stuart had been to Europe and had been prisoner of war and had experienced a lot of things that without that, you couldn’t possibly understand. I think that our Jewish origin gave us a universalism that didn’t exist in the conservative Protestant ideology. Ford just represented a whole – he captured the Vandenberg spirit, he represented the idea of the Marshall Plan, the rebuilding of Europe, the necessity for all of that.

Smith: It must have been a time, particularly for all you young guys - you’d gone off, you’d seen the world. You’d seen the world at its worst. You’d won. You defeated the most evil enemy imaginable, and you must’ve come back and thought, “We can start the world over again”.

Padnos: Well, my brother’s perspective was broader than mine. I really didn’t understand the Holocaust until after it was revealed. The press in the United States did not report what really had been transpiring until much later when reporters came back. So, even as a Jew, I remember my father having sent packages, my father still had relatives in Russia, he would send care packages to Russia and that sort of thing, but I don’t think he himself knew what had
been happening. But I think we had a broader perspective of the world than
cloistered community people here in western Michigan.

Smith: And, let’s face it. There were a lot of people who were isolationists before the
war who were isolationists after the war.

Padnos: Exactly.

Smith: And, presumably, Jonkman represented that status quo.

Padnos: And so we were concerned to make that change. We challenged voters. We
did vote counts. We did lots of things including putting signs on our trucks to
express our position, which I have to say was not all that well received in the
community.

Smith: Tell me about that.

Padnos: As a matter of fact, the mayor of our community who was a nice guy, but
pretty conservative in his view, after all, he was elected mayor of Holland,
called my father to say, “You have to understand the consequences of all this.
If these kids lose, you may have some consequences to pay.” My father was
permissive enough to let us do our thing.

Smith: That’s fascinating. And that was beyond the machine.

Padnos: Right.

Smith: That was just the local culture feeling in some ways threatened by what you
represented.

Padnos: I don’t think the machine ever threatened us. We were too small and too
insignificant. And the thought of beating Bartel Jonkman, a machine
operative, was unthinkable.

Smith: What led Ford to think that he could do that, because clearly he was
underdog?

Padnos: Derring do. I think that his father whetted his appetite and obviously
encouraged him. Gave him reason to believe that it was possible. You know,
it’s always the impossible that you – oftentimes, you accomplish the impossible.

Smith: Plus, I imagine, the other thing he got I think from both of his folks, certainly, was that work ethic. I mean, he must’ve out campaigned.

Padnos: What you have to understand is that he was somewhat of an underdog, too. They were not part of the elite. They weren’t people of wealth. He had to achieve what he achieved by his own derring do, you know. His activity in the Boy Scouts of America was an achievement and he was an achiever. You don’t become a varsity football player at South High School by not having been an achiever. And I didn’t know him then, but I enjoyed knowing about it in knowing of him.

Smith: Let me ask you something, and I realize it’s speculative, but this came up yesterday and it was very interesting. It goes again to this whole notion of the culture that he was, in some ways wooing, but at the same time challenging. The whole sequence of events surrounding his marriage to Betty. It’s always been said that…

Padnos: My wife and I were married at just about the same time. As a matter of fact, in ’48, amidst of all of this campaigning and so forth, my wife went with me prior to our being married to the state convention in Detroit. It was all part of growing up, I guess.

Smith: It’s interesting because, over the years, there’s been several sorts of explanations, and let me sort of outline what I think is the truth. He knew he wanted to marry her and he told her early in 1948 that he wanted to get married, but he couldn’t tell her when and he couldn’t tell her why he couldn’t tell her. Now, two explanations have been offered for this. One was, he wanted to take Jonkman by surprise, which he did to some degree, I guess. But the other, interestingly, which tells you a lot more about the culture, was of course, she was a divorcée and there was some question as to the political fallout if their engagement, let alone marriage, had been announced before the Republican primary. Does that, in what you know of the culture…?
Padnos: I never knew that she had been prior married, so it really didn’t matter to me. Nor do I recall it’s ever having a matter of subject of discussion.

Smith: From what you know of the prevailing culture, had it been known generally, do you think it would have…?

Padnos: Oh, I think it might have. Yeah, I do. Just as it is today, if you’re divorced in a presidential campaign, it’s not a plus. Is that not true?

Smith: Yeah, although I think it’s probably much less so. It’s certainly an issue.

Padnos: It’s much more acceptable, but in my time, you have to remember, as I recall, Holland, there was one major realty company as opposed to now when there’s 15 or 20 or more. If anyone sold their house, everybody in town knew about it and if a house came up for sale, certainly everybody knew about it. People just didn’t move around. I grew up in a Depression culture where kids actually went to CCC camp because their parents couldn’t feed them. So having grown up through the ‘30s, it was a very, very conservative atmosphere. There was no such thing as – there were old people’s homes, I remember there was a county poor farm, but generally speaking, if a couple, the parents, were in need, they lived with their children. Does that have any bearing?

Smith: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Tell me about the district itself. I mean, what communities – I assume Grand Rapids dominated the district.

Padnos: Well, obviously, and Zeeland, of course was a major player because that’s where Bartel Jonkman lived. So, when you ran against him, you ran against Zeeland as well. And you had to convince sufficient enough people in Holland. However, when the votes were counted, we won in Zeeland as well.

Smith: Really. So what were some of the major population centers of the district? Grand Rapids, presumably, was by far the largest.

Padnos: There were any number of little Dutch communities, satellite communities, in between Holland and Zeeland, Burkelouw(?) and Vriesland and all of these centers of Dutch culture.
Smith: Rural? Small towns?

Padnos: Very rural. All rural.

Smith: Which, presumably, would be thought to favor Jonkman?

Padnos: Oh, thought to favor, yes, but you’ve got to remember that I was part of a group of returning veterans and those were the guys that, when I went to the American Legion, I talked about Ford. In those days, the young veteran was a member of the American Legion and the VFW. My brother was a member of the VFW. These guys were activists, they were going to make some changes.

Smith: That’s fascinating. The McKay machine, was it district wide or was it basically Grand Rapids or…?

Padnos: Well, they were out of touch. As far as I know, it was Grand Rapids centered.

Smith: Okay. You say it was out of touch.

Padnos: Well, you know, here we are a bunch of veterans, many of whom had seen the world and this was contrary to their current orientation. So, I think that it was a veteran push as much as anything.

Smith: Do you know the story about the Quonset hut?

Padnos: Oh sure.

Smith: Tell the story about the Quonset hut.

Padnos: I don’t know the story intimately, I just know it was Ford’s headquarters and it was symbolic of the returning veterans.

Smith: But, supposedly, McKay gave orders to have it removed?

Padnos: Oh, I don’t know anything about that.

Smith: Yeah.

Padnos: You have to understand that Holland is 25, 30 miles removed from Grand Rapids. Communications were not all that… We had the Grand Rapids
Press and the Grand Rapids Herald to depend upon for our sources of information.

Smith: And where were they in this contest?

Padnos: Well, Grand Rapids Press was Vandenberg territory and I suspect that he had a great deal of influence on where they stood. I don’t know this for fact, but I have every reason to believe that Vandenberg was a Ford supporter because they shared common interests. I can’t speak intimately of that.

Smith: Was there any resentment felt by these outlying communities towards Grand Rapids? Was it sort of us against them?

Padnos: Again, I cannot speak with any degree of authority. When you lived in Holland, you were pretty isolated.

Smith: Hmm. That’s interesting.

Padnos: I went to school with kids who never rode on a train, who never left Holland. You know, my parents, we had relatives in Chicago. We’d be back and forth and that sort of thing. It was no great event to have left Holland. But if you read the Holland City News or the Holland Evening Sentinel, there used to be articles of the people, you know, “Jenny So-and-so went to Grand Rapids”, you know, those would be news articles. So, it was a completely different culture.

Smith: Bit of a cocoon.

Padnos: Yes, very much so.

Smith: How did Ford campaign?

Padnos: You know, if my father made a trip to Chicago, it was a news article.

Smith: That tells you a lot. Tell me about Ford the campaigner in those days.

Padnos: Well, again, my intimacy was such that my only exposure was that Ford came to western Michigan and we took him around to meet people. I can’t recall his making speeches. It was more or less conversation.
Smith: But he must have clicked one on one.

Padnos: Well, if you introduced him to a veteran, he was a veteran. He was one of us.

Smith: Yeah.


Smith: Really. That’s interesting. Did you ever discuss religion at any time?


Smith: Because I’ll tell you this story. There’s a wonderful story that I found out actually from a guy named Don Penny who worked in the White House for awhile, he was kind of a consultant on speeches and communication and all that sort of thing. Anyway, he and Mrs. Ford sort of conspired to sort of dress up the president’s wardrobe. So Don got a tailor, really first class tailor from Georgetown, who’s Jewish. His first name was Saul and said he had to come over. So Saul’s pretty nervous about going to the White House and meeting the president and that sort of thing. Anyway, it’s a Saturday afternoon and the president’s sitting upstairs and he’s watching college football. And Don said, “Mr. President?” And he said, “What it is, Don?” And he said, “There’s this tailor here now.” He said, “Well, we can do it later.” And he said, “Well, you know…” And, anyway,…

Padnos: “Don’t interfere with my football game!”

Smith: Yeah, he’s watching football, you know! And, anyway, one thing led to another and he wasn’t going to be discourteous so he went into another room to be measured and everything else by this guy. Quite a bit of time goes by and Don hears these voices, these low, sort of confidential tone of voice and he sort of looks around and the president’s got his hand on this guy’s shoulder and it’s almost like he’s consoling him. So once they are out of there, he was dying of curiosity, “What happened?” The president was asking Saul about his background and the fact came right away that his family – part of his family, not all of his family – had survived the Holocaust. And the president said on his own, “Well, you know, Saul, you’re probably one of the best Americans because you know what it means to be an American,” which was
just the perfect thing to say. It was obviously from the heart. It wasn’t for public effect, and you often wished that the public could’ve seen that sensitivity of Ford.

Padnos: Yeah.

Smith: Clearly, and I assume he got this from his folks, this was a man without a prejudice bone in his body on everything.

Padnos: You know, in my recollection, Ford didn’t go out of his way to make Jewish friends, but he had Jewish friends. There was a man in Grand Rapids by the name of Hy Bylan who was…

Smith: What was the last name?

Padnos: Bylan, B-Y-L-A-N, who was a conspicuous Ford supporter and, in actuality, he was the Strohs Brewing distributor. But I know that he made great efforts in Ford’s behalf. And I believe he’d been invited to the White House. In my recollection, I never saw it or was given an invitation to the White House, other than subsequently at Ford’s birthday, but I know that he lays great store in that relationship.

Smith: Were you surprised when he won the primary?

Padnos: I was elated. You know, it was an accomplishment. It was a pleasant surprise and I had no idea what the ultimate consequences of that might be. No conception of that whatsoever. He was just reelected, reelected, reelected, because he’d done such a great job.

Smith: Tell me about that because I used to talk to him about it and he thought two of the things that really damaged Congress in later years. He thought having a bigger staff was a bad thing and raising money was a terrible thing. Spending money was, you know, he didn’t like to do that.

Padnos: Well, he came from a conservative background. We were Depression kids. I don’t think that people today can have any idea of the concept of what it meant to see your father come home with a few bucks.
Smith: Of course, they lost their house. And he sold his blood to put himself through the University of Michigan.

Tell me what kind of congressman he was.

Padnos: Well, my files are full of thank you letters. He was a very thoughtful man, a very appreciative man. He demonstrated his appreciation by written expression. I can’t recall having ever asked him for much personally that he didn’t respond to. I’d wanted some things for my family to identify with President Ford and Penny always responded in magnanimous fashion, more than one might have expected, signed letters, signed all kinds of things.

Smith: I often thought, once a congressman, always a congressman.

Padnos: I guess.

Smith: He had a very good reputation for constituent service.

Padnos: I keep perpetual files and it’s incredible the numbers of envelopes that I have with his signature on it thanking me for this or that or the next thing.

Smith: And he came home to the district all the time.

Padnos: Oh yes, he did. Often. Often. Often. And he was available for any number of things. This photograph that I have here, any kind of event that he could be a contributor to, he was there.

Smith: And it’s interesting because it was a safe district.

Padnos: Oh, he didn’t have to worry. As a matter of fact, his successor rode his coattails, didn’t have to worry until he kind of lost track of his constituency.

Smith: And that was…?

Padnos: Guy Vander Jagt.

Smith: Oh, yes. Yeah, I heard the president talk about it.

Padnos: Actually, Richard - there was an interim period - Richard…

Smith: …Vander Veen.
Padnos: Vander Veen.

Smith: Who had run against Ford.

Padnos: Who had run against him.

Smith: But in the Watergate year,…

Padnos: That was the consequence of that.

Smith: …the first Democrat…

Padnos: That’s right. And then, of course, Vander Jagt was a speaker of quite substantial repute and Hope College and I carried his campaign and carried his brief, so to speak, and subsequently was very able, with not too much difficulty. However, Vander Jagt ran against 5 or 6 other candidates and, again, that didn’t put you in good stead with other people, but we were successful in winning the campaign. But, again, I don’t like to relive that situation.

Smith: Well, it’s funny because, my sense from what the president said, and he was circumspect, but he looked at Guy and he thought he was symptomatic of a larger thing, that he’d sort of gone Washington and didn’t get home as much as he used to.

Padnos: Exactly! Exactly. And got caught up in the national campaigns supporting other Republican candidates outside of his district to the degree that he didn’t tend his flock.

Smith: That’s fascinating because here’s Ford, who of course for the last nine years was Minority Leader of the House, and clearly was traveling all over the country and yet still managed to pay attention to…

Padnos: Well, yes, he did, but he took care of his home base.

Smith: And always did.

Padnos: And he had such a reputation that it could cover a lot of failures if there were failures.
Smith: He had a lot of Democratic support, too?

Padnos: Well, you know, it was hopeless to run against him. I mean, you’re just wasting your time.

Smith: Let me ask you. This is a large, maybe philosophical question, but…

Padnos: This was a Republican district, you know that.

Smith: Sure. But, you know, it’s interesting because he was a conservative, fiscally a conservative. He always said socially, he was a moderate to liberal and a fervent internationalist.

Padnos: I like to think of myself in like stead. I am a liberal socially. I am a Republican… I condemn myself by saying I really voted my pocketbook.

Smith: But that’s perfectly understandable. I think he was fiscally very conservative. I think he had a healthy skepticism about what government alone could to do improve people’s lives. Not that it didn’t have good intentions, but that sometimes good intentions produce not so good results, all of that. And yet, clearly on issues like civil rights, he believed that government had to ensure equal opportunity and in his later years, he was pro-choice. A number of things that actually left him, in many ways, stranded.

Padnos: I was with him all the way.

Smith: But this is what’s fascinating because, in some ways, conservatism changed during the period of his public life. When you ran in 1948 as a conservative…

Padnos: Conservatism is fiscal, not social.

Smith: Right. In fact, the whole range of social issues weren’t even on the agenda in part because, tell me if I’m wrong, his generation thought those were such private matters.

Padnos: You took care of your own.

Smith: But also there was this kind of very decent, Midwest reticence. You didn’t talk about things like abortion, let alone debate them and legislate them.
Padnos: Well, I have to tell you that we lived a naïve life in western Michigan. I had no idea what a lesbian was. It just wasn’t part of our vocabulary. It was never a subject of discussion. It was earth shattering when I went to New York and saw life as it really was. That’s the kind of background that we had here.

Smith: That, in a nutshell, says as much about west Michigan, because remember, in his later years, he is still the only American president ever to sign a petition for gay rights. And you can imagine what the right wing thought, I mean, the social conservatives thought. And, oh sure, okay, I think Betty was an influence.

Padnos: We didn’t have that exposure. If you haven’t been exposed, how do you know? Homosexuality was never a discussion. I know that, among my friends, there were people who were slightly different from me, but they were never singled out. They were just part of the gang.

Smith: Yeah, yeah. It’s interesting, because you also sense this ability when he gets to Washington and particularly as he rose through the ranks, he’s well aware of the foibles, of the shortcomings, and the inadequacies of his colleagues and he has his own, very strict personal moral code, and yet he doesn’t appear to be judging…

Padnos: …others.

Smith: Yeah.

Padnos: Well, I think that part of the Dutch influence was to be charitable to other people’s perspective although very protective of one’s own being.

Smith: Well put.

Padnos: I don’t know if I’m saying…

Smith: Oh yeah, this is exactly what we want. Seymour, this is exactly what we need.

I want to hurry here, because, well, toward the end, as I know you were at all the meetings of the Foundation and would have that contact with him and
obviously from time to time when he came back, you saw him. Was that fairly frequent?

Padnos: Whenever he was in the community, I tried to make it a point to be there and he always made me feel comfortable. I recall at one of our last meetings, not last meetings, but in one of the meetings, he made a point of singling me out and introducing me to some of the people whom I might not otherwise have known and always identified me as one of his oldest friends. Well, to be one of the President of the United States’ oldest friends is a pretty unique identity. And I enjoyed that.

Smith: You mentioned the White House dinner. Did you go to the 90th birthday dinner? What do you remember of that?

Padnos: What I remember of that was going to the White House and walking down the corridor and making a wrong turn and getting on an elevator with Happy Rockefeller and her, then, friend and ending up on the third floor which was not ever intended to be. It became obvious I should be on the second floor rather. My wife and I were so honored that we were maybe overwhelmed a little bit.

Smith: Sure.

Padnos: And I remember the dinner and sitting in the East Room immediately next to the president’s table. I remember the entertainment, particularly the army choir and the bass singer.


Padnos: Yes, did an incredible presentation solo. Just to have been there, to be part of that was memorable.

Smith: It must’ve been a very warm, kind of almost like a family event.

Padnos: It was very familial. I sat next to Colin Powell and Henry Kissinger’s wife on the other side and here’s little Seymour Padnos from Holland, Michigan. I never expected to be in that society of people.

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw the president?
Padnos: Yes, I do, it was in California and we flew out there to the, I forgot the name of the hotel. The president was there and it’s the first time that I ever saw him sit on a chair. He sat on a barstool and seemed quite able, although obviously not working the crowd as he typically did. And thinking to myself that I’m glad I came to California although, at my age at that time, that was quite a trip - and feeling good about it.

Smith: Did you reminisce about the first campaign?

Padnos: I never saw President Ford, but what he would say, “How’s everything going in western Michigan?”, “Tell me about what’s going on in western Michigan.” In a fleeting moment, “How do you do?” all that, and I knew that the press of his prominence limited the amount of time that I should spend in taking…you know. But he was interested, he wanted to know. There were a lot of things I would’ve liked to have said that you just didn’t feel privileged to take that much time to do. There were lots of people trying to say hello to the president and here I was, I didn’t want to overstay my presence.

Smith: What do you remember of the funeral?

Padnos: I had wanted to go to Washington, but my family discouraged me. They said, “Dad, you’re not up to it and you probably won’t get close enough to be of any significance anyway,” and so, they convinced me. I was in Florida at the time and they convinced me not to do that. However, my wife, Esther, who’s ever my companion, said, “We’ll go to Grand Rapids”. So we chartered … you’re challenging me now…And I remember flying into Grand Rapids and the group in Grand Rapids were so kind. They wanted to know when I was arriving and what the tail number of the plane was and so forth and so on. And they were going to make (inaudible) and I begged off, I didn’t need any special consideration. I knew they had enough other things on their hands. They made sure I was to know that there were to be tickets available at the hotel. And I remember having a friend of mine go to the hotel and pick up my invitations.

Smith: Were you surprised by the crowds?
Seymour Padnos  

August 5, 2008

Padnos: I was a part of the entourage on the bus and it was just overwhelming driving down the avenue and seeing all the people on both sides of the … Don’t get me emotional.

He was a dear friend. He was kind to me, almost like a member of a family. I watched diligently on television the whole development in Washington. I was impressed with Betty Ford standing there. My wife and I kept saying, “How can she possibly do this?” And then the congressman passed out in the background and my wife said, “And there but by the grace of God be you.” And so I was thankful that I was able to watch from my apartment and take it all in..

Smith: I think you just answered my question. I was going to say how you would remember Gerald Ford. How do you think Gerald Ford should be remembered by the country?

Padnos: With great appreciation for all that he did. You know, when he pardoned Nixon, I kept saying to my kids, who were so violently opposed to the Nixon performance, “Can you imagine the president of the United States going to prison?” He did the right thing. And, of course, at the time I wasn’t very popular in my own family for defending his actions and I’ve, subsequently, been vindicated. The world knows that he did the right thing. I was proud to know him. I was proud for his persistent recognition of the right thing to do. I have to say this, if I had been part of the Nixon administration, and he had asked me to go break in someplace, I’d probably have done it because I’m that kind of a follower.

Smith: The difference is, in the Ford administration, no one would ever think of making that request.

Padnos: No. No.

Smith: Perfect. Perfect, Seymour. That’s exactly what we want.
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Smith: The death of Jerry terHorst brings up a question. There are a number of people who believe that while the pardon was a factor in his decision to quit when he did, it was not the only factor. There are those who claim that he felt overwhelmed by the job, that it was just not really what he expected. Do you have any sense of that?

Weidenfeld: Well, I had him on a TV show right after that. I wasn’t in the White House yet. I remember, at the time that those of us who lived through this era, those of us who were doing TV at the time - I was a television producer of a daily television show - were absolutely thrilled that the Fords had come in because they seemed like such a calming, compassionate couple that could humanize the presidency.

Smith: And they weren’t the Nixons?

Weidenfeld: And they weren’t the Nixons. It was a sad time. It was a time when there was no faith in government. There was no faith in politicians. And while there was a big debate going on about the pardon - and many hoped that perhaps Nixon wouldn’t be pardoned - we didn’t know what the consequences of that would be. But Jerry terHorst - I have to disagree with that premise, because he really was a man of principle. That he wasn’t told was the reason he quit. And I can understand that as a press secretary. There are things about Betty Ford that I knew that I would never have talked about, and in fact, never talked about until she actually went public about them. I thought at the time there were other things that were much more meaningful. But that, of course, is a different story. He felt that he should have been told. That he wasn’t told was the reason, and I have to go by that because he was just so adamant about it. He was so principled about it and regretted having to resign because he would have loved to have stayed on.

Smith: Okay. That’s exactly what we were after.
Weidenfeld: And especially when he was watching how the White House press was dealt with after he left. So yes, he would have loved to have continued.

Smith: I take it Ron Nessen was a somewhat controversial figure?

Weidenfeld: I was at NBC then and I can’t say I knew Ron…Should we get into Ron and the West Wing and the East Wing and the chauvinism now?

Smith: Sure.

Weidenfeld: In terms of Ron, there were just so many stories about Ron and me I don’t know who was coaching him but as far as he was concerned the East Wing was irrelevant. But then the whole West Wing thought the East Wing was irrelevant and that was the mentality at that time. The White House was so traditionally based. The West Wing wanted the First Lady to be quiet, not to make waves, to go to tea parties, to be seen and not heard. I tried to get Pat Nixon on the air numerous times, and I thought, “Well, you can be helpful. You will say the right things.” Not that that would have saved him. I couldn’t get any family member.

Smith: They wouldn’t go on?

Weidenfeld: They wouldn’t let them go on TV. Pat Nixon was kept behind the scenes. As a child I had known her because my father had been in Eisenhower’s administration. She was a lovely woman, but the public knew nothing about her.

Smith: Shy?

Weidenfeld: She was a nice woman who had personality. She was a traditional wife. She listened to her husband. She had worked before she had met him. I believe she was a schoolteacher.

Smith: Right. She had a rough life.

Weidenfeld: She had a rough life.

Smith: She had a rough life; she had a lot of character, and I always thought that they served their own interests badly. I mean, to this day there are a lot of things
that she accomplished that no one knows anything about. She started the tours for blind visitors to the White House; lighting the White House at night so people could enjoy the house; she actually did more rooms in terms of the restoration…

Weidenfeld: And then Betty Ford undid some of that restoration. As all new First Ladies do. To make it their style, their place.

Smith: But the notion of the “Plastic Pat” caricature – we just had an opportunity to talk to Lucy Winchester, which confirmed the suspicion that there was a lot more there. A real sense of humor, which the public didn’t see.

Weidenfeld: Well, it’s the job of the press secretary to convey that – the style and the interests of the person who is there. But the challenge is how to do it when everybody wants something…

Smith: You just wonder – because one senses it’s not just that she hated politics, but she hated the humiliations that they had been subjected to, that she in some ways never got over. The Fund Crisis and the Checkers speech, sitting there on national TV while he detailed how little money they had, and all of that. And then the ’60 campaign – once that was over, it’s like finally we can have a life. And then in ’68 it all goes down the drain and you just sense that she brought a lot of old unpleasant memories and resentments, perhaps, at a time when most people would think you’d be lording it over everybody and enjoying life in the White House.

Weidenfeld: I don’t disagree with that. But I would submit that it was more the mentality of the West Wing that had no understanding of a First Lady and didn’t dare take a chance on her. So what you had was somebody who did traditional kinds of things which had to do, for example, with the White House, handicapped children and the like.

Smith: She wasn’t a political partner.

Weidenfeld: She couldn’t be. She wasn’t allowed to be. She wasn’t allowed to express an opinion. If she had been groomed, or prompted, then I think she might have had a different public personae. If she had married somebody else who made
her feel more secure in herself, she might have had a happier life. I’m sure she was also afraid to say anything – afraid of what the outcome would be. Would she say something wrong? Would this effect something? Would they scream and yell? She had no support whatsoever. And that was the whole reason I decided to take the job.—to give some meaning to the position.

I didn’t know Betty Ford. And I’m going to probably say a few things that I never would have talked about — and I didn’t — until she made them public. I had been at NBC and she had done a Heart Association PSA (Public Service Announcement) when he was vice president. Everybody there couldn’t get over what was going on with her because she seemed really out of sorts. She was slurring her words and seemed very anxious. And that was the gossip going around the station. I thought it was probably just stage fright. Here was a woman who was thrust into that position who had never done any of this before. She had had a career before she married. That was then.

It never occurred to me in my wildest imagination that I’d end up as a press secretary to Betty Ford. I had one of the very few TV shows in Washington. Frequent guests were White House correspondents Bonnie Angelo and Clare Crawford. Clare helped start People magazine and Bonnie was bureau chief for Time magazine. Both asked if I might be interested in doing the job of press secretary. At first I said no. I mentioned it to my folks, who said I had to be crazy; that I should at least look into it because it would be like touching history. So Bonnie and Clare called the person who was in charge of getting a press secretary at that time. I got a call the next day I decided while there was no way I would get it, at least I would touch history. I didn’t know what a press secretary did. I knew Lady Bird had done a good job with beautification but it was during Vietnam and I thought she should have expressed some opinion on that. At any rate, I drove to their Virginia home and we talked….

Smith: Oh, the house in Alexandria.

Weidenfeld: It was fun to go out there and see exactly what was going on. It was the day after the evening of the first State Dinner with Hussein. Susan was in the kitchen and still wearing whatever she had worn that night to bed, reading the
reviews of the dinner. I waited for Betty Ford who then came down in her housedress and we talked. There was just a lot of small talk and then finally I said to her, “What do you expect me to do?” And she said, “Well, how should I know? I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.” And then I thought I don’t know if this is really good for me. I don’t know about clothes that much – I’m not sure that I can…

Smith: Did she talk about her interests?

Weidenfeld: No, we just talked about the evening before, her children, her having gone to the dinner, what it was like. Just warming up to each other. And I spent several hours there. But I really didn’t know what to say about a press secretary or expectations for a First Lady. I just knew that I hoped that it would be more than the description of dresses, tea parties or those kinds of interests that Pat Nixon had. Because here’s a position - although the Constitution never talked about a First Lady – that is a powerful position. She has all this press, or rather the press is there to take advantage of.

Smith: Right. It can be a powerful position.

Weidenfeld: She can be useful to society, and if there was ever a time that we could use a role model, and somebody to set a mood for the country, it was now. I don’t know how old you were during that period and how involved you were…

Smith: I was actually an intern in the Ford White House the summer of ’75 – right after graduation from college.

Weidenfeld: You never came over to the East side.

Smith: That’s so.

Weidenfeld: There you go. This long red carpet that separated both sides, right? But at any rate, on my way back I started to think – I hadn’t told Betty Ford I would like the job and she hadn’t told me she would like me to be there – but I started to think about the possibility of how she could be a great First Lady.

Smith: What was it about her that you saw as potential?
Sheila Weidenfeld: She had a sense of humor. She told me frankly that you can’t teach an old dog new tricks. I love that. There was good press about the way they related to each other….

Smith: That was a real love affair.

Weidenfeld: Yes, but it was hard on her as a wife, because he was never home. So she did suffer the consequences of his not being home.

Smith: Yeah. Do you think he felt guilt in later years?

Weidenfeld: No, I think that may have been afterwards, because I’m not so sure that he was really aware of that. He knew she had osteoarthritis, he knew she was in pain, he knew she had to take pills, the Valium. It was very hard for her to be alone. She really loved the family unit.

Smith: And at that juncture where the kids are kind of off discovering themselves, and he’s away, so she really is alone.

Weidenfeld: I could relate to her because I’m one of four. My mother is in the same age bracket. She was a Radcliffe graduate, very bright, a colleague of my father’s, and very helpful to him - but there was frustration. She was a housewife. And this was the mold.

Smith: Who had been a Martha Graham dancer.

Weidenfeld: Yes, and she also had worked in marketing and clothes. She had been around; she was an independent thinker; and she became a mother - but she was basically, especially for a few of those years, totally alone – which wasn’t easy. And it had its consequences.

Smith: But isn’t it interesting that in so many ways, she became representative of millions of women who may not have political husbands, but…

Weidenfeld: I believe that. There were pins that said, “Run Betty for President,” because of her candor. She was always supportive, by the way. Always a great sense of humor, lots of candor, and fun.
Smith: The first time her name ever hit the *Washington Post* was in 1957, and it was some really condescending piece about her taste for quiet hats and slightly more talkative dresses. And that was it. And I’m sure that there was an inclination on the part of lots of people – just as they pigeonhole a president – to see this Cub Scout Den mother, Sunday school teacher from Grand Rapids, and pre-label her. Which is why, when she did open up and started expressing her opinion…

Weidenfeld: Well, wait a second – first of all, she transformed her tragedy into a public service; so you have to remember that that was quite something.

Smith: That was a defining moment for most people.

Weidenfeld: At that time cancer wasn’t even mentioned in obits. People were terrified of it. You couldn’t say the word out loud. That she did that publicly was pretty amazing.

Smith: Was there ever any doubt that it would be otherwise? In terms of handling the press…

Weidenfeld: There might have been doubt if somebody else had been there; if Pat Nixon had been there.

Smith: Really?

Weidenfeld: Absolutely. She did it on purpose. As a result she helped a lot of people, including Happy Rockefeller. Including – well, unfortunately she’s passed on – but the person who was the producer of *Face the Nation* – Joan Barone. Joan told me she never would have discovered it and may not have had as long a life, had it not been for Betty Ford revealing hers.

Smith: Really?

Weidenfeld: There were so many people who told us that. The mail was extraordinary. She had an amazing effect. And when you ask would somebody else have done it? It was not talked about. You didn’t talk about cancer.

Smith: It is hard for us today to put our heads in a culture that, as you said, literally swept this under the rug.
Weidenfeld: Yes. Look, that’s the way it was with AIDS for a while, too. They always called it something else. But also, we knew she was divorced – Whoa! First Lady, divorced? She was divorced, she had worked, she had seen a psychiatrist. But also she always was protective of her kids. Whether or not some of the stories that came out about them were true, we’d disagree on how they should be handled. She’d want to go back and deny it. And I’d say, “Let it die. Just let it die, otherwise, you’re going to make a story out of it.” And that happened on numerous occasions because each of the kids got press that was wrong. I’d try to figure out how to tell the reporter to forget it. “This is a non-story,” because of x, y and z. But it depended on the story as to how it might be handled.

Smith: I’ll tell you a story that Jack Marsh told us that never got into the press. You can imagine what it would have been. When [Ford] decided two weeks into the presidency to go out to Chicago and talk to the VFW about the amnesty program – anyone else would have put out a press release on Friday afternoon and gone to Camp David – but Ford, being Ford, decides to announce it to the VFW. As he said beforehand, “At least I don’t have worry about being interrupted by applause.” Anyway, the day before he goes, Jack Marsh comes in and said, “I’ve got some bad news for you.” And he looked up and said, “What’s that?” And it turns out, Steve, on his eighteenth birthday never registered for the draft.

Weidenfeld: Ah, I didn’t know that.

Smith: Yeah, no one does. But, before the day was over, they had it taken care of and no one ever knew. But you can imagine in that climate, it would have been a problem.

Weidenfeld: Definitely would have been a problem.

Smith: I want to zero in a little bit more about the cancer operation. What was it that prompted her to have the exam in the first place?

Weidenfeld: Nancy Howe. My understanding was Nancy Howe, who was there, who was getting an exam, too, said, “Come along with me.”
Smith: Okay.

Weidenfeld: Is Nancy Howe still around, by the way?

Smith: She is, and she’s not well.

Weidenfeld: Oh, she’s not?

Smith: She’s not well.

Weidenfeld: How is that? What is going on with her?

Erik: Cancer. She’s been going through chemo for a year.

Weidenfeld: Oh really?

Smith: Because clearly that is a delicate relationship. I gather a closeness, almost a dependency some people thought.

Weidenfeld: She and Betty Ford – it was total dependency. And she was always there.

Smith: Was it just because she’s in this totally new, terrifying climate, and one person, for whatever reason, provides her the support?

Weidenfeld: Nancy came in at the very beginning. She was the one who answered the door when I went out to the Virginia – Alexandria White House. She was always there to take care of any need, anything Mrs. Ford wanted, a cup of tea, a haircut, a this, a that. Nancy assumed the position of palace guard. And so she made it very difficult for many of us to get in. I didn’t want to take much of Betty Ford’s time, but I was dealing with the press and the only way the public knows anybody, is through the press. Not that I wanted to tell everybody everything, but I had to deal with the press and do what was best for Betty Ford. Do you want the press to be angry because you’re not getting an answer over some silly little thing, because you can’t get through? There was a lot of frustration for me because Nancy acted as chief of staff and palace guard. It was very hard for me but it was hard for everybody.

Smith: He obviously had years and years of dealing with the press. People commented on the fact that of recent presidents, he seemed to be the most comfortable with reporters. It was not an accident that a journalist was among
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the eulogists at the funeral. But I’m wondering: did she have an overall attitude toward the press? Not necessarily hostility or even a suspicions, but maybe a caution?

Weidenfeld: I’ve got to answer that in two ways: one is that there were lots of journalists, especially the women journalists. She really liked them.

Smith: Really?

Weidenfeld: She really liked them. But she was very fragile. And her condition was often unpredictable because she had to recuperate from the cancer surgery – the mastectomy. She also had osteoarthritis, and I never knew exactly how I would find her if I scheduled something in advance. And again, I didn’t know if what I had heard before, due to popping pills and having a drink resulted in slurred speech or just stage fright. But there were enough occasions – and since it was very hard to get to see her when Nancy was there (which was often) - there was no way I would know if she were just protecting her. I believed as press secretary and somebody who had come out of the media, that quality, not quantity was what was important. I also believed that she didn’t always have to talk to the press. I could give them an answer, especially because you never knew if it were going to be a good day or a bad day. I had to be selective. She didn’t need to give a lot of speeches everywhere. There were things she could do from her residence like the phones calls she made regarding the ERA legislation. What I had wanted to say earlier is that the First Lady can really have an important impact – I firmly believe this.

Smith: Sure.

Weidenfeld: The First Lady has that ability to play a big role in terms of not only helping her husband, but setting the mood and tone of the country by what she does and how she does it. I’ll throw out a few examples: take the ERA. We never said anything to the press about the fact that she was trying to persuade or lobby legislators to amend the Constitution. But she called state legislators, she called Barry Goldwater, she called various other people to try to sway them. Unfortunately, it lost in the end. This was something, by the way, that
Ford didn’t agree with necessarily. But she did ERA from her bedroom or the living room by making phone calls when she was up to it. I always believed it would come back and the press would hear about it. They might holler and scream, but it looked like it was something she did out of sincerity, which she did; she wanted to do it. So that was one thing.

Regarding Betty Ford economizing, I believe you show by example, which is what we did. I think it’s great that Michelle Obama is also doing it as well by showing us by example what her family eats. I’d love to get into my head/heart theory, how I finally decided how we delineate turf, because the West Wing gave us no turf at all. We had to delineate it, and I did. As I saw it, we were the heart, they were the head; they were responsible for policy, we interpreted it by daily living, by example.

The citizens band radio – I have to thank my husband for that. I’m really jumping all over the place, so excuse me.

Smith: Describe it again. For people who weren’t around in the ‘70s, what all that was.

Weidenfeld: That was about talking to truckers. Truckers were the first to have this little gadget in their truck to talk to other truckers. There was a whole lingo for it. Betty Ford never quite got it and it was very cute. Her handle [name] was First Momma. I have to thank my husband for bringing that in. A client of his had given us one and we gave it to her. She really loved it, and she was good at it. She had trouble with the lingo and her Secret Service would try to help her out. It got very positive press and showed that she wanted to be with the people, with the citizens.

You ask me questions. Various things are coming to mind as we were talking.

Smith: This is great. Did you have a sense of what her politics were?

Weidenfeld: Well, I had always thought she was fairly liberal, but I really didn’t have a sense of her politics.

Smith: More liberal than him?
Weidenfeld: Yes, I would have thought so. Perhaps I should get to the *Sixty Minutes* interview. *Sixty Minutes* was the first big interview that she did, and that was in August, 1975 – she had been there since ’74.

Smith: That was the first interview.

Weidenfeld: She was not ready until then; then all of a sudden, she just seemed ready.

Smith: Had she put it off?

Weidenfeld: We’d done the ERA. But she would still say, “I don’t want everybody just to look at my breasts.” She felt all that was going for her was her cancer and her mastectomy; so it used to really bother her that she felt that that’s what she stood for.

Smith: That was her initial reaction?

Weidenfeld: She was pleased with what happened in terms of helping people saving lives. Save one life and that’s important. She saved many. And as I mentioned earlier, she took cancer out of the closet.

Smith: Right. But that co-existed with a very kind of personal…?

Weidenfeld: Then she had to do something for society. She was in the position to do it. So the ERA was excellent. The economizing was important, as I said; also everything American, whether it be her dress or state dinner menu. As I said earlier, she loved clothes. But I knew nothing about clothes; I would feel the material and ask, “What is this you are wearing, Mrs. Ford?”

By the way, I always called her Mrs. Ford. She was conflicted – there was Betty Ford versus Mrs. Gerald Ford. She was so much more at ease as Betty Ford. When the campaign got started, those in charge didn’t want to hear from her. When they found out how popular she was, they tried to use her for everything, which was not good for her. We’ll get to that when you are ready for it. I threw that out in case we forget.

Smith: Had *Sixty Minutes* been after you for a while?
Weidenfeld: *Sixty Minutes* called at a time when I thought we could do this. I thought, she is ready. In fact, that’s the only show I ever wanted her on. The first person who asked me for an interview was Barbara Walters. Barbara called herself. I’d literally walked into the office for the first time and she was on the phone. It was the first phone call I ever got in the White House. And I always thought she is terrific - really something. She makes her own phone calls. But I had to push her off because Betty Ford wasn’t ready for that. What was she going to talk about?

Smith: Was this around the time of the breast cancer?

Weidenfeld: This was right after. I came in the very beginning of October. I was told the day before she went in for the mastectomy by David Kennerly who called to say I had the job. But he said, “You can’t mention anything. She’s going into the hospital.” And he wouldn’t tell me why. And then the next day I found out. Shortly after I started at the White House. But *Sixty Minutes* was the show I wanted her to be on. I loved Don Hewitt. He’s always been my ideal of a great producer. I loved the show and I thought she could handle it. They loved her, too. But to answer your question, they asked her opinions on all sorts of things. Don sent me the transcript before the show was aired and the only thing I didn’t like and asked, “Could you please take it out?” was when she said she wasn’t for gun control. Don thought I must be crazy because I didn’t say anything about the affair – when Morley Safer had asked her if her daughter had an affair, would she be surprised? She said no, she wouldn’t be.

Smith: Was there a right of, or were doing you a courtesy in sharing the transcript with you?

Weidenfeld: I had asked for it and they gave it to me. It was not a problem. I think he was so pleased that all I mentioned was the gun control.

Smith: Well, if were him I would have been, too.

Weidenfeld: But I liked her answer, by the way. I loved it. And it shocked me that it was misinterpreted. I shared the transcript with everybody on the plane going out to Vail, Colorado.
Smith: Before the program aired?

Weidenfeld: They knew nothing about our doing the show. It got to the point where I didn’t share much with the West Wing.

Smith: Okay.

Weidenfeld: Because, if I shared it, they would prevent us from doing it.

Smith: Really?

Weidenfeld: Little things like going to the hospital for sick children, that was fine. They didn’t care about those things. But not so with things that could make an impact, that were very positive, that I felt fairly strongly about. She signed a picture to me which I haven’t looked at in a long time, but it said something like “To my ever loving press secretary who gets me in and out of trouble.” I think controversy sometimes clears the air, and that it’s not a bad thing. But I wasn’t ready for this one. I wasn’t ready for the reaction that ensued.

Smith: I just want to nail it down: did she see the transcript?

Weidenfeld: I don’t know if she saw it or not. I’m sure I gave it to her; I gave it to everyone, but it doesn’t mean that she would have read it.

Smith: Really?

Weidenfeld: Yes.

Smith: I guess, if I had waited this long to do something and I knew this was a big deal, and I was at all awkward or uncomfortable or whatever, and then I had an opportunity to shape the result, I would have jumped at that.

Weidenfeld: I had to put my faith in them. It was the only thing she had done. She really was fine about doing it. Everybody was all set.

Smith: When it was done, she felt it had gone…

Weidenfeld: But she cancelled the show that morning; she said she wasn’t doing it. They were set; the lights were ready; the technicians were there; Don Hewitt was there, Morley Safer, and I got a call in my office while they were sitting with
me saying, she’s not doing the program. She was hysterically crying. And I, to this day, don’t know why and I never asked her. I went upstairs and she wasn’t dressed. She was having her hair done, and she said, “I’m not doing it. I’m not doing it.” And I left saying, “Alright,” and I gave her every reason why she should, and I really don’t know what was going on. I had tried everything I could in telling how wonderful this would be and that she was all ready. Then I had just started to leave the room. It was just moments after this very long period of saying, “But they’re here. We’re supposed to be taping it this morning. They got here at six this morning, all the vans, all the technicians, all the trucks.” I didn’t know what I was going to tell Don Hewitt, my idol. Anyway, she then said, “Okay, I’m going to do it.” And she did it and she was great. And we went up to the sunroom…

Smith: Solarium.

Weidenfeld: Solarium, thank you very much. She was great. She was upbeat. Who would have ever, ever known three hours before, not only was she a wreck, but I was.

Smith: And I assume they never caught on.

Weidenfeld: For a year and a half, we hadn’t done any press. I had held everybody off from Barbara Walters to both Helen Thomas and Fran Lewine, who were both very difficult people because they represented opposing wire services: UPI and AP and were always vying with each other. Nobody will ever understand the tensions in the press when it came to getting a story out after Watergate, when nobody got anything. No matter what I said, reporters (especially Fran and Helen) would often challenge it.

Smith: It's fascinating because I wonder if that’s not a metaphor. You’re right, no one seeing that would have ever guessed that she was anything other than totally comfortable and relaxed and so on. But I only learned long afterward, and it came as a surprise to me. When she would go on stage, she was wonderful. But she really had stage fright. It was more than butterflies.

Weidenfeld: As a talk show producer, I was asked to set up a program on public speaking and dealing with the media for the State Department in the early ‘70s when I
was at NBC for the top ambassadors and senior officials. Kissinger was even a student. It was a three-prong program. One was when a mike is shoved in front of you, how to handle it; another a la Meet the Press with three journalists who are querying you; the third speeches. I learned a technique from Dorothy Sarnoff, who I had on lots of shows when I had lived in New York and was with NBC then and Metromedia, which I used with Betty Ford.

So what I gave her was an approach to what I thought was really good in terms of not reading a speech, but delivering a speech and being confident in doing so. We’d go over talking points ahead of time. This was how I dealt with what I believed was her stage fright. But I know there was another component. I know it, because this was beyond stage fright. When she cancelled something reporters would say, “It’s her cancer coming back.” They always thought it was her cancer. If she slurried a word, it was her cancer. Well, it was osteoporosis, it was whatever. She had been accustomed to Valium, she had been accustomed to various things like that, and it is possible that it was some of those things that undermined her confidence and brought her down. She had once said something to me on a trip on the campaign trail when she was being over-used and abused by the West Wing when they discovered her talent. She actually broke down and started to cry. I’ve never talked about this.

Smith: No, this is great. And by the way, you’ll get a copy of the transcript and you’ll have an opportunity to…

Weidenfeld: Do I get a copy of the video?

Smith: We can give you a copy of it, too.

Weidenfeld: Thank you. But I wanted to know what was going on, why was she so down? She said, “If you only knew.” And all of these years later, I wonder, if I only knew – what was it? I wanted to know because if she got nervous, I was more nervous for her. But she wouldn’t tell me more.

Smith: Of course.
Weidenfeld: I wanted her to perform well. I knew how wonderful she is and was, and she had this sense of humor. So I wanted to ground her and believe I did a good job at it. Some people accuse me of saying I produced her. No, I didn’t produce her – she is who she is. My challenge was how do you translate her and put her in an environment that made sense for her, where she can be comfortable and herself.

Smith: Legend has it, and you can tell me if it’s true, that the initial reaction to the *Sixty Minutes* interview in the West Wing bordered on horror.

Weidenfeld: Bordered on horror? It didn’t border on anything, other than they were horrified. Nobody spoke to me the entire time I was out there. Ron wouldn’t talk to me. It was my anniversary – so my husband came out, and thank God he comforted me. Because I didn’t want to do her in. If anything, I thought this was the most wonderful thing. I was so excited about it before it happened.

Smith: What was her reaction?

Weidenfeld: Well, she watched it with Donald Rumsfeld and her husband. The President said it was fine and playfully threw a pillow at her. That was his reaction. Rumsfeld said he lost twenty or thirty million votes. He was really angry. But the next day was the tough day, because I went to bed after watching the show thinking, isn’t this wonderful? Isn’t this terrific? I’m so happy, what a nice anniversary present for Edward and me.

Smith: You were vindicated.

Weidenfeld: We had the worst trip in our life. Nobody was talking to me and I was afraid to go near the press. I didn’t know what to say. What Mrs. Ford said was totally, totally misinterpreted. I thought it was a wonderful thing for families to understand that you should talk to your kids. You should be honest. It was all hypothetical. She was wonderful after everybody left. We worked on a letter. I’m sure you’ve talked to Billy Zeoli, who I haven’t seen in a thousand years.

Smith: Not yet; he’s on the short list that we’re trying to get to.
Weidenfeld: He’s on the short list? Well, he was a character, and they did have a number of characters around them. But Billy was a good person. I always worried about what he might say that could backfire, the same way that this thing backfired on me. So why should I have been worried? But at any rate, I thought the only thing we can do is to write what I called the perfect letter. And Edward and I started it and then I gave it to her. I’d worked on that the entire trip. Really, I thought, somebody could call me, somebody could yell at me, do something, just don’t ignore me. I don’t want to hear from everybody how awful this is. Ron was difficult. Ron sent me an apology note years later. Ron was always difficult. He refused all requests to help get my office in tune with the West Wing – so we could be supportive. Aren’t we there to be helpful, to be helpful to the country? Can’t a wife be an attribute? Yes, she should be an attribute, not a neutral person sitting there.

He was so accusatory. We had such a small staff, because we came out of the Nixon White House. They didn’t want press, so I had really no staff, and yet she had to make speeches. She had to. I couldn’t do all of that – there were so many things going on. She was in demand. Whether she did things or not, I still had to have more than one aide.

Smith: The irony of this is that there’s no shortage of people who believe that Ron Nessen, by going on Saturday Night Live, ill-served the President’s interests.

Weidenfeld: I told him not to. Yup. I told him absolutely not to, I didn’t think it served the President’s interests then, and I don’t think so now. When we talked about sense of humor, let us put it in a context. Let’s see what the consequences may be. And there were just no good consequences for that as far as I was concerned. There were other ways to show Ford affable, and that, to me, was just ridiculous. I tried, but Ron didn’t listen to me on that one, either. But we were talking about the Sixty Minutes, and there was so much to the Sixty Minutes because that really did have the impact that it should have had.

Smith: Was it rough on Susan?

Weidenfeld: Was it hard on Susan? Well, the most wonderful thing of all was that years later, when I asked Susan about it she didn’t even know at that time what an
affair was. It had been so twisted. It was a big learning experience for me. I was aware how you could take something and twist it and turn it and make it into something else.

Smith: But I sense that it was also a learning experience for the West Wing in the sense that it marked – everyone fights the last war.

Weidenfeld: Well, can we just get to the end of this experience?

Smith: Yeah, sure.

Weidenfeld: I wrote the letter, what I always called the perfect letter because if people would understand that it was hypothetical, people would understand that Susan didn’t have an affair, that Mrs. Ford was being realistic, that these things do happen, that conversation with children should be open. I know Billy added a few things that I thought made the letter. That’s when she felt really good about it, and we got the letter right off. I didn’t tell anybody in the press about it. I think action speaks louder than words – and someone who received the letter would come forward and the misunderstandings would finally be corrected.

We sent the letter out. At the same time we had an overwhelming number of negative letters. I thought that by keeping journalists up to date and the public up to date on how many negatives and positives were coming in it would generate positive letters. And not only that, somebody would get this wonderful, perfect letter, and talk about it. And by God, it happened from a woman in Texas. And I’ll never forget her name, and I don’t even know her. Her name is Lorena Chevalier. Because that’s what changed everything. She got the letter, she went to Associated Press. Associated Press printed it, everybody talked about it. And we were inundated with positive letters. And that really changed everything.

Smith: That’s a perfect lead in because my sense is that you just had a bunch of middle-aged or older, white men, accustomed to their own kind of tunnel vision about society and culture and gender roles. “This is the way it’s been, and presumably that means that this is the way it is and will always be.” They certainly did not anticipate the changes that were beneath the surface, and in
many ways, she, maybe unknowingly, sort of opened the door for a lot of those changes to come…

Weidenfeld: Well, let me put it differently. Because I was her press secretary and that’s how people do know her. How do you know anybody? And how do you know that you really know them? Hilary Clinton – everybody – even Betty Ford said, “They don’t know the real me.” Nobody knows the real you. They know you as you are publicly presented. And sometimes it’s one little thing that symbolizes your whole life which might be totally irrelevant to your life.

So, no, I would say that I knew that we had to use this position. I couldn’t have taken the job if I didn’t believe that. On my way home from my one time with Mrs. Ford I kept thinking, “what can be done that’s beyond the traditional women’s things” I’m not saying that volunteerism is not important - it should be done, and it’s good when it’s done. But there has got to be something more that talks to people, that deals with their values, that deals with what’s going on. I was out of TV. I was one of the first women producers. I knew the fights that were going on.

I also was quite aware of the fact that the role of women was changing. They didn’t know that at the White House. Whoever the First Lady is, you’re going to have controversy. Expectations can be so polar opposite - no matter what it is, you’re not going to make everybody happy. You can never make everybody happy. For the West Wing, the First Lady position was always fairly traditional. The smiling wife at the podium, beaming at the comments of her man. We’ve had that since Betty Ford. But she walked that fine line.

I remember asking Mrs. Ford after we’d finished the ERA legislation, that is trying to amend the Constitution: “What do you consider a liberated woman?” And I might be paraphrasing a little bit, but she said, “I would consider a liberated woman any woman who feels confident in herself and happy in what she is doing. It’s a general feeling of positiveness and being able to live with yourself” She really walked this line where she loved being a mother, she loved being a wife, But she also was all for the woman who wanted to work.

Smith: She’s a transitional figure in a lot of ways.
Weidenfeld: And we still need that transitional figure because that debate has ensued.

Smith: But, she literally has a foot in both camps. On the one hand, there’s a traditionalist figure there.

Weidenfeld: She absolutely was a wife of the Fifties.

Smith: And yet there is also a woman who is comfortable with this emerging – as undefined in some ways, and to some people, frightening – sense of potential change. Comfortable with the prospect of change.

Weidenfeld: Yes.

Smith: Which, for a lot of people is difficult.

Weidenfeld: And still is.

Smith: True.

Weidenfeld: And I’m not saying that that mentality doesn’t still rear its ugly head. Even at the White House today I think that that’s the way the East Wing-West Wing define turf. My heart/head theory did that for me – which I presented in a memo to Rumsfeld, who paid no attention to it whatsoever.

Smith: One of the themes between the White House wings under Rumsfeld, for example…

Weidenfeld: He didn’t think we were capable of doing anything. So everything we did pretty much went over his head, unless he heard we were doing something. And he’d call on the phone on those occasion and scream.

Smith: Would he really?

Weidenfeld: And he’d tell me what I had to say and that I had to follow it.

Smith: Was there a sense, with ERA evolving into a controversy, and the looming Reagan challenge - did people connect these and say, “Oh my God, she’s lost us votes at a time when we’re worried about Reagan.”

Weidenfeld: I told you nobody knew about it. These were phone calls. Then they’d get out. And I did go to the President’s lawyer Phil Buchen and find out if it was okay.
While it was a national amendment, it was an amendment to the Constitution, and still a states’ issue. So it was okay to get involved. That was as far as I went. I didn’t go, “Guess what we’re doing!” No, we didn’t bring any attention to it. Everything was prepared. She was ready for the conversation with talking points. She had her own style and she was wonderful. I was always there for the phone calls. I was always the scribe. I took notes on every word she ever said while I was present……on little pieces of paper, a notebook, whatever.

Smith: What did she enjoy about the job? We’ve heard, for example, that she put a lot of time, a lot of effort into the hostess role, that aspect of the job.

Weidenfeld: She loved that, too.

Smith: She did?

Weidenfeld: Well, she loved to dress. She did love that part; but she also loved I think the various introductions she had, the exposure she had. I think it was a very difficult adjustment, but when she got the adoration, she loved it. Then she started to feel comfortable.

Smith: The performer came out.

Weidenfeld: Yes. The Gridiron is a good example. She was the first First Lady to perform at one. Some people like to say it was Nancy Reagan, but it was Betty Ford.

Smith: What did she do?

Weidenfeld: She danced - it’s all in my book. Too bad, I don’t think it’s at the Library, but if you need a copy, I’ll send you one. She rehearsed by dancing down the halls of the White House. She enjoyed it. She loved dancing. A lot of what you learn when you are there is how human this White House is. The tragedies that take place – with the Galubins, for example. There are all sorts of little things where you go, “Gosh, this can’t happen at the White House,” but this is a very human institution.
Smith: It’s interesting because we’ve heard from a number of people that he established, and I sensed the family generally, established a more informal, more personal relationship with a lot of the permanent staff.

Weidenfeld: Ah, yes. The Nixons were very formal with the staff. They didn’t acknowledge them. The staff told me how much they loved the Fords - that they would always say good morning, and they would always talk to them. The Fords always treated them like people, not servants, and it made all the difference in the world in terms of their happiness. That was very important for the Fords because that’s how they are. They are informal and enjoy people.

Smith: The story was that she, very early on I think, went to the Usher and said, “Is there something wrong? I say good morning and they don’t respond. Is it us, are we doing something wrong?” And he explained that the Nixons had a different climate.

Weidenfeld: Yes, that’s true. I can verify that.

Smith: You were talking earlier - the family dining room on the second floor that had that Revolutionary War paper that I think Jackie Kennedy…

Weidenfeld: That Jackie Kennedy put up.

Smith: What was the story?

Weidenfeld: Mrs. Ford couldn’t stand being in there. She said she didn’t want to be sitting in a room that’s filled with war pictures. So she said, “I’ve got to paint it yellow.” I think that was it. And she didn’t like the room that Pat Nixon did where they greeted people because it was so formal. You know, the one right next to the Treaty Room – the Diplomatic Room.

Smith: Oh, yeah. The Diplomatic Reception Room.

Weidenfeld: Not downstairs, upstairs.

Smith: Upstairs – the oval room.

Weidenfeld: Yes, there was a name for it.
Smith: It earlier had been a study and it had been lots of things. But it leads out onto the balcony.

Weidenfeld: Pat Nixon came in and she redid it and it was very, very formal. Mrs. Ford could not sit in that room comfortably and enjoy herself with guests. How would she get to know them? So that room she changed as well. She changed a lot on that floor. You know the story about the reaction she got when she said she sleeps with the President? There were people who thought this was horrible. How could she do that? That they have one bedroom, not two. She laughed about that. She thought that was very funny. And it is. It’s like pillow talk. I used to say to people, well, what if you went into the White House overnight like Mrs. Ford? Would you not talk to your husband again? The President always puts his own team together; is she not part of this team? Didn’t they talk before? Didn’t they go over things before? Give an opinion. I don’t know if Pat Nixon did with her husband. But that’s usually what happens in a marriage.

Smith: We heard about her trying to get a woman on the Supreme Court.

Weidenfeld: Yes, she did. And she lobbied and that was her pillow talk. It didn’t happen, but fortunately he chose a really good person. It’s a shame that he’s on his way out. But we’ll at least have somebody else good.

Smith: And she said, at one point, she got a woman in the Cabinet, by which I assume she meant Carla Hills.

Weidenfeld: I guess that must have been Carla Hills.

Smith: Was Ford amiable to that way of thinking?

Weidenfeld: It was hard to tell if he’d act on what she said. He’d sort of smile and appear to take some of those things in. It was like a “Yes, dear”…”of course, dear” reaction.

Smith: What was your sense of the President?
Weidenfeld: My sense was that he was basically a genuinely decent person, easy going and cheerful, who loved his wife and family, was loyal to his friends, and truly enjoyed the political game.

Smith: Did you ever see his temper?

Weidenfeld: I never saw his temper, but I’m sure he had one. I had heard about it on several occasions, but fortunately never witnessed it - not even when he threw the pillow at her after the “60 Minutes” interview – he laughed. Rumsfeld didn’t, but he did.

Smith: Did she have a temper as opposed to temperament, if you know what I mean?

Weidenfeld: I know what you mean. She would tend to be more withdrawn than to lose her temper. I never really saw her angry – no, I never saw that. I almost wish she had, it would have been easier to deal with than with withdrawing. I just want something in my face and I can deal with it.

Smith: You saw much of the kids?

Weidenfeld: It depended on the kids, but I knew them all. Jack was the one who we became most close to. He even worked in Ed’s office. Susan was there all the time. Part of the job as press secretary is being a window on the First Family.

Smith: Right.

Weidenfeld: But not the President, as Rumsfeld told me in my little memo to him. When I said we’re a window on the First Lady and the family, he said, “And not the President.” Of course not, I was not going to do anything that was going to be…who knows. But Susan – can you imagine what it’s like to grow up under a spotlight? Can you imagine what it’s like for the press to ask you if you are a virgin when you are eighteen or nineteen? Or to share your thoughts about marriage when you’re seventeen, or if you are getting married, or who is this boy in your life? And then having to talk and sound intelligent.

Smith: But one of the poignant images is when Mrs. Ford had her surgery and Susan stood in for her. The first time she ever wore gloves. There was a diplomatic reception or something.
Weidenfeld: Susan was definitely daddy’s girl. She knew she could get anything she wanted from him, and did. As for the other Ford Children, Steven was away for most of his father’s presidency. He came in at the very end for campaigning. Jack came back and lived there for a while and wanted to work. He worked out of my husband’s office for a while. We tried to find him things to do. He needed to work, wanted it, and then decided to go on the campaign trail. Susan was a teenager. But I do remember reporters asking questions like do you bit your nails? You had to be very careful. Susan had a series of boyfriends and I remember when she said all she wanted to do was be a mother and have seven children.

Smith: After Sixty Minutes, and as time went by and there began to be a realization – perhaps to the astonishment of those in the West Wing – that hey, this woman is an asset. While you are worrying about losing 20 million votes, you may not have taken into consideration the country is changing.

Weidenfeld: No, no, no. That’s not how they thought.

Smith: They didn’t?

Weidenfeld: No. They didn’t see that. What they saw was that she’d made three covers over New Year’s – Time magazine Person of the Year, People magazine and one other. She made three covers at one time.

Smith: So they saw her news value.

Weidenfeld: There were pins out saying, “Vote Betty.”

Smith: “Betty’s Husband for President.”

Weidenfeld: “Betty for President.” There were very positive stories about her.

Smith: There was no evolution?

Weidenfeld: They saw her usefulness. That’s when she became Mrs. Gerald Ford, doing his thing in his way. And it really did her in because she was no longer Betty Ford. If she had just been herself and gone out and not been over used giving messages, recorded messages, going everywhere - she couldn’t take it. She’s fragile; you know that. You’ve spent enough time with her. She’s no different
today than she was then. Everybody thought how frail she looked at the
funeral.

Smith: Campaigning was not her forte.

Weidenfeld: Oh my no. And not only wasn’t it her forte - was it in Maine or New
Hampshire? Maybe in both she slurred her words. It happened a number of
times. She was no longer comfortable in her own skin. It was too much for her
and physically difficult. It was physically and mentally bad for her. It was a
balancing act to some degree.

Smith: In her zone, she’s a superstar. But being asked to do things that didn’t come
naturally…

Weidenfeld: She was over used and they didn’t get that. If she’d been paced… When they
left office, I told the people who were handling her that they had to be quite
sensitive to her physical - to her and what they had her do. The next thing I
knew she was in Russia. I heard when they got back it was embarrassing. But
at that point, her drug/alcohol addiction had not been talked about. I wasn’t
going to talk about anything other than her osteoarthritis.

Smith: Do you think he didn’t want to believe what he was seeing?

Weidenfeld: Maybe that’s the answer. I just don’t think he was aware. Some friends of the
kids were aware she had a problem before he became vice president and was
Minority Leader.

Smith: Right.

Weidenfeld: They were aware of some problems, and surprised at how well she had done
once she got there.

Smith: At the end of the campaign they’d caught up, essentially. Did they think, did
you think that you were going to win?

Weidenfeld: No. I knew we weren’t going to win. I really wanted us to win, but we needed
credibility. Why must you stop being president to run for president. If they
knew they only had thirty days, or sixty days left, what would be the one thing
that they would like to get done? I thought that should be their campaign
strategy.” Also it struck me during the primary that Betty Ford seemed more like someone running for First Lady than someone who was First Lady. The President was no longer president, he was running.

Smith: Were you at the convention?

Weidenfeld: Of course I was, are you kidding?

Smith: And I still remember the images; the dueling entries. How choreographed was that?

Weidenfeld: Well, I wasn’t part of the campaign. I think it was probably choreographed by the media as well as the campaign. While there was really not a lot of love lost between Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Reagan, it was really hyped. To my knowledge, it wasn’t staged.

Smith: We talked to Stan Anderson, who was the convention manager.

Weidenfeld: Yes, I haven’t seen him in years.

Smith: And he told us a story about Cary Grant.

Weidenfeld: Yes, I had to take Cary Grant around.

Smith: Where did that come from? There was Tony Orlando and Dawn, and Cary Grant.

Weidenfeld: We had met him in California, and the only thing I can tell you about Cary Grant - because I was the one who escorted him at the convention and had to ease his nerves. He was a nervous wreck. He didn’t know what to do, how he was going to do it in this huge room of people, this stadium of people. And he said, “I just do movies. I can take one take after another. I don’t do this kind of thing.” He was as nervous as anybody I’ve ever seen.

Smith: Really?

Weidenfeld: He liked Betty Ford. They had met before, and they clicked.

Smith: Were there other people that maybe we don’t know about? Celebrities or entertainers?
Weidenfeld: Vikki Carr. The President liked Vikki Carr.

Smith: That’s right.

Weidenfeld: And Betty Ford was jealous, maybe envious, not jealous, would be the word.

Smith: There were entertainers at the State Dinners, and of course, all those Bicentennial dinners.

Weidenfeld: You kidding? She loved Pearl Bailey. We had the best time with Peter Sellers.

Smith: Really?

Weidenfeld: Peter Sellers was in Vail, Colorado after the *Sixty Minutes* interview and after the President had left.

Smith: That seems like an odd mix.

Weidenfeld: It was perfect timing. They just hit it off. We were with David Steinberg, his manager, who still handles Robin Williams and various others. Recently I found out my son Daniel knows his son Mason and that we each had the pictures of ourselves with Mrs. Ford and Peter Sellers on each other’s walls, all of us wearing funny hats. She loved to ham it up. It was great. That’s when she was in her element. That’s when she was comfortable.

Smith: And yet – I guess getting up to give a speech was…

Weidenfeld: She gave some very good speeches. But she had to feel prepared, grounded, confident, and not on medication. If she were really pained, then she might take the medication that Lukash would dole out to her. I had talked with Lukash about giving her valium and other pills. I was really concerned about her popping pills. I almost felt like the child watching the parent. I took that to heart. I wanted her to do well, but when she slurred the words, it was really hard. If she didn’t feel prepared, if she didn’t have the words, if she didn’t feel comfortable she would not do well.

Smith: Jumping ahead – you may take that back. When you did the book, was that a problem? Did that cause problems?
Weidenfeld: The aftermath surprised me. I took steps to confirm Mrs. Ford’s approval and feel I was betrayed by a man I thought of as a family friend, Nat Lefkowitz, president of the William Morris Agency, then the most important agency in Hollywood. Because of the friendship, I introduced the Fords to Nat Lefkowitz and the William Morris office and encouraged the Fords to listen to their advice. The Fords agreed to let Norman Brokow of William Morris, represent the family. I wrote about this in my book.

After leaving the White House, Norman Brokow contacted me and suggested and encouraged me to write a book. Initially I declined because I was eager to get back to TV and writing a book was something I would not have considered.

Brokow persisted, and I finally agreed on two conditions – one that Mrs. Ford approve of my doing it and two that he would read the book with a critical eye as agent for the Fords and alert me to anything that might be troubling to them. Owen Laster, who Brokow brought in as literary agent for both Betty Ford and me, promised to read it in installments as I was writing it. With each installment I asked if there were anything that might be troubling to the Fords. Mrs. Ford, who by then was writing her own book, personally gave me her blessing to write the book.

Owen was enthusiastic about each installment and when it was finished told me he “loved it” and knew the Fords would, too…. Before the Fords had a chance to read my book, the air was poisoned by misrepresentation of my book. I was even called a traitor and the book was labeled “kiss and tell.” I was shocked that neither Lefkowitz, Brokow nor Laster urged the Fords to read the book before reacting. I was pleased when Shirley Elder, a well-known journalist in Detroit, Michigan (the Ford’s home state) headlined her review of the book with “Read it Betty. You’ll like it.” For me, the ultimate irony was that the consummate insider, Henry Kissinger, told a group of reporters: “I I basically think books like that are a pain in the neck; but when I started reading First Lady’s Lady to see if my name was mentioned, I ended up thinking it’s outstanding and one of the most perceptive books I had ever read about the White House.”.
The whole experience was very difficult for me because I genuinely treasured my relationship with Mrs. Ford and had the greatest respect for President Ford and firmly believe they were the right people at the right time.

Smith: Historically, it’s almost as if her life after the White House is more important in terms of the impact that she’s had on how real people live real lives. Lots of presidents don’t have that.

Weidenfeld: Most presidents don’t, and that’s a real shame.

Smith: How do you think she should be remembered?

Weidenfeld: It’s not just for drug addiction, and it’s not just for cancer. I remember her saying, “if you’ve got a problem, deal with it. Just don’t let it be. Deal with it.” That’s true for all the different areas that she’s been in. You say she couldn’t have done what she did if she hadn’t really been a success in the White House as First Lady. She had a lot of fans. She was very popular. She was candid at a time when her predecessors – there was no such thing as candor. She was compassionate, as was Ford. I don’t know how many of the press people you’ve talked to or covered (that’s probably a good thing to do) they loved being with Ford. She really was a strong First Lady, in the sense that she made a name for herself. And I think that that really worked for her when she came out later and did this.

Smith: That’s interesting. One other quick thing. We know took him a little bit of time after the election to get over it. He went around in private complaining, “I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer.”

Weidenfeld: Yes.

Smith: It took a little while to bounce back. One senses that while she could hurt for him, that she was in some ways more prepared to get on with the new life.

Weidenfeld: She was always prepared to get on with the new life. She thought they were getting on with a new life before they went into the White House, because he had said, “This is it. We’re moving on.” And then this all happened.

Smith: This was a detour to a new life.
Weidenfeld: This was an absolute detour. It was totally thrust on her. She was not prepared for it. She didn’t expect it. Of course, he didn’t either, but it was different. It was an extension of his career and not hers. And she just wanted to get to know her husband again and be with him and enjoy him. And be with the family and all those things that she had looked forward to that she didn’t have as the wife of a congressman. So she felt awful that he lost, but she wasn’t sorry about herself moving on. So I think that’s absolutely accurate.

Smith: And there was never any doubt about their going to California?

Weidenfeld: They thought about Naples. She looked at a few places in Naples, Florida.

Smith: Really?

Weidenfeld: And she looked at a few other places. But I think they decided because of friends. Oh, you asked about the celebrities before – they really liked celebrities. Liza Minnelli and Frank Sinatra. In California there were lots of people. And so that was fun for her.

Smith: And then at the end. At the very end of the administration, you hear the most moving parts of all this are when the First Family says goodbye to the staff – the permanent staff, who become almost family. Was that difficult for them? Saying goodbye, leaving Washington?

Weidenfeld: Of course. Especially for him. Just put yourself in his shoes. It was the end of his career; it was over. He ran hard. He campaigned hard, he really wanted to continue.

Smith: Some say his great frustration was that he felt he had just mastered the job, when he lost it.

Weidenfeld: Yes. Put very well. And she cared more about him than how she felt about leaving and taking care of her own feelings and interests. So it was difficult in that sense, too, as it was for the kids.

Smith: Isn’t it interesting: this family that thinks, oh my God, we’re going to live in the White House, we’re going to live in the goldfish bowl, Susan saying, “I’m not going to give up my jeans.” Mrs. Ford saying, “You can’t teach an old
dog new tricks.” And it didn’t take very long, once they got there, to discover this is not so bad.

Weidenfeld: It’s a pretty nice life. But you’re also on public display. I remember when she took off to New York to go shopping on Seventh Avenue with Nancy Howe. I got a call from a White House reporter who asked, “What is she doing in New York?” I said, “Mrs. Ford is not in New York. She’s upstairs in her bedroom.” He said, “No, she’s not. She was spotted on Seventh Avenue.” And I said, “All right, let me check.” And lo and behold, she was on Seventh Avenue and had been spotted. She promised me she would never do that again, because I was supposed to know. This is going back to Jerry terHorst. That’s his story, I’ve got mine.

Smith: One of my favorites, I think Penny told the story. This was after they left office. She loved New York. And he liked New York. They would go to the theater and she liked to shop. Penny tells the story that one time she went to Studio 54. Now that’s culture shock. To see Betty Ford in Studio 54…

Weidenfeld: She loved to dance.

Smith: She did, and he did, too, didn’t he?

Weidenfeld: Yes.

Smith: In later years, I’ve often wondered, everyone knew about the ERA and abortion and issues like that. As the Republican Party moved further and further to the right, every four years they would go to the convention and they were all but marooned - this island of moderation. He is the only president to sign a gay rights petition. And the question arises, how much of that was her influence on him? How much of it was that they didn’t change, but the party did? Most people get more conservative as they get older and they seemed, in some ways, the opposite.

Weidenfeld: I don’t know what camp you are out of, but moderate Republicans felt very similar to how they were thinking, so I think the party has moved. To be Nelson Rockefeller, for example.

Smith: Did you have contact with him?
Weidenfeld: Absolutely. My father was very close to Cabot Lodge, and a big supporter of Rockefeller’s.

Smith: My first book was about Tom Dewey.

Weidenfeld: We’re from Boston and when I think about my father and the Republicans he admired, worked with and respected—like Cabot Lodge, Jake Javits, Edward Brooke——— where would they be today? What party they would join. I don’t know where you are. I don’t know where I am. But I certainly can’t relate to anything that’s going on in the Republican Party today - that’s for sure.

Smith: Did you like Rocky?

Weidenfeld: Oh, of course. He was charming and lovely and very nice though we had no substantive conversations.

Smith: I was going to say, you didn’t sense his unhappiness?

Smith: You didn’t sense, or pick up, that he was not a happy vice president.

Weidenfeld: He felt he was doing nothing. I would agree with that.

Smith: He went to his grave believing that Rumsfeld did him in.

Weidenfeld: I think a lot of people go to their graves thinking Rumsfeld did them in.
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Smith: How did your paths first cross?

Archibald: I worked at the McCallum and the lady that had the job before me worked there with me for several years and then when she got ready to leave, she asked me if I would be interested in taking the job, so I told her I’d come over and talk to him.

Smith: What was that like, the interview?

Archibald: Oh my God, I was scared to death. I was just a wreck, because, first of all, I got here to the gate and the agent stopped me and wanted to look in my purse. I didn’t even fathom the idea of what it was like to have the Secret Service and all of that. I came in and he was so nice. I think the thing, too, was, he always had you just sit there next to the desk instead of across from him which always made it a little more personable, instead of that formal type of thing. I was nervous for the first two weeks, too, that I worked here - to come in here and talk to him by myself. We always had our little routine, around a certain time I’d have all the financial stuff ready and show it to him and [say] “I don’t want to go in there by myself!” But, yeah, he was so nice.

Smith: When did you start work?

Archibald: About thirteen years ago. In May, so I only worked with him about a month before they went to Vail for my first summer here.

Smith: You didn’t go with them up to Vail?

Archibald: No, never went up there. I went and saw their place. I’d been here a couple of years, and my husband being with the Secret Service, Lee, he was doing one of the trips to take the car, so I rode up with him and got to see their residence up there and stuff. So that was nice.
Smith: What was your daily schedule like?

Archibald: He would come over the same time every day and, mainly, I would just get all of his financial information together. I had a little report. And usually around mid-morning, he would have me come in and we would go over different things and we would interact during the day on different things. If he wanted to purchase securities, he would have me get information from the stock broker and stuff.

Smith: So you say financial information meaning, pertaining basically to personal finance?

Archibald: It was all, yes, personal finances. Totally. I just did that part and still do for Mrs. Ford now. So that’s what we would do and I loved working with him that way. I guess we were the same in that he wasn’t a procrastinator at all. He would just get things done like that and I loved that. I’d set the checkbook register on his desk because he would go through it every month and go through every check that was written and put his little notes and things. I would set it there and he would be, “Well, I’m pretty busy today. I don’t think I’ll be able to get back to you on that for a couple of days,” and in an hour, it’d be back on my desk and everything would be done and he’d be, “Okay, do you have anything else for me?” I loved that - that he was quick, got everything done.

Smith: And was that the bulk of what you did for him?

Archibald: Yes, we did that and, after Lee retired, I would help him with the autographing, we would do that. He would always set aside at least an hour every day and sign autographs. That was the thing that blew me away the most when I came to work here - how much autographing was on that table. That conference room table would be stacked and I was like, “Oh my gosh, I can’t believe it,” and all the letters and the people who would just lie and tell you all kinds of different things to get an autograph from him. I couldn’t believe that.

At first, I was very sympathetic to their needs, but we did a thing called a repeater’s list, so after awhile you would see that it was the same person. But
then maybe they would have cancer, and then maybe they would have a child
that was dying and you’re like, “Okay, I’m starting to recognize this name.”
Then I got very jaded, “Don’t sign an autograph for them!” But he always
wanted to take at least an hour, especially at first, because he was so busy and
he was away constantly. And when he was here he would want to catch up
with that. Always a public servant in that way.

Smith: Isn’t that funny, people have no idea of what unique demands are placed on a
former president.

Archibald: Yeah, I had no idea about that. I was just like, “Oh my gosh, what is this
stack of stuff?” and it would be footballs and baseballs. Everything you could
imagine, they would send in. That and the Boy Scout letters, we’d do a letter
for every Eagle Scout, so we’d do about 1100 a month. There would be about
1100 Eagle Scouts.

Smith: That’s extraordinary.

Archibald: Yeah, but he always liked keeping on top of that kind of stuff.

Smith: I assume he was still getting lots of invitations, speaking invitations and the
like?

Archibald: Oh yeah, yes, that was Judy’s. She would take care of all of that. I would say
maybe 20–30 requests a day from opening the mail…that people wanted him
to do it. And he’d look at all of them.

Smith: Part of him really loved to be on the road.

Archibald: Absolutely, yes. I remember writing to him when he had his stroke in
Philadelphia, I sent it fax so he would see it, and he was like an inspiration. I
always said that. Him and Mrs. Ford both, I think, were very inspirational to
be as motivated and driven as they were at that age. I didn’t come here until
he was in his 80’s and I thought, “Oh my gosh, he wasn’t even president
before he was 60,” and people half the time are like, “I’m practically in the
grave at 60 years old and he was just starting.” So, yeah, he liked keeping
busy, very much so.
Smith: Was he on the phone much?

Archibald: Yes, I would say yes. At first definitely, when I first came here, he would talk to people quite a bit.

Smith: He was pretty accessible?

Archibald: Oh yeah. Are you kidding? On a Saturday, or if the phone wasn’t picked up, he would answer the phone himself walking through the office out there. He would, “Hello.” I think it was my daughter called on a Saturday and he grabs the phone up and he’s like, “Hello,” and she’s like, “Uh, is Shelli there?” But he didn’t know how to do the hold thing.

Smith: I’m told he was not mechanically inclined.

Archibald: I know, and Penny, I’m sure she’ll tell you about sitting with him and working on the computer with Hearts. He loved to play Hearts on the computer. But that was pretty much pushing it right there.

Smith: Did he do email?

Archibald: He had email, but I don’t think that he emailed. People, his kids especially, that’s mainly who would send him emails, but he wouldn’t email back. But yeah, the phone, since my office was right next door, you could hear him yell out and you knew he was having a frustrating moment with the telephone, so we would come in and help him out. He was funny that way.

Smith: Would he ever have lunch here?

Archibald: No, always go to the house exactly on time, because you could set your watch to it. And I think that was the thing, too, with Lee being with the Secret Service, if he was scheduled for taking a trip and flying out of LA, four o’clock would be departure, he would be, “Let’s go ten minutes early.” So I would say he was always early unless Mrs. Ford was going, then she’d make him always a little bit late.

Smith: You say he would always leave at the same time.
Archibald: 1:30 every day, back at 2:30 on the dot. You could pretty much count on it and there would be nothing that would delay that. Same thing in the mornings, he usually came around nine, then he would push that to maybe 9:30 as he got older, and then he’d stay here until 5 o’clock and then go home and take the dog for a walk.

Smith: And he was in here on Saturdays, I’m told.

Archibald: Oh yes, every Saturday. Yes, we had a Saturday schedule until, I would say, about the last couple of years before he died. About the last year, maybe, we didn’t come in on Saturdays. Pretty much until noon, we would be here, come and get the mail and do a little autographing and different things.

Smith: Maybe it was Lee who told us - must’ve been Lee, who said, “You know, it’s a holiday tomorrow.” And the president would say, “I didn’t vote for it.”

Archibald: He did, he was like, “I didn’t vote for that one.” So, “Okay.” He didn’t let you really have any vacation or holidays off or anything. If he was here, he expected one of us to be here with him, which was fine. He was funny on that, too.

Smith: They were both very visible in the desert. They were very involved in a lot of charities and other activities.

Archibald: Yes, yes. Yes, definitely. And they would participate in the Eisenhower events, the Classic, different balls. They would always go to the Carousel of Hope and go out to dinner. At Quito’s, there’s an actual booth there called the Presidential Booth and it sort of looks like a shower curtain, but they would pull that around the booth and give him some privacy, because everybody’s walking up and asking him...

Smith: How did they deal with that?

Archibald: I think well. I never was out with them, but just from agents’ stories and different things like when Lee would be with him, I think that they were always, to a point, he was very patient with that. My husband was with him at a lot of the Bob Hope Classic golf tournaments and he said that he was okay for a bit, but then it’s like still we’re on that schedule thing, like “Okay, I’m
signing autographs, but at a certain point, we need to get moving, here.” Lee
told me a funny story about they were riding in the car and he had this
schedule and he said, “Who’s this Van Halen guy?” I think he was in his
foursome. And Lee said, “He’s a famous rock star.” And he thought his first
name was Van and his last name was Halen, and so they got to the Classic and
there’s these people lined up with the white guitars for Eddie Van Halen to
sign and President Ford says, “Wow, he must be really popular!” but he had
no idea.

Smith: Was popular culture sort of something that he didn’t know much about?

Archibald: No, I would say not, because I think when he read, he enjoyed reading,
obviously history, and different things of the past. Very little non-fiction. I
remember, though, right towards the end, he read *Marley and Me*. I was like,
“Oh, that’s such a sad story.” But he did, he read that and in fact that’s
probably the only non-fiction book I remember seeing him read. I thought
that that was kind of a sad story. But keeping up with that kind of stuff, no, I
would say, no, he didn’t keep up with the pop culture and all that kind of stuff
too much. But he was exposed to it a lot, too, though. He’d go to the
Carousel of Hope and there’s tons and tons of people there of more modern
genre, I guess.

Smith: I wonder whether, too, children and grandchildren bring some of that into
your life?

Archibald: Oh, they would have to, yeah. I never, I guess, witnessed them interacting
together and stuff, because when they were over here at the office, they were
probably a little bit more formal with him instead of the “Oh, there’s
Grandpa!”

Smith: He spent a lot of time with Steve in the last few years, didn’t he?

Archibald: He did, yeah. He really, truly – and I hate to say that he had a favorite, but
I’m –

Smith: I’m not suggesting that, but it just seemed like everything just came together.
Archibald: Oh yeah, when Steve would come, you could just see a change in him. He was just excited and, I guess because they shared golf and so many things together. Yeah, and Steve’s a lot like his dad now, more as he grows older. I see so much President Ford in him it’s amazing.

Smith: They’re a dead ringer.

Archibald: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, the way they look and, I think, characteristics. He truly would enjoy spending time with Steve and I think it really frustrated him, too, as he got older and when he got incapacitated and couldn’t play golf and stuff. I think that was really hard for him.

Smith: I also wonder whether, in a larger sense, and he said as much, that there was a certain element – I don’t know if guilt is the word – but he was certainly well aware of the fact that, when the kids were small, he was out on the road. And he really left it to Mrs. Ford to raise the family and one of the things he was going to try to compensate for was that fact that he spent a lot of time with the kids and grandchildren. How was he as a grandfather?

Archibald: Like I said, I didn’t witness that very often, but he was totally different. You could just see a change in him when they were here, when they would come. I remember Jonathan and Christian came, it was on a Thanksgiving, I think, yeah, it must have been Thanksgiving. And he was out there playing, they had their little golf set and they were out here on the lawn hitting the ball around and stuff. And in the swimming pool, because obviously he was a fish, loved to be in that pool, and with the kids. Lots of good pictures of them swimming and playing in the pool and that kind of thing. So I think that he really enjoyed that and that’s really good for him, too, get out there and take time off of work.

Smith: I think it was Jim who just said, he knew the last few months that he must not be well because he wasn’t in the pool.

Archibald: Oh, he hated that, too. He came back from Beaver Creek and that pool had needed to be re-plastered. They resurfaced the whole pool. And it was not ready when he got back here and he was like, “I want my swimming pool” because he did that every day. And then he got to the point, I would see him
later in the morning and would say, “Did you have your swim?” He goes, “I really wouldn’t call it swimming anymore. It’s more like I was wading out there.” And we’re like, “Okay.” But you could see that that was kind of frustrating for him, too. And when he wasn’t in the pool, you knew that there was something wrong.

Smith: A number of people have said we were so lucky, up until the time of his 90th birthday or so, he seemed much younger than his age would suggest.

Archibald: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: And then, one of the things that must’ve really frustrated him was to be told, presumably by the doctors, he had to really cut back on his travel.

Archibald: That was terrible. You could just see the clench of the jaw when, after he had had his stroke, they said, “You need to cut it in half.” I think he tried as much as he could, but he didn’t want to be held back at all. You could just see it, he was frustrated about it and a little angry. I never asked, but I wanted to say, “Does this really make you upset?” but I could see it.

Smith: Were you in Philadelphia?

Archibald: No, I wasn’t, but I just remember watching TV…

Smith: What was that, I mean, it must’ve been…?

Archibald: Oh, yeah, it was horrid. I remember seeing that and just the phone calls and the people that…it wouldn’t let up, the press and everything. It was a little hard to tell, because I had talked to him on the phone a couple of days before he had left Beaver Creek and he sounded funny. And I said to Penny afterwards, “He sounds to me like that he’s had a stroke” and she said, “Well, he has this thing on his tongue.” But I think that was kind of the beginning of that whole scenario. He came back here after Philadelphia for two weeks and then went back to Beaver Creek and he stayed exactly two weeks and the doctor said, “You have to come back to the desert for two weeks and not go to the altitude.” So, he did that and then he went back up there for the rest of the summer. And then, the last summer they went to Beaver Creek, he goes, “I’m going up there against doctors’ orders.” He told him not to go.
Smith: But he goes anyway because he’s frustrated and he’s a very stubborn guy, stubborn! A very stubborn guy.

Archibald: Oh, very much so. Yes, very stubborn.

Smith: I’m sure lots of people had this conversation with him. But, I remember the conversation with Mrs. Ford and she said, “At this point, we’ve had quantity of life, we’re interested in quality.”

Archibald: Absolutely.

Smith: They obviously loved the place.

Archibald: Oh, they did and I think that he relaxed more there. Here was more like the work environment. I think he got up there and it was more, “This is where I can kick back a little bit.” He would allow himself to do that during that time. I think the last summer that they went, we had that huge fire here and my place where we lived was engulfed in that and my husband was there. The first thing, I tried to get home because Lee called me and said, “The fire has started back up. You’d better come home now or you won’t be able to get home. They’ll close off the roads.” I had the staff car, I took off as fast as I could to get home and try to get into the place, but they already had the roads closed. So, my daughter and I came down and we stayed in a hotel down here and I was supposed to take Jan and the chef to the airport the next day for them to fly out. I walked in over to the house the next morning and the very first thing President Ford said to me was, “How’s Lee?” and “Is everything okay?” He was so worried and I didn’t even know he knew there was a fire or what was going on, but he was very concerned about that. So, I reassured him everything was okay and so he flew off and that was the summer he went to the Mayo and has his surgery and stuff up there. But, yeah, he was always thinking about those kind of things.

Smith: What was the relationship like with the Secret Service?

Archibald: Lee worked for him for 21 years and so he was there for a long, long time. Saw it from when he was really, really busy to seeing it fade. He was such a macho man – so things like helping him, there was no helping him at first,
like trying to grab his elbow. Lee went on a cruise with them and they were getting on the cruise ship onto the little dinghy boats to take you to shore or whatever they’re called and he said, “The ocean’s going like this and the boats are two, three feet apart,” and they tried to grab President Ford’s elbow to help him down into the raft and he’s like, “I don’t need any help!”

Smith: An old Navy man, too.

Archibald: Oh, absolutely, but he said those were some his best memories, of watching President Ford swimming in the open ocean out there, just having a heyday. You could tell he was just in his element and loving this. He said they would go out for swims and just loved that. So, he was not protective of them, but he enjoyed their protection. I mean, he didn’t want them to be supportive of him in that type of way, physically, but he’d like to have that. And that’s good, I think, that barrier, because I don’t think that people realize how forceful the crowds and outsiders and strangers can be.

Smith: Plus this is a man who had been the target of two assassination attempts.

Archibald: Exactly, yes. And I remember one day we were autographing in the conference room and the gardener was mowing the lawn out here and he hit a rock and it hit the window. And President Ford, down, went to cover! And I thought, “Wow, you must do that because of experience.” And that frightened him a little bit, but I think he was very courteous to them, to the Secret Service. And, to Lee, he always was, he was so nice. They talked a lot and enjoyed each other.

Smith: How difficult were the last couple of years?

Archibald: It was hard.

Smith: For one thing, it must’ve been, on the staff, let’s face it. There was this death watch that the media had going, because I got sucked into it and it was really off-putting on every level, but you were in the middle of it.

Archibald: Well, it is. That and the constant calls we always heard. I think the hardest part for me, and I’m sure when you talk to Penny, she will agree, is that, here’s a man that was over here every day and just so vital and never seemed,
like you said, even when he was 90 years old, he seemed like he was 75, 80 years old, and then all of a sudden it snowballed and he was, then, 92 years old. And then, he didn’t come over to the office anymore and you would see him at the house and he was obviously very aware, but physically could not perform. And that was hard. It was like a heartbreaker, because it’s hard to watch. I’ve never had to see one of my grandparents even go through that.

Smith: Plus, he was proud and fastidious and all those qualities, and it must have been internally, just terribly difficult to be going through.

Archibald: I think so, oh yeah. And that’s like I said, I would like to have asked him, “What is it like at this point?” because I think we all wonder what is it going to be like for us when you get to that age. And, one thing, it just broke my heart one day, it was maybe close to the end and I went over. He always liked to hold your hand, by now he was in the hospital bed, so you would hold his hand and talk to him and I said something – I don’t remember exactly – and he goes, “I hate to go.” And I went, “Where are you going?” I was not thinking. And I didn’t realize he was talking about he hated to go, you know, to die. I had to leave. There was no way I could deal with that. That was really hard, because he was always here and such a presence here.

Smith: How long would you say it was before he passed that he stopped coming over here? Was it a matter of months?

Archibald: Yeah, it was probably, just maybe 6 months? But he would come over for certain things because I remember he had a visit from – I cannot think of the man’s name now – he writes The Leaders publication? What’s his name? Anyway, he came and he had a watch for President Ford. He wanted to present him with this watch and he came over, got in his chair, got his hair all fixed and stuff, and he was able - he could be on for that. And remember things, the long-term memory would just be great. But I would say a few months before – about 6 – that he stopped coming over and we wouldn’t see him, just over at the house. But we would go every day and try to see him every day over there.

Smith: And that obviously must have imposed huge burdens on Mrs. Ford.
Shelli Archibald

December 5, 2008

Archibald: It was, she felt very protective of him. She wanted to protect him from everything, obviously at this point, his condition and people coming in.

Smith: It’s funny, because we talked to a couple of people – Penny and I used to talk about this – it bordered on cruel and unusual punishment. Whoever was responsible – we won’t speculate about it – whoever dragged poor Bob Hope around the last few years of his life did not do him a service.

Archibald: No, that’s terrible.

Smith: And I’m wondering whether that memory sank in.

Archibald: Oh, I absolutely think so. I think that is something that, to me, for anybody in their position, you don’t want to have people see you out like that and about. And, no way, he would have liked that at all. He didn’t even want to use a cane and, finally, it was one day it was like, “You have to start using the cane.” But he didn’t want to do that and he never wanted to be in a wheelchair and have people see him like that. He was just too proud. Yeah, he was funny that way.

Smith: For some people, I guess, when he died, it was an education to lots of people. I was wearing two hats. I was with ABC during the first part of the week, and I can tell you, the media were taken aback at the public response and how it just seemed to build as the week went on. And I think a lot of that was, particularly young people who’d never seen him before, were being introduced to him and they were comparing him with what they’re seeing around today and he looked awfully good. One of the things that surprised a lot of the folks was the number of young people who were in the crowds.

Archibald: I was blown away when we went to Michigan and we were riding in the motorcade from Grace Church and the streets, lined, as you remember, they were just lined with kids and young people. It was amazing, because I think that, like my daughter, she talked to him on several occasions, she would come into the office and he was always so nice to her. Another thing that, I guess, kind of blew me away about him was that former President Carter and Bush, Newt Gingrich - these are the three I can really remember off the top of my head that came to the office – he would take them around and introduce
each one of us to them. That was great. So, when Jordan would come in to
the office, he would always be always so nice to her and drag her into
conversation, ask her about school and all that kind of stuff. So yeah, I think
they probably did see him and think, wow, with what’s going on in the
country, he was pretty solid.

Smith: He and President Carter really did become great friends, didn’t they?

Archibald: I think so, yeah. Just reading, because he would never really talk a lot about
those type of things when we would be sitting around doing autographing or
whatever. I do know one thing that really made him mad, thought, and he
said it right up until the last couple of weeks before he died, is that he was
very upset with Clinton and Bush for not including him in the relief for the
tsunami. Remember the tsunami that hit? Yeah, he was mad about that. So, I
think, Carter, you know, he always said favorable things about him, compared
to. He was mad at them about that.

Smith: But he couldn’t take an active role?

Archibald: Oh no, yeah, he was just hurt, “Why didn’t they ask me?” So, that was kind
of weird. But I worked with the special letters that he got, so we have a
collection of those that we keep, they went way, clear back to notes from
Kennedy, when he was in Congress, and the relationships that he had with the
other presidents. I remember a really nice note that he got from former
President Bush when they had, before one of the elections, they were out
together in a car and it was nice, it was like they were talking like two
buddies, you know. And I guess you don’t think of them like that, that
they’re human that way.

Smith: I only heard him disparage two people and the worst thing he could say about
someone was, “He’s a bad man.” That was the worst he could come up with,
you know? It’s so, almost Andy Hardy, you know? One was John Dean and
the other was Gordon Liddy. And if you stop and think, from his perspective,
you could understand how he felt that way.

Archibald: Oh, absolutely. No, I can never remember him saying a bad, degrading or
talk down about anybody.
Smith: I do remember, I can remember this vividly because I was involved in it with Penny, at the time, the whole craziness about Monica Lewinsky and I worked with him on the Op-Ed piece which basically pulled the rug out from under the impeachment forces which was a very gutsy thing for him to do and a very statesman-like thing for him to do. And, I take it, he took a lot of heat for doing it. I remember this story about Tom DeLay wrote him a six page letter, a constitutional lecture about all the reasons why he couldn’t do all the things he was proposing and so on and so on. But I know for a fact afterwards both people in the White House and the Republicans in Congress wished they had put aside their partisan feelings long enough to embrace the idea because for the country’s sake it would have been much better than what transpired.

Archibald: Absolutely. Yeah, he said very little about that to me especially, he wouldn’t talk about it too much, but I think that he knew he had to, he did the right thing. As usual.

Smith: It’s interesting, too, because I remember saying in my eulogy. You know, most of us get more conservative or high bound or whatever you want to call it the older we get. And with the Fords, both of them, they became increasingly almost marooned in the Republican Party. I mean, they were outspoken with pro-choice, pro-gay rights, things that were surprising to a lot of folks and were not terribly popular. And I wondered they changed or whether the party just went off in this direction, and how much she influenced him in his views, and… It just intrigues me what the dynamics were.

Archibald: I think so, because I’ve always thought that. That they seemed, like we were talking about, he wasn’t all up on the technology and everything like that, but at the same time very open-minded. I think Mrs. Ford obviously, I was telling Erik before you came in, that she was much more risqué thinking than President Ford was, at times make him even blush. My husband had grown a moustache – I was also telling Erik this – that he drove Mrs. Ford for maybe about nine years constantly and he grew a moustache after we got together. We got together on this job which was a little gossipy thing, but she got all over Lee. She was like, “Lee, why did you grow that moustache? It looks terrible on you! You have such a handsome face. Why would you do that?”
Well, I guess that President and Mrs. Ford were having dinner and about 8 o’clock that night our phone rang at home and it’s Mrs. Ford. And I said to Lee, “Lee, it’s Mrs. Ford.” And I’m like, oh my gosh, what does she want? And she apologized to him because she was telling President Ford this story and he said, “You can’t tell him that! He can grow a moustache!” Lee also has tattoos everywhere and some visible when he was still on the job, but they never ever talked down to him about that. The only thing Mrs. Ford said to him one day we were visiting and he stopped in and saw her and she said to him, “You always walked to the beat of a different drummer, Lee.” But I think at the same time, they didn’t judge that way. I like that. I think open-minded and that’s probably why they did get a little more alienated.

Other: [inaudible]

Archibald: Oh, yeah, Lee was driving and the right front seat guy and Mrs. Ford was in back and she was always renting movies. And she said to the guys, she said, “Have you seen any good movies lately?” The right front seat guy said, “Goodfellas, I just watched it. It’s really good.” And so they rented it and the next day she said, “Oh my gosh, the language!” But I think they enjoyed it and ended up watching it, but she was like, “That is the worst language I’ve ever heard!” I was like, “Oh gosh, I don’t think I would’ve suggested that.”

Smith: Were they big movie fans?

Archibald: Oh yeah. When I worked here, to go out to a movie, only a few times. I remember they went in to see the Titanic and one that he loved, and I was really surprised, was First Wives Club. He says, “You gotta go see it. It’s kind of a chick flick.” And I was like, “A chick flick?” And so he was like, “It’s really good.” And I was like, “Okay.” And they would go I think it was to the Frank Sinatra estate, I think he had a – no, it must have been the Annenberg’s – they had a theater and they would go watch. I think they watched Absolute Power and they’d see these first run, you know, these different movies.

Smith: Did they like Titanic?
Archibald: Mrs. Ford left before the end because she thought it was depressing. The agents were like all into it and, like, an hour before it's over, she’s like, “We’re going to go.” And they thought she needed to go to the restroom, but she ended up just walking around out there. And she goes, “I don’t want to watch any more of it. It’s depressing.” And they’re like, “Oh, okay. We want to stay!” She’s like, “No, I don’t want to see anymore.” I don’t know how President Ford felt about that, but that was kind of funny.

Smith: They seemed to enjoy visits to New York.

Archibald: Oh, yes. Yes.

Smith: And they’d go to the theater.

Archibald: I know, yes.

Smith: I remember hearing they saw The Lion King and I guess they both enjoyed it.

Archibald: Yes. And The Producers. They would make a trip usually around this time of year, I think, and they would spend a couple of weeks or a week and see some theater and different things. Yeah, I think they liked it there.

Smith: And they’d all stay at the Waldorf?

Archibald: I think so, yes, always at the Waldorf.

Smith: They had good taste.

Archibald: Oh, absolutely. And people treated them nice, gave them nice accommodations and all the little extras.

Smith: Did they have restaurants here that they were particularly fond of?

Archibald: Jillian’s was his favorite, they would go there. And the whitefish, I think they actually call it that. I was talking to a friend of theirs the other day and she said that on the menu it’s the presidential white fish, it’s something like that. I’m not exactly sure the name of it, but he would eat that constantly there. Yeah, they would go out occasionally but not so much towards the end of his life, they wouldn’t go out much.
Smith: You tell me, people who never knew him, what would surprise people about him? One thing, and I’m not trying to answer for you but, I saw him with numbers and anyone who ever questioned his IQ or intelligence, I mean, he has this steel trap mind when it came to numbers.

Archibald: Absolutely. I would sit down with him every day when he would get his Smith-Barney statement he would have his pencil from the thing over here and he would sit and he would hand write out every comparison from month to month. He’d have all his papers laid out. Very meticulous and very good at it. Yes, because I would be talking with him and he would go over differences from day to day and he could pop out the differences mathematically quicker than (snaps fingers). And I would go, “Oh, let me go get the calculator.” And he’s like, “No, I’ve got that.” But yes, very good about that.

But I think, just his graciousness. He was just accessible, I guess. You know, talk to you about anything. When Lee and I got together, he said one day, because he didn’t talk personally, I mean, he wouldn’t –

Smith: He wasn’t a gossip, either. I mean, because most politicians love to gossip. And I noticed, when I was around him, whenever it would veer, he would very sort of deftly find a way to change the subject, but he just wasn’t a gossip.

Archibald: That’s something I was told when I very first came to work in the office. You have four or five women working here, you’re going to have the women stuff happening and he didn’t like it. There would be none of that. “And I don’t want to hear about you saying this about them,” or whatever. And so, when Lee and I got together, the only thing he said to me, one day he said, we were sitting here and just out of the blue, “Is Lee going to marry you?” And I went, “I think so.” And he goes, “Well, he’d better and he’d better not get a transfer because you’re not leaving.” And I was like, “Okay.” But he, yes, not a gossip but didn’t pry into your personal life, not at all. It would never ever be that way. But also at the same time just enough, you know, always ask you about your daughter, you know and that type of thing “What is she doing in
school?” and so that was nice. So I think they wouldn’t have realized he was as personable as he is.

Smith: Did you see his temper?

Archibald: Oh my gosh, yes.

Smith: Lifelong, it was something he struggled to control.

Archibald: Yes, and it would flare up. It was, I think, still during my two week training, he had been to Texas to a board meeting and the door flies open… Because I’d asked the lady that I took her place, she was still here, I was like, “Is he nice?” because when you come in and interview, of course he’s on his best behavior, as we all are, but she goes, “Oh, no, he’s great.” And the door flies open and he is, you know the famous two words, and he came through the office. I tried to escape out my window because I’m like, “Oh my gosh!” because the roof is coming off. I’m like, “This is crazy!” And he went in to Judy because they did not give him the right pillow at the hotel in Texas – he liked this certain pillow – and they knew it and he didn’t have it. And I was like, “Oh my gosh, he is, he’s angry.” Yes, when we went through the anthrax scare here – the main thing for President Ford is the mail, if the mail was running, there’d better be someone there to get the mail and have the mail done.

Smith: Don’t you think that is the old congressman?

Archibald: Oh, absolutely, and it’s just this schedule. And when the anthrax thing happened, they took all of our mail at the post office and put it in a big trash bin in the back. They didn’t even want to get our mail for the fear there might be something in there contaminated. So at this post office, they have this trash bin and they’re putting all of our mail in it and we left it for about four or five days before the Secret Service could figure out what we needed to do with it. And then, about the fifth day, President Ford was like, “That’s it. I’ve had enough.” So it was like, “Okay, let’s get the mail done.”

And so then we had to open it in anti-c suits and we just got it three days a week, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, because it was just such an ordeal.
to put all that stuff on and open up the mail. And we had to seal the garage off. We had the hazmat team come and had to tell us everything of how to do it to just be sure. And he was very impatient about that. He wanted the mail every day. So, every other day that we didn’t have the mail, “Did you get the mail today?” “No, this is a Tuesday, we’re not doing the mail today.” So, yes, I did see his temper. I think that was probably the most impatient I’d ever seen him. It flared on quite a few occasions.

Smith: But it sounds like it flared and then it –

Archibald: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, just instantly. And then he’d have kind of this little sheepish little on his face and never say, “I’m sorry about going off like I did.” But you could tell that he was like, “Oh.”

Smith: Do you remember 9/11?

Archibald: Yes, he was in Beaver Creek during that. Yes, that was very bad. I didn’t experience what he felt or went through with it, but from what I understand from Penny and the other girls, he was in tune to watching.

Smith: And they went back to Washington for the service at the cathedral, which I think must’ve been one of the last times he was back in D.C. I know he was there for his ninetieth birthday. The Bush’s had an event at the White House. And I think the Foundation did something about that time.

Archibald: Was Reagan’s funeral after that?

Smith: Reagan’s? Yes.

Archibald: So that would’ve been probably about the last time was Reagan’s funeral. I was trying to think. I think that was the last time he was in Washington. Because they didn’t do another Foundation dinner there after that, right?

Smith: Yeah.

Archibald: Yeah, I can’t remember exactly.

Smith: I remember there was a wonderful, I think the next year they did – I think maybe it was in Vail or maybe it was out here -
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Archibald: It was here.

Smith: It was here. It was the occasion where he announced that he was Deep Throat.

Archibald: Oh, I know that was so funny. That was excellent! My only experience from that was, during the party, someone slipped up to him and slipped a coin into his hand. And so, the next Monday at work, I come in to do my deal with him and he has this coin and he hands it to me and he goes, “Shelli, what is this?” And I look at it and I go, “That’s a Krugerrand.” And he goes, “A what?” “That’s, like, about a solid piece of gold.” And he goes, “Oh my gosh!” He couldn’t remember who had slipped it into his hand, he was at this party, you know. And I thought, it’s not everybody who walks up to you and goes, “What is this?” and it’s a Krugerrand. I’m like, “Okay.” But yeah, they had it there and then I think the next year they went back to Washington, but I don’t think he went. They just had the tape for him and Mrs. Ford.

The thing he wanted to do the most, though, was the School of Public Policy opening. Every day, “I’m going to that”, “I’m going”, “I’m going”, “I’m going”. And I think that was really hard, that he didn’t get to go. I wish he could’ve been around to be there. He had the pictures and he was so excited about that opening.

Smith: The University of Michigan had a special place in his heart.

Archibald: It did, yes, very much so. That and, I guess what he would talk to me a lot about and usually if we were autographing, we would have a lot of time was, instead of just the business stuff, he would reminisce about things. And I think things we got to would remind him of different stories, but if he was watching a football game, there was no interrupting. It didn’t matter what happened. It’s like we could have this TV on and he would be sitting right here in his chair and would still have all his paperwork and stuff on his lap, but he was glued in to the TV. Yeah, the University of Michigan was his baby, I guess, for sure. That was a very touching thing to me I think was when they did the, they did the flyover, right? And then they had the band there in Grand Rapids when the plane came in. Yeah, that was nice.
Smith: Were you surprised at all? I mean, Mrs. Ford was extraordinary that last week at the beginning, even at St. Margaret’s. At ABC, we’d been told, “Don’t be surprised if she’s in a wheelchair.” But of course she wasn’t. And then at that last, she walked all the way down to the gravesite. And someone, I was told later on, remarked to her when she got back how impressed they were and she said, “That’s what my husband would have wanted.”

Archibald: I know. He was her motivator, I would say. He would have this end of the table covered with autographing, she’d have this little section, and a lot of people were writing for her autograph also, and it would get stacked up and stacked up and stacked up. Then it would be like, “Betty, you need to get to work on that autographing.” And she’d come over and do it. And I think that’s probably been the hardest part since he’s been gone is that she doesn’t have that motivator to get her going and stuff. But for such a small, little, frail-looking lady that she is, she’s tenacious. As you know, knowing her, that she has that tenacity, that was that pure will that pushed her through that with the funeral.

Smith: The funeral planning, how uncomfortable was that?

Archibald: It was terrible. He said the day they were asking him to pick out his casket, he’s like, “Do I have to do this?” and I’m like, “I really wouldn’t think you would have to. Let’s have somebody else do it.” Yeah, I would think that had to be very hard. I wouldn’t want to deal with that at all, picking the songs and…

Smith: It was so revealing, the very first meeting we had with him years before, and I talked about it at the eulogy but, he was adamant that there be no caisson down the streets of Washington which I think is so characteristic.

Archibald: Exactly, yes. Yes, I think so, too. He doesn’t want that hoopla, I guess, or whatever you would call it. He was low-key.

Smith: But you know what’s interesting, since that funeral, I know for a fact that – well, the Johnson girls went back to Texas and redid their mother’s plans and the Carters have redone their plans to make it more like the Ford funeral, to make it more family, a family event.
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Archibald: I think so, yeah. I mean, I obviously haven’t attended any other presidential funerals or anything, but I was amazed at how warm, because with the family, too, I didn’t know how they would be. But I thought they were so gracious and nice and just everything was on a more, I guess, like a normal person instead of like a president level.

Smith: Do you think he would have been touched by the outpouring?

Archibald: Oh my gosh, yes. Yes, I definitely think so because even though...that was important to him. Like when the autographing, if it would wane, you could tell he wanted to still be favorable, always be favorable in the public eye. That was important to him. And aware that “I’m still out there” and that type of thing. I think he would’ve been way blown away about the outpour. But all the planning and this here and there and that at this time, that would’ve drove him crazy. He would’ve been like, “No, I don’t want to do that.”

Smith: Is she still grieving?

Archibald: I would say yes. I don’t think there’s any way that she couldn’t.

Smith: I was going to say, I think one of the things people didn’t realize and they saw that week was how incredibly close they were.

Archibald: Well, don’t you think that has to happen when you are like they are in the public eye like that? And when you need to turn to somebody that just knows you and you just know them, that’s how their unit was – just the two of them. I mean, even without the children, it was just that they had each other to rely on when they had to get away from the masses. And so now she doesn’t have that. I think he would’ve done terrible if it would have been the other way around.

Smith: Oh, I couldn’t imagine him lasting.

Archibald: No, he seemed like all tough and everything, but she was, that was his baby. He took good care of her, always. Forcing her to, if she was sick, “You get home. Sit down,” you know, “Take good care of yourself,” or “Get to the doctor.” So, yeah, I truly think that, yes, she’s still grieving.
Smith: She must have satisfaction knowing, though, that the Center that she created has been passed on to Susan and it’s very rare that a succession is successful. When you’ve invested so much of yourself in something, it has to be a source of real reassurance to know that it’s in trusted hands.

Archibald: I think she totally feels that way about Susan, that’s she’s very capable. But I think that was hard for her, too, to give up the handling. She was so involved and when I first came to work here, she was there all the time, always going over there, always giving little talks to the patients. The Betty Ford Center was huge for her and I think it was very hard for her to give that up and to cut those strings and give them to Susan.

Smith: Last. Do you miss him?

Archibald: Oh my God, yes. It’s like so weird around here now. Well, I started missing him when he stopped coming over, that just wasn’t right. Yeah, I do, I miss him a lot. He was such a – I guess you would call it a force. Now he’s not here and that is weird.

Smith: How does it feel to be in this room?

Archibald: I hate coming in here without him here. I just would rather stay out, because this is his place. When he would have all of his pens and pencils lined up on the desk and stuff, so yeah, it was hard.

Smith: My hope is that this will be preserved and recreated, absolutely created as it was so that people will have a chance to see it for themselves.

Archibald: Yeah, I think that would be nice. He would like that, too.

Smith: The museum and the library meant a lot to him, didn’t they?

Archibald: Oh my gosh, yes. He was very proud, very, very proud of that. He told me once after I’d seen his home in Beaver Creek, “Well, you’ve been now to my home here and my home in Beaver Creek, you need to go to my first home in Michigan.” I didn’t get to go until he died, but the whole town, the whole Grand Rapids is President Ford, you know. Yeah, you couldn’t get away from it.
Smith: I certainly can’t thank you enough. It’s been great.

Archibald: Well, I hope that it wasn’t terrible.

Smith: No, it was wonderful!
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Smith: It is safe to say that although your dad may have contributed to the democratization of technology, he didn’t particularly share it. I think Penny told me he did learn to play solitaire on the computer.

Ford: He did. He could use his computer to play solitaire and that was about it. I used to have to – and I’ve saved some of these messages because they are wonderful – I’d get home from a trip and he would have called my answering machine to leave a message, and I could hear him talking in the background to Mom, going, “Betty, I think I left a message. I’m not sure.” And we’d get this whole extra conversation that had nothing to do with welcome home, Steve, glad you’re back. We miss you. Technology was not his deal. But it’s interesting because when you think about back in 1974-75, he started the whole dialogue about deregulation, whether it be airlines, railroads, all that stuff. That dialogue was started in ’74 or ’75, that aviation bill or something went through that basically allowed for that cheap coach seat that I flew on last night to go back to Grand Rapids. I had no leg room, but I want to thank Dad for that.

Smith: It is astonishing when you think of the pace of change that occurred in his adult lifetime. Things you had to get used to that were radically different from what you were accustomed to.

Ford: Think about this: I can remember the first time I flew back on Air Force One. Dad picked me up in Salt Lake City. I was working on a ranch, I was a cowboy and out in the West, and he was going through Salt Lake City. I hooked up with him, got on the plane, was flying back and I remember, my girlfriend still lived in the Washington, D.C. area and we were going to go out on a date that night. I wandered up to the front part of Air Force One – sort of as an 18-19 year old kid – checking it out. And I was talking to the Air Force communications guy, and told him, “Yeah, I’ve got a date with my girlfriend tonight. We’re going to be a little late.” And he goes, “Well, would you like to call her?” And I was shocked. I go, “You mean make a phone call from this airplane?” “Oh, yeah, we can do that.” And only the President had that in 1974. So I got on the phone, called
my girlfriend, and she goes, “Where are you?” And I said, “About 35,000 feet above Ohio right now.” And she didn’t believe me. And to think now, every seat on that plane, in front of it, has a phone you can pull. Whether you want to use it or not, that’s a different thing. But the technology, the chances – only Air Force One – the President was the one that had that technology back then.

Smith: I’ve been told he could receive email, but he didn’t send email. Is that more or less accurate?

Ford: Yeah. He would get email and he’d have it all printed out, and he’d read it, but that’s that generation. And then you run into other people that adapted and use email all the time.

Smith: Then the mail. He never stopped being a congressman when it came to the mail. We’ve been told wonderful stories about it. They worked on Saturdays – they would have worked on Sundays, I think, if he could get anyone to show up. But at the time of the anthrax scare, he wasn’t particularly interested in hearing why he couldn’t get his mail. And apparently there were people at the office who would be sent down to the post office and they would put on these crazy outfits, and they would go through and bring him his mail. I mean, mail was his drug.

Ford: That and newspapers. Every morning a stack of newspapers, whether it be the *Grand Rapids Press*, the *Post*, the *LA Times*, whatever. My early morning vision of Dad would be his swim in the morning, bright and early, his exercises, sit ups and everything, sitting down, having his cup of coffee, and a stack of newspapers. And that’s how he started the day. I can remember as a kid growing up around our breakfast table, at 514 Crown View Drive, Alexandria – Dad’s a congressman, the newspaper was a very important thing. All the kids, Jack, Mike, Susan, and I – everybody would grab and wrestle for a section. And you didn’t really talk much at breakfast, you sort of got into the facts and remembered what the box scores were going to be, talking about business or something. You had to sort of suck in some facts because you knew there would be a discussion that night at dinner and you had to defend your position.

Smith: That raises a large question, because after a conversation with Susan, I went away astonished, frankly, that at least in her recollection, during that summer of ’74, when your lives were about to be transformed, that there was as little discussion of this
possibility and all that went up to it as there was. How much political discussion took place around the Ford dinner table? More specifically, was it a subject that he went out of his way to avoid that summer?

Ford: Yeah.

Smith: Just as he went out of his way to avoid it in public?

Ford: Yeah, I think you just hit the nail on the top of the head. There was a denial at times, probably, going on about what might happen. With Dad being vice president, and the idea – I think everybody hoped that the smoking gun – the Nixon tape – that stuff wouldn’t come out, and Nixon would be able to complete his presidency and heal the wounds and do the great things internationally with China and Russia and all those things. But there was a denial that I think we all sort of didn’t talk about, thinking that there was that possibility. I think that’s almost natural for any family that you go, “Gosh, we hope this doesn’t happen.” Because in no way would you think that that would be good for the country, if it got to that point where the president had actually committed crimes and had to resign and stepped out from office.

Smith: So in a curious sort of way, your household may have been one of the few in America where there is a deliberate effort not to talk about Watergate.

Ford: Everybody else was mad and angry and dang it, let’s find out what happened. And that’s true, yeah, because on the street people were demanding answers and trying to figure out what did happen. Had the President been part of a cover up?

Smith: And presumably that included your mother?

Ford: Oh definitely. Oh, they may have a pillow talk in the bedroom about what was going on. But the thing about this, Dad’s career as a congressman was almost over, he was going to retire. He was not going to run for office again because he hadn’t become Speaker of the House, the Republicans had not gotten the majority in the House. He’d told Mom, “If we don’t win the majority, and I don’t become Speaker, I’m going to retire. We’ll go back to Grand Rapids, Michigan. I’ll start my law practice again.” A nice, quiet life. Everything Mom wanted after twenty some years in Congress. And then Nixon appoints him as vice president, and there were other, much more prominent names on that list that Nixon could have picked. Nelson Rockefeller, former governor of New York, John
Connally, former Democratic governor of Texas, and I think all of us – the perception was, Dad’s name, yes, it was on that list, but it was down at the bottom. Nixon – he was more important to Nixon in Congress to get legislation through than to be a vice president. And so in October of 1973, when we get the call as a family and Dad is asked to be vice president, that shocked us all. And I can remember Dad, you know, Mother was ready to go through the roof, because here she spent twenty some years to get him to finally retire, and now he’s going to be vice president. I remember my Dad pulling Mom aside and saying, “Betty, just don’t worry. Vice presidents don’t do anything.” And did that prove false.

Smith: There is a sense that – particularly during those years when he was really climbing the ladder to become Minority Leader and all that – how much was he away? How much of an issue was it? And did he feel guilty about it in later years?

Ford: He was away a lot. I mean, a hundred nights a year? Maybe more sometimes. And I know he felt guilty, but I can remember as a kid, every night when he was gone, Mom would kind of line all the kids up in her bedroom by her desk and her phone. And Dad would be on the phone and we’d all say our “How’s it going, Dad?” And he’d ask us how school went and all that. So there’s that vision of standing there in line with my two brothers and my sister, Mom pulling one of us over, giving the phone so we could talk to Dad. And that happened a lot. That’s where Mom, I mean, wow, she was a hero because she was the one there 24/7, got us to school, made sure we got to football practice, to the dentist, got the school worked on, and if there was ever a big blow up or a fight or something, she had to deal with it. By the time Dad got home, he could come home and be the good guy. Mom was the one who had to deal with it. She was the one on the front lines every day.

Smith: She was the disciplinarian?

Ford: Yeah. Because, Dad, by the time he got back, a day or two later, the storm was over and nobody was as angry and upset and things like that. So he could come bringing presents and things. In fact, Mom and I talked about this on the phone the other night. I was calling her, I travel now about a hundred days a year at least, and every city I go to, I always send my mom a postcard, because it reminds me of the kind of things Dad used to do. We were laughing on the phone the other night that when Dad would come home from these trips, and he’d always be somewhere helping a guy running for Congress, or
raising money for another Republican, or something like that. And he’d always get the key to the city or something, so he’d bring them home and for some reason, I was the one who got selected to get all the keys to the city. So I had this collection. But it was just classic Dad. With each kid he had something he did when he came home and made sure that each child had that sort of little special thing.

Smith: Did she resent it? I’m trying to get a sense of the family dynamic. Obviously, part of the later story is that it was a contributing factor, in some ways, to some of her unhappiness at the time. In a lot of ways, it made her representative of women.

Ford: Made her very normal.

Smith: Yeah.

Ford: I think, no doubt in my mind that if you go through twenty-four, twenty-five years of your husband traveling a hundred to a hundred and fifty days a year, there’s got to be some resentment built up from that. And at times, I’m sure, it made their relationship very tough. She wanted her husband, father of her kids, home. You need to be doing this, I’m the one doing that. I mean, that’s just normal. That’s just what any marriage would go through. If Mom were sitting here today, she would never blame anything on Dad, she’d take responsibility for her own choices. But I think looking back, you could paint that picture. That clearly had to play into some – and it’s gradual. None of that happens quickly for anybody. It’s gradual, builds up.

Smith: It’s never been clear to me, at that point, how interested was she in politics? Was it something, because of him, she took an interest in?

Ford: It’s hard for me to know. That’s a great question, because I’d be curious how much, back when she was a young woman at twenty – late twenties, before she met Dad, how involved or interested she was in politics at that time. She and Dad used to talk politics all the time and whether she was interested or not, she made the attempt to be up to date on what was going on and participated in all those things. Whether that was out of a love for politics, or a love for Dad, probably a combination of both.

Smith: You keep hearing about how in those days members of Congress brought their families to town. That there was much more social interaction across the partisan divide, with all the consequences of that. Who were their friends?
Ford: I think they had two different sets of friends. As you say, back in those days you socialized across the aisle and on your side, too. That happened all the time. Also a lot of your friends would be considered what they would call almost lobbyists today. There was a much freer interaction between someone that was involved in business or things like that. So there was a different ground rule. But then there were plenty of people in the neighborhood, parents. There was a bonding by they might have a kid my age and we played basketball together, went to school together. There was still that. So there were friends on a lot of different levels.

Smith: We talked to Cokie Roberts who will never forget when her dad disappeared, that your dad would, not just call every day, but would go out to the house to check up and see if anything had happened. Almost a paternal kind of role. It’s hard to imagine that happening today.

Ford: It is hard to imagine today. Yeah.

Smith: But that relationship was clearly special. They used to debate at the National Press Club. Then they would get in the car together and drive down and decide en route what they were going to debate that day, have the debate, and then they would go have a drink and lunch, and back to the Hill.

Ford: Well, you look at that, you look at the relationship Dad had with Tip O’Neill. Not your typical relationship of a President and a Speaker of the House from the other party – it usually doesn’t happen. But they had a great fondness for each other. Why it wasn’t so toxic back then? I’m not sure. I’d love to get back to some of that, but that’s the nature of the beast.

Smith: We were talking to Alan Greenspan and he said one of the things that really broke that up was the jet plane. Because you have members on the West Coast who could stay on the West Coast, and live on the West Coast.

Ford: And not have to live in [Washington].

Smith: Yeah, and I’ve always thought another reason was the Cold War. For a long time, it imposed a kind of artificial consensus.

Ford: That’s interesting. Yeah.
Smith: Plus, you had the World War II generation. They shared the life-defining experiences that transcended politics. The ‘60s race is a classic race of two candidates who really didn’t differ on very much. And so it was a combination of the political culture, and a lot of other things.

Ford: You know, I think one thing today, and it doesn’t have anything to do with Dad, but I think we, as a general population, learned from who we listened to, and when you put all these talking heads on TV today – whether it be radio, it could be the right, it could be the left, but they have a tendency to find such opposites and they scream at each other, and I think we, as a country, we learn to do the same thing by watching. That is probably not a healthy thing.

Smith: One of the things that contributed to this camaraderie one senses that people forty, fifty years ago, just drank a lot more than they do today.

Ford: I think they did. There was a typical five o’clock happy hour, and going back to Mom, I think you start adding all those things up; whether it be the happy hour at five o’clock that was endorsed by everybody, and Dad traveling and that putting pressure on their marriage. Again, it built up over the years. The drinking is just an end result of other stuff.

Smith: Do you buy into the genetic predisposition?

Ford: I do. I’m, myself, eighteen years recovering. It will be nineteen years in June. I’m a recovering alcoholic myself. And so I’m not blaming it on that, I take full responsibility for my sobriety the last nineteen years, but I thank Mom for being a great leader. You would have thought Betty Ford’s son would have known better, you know. Here we went through the intervention with Mom and the Betty Ford Center and all that, and ten years after Mom goes through her bout with alcoholism, I, too, have the same thing. And I joke, I went to Mom and I said, “Mom, I think I’m an alcoholic.” And she was just like every other mother in the country, she said, “Oh, my son can’t be an alcoholic, you can’t be.” And I said, “Mom, stop! You are like Betty Ford, the poster child for this whole thing.” And yet she was just like every other mom. I think that’s how insidious a disease it is, and that’s what happens.

Smith: When did you sense that there was a problem in her case?
Ford: When did we actively talk about it, or when did we sense it? I think we all sensed there was a problem, but, again, I think we were typical of many American families, in that we didn’t talk about it. We didn’t know you could talk about it. When we did the intervention on Mom, I’d never heard the word intervention. That was a cutting edge, new tool they were using in alcoholism. Now you’ve got TV shows on intervention.

Smith: How rough was it? On you, who were intervening as much as on her.

Ford: Let me go back and finish answering the other question. I think all of us knew there was a problem, we didn’t necessarily talk about it years before we did the intervention. You would see Mom at times, slurred speech, she’d miss appointments, not eat much dinner. So you knew something was going on, but, again, there was this denial – the elephant in the room. And finally, thank God, Susan kept after Dad and a doctor and said, “Look, we’ve got to do something.” Dad agreed, understood, jumped in there to save his wife. And, again, he was as confused as all of us, because at that time the stigma of alcoholism – it was a skid row bum, it wasn’t the former First Lady. So we had to sort of get over that hump, and when we did the intervention, Dad led it and called all us kids.

All the kids flew down there the day before and we met in his office next to the house. And we met with the doctor the night before in Dad’s office and he walked us through what this intervention was. He said, “I want each one of you to walk in there with one or two stories of how your mother’s drinking just tore up your life. But you’ve got to keep it short, you’ve got to be able to tell that story within a couple of minutes.” He says, “We’re going to go around the room and everybody is going to tell their stories and we’re going to do this in love, and we’re going to remind your mother, gosh, Mom, we’re doing this because we love you. And she’s going to get very defensive, and there is probably going to be screaming and shouting and tears and hugs, and more screaming and shouting.” The guy knew what he was talking about. We’re just blind, trying to be led.

The next morning we walked in that door, early in the morning – all the kids, Dad, Clara, a woman who helped raise us, our housekeeper years ago, and a nurse. We went in there and the initial reaction of Mom was, “Oh, look, here’s all my family!” And then it took about a nanosecond for her to go, “Wait a second, it’s eight o’clock in the morning. You guys shouldn’t be here, you live in North Carolina, you live in…” and also the walls went up, the defenses went up, and the battle was on. What I’ll never
forget, it is really kind of the journey of Mom and Dad in their marriage, is how Dad sat down, took her hand, and led that intervention, reminding her that he wanted his wife back, loved her, the kids were here, and kept calming her down, and just trying to fight to get his wife back. Dad led it beautifully. I mean, he just did a great job, and you could sense that steadiness, that he wasn’t going to move – he’s there, he’s not going. And basically, he shut his life down after that. He stopped going to some of the board meetings and stuff like that until Mom got through this. We were a wakeup call that morning; she did all the work. We woke her up, and obviously, she did all the work. That’s the image I have of Dad leading that.

Smith: Because it’s never been terribly clear as to what portion was alcohol, what portion was prescription drugs, how they mixed. One senses that maybe there is no clear distinction. But did pills, in some ways, afford a respectable kind of cover? You had this genuine, physical problem for which she was prescribed by a perfectly respectable physician. You could, in some ways, almost take refuge behind that.

Ford: Oh, yeah, you justify it. Oh, yeah. I’m doing what my doctor told me to do. And, again, that’s the slow progress of the disease. Mom had a legitimate pinched nerved in her neck, and her back hurt and you would prescribe medications for that and that makes sense. But when you combine that medication with alcohol – and that’s what sort of fooled all of us, we never saw her drink that much. But that didn’t matter because you were making this cocktail of drugs and alcohol, so it just heightened the effects. In the end, it doesn’t matter whether it was sixty percent alcohol or forty percent – the end result is she couldn’t participate in either one of them later on. And she had to get sober. Again, we woke her up, she did all the work.

You might remember, Richard, the best story I remember is after she started the process and went to Long Beach Naval Hospital…

Smith: Which was pretty rough, I’m told – the program is pretty rough.

Ford: Yes, it’s kind of tough love. And I remember going, went and sat in on a couple of group sessions, and I remember meeting some of the guys in her group, and they were all the way from an admiral to a petty officer, whatever. Rank didn’t mean anything, you were all in there as alcoholics. I remember Mom sitting there, and I guess it was the cafeteria, we were sitting at the table, and she sat there with three or four of these guys,
and they are telling dirty jokes, kind of sailor stuff, and I was just offended. I kind of raised up, I was getting to, “Don’t you talk like this around my mother…” and I talked to one of the counselors and he said, “You know what? It’s what your mom needed. They don’t care that she’s First Lady. She’s Betty.” And the doctors and everybody else had put her on a pedestal, catered to these needs, and helped create some of her co-dependency and the problems. And so the guy telling the dirty joke was probably a good thing to sort of bring her back.

Smith: Well, a detour, but it is well known among those who know her well, that she certainly has a more ribald sense of humor than your dad.

Ford: Yeah.

Smith: Jokes had to be explained to him sometimes.

Ford: You are exactly right.

Smith: She and the girls…

Ford: But it’s funny, because as a son, you want to…and remember, that afternoon we did sort of a group thing. They went around the circle, the patients and some of the family members were there. And they asked me afterwards if I’d learned anything. And I said, “Gosh, you people here are not very smart. You’re stupid. Why would anybody want to become an alcoholic? This is stupid.” And I just remember them sort of laughing at me, going, you don’t get it, do you? And here, ten years later I raise my hand and said, “I’m an alcoholic.” So that tells you the awareness factor. I should have known better.

Smith: Not an intellectual decision.

Ford: Yeah.

Smith: Did your dad participate in some of these programs?

Ford: Yeah. He went out when Mom was at Long Beach. The analogy I use between Dad and Mom at that time – Dad was very busy – again, they were building a house in Palm Springs, he’s on the board of directors of a lot of companies, giving speeches. It was a very active time in his life after the presidency. And she was home alone, and he felt it.

Smith: In some ways it was even worse because the kids were basically grown up.
Ford: Gone, yes, everyone was gone. She was really much more alone than she was, say, at the White House. The analogy I make when I look at Dad and what happened with the intervention, it’s like two people climbing Mt. Everest. And you get up to the three-quarters level and your partner gets sick and you could obviously go climb the rest of it on your own. Or you can come back and help your partner get well, to get to the top together. And I think that’s what Dad did. When he saw Mom, the alcoholism and that, he sort of shut a lot of things down, to say, “You’re my climbing partner. There is no sense in me getting to the top without you.” And he sat and waited and helped her join him to get to the top.

Smith: You know, that’s raises another question. I remember mentioning in the eulogy the cliché that as we get older, we tend to get more conservative. Maybe because we have more to conserve, nostalgia for the past, or whatever. And, again, I don’t want to make too much of this, because God knows he always remained a fiscal conservative. A true fiscal conservative. But in other respects, he seemed to take a broader view. And it’s easy to say, well, the party moved so far to the right and all that. People speculate, well she had a lot of impact, but she’d always been around. I wonder whether that unfolding experience, going through the intervention and all that followed, and being involved as much as he was in the work of the Betty Ford Center - in the course of all that, he saw all these people, good people, accomplished people, people he admired, who had a weakness, a problem. You wonder whether that fired some of the compassion, the broadmindedness. I don’t know, am I making too much out of that?

Ford: No, I think you’re right. I give it to you on two different levels. I think Dad always had a great compassion for people and helping people. He was a pull it up by your bootstraps kind of [guy], that was the Midwest Grand Rapids way he was raised. And I’ll give you two analogies – the end of the Vietnam war, he’s in front of Congress pounding his fist, saying we need more money to get these people out of South Vietnam that helped us. These people are going to die. The Vietcong, the North is going to kill them. We need to help them. He had great compassion in Operation Baby Lift and the orphans coming over and things like that. And so that compassion was already there. In some respects, he didn’t understand the alcoholism and that weakness idea because he didn’t operate on that level. Dad, you gave him a challenge, he just got it done and that’s the way. So Mom definitely opened up his awareness, even when I went through my alcoholism. I think he didn’t understand it, but he trusted Mom to tell him, “Jerry, you know this is
what happens to certain people. It’s a disease, you’ve got a weakness. You have to give it up to God. It’s not just…” You know, Dad came from that generation of, dang it, I’ll just get it done. So it was a different kind of compassion that I think she taught him. He already had that compassion for helping people that needed help.

Smith: Tell me about their faith.

Ford: We grew up going to church every Sunday, Episcopal Church, and they were very dedicated that way. I think they lived out their faith in a different way than you might see other Christians live out their faith. They weren’t a very vocal – I remember going to Africa. I went to Tanzania to work with some orphans whose parents had died of Aids, and my faith then, I was probably a little bolder about it and everything. I told that church over there, I spoke at a church, and I said, “I’ve never seen my dad lay hands on anybody, and heal them. He doesn’t speak in tongues, promise you that.” And I said, “But you know what? I see him get up from the dinner table every night, and go do the dishes for my mother. And love her the way God would love her.” So I think that’s how he lived out his faith. He was very quiet. Proverbs 3, 5 through 6, was what they, every night at bedtime they laid there and held hands. It wasn’t worn on his shirtsleeve.

Smith: Talk about opposites attracting. I assume her tardiness was a lifelong issue.

Ford: She was always late getting ready.

Smith: Was that a form of perfectionism? One thing that would surprise people - but she had butterflies before she went on and made a speech. I’ve often wondered whether the lack of punctuality was somehow related to, “I’m going to be as perfect as I can be before I go out there and do whatever I’m doing.”

Ford: I’m not sure.

Smith: Or maybe she was just late.

Ford: And it really didn’t make any difference because I can remember walking in the room so many times and Dad would be sitting in the chair, and I’d be pacing, “Is Mom ready?” He said, “Just relax, I’ve been doing this for thirty, forty years.” I think probably the first fifteen years it was tough, and he learned a little more patience later on. You’re right. Opposites attract and they both taught each other things. He loved her very deeply, and she loved him and respected him so much.
Smith: Did you ever hear them arguing?

Ford: Oh yeah. Both of them could be tough about standing their ground on their opinion. You know, Dad had a quick temper and it would come out and be gone. Once it got out, everything was fine and we moved on. But do you know when I saw his temper the most was when I played golf with him on the golf course. He’d miss a putt or mess up a shot, and “God damn it, grrr…” And then it would be gone.

Smith: Anger directed at himself.

Ford: Yes. Not at somebody else, no. Think about with Mom and Dad, the second half of her life is where she blossomed, and that was when they came to the vice presidency and presidency. And so, we’re sitting here talking about Mom and Dad – she really had the burden of raising us kids and being there on a daily basis – getting us to the doctor, football practice. And then, once they moved into the vice presidency and the presidency, that’s when she really blossomed. And she blossomed from real challenges – the breast cancer, later on the alcoholism, equal rights amendment for women. But that was her stage, and I think he was very proud of her.

Smith: Did you know she had been married before?

Ford: Yeah, vaguely. It wasn’t something that was talked about, but it wasn’t hidden from us.

Smith: Let me go back to – I still find it astonishing, when the vice presidential nomination was made, quite apart from the questions of taste, this kind of celebratory thing that Nixon put on. It was very interesting that your Dad went out of his way to not reproduce that when he nominated Rockefeller. I think he thought it was unseemly in some ways. But the astonishing thing was the logistics - you get this call in the afternoon, and that evening, you’re expected to be in the East Room, dressed and polished for your introduction to the country. It is amazing that things happened as fast as they did. Was it a blur to you?

Ford: It was. And, again, I think all of us kids, at least my impression of it was, he was not going to be vice president, they were going to chose somebody else. And then as far as the presidency, that happened again as quickly. And we barely had time to brush our hair before we ended up at the swearing in process. Both of them happened like that.
Smith: While he was vice president, was there ever a conversation in which the possibility of his becoming president...

Ford: I don’t remember having the conversation. Now, also, you’ve got to remember, at eighteen years old, that’s not the thing that you are dying to have a conversation about anyway. Part of it was denial and part of it was everybody hoped that it wouldn’t have to happen like that.

Smith: Plus it had never happened before. It was unthinkable.

Ford: Think about it Richard, this was like a Constitutional crisis.

Smith: Absolutely.

Ford: I’ll never forget walking out on the South Lawn of the White House. Everybody remembers the famous picture of Mom and Dad walking out, and Dad purposely walking alongside Nixon. You know, vice presidents usually follow the president. Here he is walking side by side, Nixon gets on the helicopter; the famous wave from the steps. We’re all standing there – Mom and Dad – and when you think about it, most presidents, after they are nominated, after they win the election, come into office, there are galas, balls, celebrations, time for change, whatever. This was not a celebration, this was a dark, dark cloud hanging over the White House. A lack of confidence, a Constitutional crisis – as the helicopter takes off, we’re going to walk back to the East Room of the White House. Mom’s going to hold the Bible, Dad’s going to take the oath of office from a Supreme Court Justice, and here you have a man who was not elected by the American public; who is going to take over this country with a war in Vietnam, Cold War with the Russians, recession, unemployment, Dow-Jones has dropped 40%, price of oil in the last twelve months has gone up 400% from $3 a barrel to $12 a barrel. And you have a man who did not get elected by the American people who is going to lead this nation. That’s a Constitutional crisis in my mind. It was a very solemn occasion. Very solemn.

Smith: And of course that night, famously, you go back to the house in Alexandria.

Ford: Dad’s just become president; we can’t move into the White House because Nixon – they haven’t cleared out all their stuff quick enough. We go back to Alexandria, Virginia – the house there. Everybody is sitting around the table, and Mom’s over there trying to
cook something, and she’s talking, “Jerry, something’s wrong here. I’m still cooking. You just became President.” And it doesn’t make any sense, but yet, it was probably the healthiest thing for the nation. You’d gone from a president, Richard Nixon, very secretive, paranoid, the Plumbers and all this stuff that was going on – to Jerry Ford, guy from the Midwest, willing to open up his life to anybody. So in planning, it was probably a healthy thing for the country.

Smith: There are stories that you decided pretty early on that you wanted to get out of Dodge. You didn’t want to live in the White House.

Ford: Well, I’d been accepted to Duke University. When Dad was vice president, we didn’t have Secret Service or anything like that, so our life was relatively normal. I applied to Duke the year before, been accepted, was just weeks away from going off on my freshman year at Duke University. And in August, 1974, Dad becomes president. All of a sudden all of us, Jack, Mike, myself, Susan – we got ten Secret Service agents that are following us around. And as you can well remember, at eighteen years old, that probably isn’t the group you are hoping to hang out with. And so to be honest with you, I just didn’t know how I was going to move into the Duke freshman dorm two weeks later with ten guys with machine guns and radios. It had happened so quick. Walked into Dad’s office, the Oval Office, and told him I wasn’t ready to go to college yet and he asked me what I wanted to do. And I said, “Dad, I’d like to take a year off, get used to this. I’ll go back to school next year.” And he goes, “What do you want to do?” And I said, “I’ve always had this dream, this kind of vision to go out West and be a cowboy.” And I can remember him going, “Cowboy? What? Why wasn’t I made aware of this?” I always figured it was better than a rock star, you know. “Dad, I’m going to follow in Jimmy Hendricks’ tradition and be a rock star.”

Smith: Would he have known who Jimmy Hendricks was?

Ford: Vaguely, because he would have said, “Is that that guy I told you to turn the music down?” And he and Mom talked about it, and thank God I have great parents that allowed us kids to go find our own way. They let me take off. Not go to Duke, moved out West to Montana, started working on ranches – cowboying and rodeoing – took my Secret Service.
Smith: Let me ask you about a story because it involves you. Jack Marsh told us, the day before your Dad was going out to Chicago to deliver the VFW speech, which Lord knows was controversial enough.

Ford: Whew, there wasn’t much applause at that speech.

Smith: No. Marsh goes into the Oval Office and says I’ve got some bad news for you. He’d gotten a lot of that, so he asked what. And he said, “Steve didn’t register on his birthday for the draft.” And he said it’s one of the few times that your Dad looked like he’d been gob-smacked. He sort of put his head in his hands. The extraordinary thing is that the press never found out. You can imagine today.

Ford: And I had to go down and register.

Smith: That day.

Ford: Yes. Because at that time at eighteen you were supposed to register for the draft. It was interesting because there was no draft anymore, basically. I can remember, as a kid growing up, sitting in the living room couch with the whole family, as my older brothers, Mike and Jack - because there was a lottery system for who got picked to go to Vietnam. And it was based on your birthday. And you got a number. And I can remember sitting as a family watching it, the lottery, and just like every family in America, praying that your kids were higher numbers and they didn’t get picked.

So that had ended. So when my birthday came about, when I turned eighteen, I had forgotten to register for the draft. So you’re right. Here was this big speech he was supposed to give, and his own son mistakenly had not done the registration. So we had to jump on that and get that taken care of. It was not purposeful, I promise you that, but it certainly would have been a terrible press situation if that had come out.

Smith: Did he discuss the pardon at all in advance? Did you hear any conversation about…

Ford: I heard more about it afterwards – the justification of it. His reasons for it. Because for myself, personally, I was, “Dad you can’t do this! These people are angry.” And he talked to me. I remember one thing he said to me one time. And again, I think he did a poor job of explaining it to the country. Now, were they so angry at the time that they couldn’t have heard, even if there was a good explanation? It’s like being in a fight with your best friend, your wife, whatever, if they are in that mindset where they are so
angry, even a good explanation isn’t going to work. But he did a poor job of explaining. But I remember him sitting down with me and talking about the idea of grace and mercy; and the idea that a president is like father of a family, and at times the father of a family has to give grace and mercy to his kids for the betterment of the whole family. To keep the family together. And I think, with the pardon, that’s how he looked at it. It was a greater picture to move the country on. Both him and Congress are dealing with the war in Vietnam, the Cold War with the Russians, high energy costs, inflation, unemployment. And Richard Nixon is in the headlines every day. There are still criminal charges pending. And so much time and energy and oxygen in the room is being taken up by Richard Nixon. And the country has to move on. And I think Dad probably expected that it would cost him politically, but I think, knowing him, he was thinking long term, not short term. And it did play out well long term. It didn’t play out well against Carter.

Smith: But it’s funny, all these years the conversation’s been about the tangible, measurable, political consequences, including the notion that it cost him a second term. What we’ll never know is what those consequences might have been if he hadn’t pardoned Nixon and we’d gone through two and half years of Nixon obsession.

Ford: I think, and don’t necessarily quote me on this, but I recall he talked to Leon Jaworski, special prosecutor, he talked to Congress, leaders in Congress, and found – how much time are you spending on this? Jaworski told him, “Look, Nixon could drag this out for years.” And Dad just said the country has got to move on. The interesting thing about the pardon, I found fascinating, is that it was based on a 1933 Supreme Court ruling the Burdick case. Where apparently they had offered a pardon to a fellow who was held in federal custody if he testified, but he said he wasn’t guilty, so he wouldn’t accept the pardon. Because the Supreme Court had ruled that by granting a pardon, it was an implication of guilt, by accepting the pardon, it was an acceptance of guilt. And Dad, and I believe, Benton Becker, explained that to Nixon that we’re basing this pardon on that principle. That I’m giving it, but there is an implication of guilt. If you accept it, you accept that guilt. And Nixon, obviously, turned that down at first.

Ford: She and Dad – just this great love affair. They really enjoyed each other, and he respected her so much, and so many times she went…here she is, talking about the Equal Rights Amendment for women, and it really wasn’t a Republican platform – a
plank in the platform at that time. But he never discouraged her. He encouraged her to be who she was.

Smith: And one senses because there was a sea change going on, and it really surfaced in the wake of the Sixty Minutes interview. People in Washington fight the last war. And with the Reagan challenge looming, they went “Oh, my God, what has she done?” And then it didn’t take too long – the polls started coming in, and lo and behold, in ways that they hadn’t anticipated, there were whole sections of the electorate that found this refreshing. And indeed, from an administration that defined itself by openness and candor, she was living that.

Ford: She was it. And they didn’t muzzle her. It starts with how Mom and Dad approached her breast cancer early on. They wanted to take the shame off that disease.

Smith: I remember we talked to Nancy Brinker, and she said newspapers, the obits, would refer to a long illness.

Ford: No one said breast.

Smith: How did you find out about that?

Ford: I was actually out in Utah, working on a ranch, cowboying and rodeoing, and I got a call from the White House Secret Service letting me know that Mom had had this biopsy and they were going to do surgery. There was no time for me to get on a plane and get back. So I sort of kept hearing about it and we had no telephone communication out on this ranch. So it was even tougher for me. And I remember saddling a horse, going on this long ride. And I asked the Secret Service if they’d let me go by myself – just pray for Mom, think about her. And they did. And so I was really out of the loop at that point. But if she were sitting here today, she would tell you, she was scared and all those things - but it was all those cards and letters from people all over the country. Women who said, thank you Mrs. Ford for being candid, open. I went in, had a test, they caught it early, whatever, it helped me.

Smith: And it must have been an extraordinary realization about the latent power that she had to educate people. And, in fact, to bring about some pretty profound changes.

Ford: And, you know, a lot of it, too, was men who wrote Dad, who said, “Mr. President, thank you for showing me how to stand next to my wife as we go through cancer.”
Because, again, there was a stigma to it, nobody talked about it, and I think the two of them sort of got the healing process and opened it up. It’s still got a long way to go. The same process happened for alcoholism. Dad showed here’s how I’m standing next to my wife Betty, as she works through her alcoholism.

Smith: Were there some members of your generation who would enjoy the White House more than others? I mean, you didn’t mind being away from the place.

Ford: I didn’t mind, but I certainly enjoyed it. Gads, I remember the first night we moved in. I invited my best high school, elementary school buddy over, Kevin Kennedy, and said, “Look, you’ve got to come over and see this place.” We went to the roof of the White House, up through the Solarium, out onto the roof where you couldn’t go today. Took my stereo up there; and we’re standing up there looking out, and the flags are blowing and we’ve got probably Led Zeppelin’s *Stairway to Heaven* playing, or something. And here are two eighteen year old kids looking at each other like Dumb and Dumber, going, “There must be some serious breach of security if you and I are sitting here on the roof of the White House.” You just never would have expected it. I mean, if you were the son or daughter of Ronald Reagan you might have thought someday your dad might be president. But not the son or daughter of Gerald Ford. And ten months earlier I would have been outside of that fence, looking in, wondering what the heck do they do in there. And the events that would have to happen in history to catapult me over there. Agnew resigns, Watergate, all that stuff.

Smith: It’s interesting you mention Agnew, because we’ve been told that although in later years, they were basically in the same neighborhood…

Ford: Palm Springs, Rancho Mirage, yeah.

Smith: They managed to avoid each other.

Ford: They did. They did not socialize. I remember going to one – I was down visiting Mom and Dad. One night they had to go to an event; they were invited over by Frank Sinatra to his house to watch a movie or something. And Dad asked me if I wanted to go. I heard Frank Sinatra, and wow, I’d love to meet Frank Sinatra, and so I went. And the former Vice President Agnew was there, there were a lot of people there, but they never had a big conversation or anything. That was the only time that I know of that they ran into each other.
Smith: We’ve been told that at times they were on the same golf course and managed quite deliberately to avoid each other. Do you have a sense at all of his relationship with Nixon in later years?

Ford: I asked Dad one time who was Nixon? Who was his best friend? And I remember having the conversation with him, and he said, “You know, Nixon didn’t really have any really good close friends.” He said, “His wife Pat was probably his closest friend that way.” And I always got the sense from talking to Dad that Nixon was not that kind of man’s man, guy-guy, that you joked around with. You had your guy friends, or men friends. And it’s interesting because here he is a politician; he’s got to sell himself to the people, and yet…

Smith: He was not a natural.

Ford: Yeah.

Smith: Nixon himself once said, “I’m an introvert in an extrovert’s profession.”

Ford: Yeah, that makes complete sense.

Smith: And part of it was, he didn’t want people to see him as a closet intellectual, which he was – probably much more than Jack Kennedy. Did your dad talk about the Kennedys at all?

Ford: I don’t remember much conversation about the Kennedys except Dad would mention that he and Jack Kennedy, basically kind of shared the same area – office space. And they used to walk across for votes together, things like that. But I don’t remember a lot of conversation about the Kennedy family.

Smith: Clearly, the Profiles in Courage Award was a huge, pivotal moment, wasn’t it?

Ford: The Profiles in Courage Award, the John F. Kennedy Award, goes back to the point we were talking about earlier – long range vs. short range – about what the Nixon pardon was all about. And to have Senator Kennedy stand up there and know what he would have thought twenty some years earlier - that that moment would ever happen where he would basically say the pardon helped heal the nation and things like that. I think for Dad, that brought it full circle. They figured the pardon cost him four to eight percent of the vote against Carter? And that could have changed the election. But, again, he was
thinking long term, not short term. And I think that showed the courage of what he did as a politician – to be a public servant, not a politician.

Smith: I only heard him speak disparagingly of two people. And the worst he could come up with was, “He’s a bad man.” One was John Dean and one was Gordon Liddy. We know famously he said he had adversaries, not enemies. Beyond that line, was he really that generous in his assessment of other people’s?

Ford: He was pretty dang good about that. He wasn’t harsh on people like that. It was a good quality. Again, he could get mad at somebody, but it didn’t last and talking about John Dean and Liddy and Erlichman and Haldeman, I don’t think he liked those guys because I think he smelled that from day one. I don’t think he had much love for those guys. I can remember him talking about Erlichman and Haldeman would come up to Capitol Hill to talk to him. He was the House Minority Leader and, “The President wants this, you get this legislation through.” And so on. And Dad said, “I used to go, wait a second.” In the back of his mind he goes, I know Dick Nixon, I served with him, that doesn’t sound like what Dick Nixon would want. And he would find out or talk to the President. And Haldeman and Erlichman had their own agenda as far as pushing things. So Dad, I think, had a good sense of what was good and what was bad – who to surround yourself with.

Smith: And I wonder, it could be very significant whether that may have consciously or otherwise informed his original decision not to have a White House chief of staff – not to put too much authority in any one set of hands.

Ford: It could have. I remember Dad always saying – and he probably wasn’t the first one to have said it – is a president is only as good as the people he surrounds himself with. And I think that was very much the downfall of Nixon. You had some people close to the top that, when it came to an ethical decision, a lawful decision, the ends justified the means, and trumped whatever laws you might break to serve the president – for national security – whatever you wanted. And I think Dad surrounded himself with people that might have wanted the same results of national security and things like that, but the laws of America trumped the president.

Smith: Why was Hartmann such a polarizing figure?
Ford: That rough, gruff kind of…but yet he came up with some of the greatest lines that Dad ever spoke. And Dad was very loyal to Bob Hartmann. And that’s a great character aspect of Dad – is the people that got him to Washington from Grand Rapids, from this district, Western Michigan – he kept them all on the train and they were part of it. Some people might say, “Well, they’re too regional, they haven’t operated on the national level enough.” And that hurt a president like Carter a little bit, some of that. But Dad was very loyal to those Bob Hartmann’s and those people from Michigan.

Smith: By the way, quite apart from the unique tightrope that he was walking as vice president, we’re told he didn’t particularly like the job of vice president.

Ford: Well, basically, I think he felt very vulnerable. There was a sense that the president was sending him out there to defend the White House. And you were trying to defend policy, whether it be dealing with Russians on SALT agreements, or the Vietnam war, the economy, and then you were also defending the battle on Watergate. And I think Dad felt very vulnerable that this could all bite me later. So I think at some point he sensed it was maybe turning, and his defense of the President and Watergate kept that distance a little bigger than…Apparently, he never used his office in the White House. He stayed in the Executive Office Building, purposefully, to stay removed from Nixon.

Smith: He was genuinely shocked and offended when he realized that Nixon hadn’t told him the truth.

Ford: Yeah. I know Dad had said that early on, when he accepted the vice presidency, he had a talk with Nixon and asked him – because at that time Watergate was not what it would grow into. Obviously, as it got closer, I think you are right, he was very offended. Because I think during that whole process, he was on the road out there supporting the President’s policies, plus defending Watergate, and I’m sure he was re-checking in with President Nixon, saying, “You sure this is all good?” Then they find out there was a cover up, and so on and so on.

Smith: When the smoking gun tape was released, that really made it clear that the Nixon presidency was over. Were you out of town?

Ford: No, I was in Alexandria.

Smith: How did your mother take the news?
Ford: I was eighteen years old, so I’m not sure I had a total grasp of how important those final pieces of information were.

Smith: When did you realize you were going to live in the White House?

Ford: I think I first believed it very shortly before it happened. As you know, it happened very…

Smith: And the subject had been avoided.

Ford: Yeah – very quickly. And you went with the flow. I’m sure Mom was much more aware of it than us kids were. No one hoped for that to happen. Dad loved being a public servant. That’s what he thought people should do. You give your life. And I don’t think he, even up to the end, suspected. He knew it might happen, but to suspect that Nixon would have put himself above the laws of the nation and the Constitution - it would just be beyond Dad. He knew it was a possibility, but he hoped for better.

Smith: Could you see her blossoming, after they got there, and realized that this isn’t so bad. There is a lot to be said for living in the White House. But she’d been a performer, and it’s almost as if all those years…

Ford: The curtain has now gone up.

Smith: We were told she enjoyed the State Dinners and the public aspects of the job.

Ford: Because you know it’s not permanent – it’s a temporary situation. Every four years or eight years, in our case two and a half years, the locks get changed and the key may open to right one time and to the left the next time. Mom did blossom, there’s no doubt about it. That was a period for her to really blossom and become First Lady. But I think the biggest help to us was it happened so quickly. We didn’t have a chance to worry about it, think about it. And again, I draw the analogy, if you were one of the Reagan children or one of the Bush kids, you almost knew that at some point your father might be president and there was a whole anxiety that went to the buildup. With us, it was let’s go. It’s you, let’s move it.

Smith: Did you think at the end of the ’76 campaign, that you’d caught up – had a real shot at winning this against all the earlier odds?
Ford: At the end of the ’76 campaign, at the end of the convention, I thought we had no shot at all because we were 30 points behind or so from Carter. As it got down to that last week, at the end of the campaign going into the election, I thought we had a real shot. And everybody was invested. And as much as I wanted it for Dad, because he wanted it, when we lost, it was almost a relief. A selfishness for me. I knew he was going to live longer because he wouldn’t serve a second term. And as a son, it was a selfish thing I was glad we lost. But on the other end, I know Dad thought his policies were better than Carter’s to lead us out of a recession, and so there was a mixed message there.

Smith: We were told it took him a while to bounce back.

Ford: Oh, yeah. He loved being a public servant. And when you come that close, it was how many votes in Ohio, and a couple places, could have changed the whole election. And the economy was getting better. Inflation was way down, they were producing jobs and unemployment started to head down. But, again, this is where I think he was a very ethical politician, public servant. He was advised by many people on his staff. “Mr. President, you have an election coming up in November, we can do some things to the economy that will get it pumped up.” But those are always short term fixes. They never last. And he was against that. That had been done before in several presidential elections. Presidents have that power to do certain things to get the economic numbers up, but they don’t last. He chose not to do that, was thinking long term again, not short term.

Smith: The fiscal conservatism – there is some debate over what kind of tipper he was – etc., etc. How much of that do you think is the product of a Depression era boyhood? Selling your blood to get through college and all of that. I assume there is a generational element. Plus, growing up in West Michigan - it’s a number of things.

Ford: Dad was tight at times – there’s no doubt. It was funny, I remember back in the Eighties, I was working for CBS for about seven or eight years on a soap opera, The Young and the Restless, and for a twenty-some year old kid, I was making good money. And I remember every time I went home he’d pull me aside and whip out a twenty and give it to me and stick it in my pocket and said, “Now don’t tell your mother.” And I just have to laugh. “Dad, I’ve got a job, I’m really doing quite well, just bought a ranch…” “Naw, you take it…” But he was always that way. He always wanted to look after you. I think it was his childhood, his upbringing, his father, his mother, Western Michigan, it was
getting out of high school and having no money to go to college. Finally got to Michigan – they had done a fundraiser at the high school – South High – and had some sort of little scholarship and raised a hundred bucks for him to be able to go to Michigan. Yeah, that all played in. He didn’t waste money on things. It needed to work, be practical, be usable.

Smith: Did he actively resent his birth father?
Ford: He never talked about him.

Smith: Really?
Ford: When he did talk about him, which was very rare - he would talk about the story if someone had brought it up at dinner, “Dad, do you remember Grandma Ford?” And he’d talk about his mother, our grandma, and then he would relay into that story that my real father left us, and so on and so on. And you could hear the bitterness there. You could see him lift up his mother, Dorothy, but he spent more time lifting her up. And in lifting up his eventual stepfather, Grandpa Ford, Gerald R. Ford.

Smith: Did you know your grandmother?
Ford: Oh, yeah. I knew both my grandparents. Grandpa Ford, he died, I was pretty young, but I remember him, he used to take me in his backyard, had these big sunflowers and he’d pull nickels out of my ears and things like that. Grandma Ford, my sister Sue and I used to stay at her apartment all the time in Grand Rapids. She had a little parakeet and she used to go to church every day and we were scared to death to drive around with Grandma Ford. She would get in the car – she wore hats every day – and she’d get in the car and my sister Susan and I would call over to my Aunt Janet, Tom’s wife, and say, “Aunt Janet, Grandma Ford wants to take us somewhere. Please come get us.” She’d race over because we were just afraid Grandma Ford was going to get in a wreck or something. So we knew Grandma pretty well. Grandpa, not as well. But Dad lifted up his mother, that was his hero – his mom.

Smith: And how did he deal with aging? His health really held up remarkably well until he was around ninety or so. I guess when the doctors said you really can’t travel, that was a kind of death.
Ford: I think a year before he died, I was playing golf with him. So I saw things that a lot of other people didn’t see.

Smith: There is a sense by the way, that he spent more time with you in those last years.

Ford: Yeah, and I think that was purposeful on both our parts. One, at that time I didn’t have a family, wasn’t married. I could do that. The last year of Dad’s life I kind of wiped my schedule clean in a lot of areas, and spent close to a hundred days with him, whether it be in Vail, Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, Palm Springs.

Smith: Were you among those who tried to talk them that last summer out of going to Vail?

Ford: Oh, yeah. And you couldn’t. And we were all afraid with the altitude, he was going to die at the altitude from his heart. But they wanted to go one more time and it was the best thing to happen. I went up and spent several trips with him. And we went out and hit the golf ball and did stuff and it was wonderful. It was wonderful. A year before he died, again, I’ll never forget – I was down at Palm Springs and Dad got me over. There was a friend of his that owned a private golf course, and we got to play on it. And Dad would not play every hole, but he would ride around and then every once in a while he would go tee up a ball, or hit some putts. Every once in a while he’d catch his drive pretty good, and it would go 175 yards. This was a ninety-two year old man. And you could just see him kind of raise up and bristle up like a big old rooster. And we’d go back and have lunch with Mom and I’d just kind of throw it out there and say, “Oh, Mom, you should have seen, Dad hit a pretty good drive on number four.” And then he’d just kind of bristle up again and tell the story. And you could just see it give him energy. He loved that. When his physical activity got taken away, that was a tough thing on him. But he did have it almost to the end.

Smith: And one senses they were both reluctant – she in some ways was especially so - to let outside people, nurses and others, come in. Because it in some ways acknowledged he’d crossed the threshold.

Ford: The kids, we had to fight with them, to get them to get help. There were a couple of falls that had taken place where she’d hit her head, or I think maybe Dad had, too. And initially, it’s just at night while they were sleeping, and then eventually it got to be all day. But, yeah, they were resistant. You feel like you’re losing your independence. But once it got going, they were happy they had it.
Smith: How difficult was it, and how aware were they, of what, for lack of a better word, might be called the media deathwatch that was going on? It must have been pretty frustrating. You go in for tests or whatever, at Eisenhower Hospital and within five minutes, someone would have tipped off the press. That kind of ongoing attention – were they really aware of it?

Ford: I think they were, Richard. But I think because we’d been dealing with all of that for so many years – not necessarily the deathwatch – but on a lot of issues. Whether it had been Mom’s alcoholism, or things like that. We were used to it and knew it was part of the territory. And it always made you sad that somebody on the staff of the hospital would kind of sell you out, but that’s just human nature.

Smith: There’s a wonderful story one of the Secret Service agents told us. The last time your Dad left the Eisenhower Medical Center and got into the Secret Service vehicle, and as they were headed for home he said he wanted to go to In and Out Burger. And so they drove to the nearest In and Out Burger. He gets out of the vehicle, walks in, stands in line to get his burger – I guess one more of life’s simple pleasures.

Ford: He loved his In and Out Burgers. I remember when I would hit golf balls over at this course, and Phil Nicholson was over there, the great golfer – just won the Masters – practicing. So we watched Phil hit some balls and then we all sat down at a picnic table there and they went and got In and Out Burgers and we sat with Phil Nicholson and Dave Pelz, and Phil’s caddy Bones(?). And Dad just loved it. They started telling golf stories and he was telling about how he used to play with Nicklaus and Gary Player and Lee Travino and Tom Watson. But I’ll never forget sitting there – In and Out Burger is what he wanted. You’re exactly right.

Smith: I also wonder – it’s speculative – but I also wonder if in the last few years, any conscious decision was made, influenced in any way by you all seeing Bob Hope’s last years. It wasn’t pretty.

Ford: He was blind at the end.

Smith: He didn’t have to be out there. There are stories about your Dad’s was nature – someone in Hope’s office would call and ask him if he wanted play golf. And they’d go out and do one or two holes, which was all the holes that Hope was [able to play]. And then go back to the house and return later in the day and resume the game.
Your dad was a proud man, fastidious. We were told after the Foundation event speech in Washington where he gave Rumsfeld and Cheney the awards – I remember working on that speech – and he was having some trouble doing it. And he said afterwards that that was the last time he would speak in public. It suggests a sense on his part of this [aging] process.

Ford: He was pretty aware of what others had gone through and had a pretty good self-awareness of himself. Not in a big ego type of way – just this is the way I want to be seen, this is the proper way. We’ve got other ways we can do this now. The kids or Mom or somebody can give the talks now. I think everybody was glad because nobody wants to see their parent, mother or father, be embarrassed by the press. Be respected as you age. Just like when Dad and I would go play golf, I didn’t invite any friends, or he didn’t have any of his friends in those last months that he played golf. It was just him and me. We trusted each other, and it would have been awkward if anybody else would have been there because he wasn’t at his best. But he still enjoyed it, he still loved it. It was funny, Dad and I discovered golf - I remember when I was getting sober, and I hated golf. He tried to get all us kids to play it, but I’d never gotten interested.

Smith: What is it about golf that is so addictive?

Ford: You’ve got to get hooked first, because you’ve got to get through that initial threshold to get on the other side to actually think you can hit it pretty well. But I was committed to find something that he and I could do together. I knew he loved it. I didn’t love it. But I was committed to have that time with him and I just thought it would be great to have three or four hours driving around the golf course, hear his stories as he wasn’t able to tell me when I was twenty years old; as I would tell him the stories, too, that I would never have told him at twenty, but you can tell him at forty. And there was this new relationship and that was my reason. Now, I fell in love with golf and we enjoyed and shared that together, and I think that was a unique bond because I was the only kid that really shared that with him. So I cherished that – all those times sitting in the golf cart and hearing things that I never would have heard if it weren’t for out there.

Smith: He was, one senses, a discrete person. And you wonder if there are things he took with him to the grave.
Ford: Probably. But he was such a Boy Scout that I doubt that they were about him. They might have been about somebody else. He was such a square.

Smith: Was he sensitive about the Chevy Chase thing? The whole stereotype?

Ford: You know, I think he probably, at a deepest level, might have been. But he wasn’t concerned with that. He always told it – “Hey, if you’re going to be in politics, you’ve got to be able to laugh at yourself.” He was very good-hearted, good-natured about it. But I can’t imagine as a human being, in some sense, you wouldn’t – to know that you were probably one of the best athletes that ever served in the presidency. Playing football at Michigan, boxing, this is a guy that skied and swam. But he was pretty good about it. It would have made me mad, but he was pretty dang good about it.

Smith: Do you remember your last visit with him?

Ford: Well, my last visit with him was the days before he died, and he was home, he was in a bed and we were getting ready to celebrate Christmas. My mom and I were down there. I was down with Mom and other kids were not there.

Smith: And, by the way, we were told all her life she’s been a Christmas buff.

Ford: Oh, yeah. And there was a tree decorated in the living room and stuff. But Dad, at that point, wasn’t mobile. He was sitting there in bed and we had it in front of the TV in the family room there. I said, “Mom, there isn’t anything Christmas in here. Christmas has always been your guy’s deal, and here we are.” And I ran over to Long’s Drugs and I walked in the night before Christmas, Christmas Eve kind of thing, and there is one pack of little lights left. And I buy it and I’m probably the last guy out that night and they are going to shut down. I go home and I string the Christmas tree lights around the TV. And the smile came over his face and Mom and I – that was sort of symbolic – you knew something was going to happen very soon. That he was going to pass away. They had told us – the hospice people had told us – actually they thought it would happen earlier and they were shocked and surprised that he lasted days longer than they’d thought. They thought his body was shutting down. But Mom and I – he smiled – we got these little few words from him about thank you. Yeah, that was shortly before he passed away.
Smith: Were you surprised by the public reaction to his death? Because he’d been out of the public eye for a while. I thought part of it was there was a whole generation that was being introduced to him for the first time, and they were comparing these old film clippings against the ugliness of current politics. And he looked pretty good. But there was more to it than that. It seemed to build as the week went on.

Ford: I think people remembered he was a decent man. I think a lot of people realized after the whole Watergate-Nixon thing – all that died down - that that was an honorable decision that he made. I think people look back and think he was probably the president we were really looking for. He wasn’t flashy. He was down the middle of the road, steady, fiscal policy, probably not so conservative on social issues. Fiscal policy he was a good solid conservative on that. And he had that perspective. And they look back and go, “Yeah, you know, he was probably the guy we were looking for.” He was steady at the helm; there was nothing flashy about him; he spoke from the heart. So it’s like an old girlfriend, you know, she really had a lot of great qualities, she would have made a good wife.

I was thinking, we kept talking about Mom being there on a daily basis and Dad being on the road and stuff – but I look back and I think one of the great qualities of Dad as a father is he understood the situation he was in, that his job required him to be gone and I think later in life he felt guilty about that. And I know I came to terms with him and I think he came to terms with me, and wished he’d been home more. But the great quality and the memories I have is when he did come home, he never opened his briefcase, he would be at the house, he’d be with you, he’d be present. And I remember in my eighth grade year, I wanted to make the freshman football team and very rarely did an eighth grader make the freshman football team. And I went to Dad and I said, “Dad, I want to play on the team.” And he said, “Well, that’s going to be tough for an eighth grader. But I’ll tell you what, if you can do one thing that nobody else can do, I can get you on the team.” And so he thought about it, brainstormed, solved the problem. He said, “There’s nobody that can snap for punts, and I’m going to teach you how to snap for punts this summer and they are going to need you.” And, sure enough, when he was home, we were out in the backyard and he was showing me when he played at Michigan how he snapped punts. So I, as an eighth grader, went out for the freshman football team, made it, lettered, played, because he came up with a plan to get me on the team.
Smith: It’s a good story.

Ford: Very practical. There was a problem. I wanted to play. He came up with a way, and he was present and did it. And that’s the memory I have.

Smith: And it’s a kind of intelligence that I’m not sure, quite frankly, people would have credited him with – finding a practical solution.

Ford: Very Midwestern, very Grand Rapids. Exactly what that is all about. The other thing I was thinking is, some of the best advice he ever gave me, and he gave all the kids this, was follow your passion, your heart. None of us went into politics, and I think it was because he advised, make sure it’s in your blood, that you love doing it. He was never a politician for fame and fortune and power. He loved solving people’s problems. He was a congressman-kind of guy that enjoyed being a public servant.

Smith: When we were talking to Greg Ford, he had a visit with him in the last six months of his life. He expected it to be a few minutes, based on what Penny had said, and it was forty-five minutes or an hour or so. Greg asked him at one point, in effect, for the secret of his success as a politician. And your dad said something actually quite profound, he said, “I always treated other people’s problems as if they were my own.”

Ford: I remember him saying that many a time.

Smith: Which is simple, when you stop to think about it, but…

Ford: You certainly apply yourself.

Smith: It’s like: work hard, tell the truth, and come to dinner on time.

Ford: Yeah, a very connected way. And Dad had some great simple ways. He used to talk about the ideal of making and keeping friends. And he said when he found somebody that he might differ with politically or gave you a reason not to have a friendship, he said he was always taught, that’s the person I need to find out something that we share. Do we root for the same football team? Did we go to the same college, or high school, or part of the country? He said he always worked to find something common that they could build a relationship on, instead of highlighting the differences. And I think that goes back to why he could reach across the aisle in Congress and work with Democrats and Republicans both so well. He genuinely liked people.
Smith: The one question I wished I’d asked him, and I don’t know why I didn’t. But I’ve often wondered whether – speaking of regrets – after the fact, he had any regrets in the whole Justice Douglas controversy.

Ford: Was it *Playboy*?

Smith: It was called *Evergreen Review*. And you know what the fascinating thing is? Today, I’m not sure Douglas could withstand the ethical scrutiny, but it wasn’t the financial arrangements so much that offended your dad, it was the fact that he wrote articles for this sort of questionable publication.

Ford: But you know, I remember Dad thinking or talking about, and I think I saw it in print somewhere, where he actually said he’d screwed up on that, getting hold of that bone and running with it. And when he looked back he said, “I could have done a better job on that one.” But he was pretty quick to admit his screw ups.

Smith: The notorious exception was the Polish gaffe which basically took a week.

Ford: They had to work on him very hard to say…

Smith: Cheney said he thought he was going to be fired. Other people said they were almost thrown out of Air Force One. But that stubbornness kicked in.

Ford: That should have happened much quicker. And it cost him. There is no doubt, you can look back on that – the campaign was going well, they were gaining ground. And, boom, that shut things down right away and took it the other direction. And I think, again, if he were here today, he would tell you he did a poor job of explaining the Nixon pardon. At the time I don’t think he did, would have thought that, but if he had sat down and explained to people that he was doing it for the greater good of the country, that the House and the Senate were spending, I don’t know, twenty percent of their day dealing with Richard Nixon, that you still had these potential criminal trials, and all this stuff. And it was going to be dragged out and he wanted to get on with the business of the country, and the economy, and getting jobs, and inflation. But he did a poor job. He was not the greatest communicator in any sense of the word. He was, in a room like this – one on one. But in front of the podium, speech-wise, he was not a great orator.

Smith: Last thing: I’ll never forget at the funeral, when you are up there in a fog, and you’re just trying to get through it and the family is sitting right in front of you, and you don’t
want to break down. And it’s odd, the thing I’ll never forget is, at some point I remember looking over because I heard this sound, and Roslyn Carter was weeping. And it occurred to me: who would have thought thirty years ago that this is how the story ends? Do you have a memory like that – almost an epiphany – from those days?

Ford: That was a hard-fought campaign. There were a lot of things said on both sides and to see – just to see them come together later on and honorably come up with a genuine friendship. I’ve often said, I don’t think there has been any president who has done more after his presidency to help the common man around the world than Jimmy Carter and his wife Roslyn. I think they remember Dad as a person they liked. I’ll tell you Richard, I really equate it with when we went through the state funeral, first starting in Palm Springs and then came to Washington, D.C., and then finally, Grand Rapids, I remember sitting there on the Capitol steps. Flags are waving and the cannons are going off. It was a state funeral, but I didn’t think about it as what Dad did to finally get the troops home from Vietnam or cut inflation from twelve percent down to four percent, or stock market got back over a thousand points during his administration, and the economy was actually rolling again and dealing with the Russians and Chinese, the *Mayaguez* – a number of issues.

I didn’t think about any of that – what kind of president he was. I thought about what kind of father he was, the man. How he showed Jack, Mike, Susan and I how to be a great husband, how to be a great father, his compassion in our family. I thought about the intervention; I thought of him holding Mom’s hand when she got cancer and saying, “We’re going to take the shame off this disease.” And I think Roslyn Carter thought about that – the man, the human being, the leader of his family. That’s probably where that came from.

Smith: Last thing. Is it true that you and your siblings, when young, would play in Statuary Hall?

Ford: Susan and I. On Saturdays, when he was a congressman. You were talking about mail earlier – he always wanted to go in on Saturday and look at the mail. And he’d take Susan and I with him and we would get there. The Capitol obviously was a different world than it is today with all the security and everything, but he would have Susan and I sit down at these old hunt and peck typewriters and we would type a letter to our mom. And he said, “Now tell her how much you love her and appreciate her.” And we’d type
it and once we got the letter typed to Mom, he would say, “Alright, you can go play in Statuary Hall.” And Susan and I would go play hide and seek in Statuary Hall, and the guards and police all knew us. It was family. And it’s a different world today. But that’s my memory of Statuary Hall - running and hiding behind the statues and typing these letters to Mom to tell her how good a mom she is.

Smith: And, again, how the cycle comes round, with him joining that august company in the Rotunda.

Ford: He will be part of that collection, and if I get a chance to speak at the ceremony, I will probably remind people of that story that forty some years ago, I was racing around this hallway hiding from my sister. The world has come a long ways.

Smith: Time was good to your dad. I mean, he lived long enough to know that people had come around on the pardon.

Ford: Yeah. He could look back and see, whether it was the results of the Helsinki Accord or deregulation, or the troops getting out of Vietnam, or the SALT agreement – even though he didn’t get a signed agreement – he forwarded the process to get SALT II. Continued the process with the Chinese. So he saw all those things happen and the healing of the pardon. That was important.
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this. You were *Time*’s White House correspondent. How did that come about? And were you there from Nixon’s departure or did you come later?

Talbott: I hope I do a better job of talking about Jerry Ford than about myself and my own biography. I came to *Time* in 1968 as a summer intern. Then, when I was at Oxford, I did a second summer internship in Moscow in ’69. I worked on a *Time* project in ’70 and joined the staff in ’71 as the number two State Department correspondent. Then in what would’ve been late ’73 or early ’74, I was attached to the White House as not the White House correspondent, but a White House correspondent. I believe that Dean Fisher was the principal White House correspondent and that was the only domestic assignment that I had. I think it may have been late ’74, but in any event, it went through the ’76 election, and I covered Jerry Ford in the ’76 election.

Smith: Were you there for the Nixon resignation at the White House or did you come later?

Talbott: Physically at the White House? I was around the White House a lot because I was a diplomatic correspondent and that included NSC as well as the State Department, but I was not attached to the White House at the time. I was covering foreign policy at the White House.

Smith: Understood. Did you find it interesting that Ford, even before he actually took the oath of office, on the night of Nixon’s resignation - almost the first thing he says to the American people - he comes out on the front lawn of his house in Alexandria and reassures everyone he’s going to keep Henry Kissinger.

Talbott: Yeah. We all noticed that, of course, and I knew Kissinger – *know* Kissinger – very well. I spent a lot of time with him during that period when he was National Security Advisor, as well as throughout his period as Secretary of
State and have seen him since. Yeah, I mean, Kissinger was a reassuring figure. There’s no question about that. And, of course, President Ford - before that Vice President Ford - was extremely close to Brent Scowcroft who was, in turn, very close to Henry Kissinger.

Smith: But it’s interesting because, within a year, while taking pains to reassure Kissinger that he wasn’t in any way being demoted, he changed that unique situation where Kissinger wore both hats.

Talbott: You’ll have other sources who were both better informed at the time and will recall what happened better than I do, but my sense of it with all this passage of time is that it genuinely was not intended so much to clip Kissinger’s wings as it was to do a couple of other things. First of all, good sense. Good sense I think would argue for having the two positions separate – NSA and Secretary of State. And the other thing was, of course, it was in the context of firing Jim Schlesinger – it happened at the same time if I’m not mistaken. Right?

Smith: Right.

Talbott: I think there was some fall out on the part of the White House. “Let’s do a number of things at once because it makes what we’re doing with Schlesinger less front-and-center and, you know, it’s more humane. And everything else that we’re doing makes good organizational sense.”

Smith: Was Schlesinger just a case of bad chemistry or was there more to it than that?

Talbott: You know, the famous story that lingers to this day is that Jim Schlesinger, whom I also knew and had a huge regard for and still do, wasn’t overburdened by modesty or deference, and used to basically – I don’t know if he was smoking a pipe, literally, at the time – but would sort of poke the stem of his pipe at the President of the United States and sort of treat him like a medium-bright graduate student. You know, that was Jim.

Smith: We’ve been told he treated everyone like that.

Talbott: Right. God knows I was on the receiving end of it plenty, but I deserved to be. But he came by his self-confidence and sense of his own intelligence
honestly. He has extraordinary intelligence and I found him kind of fun in that respect, but I can imagine how his boss would not.

Smith: You say you covered Ford in ’76. Was the White House too slow to take seriously either the possibility of Reagan running or the seriousness of the threat that Reagan might pose?

Talbott: I don’t have any searing insights on that. I think that they were slow. Now, when you say “too slow,” they were obviously too slow, because they didn’t respond in a way that limited the damage. As we sit here in 2010 and talk about this, one of the many pertinences about that whole episode was that a sitting President was challenged in the primaries within his party. That, then, fell into a pattern that was already established with Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter and would then be continued with George Herbert Walker Bush - that any sitting president that was challenged in the primaries would not be reelected for one reason or another. So what would prompt action have meant or effectively would’ve meant? I don’t know. Was there any way to stop the Reagan challenge? I think probably not. Not least because of the circumstances under which Jerry Ford became president.

Smith: It’s interesting. We’ve been told by people who worked on the campaign there were several flashpoints - maybe if things had been done differently, though it might not have prevented Reagan from getting into the race, it might not have given oxygen to the fire. For example, the Solzhenitsyn visit to Washington and the fact that Ford didn’t meet with Solzhenitsyn, Kissinger’s role in all of that fed very much the –

Talbott: I remember that episode very well, because my own specialty then and subsequently was Russia, the Soviet Union. And it felt like a big mistake at the time. It felt like a political mistake and a moral mistake. And, of course, as Kissinger’s own star fell - you were referring earlier to the way in which everybody took a sigh of relief when he was kept on by Ford - within a fairly short period of time, he was under attack from what have become known as the neo-Cons, as well as, kind of traditional Liberals, for not paying enough attention to moral politic as opposed to real politik. And the Solzhenitsyn thing was kind of a poster child for that.
Smith: One senses these cross-currents taking place during this period, where on the one hand, obviously, by the time of the convention détente had become a pejorative - almost like stimulus today - a word you’re not likely to hear from politicians. And yet it is in the Ford years when you have the joint Apollo/Soyuz mission. At the same time, you have Soviet proxy troops fighting in Angola. What was the point of détente in 1975? Was it something simply that Ford has inherited from Nixon?

Talbott: Well, there’s kind of two ways to answer that I would think, Richard. One would be sort of an independent analysis, but that is my own. And then the other is why it created the vulnerability for President Ford that it did. I’ll take them in that order. I thought that the controversy over détente and the criticism of it was exaggerated and not very sound. Which is to say I always found that détente was a kind of a no-brainer. You know, it had some vulnerabilities all along. One is that, whenever you have to attach a French word to a phenomenon or a policy in the United States, sooner or later you’re going to run into problems. You know, whether it’s rapprochement or détente. But the concept was pretty simple, which is, “Let’s reduce the tensions” - ‘tente’ meaning tensions and ‘de-’ meaning less of them.

In various ways, détente had been there since the Truman administration, and certainly the Eisenhower administration. However, making that the polestar for the policy created a couple of problems. One was that it contributed to a mindset in Washington that basically said, “Well, just as boys will be boys, Soviets will be Soviets and sometimes they will do nasty things, but they don’t go to our vital interests.” And that is simplistic. It meant making mistakes like ignoring or dising somebody with Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s stature when he comes to Washington.

The other thing was that it looked as though it was granting to the Soviets the geo-political and geographical room to maintain a sphere of influence internationally. And we might’ve come to it anyway in the conversation but I’ll mention it now - there was the whole business of the Sonnenfeldt Doctrine and whether we, the United States, should recognize an organic relationship between the Soviet Union and the Soviet leadership and the captive nations of
Eastern Europe which was highly offensive. It got Ford into big trouble, of course, in the campaign, in the debates, when he seemed to not recognize that Poland was under Soviet domination. All of that created a cascade effect, and Kissinger was particularly vulnerable to that over time because, frankly, he believed in it. I mean to say he really did believe in spheres of influence and balance of power and all that. And, of course, I think it was Ford himself in either a speech or an op-ed who began using the phrase ‘détente with strength,’ I believe that’s the case. Does that ring a bell?

Smith: Yeah, it does.

Talbott: Which was sort of a step towards retiring a phrase and trying to detoxify what has been part of your vocabulary.

Smith: Were you around the White House at the time of the fall of Saigon?

Talbott: I was around the White House all the time, but not in the sense that you mean, no. Not in the sense that you mean.

Smith: Were you surprised at all by the, for lack of a better word, I guess, resiliency? I mean, for years we had all been led to believe, whether it’s the domino theory or whatever, when you lose a war there’s a lasting, if not a permanent, diminution. And yet that summer, I believe, Ford was meeting with Sadat in Austria. The Middle East peace process was, if anything, accelerating. It didn’t seem as if the rest of the world had suddenly disregarded the United States. Was it surprising? We almost didn’t miss a beat.

Talbott: Well, I think maybe you’re either overstating the positive side or understating the negative side. The spectacle of the Americans being lifted off of the Embassy roof, the tidal wave of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regulars sweeping over all of, well, what turned out to be all of Indo China - most of it - was pretty stunning and sobering at the time. Where you’re right is that, by then, it was pretty clear that that was as far as it was going to go, that Indonesia was not at risk, the Philippines were not at risk, Singapore was not at risk, Malaysia, so forth and so on. And it was also apparent what common sense should’ve made apparent - that Hanoi marched to the beat of it’s own
drummer and it was not a cat’s paw of China, not to mention the Soviet Union.

And remember that the whole rationale for the Cold War, certainly for American policy in Southeast Asia, was that there was a global Communist menace that was essentially monolithic. That overlooked, long after there was evidence, the split between the USSR and the People’s Republic of China. And then, subsequently, underestimated the extent to which Vietnam was an independent actor in a lot of ways. I mean, it was highly dependent on the big guys for a lot of armaments, but in terms of its policies, its intentions, it was highly nationalistic. Though I think that fairly soon after the shock and humiliation of the fall of Saigon of South Vietnam, people began saying, “Well, wait a minute. How different is the world, exactly?” And that goes to the point.

Smith: I don’t mean to get off on a tangent here, but I’d be curious: what do you say to revisionists who, forty years later, suggest that the war could’ve been won if only—

Talbott: There are a couple of revisionists. I’ll take the school that you’re referring to. First of all, counterfactual history, you’re a professional historian – I am not – I find counterfactual history kind of fun as a teaching device and as a mind game.

Smith: It’s a parlor game.

Talbott: But, you know, it’s not of terrific utility because you could neither prove nor disprove any theory about what might have been. I’ve never found it terribly convincing. I think what it would’ve taken to win would’ve been so massive that it would’ve buckled. It was either going to buckle in the field or it was going to buckle at home. The fact of the matter is that it was buckling both places and we decided to let it buckle there rather than here. A number of our contemporaries are writing now about how Americans are not good at long wars and so forth and so on.

Smith: We’re getting practice.
Talbott: Yeah, well, but the experience may be providing additional evidence.

Smith: Right.

Talbott: Okay. The other revisionist theory which I find to be more interesting - I’ll call it the Lee Kuan Yew School - which is that we won. We won in the following sense: we, by creating such an impediment to what Lee Kuan Yew would characterize as Communist expansionism, and containing it, as it were, to Vietnam with obviously some pretty major implications for Cambodia and Laos, but particularly Cambodia, we did actually stop the dominoes from falling, including in the very small country in which Lee Kuan Yew lives, which is Singapore. He has made that case. Others have made that case. I don’t know, but I find that a little bit easier to entertain than the other one.

Smith: Two things, I realize they’re speculative, but I’m wondering to what sense the impending Reagan challenge and the criticism from the Right, generally, must’ve had on inhibiting the Ford White House from proceeding with normalization in relations with China and/or the Panama Canal treaties, both of which would have seemed to be logical and evolutionary – particularly in Panama, the administration was seriously negotiating.

Talbott: You bet.

Smith: But it didn’t go anywhere.

Talbott: I’ll say. No, I assumed you were going to raise Panama. That was huge. It was huge symbolically, it was huge in its own right, because, of course - and I think it was very unfortunate that Ronald Reagan chose to use that stick to beat up on Jerry Ford, because Jerry Ford’s instincts were absolutely right. Of course, subsequently, the Canal did revert and we haven’t suffered any geo-political damage as a result. I mean, we’ve got issues in the southern hemisphere, including Central America, including the Chinese mercantile growing presence and so forth and so on. But the notion that the loss of control of the Panama Canal constituted a strategic threat to the United States, or it was an injustice for us to give it back, never made sense. And Ford paid a real price for it, not least because he was on the defensive.
I think I remember at a White House correspondents’ dinner, it was one of these joke-y Washington rituals, I forget which one I used to have to go to, where he joked about it. He had a great big Panama hat. It wasn’t even a Panama hat. It was a sombrero, but he called it a Panama hat and he said something like, “They want to take this hat away from me, but it’s my Panama hat and I’m going to keep it.” He was trying to play it back, but it didn’t go over. I remember it didn’t work very well. It made him look silly. It made him look silly not least because it violated the first law of politics, which is never put on a silly hat. But it was a joke that didn’t work and that kind of underscored that it was a really damaging episode for him.

Smith: Could you see him learning the presidency?

Talbott: Yeah. It’s too bad Hugh Sidey isn’t around for your project. He was a great friend and mentor of mine at Time Magazine. Yeah, but in a good sense. I really liked Jerry Ford.

Smith: What did you like about him?

Talbott: His basic decency, his basic intelligence, his extraordinary sense of responsibility. The weight of history in a dictionary correct sense of the word – ironic. He had a sense of irony that, “What am I doing here?” But he didn’t let that paralyze him. He said, “Well, I’m here, so I’m going to do the best job I can.” I’ve always sympathized – he was so easy to caricature. You know, the bumbling thing, bonking his head, and stuff like that. He was probably the best athlete we’ve had in the Oval Office. I mean, I don’t know how good an athlete Teddy Roosevelt was. My sense was probably not terribly good, he just was incredibly vital. Jerry Ford played pretty serious football and swam every day and was coordinated and basically pretty smart and just very, very decent.

I thought he was a great guy. I wasn’t surprised, however, when Reagan gave him as hard a time as he did, and when Carter beat him because he had this huge burden, he had multiple burdens to bear. One was being an accidental president, or whatever you want to call somebody who’d never been elected in his own right. The other was he kind of had to carry the burden of Nixon
around because Nixon put him into the presidency. He had to then carry around the burden of pardoning Nixon, which I thought was absolutely the right thing to do at the time.

Smith: At the time?

Talbott: Absolutely thought it was the right thing to do. You know, we had to cauterize that wound, and cauterization hurts, and it hurt him big time. I think the polls showed that he paid a real price for that. Vietnam, it was on his watch that the inevitable occurred. And the other thing, I guess, is since he had not spent his life or at least decades driving for the presidency, he didn’t have that hard core of ambition and commanding presence that, even presidents who have not been successful or who had, you know, personalities that you would not think would make them good politicians – Nixon being the classic example. What Nixon did have was that will to be a leader that was just built into him by the time he attained the presidency. And Jerry Ford didn’t have that and I think that came through, “Really nice guy, but we can do better.”

Smith: Right.

Talbott: That was the attitude.

Smith: David Broder said, “He was the least neurotic President of my lifetime.”

Talbott: Least what?

Smith: Neurotic. He added that it was only later on that a lot of people realized, at least, in theory, this is the kind of person we claim we want as president.”

Talbott: I don’t know about least neurotic, but the point of David’s I would accept is, and I say this advisedly, because one president whose been an extraordinarily important friend to me in my life, that’s Bill Clinton. But I think to become president, there has to be something that mere mortals or near normal folks like myself would regard as a little crazy.

Smith: An obsessive quality.
Talbott: Yeah. Some combination of qualities that you realize are indispensable, both to get the job and to do it well, but you’re just as glad you don’t have yourself and you’re glad your spouse doesn’t have, if I can put it that way.

Smith: Yeah. I was just saying, it’s a TR and Taft test. Who do you want to be stuck on a desert island with?

Talbott: Who?

Smith: TR and Taft.

Talbott: Oh, yeah, TR and Taft.

Smith: And, you know, as much as I admire TR, I think I’d rather share the island with Taft, because he’d be a much less exhausting—

Talbott: As long as there were an ample supply of food.

Smith: — and a more mellow sort of companion, you know. TR would suck up all the oxygen.

Talbott: I don’t know. I think I’d go for TR

Smith: Would you? Well, he’d be entertaining.

Talbott: Yeah.

Smith: Let me ask you about Helsinki. Is that a classic case of something that is seen in one light at the time and subsequently comes to be seen very differently?

Talbott: You bet. Absolutely.

Smith: It seemed at the time as if there were no supporters. The Right obviously was critical, but I believe Carter criticized Ford on Helsinki during the ’76 campaign.

Talbott: I wouldn’t be surprised, but I don’t remember that. Yeah, let’s spend a minute on Helsinki, because I think it was a very important part of the Ford legacy. And before I get into it, you may or may not find this useful, but I remember being in Helsinki for the 20th anniversary and, as it happened, my brother-in-law, Derek Shearer, was the U.S. Ambassador there and they had a
huge conference. I was Deputy Secretary of State at the time and went over to
give a speech and participate, and Jerry Ford was there and stayed at the
Ambassadorial residence with Ambassador Shearer, as he then was. And I
spent some time with him and you might want to even talk to Derek, who is a
professor at Occidental.

Okay, Helsinki. Multiple plot shifts there. Remember what the original
purpose was: it was essentially a Soviet proposal and its purpose was to
concretize or sanctify the division between East and West. You know, it’s the
old thing, “But ours is ours and what’s yours is negotiable.” That was kind of
their philosophy. So, you take the Iron Curtain and you kind of write it into
international law and acceptance.

Smith: Why then? What was it about the Soviet leadership or the Soviet worldview
that required—?

Talbott: Look, there’s been a lot on that. I mean, the long and short of it was because
they could, or they thought they could, and they thought they should.
Remember that the essence of the Soviet mentality is a weird combination of
– it’s basically defensive in its core, but it’s defensiveness that manifests itself
offensively. You know, the old line was, I think Dimitri Simes may have said
it, but in any event, “There’s nothing more offensive than a Russian on the
defensive.” So, what they were always trying to do was to protect, protect,
protect, protect. The classic example of that - you could say the czars, as they
gobbled up much of Eurasia - but Stalin who, after being almost bled to death
by World War II then sets about to create these layers, concentric circles of
facile space essentially to protect the Soviet Union. It didn’t have to do with,
you know, the Communist Internationale or communizing the world. It had to
do with making sure that ‘Never again’. Okay?

Smith: Sure.

Talbott: So that, I think, was the mentality on the Soviet side behind what became
Helsinki. And it was quite controversial on the American side, whether to do
it at all. Kissinger writes about that, Ford writes about it, Kissinger in his
memoirs and Ford in his, I think. But in the end they decided to do it and they
- Max Kampelman in particular, who I assume you’ll talk to - it started, of course, as a negotiation that would lead to the CSCE, Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. And what happened in the course of that was that particularly the Americans, but with important input from key Europeans, saw an opportunity to jujitsu the dynamics here. And the instrument for doing so, of course, was legitimation of borders which the Russians wanted. The Soviets wanted to keep out for a long time, but ended up being included. And, instead of legitimating the Iron Curtain, the outcome legitimated the principle that the form of government under which people live is not just the business of that government, but is the business of the international community.

I’m grossly oversimplifying it, but that was really important because it created an opening for wedge initiatives to get the Soviets to accept certain principles, or at least pay lip service to them, and then allow international organizations, including the one that they cofounded, which had been the CSCE and became OSCE. And I think Helsinki was the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union. Now, you know, that doesn’t mean that once the final act was signed, that it was inevitable that by 1991 the Soviet Union or the Soviet empire would fall apart. I think that was very largely a function of Gorbachev coming into power, but it created pressures and caused sprouts to grow on the Eastern side of the Iron Curtain that might otherwise have taken a lot longer to develop.

Smith: And, at the time, Ford paid a political price.

Talbott: Yes. Well, he paid a political price because it looked like it was a peace treaty with the devil. That was essentially it. And there were a lot of things, regrettable things, dumb things said. Hal Sonnenfeldt is a very, very dear friend of mine and a colleague here at the Brookings Institution and a wise person whom I took advice from when I was in government myself. Now, he gave a speech - and you’ll have to check the date of this - to what was supposed to be an off-the-record meeting of American Ambassadors in London that got leaked. Evans and Novak lead to the headlines about the Sonnenfeldt Doctrine, which was essentially, “We’re going to let them have
their sphere of influence forever.” What Hal said was quite a bit more subtle and sophisticated than that, but there we were. It kind of fed not only into liberal opposition to the administration, but also to the rise of the neo-Cons. And then, of course, there was Ford’s what I can only describe as boneheaded misstatement of what he had meant to say in the debates about Poland, which just sort of, you know, “There you go again, right?”

Smith: He’d been to Poland. He had been to Romania and he’d seen the people in the streets. Cheney told us that in great detail, Stu Spencer; what everyone around him found so frustrating was, not that he made the original error, but that for a solid week, he would not step back from it.

Talbott: I assume you’ve talked to Brent.

Smith: Yeah, who knew instantly, “We have a problem.”

Talbott: Well, maybe this goes a little bit to one reason that the Ford presidency didn’t last. I think that, if he had had more experience at that level of government or had spent more of his life thinking about that experience, he would’ve had some software that would’ve said, “Error! Error!” and he would’ve in a not terribly felicitous way, would have backed out during the debate. “Well, you know, what I really meant to say was . . .”, but it just came out of his mouth and he said, “Well, I’ve got to live with that. It’s my story and I’m sticking by it.” And it really cost. I don’t think it cost him the election, but it sure hurt.

Smith: When you saw him twenty years later in Helsinki, did he feel vindicated?

Talbott: Yes, is the short answer. And you ought to talk to Derek about that. He was proud because, you know, in 1995, the Soviet Union was history. Had been on the ash heap of history for four years already at that point. Pretty much all of us who made speeches - it was a big international cast - and his own speeches are worth recalling. I mean, it was more memorable than a lot of other Jerry Ford speeches at that event.

Smith: A couple of quick things. You were at the ’76 convention?

Talbott: Yes.
Smith: How bitter was that? Remember, with the wives and the dueling entrances and all of the stagecraft and all.

Talbott: It made me glad that I didn’t have to cover a lot of conventions. I think it was the only – no, it wasn’t the only convention I covered – but I had the assignment of doing the reconstruction of how Bob Dole got selected for the ticket. Come to think of it, I’d been to a number of conventions. It didn’t strike me as particularly bitter. You know, conventions do not bring out the best in people and particularly politicians. That didn’t make a huge impression on me.

Smith: I don’t know whether this is part of your memory or not, but we’ve talked to a number of people, including recently Jim Baker, and the consensus is that John Sears made a fundamental strategic error in putting all their eggs in a procedural issue – that of having to name the vice president before the nomination as opposed to the far more emotionally galvanizing foreign policy issue.

Talbott: Sounds right.

Smith: And the Ford people consciously decided not to contest the Reagan platform. Kissinger was livid. There’s a wonderful story told by Tom Korologos. Kissinger made one of his numerous threats to resign and Tom says, “Henry, if you’re going to resign, do it fast. We need the votes.”

Talbott: Right. That’s very funny.

Smith: The Ford people basically decided to let them have it.

Talbott: It’s kind of coming back as you ask the question. That sounds right. And then, of course, it was four years later that Ford and Kissinger were back negotiating with Ronald Reagan about putting together a ticket that would’ve been a virtual co-presidency.

Smith: Was that serious?
Talbott: Oh, yeah, I think so. I wasn’t there, was I? I may have been there, but it sure felt serious at the time and I think Reagan entertained it. But Reagan’s own instincts correctly told him, “This is crazy.”

Smith: You know, it’s fascinating. People would talk about how Reagan would do this, Reagan would do that. And the Tea Party now is claiming Reagan. I often think, you know, Reagan is such a protean figure. Are you talking about the Reagan who was willing to put Dick Schweiker on his ticket and wanted to demonstrate his openness to moderate Republicans, or for that matter, Gerald Ford or George Bush four years later?

Talbott: I was going to ask, “Hello, what about George Bush?” My recollection is that he ended up on the ticket and he’s very much the ultimate moderate Republican.

Smith: Yeah.

Talbott: I’d still be a Republican, probably. I started off in life as a Republican and the ’64 Cow Palace convention in San Francisco pushed me in another direction. But, you know, George H. W. Bush was a paragon, is a paragon, of a side of the Republican Party that’s not much—

Smith: Whose had to pretend all these years in a sense to be something that—

Talbott: Had to resign from the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission. Yeah, I know the whole deal.

Smith: I have to tell you, I’ve been working for ten years on a suitably epic biography of Nelson Rockefeller. It opens with a thirty page reconstruction of that night, the Tuesday night at the Cow Palace where he is all but booed off the stage.

Talbott: I was there. I was there. I will never forget it as long as I live. This is wandering a bit.

Smith: No.

Talbott: What was I? It was ’64, so I was 18. I had just graduated from Hotchkiss and came from a moderate Republican family and one of my mentors at Hotchkiss
several years older than me was a guy named Jonathan Rose, who was Chappy Rose’s son. Chappy Rose you know from the Eisenhower administration. Chappy Rose was, I think, Deputy Secretary of Treasury, I believe. A very major figure in the Eisenhower administration. Anyway, so Jonathan Rose who went on to work for Nixon, got me a job working for Bill Scranton.

Smith: Short-lived job.

Talbott: Well, yeah, like for a weekend. Exactly. But in any event, Ann Brownell, Herbert Brownell’s daughter, was my boss and most of my job consisted of answering phones in the Mark Hopkins Hotel, I think it was - wherever the Scranton headquarters was. I’d gotten one pass to go to the Cow Palace and it was on the afternoon when Rockefeller was speaking. I was up in the bleachers and what I’m about to say sounds politically incorrect, but it was just objectively true – I was surrounded by little old ladies in tennis shoes and when Rockefeller came on, they started not only booing, but shouting and chanting, “You dirty lover. You dirty lover.” And I remember thinking to myself, “Not my Party.” And that was that.

Smith: And that night, one of those amazing moments in history, where you can see the page being turned because the next morning, it was not the same Republican Party.

Talbott: Yeah. That’s how you open the book? Well, that’s a great story.

Smith: Yeah. It’s almost as good as the ending.

How do you think Ford should be remembered? And do you think you would answer that question differently now than if you were asked twenty-five, thirty years ago?

Talbott: Nope and this is with one word and it’s a word he used, a four-letter word. H-e-a-l. He was a healing president and even though, you know, he wasn’t by a lot of standards, including reelection, a successful President, his overall effect was to suck the poison out of the body politic and on most issues - and the
ones I knew best and cared most about were foreign policy issues – his instincts were extremely good.

Smith: We talked to Jim Baker. Right before the Texas primary, Henry Kissinger is going to Africa to assert America’s support for majority rule in Rhodesia and the rest of the continent. And the people in the campaign are trying to persuade the President he doesn’t have to go, bad timing, so on and so forth. And, not only is he going to go, he’s going to have a press conference before he goes calling attention to this. And Baker went over to the White House to try to talk the President out of it. He said, “Ford’s puffing his pipe and he said, ‘You know, Jim, I think the thinking voters, the thinking Republicans of Texas, will understand this.’” And Baker says, “Mr. President, you don’t understand. There aren’t any thinking Republicans in Texas on this issue.” But Kissinger went and, you know, he lost 100 to nothing in the primary.

Talbott: Well, that was a clever comment of Baker’s. It, of course, wasn’t true. Of course there are thinking Republicans in Texas. They just didn’t think the same way. That’s the point. And, you know, being in tune with the Party and the nation, it’s a very contemporary issue now.

Talbott: I’ve got to go, but I was just going to recall one last thing myself about Ford as a good guy. I was the White House correspondent, I guess, by the time the election took place and I thanked Jerry Ford for getting me to many parts of the country I never would’ve otherwise seen, bouncing around with my Tandy Radio Shack precursor to laptops with alligator clips that you’d have to open up telephones and clip on so you could get your stories filed and stuff like that. It was a great experience. I really loved it. And then he lost.

Smith: Did you expect him to lose?

Talbott: Yeah. I mean, yeah, only because we had a lot of smart people at Time Magazine who really understood the polls. But at any event, the story I was going to tell is, you know, he was popular enough with the press that even those of us - I’m pretty sure I voted for Carter, all thanks to the little old ladies in tennis shoes. But, in any event, we all kind of felt bad for the guy and then he did a lovely thing. He basically said, “All of the members of the White
House Press Corps who’ve been travelling around with me are invited to come out with me to Palm Springs just as long as you leave me alone out there and we’re going to just charge the hell out of your companies for the seats on the back-up, the press plane, the Air Force One press plane, and you can bring your families for $5 apiece.” So, you know, I took my two-month old son, who traveled for virtually nothing and we had ten lovely days in Palm Springs.
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Smith: It’s hard to know where to begin. Obviously, I’d like to hear you talk about Spencer-Roberts and how the whole business of political consulting really came to be, particularly in California. Had it existed elsewhere, or was that one of the many things in which California lead the way?

Spencer: Well, as far as I can determine, California led the list. The functions of a political campaign managing firm have been conducted for years in different ways, at different times in history. The Boss Tweed era, Tammany Hall, all of those things were doing basically the same things, and in the Greek days they were probably doing it. The formulation of a company designed to run campaigns basically, be they candidates or issues oriented, started in California. I think they started because of the initiative process which was Hiram Johnson’s baby.

Smith: What is the initiative process?

Spencer: The initiative process in California is one where you can qualify for the ballot any issue that you want that meets a certain standard. An example: a bill that the legislature wouldn’t pass, you can take it to the general public. At the time Hiram Johnson initiated the process, there was a lot of corruption in California. There was a company called Southern Pacific that owned the state. They owned the Democrat Party and they owned the Republican Party, and all the legislators that went with them. This is sort of what Hiram Johnson, a reform person, was trying to get out. At that time and place I think it was good.

Smith: It really was the height of the Progressive Era.

Spencer: Right. So, that was passed. Southern Pacific still was prevailing in many ways. There was a firm in San Francisco started by Clem Whittaker and Leone Baxter, a man and wife, called Whittaker and Baxter. Their big client
was Union Pacific. They got involved very heavily in the initiative process in the state. A candidate here and candidate there, that sort of thing – and that was in the 30s – that’s how far back it goes. Then there was a period of time where nobody was doing that. Individual lawyers would run campaigns, or political junkies, or things of this nature. Then two guys by the name of Bill Ross and Herb Baus, in 1958 roughly, started a firm which was the same in LA as Whittaker and Baxter. It was just a mirror of them. One came out of the Chamber of Commerce and one was a newspaper writer-type guy. Then in 1960 Bill Roberts and I formed Spencer-Roberts and our model was these two companies. We were young bucks working in the bottom line of campaigns here and there and so forth. We thought, “If those guys can make a living at it, why can’t we make a living at it, because this is what we love to do.”

Smith: Can I back up one second, because back in the 30s you had the great Epic, in every sense of the word, campaign with Upton Sinclair. Allegedly, Louie B. Mayer tapped into all of this Hollywood money – is that true? Was the movie industry that unified and powerful?

Spencer: The movie industry was unified at that level, the studio level, and very powerful. Very powerful. Had a lot of money and spent it that way. But nobody was as powerful as Southern Pacific.

Smith: What was the source of their power?

Spencer: Land, and they had the Huntingtons, the Stanfords, a lot of those groups. It was basically a northern California–San Francisco-based group of people. A lot of wealth was involved in Southern Pacific and the railroads. The railroads were like airlines today, they were money-makers. As they went through this valley, Coachella Valley, and put the track through they got a section on each side of the track, so they owned all that land from one end of the state to the other.

Smith: Would money exchange hands in the legislature?

Spencer: Oh yes. Even beyond that it changed hands. Artie Samish was the next big powerbroker and he was a lobbyist, and he went to jail. He represented the liquor industry and tracks – I’m not sure whether he worked with Southern
Pacific or not. I would be surprised if he didn’t, because they were famous for hiring up everybody. But anyway, that was our model at Spencer-Roberts, and in June of 1960 we had been working with the county Republican committee in Los Angeles, with the director and field director. There was going to be a change in chairman, we could see it coming. All those jobs are at the pleasure of the chairman. It’s like a baseball manager, you’d better feel what you’re going to do because you’re only going to be here three years. So we said, “Let’s start a firm.” So we put up $500 each and we rented a little office for $37 a month in the back end of a travel agency and started the company.

Smith: What were you doing at the time?

Spencer: Prior to that? I was field director for the LA County Committee and Bill was the executive secretary of it. We were running the LA County Committee.

Smith: So you had a political background?

Spencer: Oh yeah, and prior to that we were both very active in the Young Republicans, and I was very active with Pat Hillings, a congressman who replaced Dick Nixon. I grew up in Dick Nixon’s congressional district, so I knew him well. Pat succeeded him and I did a lot volunteer work and other work for Pat.

Smith: Was it possible to know Dick Nixon well?

Spencer: Not in the sense that you and I might know each other, or other people. But, yeah, you could get to know him a little. You could know what he was about. He was a very talented guy, and tactically, he was as good as I’ve ever seen politically. I always said he ought to be a campaign manager, not a candidate. He had a deep paranoia, and that was his stumbling block.

Smith: Remember the famous line Kissinger once said – that something terrible had happened to him [Nixon] as a young man – think what he might have been if he’d been loved.

Spencer: Henry had a good example there. So we started the company. We had three clients going in. Two congressional campaigns and one state legislature race. We ran them, we won two, lost one.
Smith: That was the Kennedy-Nixon year.

Spencer: Al Bell was the congressman, Johnny Rousselot who later became Birch Society director. He was running and it was an upset. We won with him, he was a great candidate, but none of us knew he was involved with the Birch people at the time.

Smith: For people who don’t know, tell us about the Birch Society and the influence that they held in the early 60s.

Spencer: The John Birch Society was started by a guy back in Boston by the name of Robert Welch, who had very strong feelings on Communism. Very strong feelings. Very anti-Communist and all kinds of theories about how it should be handled. The basic theory that I saw, as I looked at it, was that he wanted to organize cells just like the Communists organize cells and fight them on the ground in the same manner. Some of his concepts, and he wrote a book, a manual, and some of his concepts in it were just over the hill. They weren’t the real world.

Smith: Eisenhower was…

Spencer: …a conscious agent [of the Communist conspiracy]. And many others who I don’t even remember now.

Smith: Earl Warren, certainly.

Spencer: Earl Warren, yeah. But John was an outstanding candidate. John Rousselot was on the pathway to the United States Senate or the governorship of California. There were a bunch of young guys around him like myself, we were all the same age, who were prepared to go that route. The first step was Congress. In fact, two years prior, when Hillings tried for attorney general, and the seat was open, we decided we were going to run John then. But Nixon was vice president, he was the power in California politics at the time and some of the fat cats in the district – the money people – they were a little leery of John because of his age and his aggressiveness and so forth.

Smith: It’s ironic, given the Nixon congressional district – aggressiveness would not seem to be a disqualifying factor.
Spencer: No, but, Nixon didn’t feel that way, the finance guys did, and they got to him. John and I were in Washington for a national Republican convention and we were summoned to the vice president’s office. Basically, the message that we were delivered by the vice president was, “Quit screwing around, you ain’t running. Pres Lieberg is going to be our candidate,” so forth and so on. So John and I got out and we got in a cab and John turns to me and he says, “What do you think?” I said, “Screw him, let’s go.” And John says, “No, no, no, the finance guys ____________.” So, Pres Lieberg ran and got beat by Kasem, an Arab candidate in the Democrat Party in a pretty conservative district.

Smith: But of course, ’58 was a disaster for Republicans.

Spencer: Yeah, but it still should never have been lost. It should have been a tight race, but never lost. There was like a thousand vote difference. So immediately we geared up, we’re going to go. Then John, he was one of our clients, but the question of the Birch thing…during the campaign in 1960, John had gone back after the Nixon ultimatum and got a job at FAA or FHA-FHA. I think that was part of the deal to keep him out of the race, but he made a lot of friends, he was the kind that made friends, and during the campaign we were getting checks from Arkansas for a grand, or I’m getting checks from Texas for two grand, and, in my naive way, I said, “Boy, John made a lot of good friends when he was at FHA, right?” And nothing was ever said, so we go on, we win, it’s all over with.

Bill and I had no clients now, so John says, “I want you to come to Washington with me and set my staff up.” So, okay, we get on an airplane, on a midnight flyer, and we’re flying back, we’re over Kansas and John starts giving me these quotes like, “Eisenhower’s a conscious agent,” and I said, “John, you’re talking right out of the Birch manual.” I really didn’t know much about it then. He didn’t say much. I said, “John, are you a John Bircher?” He said, “Yeah.” There was a seat open between us, I almost climbed over the seat and choked him. We started an argument and argued all the way into the old airport in Washington, now National, I guess. The guy was meeting us there from New York, a young Republican guy, he was a very
conservative guy, Bundy Clark. He had a house in Georgetown and that’s where we were going to stay.

We get in the car, I turn to Bundy and I said, “Let me tell you about this guy, Bundy, he’s a John Bircher.” I thought he was going to drop. We were in Maryland, we were at the Baltimore airport – there was a long entrance – one way this way, one way that way, I thought he drove off over this way, I mean he was so upset. We sat up the rest of the night, until six in the morning beating on him. Our basic premise was, “Well you’ve got to get out of that thing, or you’re done.” Couldn’t do it – couldn’t convince him. In fact, we even warned him that sooner or later the press would do an expose and then you are toast in Congress. The Santa Barbara News-Press, old man Storch did it, and then the LA Times followed up and then John, Ed Hiestand, and Jimmy Utt, all California congressmen were members and they were all toast after that.

That was the end of Ed Hiestand. He came back and ran for Congress later. The interesting thing about the Birch Society at that time, there were members of the Chandler family that were involved. They had such a big family – cousins, uncles, there were some of the Chandler’s who were involved in the Birch Society and yet they did one of the best exposes of the Society that was done. But John, the next step he took was he became the national director. The Birch Society would have died, but John was so good that he kept it going. He didn’t get it going this way, up, so to speak, but he did keep it on even keel. When he finally quit that job it just disappeared. He kept it alive for about two years, in my mind.

Smith: So by the early sixties, paint a picture of the California Republican party. It’s not that long, after all, since Earl Warren had given the state in a sort of bipartisan way. Then of course, you had Nixon. But you also had Tom Kuchel in the Senate, the classic liberal Republican.

Spencer: [Governor] Goody Knight. Once Nixon got into the VP spot, ’53, he’d only been in the Senate two years, and he had ambitions. You could tell at the time. Once he got into the VP spot he used that podium or that platform in California. He was a smart politician in the sense that he knew, “I’ve got to
take on my base first.” So we had a troika. We had Warren, or remnants of Warren, of which Kuchel was a part of, and we had Goody Knight, and there was basically a power struggle between Goody’s people and Warren’s people, and Nixon’s people. He started organizing, he basically started taking the state over. Kuchel, who was a client of ours in ‘62, he didn’t like that kind of stuff and he wasn’t good at that internal politics. He was a statesman, Tommy was. He liked to think in big terms and so forth.

Print media was the thing then, there wasn’t electronic media, and Tommy would just periodically get in a station wagon in San Diego and start and go right up the state and stop and see every editor and every publisher and it paid off for him. He had great press support, with the exception of papers like the Santa Ana paper which was almost pro-Birch in their era. But all the way up, the McClatchys, who detested Republicans, supported Tommy. So he had that kind of support, but he had no party support. He wasn’t as liberal as his enemies perceived him to be, but he didn’t do anything to change that.

Smith: Does he illustrate, it’s a cliché, but part of the problem with moderates in these internecine battles is – they are moderate. They are not passionately driven to take over an organization. They could see nuance, they can see all sides…

Spencer: They see two sides to the question – they are not single-minded. Yeah, that’s one of the weaknesses when you look at the internal politics of either party, in fact, as far as that goes. But Tommy was German and he was bull-headed and he made a lot of mistakes. I saw a fundraiser at the California Club with probably the thirty richest guys in southern California when he was a United States Senator. It was the time of the Berlin Wall, Kennedy I think was president, and he [Kuchel] gave his speech, so to speak. Henry Salvatori, a solid conservative oil guy, roughhewn Italian, was a driller or something before he made his money, stood up and he says, “Tommy, what are you going to do about the Wall?” Tommy danced around the answer. Statesman-like, Kennedy-esque answer. Henry stands up again, he says, “Tommy, I asked you a question. What are you going to do about the Wall?” Tommy dances some more. I’m in the back of the room, and I said to myself, “This is
the beginning of his downfall. These guys are never going to forget this
meeting.” And Henry Salvatori was the millionaires’ spokesman, that’s all.

Smith: What is fascinating is that so small a group of people could have such
influence on a statewide campaign.

Spencer: Well, they were the money. They had the campaign money. They then went
out and next time found a candidate, Max Rafferty. They said, “Tommy, if
you’re not going to listen to us, we’re going to find somebody who is going to
listen.” It was a bloodbath, that primary. It was a tough one and Tommy
wasn’t prepared for it.

Smith: ’62 – did Kuchel have a primary foe?

Spencer: No. If he did, he wasn’t a major one.

Smith: Of course, that’s the year Nixon did have a significant challenge in the
primary.

Spencer: See, that’s another thing in the relationship of those two groups: Warren and
Nixon. Tommy wouldn’t endorse Nixon in ’62. They are both on the ticket,
and I said, “You’ve got to endorse Nixon.” But he said, “But my labor
friends,” he had great support in labor. I said, “Your labor friends understand
that you have to support Nixon.” I was with him when we walked out of that
hotel to Nixon’s office at Adams, Duque and Hazeltine, and he sat there and
told Dick Nixon he wasn’t going to endorse him.

Smith: What was Nixon’s reaction?

Spencer: He was a pro about it. He was a professional about it. He understood the
whole thing, but also he would always say to himself, “I’ll get this son of a
bitch.” That’s Nixon. I could see it in his eyes. Tommy lost complete touch
with the state and his party out here. Nixon filled the void and took it away
from those people. Then Goody Knight was sort of an aberration. Oh, and the
other factor and personality in that big group was Bill Knowland.

Smith: Blustery guy?
Spencer: Yeah, but he decided he wanted to be governor in ’58 when Goody was sitting governor. He came out and he had the base – a lot of the base – he shoved Goody out. Goody runs for the Senate. Yeah, he shoved Goody out, he ran for governor and the main part of his platform was right-to-work, which was suicidal. Now Nixon stayed clear of all this. He was, “Let these guys kill themselves off and then I won’t have any trouble.” And they did. Goody Knight – there were billboards put up that said, “Brown and Knight, Pat Brown and Goody Knight.” Of course, Goody didn’t know anything about it. I’ve seen that happen again after that, but that was the emergence of Nixon taking over the party in California, which he owned until Reagan came along. The Birch Society and its involvement was never deep in the party. None of the finance guys were into that – they knew what it was.

Smith: The whole issue of extremism is visited in the ’64 GOP primary campaign, before the convention. As for Kennedy in ’63, what’s your sense? Had Kennedy lived, would his re-election have been a formality?

Spencer: I don’t think so. I’m not sure what would have happened, but as I looked at Kennedy’s first two years there, he was accomplishing nothing. It was wearing off. I think it would have been a contest. I don’t think it was a foregone conclusion that Kennedy would be an automatic.

Smith: And if Rockefeller had not gotten the divorce and remarried, was he the odds-on favorite for the Republican nomination in ’64? Or was the party already evolving to the point where Goldwater would be?

Spencer: You can ask a lot of people that question and get a lot of answers, but my assessment would be simply that he would have been a better candidate if he hadn’t gotten divorced and gotten involved. But Barry Goldwater had already laid a very strong base, nationally in the party vis-à-vis Buckley and Rusher and those people, and the west and the south was more comfortable with Barry. Today it’s not true, but in that era, we were never comfortable with New Yorkers in the west and the south. It was a New York thing. See what I mean?

Smith: Was it the New York condescension?
Spencer: To a degree. Which Dewey personified when he ran, and that is what was in everybody’s memory politically. But Nelson, if he hadn’t done that – he almost won the California primary. He wouldn’t have gotten the nomination, if he wanted. It was locked up. But it proved that Barry Goldwater was vulnerable and that he had some weaknesses.

Smith: Now you had been approached by both candidates about running their campaigns?

Spencer: No, never approached by Goldwater. Never. We got the Rockefeller campaign based on Tommy Kuchel’s recommendation. George Hinman went to Tommy and talked to him and we went to New York and we cut a deal.

Smith: Let me ask you, one of the things that has been said over the years is, for whatever reason Rockefeller would never put all of his trust in a Jim Farley, or Louis Howe…and that George Hinman, who was a beloved figure in many quarters and a great gentleman, was no Jim Farley.

Spencer: No he wasn’t. But he functioned very well for Nelson in the sense that as National Committeeman, he had made a lot of connections, and he knew a lot of people in a lot of states. And what George was doing was going around hiring people in individual areas and regions and states to do the Jim Farley type of activities. But also, the Rockefeller organization that sat in New York was top heavy. I mean Ronan, I can go down the list, and they second guessed us all the time in California. But we had Nelson’s support, basically, because Nelson’s attitude was simply, these guys know California, you guys don’t. He was a practical guy. But they were always second guessing us. George had to live with that on a daily basis, and it had to have hampered him.

Smith: Was Ronan particularly heavy handed?

Spencer: I thought he was. He thought he was pretty brilliant, and I guess he was pretty brilliant in some ways. He knew how to get to Nelson, and he knew how to be the last guy in the room. Right? Which is an important ingredient when you are dealing with people like this and there were a couple of others. The press guy, McManus, he was pretty good. He was a pro. The advance guys were
good. ________________, but there were others who I can’t remember now, but they were all Ronanites, so to speak, intellectuals.

Smith: Funny you say that because one thing about Rockefeller is that long before the term caught on, he himself was a policy wonk.

Spencer: Yes, he was.

Smith: Ideas mattered. Programs mattered.

Spencer: Yes.

Smith: The irony was, here is a guy who thinks that the way to become president, at the head of a party that’s increasingly suspicious of government, is to demonstrate a genius for government.

Spencer: That’s right. But you know something else I noticed about him? In all those top – Nixon, Barry – I didn’t work with him – but all those people – the toughest guy I ever heard talk about the Communist threat in Russia, was Nelson Rockefeller. He talked in terms that I thought to myself, “If he wins, he’s going to be dangerous.” He was tough. He was never perceived as that. And I asked him the question one time, I said, “Why are you this way?” He says, “Well, if you were a Rockefeller, they won’t mind.” Which was a very upfront answer, I thought. I said, “Okay, now I understand.”

Smith: You think that side of him never really came across to voters?

Spencer: No, it never did. Because, in many ways, it seemed like he was always talking domestic and concerned about domestic. When you went into the White House, Ford almost gave him the assignment of domestic. He gave him control of domestic counsel, and that’s how Jimmy Cannon got in there. Then Rumsfeld and Cheney jerked it out from under him. He liked it, the domestic issues. He had a feel way ahead of his time – the race issue – he had a real feel for it. Where he got it, I don’t know. All the money they spent at Spelman, or I don’t know what it was, his friendship with Jackie Robinson – but in ’64 we had a problem. We were down twenty odd points in January and the election was in June.
So we had to do two things. First, we had to destroy Mr. Goldwater. Secondly, find some kind of base somewhere, somehow. So we scheduled a meeting of the professional black types at the Statler Hotel in LA – a breakfast meeting which he hated. He didn’t like to get up in the morning, and he was terrible when you got him up in the morning to give a speech. So I set this meeting up and I had this black guy working with me, Don Taylor, nice guy. He set it up and I expected 35 people. 240 people showed up with their best dress, best hat on, lawyers, bankers, accountants – all blacks. I’m stunned at this thing. So when the thing is over with, I went up and I said, “Nelson, I’m stunned. I don’t understand this. What’s the basis of this.” He said, “Well, I bet you they are all graduates from black colleges.” So I went back and I had Don check, and they were! They felt they owed Nelson Rockefeller something.

So, being a Paul, I said, okay there’s something to hang my hat on. We’ll jump on this one. But, in a primary sense, there were no blacks in the Republican Party, so I put an organization together north and south where we went out and starting in March, we went into the black communities with money and re-registered 90,000 blacks to the Republican Party. Now you couldn’t do that unless you had a message. Nelson was the message because of his support of the black colleges and Jackie Robinson came out and helped me, which was important.

Smith: Was he a good campaigner?

Spencer: Yeah. The kind of guy that was issue oriented. He was interesting. But, anyway, and we did probably 20,000 in Alameda County and north, so we were able to utilize that. And the race was very close. It wouldn’t have been that close if we hadn’t got those 90-100,000 votes in.

Smith: I’ll tell you something, because we talked about this years ago, and I know over the years there has been a lot of speculation that the birth of Nelson, Jr., was the tipping point. You’re not the only one who believes, that it was at least a contributing factor.
Spencer: It was. At the time I thought it was. The scenario – how it came about – Happy came out and campaigned with him and she was great. But she was really pregnant. In fact, we were in the Hollywood Palladium, a big Republican gathering and his good friend Mark Hatfield is brought down to be the emcee and to introduce him, and it was a hostile audience of fat cat Republicans, and it all kind of indicated - early hissing and stuff before he could hardly give his speech. Mark Hatfield folded. He didn’t know what to say about it. And he had a hard time saying anything good about Nelson, when he was introducing him. Then Nelson, in his way, he got up there and he stuck it to him. I mean, he stuck it to him. But he was mad. He walked off stage, Happy walks off, I’m back there behind the curtain. We’re walking out to the limo, and Nelson turns around and he says, “I’m so pissed off I could belt ya!” He says this to Happy. Happy says, “Go ahead, Nelson. That’ll make a hell of a headline.” I mean, she was a great gal. They get in the car and drive off and he’s steaming. She was that kind of lady.

Smith: His anger, it wasn’t directed at her, but it was just…

Spencer: If you’d been there, it would have been you.

Smith: Yeah.

Spencer: He was mad and he was mad at Mark Hatfield. So anyway, we got a phone call – Bill and I prior to the primary on Tuesday, June 2, and about four days out – five days out, and it’s Hinman. He says, “Will there be any political consequences if Happy had this baby prior to the primary?” Bill and I didn’t even have to consult. I said, “Hey, George, you got that place up there Pocantico – you can go have the kid there and hide it, but DO it! It will make a hell of a difference.” Our campaign of destruction was based on overcoming the image that he was a playboy, that he was a philanderer, that he ran around. They had effectively tagged him with that early in the campaign, so we had countered it by saying that you can’t trust this guy Goldwater with a nuclear button, and all these sort of things. And it worked because in the polling data we were coming up like this [illustrates his point with hand gestures]. It was working. Then all of a sudden all the birth did was reopen that wound, which
we’d spent two million dollars trying to solve. That’s why we were opposed to it.

**Smith:** I want to tell you something that I think may or may not come as news to you. There was more than gossip at the upper levels of the campaign for years — no one would go on the record, of course — that, in fact, labor was induced. That they actually thought that — and Happy basically confirmed that in a conversation that I had with her last year. What does that tell you about their political judgment?

**Spencer:** It tells me that Ronan prevailed, because there were people in New York that believed that.

**Smith:** How out of touch can you be?

**Spencer:** I don’t know. I guess I rationalize it this way, I said to myself, “Well if he’d won it, the primary, he still wasn’t going to win the nomination.” It wasn’t going to turn the world around.

**Smith:** Could Goldwater, though, have been stopped? Might they have turned to a Scranton, or somebody?

**Spencer:** Goldwater had that thing locked up. It was locked up. The Scranton effort which came about in Frisco, probably would have had more life, but it would never had got the job done. They controlled the machinery – I was given a room over in Oakland – that’s how they controlled – I wasn’t invited. I hung out with Dick Gregory and a bunch of black friends of his, and I was going to more black bars than I’d been to in my life. ‘Cause I was the enemy.

**Smith:** Were you in the hall the night that Rockefeller spoke?

**Spencer:** No! They wouldn’t let me in the hall. He could have given Kennedy a battle though. Get out of California – he would have given Kennedy a battle. It would have been his money versus Joe’s money – and it would have been a donnybrook.

**Smith:** Stop and think. If you start looking at the electoral college – what would Nelson Rockefeller’s appeal have been in the south?
Stu Spencer  December 2, 2008

Spencer: Not much.

Smith: Which is where, obviously, there’s disaffection with Kennedy because of civil rights. You can make a case that Goldwater at least had a base, in the south and Rocky Mountain states. It is really tough to see how Rockefeller in ’64, particularly against Johnson…

Spencer: In ’64 I can see him – you could cherry pick New Jersey, you had New York, the New England combine, and you had a ballot you could put on Ohio, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and those states. You had a chance. It’s similar to Ford. We knew he couldn’t win – I knew he couldn’t win the south, with Reagan or Carter. So I never spent any time there, I never spent any money. I gave my field director, Margaret Tutwiler, who now is with the State Department, Baker’s number one gal. She was a twenty-one year old girl when she came to work for me. She was a receptionist, and after the primary she came in, as a lot of young girls were doing in those days, and said, “I want more responsibility. I want some of the action.” It was the growth of the women’s movement. She came from a very wealthy family in Birmingham – they owned the town. So I said, “Okay, Margaret, you’re going to Birmingham as state director of Alabama, and your budget is $20,000.” Thinking in my own mind, “She’ll get some of Daddy’s money if she wants to make the show right.” Right? Of course, that was illegal because we were federally funded, but it happens every now and then. So anyway, she went down there and did a hell of a job. But that’s how much I thought…

Smith: By the way, in later years it was said she was one of the very few people in the Reagan administration who would return Gerald Ford’s calls.

Spencer: Sure, because she had worked for Gerald Ford and she loved him. All those girls, that whole group of girls and I had about twenty of them. One morning there was a ringleader in it, who was one I really disliked the most, not because she was a ringleader, but because she was trying to work her way to the top in different ways. So she came in, it was really obvious to me, she put this group together – they all came into my office and I had such a little office, it was littler than this – I said, “We’ve got to go in the assembly room. There’s twenty of you.” Well, basically, their complaint was, or their request
was that they were tired of being called secretaries. They wanted to be assistants. I says, “I’ll call you anything you want, just go back to work.” But she was in that group.

Smith: ’64 sees Reagan with a famous speech on Goldwater’s behalf and then you’ve got the ’66 campaign. How did you come to be running the Reagan campaign?

Spencer: Well, I was shocked, surprised. In interim periods, off years, we’d do a lot of city council races and related stuff like that – trying to stay alive. Although we made, relatively speaking, we made a lot of money with Nelson. I paid more in taxes than I’d ever made in a single year prior to that. So, all of a sudden we felt kind of financially secure – semi. So anyway, we were sitting around doing whatever we were doing, and at the time about late November-December ’63 – we’d been doing some council races in L.A. Got a call from Kuchel, and he asked if we’d have any interest [in running the Rockefeller campaign]. And our answer was simple – we’re always looking for clients. We didn’t think much about it.

The next thing you know, we get a call from George Hinman. He comes out and spends some time with us. And we’re talking, talking. Finally he called and asked us to come to New York. We talked to Nelson, talked to Ronan, talked to a few other people, and went back to our hotel – we stayed at the Waldorf. We were going to leave the next day in the afternoon. Then that morning George called and he says, “Change your flight.” So we went up to Pocantico, or whatever it is, and it was cold and snowy. We had a driver and everything. We consummated a deal.

We went back to the city and waiting for us was Nick Timmins of Time Magazine. Nick’s brother was married to one of my partner’s sisters. That’s the only reason he knew what the hell was going on. So he took us to – what was that restaurant that was a big sports hangout? [Toots Shores] – the guy’s name in New York? Well, anyway, we went there for dinner. It had been my ambition in life at that point to have lunch or dinner there, so he took us there for dinner. He naturally had an exclusive. We started the campaign and the
first thing we do is the survey research, and man, he was like 27%, Nelson was – he was in trouble. We were like, “Ohhhh.”

Smith: Was it the divorce and remarriage, in particular, or the liberal image, the New Yorker?

Spencer: That was just a piece of it – there was the New Yorker, the liberal stigma that he had. He should be a Democrat, he shouldn’t be a Republican. That was how he got that campaign and then – this is ironic, I think. We got through that and ’65 comes along and there were rumors that Reagan was looking at running and they were talking, but we didn’t pay much attention to that stuff. He had been Barry’s chairman out there. We got a call from his brother, Neil, one day. He takes us to lunch and he asks if we had any interest in working with Reagan. We said, “Hadn’t even thought about it. Let us think about it.” Well, at the same time, right after that, and this had never happened to us before, George Christopher, the other leading candidate called us, and asked us to run his campaign. So first in line position between two major candidates, so we had a decision to make. So we’d gone out and met with Reagan at his house – he and Nancy. We talked for hours. We went back and Christopher would come down to see us and we’d talk. Bill and I were really in a quandary. Part of the success of your business is picking winners, but still, by the same token.

Smith: Presumably, the reason they were both interested…

Smith: Presumably the reason, ironic as it may seem, that Ronald Reagan was interested in hiring you, was because of the relative success that you had in the Rockefeller campaign.

Spencer: Yeah, that’s correct. It showed how pragmatic Reagan was, too. He visited his in-laws in Arizona and met with Barry while he was there and he indicated to Barry that he was going to run in California for the governorship, and had pretty well made his mind up. They talked about it – running, and what he should do and shouldn’t do. At the end of it, sort of a throw in, Barry said, “By the way, if I was going to run in California, I’d pick those sons of bitches Spencer-Roberts.” End of conversation. Well, Reagan was the kind of guy
that was pragmatic. People didn’t realize that. In the end, it was a recommendation.

Smith: And that was, presumably, a back ended tribute to the job of destruction that you had done in ’64.

Spencer: That is correct - the fact that we’d given him such a hard time. So then the discussion got very, very intense, back and forth, and Bill and I had to really struggle to make a decision. But we finally came to the conclusion that Reagan had a quality that most candidates don’t have. People don’t remember this, but George Christopher was the favorite. He was the choice of the party establishment, so to speak. He was the newspaper peoples’ – for example, Fiddler(?) – not this actor who had given one speech. But we saw the potential in Reagan and we also knew what George was all about. He had plateaued out, he was never going to get any better than he was. He was a good man, he was a smart guy, but he was dull as hell and all of that. And he came from the north, which was not a plus in California in those days.

So we made the decision to go with Reagan. Reagan called us, it was in one of his trips over to Arizona, and we’d been stalling him and he called us and he said, “When the hell you guys going to get off the pot?” I said to him, “Hey, we don’t even know if you’re a Bircher. We’ve been investigating you, we don’t even know what the hell you’re all about.” He said, “Okay, be at the house tomorrow night at seven o’clock and we’ll discuss it.” So we showed up and he’s sitting there, his legs crossed, he’s got the reddest socks on you’ve ever seen in your life. It’s his way of saying, ‘I’m a Pinko.” . So anyway, we talked at length and we finally said, “Okay, we’ll do it.” We had to consummate the financial deal with Holmes Tuttle and those guys, because he never even understood that, or cared about it, or touched it. So that was the beginning.

Smith: Did you see him then, or did he see himself then, as a potential president?

Spencer: I didn’t. We didn’t. We didn’t even see him yet as a governor. The other part of the question is hard to answer. Instinctively, I think that was the plan. Instinctively, I think that they had talked it over and they said, “Let’s roll the
dice. We’re not going to make it in this other business anymore, let’s go to this new business.” I don’t know that for a fact, but that could be.

Smith: Was he as remote as - almost like FDR. Here’s this guy who had millions of “friends” but very few friends.

Spencer: That’s true. He had a lot of acquaintances, he had very few friends. His friends were Nancy’s friends. She was the one who had the friends and brought them in and he went along.

Smith: Historically, I’d say, if it hadn’t been for Mary Lincoln, there would not have been a President Lincoln. If Nancy Reagan had never happened into his life, would he have become President of the United States?

Spencer: No, he would have never become governor or president. She was the driving personal force behind him, that was smart, that learned quickly. In May ’65 we said we’re going to do an exploratory committee. He didn’t know what we were talking about, but we’re going to do an exploratory committee, because you may bomb, you may not have it. You may not be acceptable, and you’ve got to have an out. So we’ll do an exploratory committee and when we get to January, roughly in that period, we’ll see how you did, what’s going on and so forth. And that was our period of watching him. We were five months into that before Bill and I became convinced that this guy could do it, but I think he was thinking all along, I’m going to run. I mean, he was running. Do you see the difference?

Smith: Yeah.

Spencer: It would have been interesting in history if we had set down and said, “We don’t think you can do it.” It would have been interesting what the reaction would have been. At that time we said, “Hey, this is a real horse, and let’s go!”

Smith: How unpopular was Pat Brown by that time? How much of a factor was Reagan turned out to be a star and how much of it was that Brown, by that point, had worn out his welcome?
Spencer: A great deal of it. It was two things: you’ve got to believe in miracles to be a good candidate, and number two: you got to have a lot of luck. I have never seen a luckier politician than Ronald Reagan was in his whole career.

Smith: Including losing the ’76 fight to Gerald Ford?

Spencer: That’s right. But Pat Brown had worn his welcome out to a great degree. He still had a lot of support because of who Reagan was. Reagan was an intruder into this process. But he’d been there for two terms. The dysfunction in the Democrat Party at that time, Unruh and Brown, the two major leaders were at each other’s throat. Jesse was ___________. Brown had basically committed that he would not run for a third term and it was Jesse’s turn and he’d backed down and that just turned Jesse off. So there were all kinds of things going on out there that were helpful to Reagan. And I’m sure that George Christopher saw those things, too. The best way of saying it is, the nomination for the Republican Party was worth having in the governor’s race in that year 1966.

Smith: Plus, 1966 turned out to be a good year for the Republicans bouncing back from the disaster of ’64.

Spencer: That’s right. But people don’t realize the learning curve that he and Nancy were on. Nancy and I were talking about this two weeks ago, or three weeks ago. I reminded her, “You didn’t know a damn thing when we started in 1965, Nancy.” She admits, “That was a real learning curve. Things were happening. I didn’t know what was going on.”

Smith: Like what? What sorts of…

Spencer: Why we would go here instead of there? Why we would only give one damn speech and not do a new speech? We’d let them add two things, maybe ________________. But he wrote his own speeches. We didn’t have a speechwriter. In his gubernatorial race every speech he gave he wrote. Why? Because he was one of the best speechwriters I’ve ever seen. That’s how good he was. He liked to do it. It made him more comfortable and his speeches were better because he was comfortable.
But they were on a great learning curve. They both learned fast. She sat in every session we had at the house with him, which was sort of like, one-on-one politics – let’s talk about it. See what I mean? Or I’d bring in Charlie Conrad, an old actor who had a good rapport with him, who was a state legislator. He was still doing bit parts, but Charlie was an excellent parliamentarian. He was known for that. We’d say, “Charlie, tell him about the legislature. Tell him how it functions, how it relates to this.” Charlie did a hell of a job with it. That was all learning curve stuff. Reagan’s strength – still there was a gap of knowledge as wide as a street – when he hit those gaps, by the press, I mean, the way he handled the answers was, “Hey, I don’t know everything. We’re going to learn. I’m an amateur.”

Smith: You wonder if a Ronald Reagan could happen in today’s media climate? The 24/7 news cycle and the internet, and YouTube, whether someone like that could come along, be brought along, almost learn on the job, if you will.

Spencer: It would be difficult. The closest thing to it is Obama. But he had a better grounding in the legislature, and a few years in the Senate, than Reagan did. But they are both glib and they both were adroit on their feet.

Smith: You talk about Reagan as a pragmatist. I often think of these people who proclaim themselves to be keepers of the flame. Let Reagan be Reagan and all this. I often think, well, what Reagan are you talking about? Are you talking about the Reagan who was going to put Dick Schweiker on his ticket in ’76 because he wanted to win. That Reagan never gets factored in.

Spencer: Yeah. Well, Reagan hated that saying, Let Reagan be Reagan. He detested that, because he didn’t feel he wasn’t being but himself at all times, really. Yeah, there was a practical side to him. The biggest single thing that motivated him was he wanted to win. Because he was practical; “I can’t exercise my authority, and accomplish the things that I want unless I’m in office. So let’s win.”

A lot of the very conservative people that were blinded to the Schweiker things and so forth…If you really look back on how it worked, we handled them with smoke and mirrors. We gave them enough, but you never sold out.
But he’d give them enough. Here is the guy who signed the most liberal abortion bill in the country somewhere in his 60s here in California. The Beilenson Bill. Then later on in his career he became pro-life. I asked him that question one time, I said, “What happened?” He said, “I didn’t know anything about abortion when I signed the bill. I looked at it and studied it and that’s not where my head was.” Which was a reasonable, honest answer.

Smith: You couldn’t get away with it today.

Spencer: Well, he never said that publicly. No, no, he never said that publicly. But, as candidates go, he was just the cream, the top, the best. Timing-wise, his training as an actor was a plus. You can’t deny that. People try to put it another way, but, I can remember watching him in Cleveland, 50,000 people outside City Hall – he’s going to go on – a crazy Jim Rhodes is trying to lobby him every five minutes about something. It was dangerous, Jim was. So I got Rhodes away from him, because he had to have his twenty minutes before he could go on stage to get ready.

I’m sitting there talking to Art Modell with the Cleveland Browns and my event guy comes over and says he’s got three minutes. So I get up and go over and say, “You’ve got three minutes, Ron.” “Okay,” he stands up, he walks out to the wing and out here’s 50,000 people, and I’m behind him, and he took his first steps out on the stage and I swear to God, the guy got bigger. He had this ability of – he got bigger! It was odd. The show started and he was going to deliver, and he did. I see candidates slouch out there…

Smith: I have to ask you, because there is so much to talk about later on. There was the famous remark which I’ve always wanted to hear from your lips. We’re jumping ahead obviously, but supposedly the origin of the Rose Garden strategy - by contrast, with what you’ve just described, can you describe the exchange you had in which you…

Spencer: With Gerald Ford, I assume you are talking about. Well, the whole Ford campaign was an interesting thing and when I got back there it was very dysfunctional. I was on a real learning curve, they were on a real learning curve, and he was on, because here’s a guy, a congressman who wanted to be
Speaker that now’s the President, so everybody is on a learning curve. But we reached the point where when he went out and campaigned, and we were doing daily and weekly tracking, particularly wherever you went. When Gerald Ford went out and gave one of his great speeches – ponderous speeches, which weren’t all his fault, he had a bad speechwriting shop - he went out and gave them and our numbers would go down.

That didn’t happen once, this happened about three times. He was always pounding on me, “I’ve got to get out here and talk to the people! I’ve got to get out here…” He was Harry Truman in his own mind. “I got to get out there, I’ve got to do this.” So finally I was at the end of my rope one night, it was six o’clock in the Oval Office and he’s pounding on me. Cheney is sitting there. The world wouldn’t realize how quiet Cheney was in those days. The little mouse in the corner, but bright and loyal to Ford. So, I finally got tired of it. I says, “We’re doing this for a reason,” and I went through the reason. He said something smart to me, and I said, “But basically the question is, you’re a lousy, fucking candidate.” He just looked at me kind of like, oh, okay. End of conversation. He was that way.

Very secure in who he was – it didn’t bother him, but somebody writes the book, Witcover, I don’t know who it is, Jules, Germond, somebody. They write the book about the campaign and I’m sitting there reading it one day and there it is! I went ballistic. Three people were in the room. I know I didn’t say it. Had to be Cheney. I called Cheney on the phone and before he says hello I’m on him. I’m all over him and he lets me go and gets all through and he says, “There was somebody else in the room.” And I said, “Are you saying to me the President told him?” He says, “Yeah.” I said, “Oh, God, in some ways I feel better, much better.” But what that indicated to me was how secure that he was as a person. You know what I mean? And you don’t see that in many of those people.

Smith: He was Trumanesque – in that sense.

Spencer: Yeah.
Smith: He couldn’t do a Harry Truman imitation out on the whistle-stop but in his character and his authenticity, he was Trumanesque.

Spencer: He was and, in fact, he kept talking about Truman early on. I went over and got the Clark Clifford campaign plan that he wrote for Harry and read it. I thought maybe there are some similarities that we can work with. But, yeah, I have become famous for that remark that was said in private, three guys, they’re all under the rope and I tend to be profane, which he knew and always knew and never bothered him.

Smith: When you said it did Cheney react in any way?

Spencer: Cheney was stoic – still is. But it was like sort of, did you really say that? He didn’t say it, but did you really say that? Because I prefaced it by saying, “Mr. President, you’re a lousy, fucking candidate.” Oh God

Smith: Could you have said that to any other president? Could you have said that to Ronald Reagan? Not that you would have occasion to, but could you have had that frank exchange?

Spencer: I might have said it, but I’d never have gotten away with it. Dick Nixon would have had me in Siberia, and God knows what Nelson would have done. It’s hard to say. He might have laughed out loud, but he’d have never repeated it, I don’t think. Reagan? I came close to saying those things to Reagan in private. I learned something. I said it, man on man, I didn’t have a Cheney sitting there. I learned a lesson.

Smith: Interesting.

Spencer: The Ford campaign was – I got back there in September of ’75, right after the Saturday Night Massacre, which was dumping Schlesinger, I think, or maybe it’s before.

Smith: Oh yeah, it was the Halloween…

Spencer: Oh I was there then, but barely there. Because the first guy that I talked to was Rummy, Rumsfeld, and then all of a sudden I’m dealing with Cheney, because Rummy had gone over to Defense at that time.
Smith: And you know Rockefeller went to his grave believing that Rumsfeld was the dark power that did him in…

Spencer: He’s correct.

Smith: And that Rumsfeld went over there because Rumsfeld wanted to be on the ticket in ’76.

Spencer: I don’t know about that, but he did him in and Cheney helped.

Smith: How?

Spencer: Just every way that he could internally. Alerting staff, don’t let Rocky’s people know this, don’t let them know that. The whole thing. Jimmy Cannon knows what the whole story is, but Cheney as much as admitted to me when he became vice president of the United States. With a wry smile he says, “Jesus, Nelson Rockefeller would die if he knew this was happening.” I said, “You’re right! You’re right, Dick! You’ve got that right.” I used to meet with Nelson – he was so out of the loop on stuff, I made a point of going over there sometimes on Friday night at five o’clock when he was in the EOB building next door. Who was that gal out front there? Nice old lady, secretary for years.

Smith: Ann Whitman?

Spencer: Yeah, Ann.

Smith: Who had been in the Eisenhower White House.

Spencer: Yeah. She’d see me coming and she say, “It’s going to be a while, I’m going home Stu. I’ll lock the door and you guys go at it.” And the Dubonnet would come out and I’d drink a lot more of it than he did. He only had one or two, he always quit. But he’d say, “What the hell’s going on?” So I’d fill him in, I’d tell him everything. Then he’d ask other questions and I’d ask him for counsel and advice. He knew a lot of things. I swear to God he had a better intelligence around the world than the CIA did. He’d always know. He’d tell me about stories and I’d say, “Come on, Nelson. You’re BS’ing me.” I’d get the whole pile again.
He had good people, but I felt sorry for him. He could be helpful to me, and I wanted to keep him plugged in. I really think he really appreciated it. I think he really appreciated it that I was the only guy around that would talk to him and keep him plugged in. They all knew full well that if I’d been there when they made the move on him, I would have raised hell. Now, it would have been tough to win that primary with Nelson on there, but you could have done it. You could have found ways, and he would have been one hell of a plus for us in the general election. Really. But they’re sure short-sighted. They didn’t see that. Now let’s look at the Ford campaign.

Smith: Let me back up for just a moment. First of all, what, if any, contact did you have with Ford before…

Spencer: I knew Ford before I got the phone call from Rummy. I met Ford in 1964, roughly. He was a congressman, I think he was Minority Leader then. The National Republican Congressional Committee had a retreat going on out at Arley House, which is in Virginia by Dulles, and had about twelve people in it. The purpose was, how are going to take over the Congress and Jerry Ford is going to become Speaker, right? Bob Wilson, who was congressman, the chairman of the committee, Jack Mills was the guy who ran the committee. I think Mel Laird was there. Bryce Harlow was there, Jerry Ford, of course was there. I think Les Arends, the old Illinois guy was there, congressman, and maybe young Bob Michel, I’m not sure. But we’re staying there two or three days, and Ford and I were roommates. Maybe I’d met him occasionally before that, but it was the first time I’d been with him. So we’d go through all our sessions and everything and talk and go back to the room and he and I would sit there and drink a bottle of whiskey and talk.

It was something I never forgot - that night he was really inquisitive about this guy Rockefeller, because I was doing the Rockefeller thing, so to speak, or had just done it. He said, “Tell me about him.” He had an unusual interest which struck me as kind of funny at the time, but I gave him everything I had and knew because he operated – he digested all that stuff and I’m sure he remembered some of it. So that’s the first time I met him and we spent about two nights together, lock talk politics upside down. And then…
Smith: He was a political animal?

Spencer: Oh, when he’d come west after that, I’d have to advance his trip to California. We’d speak in front of all these congressmen and stuff. Then we went into Michigan in ’66 and did the Don Riegle campaign in Flint, Michigan against an incumbent sitting Democrat. He reminded me of a young Rousselot, a Harvard graduate, same thing. First survey, down by 40 goddamn points, it was awful. We developed some new targeting methods and it was one of the reasons we went and Don knew it because it was a perfect district to test it. We had General Motors, we had labor, and we had guys on the other side of the river with money and were in the country club, so it was a way of testing it. But he was also a great candidate.

So the fact that I got involved in his state in a congressional race, then I started getting a lot of advice and counsel from Jerry Ford, right? We ended up winning it and he didn’t think it was winnable. He wanted to try. The only guy when we were halfway through it that thought it was winnable was Dick Nixon, but he was a very good pol with that aspect. He saw what we were doing, how we were doing it. I brought him into the district (he was out of office) fundraiser, and Art Summerfield lived in that district who had been Eisenhower’s Postmaster General. He was close to Dick and he kept giving Dick all these reports, Art did. Then after that, I didn’t see much of him. I probably saw more of Everett Dirksen than I saw of him.

Smith: By the way, while we’re on Michigan, was George Romney in over his head as a presidential candidate.

Spencer: Senior?

Smith: Yes.

Spencer: Yes. He wasn’t quick and glib enough. He was a mechanical candidate with good credentials. You’ve got to be kind of glib to handle all the stuff that comes at you. Worse now than it was then. No, George Romney was in over his head. And I heard that from people who were working with him close, they thought he was over his head, too, in retrospect. I get this phone call from Rumsfeld, asked me if I had an interest.
Smith: Now this in ’75?

Spencer: ’75, yeah.

Smith: Are you assuming at that point that Reagan is going to run?

Spencer: Oh, yeah. I knew Reagan would run, but I knew I was never going to get that phone call. I had reached the point – I ran both Reagan’s governors races and he had a lot of problems in his staff in Sacramento. The first thing was the gay thing, after that policy problems – a whole bunch of things were coming down. He has some pretty good cabinet people around him. Vern Orr and people like that, they were very good. Cappy Weinberger, finance director.

Smith: Who had been Republican state chairman in California, and who told me, he was a closet Rockefeller supporter in ’64.

Spencer: Oh, yeah. Definitely. Cappy was a guy, San Franciscan that ran for attorney general in ’58 against Pat Hillings in the primary. Pat beat him. He went back to the law practice, so to speak, had been state party chairman etc., etc. When the meetings were being held with the - what was that…The Kitchen Cabinet. When they were sitting around they could divide the pie up and make decisions on who was going to go – they would invite me to the meeting.

I made a point in the meeting of saying there’s two important appointments this man has got to make. The way he operates the chief of staff is really important - which proved out. Secondly, for finance director, because of the economics in this state and the fact that he didn’t like taxes, but he was going to have raise them – that’s what it boiled to. So they said, “Oh, we’ve got the guy, we’ve got Gordon Smith. He’s a CPA with an accounting firm, a big firm.” I said, “Well, there’s a lot of politics in being finance director. You’ve got to deal with legislators, you’ve got deal with Democrats, you got to deal with Unruh,” who was a master. So I said, “I would suggest Cappy Weinberger.”

I was not one of Cappy’s favorite people at that point because I’d helped Pat Hillings run against him in the primary. But I knew his skills, so I said Cappy. “Oh, he’s too liberal, he’s too this, he’s too that.” I didn’t break my pick for
Cappy, I let it go. Well, Gordon Smith was a total disaster, which history will show. Who’s the next guy they turn to, they went to Cappy. Cappy and Reagan became like twins. That’s how close they became. From there on out, through history. But he was too liberal at the beginning for them. It was just a perception. He was a San Franciscan.

Smith: Why weren’t you going to get the call to run the Reagan campaign?

Spencer: I wouldn’t get the call because of the palace guard, that is the chief of staff, all the people around him. I’m not going to name names, you can go back and look them up. But there was some turnover. I was in a terrible position. The Kitchen Cabinet, they’d do something up there that didn’t look good, or wasn’t right or something like this, and Taft Schreiber was usually the guy.

Taft was a tough guy – Lew Wasserman’s guy, and an old ancient friend – he was ancient for Reagan. He told me one time, before I got involved, he took me to lunch and he said somewhere in the conversation, “You got to fire a lot of people.” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “Ronnie’s never fired anybody. I did.” I said, “You got to be kidding.” But he was right, he was dead right. So, those guys forced me into going to Sacramento when they had a message, and delivering the message.

Now, these guys had been my breadbasket – they took care of me – they were wonderful to me. If they had a project they hired me, they paid me well, and I was loyal to them. And yet, some of these guys up there I’d created like Deaver, a field man for the state party and stuff, and Lyn Nofziger, who I gave the first political job in his life – and that was press director for Reagan in ’65, first guy I hired. So, I’d go up there and I’d try to do it politely, for the good you know and so forth. But they didn’t want me around. But I kept knocking the door down when I had to, and going in and doing what I had to do. The Reagans weren’t involved in that.

Smith: Was that a matter of very artfully keeping a distance from what’s unpleasant?

Spencer: No, I think it’s a matter of, I wasn’t the kind of guy that would go tell him. Say, hey, if you’re going to treat me like this, I’m gone. The Palace Guard was not going to tell them, because they knew I was still held in respect in
anything political. Not policy – it was politics Reagan ________________, too. To that point. I had a lot of battles with them and they didn’t want me around. Which goes back to one of my thesis, which I don’t think they recognized. But the one I always had with Reagan was, whoever owned the body ran the shop. You see what I mean. I knew that. I don’t think they ever recognized that. If they did, I didn’t give them enough credit. So anyway, I would just start backing off.

I did the ’70 thing and did it with Tom Reed who was not a problem for me up there. Then I just started really backing off. I’ll just tell you right now that they poisoned the well from there on out in terms of anything…so I went my way and they went their way. They wanted to be the guys that put him in the presidency, and all that stuff.

Smith: By ’70, was there any doubt in your mind that he had the White House in mind?

Spencer: Not at all. In ’68 I knew he was going, because they started getting these people, the Cliff Whites, the Rushers, and the Buckley’s and all these other people were coming talking to him about it. Then they put a little group and the Reagans insisted that I come to these groups in ’68. I sat there and I listened to Cliff, of course I’d known Cliff for years in other ways, and so forth, with the whole thing. It just didn’t smell right to me – the president – ’68. Plus I knew that Nixon had it locked up.

Smith: Let me ask you – remember there was this kind of bizarre coalition of convenience between Rockefeller and Reagan. That was the only way to forestall Nixon’s nomination, the hope being that if you could stop him on the first ballot then eventually one of them would win the nomination.

Spencer: Yeah, that’s talk. There was no coalition. They weren’t talking. I remember going to the first governor’s conference at the Broadmoor in Colorado with Reagan and when I got there I said, “You’ve got to meet Nelson while you’re here. You two guys have a lot more in common than you think.” The irony was, we get on an elevator and we’re going up, I think. We stop at the first floor and who is standing there? Nelson. So I said, “Governor, meet
Governor.” There was no communication there – any attempt at it. Because most of those people around Reagan, they couldn’t stand Nelson. They weren’t pragmatic enough to sit around in a room with him and say, “Nelson, let’s make a deal.”

Smith: And was Strom Thurmond the factor in supposedly holding enough of the south for Nixon? Clearly, there were southern delegates whose heart belonged to Reagan.

Spencer: Oh, believe me, yes. Yes, Strom was – and others, but Strom was the key guy. In one of these meetings I listened to it and I said, “This is going nowhere.” Some guys like Tom Reed, they had him running around the country at this point talking to people. So I stayed over that night and went and saw Reagan and Nancy the next day and said, “Are you running for president? There’s three of us, tell me.” And I got the famous quote that was, “The office seeks the man.” I remember, I leaned forward, and you asked me if I ever said anything to him, I said, “Ron that’s bullshit. If you want it you’ve got to go out and get it and you’ve got to put it together right to get it.” He listened. Oh then, I closed by saying, “If this is the way it’s going, then I don’t want any part of it. I’m out of here. I just want you to know. It’s either going to be done right or I can’t be a part of it.” He didn’t argue with it. He was passive. He really believed that the office sought the man.

Smith: That was totally sincere on his part?

Spencer: Totally sincere. I guessed it ain’t gonna work and I backed off.

Smith: Was she more realistic?

Spencer: Oh, yeah. She’s going like this. I’m nailing him and she is giving him this, you know what I mean. And God knows, I always wanted to know, what the conversations were like after I left. That’s what I always wanted to know. That’s when I knew, yeah. He was running. Of course, it didn’t go anywhere. In fact, I backed off and with the finance guys – they kind of liked the idea – I put together the delegation that went to Miami and it was a great delegation. If they only knew what I did.
I had balance between Reagan and Nixon. They could go either way. I had them either way. Because Nixon, you're going to fail, he may have jumped in there and tried to push it to Nelson or something, you never know. But I had a twofer delegation, which with Bob Finch, I used him as my key lynchpin because he knew what I was doing. So it was a comfortable delegation for Reagan, but it was also – I had no problem with Mr. Nixon if it was obvious.

Smith: This is sort of a detour, but it has always fascinated me. Politics is full of people who appear to have such promise, unlimited promise, and for some reason or reasons, including circumstance, it just is never realized. That’s probably the historical reputation that Bob Finch has. And why was that? Was he too loyal to Nixon? Or do people exaggerate the talent, the potential?

Spencer: No, he was very loyal to Nixon. That was a plus and a minus. He was a talented guy, he was a creative guy. He’d come up with great, off the wall concepts and ideas and things to do. Some of them good, some of them bad. But his loyalty to Nixon was probably the biggest problem because he made some bad decisions, and all of us who were close to him told him. The first thing he runs for lieutenant governor, he’s not necessarily a Reagan guy. But Reagan embraced him and he wins by the biggest margin.

Three weeks out he’s only 300,000 ahead and we turned our billboard around and made them Reagan/Finch. We put a bundle of money behind Bob and he gets more votes than Reagan. He never quit reminding the world of that. I used to say, “Robert, where were you three weeks out?” He knew what I was talking about. It was nice. He is sitting there as lieutenant governor, he’s the heir apparent. Nixon offers him something in the cabinet and he didn’t offer him HEW. He said, “What do you want?” We get the group together and Bob tells us, “What do I want?” We said explicitly, it was HEW then, we said explicitly, the worst job in the cabinet for a Republican is HEW. You just ruin your credentials. So what’s he do? He takes HEW. Ah! So, his decision making was poor. Leaving the power base that he created for himself of independents, going back to work for him…

Smith: And then getting ground up.
Spencer: He was an insecure guy, Bob, and I loved him, but he was really an insecure guy. He wasn’t like Ford here, who felt good in his own skin.

Smith: That’s interesting. Tell me about Ford’s intelligence.

Spencer: He was very intelligent. He wasn’t – some people who are intelligent are quick and glib - he was intelligent – he tended to be ponderous about it. But he was intelligent. He always came out on the end of the tunnel with logic and the correct thing to do, based on the input of facts that he got. His biggest weakness was he would let personal feelings enter into to some decisions, color some of his decisions. His extreme loyalty to people was a great plus but a great minus. I can sit here and give you so many examples of loyalty to me.

Smith: Give me some.

Spencer: When I went back there, I went back on the commitment that I was going to run in New Hampshire and the Florida primaries and then I was going home. Well I got there and the campaign was dysfunctional. Callaway was in trouble, he canned Lee Nunn, I didn’t know all this was going on.

Smith: Where did Calloway come from? Was he a Rumsfeld person?

Spencer: Rumsfeld had picked him, yeah. Their thought and theory at that time when they made that choice was that he had started GOPAC, which I think is sort of a conservative fundraising thing…that Ford could carry the south.

Smith: Against Reagan?

Spencer: Yeah. Of course the first thing you’ve got to recognize is they didn’t think Reagan was really going to run. Number two, if he ran, he was a lousy candidate, because he was an actor and a this and a that – the whole Washington establishment, both sides of the aisle, they all felt the same way. I knew better. When I arrived on the scene that’s all I heard. And I was whistling in the dark, and telling them all, “You’re crazy man, you’re crazy. Number one, he’s going to run. He’s been planning on it, he feels like he was cheated out of it by Watergate.” And I said, “Rightly so, he was the heir apparent. And then you come along and you’re in his way. Secondly, he ain’t
dumb. He’s a smart campaigner and he has a real pulse of the party – what they want to hear, what they want to do.” They didn’t believe me.

Smith: Did that include Ford? Did you have conversations like that with the President?

Spencer: Oh, yeah. But, you know, it’s like when you’ve got Marsh, who is a great guy, and you’ve got Hartmann, who’s a dumbo, and everybody else telling him that Spencer’s nuts – what do you do?

Smith: How much of that was – part of the beef was – Ford took a long time, maybe never did fully outgrow his congressional roots, whether it’s how you run the place, the whole spokes of the wheel notion, or even the campaign. Hartmann was clearly a lightning rod in his congressional office, yet he brought him along to the White House. Who was Bob Hartmann and why did he matter?

Spencer: Bob Hartmann was loyal to Gerald Ford. Bob Hartmann wrote two good speeches a year. But the other twelve weren’t too good. He was there in the tough times for Ford and he was loyal to him and Ford honors that and he respects that.

Smith: Difficult person though, right?

Spencer: Bob? Oh, yeah. He was difficult. Drinking was his problem. He was a two time person – I remember when he was a political reporter for the LA Times. He ran the Washington Bureau for the LA Times. Drinking was his biggest problem. Is he still around?

Smith: No, he passed away about a year ago.

Spencer: Down in St. Croix or somewhere he moved to?

Smith: Wherever, yeah.

Spencer: That was his biggest problem, he drunk days, not just drinking at night.

Smith: It’s interesting you say that because he clearly was this very polarizing figure within the congressional office. When they moved into the White House, the little hideaway office off the Oval Office - he wanted that office for himself.
Which is revealing, but what does it say about Ford’s comfort level with difficult people? Diverse, egotistical, whatever you want to call them.

Spencer: He could handle it. He could bounce it all together. Jack Stiles was the same way, his original campaign manager. When I got back there Jack Stiles is sitting in an office. I say to him, “What’s Jack doing?” “Well, Jack’s this or that.” Well, I had to find room for Jack. I went to the President and I said, “What do you want me to do with Jack Stiles?” He said, “He’s my guy.” I said, “Okay.” So I pleased Jack.

Smith: He was from Grand Rapids?

Spencer: Yeah.

Smith: And had been in the congressional campaigns?

Spencer: He had run his first campaign for Congress. A lot of people showed up from Michigan. I found them all over the place.

Smith: Was that part of the problem? That it was a congressional mindset being superimposed on a presidential campaign?

Spencer: Yeah, plus, the breakthrough I had to make was, he’d been in that town so long, everybody liked him – both sides of the aisle. Most of his people were Congressional people – they all had the answers, they second guessed me everyday – every hour of the day of the week. They had access to him. It was a nightmare for me through the early stages. A nightmare. But this is a demonstration of his loyalty, too. I went to my godfather, Bryce Harlow.

Smith: The original wise man?

Spencer: Yeah. I said, “Bryce, my commitment was to come back for New Hampshire and Florida, then I’m going home.” I said, “These people don’t realize that if they don’t win New Hampshire they are dead meat. They just don’t realize that.” But that’s the truth. He agreed. I said, “The second problem is Florida. If we can get through three, then I think we’re in a race, at least.” But if a sitting incumbent president loses the first primary, he’s done, especially with a guy like Reagan out there sitting.” So, Bryce agreed with that. So I says,
“That’s what I’ve committed to do. Besides that, I’m sick and tired of fucking Mel Laird…” and I go down the whole list.

Smith: Tell me about Mel Laird.

Smith: There must have themselves, a reaction from the Reagan camp, or at least from the Reagans when you committed this ultimate betrayal of going to work for Ford.

Spencer: I think they’d accepted the fact that I was out of the picture by then because they’d been running. I never heard anything. There was never any reaction until I did my infamous commercial which said, “Governor Reagan couldn’t start a war, but President Reagan could.” Then I got a reaction. He blamed the whole thing on me, put his fist through the bulkhead. That was the only reaction I ever heard about to my participation in the Ford campaign.

Smith: Was that the raw nerve? The warmonger issue?

Spencer: No. The key to the New Hampshire win, I don’t care what anybody you interview says, the key to that win – the White House, the Ford entourage of Washington – didn’t know Ronald Reagan. They didn’t know anything about it. They didn’t respect him. The fact that I was hired by Ford, I don’t think at any point in time it went through their minds that we’ll hire him because he knows Reagan and he worked for Reagan – which would have been a smart way, I think. I had never found any indication that it was for my other alleged “raw political skills,” shall we say.

So, I know one thing about Reagan. They’re lucky they got me in that sense, and I don’t say that to brag, it’s just that I was the only person that knew anything about him. I knew that he was a rhythm candidate, ‘cause I’d seen him in rhythm, and I’d seen him out of rhythm, and my whole goal was to get him out of rhythm in New Hampshire every chance I could get. Because I knew we had a week’s down time because he would screw it up when he got out of rhythm.

Smith: Explain rhythm and out of rhythm.
Spencer: Rhythm is, he doesn’t get a tough question. He gets a question that he can’t handle, something in his past is brought up that he really said that is kind of stupid now, but he said it – you’ve got it documented. An accusation when he was running for governor, he was on the same stage with Christopher one time and either Christopher or ______________, I can’t remember which, basically accused him of being a racist. He lost it. He storms out of the meeting, I’m chasing him down the hall. It’s damage control right now, what are we going do? He’s cussing Christopher, he’s cussing everybody, “I’m not a racist.” And he wasn’t a racist. I forget what brought it up, but it came up. I saw him lose his cool on that one and it was hard getting him back in focus. That sort of thing really upset him. So I set up, I had a press guy call me in the Chicago Tribune, can’t remember his name now, and he said, “Have you heard about the ninety billion dollar program that Reagan advocated in New Jersey or someplace?” I said, “No, I never heard about it.” I didn’t think much about it.

Smith: It wasn’t Peter Lisagor

Spencer: No, no. It was J something. And he thought it was a great story. He was mad because they buried it in the seventh page and it had happened prior. It was speech written by that guy Bell, who was…

Smith: Jeffrey Bell.

Spencer: Jeffrey Bell. So I get the speech and I read it and I’m not a big policy wonk, but I said, “This doesn’t look good.” So I turn it over to some research guys and said, “I want you to take this and extrapolate it. I want to know how much this would cost the people of New Hampshire, of Florida and every other state.” Knowing in my mind that New Hampshire was a non-taxed state. They prided themselves in being a non-taxed stated. So the numbers they came back with were astounding. It was going to cost everybody in New Hampshire twelve grand or so. It was one of those off-the-cuff speeches you give to the Women’s Federation type thing– raw meat time. So, with Peter Kaye, my press guy – he was a wily little guy, we put together a campaign, we put together a kit, we put together a timing, we took the ______________ who had great rapport with the media, went to the right guys, the Broders, and all these
people and prepared them that something was coming, and so forth. The day we hit it, it was on the seats of every press guy on the Reagan plane, as well as every press guy who was traveling with Ford ____________.

Smith: Now how did it get on the Reagan plane?

Spencer: You have ways. You have ways. And so, it’s a charge we made and we delineated what it would cost the people and then we attack him on it. He stumbled all over New Hampshire for three days. Couldn’t answer the damn question. Guy got him out of rhythm. So then he goes back somewhere else and tries to get – it takes a week to get him back, I noticed. It bought us a week’s time – that week. And that’s exactly what my Governor Reagan couldn’t start a war, was the same thing. We did it in California, where I knew we’d have our tail handed to us. It was just a matter of – you get beat by ten points or twenty points. I said, “How can I make something good out of that?” So I said, “We’ll do it in California, ‘cause it’s going to affect Ohio and Jersey and other states.” They were still a little iffy about this guy, whether he was a warmonger and all that kind of stuff. We got swamped in California – the reaction there was fierce. They were all over me. We only ran it once, and the national media picked it up for us and did my job by running it in Ohio and New Jersey and everywhere else.

Smith: It really is almost like the famous Daisy commercial.

Spencer: Yeah, same thing. Same concept. So, that put him in orbit. But it also put him off his feed prior to those primaries. That was my whole goal – always trying to keep him screwed up.

Smith: While you were coming up with this stuff, did Ford know about all this?

Spencer: I would brief him, but not into any great depth. I’ve always believed the candidate should know what you’re doing, particularly if it’s going to get controversial. He bought in.

Smith: For example, this particular ad…

Spencer: He knew about it. I don’t think he understood the depth of the consequence. I don’t think he understood the rhythm thing that I was talking about because
he wasn’t a rhythm candidate. But he trusted me, he had faith in me. But
going back to the Laird group and all that. It wasn’t the Laird group, it was
the Rhodes, Johnny Rhodes, Jesus, I can go through the whole list of them. I
was always being summoned to the Hill to be told what I was doing right and
what I was doing wrong, and so forth. I got sick of it. I’m living in a motel or
a little hotel across the street from headquarters. I’m getting about four hours
sleep a night. I’m killing myself, and so I go to my godfather, Harlow, and I
tell him my commitment to stay and I’m going home. Bryce looked at me and
he said, “No you’re not.” I said, “Why?” He said, “The President needs you.”
I said, “I don’t give a goddamn,” and then I dump all over his friends.

Bryce got on my ass, “Okay, Spencer, yeah.” And he did this (contemplative
hand gesture) and the whole thing.” When I leave, Christ, I’m not gone two
hours and the phone rings. It’s the President. He says, “Come on over to
dinner tonight.” Right? “You’re not going anywhere.” “You don’t say no to a
President is what it was. I says, “Okay, then the ground rules change. Your
goddamn friends,” and I named them, and I told him and went through the
whole thing, “they’ve got to get off my back and leave me alone. They can be
helpful, but let me go to them to ask for their help. They’re taking up four
hours a day.”

“I’ll take care of it.” I never heard from them again.

Smith: Really.

Spencer: He took care of it.

Smith: So he could lay down the law?

Spencer: He could lay down the law. John Heinz was running for the Senate. The
closing days of that campaign, I get a phone call from my field guy in
Pennsylvania, he says, “I got up this morning and went to work and there was
these Carter-Heinz signs, billboards all over Pittsburgh.” I said, “Take a
picture of one for me.” I know what’s going on. I called John Heinz up, he’s
not a Senator but I called him. I said, “Heinz, what the hell’s going on?” “I
don’t know anything about it.” I said, “I don’t believe you. You’re full of
bull.” I got all over him. He started getting mad at me and we’re going back
and forth, finally I says, “You know, John, some places in this country you’d get kneecapped for doing that.” He said, “You’re threatening me,” and I said, “No,” and I hung up.

Well, afterwards I thought, Jesus, I’d better go talk to the President. So I called over and that secretary answered and I said, “Whatever you do, don’t let Heinz through until I get to see the President first, okay?” She said, “No problem.” So I get over there I says, “I’ve got to tell you a story.” So I tell the story and what I say to him, all these billboards popped up, he goes, “What?” So I tell him the story. “But let me tell you about my conversation with Mr. Heinz.” So I tell him this little story straight, the way it was. He looks at me, “You did the right thing. I hope he calls.” So I says, “Okay.”

Bill Simon, his great secretary of the treasury, my sources kept feeding back to me that he’s out giving speeches and he never mentions Ford’s name. I know his advance guy, so I call and I said, “I want a copy of all of Simon’s speeches.” I read a bunch of them. He never says his name. He gives a hundred and twenty speeches, he never mentions the President. I had already passed the word to the Cabinet that when you’re out giving your speeches and something good is coming down, refer to the President and give him some credit. Butz and those guys, they were great. Coleman, he was great.

That ticked me off, so I call up Hines(?), Garland was his chief of staff, former advance guy for me. Garland knew that I never went to see these guys unless I was mad, he knew that about me. So when I walked in the door, he said, “What’s the subject?” I says, “He ain’t going to like it.” He said, “I’m getting the hell out of here,” because he had a terrible temper, Simon did. I get in there and we chatted and he’s a happy man, he’s always got something. Bill Simon had ambitions of his own to be president and I knew that. So I says, “Bill, you’ve given 127 speeches in the last twelve months or something. You’ve never mentioned the fucking President’s name!” Psssst – up straight up, and it went bad from there.

Smith: What was his explanation?
Stu Spencer  December 2, 2008

Spencer: Well, I was wrong! I said, “But I read them.” Grrrr – sidebar – “I did this…” It went on and on. I said, “I don’t know what your game is, but I’m just putting you on the alert that we know about it and we expect more support for the President from his Cabinet.” Again, I said, “Jesus Christ, (words unintelligible) So I run across the street and the Treasurer is talking to Kissinger and he sends Kissinger out because I said it’s important. So I tell him the story. Again, “You did the right thing.”

That’s support! I had it 100%.

Smith: Do you think he suffered from not having more people like you around him?

Spencer: Early on he did, because he was working with the Nixon crowd. They weren’t Ford people. At least Hartmann was dedicated.

Smith: Leon Parma told the story: at the last minute he and Rhodes and other folks from the Hill got sort of pushed into the East Room for the inauguration at Ford’s insistence. Afterwards there was a little receiving line that formed up and they said, would everyone join us in the East Room and so on. He said, “We were down in the East Room, there were a few of us, and the Nixon people, en masse, turned and walked away. Never came down to where the President was.” What more dramatically illustrated the fact that Ford was marooned in a White House staffed with Nixon people?

Spencer: He was. It is a difficult thing to say, because they knew where the keys to the door were. Slowly it transitioned out. Gergen was there, Jones __________ was there, he was Al Haig’s guy, they were all there and Rummy to a degree, but you can’t put him in that category, because he was close to Ford. Cheney was a detachment of Rummy’s.

Smith: When you look again at the Rockefeller situation. In many ways, Ford almost created that situation by leading Rockefeller to believe that he was going to be in the domestic sphere when Kissinger was in the foreign sphere. That he was head of Domestic Council and it was really built up. Rumsfeld, for all of his shortcomings, is basically in an impossible situation himself. You never want to blame the president so it’s always the people around the president, who are your enemies. Could it have worked, given the temperament, given the
personalities? Example, Rockefeller loved programs – that’s how you get elected in New York. Ford decided early on there weren’t going to be any new programs.

Spencer: You’re right. A lot of it is Ford’s fault. When I first read it and saw the job description, I said to myself, that’s not right, because they are a hundred miles apart on domestic issues. They were on in foreign policy, but how could he give Nelson that? That must be a misprint or something. Nelson would come up with a program and go into the President and the President would ash can it. Or they’d get in a big argument because they were that far apart. Yeah, he has to hold some responsibility for that sort of thing. The chairs were changing in the office, the power was moving back and forth. Cheney developed into an excellent chief of staff. The thing that I appreciated about him and noticed about him was that no matter what the point of view was, the person got access and the right to talk. He didn’t shut people out. You would have never known what his philosophy personally was in that era. That’s why so many people say today, “That’s not the Cheney – that’s not the Cheney I knew.” He was acting as the honest broker and he was a very good chief of staff in doing that.

Smith: One thing I don’t think we actually nailed down: what was the original approach made to you about coming into the Ford campaign?

Spencer: First one was by Rummy in a phone call, and they were going to meet in Sacramento when he got shot at by Squeaky. I went up there, I was in the hotel. Rummy and I were starting to talk about it and all hell breaks loose. We’re out the front door and Squeaky’s taking the shot and…..end of conversation.

So I come home and I don’t hear from anybody. Then I go to the state convention – Republican Party in San Diego. I’m going to be there a couple of days and Bo Callaway comes to it as National Chairman of the Ford campaign. He corners me. He really starts working on me. You can tell he’s talked to everybody back there. His mission was to get me to come back and do something in the campaign. So he lobbies and lobbies and lobbies, and I didn’t know. I thought about it.
At the time the marriage I was in was not going well, and it sounded pretty good – like get the hell out of town, to be honest with you. So I says, “Okay,” and I left on that plane with my little ditty bag and Bo and came back to DC and walked into an absolute firestorm of problems.

Smith: Describe the campaign that you walked into.

Spencer: When I walked into it, Bo the chairman was now in trouble with the West Wing. They realized at that point that maybe the southern strategy wasn’t going to work, and yet he was the kingpin of the southern strategy. Number two: Bo had hired Lee Nunn out of Kentucky to be his political director, and they didn’t get along. Discord between the West Wing and the campaign, dysfunction going on in the campaign headquarters – I almost got a plane and came home. The only reason I stayed was that I had made this commitment, they can do what they want to do, I’m going to go run New Hampshire like it’s a Congressional race. And I’ll get Florida started.

So all of a sudden, Lee – he’s got me - so he cans Lee. I took the credit – they gave me all the credit for Lee – I had no idea what was going to happen. Now I’ve got an enemy all over the country, poor-mouthing me, calling… I had nothing to do with it. I was used, so to speak. So I’m now political director, so I start thinking over some things, and had the complete confidence of the White House. Well, Bo didn’t. I’ve got to get things done! I’m in a balancing act trying to keep my chairman happy and not trying to hurt him, yet doing the right thing, back and forth, back and forth. Then Bo gets in trouble and they find an excuse to dump him.

Thirty days went by and I’m called vice-chairman of the campaign – I’m sort of the top dog over there – but I’m still busy running campaigns. I’m going to take care of this other BS. Finally they bring old Rog in. Morton, who was a great chairman, but sick, dying of cancer. He said, “You do what you want to do, Stu. I love ya. I’ll back ya.” And he did. He gets sick and he couldn’t come into work and then he got in trouble with his great statement, which was a cheap shot by the press, the White House really felt after the convention they had to get rid of Rog.
Smith: Was that the thing about rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic?

Spencer: That was the first one. That was the primary night. In his office, we had a bar set up for the press and it was all behind him – Rogers wasn’t even drinking – they were drinking the goddamn booze. Oh that was a cheap shot.

Then the other was at the convention he made some crack that was blah. But anyway, Jimmy Baker had been brought in. Rogers came to me and he said, “I got this guy over at Commerce (I think it was). A bright young guy, he’s this he’s that, and he wants to get in this political thing.” Well, I said, “Rogers, I’m at the point where I’m running campaigns. We’re getting delegates. I can’t keep track of the delegates, somebody’s got to take care of the delegates, ‘cause I’ve got to go to another two states next Tuesday and another two states, and now you’ve got eight states behind us with delegates. Half of them are emotionally committed, but not legally committed.” I said, “That’s what I need.” That’s what I had in mind. I said, “Bring him over.”

Bob Teeter and I interviewed Baker. I liked what I saw. I explained what I thought his role would be and he came. He moved right in and he did a great job. Just a great job. Jimmy always does a good job. After the convention, Rog got into trouble again. We were at Vail, Dick and I and some others, talking. It was a consensus that Rog wasn’t up to the general election effort. So then the big debate became about them. I thought Jimmy would do the job. I wasn’t totally sure, but my job description for a chairman is the ability to handle the Sunday shows, be articulate, to go on and do all the news shows on Sunday. Take care of the money, because we’re federally funded – there were laws involved. And stay out of my way.

That was sort of my theory of what the hell a chairman ought to be. Jimmy came and did a great job. The funniest part of the whole thing was, he was so worried about the law which said that if you spent more than $21 million dollars, the president and the chairman could go to jail. I said, “Jimmy, there ain’t no way they’re going to throw the President in jail or you. It’s BS!” Well, we went home with a million bucks because Jimmy was cautious. I learned later he was always cautious.
And the second was, when I came in to tell my chairman that I was going to send out a mailer to all the – I’ve got a great list of all the religious right around America – and I got this Catholic list and I got this other list and I’m going to send out inflammatory mail, and I’m going to put a little newspaper together and send it out. He was like a nervous cat on a hot tin roof. I found out later, I won’t say who from, but it was a person we both knew well, Jimmy and I…he said, “When I do that dumb crap,” the lawyer in him would make a memo ‘for the record’ and put it in the file. The file was about that thick when the campaign was over with, because he was – I’m a guy that swings for the homerun – he’s super cautious. We actually made a good team. We made an excellent team. I really became very close to him – still close to this day.

Smith: Let me go back to the primary campaign in New Hampshire. You’ve got Reagan in some ways at least in a vulnerable position. You’ve changed the dynamics of the race, anyway. But you still only win by what? A thousand votes?

Spencer: Oh, yeah!

Smith: It’s a cliffhanger. What do you remember that night? Were you confident that you were going to win in New Hampshire by the time the primary rolled around?

Spencer: I wasn’t confident, I felt good, but I knew that it was up for grabs. That’s why we drove our phone banks to the end. Reagan cut his off. There were a lot of things. Reagan left the state, we flew the damn Air Force One into some burg town. They could hardly fit it in. We stayed until the end because I was worried. Reagan – they pulled out. Their polling data showed them winning by eight points or something and they pulled out and left us a 24-hour gap with all the accoutrements of a president, the airplane, the Secret Service – all the things – the trappings that you can take into a little state like New Hampshire.

Smith: Remember though, it was right about that time that Richard Nixon decided to visit China?
Spencer: Yes. Well, I knew Dick Nixon. I grew up with Dick Nixon’s school of politics. When I came home from the Navy and I’m out drinking beer one night and I come home and sitting at the kitchen table is my dad and Dick Nixon and they’re talking about how they are going to raise money in that area, that part of the district, for the race. I’m introduced to him. Politicians didn’t impress me when I got out of the Navy. That was the first time I ever met him. I was around him a lot after that. I knew the guy.

He knew what he was doing when he went there. He knew it wasn’t helpful to Ford. He knew that his timing was a factor. He knew those things. I said something to Brokaw, and of course it was a great news story. The White House came unglued. Cheney really climbed all over me. There were a lot of Nixon people still in the White House. I stuck to my guns. I said, “Look, I’m telling you right now, that son of a bitch knew what he was doing and he’s sending a message.”

Smith: What?

Spencer: I don’t know! That whole transition from Nixon and the Ford, the pardon, the whole thing – I was never a part of, I’ve heard conflicting stories – the only people I know in the world who could probably tell you what really happened is Phil Buchen and Becker – Benton. And Becker would never talk to you because I know Benton very well. Benton’d talk to you, but he’ll never tell you the truth. He was in it up to his ears. He was sharp – Benton’s a sharp guy. I believe Ford’s story on the pardon, I mean, I have no reason not to.

For people who believe in conspiracies there are a lot of reasons not to believe in it – so, leave it alone. Everything that transpired there about his records in the White House, trying to sneak the records out, all kinds of stuff. There could have been some bad blood, there could of have been some, “Well if I can’t have it, why should this guy have it?” I do know one thing. I know the man well enough, I knew the man well enough, to know that it wasn’t an accident, that he knew what he was doing and he knew it could have an effect upon what happened.

Smith: And did it have an effect?
Spencer: I don’t know. That race went back and forth, back and forth.

Smith: You know there is an argument that Reagan unintentionally performed a service in that he made Ford into a better candidate than he would have been otherwise.

Spencer: True. It’s true. There’re dichotomies in everything that Ford did. That made him a much better candidate. That was two 400 pound gorillas going at it, those two guys. One with the power of the presidency, the other with the talent and really the hearts of the voters, the Republicans were with him. We had to muscle him away from him. Giving stuff away, doing everything, making commitments, and then holding them. It was close in Kansas City, really. So, yes, that made him a much better candidate. But then by the same token, the division we created hurt him in the general election. So you go back and people say, “the pardon.” I think he did the right thing. Did it hurt him? Yes, it hurt him in the election. So he does the right thing, and then it’s the burden he’s got to carry.

Smith: The other school of thought which is: say he hadn’t pardoned Nixon. And say we’d spent two and a half years obsessing about Nixon’s legal problems and Nixon’s papers, etc., etc. It can be argued either way.

Spencer: It can be argued, but I could not have run a campaign if every time he went in front of the press somebody hit him with a Watergate question. We couldn’t have gotten the message out. We couldn’t have had any continuity, and we would certainly have had a frustrated candidate.

Smith: I assume candidates, even people who are gentlemen and who like each other at the beginning of a campaign, probably can’t avoid developing a personal animosity the longer the thing goes on. And there was no pre-existing friendship between Ford and Reagan.

Spencer: No. There was no respect of Reagan on Ford’s part. He didn’t think he was qualified. Reagan felt that Ford, by his appointment, and then in saying he wasn’t going to run after he got it, that he interrupted the natural flow of the Republican process. It was his. So there were a lot of reasons. They never liked each other – before, after, to the end. Period. They were civil.
Smith: It wasn’t simply a question of staffs or wives, those functions that often tend to drive these things. It was the principles.

Spencer: Yeah, they just didn’t like each other. He asked Reagan if he wanted to be VP. I would say, “Do you want Reagan for your VP?” “Hell, no.” “But you’re going to ask him, aren’t you?” “Oh, yeah.” Reagan says, “I don’t want to be asked,” because he doesn’t want to say no to a president. That’s all in the ______________.

Smith: You were getting those signals in advance – don’t ask – but by that point – did Ford want to ask?

Spencer: No, but he knew he had to. We had to have that cover with that base. When it all came out and everything, we had to be able to say that we asked. That it was going to be first choice.

Smith: So, did he ask Reagan in the meeting? Or was that just something in the run up to the convention.

Spencer: The word was passed through Cheney to Sears that Ford would pick him if he had to – not if he had to, but if he wanted to. In other words, backhanded, I really don’t want it. So never were they in a face to face.

Smith: But through channels, reliable channels, the word was passed that if Reagan wanted it, he could have it. And the response was?

Spencer: No. Now, in the Reagan campaign they weren’t communicating internally very well because a lot of the people over there thought that Ronnie should get it, were blaming Ford because he wouldn’t – they weren’t keeping their people informed. But we had a ground rule early on before the convention started. One spokesman, one spokesman. Cheney here, Sears here. They wanted me to be it, I said, “There’s no way.”

Smith: It is fascinating you say this, because Leon Parma told the story of where after the convention, he was approached by Justin Dart, who went off about this. And he said, “Wait a second, Bill Smith told me not to ask,” etc. etc. and Dart said, “You’re lying.” Fortunately Smith came into the room at this point and vouched for everything that Leon had said.
Spencer: A lot of those Kitchen Cabinet guys weren’t informed and they were mad as hell about the whole thing, but our side, everybody knew what the game plan was.

Smith: If Ford had lost New Hampshire - now remember for much of the evening Reagan led, it was only late that Ford eked out this victory - would it have been over?

Spencer: Yes. I’m probably the only guy in America that believed that, at that time. But at that time I don’t think anybody – that would have been the catastrophic defeat for a sitting President of the United States by one of the best candidates America had seen since FDR at that time. That would have been a chink in the armor. Boy that would have been dead meat. I even tell it to a degree the same way about Florida, that we couldn’t lose that. Then I breathed easier, we went and won Illinois and then it all came down – we got our lunch handed to us in North Carolina, which was an indicator of where there was going to be long summer.

Smith: Describe Florida because, that’s thirty years ago, it may surprise people today to think of Florida as a state where a relatively “moderate” Republican could win, particularly against a charismatic conservative.

Spencer: There was a quite large Cuban delegation in there and it was all pretty conservative. But Florida was also settled by retirees from Michigan and New York, and etc., etc. We found ways of accessing those people by mail and we pounded them with mail. Plus we used the trappings of the presidency again. We put him in an open car up in Palm Beach, and make him drive in the rain all the way through Miami. A whole road would be lined with people to see a president, which they do. We had a chairman named Lou Fry, he was a Congressman, he was awful. One of my first moves was dumping Lou Fry, again a Congressman. He had a Cuban working for him, Juarez, and he was a staff guy and I’d go in the office one day and I open a bottom drawer and there’s about twenty thousand dollars worth of unpaid bills sitting in it. I can’t remember who we put in as chairman.
It’s weird, but what I did, basically, is – Bill Roberts had left the company in ’73 – he had diabetes, he had health problems, he had IRS problems, he was sick of politicians and he left and started some other operation. It wasn’t a political operation. It was something in health care. At the time when he left, I bought him out. I said, “Bill, you’re going to be back somewhere because you don’t know anything but politics. That’s all you know – that’s all we know. We couldn’t make a living if it wasn’t for politics.” “Oh, rahrahrah…” So I kept getting word from people that Bill was getting bored with what he was trying to do. So I called him up on day and said, “How’d you like to go to Florida and do the Ford thing for us?”

He was on the next plane, right? So I told the White House I was bringing Roberts in, they thought that was good. But I said, “But I’ve got to warn you, Bill loves to throw money at problems,” which he always did. I said, “We’re going to spend a lot of dough.” He went down and he put it together great, did all the right things and we did very well in Florida. We had a good carryover in Illinois, but that was a more natural state.

Smith: Was Social Security an issue in that campaign?

Spencer: They tried to make it one, but it wasn’t really an issue. We had some Democrat congressmen up in the peninsula area who were really helpful to us. Of course, as I remember, they got a Veterans Administration hospital, too, somewhere along the line. We pulled the plug on all that stuff, we did everything.

Smith: The Rose Garden strategy was more than standing in the Rose Garden. It was clearly exploiting, to the fullest, the advantages of the incumbency.

Spencer: It was the primary concern: what have we got, what can you deliver, Earl Butz out there in Iowa? What can we deliver to Iowa?

Smith: The last story of the day, because I remember hearing from several folks that the Queen’s visit came a month before the convention, And it’s a good thing she didn’t see the guest list because apparently it was larded with undecided delegates and their families who wanted something tangible from the Ford
White House. And I guess there were some delegates who kept changing their minds and you had to keep…does that ring a bell?

Spencer: That’s true. We larded that and we larded White House dinners. When the president of Italy was there, you saw every Italian-American in Jersey there, I guarantee you. Yeah we used the power of incumbency. My thesis has always been, you deal your strength, and I was his strength. Yeah, Mississippi was the biggest example. Clarke Reed was – I don’t know how many times we bought him – and he’d come unglued and we’d buy him back.

Smith: What did you buy him with?

Spencer: Oh, I don’t remember what we did with Clarke Reed. Cheney had not really been in politics – he was a policy guy – he never ran for anything, he’d never been involved in a campaign. And he was sniffing around, getting in and out, so we assigned him Clarke Reed. “You are responsible for Clarke Reed. You’ve got the power to give him the house, right, where you sit? You’re in charge.” So I never asked, really. If I was told, I forgot.

Smith: There is a wonderful story – one day right about then some crazed individual tried to climb over the White House fence, and was shot. The story goes, Cheney was in the room, this was related, and the Secret Service agent says, “Shit, I hope it wasn’t an uncommitted delegate.”

Spencer: Well, I’d say, I hope it wasn’t Jack climbing out. There were others. The other thing I never understood from the Reagan standpoint in that campaign was, I was nervous going into Kansas City. We had like an 84 vote delegate lead, I thought – somewhere around a hundred. We had a lot of delegates who loved Ronald Reagan. They were for us for practical reasons, but their hearts were with Ronald Reagan.

So I thought they would start a fight on floor about some policy thing – some ideological issue that we couldn’t measure up to correctly, and stampede that joint. That’s what bothered me the whole time. That’s why I said to my people when they went out to the platform committee, which started a week before, I says, “Whatever they want, give it to them.” Everything. So I get called and they say, Jesus, they want to do this – I say, “Give it to them!”
I get summoned over to the White House about five o’clock one night. I walk in and old Henry Kissinger - (in German accent) “He’s a giving away my whole foreign policy,” he’s pointing and yelling at me. I listen to Henry. Ford is listening to Henry, and he looks at me. I said, “He’s right, I’m giving it away. But if you want to be the nominee, we got to give it away.” End of conversation. Ford was practical. Henry was mad at me, but who cares.

Smith: That’s perfect! On that note we’ll end for the day.

Smith: Golf and the president.

Spencer: He loved the game, he really did. He was pretty good. In the period of time I knew him, really knew him, in ’76 on, I’d say his handicap ranged from about a low of twelve or thirteen to a high eighteen or twenty. It was not fun playing with him when he was president because he’d be out at Burning Tree, and he always had to have a bet and he always had to keep score. He’d hit a ball over to the trees at Burning Tree, the Secret Service would be walking along the tree line with their big guns, and you’d see him hit it out, he’d go down the fairway, all of a sudden his ball would come flying out of the wood. The Secret Service would throw the ball out. So I’d climb all over the Secret Service guy and he’d just smile at me. The message was, “You’re not President. Presidents get advantages and they get a break.”

Smith: Did his game deteriorate after he left the office?

Spencer: No. The older you get, your game deteriorates, all of us. In terms of when he left office, he played a lot more golf, frankly. He probably got a little better and then maintained it. His knees were his problem. I could remember over at Morningside we used to play a lot and he’d get into a trap and he couldn’t get out of the trap. He’d stand there until you put a club in there and he could grab hold of and pull himself out with. So we used to make him stand in the trap – his son Steve and I. I remember we used to do that to him. He loved the game, he worked hard at it. If anything, I would say he got too much counsel. Because of [his] position in life he played with all the great pros. They all had to give him a lesson, but the greatest one I ever saw was Craig Statler.
For some reason, Ford picked me as his partner in this tournament one year. He always wanted to win his own tournament, naturally. He was competitive. He and I had been playing out here in the desert prior to that quite a bit and I was playing better than my handicap at the time. I was playing pretty well. He noticed that. So when Barrett and he put the pairings together, he picked me as his amateur partner because he figured I could pick up some holes for him. We drew Craig Statler as our pro. We played two days. We were on the Vail golf course and Ford had a terrible putting problem. He had what is called the yips and he developed them early.

So he went to the long putter and he still had the yips with the long putter. Craig had watched him on two or three holes and finally he went over to the president and he gave him a little putting lesson as we were moving along. “Swing it back, just through the ball, back and through the ball, Mr. President.” I was sitting in the cart watching all this and we get to the next hole and I was sitting in the cart. Craig gives him another little lesson, almost verbally before he puts. He comes over and sits down next to me in the cart and he turns away and he says, “I can’t watch this.” He enjoyed the game; he was pretty good at it.

Smith: Would he get angry with himself?

Spencer: Yes. He would get angry with himself. Disgusted is a good word.

Smith: Language would reflect that fact?

Spencer: Yes. But he also used it as a vehicle to get his frustrations out. I remember one time he called me, we were in DC and it was a Sunday. Seven o’clock in the morning I get a phone call – he says, “We’re going to play golf at Burning Tree.” Ughhh. I had to go tearing around and meet him outside the gate at the White House and get in the car and go out there. He was somber, which was not like him in terms of going to play golf. We got on the golf course, we were on about the third hold and he started in. He was really upset about the leaks.

The leaks, which is a perennial problem with anybody, but it was starting to get to him. The more he talked, the madder he got. To the point where he was
banging the club on the cart and I’m beginning to think, does he think I’m the leak? Am I out here to be…? Finally I said, “Mr. President, do you think I’m the leak?” He said, “No, no, no,” and he just went on and on and on. But two hours later, he’d got it out of his system. You could tell he felt better. I kept telling him, this is not your problem, this is a historic problem of any White House. There are things you can do to solve the problem, but it is still going to happen.

Smith: For someone who valued loyalty as much as he did, it’s one thing to say, “Yeah, intellectually I know this is the way it’s always been.” But then to be in the middle of it…was that White House – you’ve seen White Houses – any more, for lack of a better word, cutthroat than others?

Spencer: No, I don’t think so. The leak problem, the cutthroat problem, whatever you want to call it, is the end product of the way the West Wing is structured, basically. Now in his case, he had Nixon people and he had his people, and he was trying to meld the two together. That creates a division. In other words, there are press loyalties developed by all these people. Nixon’s people had some press loyalties, Ford’s people were developing them. So there was that.

The Reagan White House was more stark. You had two camps. You had the Meese camp and you had the Baker camp. Created by the man, himself. I can distinctly remember the same story with Mr. Reagan. I’m at the residence for dinner one night – the three of us, Nancy, he and I, and he’s mad about the leaks. He’s going through the same song and dance. First I said to him, “You created it.” He said, “What do you mean?” I said, “Your troika. They are all down there vying for power, they’re all trying to one up the other side. The press are having a hay day – it’s readymade for them.

There is a solution. He says, “What’s that?” I said, “When you walk down to the office at nine o’clock tomorrow morning, you stick your head in the press room and say, ‘I want everybody in here to know that everybody in the White House is on the record. There are no off-the-record conversations.”

“Good idea, good idea.” And I knew that this is what would happen, he doesn’t stop, he goes to his Oval Office and in comes Baker and Deaver,
probably, and he says, “Oh Stu had a great idea last night,” and he lays it out and they go ballistic, right? So later on I asked what happened. He says, “Well I told the boys what you said, they didn’t agree with you.” I said, “Yeah, because they’re the problem!” He just looks at me, “Okay.”

They all have leaks, they all have problems. These new things coming out at the Nixon Library - about the tapes - and you can see how tough they were on leakers. They were brutal, you leak, you got your taxes checked. They’ve all faced it.

Smith: Was that the roughest White House you’ve known.

Spencer: Yeah, within my lifetime. Oh yeah – that was out of bounds.

Smith: Ultimately, I assume it reflects the temperament, the character, the outlook and the methods of the man in the Oval Office, doesn’t it?

Spencer: In my judgment, it always does, yes, correct. Dick Nixon was paranoid and it’s reflected in what the people did around him. I knew Haldeman when he was a young advertising executive and he wasn’t of that demeanor at that time. He developed that. He identified with his principle and couldn’t break the cord and became one of the bunch.

Smith: We were talking about the primaries, but before the primaries you had the dumping of the vice president and the whole shuffle in the Cabinet. Schlesinger went, was replaced with Rumsfeld, Rockefeller was dumped. Had there been talk of that as a distinct possibility leading up to its actually happening? Was it something that was in the air around the West Wing or in the campaign?

Spencer: I wasn’t there. I didn’t come until September, but I realized after I got there, I asked questions because I bridged the gap. I knew Nelson well, I’d worked for him. I liked him. I thought he brought a great deal to the Ford White House politically. The basic story in conversation I got was they had a southern strategy and they had brought Bo in and Bo and others had started to immediately talk about “we have to get rid of Rockefeller.” That was the beginning of it.
Smith: Is that something that would have been developed outside the White House, or inside the White House? It’s hard to imagine something like that taking root in isolation from whoever in the White House was looking out for the president’s political interests.

Spencer: No, it couldn’t have been in isolation. It would have originated there and then outsiders brought in. In the Ford White House a lot of outsiders had input. He had friends. He had his Congressional friends. He had lobbyist friends all over town. Power brokers all over town. He sought and got a lot of outside input, more so than any other presidents I knew.

Smith: Would you say that’s a good thing on balance?

Spencer: Yeah, if the person is a stable, balanced person, yeah. A lot of people cringe at the idea of a lobbyist – a major lobbyist like Bill White was then - and was a good friend of the President’s. I was talking to Bill about something, but Bill was a sensible, reasonable, balanced guy that understood that town totally. I think it was a plus that he reached out all the time and talked to other people. That’s a cocoon, boy. You could lose your perspective. He still had that middle western perspective.

Smith: Do you think the family helped?

Spencer: Sure. He spent a lot of time talking about his family. He had young kids for his age when he was in the White House. Two of them, three of them were at an age where, let’s face it, if you have kids like I have, they were a pain in the ass. Right? His sons and my son were about the same age. He and I had some of the same problems and I’ve seen him, when I’m in the Oval Office with him, keep Henry Kissinger waiting outside for fifteen minutes to talk about Jack – something Jack’s doing. And I’d say, “Well, I know what you’re talking about. My Steve’s doing it, too.”

Smith: Jack Marsh told us a wonderful story. The day before he goes out to Chicago to the VFW to announce the Vietnam Amnesty Program, which again, is characteristic - anyone else would put it in a press release on a Friday afternoon and be done with it. Ford goes out to this hostile audience to make this speech. Anyway, day before he leaves Jack comes in and says, “I’ve got
some bad news for you.” He [Ford] says, “What’s that?” He says, “Steve never registered for the draft on his eighteenth birthday.” And the president looked like he’d been gob smacked, just, “Oh, no. What more?” Well, amazingly, they got the head of the draft in, they got Steve, they did all the paperwork that day, the press never found out. But it would have been a quite a story.

Spencer: But, you know, three kids, teenagers, the one son was down at Wake Forest, and he was a preacher or whatever it is, a chaplain, and I never really knew him. But these other three kids were at that worst stage in their lifetime, as far as a parent is concerned, and he’s sitting in the White House. That was a load he never talked about, and people never really talked about. But I could see it every now and then in his eyes and his body language. Betty’s addiction problem was a tough row and he handled it, but it was tough.

Smith: Were you aware of it? Were people aware of it at the time?

Spencer: If you were around there, you had to be aware of it.

Smith: We’re talking about in the White House?

Spencer: Yeah, oh yeah. I was aware of it. As presidential wives go, she really didn’t show up very often anywhere. But he had to carry that burden and I don’t think at that time he really had an understanding of addiction, either. I know I didn’t and I went through that with a lot of my family and friends after that, too. I’ve had a lot of them in Betty Ford’s over here, and I don’t think any of us understood it when we first saw it. I think he was that way when he was in the White House.

She was charming and she was all that, but there were times she was floating. She floated. I brought her over to the headquarters one day for all the to-fors, and volunteers and paid people, a lot of them from Michigan, and I was standing in the door of my office and I had some of the Michigan people greet her that were working there. I saw her walk through the door and start moving, and I says, man, she’s floating. She was alright, but if you knew, you watched her, she was floating though the place. Today Betty wouldn’t even
remember being there. I went over and asked her, I said, “Do you kind of remember that,” and she said, “I don’t remember that.”

Smith: She became an issue in some ways. There was the famous Sixty Minutes interview. The sense I have was that the initial reaction in the White House was, “Oh my God, what has she done?” Particularly with this looming conservative challenge and so on. But that over time, there was this second wave of reaction – a lot of it from women, but also a lot of it, post Vietnam and Watergate, all of a sudden she came across as authentic, candid, maybe to a fault. But in that climate, that was a very appealing quality. In fact, I think she said things in that interview I don’t think Hillary Clinton could have said twenty-five years later.

Spencer: That’s true. There were mixed reactions within the framework of the White House, I think at that time. It didn’t bother me. I thought it was a plus, but there were others very concerned about it. I always maintained, you’ve got to be who you are and most political figures and activists don’t recognize the fact that the public is a lot smarter than they think they are and they can sense things and smell things. She came across as sincere. Even if you disagreed with her position on Susan, okay, well, the lady is being honest. That quality of honesty in coming out carried the day for her, I think.

Smith: Didn’t she add a little bit of sex appeal to the Ford White House?

Spencer: Oh sure.

Smith: It was a pretty vanilla place.

Spencer: Yeah, she did. It was very much different than most Republican women would talk at that point in time.

Smith: You probably saw some of the mail. I’ve seen some of the letters…my favorite was from Maria von Trapp, of Sound of Music fame, who wrote to the president and said, “If you want to get re-elected, you have to tell your wife to shut up.”

Spencer: Well, the breast cancer thing was a plus, I think. The longer it went and the longer time has passed, the bigger the pluses become of the awareness she
made of that. This all happened afterwards, but …why I think she is beloved today, is the way she handled her addiction, upfront, went through the process, then turned around and got Leonard Firestone and these guys with money to back her and put that Betty Ford Center together which has helped thousands of people every year.

Smith: In terms of actually addressing how ordinary people live their lives. In particularly in terms of coming to grips openly with the addiction issue, or breast cancer, or whatever, she’s made as much impact as a lot of presidents.

Spencer: Oh, definitely. And the Fords themselves were probably two of the most open people in the White House and out that I’ve ever dealt with. The Rockefeller family, very measured in terms of what they talked about. The Reagan family has probably got more exposure, but they don’t talk about it. Whatever their problems are internally with their children, etc., you never hear them say anything publicly about it. And they had their problems.

Smith: Would it be the culture? You forget, in the mid 70s the culture wars are beginning to take shape. It was somewhere in the press that, unlike other presidents, the Ford shared a bedroom and they shared a bed. And there were concerned Americans who wrote the White House to protest.

Spencer: I can believe it.

Smith: Did the kids enjoy campaigning?

Spencer: Ford kids?

Smith: Yeah.

Spencer: Jack did. Susan had other thoughts on her mind. Steve was out west, I never saw him much. Jack showed up in my office with a written campaign plan. Jack had his own ideas and was another problem I had to deal with. He’d bring one of his bright young buddies with him. I’d give him jobs and assignments. He showed an interest in that way, but Jack had a very short attention span in terms of – it was one of those situations when you knew it would be gone in a week. You wouldn’t have to worry about it.
Steve didn’t seem to want any part of it. Susan was just a teenage gal, interested in what she was doing and dating and all that stuff. Jack showed a real interest. Later on, after Ford came out here to the Palm Desert, Rancho Mirage, he called me up one day. I was over at Newport Beach, then, before I came out in the desert. He said, “Jack thinks he wants to run for something.” I said, “Okay, we’ll talk about it.” I think I came out here and he and I talked about it first, and then Jack and he and I talked about it. I kind of delineated…you have an opportunity because your name is Ford. Other than that, you have no basis for doing it. The president understood that, Jack didn’t of course. The president really wanted this to happen, believe me.

He wanted this to happen. I said, “Okay, we’ll do a trial run here. We’ll leak some stuff, I’ll put some stuff together. We’ll try to raise a little money.” I made Ford drive all the way from here to Corona del Mar at the beach to a person’s house to talk to some people so I could put $10,000 in the bank to start the ball rolling for Jack. He was there and he produced. We did a few other things and the president would show up and Jack wouldn’t. Shall I put it that way? It became evident to me that Jack liked the glamour of it, but he didn’t want to get in and do the hard work. That was not Ford-like, because Ford was the reverse. He would do the hard work to get to the end.

Finally, I think the president recognized that Jack really wasn’t built to do it. I think it was a statewide lower office that, to me, with that name, if you ran a hard, tough campaign was achievable. But the candidate himself has to be hungry and Jack wasn’t hungry.

Smith: Let’s get back into the primaries and the convention in ’76. After he was dumped, did you ever have a conversation with Rockefeller about anything – about his role in the administration or the ’76 campaign or just generally him blowing off steam?

Spencer: I met with Nelson about damn near every Friday night during the campaign. If I was in town, and I wasn’t in town a lot, but it had to have been fifteen or twenty times during that period of time, I would go over to his office in the EOB and sit with him at five o’clock, at the end of the day. The staff would leave and I would fill him in. He’d give me counsel, he’d give me advice,
he’d bitch and whine about something that was happening to him. He’d ask me for counsel, we had a very good relationship. I thought he was a plus. He was a plus to me.

The specific act of him being dumped, I asked him one night in this conversation. I said, “Do you want to tell me what really happened?” The answer was, “No.” And that was the end of it, and if you knew Nelson, you’d know that that was, “I’m not going to talk about it.” So I never heard his version. I heard versions from his staff and from the other side, but he never commented. He was the good soldier. I remember at the convention Ford went through this agonizing process of picking a VP running mate. It was agonizing because, when I look back in retrospect, he pretty much made up his mind what he was going to do, but we went through six hours…

Smith: You mean before the convention?

Spencer: At the convention. Sitting in the room, Nelson’s there, Bryce Harlow’s there, Laird’s there, Marsh was probably there. Cheney was there. They’re probably ten or twelve of us. All the names were put on the table and they all were evaluated. Closed meeting. Incidentally, there never were any leaks from it, which I was always proud of, considering some of the people who were there.

Smith: Like Mel Laird?

Spencer: You know what I mean.

Smith: Is he the champion leaker?

Spencer: He was very good at it. Then we’d adjourn and we’d go back and some of them would go on until like one o’clock in the morning. And we’d go on to our room, and then at three o’clock we’d get a phone call, and we’d get up and we’d stagger back. I remember I’m staggering down the hall, because Bryce Harlow was in a room right by mine, and he and I came out the doors at the same time. And we’re staggering down the hallway to go to this and I turn to Bryce, I said, “Bryce, you have any idea what he’s going to do?” Bryce says, “None whatsoever.” So I says, “Okay.” So we go back in and then we go back through the whole process again. But Nelson was there at every
meeting, Nelson was a contributor. It got to look like what was an absolute stalemate. People are grinding on each other.

Smith: By the way, was Anne Armstrong seriously considered?

Spencer: No. I was going to get to that. Only by me. I see a stalemate and animosity developing, people had their favorite candidate. Ruckelshaus – there were people pushing Ruckelshaus. Teeter was there. He was pushing Ruckelshaus. At the stalemate point I says, “Mr. President, what are we screwing around for? Why don’t we just go with Nelson again?” The first guy that pops up is Nelson, “No, no, no,” and goes into his – of course, nobody there wanted Nelson to go again – “I don’t think.” Everyone else shut up. So Nelson bowed himself out very beautifully. Then I said, “Why don’t we take a hard look at Annie Armstrong?” Again, there’s a big blaaaaa – silence in the room. I give my pitch. My pitch is, “Hey, we’re thirty-two points behind today. What have you got to lose? Let’s swing for the fences.”

Smith: Do you think Walter Mondale had that same conversation a few years later?

Spencer: Yeah, I think so. That thing never got off the ground.

Smith: Howard Baker was supposedly a leading contender?

Spencer: Howard was a leading contender. What it really got down to, when you analyze it, and Howard was a leading contender, was I kept reminding him – you’ve got a problem in the farm states – we’re losing today – we’re losing Republican territory. That’s really what Dole’s strength was, and it was a good decision for that reason. Dole was given an assignment, he delivered. He’s taken a lot of heat for some reason, but he did everything he was asked to do and he delivered. All the states we were worried about, we got them. I attribute it to Bob Dole. It was the correct choice. He was flippant and things like that. He got in trouble at one debate, but who cares about a VP debate in the long haul? People don’t understand that. I’m surprised Biden didn’t get in bigger trouble than he did, because he’s flippant, too.

Smith: Was part of Baker’s appeal the thought that he could poach on the south? Was it a geographical…
Spencer: It was that in part, and part of it because his role in Watergate. He was the good guy Republican in Watergate. What’s the great statement he made when he was on that committee, he made a statement about…

Smith: “What did the president know and when did he know it?”

Spencer: Yeah, that’s correct. That was a nice little theme.

Smith: I heard, over the years, that the reason he didn’t get it was because of concern about Mrs. Baker’s drinking problem.

Spencer: Joy, yeah. Joy, yes, that’s correct. I knew Howard well, and I love Howard and that was a burden he carried too as a public official for a long time. But, ironically, she was Everett Dirksen’s daughter, and Everett had the same problem, but Everett knew how to handle it. He was a functional alcoholic is what he basically was.

Smith: Really?

Spencer: He gave a speech one night, biggest fundraiser, I forget what they call it – the Republican Party puts on in Washington every year – they still have it. It had to be prior to ’68 because Nelson Rockefeller had a table, Ronald Reagan had a table, all the heavyweights of the party were there. Everett was the main speaker. I was told by somebody, it might have been Howard, somebody said there was a reception in the Presidential Suite beforehand and – Dirksen had star power – I was assigned to keep track of Everett that night – makes sure he gets down there at the right time, the whole thing.

So I’m up in the room and everybody is having a belt or a drink, and Everett has – I wasn’t paying much attention, he always understood what the ground rules were. And he comes over to me because I’m in charge of him, he knows that, and he says, “On the podium, under the podium, a glass of (I can’t remember, either gin or vodka) I want it there where they put the water glass.” I said, “Yes, sir.” I get down there and I put one underneath there and we go down and all the preliminary speakers – I’m sitting there at the table in the front row – and I’m saying, “God I hope they don’t want a drink of water,” to myself, I hope they don’t do it – and none of them did.
And then Everett gets up there and he got a tremendous ovation after he was introduced, and it went on and on and on, and Nixon is over here and Reagan is over here. And as soon as the ovation finally dies down – I mean it was four or five minutes and while the ovation is going on he was _______________, and I’m going, “Holy Toledo.” And it’s over with and he leans over into the mic with that gruff voice of his and he says, “I accept the nomination.” I mean, it was classy. And then it was five more minutes and the Reagan table and Nixon table are kind of like, “What?” And then he proceeded to give a spellbinding oration, which he did and knocked off the whole glass.

I almost kept the glass as a memento – I was going to take it home and put it in my case - the Everett Dirksen glass. The point is, Everett had a drinking problem, too. It is a genetic thing, I’ve had it in my family. My father, real father was a falling down drunk Irishman, and the gene skipped me, thank God, but it caught others in my family.

Smith: You bring it up – did people drink a lot more in those days – in the political culture?

Spencer: Oh, yes. I started noticing that in the late ‘80s. The young people that you would bring in the campaigns – the guys and gals out of colleges that would migrate to Washington from all across the country - they were into wine, they were into pot, they were into that stuff. But their predecessors, my generation, we were into hard booze. We drank whiskey, we drank bourbon, we drank scotch, we drank gin, and of course everybody smoked. The kids were starting to get away from smoking, too. So, yeah, drinking was an ingrained part of the political culture.

Smith: Did it fuel some of the more eloquent oratory?

Spencer: Some it did. There were people like me – there were certain jobs in campaign where I would only hire a non-drinker.

Smith: Really? There was that story, and I don’t know if it’s true or not, I think Ehrlichman is the source - before the ’68 campaign when Nixon’s about to run, he wants to hire Ehrlichman and Ehrlichman has watched Nixon in action and says at some point, he’d be interested in doing it, but not unless Nixon
can guarantee that he’ll control his drinking. Now that may be self-serving on Ehrlichman’s part, but it’s a….

Spencer: Well, no, that’s a problem. Probably the closest I ever got to Dick Nixon was when he was out of office between ’60 and ’68. He would work with our law firm – he started a law firm in LA called Adams, Duque, and Hazeltine and went to New York with the Rose firm, but he still came back and forth. Many of the times when he came to California, he’d call me up and say, “Come on over to the hotel, I want to talk.” Because he wanted to talk politics. Well, we’d sit there and drink and talk politics. He couldn’t handle it. He really got paranoid when he got three drinks in him. There are things I’m not even going to discuss that were said, but they were the result of drinking. He could not handle drink. So, if Ehrlichman said that, there’s fact, there’s reason to believe him.

Smith: Did he resent Eisenhower?

Spencer: Yes. He resented everybody. There was the paranoia there. Why would a guy have Butterfield go through the White House and take down every ex-president’s picture? That happened.

Smith: Really?

Spencer: Yeah. That’s resentment. I say that he was a Jekyll-Hyde guy. He was one of the better political thinkers of our time. He was one of the best tacticians of our time. In these conversations I would have with him, I mean he used to talk about timing, peaking, I mean there were things I hadn’t thought about that I thought about later. So, he had all that. I said to his face on occasion, “I don’t know why you’re a candidate. You ought to be a manager.”

1968 I get a phone call from him, a year out from the election maybe, he says, “I want you and Bill to run my campaign.” He’d gone through a group already and canned them. I think Haldeman had come. Haldeman had come over to see me, too, and he was with J Walter Thompson, I think, and basically, he made an offer to buy our firm – to bring it in. Bill, my partner and I talked about it. It was evident to us that they wanted to buy us now and then use us
later. It was all part of Nixon’s concept. We said no. If the price had been right, we’d have said yes, naturally. But we said no.

So he called and he asked if we’d run his campaign. I said, well, we’ve got to think about this. “Well, I’m going to South America on a trip, when I get back we’ll talk about it.” So Bill and I talked it over and there were two factors involved, because we eventually said no to him. First one was, we knew that Nixon ran his own campaigns – we knew him.

Smith: Was that the problem with the ’60 campaign, for example – that he really ran it himself?

Spencer: Yeah, it was. The other thing was that we knew that our governor, Ronald Reagan, had stars in his eyes. It was ’68. And we had to do business in California, and his staff had already been giving us enough trouble on the business level, so we said no. So Nixon calls when he gets back and we go through the song and dance, and the first excuse I used was the Reagan excuse. But incidentally, that’s information Nixon wanted. That told him that this guy is serious. He was that way. But then, at the end, I said, “Besides that Dick, you run your own damn campaigns.” And he chuckles on the other end of the phone. “Yeah, you’ve got a point.” He ended up by saying, “Okay, but I want you to do something in the campaign.” I said, “Fine, wonderful. You’ll have your team put together, everything will be going great.”

So that was the end of it. Then after the convention I got a call from Bob Finch. He says, “What do you want to do in the campaign?” I says, “You got the team.” He says, “Nixon said to call you and ask you what you want.” I said, “Okay, pay us some money, we’ll do nothing.” Finch says, “No, you’ve got to do something.” So I became in charge of all the California fundraising guys – to help all the Nixon, Taft, Shrieker, and all those guys who were helping him to raise money. They paid me seven thousand dollars a month or something because Nixon was the political figure that kept his word.

Smith: Interesting.
Spencer: He didn’t have to. We didn’t expect it. I was shocked when Finch called. In fact, Finch was shocked. So anyway…I can’t say he had a drinking problem, he was just a guy that couldn’t handle liquor.

Smith: Did you spend much time around Nixon after his presidency?

Spencer: Yeah, not much. The first person, I’ve got the handwritten note some place in my office at home. After the Ford campaign, I came home either the end of November or the first of December. I called Nixon up in San Clemente and I says, “I want to come out and talk.” “Come on.” So I go down there. Three hours. I wanted his critique, because I respected his political, tactical judgment. This is all in light of me blasting him in February of that year for going to China, but I understood what he was doing, he understood what I was doing.

Smith: Is that the mark of a pro – that it was just business?

Spencer: Yeah, that sort of thing was business. He always considered me one of his because I grew up in his organization doing all the menial jobs – learning the business, so to speak, from Murray Chotiner and all those guys who were around him and were good. We went through three hours of critique. When we got through that he started being the political animal that he was. He started asking questions like, “What’s Bob Finch’s future?” or saying, “Let’s talk about the next governorship in California,” and he says to me at that time, “I think Pete Wilson will be one of the better candidates down the road.” Well Pete Wilson ended up being governor of the state of California.

Smith: And in fact, was one of Nixon’s candidates for ’96. I’ll tell you my story. At Pat Nixon’s funeral there were four eulogists. Improbably, one of them was Pete Wilson, who had been an advance man in the earlier campaigns, and one was Bob Dole. Nixon never did an uncalculated thing in his life. At Nixon’s funeral there were four eulogists. One of them was Pete Wilson, one was Bob Dole. I wrote Dole’s eulogy and to my dying day, I’ll be absolutely convinced Nixon knew, first of all, that Dole wouldn’t be able to get through that speech without breaking down – and that would be the best thing that could happen
to Bob Dole. He was using his own funeral as a showcase for his political heirs for '96.

Spencer: Yeah. That sounds like him. Because those were some of his favorite people. Now Finch, he was always fun, he was like a son to him.

Smith: What happened to Finch?

Spencer: Because of the decisions he made of leaving the lieutenant governorship and going to HEW - he got into trouble at HEW – you talk about the drinking thing, Bob had sort of the same problem that Nixon did. He didn’t drink, but when he did he was gone. I went back to Washington when he was at HEW. He brought Jack Veneman, who was a shrewd, smart, California legislator as his deputy. Jack did the best he could, I know, to protect him. His secretary was Doris Jones who had been Pat Hillings, my congressman’s secretary and worked for Nixon in the VP spot, I think. An old pro gal, a protégé of Rose Woods. I’d go Finch, Doris would call and say, “You’ve got to talk to Bob,” so I knew there was a problem. So I showed up. It was a Saturday morning. When I walk in I notice there is a desk out front and Bob Mardian is sitting at it. I don’t know if you know the name Bob Mardian.

Smith: I know he had a Watergate connection.

Spencer: Yeah, but he was a Mitchell guy – from Phoenix. Originated in California, went over there. I never trusted Bob Mardian. He had his own agenda and in my political mind, I see Mardy in there, I know he’s not a Finch guy. I go into the office and I say, “Bob, what the hell is he doing out there?” Bob tells me and I say, “Get rid of him!” “What do you mean?” I said, “He’s a spy.”

That White House had the old crowd and the new crowd. The old crowd was Chotiner and Dent and Finch and the new crowd was Mitchell and Haldeman, and he had to make a decision on the side you were on. So Bob and I went down to lunch at the waterfront, there on the Potomac, one of those restaurants. Now here’s a guy that didn’t drink, really. We sit down and the girl comes over, she says, “You care for a drink?” Bob says, “Yeah, I’ll have a martini.” I kind of looked at him and I said to myself, “Okay, Bob is going
to have one. I’ll have a martini.” I mean, we had four and Bob and I were grrrrrr, but the job was eating him up. He knew what I was saying about Mardian, but he wouldn’t admit to it. Plus he was in a job that a Republican can’t survive at. It was eating him up – it took a lot out of him.

When he came home he dinked around in politics, and did a lot of things. But you notice, none of the old crowd got trapped in Watergate? Nixon’s old crowd – Herb Klein, he didn’t get caught – they had to have inklings of what was going on and they sure as hell stayed away from it, but they were very loyal to the guy.

Smith: Let me ask you, the loyalty to Nixon. What was it in Richard Nixon that would inspire the kind of loyalty of a Rosemary Woods, and I’m sure others, people of character who apparently loved the guy? Was it the Dr. Hyde side of the Jekyll-Hyde, or what was it?

Spencer: Oh, I think that was part of it, and I can speak for myself to a degree. It was the recognition that he really was a talented guy in some ways, which might be, say, the Hyde side of him. But the other side could have very easily been, he was our vehicle to power. A selfish thing on their part and my part, in that, here we’ve got this young guy from California, my congressional district, and they all were starting to get connected with him back in those days. And then he’s elevated to the VP slot - he runs in ’46 and in ’52, in six years he’s VP?

At that point in time he’s thinking president, everybody thinking presidency around him and he’s our vehicle, he’s their vehicle. Any political animal that is interested in the process is always looking for vehicles. And we had one, and he was close to all of us because we’d been around him. He was different than Eisenhower, who really is the guy who got me interested in the process – his candidacy. I was excited about him like these young people were about Obama this time. I was that excited – we had that excitement about Eisenhower.

Smith: But in Eisenhower’s case, wasn’t it almost because he was above politics, in a way?
Spencer: Oh, yeah, and because he saved us in World War II. I registered in ’46, I voted for Harry Truman, I was a registered Democrat. I was going to East LA Junior College, which is in the middle of the barrio, very liberal college, and Cal State, which is a very liberal college, where we had on campus, five Communist Party organizers, quietly. We were all veterans. We’d all been in the service, most of us guys. Even the liberal guys had been in the service.

We took care of those guys. The faculty didn’t have to do it, we found ways as they made their moves for power within the student organizations. We’d take them out and take care of them. It was a great learning experience. That is where I came from. I was exposed to the liberal point of view, and also living in a household where my parents were Republicans, I was exposed to both points of view. But Eisenhower captured my imagination. That was where it started. Those are the things. And he knew how to take care of people. He took care of Finch – Finch got legal business. He took care of me in ’68. So all those things add up to the fact that would give people reasons to stay loyal to them. I think the loyalty of the old group, as I call it – you could sit down with Herb Klein, who’s in his nineties in San Diego right now, and he’d still be very loyal to Nixon.

Smith: How would they explain away Watergate?

Spencer: I don’t think they would. They would basically say, be disappointed – a mistake – blame it on the guys who replaced them. Which they could do legitimately. But even as they were being shoved out, I think a lot of them lost their lust for Nixon. But they were loyal and kept their mouths shut. A few of them sort of crossed the line. Ziegler was brought in by Klein and those guys and he went over to Haldeman. A couple of others, I don’t know who they were. The John Deans were never around – I don’t know where they came from.

Smith: By the way, I only heard Gerald Ford disparage two people. And the worst thing he could say about someone was, “He’s a bad man.”

Spencer: Yeah.

Smith: And the two people; one was John Dean, and the other was Gordon Liddy.
Spencer: Yeah. I’ve heard those speeches from him. Afterward when he was here in this office, in the last few years – that last time I saw him was about June or July of that year he passed away, which was two or three months before. He was on a walker and needed help and was over here at the residence. But prior to that, I spent a lot of time here just talking. He’d call me up and say, “Talk,” and we’d come over and we’d talk. And so I heard him say a lot of things. Have you read the DeFrank book? Of course, you have. Those are the things we were talking about. His pictures, his friends, his protégés, he was really upset with some of the things that were going on. I’d say to him, “Are you going to go public?” You know me – are you going to go public? He said, “No,” which was typical.

Smith: Now we’re talking about the current – the Bush presidency?

Spencer: Yeah, he was unhappy with Iraq. He was very unhappy with the deficit spending. He was in orbit! But yet, here were his guys, Rummy and Cheney, and a lot of people.

Smith: And Paul O’Neill must have been a particularly difficult case because of the circumstances under which he was forced out.

Spencer: Yeah. I’d hear about all that stuff and I never said anything. I’ve got to keep his confidence. DeFrank used to come out here to the desert twice a year to see the President. He had an affection for the President. They had affection for each other. Every time then, DeFrank would call me and he and I would go out to dinner. He wouldn’t tell me what they were talking about. I said, “What did you guys talk about?” Grrrr. So I sort of figured it out, because he kept coming regularly. Finally, one day, much prior, DeFrank told me on the phone, “I got to get out there and talk to him when his health was really bad.” Sort of the final chapter. I remember saying to DeFrank, “Well, it probably will be more candid than the others at this point in time.” It was. I didn’t realize there was a book being written.

Smith: That was my next question. Do you think Ford thought there might be a book being written?
Spencer: Sure he did. I think Ford knew it, I think Ford wanted it. And I wouldn’t be surprised if he said to DeFrank exactly what he says, “Write it when I’m gone.” I think that is probably a direct quote, because it was building up in him. He was the type of person that he was not going to pull the rug out from his protégés, but it bothered him. It really bothered him in terms of the country, the future and all of that. He wanted to be on the record, and that way he could be on the record without having any bother. Sure he knew it.

Smith: Let me go back to ’76. We’ve talked about New Hampshire, we talked about Florida, and then of course he won Illinois. Then you ran into North Carolina. What happened? Did you underestimate the Panama Canal Treaties for example as a hot button?

Spencer: I don’t think we underestimated it, but we also knew it was a tremendous problem, politically. What we ran into was, now we’re in Reagan’s strength. His strength was stronger than we thought. Jesse Helms did a fabulous job of organizing his state. We made some mistakes in message when we were there. My attitude was, we got away with our life in New Hampshire and Florida. We could have lost those states. So we were ahead of the game, and North Carolina proved to me that we were going to do nothing in the south. That was going to be Reagan’s stronghold, and so we had to adjust our plan and our strategies to the point of, how do we handle the Midwest states, how do we handle the farm states, how do we handle the west?

At that point in time, I would say it was apparent to me that we could start defining what our strengths were and what his strengths were. And we could start dealing to our strength, which is what I like to do. It was a wakeup call to Ford and the White House. It wasn’t that much of a wakeup call to me, because I knew it was coming. We got tromped. Probably the biggest single mistake I ever made in politics was Texas in that primary. Texas was a state where you had a large delegate, you had these congressional districts delegates, you had delegates in a lot of different divisions. It wasn’t a winner take all. I will admit that I was given some polling data that had to be erroneous as I look back on it at the time. But that is immaterial. I still made the decision. I put $800,000 into that primary state. Didn’t get one delegate!
Now I used to go to sleep at night thinking about that before it happened, say well, I’ve got to pick up congressional district, I’ve got to be able to get some here, and I’d go through the whole thing through my mind again. We didn’t win one. I should have written Texas off. I shouldn’t have spent $800,000 there.

Smith: Was fundraising a problem?

Spencer: No. It was early, but not later. There is no excuse for an incumbent president not to be able to raise money. David Packard was our first finance chairman and David was one of the sweetest guys I know. He was also chairman for me in the Flourney campaign years later, but David was a donor, not a raiser. He couldn’t ask for money. So it was a problem. We kind of moved him aside and brought in Max Fisher and Les Packer(?), I think, and they didn’t have any problem raising money.

But the great David Packard story, was the Florida Flourney governor’s race. He was my finance chairman, it was right after Watergate. I called David up one day and said, “David, I need $100,000 for TV by (this is Monday) next Thursday. Raise the dough.” On Wednesday, I wouldn’t get a call from nothing, I’d get a check for $100,000. He’d give it! He’d rather give $100,000 than raise $100,000! I just thought, man, I can’t believe this. But he was sweet, he was really sweet.

No, we didn’t have a fundraising problem. Reagan didn’t have any fundraising problems. Then of course, the general election was the first publicly financed presidential campaign and that was twenty-one million dollars. Look what they are spending now, but that was twenty-one million dollars and the ground rules were different. They’ve changed the law since then. The first law that they passed in publicly funding the presidential race created a situation where it discouraged volunteers.

Here’s the reason: if you went out in this state of California and opened a Ford headquarters, it was charged against my budget back in Washington. I had two headquarters in California, that’s all. One north and one south. I had better ways of spending money than put in a bunch of headquarters. That
discourages volunteerism, that discourages involvement. Well they changed the law – it’s a play on words. It’s a party-building activity, they can spend it. Now they misinterpret it – the lawyers got hold of it and party-building activity can include TV expenditures and internet expenditures. They get around it. But it was a publicly financed campaign, and I think it was a prime example, historically. Historians who look at it, you could say the law of diminishing returns applies to political money. We had to, both sides, we had to figure out what was important and what wasn’t important and go accordingly. I think 70% of our budget was in media.

Smith: Were you surprised when Reagan announced Dick Schweiker as his candidate for vice president?

Spencer: Yes, I was surprised and chuckled – I was happy. I was very happy. It was so phony. Our guy in there was Drew Lewis in Pennsylvania. We knew Drew Lewis had a handle on it and that Schweiker couldn’t take it away from him, so we were happy.

Smith: Did they actually think that maybe they could put Lewis himself?

Spencer: Oh, they tried to flip everybody. Yeah, they tried Drew, but Drew was pretty a stable guy and, I don’t know what their thinking was. They did a lot of things that I couldn’t figure out what their thinking was, to be honest with you.

Smith: What are John Sears’ strengths and weaknesses as a campaign manager/strategist? And are those two different roles?

Spencer: What, strategist and manager? Well, they can be two different roles. I think John is not a manager. If any strength, it’s strategy. He didn’t like the details. Most campaigns I’ve seen John in, he’s hired people to take care of the details. He thinks academically strategy-wise. All you guys, historians, talking heads on TV that I listen to, I say, how many campaigns has that guy been in? That sort of stuff. I see a lot of analysts of little political background who have been in two campaigns. John had talent, John made friends with a lot of media and if you’re in that business of manager, it sort of gets back to the point – somewhere about ’76, somewhere in the mid-’70s, the media decided the process was more important than the ideas on issues.
All of us thought that being on the cover of magazines, I saw *People Magazine* and God, I couldn’t believe what was going on. John had made – he had to have been a good source for a lot of writers because they try to cultivate you when you’re in that role. They always treated him kindly. I think John strategically is a thinker, would be an academic thinker and there is nothing wrong with that. I was a street guy. I know some people used to say to me, “You’re a Republican manager, but you think like a Democrat.” I says, “It’s a plus.” So he wasn’t an organizer. And that’s hard to judge when people have that. I saw it happen.

When he took over the Reagan thing in early ’80 or ’79, or something, I was at a governors’ conference in the Carolinas and I was, of course, out of the Reagan act totally. I think Charlie Black was with him then, I’m not sure, but somewhere John says, “Let’s talk about Reagan tonight.” Okay. So we had dinner and we drank. I pontificated. I said, “I’m going to tell what you’ve got to do, John.” He listened. I says, “The first thing you’ve got to do is, you’ve got to get rid of that palace guard around him, or they are going to get you.” He’d already started at that point, I think. He’d dumped one person, it might have been Lyn, I can’t remember. But I said, “Let me tell you something, now. You’ve got to decide on which one you’re going to keep. Some body that when Reagan gets up in the morning, he sees a friendly face.” He didn’t take my counsel. He got them all. And then they got him later, right? That really bothered me, because that was good counsel and it was so, for someone who knew the situation as well as I did. If he’d kept Deaver, he’d never have had any problem. Not that Deaver could contribute that much politically, but he could have been the bridge, which he needed.

Smith: To the candidate as well as the candidate’s wife?

Spencer: Yeah, correct. Certainly. Hey, you can’t say Reagan without saying Nancy. It was the Ron and Nancy Show, and without her he’d never achieved what he achieved. Sure, she was a very big part of the picture. There’ve been other situations like that. When you’re in the management role you just have to recognize it. John never handled her very well, either. You got to sit and look
her in the eye and back her down. She has no problem with you giving it to her, she’ll give it right back to you. If she sees fear, you’re dead. You’re dead!

Smith: My experience, which obviously is miniscule compared to yours, but we had a very good relationship when I was out there. It deteriorated when she found out I was going to Ford. I discovered on several occasions, sort of the flip side of what you said is, most people were so afraid of her, but if you could make her laugh, that showed you weren’t afraid.

I’ll never forget one night, it was a Friday night, cold, we were waiting out there for a forty-car motorcade bearing King Hussein, up to the Library for an award ceremony. She was a little miffed. It was late. She had the whole thing, the mink coat. So I just looked at her and I said, “Well, what becomes a legend most?” She sort of looked at me, and then she giggled. It was that moment when I realized that she was surrounded by people who were terrified of her, very few of whom related naturally, and she liked to laugh. I felt like I’d passed the test.

Spencer: You did. Two instances. One: in ’65, three months into the exploratory group, we used to meet two times a week at the house for hours talking. She was always there. He was in his chair. She was over on the ottoman thing, sitting there. Bill and I, one day we got through a three hour session, we’re going to the door and Nancy grabs me and pulls me aside. She looked at me and she said, “You know, I never want to play poker with you and Bill.” I looked at her and I said, “Why?” She said, “I can’t tell what you guys are thinking.” She’s sitting on that thing for three hours watching our body language, trying to figure us out. It was not premeditated.

Smith: But that also suggests a very active mind. To be blunt, she was a lot smarter than I think people credited her. And she was put in an impossible role of being his son of a bitch.

Spencer: Yup, but she enjoyed it. One time, when Rollins was chairman of the campaign in ’84 and the whole process of how Rollins got there is hysterical because they were trying to shut him out of the White House and we had a meeting. ________, me and Deaver and Baker, and talking about who it
should be. I’m pushing Charlie Black and they’re pushing Rollins. Finally I realized why. They don’t want him running the White House. He’s a leak, he’s this, he’s all that. Finally we made a deal and I agreed to it.

In reality, we had hundreds of meetings that he wasn’t even in because he couldn’t handle it, or we couldn’t trust him. But one day, here he’s got the title of chairman of the campaign, and he doesn’t even know the Reagans. So I say, “I’m going to take you up to the residency and you’re going to meet Nancy and we’re going to talk, okay?” I call Nancy and I say, “Rollins and I are coming up.” She didn’t like Rollins. “Your chairman,” I told her. Grrrrr. So, we get up there, he sits on the couch. If you were ever at the residence, there was a couch along this window and the wing chairs out here – Nancy’s sitting in her chair here. Put him here. I’m sitting over here because I want to see all the faces.

Going up the little elevator, he’s got sweats coming off his face. I say, “Cool it man, cool it. If she smells fear, if she smells it, you’re going to get chewed up.” So, I wasn’t very much help. He sits there and he stumbles around, I look at her, she looks at me, and I think, “Here she goes.” She started bearing in on him. The guy was a basket case when he walked out of that residency. She was having fun, is what she was doing.

One thing about that woman, she really liked her parents, her stepfather Loyal. I never really knew Loyal. My only knowledge of Loyal was AMA was one of my clients and he was not very beloved in the AMA, that doctor thing that I didn’t pay much attention to that. But her mother, I just love Edie. I have never heard Nancy swear. Never. Might hear her say damn, something like that. Her mother was a stevedore, absolute lady after my own heart. I loved the lady. I could never figure out Nancy, never – I swear a lot and I notice my 54 year old daughter swearing a lot now – I don’t know where she’s heard it, you know? But Nancy, I never heard her swear.

Yet Edie, she always called him Ronnie – during that early stage when I saw her someplace she says, “I’m going to give you some names of some guys who will be giving money to Ronnie.” I said, “Fine.” She gives it to me. Five names. If you went to Wall Street, Forbes Magazine, they’d be big. So I call
them up and I go through the song and dance and I get a check for a thousand, I get a fifteen hundred. She calls me up a couple of weeks later and said, “How you doing on the list?” I said, “Pretty good,” and she says, “Well, how much? Richard Norton – how much did he give?” I tell her, “Fifteen hundred.” “Well, that cheap son of a bitch.” I go through the list and blue, the room is blue! “I’ll take over!” I says, “Be my guest.” I get checks for ten grand, I get checks for fifteen grand. The same list! She was a beauty. I loved her.

Smith: Let me ask you about the convention.

Spencer: ’76?

Smith: In ’76. Going in, how confident were you?

Spencer: I was confident if we could avoid an ideological issue on the floor, an emotional issue.

Smith: And the rules change about forcing Ford to name a vice president. That didn’t qualify as an ideological issue?

Spencer: No, see that’s what makes me question the prior question you asked. And that is, if I was in the Reagan role at that point in time, where Sears and these guys were, I would have found an emotional issue to stampede the convention. I would have created one somehow. And when they came up with that procedural thing, I went, oh boy, that’s wonderful.

Smith: But, presumably they had tried - on the platform with détente - and you basically rolled over.

Spencer: That’s why we rolled over, because that would be their platform to do it. What’s the matter with going outside the realm of the convention and going public and attacking Henry Kissinger and raising an issue – they never even tried that on us.

Smith: Also, before I forget, because there was a period right around the Texas fiasco where I think Reagan actually took the lead in delegates, or at least it was a
tossup. It was right about that time that Rockefeller basically delivered New York and Pennsylvania. Is that true?

Spencer: That’s true.

Smith: That is the ultimate good soldier.

Spencer: He was the good soldier. He delivered.

Smith: Do you know if Rumsfeld was at the convention? I tell you why I ask; Bill Seidman told me the story, and Bill is a straight-shooter.

Spencer: He’s a good guy.

Smith: He is a good guy. He was fond of Nelson. He told me, this is what Rockefeller told him, now who knows whether he was blowing smoke or what, but he said, at the time – right after delivering New York and Pennsylvania – he had the weekly luncheon with the president, and he said basically there was only one thing he wanted, and that was for Rumsfeld not to be at the convention. And that if Rumsfeld were at the convention, he couldn’t vouch for the loyalty of some delegates in New York and Pennsylvania. The reason being, at that point Rockefeller convinced himself that a) Rumsfeld was responsible for him being dumped, and b) Rumsfeld wanted to be on the ticket with Ford. Accurate or not, that’s where Rockefeller’s mind was at that point. I was told by someone, that Rumsfeld in fact was not at the convention. That he chose to have some elective surgery performed or something. But I’m wondering whether any of that rings a bell – whether it sounds plausible.

Spencer: Yeah, I don’t remember Rumsfeld being there. I don’t remember Rumsfeld being in a meeting of the vice presidential choice, which naturally he probably would have been. So I think you may be right. In terms of whether he wanted to be VP or not, I think that was a possibility. But I also know that when Nelson got into a conspiracy theory, he really got into it – I mean he got into it. So I don’t know about that. One Friday night he says to me, we’re talking about Nixon, and he says, “Well that trip to China and he and Pat brought back $200,000 worth of ivory and goodies and stuff like that,” and I says,
“What the hell do you know about it?” “Oh, I’ve got my sources,” so I don’t know if that was true or not. He believed it.

Smith: Well, I can top that. He believed – Jack Stiles, who died in an auto accident?

Spencer: Yeah.

Smith: Nelson Rockefeller went to his grave believing that it was not an accident.

Spencer: Why? Stiles had no problems there. If Stiles had any problems, it would be with me.

Smith: He thought there was a conspiracy including Rumsfeld to defeat Ford in ’76.

Spencer: Oh, well….

Smith: It goes to the conspiracy mindset.

Spencer: Jack was at the top of a hill on an icy night, he drank too damn much and he couldn’t stop his car at the bottom and wrapped it around a tree. I knew Jack and he was a good guy. But he wasn’t important in the future of the whole thing. Rummy was principle in dumping him, yes. Whether Rummy wanted to be VP or not, it’s a possibility.

Smith: Remember, because at the same time, George Bush was deep-sixed at the CIA and it was thought to be the end of his political career, and who was it that Ford had looked at, but Bush and Rumsfeld….

Spencer: No, it could be fact, but Nelson might have carried it too far, is all I’m saying.

Smith: I’m also told that Rumsfeld was very good, he never left his fingerprints.

Spencer: Oh, that’s true. He was good at it. He was a very ambitious young guy and had some smarts. Had personality problems in my judgment for a politician. After he got out of office, he was on the board of RAND or something, and I used to get RAND’s annual report every year. I couldn’t understand it. Why does he keep sending me this junk for? Then there was a point in time where he - which year was it – ’96 or ’92 –

Smith: He was interested in ’88.
Spencer: Was it ’88?

Smith: ’88 – he was interested in running.

Spencer: Yeah, because I got the phone call from Cheney and he said that Rummy was interested in running and he was going to talk to me. Cheney wasn’t too happy with the idea in ’88. As close as they are and their loyalties and all that, he understands Don’s weaknesses. Yeah, that was ’88. I never did hear from him, thank God. I don’t think I ever talked to him about it. But the [’76] convention was tenuous at all times, the whole thing was tenuous, it was an eighteen month struggle.

Smith: Is it safe to say that Reagan enjoyed the [delegates’] emotional intensity? Where there is emotional intensity, it tended to be on Reagan’s side, whereas Ford had the organization, if you will?

Spencer: Sure, he enjoyed it. He thrived on it. It was part of his life, being center stage.

Smith: What was the story with Clarke Reed in Mississippi.

Spencer: I don’t know. Oh, God it was so convoluted.

Smith: Wasn’t Mississippi crucial?

Spencer: Oh, yeah. Well, it was crucial from the standpoint that it was so symbolic if we broke it. Not that the actual numbers were that important as it was the fact that we broke the pattern. We promised them something, I don’t even remember what the hell it was, to be honest with you. Some of these other guys you’re going to interview can probably tell you.

Smith: He has a reputation of being purchasable.

Spencer: Yeah, he was! Oh, yeah. And we bought him. What we paid, I don’t know. Because as I said yesterday, I think we sort of gave Dick the job of taking care of him. But boy he was hard to keep bought. You had to whip him around a little.

Smith: Were there moments in that convention when you thought this might be slipping away?
Spencer: No. I never had that feeling. Once we got by the platform, we knew what the platform was, we had a lot of people out there on top of delegates. Every delegate was assigned to somebody, and they were to keep in touch with them on like an hourly basis, so that we could get any feedback. I saw no attempt by the other side to start a ground wave of discontent. But I saw people crying as they were voting for Ford on the floor. I did.

Smith: His acceptance speech, which everyone said at the time was the best speech he’d ever given, in retrospect tends to be overshadowed by Reagan’s appearance. Apparently he had practiced, which also tells you that he knew he had to practice. You could level with him about his shortcomings as a speaker.

Spencer: Yes. The funniest thing that happened there, though, was after that. He picked Dole and he had an office set up in the Crown Plaza Hotel. Cheney and I appeared at seven or eight in the morning, right after the vice presidential thing was through. Everything was through. He brought Dole, his nominee, to the meeting, and he’s behind the desk. I’m here, Cheney, and Dole’s over here, and everybody’s out of gas but them. We worked harder than they worked. We really do.

So, anyway, we start talking about down the road in the future and this was not unusual. Cheney, Spencer, Ford got into a hell of an argument about something. We went after each other – all of us. And poor Dole, he’s sitting over there and isn’t saying a word. I looked over at him once and he had this funny look on his face. He had to be saying, “What am I getting into?” Then finally it got back to – he and Dole had made a decision, his first appearance out of the convention was going to be in Kansas – at that burg town.

Smith: Russell, Kansas.

Spencer: Russell, Kansas, and Dick and I said, “Hey, our advance guys have been strung out for six weeks, they’re tired, they’re beat up.” I kept saying, “The first event has got to be gangbusters, and we can’t guarantee you nothing in Russell, Kansas.” And Bob’s guaranteeing this and all that. So, the two principles make a decision – the two peons are arguing with him about it.
Ford got so mad he jumped from the desk and walked out that door and walked up and down the hallway.

I look at Dick and Dick looks at me, and Dole is just sitting there like this…and I get up and I go out the door. He’s going up and down and I say to Ford, “What’s your problem?” He says, “I’m the President of the United States. You guys aren’t the President of the United States. I’m going to make some decisions.” I says, “Anything you want.” I totally capitulated. I says, “If you want it, fine. But we ain’t going to guarantee you anything.” Okay, well, we did it. Poor advance guys.

Then I flew from there to Washington, Dick went with him to Russell. I didn’t go to Russell. Dick says the planes coming in Benton(?). It goes like this, he looked up, there are cars for fifty miles in every direction. Ford leans over, past Dick and says, “Hey, you guys, see what happened?” I’m back in DC doing something, getting ready for the general and Dick called me and said, “God, you’re not going to believe it.” But that was so funny. I often thought – I never asked Bob after that – what he was thinking. He had to be going, “Oh my God.”

Smith: You had a strategy session out in Vail, didn’t you?

Spencer: Yeah, in Vail. We had a strategy session to talk about everything, look at polling data.

Smith: John Connolly was on the periphery in some way, wasn’t he? What was his role supposed to be?

Spencer: I don’t know.

Smith: Deliver Texas?

Spencer: I don’t know. John was a great giver of advice. He was a great inside pol. I have this theory that there’s outside pols and inside pols, and he was one of them. But the big question there was picking a chairman because the Rogers Morton’s problem had come about, and there were several – I think John’s name was one of the potential names for chairman. But Cheney and I privately really thought that Baker could be the guy. We knew it was a risk,
but I’d worked with him now for five or six months and he grew in the job, he was ambitious.

He had a real problem. I called him in Houston, he wasn’t in Vail with us. I said, “We’re talking about making you chairman. What’s your reaction?” He was a protégé of Rogers’. Rogers just got dumped. He says, “I can’t do that to Rogers.” I said, “I’ll take care of Rogers,” because I knew Rogers well. I said, “In the end Rogers will appreciate it.”

Well, Rogers’ wife called Jimmy and gave him hell. The world doesn’t know that. Jimmy doesn’t like problems, he doesn’t mind big problems, sort of like Reagan – he hates little problems – but also he undoubtedly had to see this as a great opportunity for his future. And he agreed to it. Rogers was great. He handled it well.

Smith: Before I forget, I want to ask you, in that acceptance speech, the President took everyone by surprise by challenging Jimmy Carter to debates. What was the origin of that idea?

Spencer: The origin of just about everything was we were thirty-one points down coming out of that convention. What could we do? You’ve always got to try to be on the offensive – how to get control of the agenda, so to speak, and the challenge was controlling the agenda. We were going to debate Mr. Carter, and not let them challenge us, or let third parties do it. Let’s be out front and do it. That was the origin of the whole thing. He did well at every debate except Frisco, and in some ways he didn’t do bad there, his stubbornness came forth.

Smith: Tell us about – real time. Where were you, who were you with, what happened?

Spencer: We were in this auditorium thing, I can’t remember. It’s a museum or something up there. He’s staying at a residence not too far away. We’d had a lot of rehearsals. They had a stage and it had wings off of it. I guess Carter must have had people in one wing and we were in the other wing. I’m sitting there and we’ve got TV sets so we can see the whole thing or we can go over there and look out and watch them in person. I always loved to watch them on
the tube because that’s what the public was seeing and that’s where the judgment is going to be. So I’m sitting next to Brent Scowcroft and I’m listening to the whole debate and he’s going along, I think, doing fine. He gets to the question of Poland being dominated by Communist Russia, and Eastern Europe and Reagan gives him his answer. No registration in my head.

Smith: Carter gives him, you mean, Carter gives him his answer.

Spencer: No Ford gives his answer, yeah. And then the questioner, the guy who asks him the question, comes back and gives him a chance to clean it up. But the first time, to me, no problem. Then he goes back to clean it up and he goes through it and it’s still no problem. Brent’s right here, kind of a quiet guy. He says, “You’ve got a problem.” I said, “What do you mean, I’ve got a problem?” He says, “The Russians have got x number divisions in Poland.” I said, “So? How many in divisions, Brent?” He says, “Oh, 240,000 or something.” I said, “Holy Toledo, we’ve got a problem!” Like that! I guess I realized that I knew what his intent was, psychologically, emotionally, that they were not dominated people, but he wasn’t swift enough to pick it up and say, this is what I mean.

Smith: He’d been to Poland, and he’d seen these huge crowds, cheering him. If he had simply described that experience, it would have been a plus.

Spencer: That’s right. So what happened was, we left there and we knew already there was going to be a press flap. Cheney and I headed back to the residence. I walk in the door, I hear (in German accent) “Mr. President, you were wonderful tonight. Wonderful tonight.” You know what I’m talking about. Then walks in the hack, Spencer, and the staff, and they were saying, “You were shitty, we’ve got to straighten this one out.” He listens to his secretary of state, Henry. He’s not going to listen to these two guys. We pound on him. He gets mad. When he got mad the red started here and went straight up. You could see it. Henry was no help. There was a press conference held, which he was not at, which I forced Brent to go to, I think, and some other people. They staggered around the podium just getting onslaughted. It became the issue.
Smith: It played into the storyline that this is a nice guy, well meaning, but not on top of his job. That was the storyline, the narrative.

Spencer: It was obvious that it was on Cheney’s mind and on my mind and at breakfast we started in on them again. He brushed us off. He had all the overnights at the meeting – you could see what was happening, but he brushed us off. We got on a plane, we’re flying to LA. I really was concerned about the problem. I go back and talk to him alone. Piss him off, come back. Cheney goes back, talks to him alone; nothing.

Smith: Why was he so ‘W’?

Spencer: I don’t know, except his chief foreign policy adviser was saying he did a wonderful job. That’s the only thing I can think of. So, I said, “Okay, one more shot. We’ll go back together.” I think Dick and I went back together. I think the end result was, when we both walked out of there, we thought we were going to get fired. We really did. We’re over Santa Barbara in Air Force One and we thought we were going to canned, because his great last line was, “What do you want me to do, apologize?” and I said, “Yeah.” I made him mad. Well, we got a statement written finally, between there and wherever we were staying. He was going to speak at Verdugo Days in Glendale, which is an annual celebration, Spanish-type thing. We released that statement before he gave his speech in Glendale, but it was after the curve and it was meaningless. Some papers probably never even printed it. It wasn’t referred to. But the local knowledge you have to have in politics came out at that Verdugo thing, because I’m walking around the back of the auditorium where the press guys were and, Ford being a guy from Michigan, he’s going through his speech and he says, “It’s wonderful to be here today at Vertigo Days.” Well, Verdugo, it’s like La Joy-a, instead of La Hoy-a – and I hear it and I go ‘oof’ like this. Well, enough of the press room, at least they didn’t catch. They were as bad as him. It was a piece.

Smith: How important do you think that was? The conventional wisdom is, that it stopped your momentum dead.
Spencer: Yeah, it did. The only thing that did. We had momentum, it stopped our momentum for a while. It was important in that aspect, because we needed to keep that momentum, because the race ended up close. You can never say you won or lost usually on any given thing, but it’s contributing factors and that was a contributing factor, that’s all.

Smith: What about at the very end, the last weekend. There was the Lou Harris poll that showed you’d actually taken a one point lead. I don’t know what your own polls were showing, but there were some economic numbers that were released that at least suggested a pause in the recovery that you were out trumpeting. I’ve always thought that the combination at the very end, when people were confronted with the prospect, “Hey, he might really win, we might have another four years,” and then the sort of uncertainty stoked by the economic issue, at the very end, those came into play.

Spencer: Oh, they did. But you go out to any precinct in Ohio and you have a marginal voter who is trying to make his mind up in the last week of the campaign, and one of them will say, “Well, I’m going to go with Carter because of the Polish thing. I’m going to go with Carter because of the economy.” They’ll all have their different reasons. But I think the economy was more important than the Polish thing for the simple reason that historically, in this country, people have more confidence in a Democrat dealing with the economy than a Republican. They have more confidence in Republicans dealing with foreign affairs than they do Democrats. That has been a given and it was definitely a given in those days. So, when you get a little dipper in the economy and you’re a Republican, you’ve got a little bit of problems that you wouldn’t have if you were a Democrat. So, yeah, I think it was a factor. The hangover from Watergate was a factor. What post-election showed was that six percent of the Republicans didn’t vote for Ford because of Watergate. That’s pretty bad of those that voted. He was running in a tough time.

Smith: Could Reagan have made the difference?

Spencer: I don’t think so. No.

Smith: Do you think Ford thought he could have?
Spencer: He never felt that Reagan campaigned for him. And he’s right. That negotiation was awful. Of course I was excluded from it, by choice. But Deaver and Cheney, I guess did it.

Smith: What did it entail?

Spencer: I gave Cheney a laundry list. This is what I want from the son of a bitch. Right? Cheney was pretty good at that stuff, and he goes down there and got six appearances and bye-bye. But the thing that irritated me the most was that the premise, they kept saying, “Well, he’s going to be all over the country – he’s going to talk about the platform.” I said to Cheney, “Tell them to go to hell.” I said, “We don’t want him on the platform! We have ___________ on the platform.” But that was their out.

Smith: Do you think they were already looking at 1980?

Spencer: Sure. They had to be. It’s that nature of the beast. The Reaganau, I’ll call them for different reasons, think that if he could have won in ’76, he could not have beat Jimmy Carter in ’76 and I said to him, I would say to him later, “The luckiest thing that ever happened to you is you didn’t win the primary nomination because you’d have got your tail handed to you.” The logic is very simple.

Smith: Did he believe you?

Spencer: I think he might have. I think Nancy did. But he was a perennial optimist about everything. But it became very evident to me early on that the south was going to go for Jimmy Carter because he was their boy. And they wanted him. They wanted to prove a point. Now they proved their point, but they created a great opening for Reagan because they were so disappointed in Jimmy Carter after four years that they loved Ronald Reagan. So, how’s he going to win in ’76 when he can’t hold up the south and we’re in these industrial states, some of them Rockefeller-type states. Reagan couldn’t have carried those states. He couldn’t have carried Michigan, he couldn’t have carried those states.
And another interesting thing, people forget now, of course, but it was Jimmy Carter who brought the born-again’s into the political arena. Was that ever an issue in the campaign – the Fords were Episcopalians; they were more button-down in their religious views.

Externally, no. Internally, it was a battle. I saw it. The religious right was very quiet about it then – they were working it. I saw it and I was trying to counter it. I was lining up preachers and Catholic priests and I had a mass mailing nationwide to a list – one of Catholics that I got from a priest out of Chicago, and an Evangelical list I sent out. I was going after them, too, in a lot of different ways, quietly. Nobody knew what the hell I was doing. Even Baker didn’t know what I was doing. I had Nofziger do a piece for me and put it out. So, yeah, I recognized what was there, they never identified with Ford because of what he was. They had a better argument than we had to get to those people. But, you’re right, Jimmy Carter…Ham Jordan and those guys did a very good campaign. They did a great, good job. I was impressed, particularly with their primary operation. Jimmy’s 11% in the national polls in February, and they got the nomination – I mean they did a good job. They don’t get credit for what they did in my mind by political historians.

I’ve heard people say, just recently – Mark Shields, who you wouldn’t expect to hear this from, Mark Shields said the best campaign he’s ever seen, was Ford’s campaign in the fall of ’76. He talks about MacDougall and the media, in particular. Tell us about that whole aspect of it.

I either read or heard Mark say that, but, it was a good campaign. It was a tight campaign considering…some of the best campaigns I ever ran, and I’ll get to that, I lost. I think the effort that Bill and I made for Nelson Rockefeller in California was one of the best campaigns we ever ran. We got beat, but we were at 27% in the polls when we started. You’ve got to figure those things. MacDougall was an ad guy out of Boston, I think. He was brought in by Deardourff and Bailey. Deardourff came out of the Rockefeller organization. I don’t know where Bailey came out of, but he was basically a re-writer type, and I had confidence in them. Because I did, I think the president did. There were other people in the White House that didn’t. But that was my problem.
They brought MacDougall in to write a lot of stuff. He was a wild man, he was a crazy Boston Irish pol. I think he contributed greatly. I think their work was outstanding.

Smith: "I’m feeling good about America."

Spencer: Yeah, I thought it was very good. The only thing I’d say about MacDougall is, he wrote a book afterwards. I hate people that write books. People that make notes and memos while you’re working, and then they write the book. He wrote this book and I went through the roof. He got the word that I was going to kill him and so he calls me up and he’s all apologetic. He was nice, he was a smart guy, but I have a standard and that’s few, but I have some standards, and that was one of them. I don’t like people going out and writing books. Stories – outsiders – that’s fine, that’s their job. But insiders, he had no business writing books. But he did and nobody bought it, naturally, I’m sure, but insiders. In Mark’s experiences, he was very close in that campaign in terms of coverage. Democrat, really at heart, but it seemed to impress him.

Smith: Where were the debates inside the campaign about the strategy. Or was it, once the debate was decided, you basically all stuck to it – a strategy?

Spencer: There was some debate about the Rose Garden strategy. There was some about that. There were debates about schedules.

Smith: And was the south still thought to be in play?

Spencer: Some people still thought it was, but I didn’t, and I wouldn’t put it in play. See, the joys of my position in those things is that I’m going home. I don’t have to stay and fight the battle in the West Wing. So, I say it like I feel, because I don’t have to worry about that. There was a constant struggle over the speeches. He had a very poor speechwriting shop, headed by Bob Hartmann. His speeches were not good. We finally got to the point where every speech that was going to be given ahead, they were started a week out, we would be at speechwriter meetings. Then an initial meeting with the principle, the President, and then go back and finalize it. So, after a series of what we considered politically bad speeches, I went to Cheney and I say, “I’m going to start bootlegging speeches in here.” There were a lot of good
speechwriters back then, I mean, I’d come to Richard Norton and I’d say, “I want you to do a speech on this and that.” Bailey was a good speechwriter – Doug. Well, Mr. Hartmann didn’t like that logic, so what happened was, Cheney and I made a decision. One of us would be at all the speechwriters meetings to make sure that it wasn’t too bad, at least.

There comes a speech for the Future Blue Birds or Future Housewives of America Convention in South Carolina, I think it was. My turn in the stool. I go to the meeting. It is CRAP! I sit there and I don’t say a word. I don’t say a word – but I say to myself, “I’m going to let him give this and I think I’ll win a point.”

So he does, he goes down and he gives this speech. I’m in the back of the room again, walking around, the press guys are all there. Anti-feminists, terrible speech, you little girls, blah, blah, you grow up to be good kitchen help – I mean, Goddamn it was awful. The press were going like, “What the hell’s he talking about?” I’m going (shrugs). Well, by the time we got back to the White House, first thing, Cheney looked at me, “Where were you in the meetings?” I says, “I was there.” He said, “What did you do?” I said, “Nothing.” He says, “Why?” I says, “I want to bring in outside help.” He says, “I think you’re going to get it.” And we start bootlegging speeches in. That’s how far I had to go to break the hold of the shop. Ohhh – that was a big, contentious thing, I was not very popular over there. To this day I’m probably not very popular.

Smith: What do you remember about election night?

Spencer: I don’t remember much. I started drinking. Nothing I could do.

Smith: On election morning, did you think he had a chance?

Spencer: Yeah, I thought it would be a close race. I didn’t feel really confident like I did in the other campaigns, but I thought we were in the game and by that point I am, believe it or not, so relaxed. One time in California I went on election day morning and took my annual physical from my doctor of a hundred years, and my blood pressure was normal and everything. His name was Stokesberry and he says, “I can’t believe you.” I says, “Hey, man, you
don’t understand, I’m relieved that it’s over. I don’t care what happens
today.’ And that’s basically always been my attitude. I’m just so glad it’s over
with. That’s the night I was in the headquarters, I was drinking, I don’t know
what happened. I didn’t go over to the White House.

Smith: How did Pearl Bailey and Joe Garagiola become spokesmen?

Spencer: Pearl became very close to Betty somehow. Joe, I saw Joe last spring at spring
training and we talked.

Smith: How old is Joe?

Spencer: He’s my age, we’re the same age, 81-82. Just wrote another book. Two
things, we had the Italian prime minister came for a White House dinner, I
think it was the prime minister, or whatever they call them. And I made sure
they put an Italiano list together. As Sinatra used to say to me “A Wop list.”
The Wop list and Joe was on it and Yogi was on it and Paterno was on it.

Well that was the first meeting and Joe was a very glib guy, and so later I
convinced Ford because good friends of mine were running the Philadelphia
Phillies. Dallas Green and Paul Owens, and Carpenter was a DuPont – owned
the club. They were all good friends of mine and I used to spend a lot of time
with them. They had the All Star game in Philly that year and I convinced the
President that we’d all fly up for the All Star game. It was good politics, but it
was also doing my friends.

I put on the plane Joe, Jim Murray, the old sports writer, there were a couple
of other sports figures, and Joe was the entertainer for the President and they
became good buddies and all that. In fact, Joe told me a funny story this
spring when I saw him. He says, “Do you remember when we arrived?” What
I’d done, I put Joe in the car with the President and they arrived in the front of
the stadium and Bowie Kuhn, the commission of baseball, was standing there.
The door opens and out walks Joe Garagiola and Joe says, “You should have
seen the face of Bowie Kuhn. What’s that bum doing here?” And then the
President gets out. But that’s how they got there and I think he was there at
the White House that night, wasn’t he?
Smith: He was.

Spencer: They had a lot of their friends. Parma was probably there. Leon was probably there. That was a connection. Pearl Bailey, she was around a lot, but it was through Betty.

Smith: But she was part of the last broadcast?

Spencer: Could have been.

Smith: It was on the plane, actually, on Air Force One. The President spoke and Pearl Bailey spoke and Joe Garagiola spoke.

Spencer: I don’t remember it.

Smith: I don’t want time to run out without asking you about, you mentioned ’80. His consideration of running in ’80. Tell us about that.

Spencer: There was always, by people you might call Ford people, whether he ran or not in 1980 – there was always talk and speculation that he might go seek it. He never really tipped his hand during all these things. Then you get down to, it’s the fall of 1979, I think it’s the early fall, and a lot of his friends in the east are calling him and encouraging him, some asking him, but a lot encouraging him. There was still this animosity toward Reagan, this belief that Reagan wasn’t a heavyweight – that Reagan couldn’t do it. This still persisted in the eastern establishment types. So he was getting those phone calls, people coming out and sitting here and talking to him and telling him, and I had a conversation with him early in that period. What I basically said, there are periods of opportunity, you’ve passed two of them – to get him prepared to do this. So you’ve got to make a decision. I don’t think he’d made a decision yet, otherwise our openings – things that have to get accomplished at this point in time, at this point in time and this point in time.

Smith: In organizational terms.

Spencer: Organizationally, although the whole thing. And Reagan was doing them all. I told him the window of opportunity was going to close, without saying do it or don’t do it. It was, “Hey, these are the facts, Mister.” He listened as I went
through all this. So he called a meeting. Held it in his conference room over here, of which, you’ve probably got the list somewhere, I don’t know if you’ve got it.

The eastern crowd was here, Bailey was here, Deardourff was here, I think Jack was here, Marsh and Teeter and Cheney was here, I was here, I think Phil Buchen might have been here. People like that. These in the group really wanted him to run. I mean, they have him a pitch to run. Cheney shared my thoughts at the time. I put a damper in the meeting, I’m sure. I just said, “Hey, we missed too many opportunities to do it.” I was still the only one who said, “Hey, Ronald Reagan’s one tough candidate. He’s one of the best, you’re not running against a patsy. He basically today owns the party. To me, guys, this is not a realistic decision. It could be a suicide mission.” But I said, “It’s his decision to make.” He listens, he always listened and listened and listened and kept his own counsel, but I definitely left the meeting and Cheney and I had stayed overnight at the Racquet Club and then came over here and then he was flying out, I was driving back to Newport.

We left the meeting, we were convinced he wasn’t going to do it. I think it was two days later, 48 hours later, I get a phone call. “We’re going to have another meeting to talk about the presidency.” Barrett calls me. I said, “You’re nuts.” He says, “Yeah, he’s got another meeting. We can’t find Dick. Can you get him?” I says, “I’ll get him.” So I called Dick and he said, “I ain’t coming to another meeting. They know my position.” He was right. “I’m not flying back out there for another meeting.” He was not a Reagan guy at all, he never thought very highly of Reagan, Mr. Cheney didn’t. The second meeting was held. I don’t know what transpired, but I think Betty got in the act. I could smell it. By the time he went home and Betty said, “I ain’t going to do it.” It was pretty much pronouncement at that second meeting that, “I’m not going to do it.”

Smith: She had just come off the intervention, and had a whole new life out here.

Spencer: Oh, yeah. Whole new world. I don’t know what she said to him - she said something and that was the end of that game.
Smith: Did the meeting take place? The second meeting? You attended a second meeting, but the tone was different?

Spencer: Yeah, the tone was different, the crowd was different. That’s when I said Betty got in the act.

Smith: It would have made no sense, would it – for him to run in ’80?

Spencer: No. It only would have made sense if on January 1, ’77, he would have said, “I think I’m going to do it,” and gone out there and started working his butt off. Then it might have worked. But no, he wanted to make the money – you couldn’t have them both.

Smith: They enjoyed their new lives out here.

Spencer: Sure they did.

Smith: You saw them, obviously, a number of times over the years?

Spencer: Here? Oh I saw them all the time. I was close. I moved out here basically right after he got out of office and we played a lot of golf, he was very active and involved all that period of time. He had phone calls from everybody, and he wanted to talk politics. He wanted to talk, and he trusted me. I was a great guy to talk to. We enjoyed each others’ company. We weren’t social. I only went out to dinner with the Fords about twice in my life, when they came out here and she was still drinking and they were disaster nights. We’re all drunk.

Smith: This was before the intervention?

Spencer: Oh yeah, I think Betty worried about me for a while, after she went into the intervention – by some of the things she said. Yeah, I saw him all the time. We played golf, I was sort of the middle person for a lot of people – like press people who wanted to talk to him. Not that they couldn’t call here. Like Brokaw, I’d say, “Okay, we’ll play golf, you and I and the President, and you can talk to him while at lunch.” He loved that. We played golf and then we’d have lunch at Morningside, and Brokaw and the President would sit there and go at whatever they wanted to go at.

Smith: He liked reporters, didn’t he?
Spencer: Yeah. He loved DeFrank, he really did. He liked Jimmy Naughton. When we pulled tricks on people like the DeFrank thing and Peoria, we put the sheep in his room one night. We got so sick and tired of hearing about Texas A&M, his college. Ford was part of the conspiracy. He got in the act. Naw, he liked reporters. I never heard him put off any reporter.

Smith: Who did he dislike?

Spencer: In terms of people?

Smith: Yeah.

Spencer: Well, there was a period of time that he disliked Carter. That was the most shocking thing in my life. I’m saying to him, I said, “Who’s your new buddy?” He didn’t like Carter.

Smith: How much of that, I wonder, was grounded in the fact that they both ran against Reagan?

Spencer: Some of it, yeah. And I guess it all came to fruition on that flight to Egypt which they were all three on, as I recall. Reagan is over in his seat.

Smith: No, it was Nixon, Ford, and Carter.

Spencer: Yeah, that’s what kind of – Nixon was playing the independent. They became very close. I never let them forget it. I don’t Barrett let him forget it either. I know a lot of other press people, they’d linger through here and they’d usually call me after or before, and I’d see them. A lot of substantial people.

He became very involved in the community here, in the philanthropic things, the church over there up by me on 74, the Episcopal church. Of course Betty’s program here was a big part of the valley.

Smith: He was so proud of what she was doing over there.

Spencer: Right, he was.

Smith: They had their annual alumni event, and there were stories that you’d see him cooking hot dogs and that kind of involvement.
Spencer: He was very happy. There is quite a little social structure here, because there is so much wealth here in the winter season and he was a star attraction for the dinner party – the event.

Smith: And he knew that.

Spencer: Oh, sure he knew it. I used to needle him about it. I used to have fun with him. He’d just laugh and say, “You’re jealous.” “I’m jealous, yeah. I’m jealous about those bums.”

Smith: Did he hold a grudge?

Spencer: Yeah, he could hold a grudge. But there’re degrees of grudges. I could really hold a grudge if I wanted to. He couldn’t hold a grudge like I could. He was softer at it. He believed in people. He was a supreme optimist, he really was. I’ve always said, good candidates have to believe in miracles. He did.

Smith: Did he dwell much on the past? Did he talk about it? Or was it really here and now?

Spencer: He thought of forward. He’d go through a short period of grieving and then go on about his business in the world. He didn’t hold on to things. He felt good about himself. It was evident. He felt confident in who he was.

Smith: He had a pretty extraordinary life.

Spencer: He had an extraordinary life. He didn’t have any hang-ups, he didn’t have any paranoia’s.

Smith: He and Mrs. Ford, together, were increasingly, in some ways, marooned in the Republican Party. They were outspokenly pro-choice, they said nice things about gay rights, at a time when the party was going this way – I don’t know whether he moved to the left, or whether he just stayed where he was and the party moved to the right.

Spencer: Reagan had a great quote that’s apropos to this. He changed his registration in 1960 or ’62, from Democrat to Republican. And his premise at the time went asked was simply, “The party left me, I didn’t leave the party.” Well, that’s exactly what happened to Ford and a lot of other people. I could say it with
great comfort today, the party has left me, I haven’t left the party. This is not
the party I grew up in or worked in.

Smith: Including Reagan’s party.

Spencer: Yeah – ah, Reagan may have shared some of these social network concepts,
but he wasn’t going to talk about it, they were private matters and he wasn’t
going to hold it against you if you were on the other side. He and I disagreed
on abortion, we disagreed on a lot of things, but, okay, fine. So be it. I’m not
going to make a national issue out of it.

Smith: Were you surprised at all by the amount of reaction to Ford’s death. I was
wearing two hats, I was with ABC for the first half of the week and then I was
with the family. I can tell you, from within the media cocoon, people were
surprised, especially as the week went by. And of course, eventually they
went to Grand Rapids. There were surprised because this guy had been out of
the public eye, and as far as they were concerned, hadn’t really been a player
for a long time. And my theory was, there was a whole generation that didn’t
remember Watergate, but were being introduced to him for the first time
through these old clips. What they saw, compared with what he have today
looked pretty good.

Spencer: Yeah, I think that’s true, and they also kept in the limelight, and Betty’s work
was a plus for him. But, in some ways, he was still a quantity and he had a
fatherly, grandfatherly image that young people can adapt to. The press never
hurt him. The press was always good to him. I think the country was looking
for something to rally around. Bush was in trouble and here was this
grandfatherly guy that had gone through Watergate, tried to straighten it out,
and it was something to rally to. I was at the church over here. I did the thing
out here. I didn’t go back there. This valley really rallied around him. We’ve
still got billboards around here, “Thank you, Gerald Ford.” There up on the
damn 10 freeway. There’s one right there today. First time I saw it I thought,
“What?”

Smith: I was surprised, when I saw later the numbers of people. I had been part of the
group that was planning the funeral and we worked for two years. I said, “Oh
you don’t want to have another leg.” They were proposing California. “It’s too much.” But, 57,000 people, overnight, went through that church.

Spencer: The only thing I saw – it ran ten days, didn’t it?

Smith: Six, partly because of January – because of New Year’s Day added a day.

Spencer: All of a sudden I thought, “Jesus, this is going on too long, come on.” But everything was great. I don’t know why, but I just wasn’t surprised at the reaction.

Smith: Do you think he would have been pleased?

Spencer: Oh! Yes. He would be happy, happy, happy.

Smith: Last question: if you were telling someone who had never known him. He’s just a name in a textbook or clipping or something. What do people need to know about Gerald Ford and/or is there something surprising about Ford that most people don’t know?

Spencer: I’d have to say to you, he was a very decent human being, first. Everything he did, he did with integrity. He had a belief system and he lived by his belief system, which is a very positive thing, I think, for a public figure. The thing they don’t know, the thing that I think they never understood was that he had an intellect and he had some brains. He wasn’t the dumbo that fell down the stairs. He was one of the best athletes that ever sat in that chair. He had bad knees. He had smarts. He had intellectual capability. He could analyze. He totally shocked me, and an example of that, he totally shocked me in 1976 when he took the budget and stood up there without a note and went through the whole thing like a diagram. I couldn’t believe it! The guy knew the budget!

Smith: The federal budget.

Spencer: Yeah, the federal budget! He knew where it was coming from, where it was going, what the numbers were. That took some intellect, in my mind. He never got recognition for that side of him. The mis-service that the media did to him, particularly the visual media, was the guy that played ball without the
Stu Spencer  December 2, 2008

helmet and fell down the stairs. And that became very ingrained in America –
there’s no doubt about that. That would be the thing I think I would say to
America – that they should really understand this guy had some brains and he
had some intellect. Not excessive, but much better than the average. Much
better than some other people I’ve known in that job. Let’s put it that way.

Smith:  Was television not his friend?

Spencer:  Television was not his friend at all. No. He tried to be a politician orator in the
William Jennings Bryan sense. If I can yell louder and scream louder and
pound enough things louder, I’m going to get my point across. He wasn’t. He
was not an electronic candidate.

Smith:  Do you think he envied Reagan his gifts?

Spencer:  Sure he did. I think everybody in public life envied Reagan. They had to, the
guy was so good. Sure, he envied him, but that just was not a good
relationship for a lot of reasons. There are relationships in life that get off on
the wrong foot, and they’re really not that far apart, but they never change. I
have a relationship with Bush, Sr. that way. The situation started twenty years
before, but something always happened like, he’s chairman of the party,
Watergate’s going on, I’m running a governor’s race here. The White House
says to him, I think we’re going to have seven fundraisers around America,
the president’s going to be on a big screen, blah blah blah – one of the site’s
California, LA.

So I get a call from Bush’s guy and I said, “I don’t want it.” But Bush wants
it. I said, “I don’t give a Goddamn what Bush wants, I don’t want it.” So, all
hell breaks loose. Finally I end up telling Bush, “Go ahead and have it. The
Republican gubernatorial candidate is going to be in Eureka that night.” My
premise was simply, every morning I woke up something new was happening
in Watergate. I didn’t know what else was going to happen. So what happens
a few weeks later? Butterfield comes out and finds the tapes and another shoe
dropped. They cancelled the ball, right? But I was defiant of the chairman.
Only representing my client, that’s all.
So that started it. Then I’m running the Clements campaign in Texas. I bring Connolly, Tower, Annie Armstrong, and Bush to a hotel - going to have the cameras, I’ve got them scripted, we’re going to shoot commercial spots, endorsement spots of Bill Clements. Connolly and Tower are pros, they click it off. Annie did a good job. George screws the first one up, he screws the second one up. I won’t let him leave the room until he gets it right. I really pissed him off. Really. He’s going out of here grumbling about that son of a bitch Spencer. I heard it! But I had my job to do and I did it. Then he goes to the White House, sort of the same thing. Every time something happened.

Smith: I always said, George Bush, ’41, would have made a great secretary of state in 1949. He really was much more, in some ways, attuned to that sort of establishment appointive position.

Spencer: He was. But I didn’t dislike him. I brokered the Reagan/Bush thing when they made the handoff, ‘cause that was some bad blood there, staff-wise. I did a lot of things for him. I never got any credit.

Smith: One last thing: the Ford vice presidency boomlet in 1980 – where did it start? One senses Kissinger was negotiating, Greenspan was negotiating.

Spencer: It was started by the Ford people. They wanted back into the game. I stayed away from it. The other thing for Bush, and I don’t know what Reagan’s process was, but when I came back aboard before the convention, the Reagan campaign – they brought me in and they asked me to fly back to Detroit with them to the convention. This was the first time he and I had been together in years. He’s very gracious and he started talking about the primary and all that. And he spent twenty minutes really mad at George Bush. Voodoo economics, blah, blah, everything was said about him. I’m not saying anything, I’m listening.

Finally, I said, “Hey, that’s what campaigns are about. You got to forget that stuff, it’s over with.” So we went into another subject and he turned to me and he said, “What do you think about the VP thing?” I said, “Well, politically, it’s obvious to me that you’ve got to pick someone who is perceived as moderate because we’re going to a convention that’s written a platform that’s
really right wing. The guy that fits the bill is George Bush.” He said, “You haven’t been listening to me have you?” You’ve been dumping all over George Bush. I said, “I’ve been listening to you, but politically, you’ve got to pick George Bush.” He said, “Whoaaaa.” That’s how he was. Then we got on another subject. We get back there and then all this other crap breaks loose. And I know it’s not going anywhere. It’s just not going anywhere.

Smith: Is it just a great media story?

Spencer: Yeah. Betty would have divorced him. Let’s be honest. I go down in that damn hotel, you could never get down in the elevator, and there’s Baker sitting over there. He’s got his bags and stuff and it’s before the last night the decisions are made and all that. I said, “Where you going Jimmy?” He said, “I’m going back to Houston.” I said, “I’d stick around if I were you.” He said, “What do you mean?” I said, “I’d just stick around if I were you.” Brokaw calls me in my room that night, and see, Rather’s gone with the story. I said, “Brokaw, I’m going to give you a piece of advice. I wouldn’t touch it.” “Well, what do you know?” I said, “I don’t know nothing, but I’m just telling you.”

Today he thanks me for giving him that piece of advice. And it went away. I got a phone call from Reagan, I wouldn’t even go up to the rooms. I wasn’t up there. I’m in my room, I’m hiding, actually, from everybody. He says, “You still feel the same way about the VP thing.” I said, “I haven’t seen a thing happen here that changes my mind.” He says, “Thank you.” Hung up. I’m sure he talked to other people, too. And I’m sure other people were taking my position. I certainly hope so. He made the right decision. They got along great. Bush was in total awe of that man, unbelievable awe. To this day something will happen. I feel sorry for George, Sr. His son’s eight years is such a debacle. I feel sorry for the man. I’m talking to Baker the other day, and I said, “I really feel sorry for George, Sr.” I said, “Why don’t you tell him.” He said, “I don’t think I would. He wouldn’t take it well coming from you.” I said, “You mean he wouldn’t have a sense of humor, huh?”

Smith: Perfect, that’s perfect. That was great.
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Smith: We’re basically at that point where it’s now a four ring circus. We’re still doing interviews; we’re sending interviews out to interviewees to review; we’re now reminding people who have had those for three or four or five or six months; getting them back and incorporating their changes and indexing them; and then sending them on to Grand Rapids. Right now Grand Rapids has about fifty-five that are done.

Susan Bales: That are signed off?

Smith: That are signed off, which is actually pretty good. The frustrating part of this is getting them back from people.

Susan Bales: Yeah, I understand.

Smith: We’ve got about forty that are out there now. Just this week I’ve sent out twenty reminders, along with a copy of the original transcript and a handwritten note and all that kind of thing. It’s that overlap that will take this to the end of the year, but we’re planning on finishing the interviews by the first part of October.

Susan Bales: I bet it’s been fascinating. Did you learn anything that you didn’t know?

Smith: Oh, we’ve learned a lot.

Susan Bales: Oh, okay. So it’s not boring?

Smith: Oh, God, no, particularly parts of your dad’s life. Obviously both of your parents, but much of the focus is on your dad. The post-White House years – not surprisingly just because of the age of the people we’ve talked to and all that – the sheer, not only volume of activity, but the seriousness with which he took it. And the contributions that he made; so much of it was off the radar screen and so much of it reflects back on the kind of person he was and how seriously he took all of those things. But also the humor; him going to the
movies and coming back and telling Penny and all the gals, they’d like it, it was a chick flick. Which is not a phrase you’d think as automatically rolling off his tongue.

Susan Bales: Did they talk about him going to In and Out Burger?

Smith: Oh, yes.

Susan Bales: Going through the drive-thru.

Smith: In fact, the last time the Eisenhower Medical Center – it was just a great story. But there are so many…

Susan Bales: Lorraine Ornelas.

Smith: Lorraine’s story is very poignant.

Susan Bales: Oh, Lorraine.

Smith: And she told it so well. She was a nervous wreck getting on the plane the first time or going down the ski slope.

Susan Bales: Right.

Smith: But she was wonderful.

Susan Bales: And he was a huge father-figure to her.

Smith: She made that very clear. She learned all about self-discipline and having a purpose. And it was very, very clear it was a very special relationship.

Susan Bales: Yeah, it really was.

Smith: There is obviously a dwindling number of folks; we tried to go first after members of the Cabinet, but also people who had been in Congress with him. We talked to John Dingell on Thursday. Had a wonderful interview with Mike Wagner on Monday, and he told us at the very end, he said, “Let me tell you a story that I don’t think anyone knows. It was about a Navy Ensign we’ll call Shirley. Anyway, her parents were from West Michigan. Post 9/11 and post-Homeland Security Department setup, basically Secret Service was given a new coordinating responsibility for state funerals - to basically pull together
all the pieces. They gave an agency assignment to the woman and it turned out her parents were from West Michigan and she was an infant at the time. Her father was a disabled veteran, I think from the Korean War, and the government screwed up, he wasn’t getting his checks and it got to the point where they were literally facing eviction from their home. In desperation they called their congressman. Well, one thing led to another and he took care of it. They saved their house and fifty years later she says, “Now I can repay the favor.”

Susan Bales: Wow.

Smith: You’d be amazed at how many of these interviews are studded with those kinds of stories.

Susan Bales: For instance and you might check with Donna and Joe Calvaruso, there was a gal that I met at the museum who was one of Vietnam refugee babies who came to the wreath laying. I didn’t realize it when I met her; I realized it later.

Smith: One of the really extraordinary moments of my life was the day when he came back and we dedicated the Saigon stairway, and there were probably five hundred members of Vietnamese community from West Michigan. It was bittersweet.

Erik: Remember the little guy who came up to President Ford with tears in his eyes and said, “Mr. President, I wouldn’t be here right now if it wasn’t for you. I would be dead right now.” And hugged him.

Susan Bales: And that is something that Tyne did not know about, and I have passed some of this on to her and she’s like, “Wow” - because she wasn’t born.

Erik: She says, “This is neat, this is Grandpa.”

Smith: Let me ask you first of all about your grandmother. One senses that’s she’s a really pivotal figure in this whole story.

Susan Bales: Miss DAR, there she is.

Smith: Tell us about Dorothy Ford.
Susan Bales: Well, first of all, I was like ten or eleven when she died, so I have some memories but they are a little bit fuzzy. My cousins would have - Lori and Linda and Julie. But I always remember we spent several days with Grandma before we would go to camp because Steve went to Leelanau – all the boys went to Camp Leelanau.

Smith: And that was where?

Susan Bales: Traverse City. And so always we would go back and the kids spent the whole month of July in camp, and then we spent the month of August at the cottage. The cottage does still exist. Actually, I took my girls and Joy back two summers ago.

Smith: That is also in Traverse City?

Susan Bales: No, it's in Holland – Ottawa Beach. And we went and knocked on the door and the woman let us in the cottage, which was phenomenal because as a child, you have these memories of “The Cottage,” but then to see the cottage...So anyway, usually Mother would go with us. Sometimes Mother wouldn’t go with us, and Aunt Janet would then take us to camp. The thing you were always told is, don’t let Grandma drive you. Grandma was not known for her driving skills and she had really bad eyesight and really bad cataracts. So you were always told never to get in the car with Grandma. She was a very strong woman, she was very direct – in a sense she was like Dad. I mean, it was pretty black and white, not a lot of grey. She was very transparent, very truthful, told you what she felt.

My mother tells stories about – my mother – here she finally gets a girl after three boys and my mother goes and cuts my hair into this really short pixie haircut and it looks horrible. So Mother puts a bonnet on me to take me to Michigan to see Grandma, and Grandma takes the bonnet off my hair and there’s this really short haircut. I guess Grandma Ford let my mother know how she felt. “You finally got a girl and you cut all of her hair off...” and that sort of thing. I would not say Grandma and I are the same kind of grandmothers. I’m a really warm, fuzzy grandmother. Not that she wasn’t warm and fuzzy. I would say I was one of her favorites. I was the last girl
grandchild to be born. There was only one other grandchild after me, which was Greg. I have her four-poster bed that Grandpa slept in that President Eisenhower slept in. She gave that to me and I still have it. I will probably give it to my granddaughter. She was an active woman. She had to be tough, she had four boys. Think about it; four boys is a handful.

Smith: The famous story is, of course, that she died in church and they went home and found her appointment book filled for several weeks in advance.

Susan Bales: Oh, yeah. She was a very busy woman and she played cards and did all that stuff. But she was very direct. She never stayed with us; she stayed in a hotel. She stopped by and would spend several hours with the children, and then she would leave. I don’t remember her ever getting in there and getting her hands dirty, but I’m not sure grandmothers did that then. Let’s think about the time, it’s a very different generational thing.

Smith: Was there ever any talk – or is it one of those things all families have that you sort of knew existed, but you didn’t talk about – about her first marriage, about the circumstances surrounding your dad’s birth and all of that? What she went through? It clearly had to have stamped him in some ways.

Susan Bales: Do you know, actually I never knew about it until I was probably sixteen years old. It was just not something talked about. And I think part of it was to me, and I mean a rude awakening when they referred to Uncle Tom and Uncle Dick and Uncle Jim as half brothers; and I went, “No they are not. Those are my uncles.” Biologically, you are calling them half, but I don’t know the King family, I’ve never heard of the King family, and I don’t want to say Dad hid it; it was just not talked about. And I actually never understood the whole circumstance until I sat down and read Jim Cannon’s book that goes into such great depth about how it happened. And then at some point, I went to Omaha, Nebraska and I saw his birthplace. So Dad talked about being from Omaha, he just never talked about being from Omaha and as a King.

Smith: Did you ever have that conversation later?

Susan Bales: He talked about it – the parts…
Smith: One sensed at least in public he got more comfortable - it says something for his own capacity to evolve that he was maybe a little bit more comfortable talking about the idea of the broken family and all that.

Susan Bales: What he talked about more was when he was cooking hamburgers at the hamburger stand in high school and this man coming up to him and saying, “I’m your father.” That was a very difficult – that’s the story that maybe we talked about the most of. “Gee, Dad. How did you handle that? That must have been really difficult.” And then going and spending a summer with him and then also how - I think he was extremely proud – proud in a different way – that he was able to throw his father in jail so that his mother got the money. I don’t want to say that he was momma’s boy, but he was the first son, he was the oldest son, he was productive, he was on his own, and he was protecting his mother.

Smith: Well, just a sense of justice, as well. Let’s face it; it was the father who had…

Susan Bales: Had beaten his mother. But, you know what? We just never really thought about it. Occasionally, we would get letters at the White House from Kings saying, “We’re related.” And I don’t want to say we brushed them off, but to us they are not our family.

Smith: Understood. Did you talk about your mother’s first marriage?

Susan Bales: I always knew about that. That was never something – it was discussed – not a lot, and we knew the circumstances to it and all of that, but that was not hidden, whatsoever. And I know she was glad she never had any children with Bill, because that, of course, makes it far more complicated. I have to say, also, when I got a divorce, she was far more understanding because she knew what it was like.

Smith: Interesting. And then again there was this sort of mysterious circumstances surrounding her own father’s death.

Susan Bales: Alcoholism.

Smith: And she sort of alluded that suicide was considered a possibility. Was there a sense within the family that was the probable motive?
Susan Bales: Yes. I would definitely say that’s for sure. And I think now that Mother is open and honest about her alcoholism and addiction and that sort of thing, her father was an alcoholic – there’s a very strong genetic link in that family, or that side of the family for alcoholism. Now when you go back and look at it, there is without question.

Smith: I don’t mean to dwell on it, but it seems a little bit like a black hole in the story. That must have been an incredibly traumatic experience for her.

Susan Bales: Yeah, I think probably because of her age more than anything. She was what – fifteen, sixteen years old? And you’re father dies and you just go, “Oh my gosh.” She never has really talked to me about what kind of influence her father had on her or how close. She was very close to her mother. And maybe the boys were closer to their dad, I don’t know.

Smith: How many brothers did she have?

Susan Bales: She had two brothers. She was raised with brothers; I was raised with brothers. The male gene is pretty strong on both sides of the family. But it also tells you – the stories that I’ve heard about her mother, because of course, I never met her mother. She was dead before any of us children were born. She was a very strong-willed woman, too, in what I’ve read about her. I mean, she was a tough cookie.

Smith: And one senses that she certainly – indulged isn’t the right word – but your mother wanted to follow an somewhat unconventional career path, and at the very least, her mother was willing to bargain with her to give her an opportunity to show what she could do.

Susan Bales: Right.

Smith: Certainly she wasn’t suppressing her.

Susan Bales: No. But just to live through – and I think Grandma Ford and Grandma Hortense, they all lived through the Depression. You look at what they lived through, and they made some pretty strong women out of that whole thing. And I think it says a lot.
Smith: It’s easy to apply a generational element to this, but it makes sense. Do you think that makes a significant factor in your dad’s shall we say, fiscal conservatism.

Susan Bales: Oh, please – yes.

Smith: Your dad was…and it never changed.

Susan Bales: No. That I would have to say – I remember we all were told if you left lights on in your room, “What do you think – you own stock in the electric company?” How many kids have not heard that line from their parents? “Would you turn off your lights…”

Smith: Let me make it clear: it was him, not her?

Susan Bales: Oh, no. It was him saying that. I don’t want to say Mother was frivolous, but her purse strings were much looser than his. So he would get after you for leaving lights on, leaving water running or dripping, all of those things – when he was home, which was a little bit rare, too. But when he was home, he was after you for that.

Smith: Did he tell stories about his youthful privation, for lack of a better word?

Susan Bales: No.

Smith: He didn’t?

Susan Bales: No.

Smith: That’s interesting.

Susan Bales: Didn’t talk about that. But he did not believe in a mortgage. So when you bought your first house, and you would say, “But Dad, that’s the only tax write off you can get. You don’t want to have any debt.” Well, to him, credit cards were useless because you pay for everything in cash, you weren’t to have a mortgage and to him you were to pay that mortgage off as fast as you possibly could.

Smith: It’s almost a sign of character.
Susan Bales: Oh, absolutely. He had no mortgage on the Palm Springs house, he had no mortgage on the Beaver Creek house, he had no mortgage on anything, very quickly. I think he did temporarily when they were building them and doing things like that. He had like a building loan or whatever it’s called. But it was paid off very quickly. The man did not like that and he did not like his children to have debt. Once a year you’d get called into the office and it was, “How are your finances?” And you were like, “Oh I hate this conversation.”

Smith: And how old were you at this time?

Susan Bales: Oh, until the day he died. Every year you got that, “How are your finances? Do you have a retirement fund? Are you putting enough money away every year to take care of you? How are the children? Are you paying for their college?” He prodded into your finances. He didn’t want to know numbers, but he wanted to know that you were fiscally sound, shall we say, would be the best way to put it. And if you were hurting, he would do short-term loans. If you would say, “Dad, until so and so, until I get something,” and he would. And you signed a document that you were going to pay it back. But it was a riot.

My favorite story is still the car and putting the blanket over the car; the car that he paid $75 for before he went off to college. It was cold and he put it in the garage and put a blanket on it and the thing burned up and he went off to college without a car. Can you imagine? Think $75 for a car? That’s amazing to me.

Smith: Most of his life he didn’t have any money to speak of.

Susan Bales: He didn’t have money until he left the White House.

Smith: Someone told us the story – I think maybe it was someone who worked with Bill Seidman, but anyway, in his first couple of weeks on the job, maybe less, he asked when he would be getting a paycheck because he had someone going to college and he had…

Susan Bales: He had several in college at that point.

Smith: And he literally was living paycheck to paycheck.
Susan Bales: And when they bought the condominium in Vail, Dad borrowed money from all of us kids’ investments that he had set up – our stock funds – which were our college funds, actually. And they bought that Vail condominium, if I’m correct, for $50,000. They borrowed against their life insurance; they borrowed against everything to buy that condo; and then sold it for $500,000 or whatever.

Smith: Which, first of all, tells you how much they must have fallen in love with Vail.

Susan Bales: Yes, exactly. That was a huge – I don’t know, I mean, today’s economy is so different, but I don’t know how he afforded to take us skiing every year. Four kids, skiing, in ski school, ski lessons, Boyne Mountain, Sun Valley, the whole nine yards. Skiing is not an inexpensive sport. And to take a family of four skiing, that’s huge. That would have been huge.

Smith: Was that something you did almost as early as you can remember? Is that something from childhood?

Susan Bales: I started skiing when I was five years old.

Smith: Really?

Susan Bales: And the first couple of Christmases, Steve and I stayed home with Clara, and Mother and Dad took Mike and Jack. But once Steve and I were five and six years old, then Steven and I got to go. We started off in Boyne and I remember ice skating on the ice rink in Boyne Mountain and there was the Snowflake Lounge in the lodge that children were not permitted in. And so Mother and Dad would go to the Snowflake Lounge at night. But Boyne was so small then that kids just ran loose in the lodge all night long and you made friends down the hall – and the kids just ran loose. It was very safe. It was really fun, but it was safe. It was a riot.

Smith: We were out in Vail and it was so clear that they are held in such special regard out there. Not least of all because they are the people who put the place on the map as a year-round destination. They contributed to its success as a winter sports destination.
Susan Bales: Then when you go back and you look at the whole fact that the first house we ever stayed in was Ted and Nancy Kendall’s house. Ted Kendall’s dad was my dad’s Scout master. And we’re still in touch with the Kendall’s. I ran into somebody in Grand Rapids last week and they said something about the Kendall’s. The Kendall’s are in Phoenix now. They are still around; there is contact with the Ford family and the Kendall family.

Smith: You mentioned Clara. Tell us about Clara.

Susan Bales: Uh…sainthood would be best.

Smith: Was she a surrogate mother?

Susan Bales: Yeah, very much so. She was the glue that kept us all together. Clara kept Mother calm when she was out of control and frustrated when Dad was traveling and not available and Mother was trying to raise four kids. Clara was our housekeeper that came Monday through Friday, from nine to five. We all used to fake being sick so we could stay home with Clara instead of going to school. Clara was the one that when we ran away from home she would walk around the block and find you. She was the glue. Even after Clara left because her father became ill and she had to go and take care of her own father, Dad sent his shirts out because only Clara knew how to iron a shirt. I think they paid her fifty cents a shirt or a buck – I don’t remember what it was – but it was unbelievable. So I would go out when they would drop them off – and I’d go out and spend the day with Clara and her dad at the farm. She was the glue. She could calm us all down, and if she took her slipper off, you knew to run as fast as you can because you were getting ready to get spanked and spanked hard. She was tough, but loving.

Smith: And your mother was perfectly comfortable with her playing that role?

Susan Bales: Oh, absolutely. Clara introduced us to Cassius Clay. Mother and Dad would travel and Clara would stay with us. So when Mother and Dad would travel and go on trips to who knows where and all over, all four of us kids would pile into Mother and Dad’s king sized bed in Alexandria, and Clara would turn on the black and white TV and she would turn on Cassius Clay. She taught us about boxing as kids, because she loved Cassius.
Smith: She was African-American?

Susan Bales: She was African-American. Not dark-dark, but she was totally African-American. And her mother actually worked for my mother first. So Clara was with us for about twenty-five years.

Smith: So how old would she have been when you were a child.

Susan Bales: Well, she was there the day I came home from the hospital. She was there the day I was baptized in church, which some church members had a problem with an African-American being in our church. And the Museum has video tape – I think of my baptism and she probably left when I was twelve or thirteen – somewhere in middle school.

Smith: Okay. Did her presence call forth – did you have a conversation with your parents about race?

Susan Bales: No, but I do remember the first day at my elementary school, which was Douglas MacArthur in Alexandria, the first day that black kids were allowed in our school. And I remember one day, to my huge regret, calling Clara a very ugly name. And that’s probably the first time that I ever had a conversation with my parents about race. There was just no discussion. I mean, Clara was family. It didn’t matter. I didn’t care what color her skin was and I think some of that came from me calling her an ugly name of growing up and hearing about it in school and things like that and going, “What are you all talking about? I don’t get this.” So to me, Clara was just – I don’t think I saw her skin tone.

Smith: But the conversation you had with your parents was admonitory?

Susan Bales: No, I think it was more of trying to explain. Richard, you know that they were from Michigan; we were in Virginia; Virginia is the South. Things are a little bit different.

Smith: The first time I was ever in DC, it was in September of ’64, and I’ll never forget, we went out of the city and went down to rural Virginia, and stopped at a restaurant and on the table were paper placemats which said, “We
Susan Bales: My dad took us down to Tent City when it was in Washington and drove us all through Washington when they did the whole Tent City all along between the Capitol…

Smith: The poor people’s city.

Susan Bales: Yes.

Smith: He took you down there?

Susan Bales: He took us down there and showed it to us.

Smith: Really. People always said of him, conservative on economics, internationalist on foreign policy, but moderate to even liberal on civil rights, the whole party – Abraham Lincoln bit.

Susan Bales: Exactly. And look at the whole football story. He wasn’t going to play football if Willis Ward…

Smith: And the sequel to that story, of course – many, many years later – the statute…

Susan Bales: Which is phenomenal. I know you read a lot, but have you read the book *The Help*? And it’s not a chick-flick book. It is about the South in Alabama and Mississippi in the ‘60s and *The Help* is the help stories where they are on the bus going home every day. And it was like sitting at the kitchen table listening to Clara. I’ve never loved a book more in my entire life. It is so touching and, sad to say, even in Tulsa, a friend of mine was in a house recently where there was a toilet in the garage and you know what that toilet was for? The help.

Smith: So she would talk about her experiences as a black woman?

Susan Bales: In the book *The Help* they do.

Smith: Okay.
Susan Bales: Not Clara. Clara – there was no color difference. She was family. And that was just the way it is.

Smith: Did your dad – he obviously had the three brothers – was he closer to one than another? What sort of qualities did each have?

Susan Bales: Well, I guess the thing is they were all very competitive. And I think Tom and Dad were probably the most competitive. I think Tom, from what I’ve heard – I was too young to really understand it – was competitive because of the politics. He was a state legislator and Dad was, you know. I think Dad was a better golfer than Tom. Now we all know that Uncle Dick was probably the best golfer of all of them. Dick and Jim were probably the better golfers of the four boys. But they all had a good time together.

Smith: The competitiveness didn’t get in the way of just enjoying the company?

Susan Bales: Of their relationships? No. Tom went to Michigan State, I’m pretty sure. Some went to Michigan, some went to Michigan State, so I think it was a split household, as to college and that sort of thing. I only saw them in the summertime, on my way to camp. I loved my cousins; I looked up to my cousins because they were all older than me and they were like big sisters and I didn’t have big sisters. So I used to love going to see my cousins.

Smith: Let me ask you – it’s jumping out of sequence here, but that’s the way this goes – how sensitive was he to the whole, for lack of a better word, the whole Chevy Chase caricature. The impression that had been created; obviously at odds with his athleticism. Over the years the story has been, well, he kind of laughed at it, or he sort of laughed it off. Is it something that bothered your mother more?

Susan Bales: You know, it’s interesting because I personally thought the skits were funnier than – those parts were kind of funny. I think it may have bothered him because we all know that he was extremely bright, extremely athletic. They would pick one thing and it’s kind of like let’s repeat, repeat, repeat.
Smith: It’s such a turning point; *Saturday Night Live* goes on the air during the Ford administration and some people thought it was a breath of fresh air, some people thought it was outrageous, but it was a defining moment.

Susan Bales: It was a defining moment.

Smith: Satire turned to sarcasm; irony became cruelty.

Susan Bales: Yeah, Dad has an unbelievable sense of humor and he’s pretty thick skinned and so much of it rolls off of his back. I think over time, it began to bug him that that’s what people would drag up more than anything. At the time it was okay, when you talk about history and things like that – that that’s what people drag up is a little bit much.

Smith: And the fact that Ron Nessen went on the air…

Susan Bales: Yeah.

Smith: Was of questionable judgment.

Susan Bales: Yes.

Smith: Or judge-a-ment, as he might say.

Susan Bales: Yeah, there were some fluky things about it that just didn’t – but I’ll never forget Sally, bitchy, at the *Washington Post*.

Smith: Sally Quinn.

Susan Bales: Thank you. She wrote a nasty story when I graduated from high school about me. That the only reason I graduated from high school was because my father was President of the United States and I wasn’t a 4.0 student or anything else. Wrote this horrendous story about me. That was one of the most hurtful things that ever happened to me at the White House and my dad said, “You know what your grades were, I know what your grades are; it doesn’t matter. No, you weren’t a 4.0 student, you’ve never been a 4.0 student, you were a B-C student; you were always a B-C student. We never asked you to get straight As.” But it’s things like that that you go, that’s what you remember, is the story that she wrote. But I knew behind the scenes, the conversation my dad
and I had and he’d say, “Just forget about it.” And he was so good at saying, “Let it roll off your back. It’s really not worth making a big deal about. Just let it go.” And I’d go, how can you do that? He was so good at that.

Smith: You wonder because he talked about – and it makes perfect sense – but you also wonder if it wasn’t also a little bit of a rationalization. He talked about playing football as wonderful preparation for life in that sense. That there are a hundred thousand people who may be booing or cheering, depending on your last play, and it’s in effect, irrelevant. They’re not the ones down there who are playing.

Susan Bales: Exactly.

Smith: And he could carry that attitude into politics, which is pretty rare.

Susan Bales: Well, and it’s true. Because when you think about the center, a team can’t play the line without the center. The center is a very important person in the football line.

Smith: But one that doesn’t get a lot of credit or visibility.

Susan Bales: Right. Everybody is crazy about the quarterback; but do they talk about the center? No. And he really does play almost a far more important position than the quarterback does. But that always blew me away that I didn’t get that quality and I wish I would have. But some of that may go back to his mother. I remember him telling me a story about his mother. I guess Dad had a really bad temper as a young boy. And his mother saying, “Have you ever looked at yourself when you are angry like this?” And that had a profound impression on him. Now we all know he got angry, and we all saw it. And it was not pretty.

Smith: Apparently there were days when you knew were God damn it days.

Susan Bales: Those were God damn it days and you disappeared really fast.

Smith: Was it kind of a slow boil? Other people talked about a summer thunderstorm – that it would just explode and then be gone.
Susan Bales: Except for when it was football. Colorado – Vaden –he could probably tell it better - the Colorado-Michigan game. Mother and I were out shopping and Vaden was at the house with him and I guess it was like the last twenty seconds of the game and Colorado won. And I mean things were flying across the living room and Vaden was like backstroking out of the room as fast as he could. And Mother and I walked back into the house and say what’s going on and Vaden’s going, “Don’t ask about the game.” He was not happy.

Smith: I suppose, actually, if you’re going to get angry or throw things about something, probably a football game is better than – at least it’s not your marriage or your kids.

Susan Bales: Right. Exactly. And I do remember giving him one year for Christmas, or sticking in his stocking, I had bought off the University of Michigan site and it’s a sponge yellow brick with M so that he could throw it at the TV. It was like, “Here, Dad, use this when you get mad.” But to me it was more of a spring thunderstorm that just volcanoes. Quick eruption and then it’s over and you go, “Wow, that’s really good.”

Smith: Would he apologize afterwards?

Susan Bales: If the grandchildren were there, because Mother would usually say, “Jerry, you probably used some words that probably the grandchildren didn’t need to hear.” Glasses got thrown, kind of whaled across the room. But, you know, he usually didn’t apologize; you just kind of understood it. If you were family, you understood it.

Smith: One thing that Tyne said…Your mother is a very complex person, who - people always want to pigeon-hole everyone, it’s a shortcut, it’s easy, they don’t have to make the effort to understand people on their terms. And I’ve always thought she has a foot very much in both the traditionalist camp and the contemporary-visionary camp. Here’s a woman who people often refer to as a free spirit. And we all know she had a more ribald sense of humor than her husband.

Susan Bales: Yes.
Smith: And yet, as Tyne illustrated in a very loving way, there are standards and you adhere to those standards, in some ways very old fashioned standards, about what you wear in public and how you comport yourself. Can you sort of weigh those two sides? You buy the notion that your mother is a more complex figure than the…

Susan Bales: Oh, my mother is a very complex individual. She is a tough cookie, a strong individual, but I think back to when once we all knew that Dad was close to the end, within six months, we were all as a group sending out emails of what is appropriate. I sat down and had a conversation with Mother and I said, “What do you expect people to wear? Because I don’t want any discussion, concerns of you looking at a granddaughter or a daughter or daughter-in-law or somebody and going, ‘Oh.’”

I know my mother has standards. What do you expect? She expected everybody to have hose on; nude or black, not to have open-toed shoes, and your arms were to be covered. So if you had a sleeveless dress on, you needed a wrap, you needed a jacket, you needed something. And one of the classic stories was when we went on the Crow’s yacht, the *Michaela Rose*, which was an unforgettable family vacation, and mother made us dress for dinner. And there were what – nine of us? And a staff on the ship of eleven or fourteen or whatever it was. But what Mother meant “dress for dinner” for men were: no, she did not want to see hairy arms at the dinner table. So it was either a long-sleeved shirt, you didn’t have to have a tie on, but you had to have a long-sleeved shirt or sweater or jacket on. Polo shirts were fine for lunch, but they were not fine for dinner. And so us women, we wore skirts and cocktail pants and she kind of gets into dressing up and we didn’t. But we made it through it. It’s fluky little things like that that are important to her. To this day, her table is to be set nicely, appropriately, different china and dishes are used for different meals because of the quality of the plate and the…

Smith: Presentation.

Susan Bales: Presentation. And I think some of it comes from her not having it as a child, and if you have the stuff, use it. She’s not doing it to show off. She’s just doing it – she likes those things. She likes dishes, she likes a pretty table, and
she likes fresh flowers. She likes those things. But if you are going to use them, use them properly. I know one time I used a white wine glass and put red wine in it as I was sitting there in the den having a drink with them, and Mother said something about, “Well, that’s the wrong one,” and I’m like, “Well, who cares?” She does. She does.

Smith: And grace was said at meals?

Susan Bales: Yes. Grace was said at meals, more so when it’s the whole family. And growing up it was. In Alexandria we had, which we still have this table and it’s in their kitchen in California, a table. There was no dining room and a kitchen; it was the same place. But there was a lazy Susan and if you didn’t get your food – now remember, I’m sitting – Jack was to my right and Mother was to my left, and Mike was on the other side of Mother – and so on the lazy Susan, if I didn’t get my food by the time it went around the second time, there was nothing left to eat because I was always fighting against the boys. And that was pretty casual for her growing up. But that was okay. But once they got to California and the White House, and Mother was very respectful of the White House. She didn’t want them to come ‘down to our level.’ It was ‘we needed to step up to its level.’

Smith: Let’s go to the large issue of their faith, because I think a lot of people learned, or maybe relearned things they had forgotten during that week of the funeral. First of all, they were reintroduced to the family. Secondly, I think they came to realize the Fords had a real love match for fifty-eight years, and the importance of their faith, generally. How would you describe that?

Susan Bales: Their faith was extremely important to them. I don’t know if a lot of people realized that Mother was raised Christian Scientist.

Smith: I didn’t know that, because I am a Christian Scientist.

Susan Bales: She was raised Christian Scientist, and when she married Dad she converted to being Episcopalian. So he was the Episcopalian, and she was the Christian Scientist, which is why the boys went to Leelanau - a Christian Science camp.

Smith: Oh, okay.
Susan Bales: I don’t know if that is still true. So, anyway, we went to church on Sunday. I wouldn’t say we made it every Sunday; we were all baptized in the church; we all went to confirmation; I sang in the choir; we did all of the things that you were supposed to do to become an appropriate Episcopalian. I guess we were known as Emmanuel on the Hill, and Alexandria was the low Episcopal Church versus the Christ Church which is downtown. Alexandria was the high Episcopal Church. I never figured out what the difference was.

Smith: I think maybe one is more Protestant and one is quasi-Catholic.

Susan Bales: We were low Episcopalians. And I have continued. I mean, I’m very proud to be today a practicing Episcopalian. I have no problems with it. And Mother and Dad were very involved in St. Margaret’s. As far as Grace, the Grace that they went to in Grand Rapids, is not the Grace Church that exists today. But Mother taught Sunday school, and of course, Boy Scouts was at the church hall and she did that. They were very much involved and a lot of our friends that we got to know and that kind of thing, we got to know through the church. And then the same thing at St. Margaret’s. They were very involved in St. Margaret’s at Palm Desert and building - that new sanctuary. The original church – actually, I got married in the first original church – which is now like the auxiliary hall compared to the big church that she and Dad and Leonard and Mom were very involved in building that huge church out there in Palm Desert. So the church has always been very much a part of their life.

Smith: Tyne spoke very movingly about conversations that she had with her grandfather. Whether he said it explicitly or she clearly drew this impression that there was a direct connection that he was not afraid to die.

Susan Bales: No. No, he was not afraid.


Susan Bales: Oh absolutely. That was not – and I know my brother Mike, having a divinity degree – Mike had long conversations with Dad about that whole time. But he had absolutely – I mean, I spent a lot of time with him from the time he came back from Mayo’s until the time that he died. I was out there probably every two weeks or so and no, there was no qualm whatsoever.
Smith: Do you think her faith has helped her to get through the last few years?

Susan Bales: I think that her faith and her family are what keep Mother going. She has lost a lot of friends since Dad, she’s lost Lee Annenberg, she’s lost a lot of friends, and I think that’s probably the hardest part of growing to be the age that Mother is – that all your friends are younger. But she still has Lilian Fisher. Lilian Fisher – they are the same age and they’re both still going strong and I know she talks to Lilian a lot. But other than that, she’s pretty limited in a lot of her friends. So, us kids and grandkids are out to see her a lot, but that, I think is what keeps her going. That and when she gets just ornery and stubborn. She is still very much in control, I promise.

I will tell you a story that will just let you know how much she is still with us. I needlepoint a lot, and so Vaden and I were just out seeing her in early July while attending Greg Willard’s son’s wedding, and I’m sitting at the kitchen table needlepointing and we’re talking because she’s eating her breakfast and I’d eaten an hour or so before. I had needlepointed Dad a Christmas stocking. Well, it got lost several years ago and I think it got thrown out. To a needlepointer, that’s very hurtful. There’s a lot of time spent on these things. So when they get thrown out, it’s like you somehow got thrown out. So we’re talking about it and Mother looks up and she goes, “Maybe he took it with him.” I just went, “Really?” Okay.

Smith: She has a distinctive sense of humor, doesn’t she?

Susan Bales: Oh, she has an unbelievable sense of humor. And she does stuff like that every now and then and I go, “You are really still…” She truly sits back and she knows exactly what’s going on, who’s playing what game, whatever. And she doesn’t say a lot, but when she does, listen.

Smith: Go back to the beginning, because it’s always been a little bit cloudy, this issue of - he’s climbing the ladder at an accelerating pace, particularly after he becomes Minority Leader, post-Goldwater debacle. And was on the road a lot. I assume he had been on the road a lot before. He liked travel, didn’t he? He liked the rubber chicken; he liked…
Susan Bales: He liked people. That’s as simple as it is. His liked people. And he became the Energizer Bunny when he was around people. And I’m not going to say he didn’t like being home and he didn’t like reading his newspaper. He loved watching his boys play football; he loved being with his family. But the man liked people and it was like food for him, I guess is the best way to put it.

Smith: How much of that was an issue? Did it evolve over time? Did it become acute? What did it contribute to her unhappiness?

Susan Bales: Well, see, you’ve got to remember that when he was Minority Leader I was middle school, freshman, sophomore year high school. Parents were not probably one of my most favorite things to be around. But, yeah, I would say…

Smith: Was it a source of tension?

Susan Bales: Yes, I guess that’s the best way to put it. And not that I wanted to be around the house anyway, I was usually out in the neighborhood playing with my friends or demonstrating – you always thought that somebody else’s house was way cooler than your house and way more fun and everything else. But yes, I would say tension. And that’s where Clara was the relief valve. I could talk to Clara about things that I felt I couldn’t talk to my mother because she was tense. And as she says in her book, she was seeing a psychologist. Yes, there was tension. My parents never fought in front of us kids. If they fought they went upstairs to their bedroom and closed the door and fought behind closed doors or after we went to bed. I would say you would hear Jerry and a few curse words, but then they quickly excused themselves. There was no screaming and yelling and finger pointing in front of the children. So I could not tell you what kind of fighters they were. Unlike some people who probably could.

Smith: What is the sequence of events – I know she had the pinched nerve.

Susan Bales: She had the pinched nerve from tripping over a stool in the den in Alexandria. She had the pinched nerve, she spent much time in traction, on and off over the years; and she did a lot of physical therapy. She went to a psychologist for
peace of mind, which I understand. When you’ve got a husband who is gone a lot and you’ve got four kids you are trying to raise.

Smith: It’s been suggested – and I don’t mean to be trendy here – that she is, in so many ways, a kind of a stand in for a whole generation of women who were sort of on the cusp of the women’s movement and self-realization – whatever that meant. But it’s almost as if the language didn’t exist yet. It’s as if they didn’t quite know what they were looking for, but they were sort of groping their way towards some re-definition of role.

Susan Bales: And I think that’s true, but I also think she was very involved – there was the Senate Wives’ Club, and the Republican Wives’ Club, and all those clubs – Mother lunched a lot. Did the Red Cross stuff, which I don’t think any of that’s even done anymore. They were truly her support group. Bobby Burns, the McGregors – the families that stick out in my mind that they saw on the weekend were the McGregors, the Burns, Glenn from Wisconsin.

Mel Laird, Mel and Betty Laird. Les Arends, I’m thinking of the people we went to the Greenbrier with. I knew their kids, their kids knew us, those were the people – and there were other congressmen and senators and stuff. I ended up in college with Cissy Baker and her dad and my dad go way back.

Smith: And on weekends you would play in Statuary Hall?

Susan Bales: Yes! Hide and Seek. But we’d also go to the Army/Navy Country Club. I think as a congressman you automatically got a membership at Army/Navy Country Club. So we would go to the country club a lot on the weekends and so you would run into these same kids over at the Country Club. And so you’d swim with them in the pool and the dads were all playing golf and the mothers were playing tennis or sitting on the lawn on the beach towels and that sort of thing. Those were the people you saw on a regular basis. And so that was your support group along with the Senate Wives Club and the lunches that they were all doing. I remember doing fashion shows, mother/daughter Senate Wives fashion shows, raising money – I don’t know who they were raising money for. They did the *Congressional Wives*
Cookbook. There was a lot of support in that group of people then. I don’t know, but I don’t think that goes on anymore.

Smith: And it’s fascinating because those were all “political wives” who in many ways shared experiences, and probably shared their frustrations.

Susan Bales: Absolutely.

Smith: Did she seem unhappy to you?

Susan Bales: She had unhappy times. She and Jack were like cats and dogs growing up. And I think it’s because they are very much the same. And Jack in high school, if Mother said black, Jack said white. And he just liked to get her riled up. And he would get her riled up and there was no father there to say, “Jack Ford, stop that.”

Smith: I was going to ask you what your dad’s response to this was.

Susan Bales: He wasn’t there.

Smith: Yeah. He was really away that much?

Susan Bales: Yeah, he really was away that much. And so Mother would get upset because she and Jack would get into this big fight and then I would have to go up and calm Mother down, Mike would go and have to say, “Jack, you need to go apologize.” Mike never really became the fatherly figure, but Mike was having to do things…so that’s kind of the way it was. Some mothers have one child that they just…and Jack and Mother were the bristly ones, shall we say?

Smith: Do you think your dad felt guilt, either then or more important, maybe, in later years? Because there is this sense that, although certainly he kept on traveling, that was…

Susan Bales: He did keep on traveling, but I don’t think he felt guilty. He came, he went to North Carolina to go to his grandchildren’s graduations; I think he spoke, not at their high school graduations, but I think he attended school with each and every grandchild for one day. That’s a huge commitment. Now he did other things while he was there.
Smith: That could also be seen, though, as in some compensating for what he didn’t do or wasn’t able to do.

Susan Bales: Yeah, and maybe that was his way, but when he came to Tulsa, and he came to Tulsa several times, one he did Law Day while he was there. He went to Heather’s middle school, but at first he went to Tyne and Heather’s elementary school, which was a public school. I know he did it for all of Mike’s kids and I know he went to Jonathan and Christian’s football practices when they were little boys. Very close to the end of his life. He was involved with his grandchildren; he knew what his grandchildren were doing. He talked to them on a regular basis. I don’t think it was guilt, I think he truly loved and cared about them.

Smith: But in terms of maybe more intimately, meaning the relationship with your mother…

Susan Bales: He bought her jewelry. He knew how to make up to her. He bought her jewelry.

Smith: She likes jewelry?

Susan Bales: She likes jewelry. And Ann Cullen would go – and I don’t know, have you talked to Ann?

Smith: Yeah, we have.

Smith: Ann would go to the jewelers and he would say, “Here’s the budget.” And that was the hard part. And Ann would go to the jewelry store and she would come home with several things. She would try them on and she would walk into the office and say, “Okay, here’s this, and here’s this, and here’s this ring, or here’s this bracelet…” or rings or earrings. Mother was big on earrings. And so Dad would say, “Well, I like this one, but which one do you think she would like?” Ann had impeccable taste. And Ann, having worked for Mother for fifteen years, knew Mother’s taste. So Ann would say, “Well, I really think this is the one she would like.” And then the price discussion would happen, because sometimes Ann would go over the budget just a little bit because it was close enough, and Ann knew that Mother would really, really
like that one. So he knew jewelry always made her very, very happy. Very happy. We always waited for the little box on Christmas morning. Or he’d call me and he’d say, “What am I going to get your mother?” And I’d say, “Dad, I don’t know. You need to talk to Ann. Ann is with her every day. I don’t know what Mom needs; I don’t know what Mom wants. Ann really does.” But jewelry appeased her, shall we say? My mother liked clothes, a lot. And she liked expensive clothes. Very tailored, very simple, but she had good taste in clothes, and I don’t think he ever said, “You spent too much money on clothes.” It was his way of, if that’s what she wants…

Smith: And then - talk about opposites attracting - because he was the most punctual of men.

Susan Bales: Oh, I thought you were going to talk about his clothes in the ‘70s.

Smith: Well, actually, we could, because the legend is there were closets full of suits that were older than you. And that he didn’t want to get rid of. And that part of her function in life was to make sure he didn’t embarrass himself by going out in some of this stuff.

Susan Bales: When you compare – her being the queen of fashion, he was not the king of fashion. He had one jacket that was a brown and blue wool plaid, double vents in the shoulder – I think it even had suede elbow patches on – that when we cleaned out the Beaver Creek house was still there. And when it went in the Goodwill pile, it was kind of sad to throw it out because he’d put it on and Mother would go, “No. Put it back.” “Well, it’s still good. It’s not worn out.” And we’d go, “It’s not that, Dad. It’s the fashion. Double shoulder vents is not in fashion anymore.” That’s where he was very frugal. It had to be worn out before he threw it out.

Smith: But then, as I said, the punctuality, which I assume as long as they were together, must have been an issue. Let me try out a theory, because I think one of the things that might surprise people about your mother – for all the time she spent in the public eye, for example, before she went up and gave a speech, she had butterflies.

Susan Bales: Oh, yeah.
Smith: Which is, in many ways, the mark of a true performer. It’s when you stop worrying…and I always wondered whether some of it was - that’s last thing I can do that I have control over. It’s a kind of perfectionism. So maybe it’s the last piece of jewelry, or the last look in the mirror, or whatever – but also, a little bit of butterflies.

Susan Bales: She did at the funeral.

Smith: She was late?

Susan Bales: She was late.

Smith: I noticed a couple of times we were waiting.

Susan Bales: I can’t remember if it was – and it was simply when you go back and look at it and Greg Willard would be the one to know exactly what the item was, she had forgotten to get. One of the things she carried was one of his handkerchiefs. And she looked in her purse and that handkerchief wasn’t there. Things that meant something to her. But all of us are sitting in the cars waiting in the motorcade because the motorcade can’t leave until she is in the car in the lead motorcade. And we’re all sitting there looking at our watches going, “Okayyy.” But, to her, and I don’t mean this in a rude way, it was her show. And she does it now with dinner. We’ll say, “Mom, can we eat at 7:00 instead of 7:30?” “Well, maybe.” And at 7:45, and then you just can’t…

Smith: She just has a different sense of time.

Susan Bales: She just has a different sense of time.

Smith: Was it an endearing difference that they had? He obviously accommodated himself.

Susan Bales: Oh, he was pacing. He would be pacing waiting for her. And the times that I would be with him, and you could see the eruption, “God damn it, people are waiting on us.” And I’d say, “I know, Dad, but screaming and yelling is not going to solve the problem and it doesn’t solve the problem with her.”

Smith: Did she acknowledge that there was a problem with her?
Susan Bales: Oh, yeah. Oh she knows there’s a problem.

Erik: Excuse me, Susan, I just wanted to ask, did he ever have a schedule, if he knew it would begin at a certain time, would he ever….?

Susan Bales: No.

Erik: He wouldn’t move it maybe a half hour?

Susan Bales: No, I have friends that I do that with, but no, they never padded the schedule that I’m aware of. He would say to me, “Will you go check on her?” And so you’d go back and you’d kind of see, okay, the hair is done, the jewelry is going on, so we’re probably five minutes away. But the whole thing with him, he’d come out in a suit and he’d have one tie on and he’d always have a tie in his pocket. And he’d go in and he’d say, “Betty, this, or this?” And she always picked, “This.” This is what he wanted, this is what she wanted.

Smith: But he would defer to her judgment?

Susan Bales: And she’d go, “Uhum,” and he’d go change it.

Smith: That was his idea of getting ready to go out.

Susan Bales: Right, and I guess because of her lateness, I’m unbelievably punctual. If I’m late, I’m late for a really good reason. Something has truly thrown me off. Because I back into things.

Smith: When that little cloud, no bigger than a man’s hand, first appears, in the form of Watergate? By the way, were politics talked about in the house? Or was it something he left at the office? And was she political?

Susan Bales: First of all, my freshman and sophomore year in high school, I was at boarding school, so I was only at home on the weekends, because I was the last kid. And you’ve got to remember that Steve went to TC Williams, which is – did you ever see the movie *Remembering the Titans*?

Smith: No, but I know about it.

Susan Bales: Okay, that’s the high school that I would have gone to as a freshman and obviously there were some issues, which is why I went to boarding school.
And Steve, being a boy, he could be tough and he’ll be okay. So I was only home on the weekends. I was home Friday and then I had to be back at school Sunday night by four o’clock, or whatever it was. So when I saw him, I did not hear a lot of politics being discussed. Before that, in middle school, politics in general were being discussed because Mike and Jack, at that point, were in high school and they were starting to discuss politics.

Smith: Was Vietnam a topic?

Susan Bales: Yeah, because I remember when the boys got their numbers, which they got very high, high numbers and knew that they would not have to go. But I was way too young and I really didn’t get it – I didn’t pay attention to it.

Smith: You asked about stories – I’ll tell you one. Jack Marsh gave us a great story, which I’m sure has never appeared in print. At least he said it hadn’t, and it’s amazing that it wasn’t ferreted out at the time. Your dad’s first days on the job in the White House; it’s the day before he goes to Chicago to give the VFW speech, which, let’s face it, as he said, “At least I don’t have to worry about being interrupted by applause.”

Susan Bales: Right.

Smith: That day, a day in advance, Jack Marsh comes in and says, “We’ve got a problem,” and he had a lot of problems on his plate at that point.

Susan Bales: It comes with the job.

Smith: It turns out Steve had not registered on his birthday for the draft. And the thought that…you know, it’s a juicy story. He said your dad looked like he was gob smacked, he just kind of put his head in his hands…

Susan Bales: Like, “How did I let that slip?”

Smith: And so, before the day was over, I think they got General Hershey himself, they got it all taken care of, buttoned down. And the press never found out. But you can imagine…

Susan Bales: We’re not perfect, as we all know.
Smith: Most families argued about Vietnam. Were there arguments about the war that you can remember?

Susan Bales: I remember Jack and Dad getting into arguments about politics. Even then Jack was one of those students that sat in Social Studies class with the social studies book and a *Time Magazine* or *Newsweek* inside of it. He was always reading that kind of stuff. He was very much in tuned to it – I was just into riding my bike and playing with the dog. That would be a Jack question – which is why he got involved in Nixon’s re-election campaign, where he met a lot of those people. That’s why Jack was so involved in Dad’s campaign. That was his thing – it wasn’t mine.

Smith: Was there a moment when suddenly the prospect of your life being turned totally upside down crystallized? I mean, did your parents discuss this ongoing…before the vice presidency? It would have been before that.

Susan Bales: Well, in the vice presidency – with that happening, that summer I was dating Gardner Britt, of Ted Britt Ford, where you probably see those commercials now, in Virginia – Ted Britt Ford. Gardner, I dated him in high school, isn’t that special? I went with his family to Rehoboth Beach that summer. Wait – Dad was vice president – I’m trying to think about that.

Smith: Okay, so ’73 is when Agnew’s problems emerge. August of ’73 is when the *Wall Street Journal* comes and then, of course, October…

Susan Bales: Right. Because I’m just starting to think – I took Secret Service agents to the beach with Gardner’s family and they hung out in the garage of the house that the Britts had rented. So for the vice presidency, the only thing that truly sticks in my mind is, I came home on Friday and the front yard was full of press. And I mean full.

Smith: It’s not a big front yard.

Susan Bales: No. It wasn’t. We still had a garage then, because the garage had not been converted. And then some of them were across the street in the Abbruzzese’s yard. So I came home, it was probably four o’clock that afternoon that I got home from boarding school, and Mother was frazzled, truly frazzled, and she
Susan Ford Bales  July 25, 2010

says, “I need to go up and take a nap.” I said, “Fine, you go take a nap and I’ll take over the phones.” And that’s when Sam Donaldson and I became best friends, because Sam called every thirty minutes. “Have you heard anything? Do you know anything?” Finally, I went, “Now I know why my mother is frazzled,” because our phone number was published in the phone book. It was horrible. So that’s when I really got the first sense that something was getting ready to change. It was ugly. And that’s when Mother and I, because she was a late person and not terribly punctual, I said, “We need to pick out some clothes. We just need to pick out some clothes if you’re going to have to be in front of the press, let’s just pick out a couple of dresses that would be acceptable if, at the last minute, you have to jump and get dressed.” That’s the kind of stuff – I wasn’t in tuned to it. I wasn’t paying attention to it, because of my age more than anything.

Smith: And when the call came - the thing that I find astonishing is that literally, you had so little time. I mean, within a couple of hours you were supposed to be in the East Room of the White House for the ceremony.

Susan Bales: Yeah. And we couldn’t find Mike, and we couldn’t Gayle. They’re driving to Massachusetts. I mean, when you start putting all the pieces together, it’s a comedy show and we do look like a bunch of mucks from the Midwest that have no idea where anybody is. But, yeah, it was pretty amazing.

Smith: One senses your dad did not enjoy the vice presidency for reasons quite apart from – clearly there was a unique set of – he was walking a tightrope. But no one particularly enjoys the vice presidency, and in that sense, it was the job itself that wasn’t much fun.

Susan Bales: I don’t want to call it a ceremonial job, but it really is a ceremonial job. My dad loved to have his hands in the mess. And to pull him away from the Capitol…and maybe when he was vice president he could truly make a difference because he knew the players and could go up to Capitol Hill and do one on one lobbying and talking. “Come on, let’s talk about this bill,” and that sort of thing. And he really had a savvy about him with those. But, yeah, it’s not a great job. The only thing I cared about was, I was anticipating moving to
a different house and I wasn’t going to have to share a bathroom with my brothers. That’s all I was concerned about.

Smith: You were going to move into the Admiral’s House.

Susan Bales: That’s right. Mother and I had picked out my bedroom, we’d picked out fabrics, we’d picked out all kinds of stuff.

Smith: And was she comfortable with the way her life was going at that point? Or at least she was along for the ride?

Susan Bales: She was along for the ride. Yeah, I think she was along for the ride. I think she was enjoying working on the Admiral’s House and if anyone has seen the pictures of what the Admiral’s House looked like beforehand, it was a disaster. It really was a disaster.

Smith: Did she enjoy decorating?

Susan Bales: Yeah, she enjoys doing that stuff. She enjoys fabrics – I think that’s the fashion side of her doing things. So, in that sense, it was going to be fun, it was going to be nice. I was going to be closer to school.

Smith: And it would only be a couple of years.

Susan Bales: Exactly. And I think her theory was, it’s only a couple of years and then we get to retire and go do what we want to go do. Which we know is not what happened.

Smith: Of course Tom DeFrank made a great deal in his book about a slip of the tongue that your dad made – something to the effect that, “When I’m,” as opposed to “If I’m,” a subject he presumably avoided under ordinary circumstances. At home, one would think it would be harder to avoid – it’s like the edge of the falls is over there. Were there discussions about what if; aside from the very end, when everyone knew what was going to happen?

Susan Bales: I never heard it. But you’ve got to remember, Steve and I were the only ones home. And when you consider the age that we were do you think we were really paying attention to it? No. We were concerned about where our next date was coming from, whose party – we’re high school kids. And we knew
the Nixons. We’d known the Nixons our entire life. We had been to the White House. To us, I think partially, we felt bad for the family because we knew them as a family and as friends.

Smith: In fact, your mother said that it was the worst day of her life. And one understands that she was referring to that personal element of what the Nixons were going through.

Susan Bales: Right. Because Dick Nixon, if you go back and look at Dad’s book, he talks about how Dick Nixon was such a good friend to him when he was a young congressman in Congress and things like that. And Mother and Pat had become friends through these congressional luncheons and stuff that they all did. So it was very hurtful and we saw that in our parents, I guess, is the biggest thing. You saw the pain in your parents, because their friends were going through this. It was not, “Look at what we’re going to get. Bye-bye, so long.” It was that you were feeling the pain that your parents were feeling is probably the better way to put it.

Smith: At what point did it dawn, or was it revealed to you, that this was going to happen?

Susan Bales: When Dad got the phone call, because I’m the one who answered the phone. Are you talking about the vice presidency?

Smith: No, I mean in terms about moving into the White House - about the fact that at some point he’s going to be president.

Susan Bales: Dad came home after that meeting after he knew.

Smith: Was that the meeting with Haig?

Susan Bales: Yes. And he didn’t directly say it, but he gave some innuendos, kind of like, “We need to be prepared.”

Smith: How did your mother deal with that? Over the years the impression has been left, maybe you were all in a state of denial, but that in fact, it was news to her. That it was a surprise to her, and not a necessarily totally welcome surprise.
Susan Bales: Oh I think it was. Dad was very confidential. When you’re not supposed to talk about stuff, you don’t talk about stuff.

Smith: It’s interesting you say that because I wonder what secrets he took with him to the grave.

Susan Bales: Oh, wouldn’t we all like to know? Yeah. I agree with that. No, he was very confidential, and I think part of it, too, when we look back at it all, Mother is seeing a psychologist…

Smith: At that time?

Susan Bales: Oh, sure. So there is tension and he’s thinking, “Why do I want to add more tension to what’s already going on there?” Now life is a little bit easier because we now have Navy stewards cooking and helping at the house and doing things like that, because the vice president’s house is not ready and we’re still living in our house in Alexandria. Which, let me tell you, was really cramped quarters. What people don’t realize is that the life that we lived was a very simple life; we were a very simple family. My clothes came from Sears and JC Penney’s. The first time I got a dress from Lord and Taylor or Woodward and Garfinkel’s was when my dad became vice president.

There were four children. He made thirty some thousand dollars a year. We couldn’t afford what a lot of those other people out there – I mean most of my friends were far more wealthy than my family was. So our house was small. It was adequate, but when the Secret Service and Navy stewards move into – I mean, our kitchen and dining room area was probably not much bigger than this room, so when you get people moving in and preparing food, it gets really small, really fast. And I don’t think people realized that we didn’t grow up with silver spoons in our mouths, to put it in perspective.

Smith: Over the years the story has been told many times, and I’ll give you a chance to confirm or deny it – that you, at one point, said you didn’t want to go to the White House if it meant giving up your jeans.

Susan Bales: Oh, I don’t know about that. We were criticized for wearing jeans. We were one of the first families to wear jeans and were criticized for them. I mean, my
dad wasn’t wearing jeans. My mother was still wearing dresses; you saw her in pants, but even then the First Lady didn’t wear slacks. And I think the President almost always had a tie on, unless he was on the golf course. But us kids were criticized for wearing jeans – that was inappropriate First Family attire.

Smith: And there were the letters. The letters that I read when she let it be known that they shared a bed, and there were concerned Americans who wrote in to protest this fact.

Susan Bales: Yes, absolutely.

Smith: This must have been a whirlwind in any event, but the fact that suddenly you are fodder for anyone and everyone. Do you ever adapt to that?

Susan Bales: Yeah, you do.

Smith: Did you ever discuss it with him? Or her?

Susan Bales: No, some of it has to do with your age. Mike and Jack were gone. Steve left, went to Montana and jumped on a horse and said, “I’m outta here,” instead of going to Duke.

Smith: Was that influenced by – he didn’t want to be in the goldfish bowl?

Susan Bales: Yeah. “This ain’t going to work for me.”

Smith: Okay.

Susan Bales: And I think maybe Steve had talked about deferring a year, anyway. But I think this just kind of pushed it over the edge. “For sure, I’m going to take a year off before I go to college.” So I went to Mt. Vernon College in Washington, which now is part of GW, and then transferred to the University of Kansas because I wanted the real experience. I wanted the real college experience. And I kept trying to get the real college experience and part of it is, you can’t do that in Washington. The press are constantly following you. It didn’t help that I was a photo journalist and I was working at AP – so no matter where I turned – I was with the press. To get to my father’s office I had to walk by the press room. I mean, I kept trying to get the real experience.
Smith: Was there anyone who gave you advice, anyone who had lived in the White House before, anyone who was in a position to know what you were going through?

Susan Bales: No. Later, now, I’ve talked to Luci and Linda and people like that, and the thing is, it’s changed so drastically. The White House days then and the White House days now, the press really followed the children, but we didn’t have 24 hour news back then. And today you’ve got this 24/7 stuff and I cannot imagine being there now. They don’t seem to follow the family quite as closely because they’ve kind of put a wall up and said, “You can’t do that anymore.” I don’t know. It’s tough. I’m sitting there looking at what they are doing with Chelsea Clinton’s wedding. Come on, she’s not in the White House anymore. Please.

Smith: The first few days – you were still in the Alexandria house for a week or so before you actually moved in.

Susan Bales: Almost two and a half weeks – maybe it was ten days, but close. Right.

Smith: Was there a time when you went on a tour of the White House to see your new quarters?

Susan Bales: We did go on a tour. But you see, that summer I had worked at the White House selling guide books. I had worked at the White House – my summer job when Dad was a congressman was working for the White House Historical Association. We called it the White House Hysterical Association, selling guide books to the tourists who came through. So when we went on the tour, I knew all the police guys, and when I walked through with my mother, they’d say, “Hey, Susan, how are you?” Which was kind of weird.

When the Nixons were there, there was always a folding screen at the end of the hallway so that you could get from the family elevator to the West Wing and the tourists could not see the family and the family could get out through, I can’t remember the name of that room, to get out the front to get in the cars and leave. And so Mother and I go “behind the screen.” Why, I had never gone “behind the screen.” And so it was Clem Conger, Rex Scouten – Mother and I went out and did the tour of the whole second and third floor.
Smith: That name, by the way, rings a bell because over the years there have been suggestions that your mother and Clem were not completely simpatico in terms of style, temperament, whatever.

Susan Bales: That’s true.

Smith: And that he presumably had a view of the White House that was not only very protective, but possessive as well.

Susan Bales: Yes, it was his house. Yes. That is true because when we walked – the only other bedrooms on the second floor was Tricia’s suite, which was a two-bedroom area, and it was truly bubble gum pink. Pink shag carpet, pink bedspreads, pink walls, pink, pink, pink, pink. And both Mother and I just went “whoaaa.” I would not call me a girly-girl, and so when we went upstairs, I actually took Julie’s old bedroom and Clem said something to me about, “Well, do you like this furniture in here?” And I said, “It’s fine, but I’ve always wanted a brass bed.” Which I truly, truly wanted a brass bed. Well, a brass bed did not fit the era and time of the House. Clem was not happy. So Mother looked at Clem and said, “If you could find her a brass bed, that would be nice. If in the storage, whatever…”

Well, that wasn’t going to work with Clem. Clem found me a phenomenal brass bed that was in Missouri somewhere that actually had - and I don’t know the term for whatever that piece is that is on the top - it wasn’t a full canopy, it was a partial canopy. And actually Chip Carter, I think, wanted to keep it because he took my room after I left, and Clem called the family in Missouri because they loaned it to the White House, they didn’t give it. And they said no, we want it back. There’re all kinds of little stories like that.

It’s like Freddie the elevator guy going out and swimming with Dad in the pool.

Smith: Really?

Susan Bales: Yeah.
Smith: We’ve heard that almost immediately there were relationships with the permanent staff; that your dad would invite the butler to come in. “Oh, come on in and watch the football game.”

Susan Bales: Yeah.

Smith: Or at dinner they would talk sports. And I wonder if that presented a bit of a challenge in some ways. Clearly the Nixons ran the White House differently. There is the story about your mother at the very beginning saying good morning to people and not getting a response.

Susan Bales: Right.

Smith: And going to the Usher to ask if there was something she did.

Susan Bales: Had she offended them? And I don’t mean that the Nixons don’t see color, but that’s just once again a statement of most of the White House staff was black, and we didn’t see that as “You are servants or butlers or maids.” We were all just kind of one big happy family. They got me in trouble a couple of times. “Susan didn’t make her bed this morning.” Because my mother had a rule that we kids had to get up and make our beds. It was not going to be: move into the White House, and put your feet up and snap your fingers and ring the bell. “You are to get up and make your bed every day. That’s the least you could do.” And so they would tell on me and say, “Susan didn’t make her bed this morning.” And I’d catch all holy hell by the afternoon. “I overslept.” “What a surprise.”

Smith: But I take it that both of your parents got acclimated pretty soon to life in the White House.

Susan Bales: Oh, yeah. It’s nice, it’s really nice. It’s nice digs, it’s great food. And they are nice people. They are probably the nicest people you could ever imagine. The staff at the White House is what makes the White House what it is. The White House is just a building. But the staff is what truly makes it special.

Susan Bales: Did you ever get used to the press?
Susan Bales: No. No, you never get used to the press. They become your friends; you think you can trust them; you think you know them; and then all of a sudden you open the newspaper and you say, “Whoops.”

Smith: The pardon comes along.

Susan Bales: Right.

Smith: And did you have a sense of being in the eye of the hurricane? Did what was going on out there translate around the dinner table?

Susan Bales: No. Because once Dad came upstairs, it was family time. And that truly is the other advantage of living in the White House and having Air Force One. He was home so much more. I was a senior in high school, so I was pretty focused on getting graduated, getting into college, that sort of thing. And when he came upstairs, it was time to talk about, “What did you do today? What are you doing this weekend and what’s going on with you?” and that sort of thing. I had no clue ahead of time that that’s what he was going to do. None.

Smith: And then, of course, in short order, comes your mother’s breast cancer surgery.

Susan Bales: That was tough. And the reason I say that was tough was because, besides Gayle, there were only three females now in the family. Mike’s married to Gail, there’s Mother and there’s me. And I was seventeen - that seems like many, many decades ago, which it was. We’d just moved into the White House. Mother goes in; finds out that she’s got to have surgery; and the fact is, as a senior in high school – you’re trying to cut the umbilical cord anyway, and when you find out that she’s got stage II, several lymph nodes involved, the prognosis is not real good. And you’re going, “My mom may die.”

Smith: How did she tell you?

Susan Bales: She didn’t. Dr. Lukash told us. And I think that was the easiest way for her to do it. Lukash told all of us.

Smith: Including your dad?
Susan Bales: Yeah. I think Lukash had already told Dad, but then he sat down with Dad and Mother and I together, kind of again, “This is what’s going to happen…” that sort of thing. And you’re seventeen years old, you’ve moved into the White House, and now your mother’s got breast cancer, and the chances are that she could die because of the technology of the time.

Smith: You were awfully young. Was the impact of the news even greater because it was something no one talked about at the time?

Susan Bales: I think so. Because when you think about it, back then Mother and Dad could have said she was having female problems. And the press would have left it alone because I don’t think you could even say breast on TV then. And the press didn’t invade like they do now. Do you think they ever would have asked my dad about boxers or briefs? Hell, no. Just to set the stage of where we are. So I think once Mother realized the impact, and I don’t think she was going for impact - they had told her breast cancer is killing women and this could really make a difference if you’d change two words in the press release: breast cancer versus female problems.

Smith: So that discussion took place: how we handle this?

Susan Bales: Because Dad had said, “This is going to be an open and honest administration.” And that was the discussion of breast cancer versus female problems.

Smith: And who was in that discussion?

Susan Bales: I think probably Ron Nessen, Dad, Sheila…

Smith: There was a professional…

Susan Bales: There was a professional side to it.

Smith: Did the family have the discussion?

Susan Bales: We discussed it. We had a little bit of time to hash it out and think about it, and the Johnsons came, and Mother left for the hospital right after that. But there were a few days before the Johnsons came that we were putting it all together, I guess, is the best way to put it - from the time that the doctors
discovered it, because they hadn’t even done the biopsy – all they’d done was find the lump.

Smith: Was she scared?

Susan Bales: Sure she was scared. I would have been scared. Yeah, she was scared; we were all scared, because we really didn’t know. Back then it was the “I don’t know” days. They didn’t know if it was cancer; it was strictly a lump; back then if it was cancer, they automatically do a mastectomy. There is no decision involved in the process.

Smith: And let’s face it, a lot of people assume it’s a death sentence.

Susan Bales: Yeah, exactly. And we didn’t know then what kind of cancer it was. We didn’t know how many lymph nodes were involved. We didn’t know a lot. It was strictly, “There’s a lump and we’re going to go see what it is.” And you didn’t know what you were going to wake up with. That was pretty much: were you going to wake up with a raw chest, or were you going to wake up with your own boob there? We didn’t know. The unknown, I think, is the fear more than anything.

Smith: Over the years, understandably, so much has been written and said about the example that she set and the history that she made. But he set an example, too.

Susan Bales: Oh, yeah. And it also showed the very tender side of him, very quickly. When you go back and you look at those tapes of him, and I’m trying to think of the one in particular…

Erik: The Economic Summit.

Susan Bales: Thank you. Where he says, “Betty’s going to be okay.” Which you can tell that he’s very touched; he’s hurting. And so that wasn’t a side that the public had seen of him right off the bat.

Smith: Did you go up to the hospital?

Susan Bales: Oh, I was there the whole time. See, that day, it was really an interesting day. Louise Abbruzzese, who was the neighbor who lived across the street, went into labor that morning, and she was in that hospital giving birth to her third
child the morning that Mother was having her surgery. I guess they had come up and said it’s cancer. I went down to see Louise, because I had babysat her other kids, and she let me hold the baby, who is named Elizabeth Ann, after my mother.

Smith: That’s great. We talked to Peter in one of our interviews.

Susan Bales: How is Peter? He’s like ancient, because he was like sixty years old a long time ago.

Erik: Will you ask her about the story about being locked out of the house – remember that story. While she was babysitting – with Secret Service.

Susan Bales: Ohhh, yeah. I do remember that one.

Erik: He was roaring telling us about that one.

Susan Bales: Yeah, I bet he was. When they were parents they probably didn’t think it was. I don’t remember the whole story, but I do remember it happening and going, “Oh, shit.” No, I’d take their kids to the beach. Their kids – I loved their kids, they were great kids. I’d love to know where they are now. But Peter was old back then, or looked old.

Smith: Well, he’s very, very well preserved.

Susan Bales: He’s very, very, Democrat.

Smith: Yup.

Susan Bales: Very much a Democrat.

Smith: But that’s great to get that perspective.

Susan Bales: Who was the congressman he worked for?

Smith: Wayne Hayes.

Susan Bales: Wayne Hayes, that’s who it was.

Smith: Interesting background.

Susan Bales: Yes, exactly.
Smith: Did he talk about Nixon in later years?

Susan Bales: He never really did. I know for a long time, I think they still called each other on birthdays. There was still a friendship of some sort.

Smith: You have to assume the relationship must have been changed from what they went through.

Susan Bales: Right, but as we’ve gone through stuff, there is always correspondence. You don’t just write somebody off like that who has been a long time friend. But, no, he really didn’t talk about him much.

Smith: Did he talk about Reagan?

Susan Bales: He talked about Reagan more because Mother and Dad saw Nancy and Ronnie in Beverly Hills at functions, in LA, they ran into them at parties, that sort of thing. I know Mother talked to Nancy several times after he sent out his memo about the Alzheimer’s. She felt very bad for her because she realized what a lonely life Nancy had ahead of her. And to me, part of me says, we had a very short time that we knew my dad had left, but his mind was there, all of those things. I think ours was far less painful. Who am I to judge? Except that I have a father-in-law who is more like a Ronald Reagan right now, who doesn’t know who I am. I think it’s far less painful the way that Dad went.

Smith: Let’s go back to the White House years because I guess it must have been – well you would know – hard on the heels of your mother’s operation, you were wearing white gloves and making your social debut.

Susan Bales: They were miserable to wear. Maybe that’s why I never got to be in a diplomatic party – that was my debutant party, I guess is what it was.

Smith: What was the story behind that?

Susan Bales: Well, Mother was still in Bethesda Naval Hospital after her mastectomy, and actually that afternoon we had just surprised Dad with Liberty. And that was the ambassador’s embassy White House dinner. And it’s really not a dinner; it’s more like drinks and desert. It’s an after-dinner event, because I really
don’t think we sat down to dinner, if I remember correctly. Maria Downs would know. But it is very formal, I think it’s actually – besides when the Queen came – it’s the only white tie, and I had never worn white gloves like that before, which they are miserable to get on and off. So you stay in this receiving line, you greet every ambassador and then there is dancing afterwards and I had to dance with all these people. And it was quite an experience.

Smith: Did you volunteer? Were you asked? How did it come about?

Susan Bales: No, my dad needed a female escort, and being the only female in the household, I didn’t have a whole lot of choice. I had no intention of going to that, but Mother’s surgery is what got it started.

Smith: Did you relate the experience to her afterwards?

Susan Bales: Yeah, it was like, how do you get into this stuff? To me, I wouldn’t say it wasn’t fun, it was a very special evening between my dad and I; and that was the neat part of it. The diplomat, proper etiquette, title – I’m sure I called an ambassador by the wrong name – that wasn’t my everyday life.

Smith: The fall of Saigon – what was the mood?

Susan Bales: Didn’t see a lot of Dad right then.

Smith: I guess that brings up a larger question: did he bring the job with him?

Susan Bales: No, when he came home at night, he did not bring it. There may have been a brief moment of discussion of “I may have to be excused to go take a call,” or “If Brent is coming up or Henry is coming over, I may have to excuse myself to go in the other room and talk to them.” And we knew better than to ask why, because most of the time he couldn’t talk about it anyway. And then you knew what it was all about afterwards. So there was so much of that that just took place in the room next door, that you didn’t really know what it was all about until it was all over with. So, no, he didn’t bring it home with him.

Smith: There were two assassination attempts.

Susan Bales: Yes.
Smith: Astonishingly, three weeks apart, both in California.

Susan Bales: And I can tell you where I was for both of them. I can’t remember which was first.

Smith: Squeaky was first.

Susan Bales: When in the year, though, it would tell you where I was. Because one I was at the beach with girlfriends, and the other one I was with a boyfriend in the solarium. Why I remember this stuff, I don’t know. I had gone to the beach, all of us were getting ready to leave for college, which would have been August-September-ish. And the group of girls that I ran with, we all decided to go to the beach to have our last weekend before we all scattered. So we’re down at the beach.

Smith: Which beach?

Susan Bales: Rehoboth. Down at twins house and we had had the radio on and we were just lying there, lying on the beach and I guess a bunch of us got up to go swimming, and my agents turned the radio off while I was gone. And we came back from swimming and somebody noticed that the radio was off and we went to go turn it back on and Tommy Pabst, who was head of my detail, who was with me, said something like, “Oh leave that off,” or something. He obviously had gotten the information and was trying to figure out how he was going to tell me. So, anyway, we walked back to the townhouse and before I walked up the steps to go up to the townhouse he said, “Susan, I need to talk to you.” And so he told me. And that was before cell phones or anything like that. He said, “Your dad is fine, everything is great, don’t worry about it.” But, yeah, I couldn’t wait to talk to him until he got back to the White House. I guess if I really was persistent, I could have called Air Force One or whatever. But you didn’t do things like that. But I was with my girlfriends, so I was glad I was at least with friends when that happened.

The other one was, I was dating a guy and we were up in the solarium and my agent called me up there and told me just over the phone. And that was to me, probably the beginning of 24 hour news in White House world. Because the technical communications guys could run it on the TVs non-stop, the footage
that they were picking up off the news networks and they were running it on the White House TVs. And so we were sitting there in the solarium, watching all of that stuff and then I went downstairs when Dad came back in the helicopter. But, yeah, those were scary. He had several bullet-proof vests made to match suits. And Mother and I chose never to find out what suits those were, so that when we would see him in a crowd, we wouldn’t be concerned. I can’t believe a woman – here he is married to a woman who was promoting the Equal Rights Amendment and tries to shoot him.

Smith: Parenthetically, do you resent the fact that both of those women have been released?

Susan Bales: No. And you know what? If I saw them on the street today, would I recognize them? No. I’ve seen them on TV. They look like a normal, grandmotherly type person. They’ve served their time. I’m uncomfortable, I don’t like it, but they have a right to be out.

Smith: Has your mother ever expressed an opinion?

Susan Bales: No. I think some of the things – you’ve always been told you’re supposed to get notification of hearings and all this other stuff – we haven’t been notified about any of that stuff. That irritates me. So my mother has not been notified of a lot of that stuff and that’s very irritating. That’s more irritating than the fact that they are out.

Smith: The campaign of ’76 – were you at the convention?

Susan Bales: It’s right before I met him [Vaden] for the first time. First time I ever met him in my life. (?)

Smith: How bitter was the atmosphere up there. I mean the two camps. Literally you had dueling entrances by the First Lady and Mrs. Reagan, it just felt like a very divisive…

Susan Bales: It was divisive – I think that’s a really good term for it. But I have to say, we were on such a cloud nine and so confident that we had it – at least I, as a family member, did. That to me it was, pooh-pooh on you guys. But the thing is, when I go back and look at it, that’s not what I remember. What I
remember is the fun that we had, the fun we had campaigning as a family together. The time we had together as a family, the excitement, the joy, all of those things. That’s what I remember. I don’t remember the divisiveness and that…

Smith: Did you think at the end you’d won it? Did you think you were going to win?

Susan Bales: Sure.

Smith: I mean, you certainly came to have fun.

Susan Bales: And the thing is, that was August, and we had until November, and when I fell asleep and when Mother finally woke me up and sent me upstairs to go to sleep, which was like midnight, one o’clock in Washington in November; I went to bed thinking, we’re going to pull this off. So when she woke me up the next morning and the first thing out of my mouth was, “Did he win?” And she said, “No.” It was like, wait a minute, I want to go back to sleep again. I just couldn’t believe that at the last minute we couldn’t pull it off.

Smith: There is a wonderful story Rex Scouten told us. Rex, of course, is the soul of discretion, and the ultimate professional.

Susan Bales: Yes.

Smith: But he did tell us the story that that night he was upstairs and oh, along about two o’clock or so, whatever, in the morning, it wasn’t looking great and the President decided he was going to turn in. So he goes across the hall and Rex follows him because he wants to say something consoling. And he said, “You know, Mr. President, who knows what’s going to happen. If you don’t pull it out it really will be shame because you deserve it. You worked hard for it. But you know, think for a minute, you’ve spent your whole life in service to this country. Whether it was in the Navy during the war, or all those years on Capitol Hill, and these are two of the toughest years any president…” He said, “You know, maybe it’s just time for you to take a well-earned vacation.” And your father says, “I don’t think so.”

Susan Bales: Well, I think, to comment, do you think he worked less after he left? No. He traveled as much, if not more, and he took his job seriously on the boards.
Smith: He took heat for “commercializing” the ex-presidency. We’ve talked to a number of people who were on boards with him who made it very clear he worked very hard on those boards.

Susan Bales: He was committed to them.

Smith: Yeah. And the other thing that people never really paid much attention to, or at least the critics, two things: all the work he did for charity and all the campuses that he visited; but two, the fact that he had to raise ten, twelve, thirteen million dollars to build those facilities in Michigan. Which, for someone who had never seriously really been challenged in his congressional races, must have seemed an awfully tall mountain to climb.

Susan Bales: Yes.

Smith: And he was a very generous donor to the Foundation over the years.

Susan Bales: He was, and then he turned around and helped Mother raise all the money for the Betty Ford Center. She learned it from him. I’ll never forget one very wealthy person was over for lunch one day and Mother is the one who had invited this person. And she looked at Dad ahead of time and she said, “This is mine, not yours.”

Smith: There was that line, I don’t know if it was true or not, that supposedly everything east of the Mississippi was his and everything west of the Mississippi was hers.

Susan Bales: Well, I wouldn’t put it that way, but they put dibs on people. The thing is, if you look at both organizations, there is a lot of crossover between the two of them. But Mother learned from him.

Smith: For her, just creating the Center must have called on a lot of muscles that hadn’t been used. In terms of, fundraising and building a building and hiring a staff – all of those kinds of things.

Susan Bales: But you see, it’s not only that. It’s not like raising money for a museum that’s going to go up. It’s raising a place for addicts. A lot of people don’t like to have their name associated with drugs and alcohol. It’s kind of like the breast
cancer thing. What Nancy Brinker did in raising money for breast cancer – unbelievable things. And I think my mother did that for drugs and alcohol. She put a face to it and made it okay. It’s got a long ways to go, but that’s just another one of her pearls. Hey, wouldn’t we all like to have our name on a presidential building and foundation and whatever, but a drunk tank? No.

Smith: But you know something? When you stop to think about what she changed, at the intersection where the rubber meets the road, where ordinary people live their lives, it can be argued she had more impact than most presidents.

Susan Bales: Oh, I would totally agree with you on that. Yes, absolutely. And she had a gentle, strong spirit about her in twisting arms.

Smith: Did she turn out to be a natural fundraiser?

Susan Bales: Yeah, and she will tell you that she learned it from Leonard Firestone, though.

Smith: He clearly was a pivotal part of this story, isn’t he?

Susan Bales: He was a pivotal part of my family’s life. I mean, first of all, Leonard and Dad were friends for a long time. But it just goes on. I know Leonard’s kids; I know Leonard’s grandkids; their grandkids. Our families had been together for a long period of time. But Leonard and Dad go back, that gets into Bob Hope and how Dad met lots of people in the desert. Mother and Dad buy the lot from Leonard to build the house next to Leonard; then Leonard goes to Beaver Creek with Dad.

Smith: I’ve been told by more than one person that she basically saved his life.

Susan Bales: Yes. And I didn’t know Leonard was a drunk. I did not see that. I did not know that. I saw him more in social situations. We all know how to behave when we have to. Yeah, the Firestones have always been around.

Smith: Let me ask you a sensitive question, because you mentioned Bob Hope. I wonder if in any way seeing Hope’s last years, whether that made an impression on your parents in the sense that if that “we’re never going to let history repeat itself.” I think the last time that he did the dinner in Statuary Hall. I had written the remarks and he said to someone right after he finished,
“That’s the last speech I’m going to give.” An awareness of bumping up against one’s limitations and having sufficient pride, self-respect, whatever.

Susan Bales: I don’t know if I would say it was Mother; I think that was truly a family decision. We knew when it was time for him not to be out photographed in public. I think probably one of the last pictures of him was when President Bush came to the house.

Smith: April of 2006.

Susan Bales: Right. And Dad was standing and walking and he was until the day he died. But you do make that decision of “we’re not going out anymore.” And it is a sense of pride; it’s a sense of family pride as much as it is as individual pride.

Smith: I remember the vultures of the press being what they were, and a real concern on the part of the family that we have privacy.

Susan Bales: Leave us alone.

Smith: He’s not president anymore. But I mean, is that realistic in the modern media climate? Did you pull it off?

Susan Bales: No, I think we pulled it off. I think the fact that the last picture of him was with President Bush is really the way it should have been. He was with another man of his same club. And we weren’t hiding anything except for we knew the end was coming. But do you make announcements about that? No.

Smith: It must have been frustrating because I assume there were leaks coming from the hospital. There were people there that would tip off the media and that’s got to be frustrating.

Susan Bales: We got really good at it. Actually I have pictures somewhere of Steve and me sitting in our car taking pictures of the media. And Steven and I walking out of the hospital, and them not recognizing us. I think even one of us walked up to them and said, “What are you all doing here?” Steve and I kind of had fun with that. It was one of those hahaha, we can do this, too. And we got good at it. It wasn’t fair. I mean, a lot of times he was just in the hospital for tests.
And when you get to be in your nineties, you have little tests, you’re checking stuff.

Smith: Did he share in that? Did he resent the media intrusion at that point?

Susan Bales: I don’t think we told him it was much of a deal. The only thing that we ever had was, we had a standard press release that we would use if we needed it. But to go in for tests, or things like that, they were on a death watch and that was the thing and they were on it for years. Probably I would say the last four years.

Smith: Yeah.

Susan Bales: It just got to be a joke – well, the press are back, oh well.

Smith: Let me ask you, obviously I’ll be asking President Bush tomorrow morning, was it difficult for him having so many of his people who came back in the Bush administration and it didn’t always work out? I’m thinking of Paul O’Neill, in particular, with whom we’ve talked. Obviously, he knew Cheney became controversial, but Rumsfeld even more so.

Susan Bales: He didn’t talk to me about that. It was more of – he stood behind Paul O’Neill, he stood behind Rummy, and to him they were friends and that sort of thing and I think he was discouraged more than anything of – what do see wrong with him, because I’m proud of them and they are still my friends.

Smith: Before I forget, back in the White House days, did you have contact with Rockefeller?

Susan Bales: We had some. I would see them at dinners and things like that. I went to the Vice President’s house a couple of times for meals, events, that sort of thing. I got to know Happy’s daughter…

Smith: Carol?

Susan Bales: Carol – fairly well. Carol and I were close in age. She was older than I was, so we communicated some.

Smith: Happy wasn’t in DC very much.
Susan Bales: No, and the boys would come and go for different stuff on occasion. And that’s about it. They were always very nice and very polite to me. They knew my name, so that’s always a good start.

Smith: Your memories of the funeral…

Susan Bales: Yeah.

Smith: I’ve asked a number of people because I was wearing two hats that week, and I was with ABC the first part of the week and then with the family the second part of the week. And I can tell you, journalists, particularly the younger journalists, were surprised at the amount of public response. And I think that was because: a) they didn’t know much history; and b) he hadn’t been in the public eye for a while. But I also think what was going on – there were a lot of things going on – one of them was that it was a time when the country desperately needed to feel good about itself. It needed to convince itself, even for a few days, that it could rise above the kind of ugly partisanship that had become the norm. There’s a whole generation that discovered him for the first time through those grainy film clips. And they were comparing what they saw with what goes on now. And he looked awfully good. And ironically, the Nixon pardon was trotted out as the prime illustration of political courage. So there was all of that going on, but things like, for example, I’m told the numbers of people on a Saturday night who turned out at Alexandria surprised you.

Susan Bales: Oh, it was unbelievable. And that was one of those things, Richard, you know. We planned that week to ten days of events, every single part of it was thought through, rehashed, discussed. And I don’t know who came up with the idea of, we can drive through Alexandria on our way to Washington, and there was a relief - that’s another way of going home. Because that was, for us kids.

Smith: Sure.

Susan Bales: That’s where the boys had played football and Old Town Alexandria was where we hung out when we were young kids, and Alexandria, besides Grand Rapids, the other home, I guess is the best way to put it. That was huge and it
felt good. Just like going past the (World War II) Memorial and the people, the soldiers and stuff. It felt good. Dad chose not to do the horse and all of that down on to Independence Avenue. Which I’m glad. At first I kind of questioned his decision about that. Now I think back on it and I think it was truly the right decision, because we did these things, which to me were far more symbolic of him. And it said something about him.

Smith: It’s interesting, because after the fact I know the Johnson girls right away, but I believe the Carters as well revised their plan because people saw the Ford funeral and it felt much more like a family event, a little bit less pageantry and more honest emotion. So it’s had a lasting impact in that sense.

Susan Bales: And you know, going up the House steps and coming out the Senate steps, most presidents won’t be able to do that. I guess they could do it, but it wouldn’t have the symbolism that it did for us. Those are the kinds of things that were so special and so important to us. And what people don’t know – there was so much laughter behind all of that. My friends would call me and say, “You just look so sad,” and I said, “I am, but you know what? We are also laughing and telling stories and being together as a family.” The public part is the hardest part of this thing. But there was still lots of laughter and enjoyment of being together. So it wasn’t all sad.

Smith: Kind of an Irish wake. Kind of an ongoing wake.

Susan Bales: Yes. That’s a good way to put it.

Smith: And one of the surprises – again, I was up at the cathedral that morning – ironically, although he had chosen not to have the caisson through the streets of Washington, I was told a lot of folks turned out along the route just to watch the hearse go by.

Susan Bales: It was phenomenal. It just really was. I did not expect it. Mike Wagner had kind of warned us this could happen. And MDW can’t predict what crowds are going to be. They didn’t have a clue.

Smith: It’s a holiday.
Susan Bales: Yes. It’s Christmas; it’s New Year’s. And maybe the crowds were bigger because families were home. I don’t know. But it really was warm and fuzzy and it made us all feel good.

Smith: Including your mother?

Susan Bales: Including Mother. We all were just flabbergasted; it was just like “wow.” And it just goes on and on and on. Grand Rapids was very understandable, but as cold as it was – the miles of Boy Scouts and things like that – that blew us away.

Smith: She was not well that week, right?

Susan Bales: She wasn’t, no. We didn’t know how sick she really was. She was very sick.

Smith: Was it a bronchial thing?

Susan Bales: It was a bronchial thing, which we later found out – I don’t remember the name of the bacteria that was in her lungs – but she ended up having to be on intravenous antibiotics for three months afterwards. It was a form of tuberculosis.

Smith: She’s always had kind of a respiratory vulnerability.

Susan Bales: She has a bad respiratory system. And the only thing we can think of today is that the dog – something that is in the soil, the dog brought it in, had it on his paw, put it on the bed and somehow it got in her lung. For three months she was on antibiotics. She was sick.

Smith: We’d been told, again on ABC, at St. Margaret’s, don’t be surprised if you see Mrs. Ford in a wheelchair. And of course we never did until at the end, and then of course, she got of the wheelchair and made that long walk down to the gravesite. And the story goes – a week later, she’s back home and there’s a visitor who was complimenting her - in effect, “I don’t know how you did it.” And the story goes, she responded, “I just did what my husband would have wanted me to do.”

Susan Bales: That’s very true. To me, it’s the old Depression ‘pull yourself up by your bootstraps, stand up straight and we’re going to get through this.’ Now, truly,
I think the three days in Washington to rest in between California and Washington (Grand Rapids?) was a blessing to all of us, because we got to relax, we got to put our feet up; we got to take a deep breath. She literally got to spend two days in bed. And she wasn’t diagnosed – they thought it was just respiratory – she wasn’t diagnosed at that point with what we later found out she had. We were just kind of shooting anything we possibly could. That was the way we were to do. “Do not whine, do not cry, do not complain. I do not want to hear your sob stories. This is what you’re going to do and you’re going make your father proud.”

Smith: And then while she was at Blair House, you had a host of distinguished visitors. I think the Nixon girls came. I think the Johnson girls came.

Susan Bales: The Bush family came.

Smith: And also the Carters.

Susan Bales: The Carters came. The Clintons came. Now some came up into a private den and met with us and some met with the ambassadors. Because, you see, you’ve got to remember we had the Cabinet and the pallbearers that came first. And that’s when the Clintons and some of those came. Happy Rockefeller came. So that was where we greeted a lot of those people But the Bushes we met privately with their family upstairs. They weren’t part of the larger group. That was the whole point of Blair House, so that you can greet a lot of those individuals and have time. And that stuff is exhausting. It’s just exhausting. So we really controlled Mother’s time in that situation because we didn’t want to wear her out, and she wasn’t well.

Smith: And it must have been touching, on the way out to the cathedral to go by the White House with its staff out on the street.

Susan Bales: With the staff out front waving at you – I think the only thing better than that would have been to go over and hug them all. Some of us went over to the White House and saw Dad’s portrait draped, which was very comforting. It’s so funny now – when we were there, what – a month ago – walking by the White House and saying, “My bedroom was up there. I lived there.” And people going, “Yeah, sure you did.”
Smith: Do you remember – were you there at the ninetieth birthday party?

Susan Bales: Yes, we went to that.

Smith: That must have been pretty special.

Susan Bales: That was special, and that was also the time, if I’m not mistaken, that they let us run all over the House. And we went to the third floor and the second floor – or was that ’41? Okay – long time.

When ’41 was there, they let us literally go, and that was the only other time we were allowed back on the family floor.

Smith: What is it about the solarium that every White House family seems to fall in love with?

Susan Bales: You could put your feet on the furniture. It’s really simple. Everything else is an antique and a museum this and a museum that, and you’re afraid you’re going to put a ring on an antique table. The solarium is overstuffed couches and manufactured furniture from I don’t know where. But you could put your feet on the table. That’s the difference. We used to play cards up there a lot.

Smith: And there are pictures of you and your mother making Christmas ornaments. I’m told she is a Christmas fanatic.

Susan Bales: Oh, she is so Christmas. And I try and be Christmas. I don’t. She over buys, if you looked at the pictures of the amount of gifts under the tree at Christmas time, it’s huge. The house was decorated to the hilt. It’s just the most magical time in the whole wide world. And I don’t know, because I never spent Christmas with her mother, I don’t know where she got it from.

Smith: Do you remember how old you were when you concluded Santa Claus was fictitious?

Susan Bales: You just informed me. Thanks, Richard.

Smith: I’m not talking about Uncle Santa. There is a difference. No, I’m wondering if you ever had that talk with, doesn’t everyone have that talk with a parent? I would think it would be pretty traumatic.
Susan Bales: I don’t remember it. And I don’t remember it with my children.

Smith: The subject you dare not speak its name.

Susan Bales: It kind of just happened. And I remember maybe Tyne had stopped believing, but Heather hadn’t. And I was like, “Oh, we’ve just got to go along with it. We’ve got to keep it for Heather.” And then once Heather had outgrown it, then there was Hannah, and then after Hannah was Christian and Jonathan. So we’re all still believing that.

Smith: Have you seen The Polar Express? Set in Grand Rapids.

Susan Bales: Oh, yeah. We saw that this year, we watched it. Of course, Santa is for real. It’s big time.

Smith: At the end – you went back after the internment, you went inside the Museum, and I think the Carters were there. I assume there were others.

Susan Bales: You know, it was such a fog because we were so tired. You are so tired and you are so numb. There are some things that are very blurry.

Smith: I told people when you are up there doing a eulogy, you’re in a fog, and you’re just trying to get through it. And you look at the family right in front of you, and you want to connect with them, but you don’t want to lose it in front of everyone. And it’s odd, the thing I remember – the thing that cut through – I looked over and Rosalyn Carter was weeping. And I thought, who would have guessed thirty years ago that this is how the story ends. Who would have imagined.

Susan Bales: Yeah, those are the fluky little – and there were a lot of fluky little things like that that happened.

Smith: Or him on Air Force One with the baby over his shoulder.

Susan Bales: Yeah, there were just fluky little things like that that happened that week, that if we really sat down and tried to write a book about some of the stuff that went on behind the scenes, nobody would believe us. Nobody would believe us.
Smith: It looked flawless.

Susan Bales: Some of the people that call and say, “Where’s my invitation?” twenty four hours after he’s passed away – they expected them that quickly. The demands that some people…you just go “Excuse me, we’re just trying to get through the first twenty-four hours right now.”

Smith: Funerals bring out the best and worst in people.

Susan Bales: They really do. For us, for our family, my girls were home, I had been with Dad ten days before. And every time I left him at that point in his life, I wondered if this was the last time. But I had been with him ten days before and I’d made a commitment to come home and spend Christmas with my family and my girls came home for Christmas. And Joy, this was Joy’s first Christmas, and we knew Christmas Eve that he had gone into a coma, and we were on our way to church and Steve just said, “Pray for Dad,” and I said, “Okay.” And so we came home from church and made the decision to open gifts that night because of his state, which we knew it would be…

Smith: On Christmas Eve.

Susan Bales: On Christmas Eve, which we knew probably within twelve to twenty-four hours we were going to be packing our bags to leave. So we came home from church and had Christmas that night. Got up Christmas morning and we all looked at each other and went, “Nobody called us. It’s now Christmas morning and we’ve already opened our gifts, what are we going to do?” And Christmas Day we all literally sat around staring at each other, going, when is the phone going to ring? Really, just going, “Okayyy, this is supposed to have happened by now and we’re still sitting here. Does it surprise you that Jerry Ford is going to stretch it out just as long as he possibly can?”

So in the meantime, I’m calling our travel agent, and every day she is moving our plane reservations another day. Cancel for today, book us for the next day and just keep doing it. Meantime, Hector flies back here to Dallas to get Tyne and Hector’s funeral wear and Joy’s portable swing and baby stuff, because we know once it starts, it’s going to start. Heather was supposed to leave the next day to go back to New York to go to work. She calls her boss and says,
“Can I have two more days off? My grandfather’s health is failing.” Because what’s the point of Heather going back to New York for one night, to turn around and then have to fly across the country by herself for her grandfather, who has just passed? So it was finally the day after Christmas, but I mean we sat around looking at each other, going “What do we do?”

Smith: There was a notion that he willed himself...

Susan Bales: Not to die on Christmas.

Smith: Not to die on Christmas.

Susan Bales: To ruin it for us forever. And Christmas will never be the same; it will never be the same. And I don’t know – knowing him, he could have been willing himself to, but I don’t know. The whole thing is that it still puts a damper on Christmas, no matter what. But I don’t think my grandchildren will – I have to make Christmas magical for my grandchildren, just like my parents made it magical for my children. So that’s my job and I have to do that. And I may be sad, but it’s not about me. It’s about them.

Smith: The last thing, does she talk about him?

Susan Bales: Yeah, we laugh about him.

Smith: Is that part of the process? In an way, of extended grieving, to get to the point where you can…

Susan Bales: Oh, yeah. We laugh, we tell stories, we make fun of him – “Do you remember when Dad” did this and that sort of thing.

Smith: He was not a friend of technology.

Susan Bales: No.

Smith: I was told that he, at some point, mastered the art of solitaire on the computer.

Susan Bales: On the computer, because he did love to play cards and he was a good card player.

Smith: Was he?
Susan Bales: He was a fantastic bridge player. He and Mother played Gin their entire life. They played a penny a point, and at the end of the year, they totaled up who won at the end of the year. So they played cards their entire life. And he did master solitaire, but he and the telephone were not great friends. And the fact is that we finally taught him how to use the hold button, but he never could transfer a call. He would stand in the stairs in Beaver Creek and scream, “Vaden, line one’s for you!” because he couldn’t figure out how to hit the intercom button and call you and tell you that the phone was for you. And if he didn’t answer the phone so quickly, because he barely let it ring once, somebody else might have gotten it. And if the phone didn’t get answered, that was another one of those “God damn it, somebody answer the phone.”

Smith: Like answering mail.

Susan Bales: Yes. Now you know why I always answer the phone. I was raised by him. So another great one was a speech that he gave at Heather’s school in Albuquerque, and he was supposed to say, “CDs” and he said, “CDS’s.” And there was another one, but it was stuff like that you just went “Ohhh, Dad.”

Smith: The Church of Latter Day CDS’s.

Susan Bales: And Glenn Campbell was Glenn Cantbell. There were some things that you were not going to change about that man. Mother never got great on the computer, but she could read email and do stuff like that. And we’ll send her pictures of the kids and stuff and that’s great. She looks at the computer. That generation, it’s just not their thing.

Smith: Yeah. It’s an awful question to ask at the end because it’s so huge, but I’ve asked so many people. How do you remember him? Or maybe it’s easier to say – how do you think he should be remembered?

Susan Bales: Well, I think the way I remember him and the way he should be remembered are almost two different questions. I remember his smile, the twinkle in his eye, and him calling me Susan-Gusan, the girl of my choosen. He should be remembered for his decency and his honesty, and his listening and caring. Because I think, you’re right, I think he’s all – he’s really one big, soft,
squishy person until you push that one button, and then he’s a gorilla. But he
was truly a statesman and a good statesman. I don’t think there are many
statesmen out there anymore. That’s the sad part. And the crooked finger.

Smith: Does your mother expect to be reunited with him?

Susan Bales: Absolutely. Can’t wait.

Smith: Perfect. Thank you.
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Smith: Thanks for doing this. We really appreciate it. Tell us a little bit about what you were doing before your path crossed with Gerald Ford’s.

O’Donnell: Well, I was an Air Force Academy graduate and an Air Force officer, and after Vietnam, I was serving in Washington, D.C. Alex Butterfield, who was my father’s military aide in Hawaii when my father was Pacific Air Forces Commander, called me up one day and he said, “Terry, the Nixon White House is getting ready for the ’72 election. Would you like to come over and get interviewed, because I know you’re thinking about leaving the Air Force?” I was a JAG officer, a legal officer, at the time.

So I took him up on that, went to the White House, interviewed with Dwight Chapin and Ron Walker and a couple of other individuals and was hired on as a staff member in the Nixon White House. I did some advance work and then I went and worked directly for Dwight Chapin from the convention until the election and then I worked for Bob Haldeman directly as his assistant from the election in ’72 until Bob resigned in March or April of the following year.

Then General Haig came in to take Bob’s job. I’ll never forget it, I was right in his outer office, my little office was right there in the West Wing. He said, “Terry, I understand you come from a good military family, so I want to keep you on the staff, but your last two bosses, I’m afraid, are going to go to the slammer. So, if you don’t mind, I’m going to put you over into the Executive Office building for awhile until things cool down.” Of course, I was delighted to stay on, because a lawyer leaving the White House during the Watergate time would not have been a good thing and I’m afraid I might have had some trouble finding a job. So, I was delighted to stay on. And, roll forward, when the resignation occurred, General Haig as Chief of Staff at that point asked me to sit in the President’s outer office filling the job that Steve Bull used to fill for President Nixon as his personal aide for a few weeks until things settled
down, because there was no discipline, initially, in the office. People were walking in with papers and letters and things of that nature.

Smith: The famous spokes in the wheel?

O’Donnell: Yes.

Smith: Although one senses the wheel was coming off.

O’Donnell: That’s right. So, I was happy to do that and that’s how I ended up having my first meeting with President Ford.

Smith: Let me back up. Do you remember where you were when you heard about the Watergate break-in?

O’Donnell: Well, I don’t remember where, but I was on Ron Walker’s staff, on the advance staff. That was my first job when I came in. That was in June of ’72 and I had been on the staff for maybe three weeks prior to the Watergate break-in. Of course, it didn’t seem to be a very significant event, initially. Nixon had that landslide win in ’72 and then it eroded and ate away and the resignation was ultimately the consequence of that. It was a tough time to be on the White House staff.

Smith: What was it like to be around Haldeman at that point?

O’Donnell: Well, one thing that I’m forever grateful of is neither Bob nor Dwight Chapin ever shared with me anything. I was a young aide working for them and they never shared anything with me about those events and I was very happy that I did not have to go to the FBI for interviews and everything else as many White House people did. Bob was a very dedicated guy. He was an exacting executive. He expected perfection. He said, “This White House is the President’s house and it should be the best in the world.” So if he walked through the West Wing and saw a paper askance, he’d make note of it. And if he went, literally, into the john at Camp David because this really happened, and the toilet paper roll was almost run down, he made a note of it and say, “Terry, that’s not as it should be. Fix it.” And that was my job and I found whoever was in charge of it and got it fixed. So that was the kind of man he
was. I enjoyed working with him because he’s the toughest boss that I’ve ever had.

Smith: I also sense that Mrs. Nixon was held at some distance by Haldeman and Ehrlichman.

O’Donnell: The East Wing was very distinct in those days and dealt with differently. I would say, the more modern presidencies have incorporated the East Wing. Things have changed a lot since then. You’re right.

Smith: Did they resent her? Did she resent them? Because I’m sensing there was a personal element quite apart from the cultural sense that, “Well, that’s the East Wing and they do women’s issues.”

O’Donnell: That I can’t comment on because I never was privy to any information about the inner workings vis-a-vis Mrs. Nixon. I know about the two staffs and how the East Wing was dealt with as a staff during the Nixon times, but I don’t know the inner relationship between Bob Haldeman, or Dwight and Mrs. Nixon or Steve Bull. I just can’t comment on that.

Smith: Was there a time, an epiphany, or was it a gradual dawning process, end of ’72 or first part of ’73, when you personally began to sense that a) this was bigger than we thought, and/or b) that maybe the President’s involved?

O’Donnell: I think it was a gradual kind of painful process, step by step. There was a cartoon at the time which I think best defines it because I can remember it vividly. There was a gentleman on crutches and he’s asking someone for directions and the fellow tells him, “It’s just around the corner.” We always felt the good news, the break, is just around the corner. But in the cartoon, corners just went on for infinity, just a squiggly line of corners. And so that’s the way we began to feel. The staff was a terrific staff. It was a very dedicated and loyal staff.

So many of the people, the Nixon people, went on to become Ford people and Reagan people and George Bush people, Bush 41. So they were very, very good, capable staff with a lot of hope in the President and a lot of trust and so it was a slow, painful process that ate away at the confidence and trust. And
then, when the tapes came out, some of the tape quotes, I think at that point, everybody on the staff was very concerned about what really happened here and how it happened.

Smith: Did you know about the taping system?

O’Donnell: I’ll tell you a funny story. I did not, bottom line. But when I went to interview in June of ’72, Fred Malek was Nixon’s personnel guy; he was one of the fellows that I interviewed with. After the interview, I went to meet with Alex Butterfield who I had known as a family friend and former military officer for my dad. And Alex took me into the President’s office, the Oval Office; the President was away and I was looking around and touching things and he said, “Terry, be careful, there’s a lot of tricky things in here.”

That’s the word he used and I had no idea what he was talking about, and then later I realized, that Alex was aware of the taping system and, in fact, I think it was under his jurisdiction or part of his responsibility to help to set it up. He didn’t make the decision to do it, but he implemented that decision. But I never had an idea that it was there until it was disclosed publicly. And Alex, I don’t know whether the Watergate staff knew before they interviewed Alex Butterfield that day, but you remember, he was the one who was credited for revealing it up there on Capitol Hill in a staff interview and immediately they rolled him into a formal hearing and made him say it on the record. And I think that was the beginning of the end because without the tapes, the President never would have resigned and they never would have a “case” against him, I believe. I just don’t think it ever would’ve occurred.

Smith: You know, it’s interesting, I only heard President Ford speak ill of two people and the worst he could say was, “He’s a bad man.” That’s the worst he could come up with. One was Gordon Liddy and the other was John Dean, both of which, in retrospect, you can see why he might have felt the way he did. Did you have any contact with either one?

O’Donnell: I had a fair amount of contact with John Dean. Liddy and that whole operation, when you think about it, I think, was a horrible misjudgment, judgment error based on funds beyond belief. There was so much money that
was raised, there was really nothing you couldn’t afford to do and here was a step going too far because the money was there where you could do these things and one of the greatest errors ever made in U.S. political history in terms of political judgment and the like.

John Dean, I didn’t have a good relationship with John Dean, but when I was working for Haldeman, I would see him come in and out of Haldeman’s office frequently and I would set up meetings. So I saw a fair amount of him. My problem with John Dean is that, because I’m the general counsel of Textron and before that I was the general counsel to the Department of Defense, and if you’re general counsel, you have to be the conscience, you have to be the road block if something starts to go wrong. It’s your job to say, no matter how unpopular it is, “We can’t take one step in that direction,” or “We can’t put that out in our press release,” or “We can’t put that out in our earning’s release because it’s not accurate and ultimately it’s going to cost you.”

And quite the contrary, John, I think, helped lead the President and Haldeman and others down the wrong path as counsel when he should’ve been doing just the other thing. And then when it began to bind and he became the focus of an investigation, he flipped and cooperated and, to this day, still points the finger. But I think he was very ill-suited to be the chief lawyer of the White House. It was a bad personnel selection and I’ve often wondered if he had been doing the courageous thing as counsel, how that might have changed the course of events, because it was his job to say, “We can’t pay under cover one dollar of those attorney’s fees without disclosing it, because if we do, that’s the road to an obstruction and that could lead to your resignation. So, I’m not going to do it. You shouldn’t do it. I don’t care what we have to say or what comes out. We can’t go down that road.” And he made that mistake and it was a tragic mistake, really, I think, so I would agree with the President 100% on that.

Smith: Do you think John Mitchell took any secrets with him to the grave?

O’Donnell: Oh, I don’t know.
Smith: Well, let me rephrase that. Is there anything we don’t know about Watergate, including, I suppose, who ordered the break-in, that you think we ever will know?

O’Donnell: I kind of doubt that we’ll ever know anything more than we know now unless somebody is deciding to hold back on their true knowledge. But now that Deep Throat has been identified and so forth.

Smith: Did that surprise you, by the way?

O’Donnell: It did. It did. I didn’t know that fellow.

Smith: Did you play the game, I mean, did you have candidates in mind?

O’Donnell: I didn’t have a good lead. I actually bought into the composite theory, that Woodward and Bernstein were getting bits and pieces of information from a number of people and that was Deep Throat and they were just doing that.

Smith: That’s what their editor, Alice Mayhew at Simon & Schuster, told Steve Ambrose, point blank - that it was in fact a composite.

O’Donnell: Because I don’t know how one person, as I thought back at the time, would have all that information. Now, the FBI, that makes sense because so much different information funnels in. But then again, the notion that an FBI agent, much less an FBI leader deciding on his own that he was going to transfer information which he is sworn to protect, the FBI is sworn to protect their investigative information unless they’re given permission, to me is repugnant. I mean, I just couldn’t believe when I heard who it was that he would really carry on that course of conduct. I mean, he had a grudge, he wasn’t selected for the top position, this and that, but none of those things justify that kind of conduct in my view. So it was a surprise that an FBI man would do that.

Smith: Remember, there was a wonderful moment, a couple of years before President Ford died, I think it was the last meeting of the Foundation. It was out there. And this was right at the height of the media speculation. And he had practiced, his timing was perfect, you know. He said, “I have an announcement I want to make. “I just want all of you to know that I’m Deep
Throat.” And there was just this stunned silence for a moment and then people realized it was a joke.

O’Donnell: That was a Foundation meeting I couldn’t go to. I couldn’t get out there and I truly regretted that because it was a special meeting, I heard, really a good one.

Smith: How did Haldeman tell you he was leaving? Or did he tell you he was leaving?

O’Donnell: He did. His lawyer was in and out, not Buzhardt, but his private lawyer, and the drumbeat of articles in the press and the like. And I don’t remember precisely when I learned, but I learned from him. He would typically come out of meetings - he had long meetings with the President, generally two a day - he would come out of the meetings and Larry Higby, who had the job before me, would sit down with him and take notes. And out of a normal meeting with the President would come 15 or 20, and perfectly appropriate things, but action memos, usually a sentence or two saying, “Do that” or “Do this,” that went out to the staff.

They’d be called Higby-grams or whatever. And so Larry moved into Dwight’s office and I really took that role. Larry would still sit in those meetings. But, Bob came out of one of those meetings and said, “This is it. We’re going to resign, John Ehrlichman and myself, and on a date certain.” It was really a short timeframe, if I remember. And that’s really when I first - that I learned of it. I wasn’t surprised because the drumbeat of the press was relentless.

Smith: Were you surprised when the stories appeared in the press about Agnew’s problems?

O’Donnell: Yes. Yeah, I had no idea that those problems existed and hadn’t paid a lot of attention to Vice President Agnew’s history and pedigree and so forth. I knew a lot of the staff members. There were some very good members on his staff. And so that was a shock, yeah.

Smith: Did you see much of the President during this period?
I sat in for Steve Bull on occasion and helped Steve, because you remember, I came in to do advance work for President Nixon and when George McGovern was selected, the President found no reason to go out and campaign. And so, the advance team supported the first family, Julie and Trisha and Mrs. Nixon, and they would go out and do events. And so we had some time on our hands that summer and early fall, and it was just at the convention in Miami that Dwight picked me up out of the advance office and I became his assistant working at the convention. So my contact with the President was never personal. I was in a few meetings with him about some trips and of course I was on the road with him on several occasions. I did advance Senator [Allen] Ellender’s funeral down in Slidell, Louisiana, but I had no personal rapport or contact with the President. I was just a junior staff member.

Even into ’74 the defining months at the end of his presidency?

Yeah, when Haldeman left and Haig came in, I went over to the Executive Office building and I even saw less of the President and the West Wing team than I did when I was in the West Wing.

Were you around the Vice President at all during that period?

No, I was not. I really didn’t have a chance to work with him. My dad, who had passed away in 1971, really liked President Ford a lot as a Republican congressman from Michigan and they got to know each other well. They played golf together at Burning Tree and so I heard my dad say great things about Jerry Ford over time, but that’s about all I knew.

What did he say? And how did they get along?

My father had a great sense of humor and he liked to tell stories and play some golf and have a drink or something at the club there, and I think the Minority Leader at the time then, Ford, did the same thing and they were very compatible in their views and they just got along very well. And, in fact, when the President asked me to stay on after the initial two weeks as his personal assistant he commented on my dad who had passed away and how good of friends they were. They were golf friends, mainly, but they were good friends. So that’s really all I knew, other than he was a Minority Leader
and had been around politics for a long time and was on the Commission involving the Kennedy assassination. That’s really all I knew about Gerald Ford at the time when he came in as Vice President.

Smith: What are your memories of August 8th and 9th?

O'Donnell: Yeah, the very vivid memories of being told about going to the East Room event where President Nixon made his farewell address to the staff, you know, with all the staff members, and then marching out of the East Room down to the portico and out on the lawn where the helicopter was and waving goodbye at that point. I remember it very, very vividly. The President gave his victory salute and got onto the helicopter and off he went. And I was still over in the West Wing working with David Parker, who was a Nixon guy, who was head of appointments and schedule and what Warren Rudland subsequently did for awhile for President Ford. And then we went back the next day, was it the next day, the next day for the President’s swearing in ceremony.

Smith: That’s that same afternoon.

O'Donnell: That’s right, same day. I was there for that and it was a dramatic 24-hour period when you first heard about, because President Nixon was on television the night before, wasn’t he? And announced the intent to resign and so all the way through that day was very disruptive.

Smith: Were there tears in that East Room?

O'Donnell: Yeah, yeah, there were. The staff was very, very proud of the accomplishments of the President and the staff and really was very dedicated to President Nixon, warts and all, for the good things that he had done, not standing up for the problems, but for the good things that he had done.

Smith: Let me ask you. Someone who was in the East Room for the swearing in, sort of got shoehorned in at the last minute with some congressional types, described the situation afterwards. After the ceremony in the East Room, there is a receiving line and people were all invited down to the State Dining Room for, I guess, a reception.
O’Donnell: Right.

Smith: And, at least, as this individual recalled it, he said, “You could see the Nixon people kind of peel off and go back to their offices.”

O’Donnell: That’s right.

Smith: And it illustrated that among the challenges the new President faced was integrating the vast majority of the existing White House staff, which had no taint, except political, with a few Ford people and whoever else he wanted to bring in. What’s your recollection of that?

O’Donnell: Well, I do remember several of us leaving an event, I guess it was in the State Dining Room or the hall there after the swearing in and my thought was, “This is the new President’s day and this is his staff and his family and his friends.” And so it seemed like the appropriate thing to do, not to linger too long. It was out of no disrespect for him or anything along those lines.

There was, that afternoon, if I’m not mistaken, a meeting in the Roosevelt Room, I think, of the staff, and one of the funniest things I’ve ever heard occurred in that meeting. Everybody was pretty much in a state of shock. You may have heard this story before. And you had the senior staff of the Vice President, now President, and you had the senior staff of the outgoing President and you could’ve heard a pin drop. I mean, everybody was wondering, “What’s going to happen here?”, “What’s going to happen to me?”, “What’s going to happen to the country?” I mean, you could really cut the air, it was that thick. And Tom Korologos bounced in, who had a magnificent sense of humor, and he looked around the room and he said, “You know, you Nixon guys are in serious trouble.” Of course, he was the arch-Nixon guy. Everybody laughed and he broke up the meeting.

I remember that very well, but that was kind of the view because you had a change of power instantly, here, which has occurred very infrequently in American history. I mean, I guess if you roll back to the Kennedy assassination.
Smith: Which at least was a friendly transition, a tragedy, which, if anything, bonded the country. But there must have been enormous uncertainty among the Nixon folks.

O’Donnell: Oh, huge. I mean, “Are we out tomorrow?” or “Should I send my resume out this afternoon?” “Can we help? Is there something we can do?” “What’s the right thing to do?” So those were all those things going through. And though there was tension during the Ford vice presidency between the Nixon staff and the Vice President in that, with Spiro Agnew, the practice was that the great speechwriting team of Ray Price, Pat Buchanan and Bill Safire, you know, they’d write stuff for Spiro Agnew and he really wasn’t permitted to change anything. He’d go out to the hustings and deliver whatever he was told.

I think Vice President Ford probably asserted more discretion and pushed back a little bit more. Obviously, the Vice President does the President’s bidding as long as it’s appropriate and everything. So I think a little tension built up over that, and then there were the things that the Vice President had to do to protect the transition that he felt, I look back and I’ve read, he felt was coming for awhile. And he had to maintain his credibility and there were certain things that he couldn’t do, that wouldn’t be appropriate to do when he is knowing that he is very likely to be the President of the United States at some time in the not too distant future.

I think he acted appropriately in that regard, but it created some tension with the Nixon staff because he wasn’t doing everything he could to defend the President because he had to maintain a certain degree of discretion for the country.

Smith: You can understand how everyone played that role and how everyone felt the way they did. It’s interesting, we were talking to Bob Barrett and he said, “People really don’t fully appreciate how good Ford was at keeping secrets.” And he said, “I’ll bet you there are things that he took with him to his grave.”

O’Donnell: Oh, I bet. Yeah, that’s an interesting observation. I would share that.
Smith: One of the curious things I’ve found about the President that set him apart from most politicians I’ve been around, is he wasn’t a gossip. I mean, politicians love political gossip, but on the personal level, I sensed he almost found it distasteful. That he’d change the subject if you went too close.

O’Donnell: Yeah, he had a very clear - and it’s the only way I saw him, as President - he had a very clear view of appropriateness and discretion for the President of the United States - what you should talk about and what you shouldn’t, and he did not want to get into talking with staff about what’s good or bad about another person other than personnel issues or something like that. He didn’t have any patience for that. I didn’t know whether that was the way it’d always been or whether that was a mantle he took to the presidency. It’s a good thing to do, because as the President it doesn’t do himself any good to get dragged down into gossip and things.

Smith: And I assume there’s no such thing as a private conversation with a President.

O’Donnell: Well, the President has absolute discretion to share anything with anybody he needs to get something done or whatever.

Smith: But in terms of, for a President to believe he can have a private conversation, I mean, how far do you go?

O’Donnell: I think that mold has been broken. I think it existed. I really do. I think the President did have confidence when he was meeting with certain people. Rumsfeld and Cheney, for example, when they did the back-to-back that they would be totally loyal and discreet in that information and to my knowledge, they were. I mean, Cheney was an absolute example of maintaining confidences and secrets of a lawyer. As a lawyer, you appreciate that because that’s what lawyers have to do with their clients’ confidences and secrets.

Smith: Yeah.

O’Donnell: He would tell us, the staff, what we needed to know, but he wouldn’t get into any of the dialogue. Haldeman, on the other hand, would come out of the meetings and, to his trusted aides, Larry Higby and then later myself, would describe a fair amount of what went on in those meetings, but by no means
everything. He kept a lot of it to himself and I know that because you subsequently found out what went on in those meetings through the tapes and so forth.

Smith: Tell me about the President and Edward Bennett Williams, their relationship.

O’Donnell: I observed that they had a very good working relationship and I think President Ford felt good about Williams being on the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. And I recall one meeting of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board in the Cabinet Room in which a policy debate ensued over intelligence tactics, if you will. And Ed, who was a prominent Democrat, was conservative on foreign policy and intelligence, and he knew constitutional law like the back of his hand. And so he and Attorney General Ed Levi got into a to-and-fro on the issue. The meeting concluded and the President asked me to get Ed and bring him into the Oval Office. So, I quietly did that, but it was apparent to those in the Cabinet Room that Ed was being led out of the room by me, which meant one thing, that he was going in to see the President. And he left the rest of the members of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board cooling their heels and Ed stayed in there a good while. Finally, I came in because we had a visiting group in the Rose Garden and we were quite late, and I broke that meeting up and to roll forward, when I interviewed at Williams & Connelly after Jimmy Carter won, Ed said, “Yeah, O’Donnell, I remember you. You’re the one who broke up the meeting with the President just as I was about to make my sell.” But they did have a nice working relationship.

Smith: Was he at one point approached about the CIA job?

O’Donnell: I believe he was. Yes, I believe he was and I think President Ford wrote about that in his book, although I can’t be sure about that. I think he wanted Ed to take that job. I believe that to be the case.

Smith: Clearly the President had a lot of friends who were Democrats.

O’Donnell: Yes, indeed. Indeed. He surely did.
Smith: Tell me about the relationship with O’Neill. There’s a wonderful story that Don Penny tells - he was sort of an outsider and he took things at face value. And he saw one day, I guess in the Oval Office, the President and Tip had had a meeting - you know, warm and friendly. And then Tip went out on the North Lawn in front of the cameras and, of course, lambasted the President.

O’Donnell: Right.

Smith: And Don, seeing what he saw, went back in to report to the President this outrage that was occurring outside his very door and the President’s got his pipe and, you know, he says, “Don, that’s just politics.”

O’Donnell: Well, the identical thing happened to me. One of my fun duties on a Thursday or Friday afternoon if the President could break away Saturday morning for golf, he would ask me to call two or three guys in his name and set up a golf game at Burning Tree. And Bob Michel and Tip O’Neill were typical golf partners.

He asked me to do that on one day and I kind of screwed up my courage and I said, “Well, Mr. President,” you know, because it wasn’t my job to intervene on this, “are you sure you want to play with Tip O’Neill?” And he said, “Of course. Why not?” Well, he’d just made this statement this week and it was one of the pointed statements about a football helmet too small or being able to walk and chew gum or something like that. At any event, I was offended by Tip O’Neill’s statement and I told the President that, and he just laughed and said, “That’s nothing. That’s politics. That’s nothing.”

So he had a strange ability to enjoy his friends, almost unbelievable ability to enjoy his friends and their friendship even though some of them were very tough on him, and Tip O’Neill was one of them. He would blast the President on a fairly regular basis and yet he would be in the golf foursome. I can understand Michel, he was on the same team, but Tip was not. It’s interesting isn’t it, because you don’t see much of that today?

Smith: Ford comes into office - where were you at the very beginning of the administration?
O’Donnell: At the very beginning, I was still with Dave Parker in the Executive Office building next door to the West Wing. I think it was on the first full day of the presidency, General Haig called me and he knew that I had understudied with Steve Bull a little bit as personal aide to President Nixon in handling the appointments and paper flow and all that. And he said, “We’ve got people coming in,” and this is part of the tension between the two staffs, he said, “We’ve got some people coming in who worked with the Vice President when he was Vice President with an inbox under their arm, papers falling out, and getting in there and we have no record of what was discussed or decided or anything else. We can’t run the White House this way. You know how to do it. Would you go down there and enforce the schedule?”

“You have to have an appointment to see the President, you can’t just walk in, and we have to make sure that ideas that come into him have the comments of the right people that are staffed properly.” So, I said, “Sure, I’ll go down and do it.” And he said, “You know, it’d be a couple of weeks or so and after that we’ll see if we can find a good legal position for you over at the Department of Justice.” And I said, “Terrific.” So, he took me in and introduced me to the President, who I did not know personally, and as I said, he knew my dad, and the President was, “Great, let’s give it a try.” And so I moved into the little office next to the Oval Office between the cabinet room and the Oval Office and started to fulfill that role.

Smith: And you know who wanted that office?

O’Donnell: No, I don’t know.

Smith: Hartmann.

O’Donnell: Oh, I didn’t know that. No, this is not his study, now, this is the little office, it’s hardly bigger than a closet, right between the cabinet room and the Oval Office and Bob ended up, of course, with the big office next to the President’s study where Alex Butterfield used to be. But, in any event, I moved in and took the job and we got along well and a couple of weeks came and passed and a couple of weeks later, the President said, “Terry, this is working out fine. Why don’t you just stay?” And I said I’d be delighted, because from a
standpoint of a position, I was having a great time and that it was a wonderful job.

Smith: What were your first impressions on him?

O’Donnell: Extremely hard working, extremely dedicated, wanting to hear from everybody initially, including his old pals, the Grand Rapids group, the congressional group, the industry group, K Street Corridor, who were pals of his, some of those people, and becoming a little frustrated with wanting to get all that done. You just couldn’t do it all.

Smith: In those first few days, understanding the substance of symbolism at such a time, he had the Congressional Black Caucus come over and George Meany over and people who had not been in the Oval Office for some time, clearly sending a signal that this was a different—

O’Donnell: This was open and this was an open White House, open presidency and he wanted to continue those fine thoughts in the speech he had made upon taking the oath, you know. And so I enjoyed him immensely as a boss and I kind of reported directly to him and to the chief of staff of the White House who was then still Al Haig.

Smith: Was there any question of Haig staying long in that role or was it simply a question of what alternative you were going to come up with?

O’Donnell: I was under the understanding, and I could be well wrong from my perspective because I wasn’t in the counsels where some of these things were discussed with the President. I typically, if you were visiting the President, I might work with the scheduling office to set your appointment and I might go out to the West Wing hall, say hello to you, say, “It’ll be five minutes,” or whatever or, “Come on in and sit outside my office” and I might take you in there and on occasion the President might ask me to stay and takes notes in the meeting, but that was rare. And then I would excuse myself, so what went on was not my jurisdiction, if you will.

Smith: You were a facilitator.
O’Donnell: I was a facilitator. I was not a policy person. So I thought for awhile that the President was just going to give it a try and then Don Rumsfeld, of course, came back and others came in on the transition to advise and assist.

Smith: Was that related to this recognition that the spokes of the wheel just wasn’t practical? That a Rumsfeld would not have come in unless there was going to be some significant change?

O’Donnell: Almost immediately, there was a huge clash of approaches, because what I would say the successful representative in Congress, in that model, which is the one that the President had lived and breathed for all these many years with the vice presidency being a brief interlude, and then the battle of the Nixon White House discipline process, heavily processed Staff Secretary ensuring that every piece of paper that went to the President had the views of all the interested parties, which is a good thing. But there was a big clash between those two cultures, which I observed. I mean, it was right in front of me, day in and day out.

Smith: And, to what extent was it personalized? For example, Bob Hartmann was clearly a polarizing figure.

O’Donnell: It’s no secret that Bob and Al did not get on at all from day one and there was, not without reason, but there was a sense that the holdovers really should be purged, that we don’t know where all the bodies are in Watergate, and after all, it became, despite all the good things done, the administration crashed and it was a failure in that regard and that’s a fact. And so, we ought to get rid of those people and bring in all new people. And that view clashed with the notion that it was very hard to start a White House on the run without the experience and capability of the people on board. And secondly, the President knew a lot of these people because he had been an influence in Washington for a long time as Minority Leader, so he knew and respected a lot of the talent in the National Security Council, in the White House, and in the cabinet. So he really wasn’t interested in making a wholesale change. And there was a lot of give and take. I mean, you’ve studied this and you know, there was a lot of tension and give and take at the time as to who would go, who would stay, who would end up in what position, whether the Nixonites
were suffocating and crushing the new presidency in the cradle or whether
they were just bringing the best practices of how to run the White House
successfully to bear.

Smith: One of the things we’ve been told, and it’s perfectly consistent with what you
say, is that a not insignificant consideration in the President’s thinking was
basic fairness - that it was not fair to tar everyone in the Nixon White House
for the crimes of a handful. He really didn’t want to be a party to branding
people, in effect, professionally for life by simply kicking them out on the
streets.

O’Donnell: That’s wholly consistent with my observation of Gerald Ford, that he would
take that position. I never heard that one way or another, but I can understand
that that’s the way he would be. You know, he had a high regard for a lot of
the people. He saw a lot of the congressional relations people on a regular
basis. He had a high regard for a lot of those folks.

Smith: Those first couple weeks…certainly as he talked about the pardon, one senses
that perhaps naively he believed the country was ready to turn the page. As a
new president who never expected to be president, he was painfully aware of
everything else on his agenda.

O’Donnell: Right.

Smith: It should be everything from Greece and Turkey and Cypress to, gosh, the
Glomar Explorer, the economy, the continuing energy problem - all this stuff.
And then there was that first press conference on the 27th or 28th of August
where he, again, perhaps naively, expected to be asked about all these
concerns and it didn’t happen that way, did it?

O’Donnell: No, they focused like a laser right on Nixon and the criminal investigation and
cooperation and documents and document flow. He, even in my presence,
expressed enormous frustration with all of the lingering strains of the Nixon
investigation. I know and I heard him say on multiple occasions, “We’ve got
to clear the decks.” And he used that phrase, “We’ve got to clear the decks.”
And so I wasn’t surprised at all. I got very short notice of the decision and
came rushing in the night before, I think I was told, and came in to set up the
Oval Office with the press office for the statement that he would make on that
date for the pardon. But I do think he was stung by the aftermath of the
pardon and strong reaction to the contrary. I think, from what I observed, he
knew it would be controversial but he didn’t have any idea that it would blow
up on the doorstep to the extent that it did, and that Jerry terHorst would
resign and, you know, all of these things.

Smith: This obviously is supposition, but there is an ongoing debate as to what, in
fact, lay behind terHorst’s decision. We’ve been told by more than one person
that it wasn’t simple. That terHorst was genuine in his disappointment/
resentment/anger over the decision to pardon President Nixon, but there was
in fact more to it than that, that he felt the job was overwhelming—

O’Donnell: He wasn’t comfortable with the responsibilities of the job.

Smith: Yeah, the sheer volume and demands of the job.

O’Donnell: That was my observation of Jerry at the time, but I was deeply disappointed at
the time because I didn’t think it was an appropriate response to the exercise
of a well-established constitutional power. I mean, if the President had done
something wrong, I can see people resigning, but I didn’t see that. You might
disagree with it, but the President has unfettered constitutional authority to
grant pardons. But in any event, it was defining surely for the rest of the
administration - the pardon lingered on right up to election day.

Smith: Right. Apart from the President, in your own sense, was it literally night and
day? Was there pre-pardon and post-pardon in terms of just the reaction of
people?

O’Donnell: Yeah, I think it was. Of course, you had the congressional committee stirred
up and the question of the President going to testify and “Was there a deal?”
and all these things. They kind of took the place of dealing with the criminal
investigation. Maybe they were more demanding for awhile than was the
status quo with just the ongoing independent counsel.
Smith: And how did that originate? Clearly Ford was perfectly willing to do it although it had never been done before. But, was that an invitation that came from the Hill informally?

O’Donnell: That I don’t remember because, again, I would not have been involved in the decision to do that. I would’ve strongly urged against it just because I don’t think the President should have to go up. I think it’s a bad precedent to go up and testify before a committee under our system versus the Brits and everything, and even then in Britain, that’s debate, that isn’t sworn testimony. What takes place in the House of Commons is a great tradition, but I think it’s different than an investigative committee grilling under oath. But, anyway, he was a man of the House and he felt that he wasn’t exposed here and hadn’t done the things that were being rumored.

My sense is in the snippets of conversations that I heard, he wanted to go up and clear the air and he felt he was the only one who could do it. And it was part and parcel to “getting this all behind him.” Because the investigation was supplanted by the post-pardon investigation and the trouble with that is the post-pardon investigation was focused on him. The pre-pardon investigation was focused on Richard Nixon. So, in a way, this decision bit back and I think he was really genuinely surprised at the intensity of the backlash.

Smith: One of the things we’ve been told is that the White House was being told through back channels from Leon Jaworski, that it could take up to two years to bring Nixon to trial. That had tended to define…” that’s how long I’ve got to be here,” assuming I’m not running for or reelected in 1976. “Do I really want to spend all my time here dealing with these things?”

O’Donnell: Prior to my taking the Textron position in 2000, I did a lot of defense work for companies and white collar defense work, and two years is about right. And the President’s view is it’s going to dominate all of his term and he genuinely believed, in things that I heard, that he just couldn’t get about dealing with these problems with these things lingering in the background. And I remember the lawyers coming down to see him time and again over the investigation, the handling of the former President’s papers, who was going to screen, what about the privilege, you know, the attorney-client privilege, and
executive privilege of those papers. And the President I think just threw his hands up in frustration and said, “I can’t deal with this. I just can’t do this and fulfill my duties. I want it over.”

And so I think he did it for all the right reasons. I was very pleased and proud and surprised years later for the Kennedy Award came to him for that decision because I thought it was deserved. I still think it was the right decision for the country. But it will be one of those things that will be debated forever.

Smith: It’s funny, and it will come as no surprise to you that Mel Laird still thinks he had a better way to do it. Mel had a plan. Mel’s plan was, he was going to bring twenty or thirty members from both houses of Congress, bipartisan delegation, down to the White House to ask the President to do this. The problem with that scenario is, put yourself back in the supercharged climate of the day. Because I remember spending an evening one night with the President war-gaming this, thinking there must have been a more adroit way of doing this. The problem was, any trial balloon, I don’t care what source, would never have gotten above the trees before it was shot down. I mean, there was no way to “prepare” the country for this.

O’Donnell: I think you’re absolutely right, I think it was just too hot a topic. And he decided just to take it on quickly, and once he made the decision and acted on it quickly, there was not any time for it to leak out and bounce around anymore than speculation had already talked about the pardon somewhere out there. And, boom, he did it.

Smith: There has been criticism over the years that he didn’t get much in return for whatever reason. That he didn’t get Richard Nixon to say very much.

O’Donnell: Yeah, I read about those discussions and the intermediary who was—

Smith: Benton Becker?

O’Donnell: Benton Becker, yeah, the very fascinating discussions in San Clemente and everything that was going on out there at the time. I think the President in my view really had his eye on the ball when he did this and maybe he could’ve rounded the corners or made it a little more palatable, but I don’t think it
would’ve gone down much easier than it did. And he thought it was the right
decision and he got it done early in his administration. Substituted another
problem, which was the backlash from that problem, which was focused on
him, but he still thought to his last day that that was the right thing to do for
the country and I think that was why he did it.

Smith: And then literally just a couple weeks later, you have Mrs. Ford’s cancer
operation.

O’Donnell: Right.

Smith: What are you memories of that period?

O’Donnell: Oh, he was extremely focused on her condition and I remember going out to
the hospital, I think it was, not Walter Reed, but the Navy—

Smith: Yeah, Bethesda?

O’Donnell: I think. And he was worried about her the entire time, extremely focused on
her. It was a tough thing for him to do because they were, from my
observation, so close at that point. I think Bob Hope may have come in to see
Mrs. Ford or been there at the time with the President. I have a slight
recollection of that. But in any event, it was a tough thing for him, that's what
I recall personally - for him to get through.

Smith: It’s fascinating, when she did her 60 Minutes interview, she became this sort
of controversial, certainly an unconventional first lady. One senses that the
initial consensus among the kind of good, grey male political types in the
White House was, “Oh my God, what is she doing?” to be succeeded by
perhaps mild astonishment when the polls showing that most Americans
found this very refreshing. I mean, it may not have been helpful to the
Reagan challenge.

O’Donnell: Yeah, it may not have been helpful on the conservative challenge front. The
funny thing about what I recall from the President was he was remarkably
buoyant and supportive of her views and would talk about them and kid about
them. So, they were an interesting couple.
Smith: Was it sort of a joke on him? A joke on her? Or how would he kid about that?

O’Donnell: He would say, just in groups that would come into the White House, you would get questions on, say, abortion issues, that would come up and some of the women’s issues that would come up, and he would say, “I feel this way or that way, however, Betty feels…” You know, he would always bring her into it. “Betty feels a little differently than I do” and he always would laugh about it. Or “We don’t always agree” and then he would laugh about it. And he had that way about him, about poking fun at himself. But he seemed to not only take it in good humor, he seemed to support it. Now, maybe to a Stu Spencer or someone there may have been a different communication about it, but that’s what my observation was, that he was highly supportive of her views and respected her views.

Smith: And that extended to his kids as well.

O’Donnell: Yeah. Yeah, that’s right.

Smith: I mean, one senses, they didn’t ask for this. You know, leave them alone or let them be themselves.

O’Donnell: Yeah, he was, I think given all his time and pressure that he had, I think he was a good father to the kids and was very devoted to them. You just see it come up during the day’s activities. [He’d] ask me the question, “Is Susan back up yet?” or whatever. I could just tell they were always close to him, close to his mind how his children were doing, how Mrs. Ford was doing.

Smith: What made him so grounded?

O’Donnell: Well, it’s just his cut, you know. He just took the presidency, just stepped right up to it and ran with the ball. He had enough confidence with himself, he had enough confidence in friends and advisors and staff, and he didn’t hesitate. I think it goes back to his entire career, you know, Naval officer training, his football career, his law career, small law firm in Grand Rapids. That’s pretty mainline, solid stuff in America that he experienced all of those things. He was a member of Congress.
So there isn’t much he hadn’t seen in my view and he was blessed with a very, I think, good sense of humor. Not that he couldn’t get mad and he sure did, but he was blessed with a great sense of humor and a real interest in people around him. I mean, he would never get into inappropriate discussion, but he knew the agents, he was interested in their families, sometimes he met their wives, you know, because they might have been up at Vail or something like that on occasion. He had a genuine interest. He knew my two young daughters at the time. He knew Margaret and he would ask about them. You don’t concoct that. That was just natural for him. So it’s beyond my kin to speculate, but he was pretty darned solid, really well tied to the ground, really well-rooted.

Smith: The first day, of course, they lived out in Alexandria that first week, and the first day, I think, he actually was living in the White House and he’s walking up to the West Wing and there’s a Marine guard, of course, saluting, you know, holding the door for him. And he walks up and extends his hand and he says, “Hi, my name’s Jerry Ford and I’m going to be living here. What’s yours?”

O’Donnell: Yeah, I didn’t see that, but I can picture it in my mind and that was Gerald Ford.

Smith: But that goes back to this larger question, because there is this view that it was the congressional Ford that was sort of plunked down in the Oval Office and that it took him awhile to learn, almost to grow out of that role. And yet, in many ways, it was those qualities that made him what he was and it was sort of perfect for the time. Did you see an evolution in comfort level - the difference of being a Minority Leader on the Hill and being the President?

O’Donnell: Yeah, I never saw him change in his focus and dedication to his family, his concern and interest in his friends. The frustration that he didn’t have time any longer for a lot of his friends, you know, as much time as he’d like to spend with his friends, that was frustrating for him, you know. The frustration with the discipline and the amount of work that was required, not because he didn’t enjoy the work and have a great appetite for it, but it just precluded him from doing things with people that he intended to do.
Smith: A sociable guy.

O’Donnell: Sociable guy, very. And he liked, unlike President Nixon, he really enjoyed having the debate on a policy issue before him.

Smith: Can you illustrate that with an example or two?

O’Donnell: Yeah, of course, he loved the budget and he had a lot of experience with the defense budget and so, at budget time, he actually held appellate meetings in the cabinet room. This is the antithesis of anything Richard Nixon would do. He [Ford] would sit in the cabinet room and Jim Lynne and Paul O’Neill would be at his side. On the other side of the table would be Carla Hills or Matthews or one of the cabinet members complaining and raising issues about this budget. “Look what OMB has done to this program. We can’t live without this program” and that. And he’d entertain these meetings and I thought that was fascinating. It took a lot of time. Was it the very best use of his time? One could debate that, but he thought, “My cabinet members feel strongly enough about an issue, I’m not going to decide it on a piece of paper. I’m actually going to hear them out.”

So he wanted to repeatedly have the advocates come in and sit with him and he’d entertain debate, give and take, before him. Nixon really wasn’t interested in doing that at all. He wanted that done out of his presence and if he wanted to see contrary views, he wanted a well-staffed memo because I used to, with Steve, all the paper that went in from the staff secretary or National Security Council or anything else went through me. I mean, I was the guy who took the folders, take them in, unless Cheney or Kissinger brought a particular paper in alone and that was rare. Most everything went through the process and it was totally different the way they behaved, but what changed dramatically in Gerald Ford was his recognition that with all he had to do, he couldn’t do as much of that, anywhere near as much, as he wanted. So I saw him move, a little painfully, toward a more efficient use of his time. He grew, in my eyes, as President, pretty dramatically over that period of time.
Smith: It’s been said that his greatest frustration was, by the fall of ’76, he felt he’d really mastered the job, only to lose.

O’Donnell: Right. Exactly. He would’ve been honestly a really fabulous second-term President. He really had his feet on the ground. He really had his understanding. He wasn’t Ronald Reagan on the campaign trail or Barack Obama or whatever, but he was even getting better at doing those things and the last campaign swing which ended up in Grand Rapids with him losing his voice was one of the most fabulous political - from an advance man’s point of view, was an enormous success. Big crowds and lots of cities, two and three events a day. It was a real demanding trip which Red Cavaney and his capable team put together, and I was working with them on schedules and briefings for the President on each event and he performed magnificently as a political combatant in that campaign in the end and you know, “coulda/woulda/shoulda,” was almost there.

You know, the San Francisco situation set the polls back a couple of days. I’m sure Stu Spencer regaled you with some interesting stories. I saw Dick Cheney and Stu Spencer try to deal with that problem for 24, 36 hours and it was a tough one.

Smith: Was he just stubborn?

O’Donnell: On that one, I think he was pretty stubborn. At the San Francisco debate, he said what he said, and I was on the Poland trip with him and I knew he was talking about the spirit and the hearts and the minds of the Polish people, and if you asked him how many division the Russians had in Poland, he could quote you down to the weaponry that they had there, how many tanks. So he knew exactly what the situation was, but he didn’t say it articulately.

Smith: If he had simply referred to the fact that, “I’ve been to Poland and I’ve looked into these peoples faces and I’ve seen…” he could’ve turned it to an advantage.

O’Donnell: It’s the indomitable spirit that he was talking about, not the fact that Russia had tactical, strategic control at the time of the geography, but you know, Scowcroft and Cheney, Spencer and those guys were kind of running around,
we were in the back during the debate. The President came out, we whisked him off immediately, and there was no time for any kind of assessment, to Senator Hayakawa’s campaign event in the hotel, the same big ballroom. And the President had been studying for it the day he got there and he mispronounced it, Senator Hayakawa or something like that, I can’t remember what it was. But a great event, big rally and the President was buoyed, he was buoyed by the crowd, he thought he had nailed the debate and he felt fabulous.

Red Cavaney and I go back to the residence. He was staying at a residence in San Francisco. With him back there was the captain of the Mayaguez ship and that was prearranged, and the President comes in and he’s feeling good, asks for a drink, and says hello to the captain. Red and I are the only guys there. Cheney’s not there and Scowcroft’s not, as they normally would be, and the President looks around and says, “Where’s Dick?” And I said, “Well, he’s back talking to the press.” And he said, “Okay.” And the President gets the captain a drink and they’re sitting down, just the two of them there and the President said, “Flip on the TV.”

So, I turn the TV on and he is getting hammered, real-time, right there, this is one hour after the debate, maybe, and the President’s face, he can’t believe what he’s hearing. He didn’t really comprehend what had happened there until he sees this stuff on the TV and Cheney and Scowcroft are doing their clean-up brigade with the press, trying to get things on an even keel, and then they get back to the house and the meetings, they ensue. Meetings break out, they’re talking to him, and I’m out of the room then. But it was a total shock to him and they tried to get it turned around for him all the next day and half the day into, I think it was 36 hours or so, he finally kind of pierced the well a little bit.

Smith: That raises the question, could he be stubborn?

O’Donnell: He could be stubborn and I think he was pretty stubborn on that issue because, “I know damn well what I meant and I know that it’s right,” and, “My words aren’t wrong.” They weren’t as precise as they should have been. And Dick
and Stu went in and told him that in multiple ways and he’d get a little angry, get his back up, and almost throw them out a couple of times.

Smith: That’s exactly what Stu said. He thought he was going to be fired.

O’Donnell: And seldom did I see him get wedded to a position so vigorously as he was on this one, but it did turn around and he started to pick up again.

Smith: Going into election day, did you think he had a real chance?

O’Donnell: Yeah, I thought so because it was one large state or two small states that I recall might have made the difference and it was so close, so close.

Smith: Were you at the White House that night?

O’Donnell: Yes. We were in the Roosevelt Room. We went up to the residence a couple of times for a brief stint, but he was up there with the senior staff and some of his key people and stayed all night. It was pretty bad, because by 12, one o’clock you knew things were going down.

Smith: What was it like the next morning? And how long did it take him to bounce back?

O’Donnell: Funny thing happened the next day and David Kennerly took a picture of it. Just David and I were in the office, it must have been between appointments and I said, “Mr. President, you know that that last campaign trip that you took, you performed magnificently and you deserved to win this thing,” and I was a little choked up about it. And so, I was trying to get him to feel good and he came over, put his arm around my shoulder and said, “Terry, we put up a good fight. You can be proud of it. And I’m going to be just fine.” Here he was helping me and I was trying to help him, and I remember that very clearly, and David has a picture, I have the picture around here somewhere with his arm around me.

Smith: Did it take a while?

O’Donnell: It took a little while. You know, he went out to Palm Springs in, I guess, December. It was never the same, really. I mean, it never is between election day and January if you’ve lost the election. You know, you’re winding down,
you’re a lame duck. And he got back on his feet from what I saw pretty well, but he believed as we all believed that he was equipped to do the job and that he would’ve done a better job than Jimmy Carter. We felt very strongly about that. And he had his issues with Jimmy Carter during that campaign on a number of occasions even in my presence. He got quite upset because he thought Jimmy Carter wasn’t conducting the campaign at a high national plane of integrity and truthfulness. He thought he was cutting corners and he was demagoguing. That was the word that he used on occasion and this upset President Ford significantly. He didn’t get upset at people very often but he got upset at that. But true to form, it didn’t last and they become friends and they go out with you and they do seminars together and things like that.

Smith: Bob Barrett, during the interregnum, after the election, he said the President would go around saying, “I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer.”

O’Donnell: That was the sentiment. That was the sentiment and the day that Jimmy Carter first visited, I brought him into the office, as was our practice, and they sat down and the President was not interested in seeing that meeting last too long, just the appropriate amount of time. So we made sure that happened. It was just one of those things, you know. But he got over that, too. I think he counted him as a friend for many, many years after that. And that’s true to Gerald Ford; he’s not going to hold a grudge, at least from what I could tell.

Smith: Do you think his relationship with Nixon was permanently altered as a result of what they’d both gone through?

O’Donnell: Yeah, I think so. I think so. I never really understood. You know, they had a longstanding relationship because of their position in the national arena that goes so far back and it was pretty solid, I thought. I think it was strained during the vice presidency. I think it was strained further in connection with the pardon and the aftermath of the pardon. The President, I remember, we were out in California and President Nixon was in the hospital with phlebitis and President Ford wanted to make sure he went by the hospital, if I recall correctly.
Smith: And that was something the political advisors didn’t want him to do right before the mid-term election.

O’Donnell: I think you’re right. I hadn’t thought about that. Yeah, I think you’re right. But, you know, there’s a lot of things that he was told politically would be very bad for him and he went and did them anyway. I was frustrated by some of them, because politically I wanted him to be strong.

Smith: Such as?

O’Donnell: You know, the wheat embargo with Henry Kissinger. Some of Henry’s advice which he took which drove the conservatives to a further hostile base, but things he thought were correct, he just did them. Encouraging Mrs. Ford rather than discouraging her is another one. You know, the conservatives didn’t like Mrs. Ford because of her views, some of the conservatives didn’t, and he didn’t try to muzzle her, at least as far as I know, he never did. I saw him encouraging, not discouraging.

Smith: In the spring of ’76, the eve of the Texas primary, Kissinger has a trip to Africa, which basically is to advance black majority rule in the former Rhodesia. He could’ve put it off, but what were the chances that he bumps it for the Texas primary?

O’Donnell: No, not likely.

Smith: But he went. I mean, the President told him to go.

O’Donnell: Yeah, he had a very traditional view of taxpayers’ interests, the taxpayer, the citizens’ interests, the citizens’ time. We would go out in the ’74 elections for all of these dinners, you know, the rubber chicken circuit. He didn’t want to leave the White House until four or five o’clock, you know we’d fly out to Iowa to do a dinner for a congressman and friend of his and he’d fly back because he wanted to be in the office in the morning because that’s the peoples’ business. He didn’t want to spend the night even though that would be the easy thing to do. So, time and again, he would arrange the schedule, they were grueling schedules, so that he could, like a good lawyer or banker
or someone who wants to be at the desk and feels they need to be attending to the business, that was kind of the mentality that he brought to the job.

Smith: One thing a lot of people commented on was just the sheer amount of energy that he brought to the job, which is not something you automatically think of. I mean, physical stamina is one thing, but just the ability to maintain that—

O’Donnell: Yeah, he kept going hard, and sometimes he would get very tired on these trips and we would discourage him from adding another appointment or another issue, but his friend wanted him to do this or something and he would do it and he’d get tired sometimes. And he wasn’t at his best when he really got tired. Sometimes it would really effect his performance if he had to give a public address, you know, so we had to give a constant fight and he was helping the fight at the end, but really pushing it at the beginning, and that was to pare down the schedule to really focus on the critical things and even though it may hurt some of your friends and associates and members of Congress who you want to spend time with. You just don’t have time to do it all. So he was torn a little bit between those two tensions.

Smith: Were you around him at the time of the two assassination attempts?

O’Donnell: Yes, indeed. Typically, as we worked the rope line in Sacramento just in front of the state capitol where Jerry Brown was waiting for the meeting, there was, shoulder to shoulder, an agent in front of him, behind him and on his side, and between the agent on his side and the agent behind him, I was there walking the rope line with him. Literally, shoulder to shoulder to shoulder almost, because people would constantly give the President things, envelopes, pictures to sign, letters, all kinds of things, and the agents had to keep their hands free, so they couldn’t touch those things. The President wasn’t permitted to touch them because it wasn’t appropriate or safe, so I would take them like the bag man and I would put them in a big briefcase that I would carry. Then we’d take them back to the White House and every letter would be answered and every request would be dealt with one way or another.

Smith: That’s a congressman.
O’Donnell: Yeah, that’s right. And often he would take those pictures home and sign them at night instead of having the autopen. Isn’t that amazing?

So, we’re working the line and I saw, about one row back, a woman with eyes that were scary that I could still see and it was Squeaky Fromme and she had some kind of an orange cape thing on. And I caught her eye just before the event occurred, as we were walking down the line, and I was struck by the fact that she didn’t look like a normal person. I was wondering what she was doing there. The next thing I know, the agent is yelling “Gun!” and her arm is coming up and that’s when Larry Buendorf, the agent, caught the gun coming up and cut his hand right here with the force of the gun. The agents collapsed the President.

Smith: Buendorf was where?

O’Donnell: Buendorf was in the front, as I recall, the front agent and then the middle, Kaiser, the back agent, and then I was kind of tucked right in there. And they yelled “Gun!” True to form, they collapsed him which really meant, collapsing him, meant putting him on the ground and jumping on him. It was a huddle. They’re looking around, they got the gun, and they got the lady. They yelled “Clear!” We’re up out of the huddle, I wasn’t in the huddle, I was next to it, and when the President is going down, he was throwing an elbow because he was being treated pretty roughly, you know, like a football player. Like, “What the hell’s going on?”

And so we get up and we walk at a fast pace and double time, literally, to the state capitol and the President goes like this, (straightening his tie) goes into the state capitol and off into the room and there’s Jerry Brown. “Hello.” [He] meets Jerry Brown’s guys and Jerry Brown knows nothing of this and it just occurred a minute before, two minutes. And I’m in the back of the room and one of the Brown aides comes in and whispers to Jerry Brown, and Jerry Brown kind of turns white and he said, “You okay, Mr. President?” And the President laughs and he said, “I’m just fine.” And that’s how Brown learned the incident. President Ford didn’t say a word about it.
Smith: Maybe it was just too fast, but when you were double timing it into the capitol, was there any conversation, any discussion? Did he say, “What happened?” or “Who was that?”

O’Donnell: I don’t remember anything at all. I remember, I think it was the agent probably said something to him that there was a person with a gun or something. So in any event, we finished that trip, get back to Washington and there was a big fight between security and political people about whether or not he goes back to California and when, particularly Northern California.

Smith: Because it was a hotbed of radical—

O’Donnell: Yeah, and because this event occurred when there been other threats from out there. So President Ford said, in my presence, told, I think it was Dick Cheney that, “I’m not going to be a captive in the White House and we’re going back.” And it was a month to five weeks later, we were in San Francisco and the President was speaking, I believe it was the Hopkins or the Saint Francis Hotel, I don’t remember, and while he was speaking upstairs, I went down into the street to check the situation with advance men and the agents. And there was a crowd, mean crowd, demonstrating across the street and the agents said, “We recommend you take the President directly to the car, from the door of the hotel directly to the limo and not shake hands on either side” which he would normally do because people are lined up on the sidewalk.

So we go back up, the speech finished, the President comes down, we’re in the elevator, and then we get him on the first floor and I say, “Mr. President, the agents want you to go straight to the car.” And he says, “Fine.” Didn’t ask because he knew if they had a reason, they had a reason. And so we get out the door and it’s about ten, fifteen steps to the car and we get about halfway from the door to the car and there was a gun pop sound across the street and the agents yell “Gun!” and they collapse the President again into this huddle. Rumsfeld was on that trip. This must have been before Don went to Defense. And then they throw the President into the car like a log, Rumsfeld’s trying to get into the car and I think he did.
The motorcade then starts to peel out and my car is right behind the agent’s car. I’m losing agents in the control car, so I jump into the control car because it’s moving pretty fast, and I grab the door and jump into the thing and one of the military aides, I don’t know if Bob Barrett or one of the aides was there, and we speed out to the airport. We were so concerned we were going to kill somebody because there were a lot of crowds, and the agents were driving so fast out of there.

When all that was done, I must say, I didn’t have a great feeling about Northern California. That was Sarah Jane Moore that fired that shot off. And, by the way, the shot went over my left shoulder and hit the hotel wall and I was on the President’s left and it was about that far away [gesturing an arms length]. I didn’t know that at the time. And one of the photographers on the other side of this limousine, looking over the limousine, took a picture of the President coming out, you know, one of those rapid firing [cameras], and you could see them collapsing the President and I’m part of the way down and then I’m down all the way. And the President’s 2/3 of the way down and then he’s down. But those were frightening incidents.

Smith: Let me ask you, do you think people took too long in ’75 to recognize the potential threat that Reagan posed? I mean, did people either believe he wouldn’t run or if he did he would be a less formidable challenger than he turned out to be?

O’Donnell: From my observation, that was correct, but I wasn’t a political advisor. I think his [Reagan’s] strength in the primaries surprised people significantly and you know it was a real tough time. I remember in Kansas City, we had the Presidential Suite where they arranged a bunch of very good military photos - you know the President’s photo gallery, those big, framed photos in the West Wing. And we had one with the President inspecting an aircraft, inspecting the troops, climbing on a tank, and near a naval ship. So we had the suite looking really good and conservative, and then Baker and the group would bring up these delegates, onesies, twosies, and threesies at a time, you know, from Mississippi and elsewhere who were undecided. And it was pretty tiny and we worked that entire process of the delegates there and that same
suite was where the President’s Vice Presidential decision was made. Having stated Rocky was not going to run, they debated late into the night and ended up with Bob Dole. I was at the door that night of the suite, so I heard that debate going on.

Smith: Was Anne Armstrong ever considered?

O’Donnell: You know, I don’t remember. I don’t remember whether Anne’s name came up.

Smith: The reason is I think Bob Teeter had maybe included her name in a poll and I think the idea was, “We’re so far behind. We’ve got to do some Hail Mary’s.”

O’Donnell: Well, that’s when Rocky was not particularly happy, obviously, being out at the convention, but not being on the ticket.

Smith: How bleak was it for him? I mean, he was a good soldier.

O’Donnell: He was a good soldier and he hung in there. It was tough for him and his assistant Joe Canzari and I worked together to make sure things between the two of them were as good as they could [be]. The President, you know, was fine, but Rocky, this was a tough situation for him. And there was a strategy meeting for him afterwards. You know, it was important for Rocky to go and so forth, and he did, and he hung in there.

Smith: At one point, he wasn’t going to go.

O’Donnell: That’s right.

Smith: He went to his grave convinced that Don Rumsfeld did him in and then he transferred that to Cheney as Rumsfeld’s deputy.

O’Donnell: Well, you know, there’s that classic picture that Kennerly has and a lot of photographers have of Rocky giving the “one finger salute” at the convention floor. It almost looked like he enjoyed doing it, too, you know. I think he was at that point pretty fed up. And the conservatives on the floor, which was a very strong group, the Reaganites, you know, they needled him to death, they wouldn’t let him alone. They were pretty tough on him.
Smith: His relationship with the President, did it suffer?

O’Donnell: Yeah, it did. It was never the same after that decision, I don’t think. He was a buoyant person, Rocky, and the President liked him a great deal personally and he would see him for his weekly meeting, and he would come with a well-developed plan or policy of some sort that hadn’t necessarily been staffed through the White House. Jim Cannon knows a great deal about that and so forth.

Smith: That’s how you were elected in New York.

O’Donnell: Yeah. That’s right and Rocky was a fountainhead of creativity and thinking and he was good. He was very good.

Smith: One thing before we wind up. At some point we’d love to have a second visit, but the fall of Saigon must have been extraordinarily difficult time for everyone.

O’Donnell: Oh, yeah, yeah. I mean, I don’t have crystal clear recollections of that other than the President’s monitoring the heck out of it and being constantly engaged in it. One vignette related to defense which comes to mind is that Jim Schlesinger, whose an extremely bright guy, and the President would have these sessions in the Oval Office. Say it was going to be 45 minutes and Jim knew that going in; and he was a tough guy to get out of there once he was in. And both of them would light up their pipes and there was this kind of blue fog in the Oval Office area, they’d both be in there smoking their pipes. And the President knew a lot about defense and so did Jim and Jim would repeat a lot of what he knew, and I saw that relationship kind of deteriorate because of that.

Smith: Chemistry.

O’Donnell: The chemistry just wasn’t very good, so that was kind of something in the making for a period of time. It was a chemistry issue. You’re absolutely right.

Smith: And the massacre, whatever it was, when Rocky went and Rumsfeld went to the Pentagon and Schlesinger and Colby were replaced, and George Bush was
brought back - again Rockefeller absolutely convinced himself that it was all Rumsfeld, that Rumsfeld was pulling all these strings. I assume that was a gross oversimplification or just plain—

O’Donnell: Yes, because they were straight events. The Bush thing, Bush coming into the CIA. I mean, I don’t remember the sequence of events, but I remember them being all at once. Maybe I’m wrong on that.

Smith: Yeah, basically there was a grand shuffle.

O’Donnell: I knew there was a shuffle, but somehow I thought Bush might have been over there already, but maybe not.

Smith: Obviously I’ll ask the Secretary, but was it your understanding then that Don Rumsfeld wanted to be Vice President?

O’Donnell: I never saw that. Not that it wasn’t there one way or another, but I never saw it because I knew the President was going through this process and was working on the Vice President selection, back in his study working on it pretty hard and there were a number of meetings associated with it and people, Rocky, came in and we brought him ______________, I think, in under the tunnel. I think we did. I know we brought one of the candidates, I think it was Rocky, he’d go in to Treasury and go into the tunnel.

Smith: And was that when Rockefeller was—

O’Donnell: Being interviewed for the Vice President’s job, yeah.

Smith: So that was at the beginning of the Ford presidency.

O’Donnell: The very beginning, I’m talking about now.

Smith: Supposedly the three names on the list were Rockefeller, Bush, and Rumsfeld.

O’Donnell: Yeah, see, I know Bush and Rocky were on the short list, but I don’t know who else was on the short list, but I’m not surprised because Don had engineered the successful Minority Leader run for Gerald Ford in the House, so they were pretty close.

Smith: Tell us something about Gerald Ford that might surprise people.
O’Donnell: I’m trying to think if I can come up with something that I haven’t alluded to already today.

Smith: Did he have enemies? I mean, he didn’t think he had enemies, but I suppose Ronald Reagan qualifies.

O’Donnell: You know, one thing that hadn’t gotten a lot of attention is the Church proceedings which changed, perhaps forever, intelligence operations. Mike Duval and Jack Marsh were advising the President on that a great deal. I think one of the things that people don’t really understand about Ford is his depth of comprehension and understanding of the mechanics of government and the agencies and the departments, National Security, Intelligence, Defense, the budget. He really knew how the sausages were made, you know. He would go over to the state department and give a briefing on the budget which was pretty spectacular to show the breadth of his knowledge. And with the Chevy Chase stuff, you know, the constant degradation of his –

Smith: Was that tough for him?

O’Donnell: If it was, he really guarded that closely, because all he did was laugh about it, but it had to be, at some point, tough on you. But then again, he’s a resilient man. He didn’t let stuff like that get under his skin.

Smith: And you wonder how good an idea it was to let his press secretary go on Saturday Night Live and, in effect, call attention—

O’Donnell: Humor and satire are powerful things and I think we saw it this election with Sarah Palin. I mean, my God. And the next thing you know, you’re a caricature of yourself and you’re not yourself anymore as far as people looking at you from the general public. It’s not regulated and it shouldn’t be, but we have a First Amendment in this country and it is a powerful thing. I can remember one trip, just to give you an example, out to Vail when [we] were into the stumbling, head-bumping stories, you know, the Chevy Chase things, and damned if the press hadn’t pooled together to stake out the mountain and they combined. I mean, they had photographers all over there, AP, Newsweek, they were going to share, right? Who’s going to get the big stumble picture? And the President was a pretty good skier and I skied with
him a couple of times and he was a lot better skier than I was, and I had a hard
time keeping up with him. He would push the envelope, so you’re going to
fall when you do that. And, by God, they got their picture, you know, rear
end over tea kettle, and put it on the front page of the *New York Times*, which
I thought was really so unfair, but that was one of the political weapons. We
don’t really appreciate how powerful a weapon it is.

Smith: A great Ford story, in Vienna in the rain with the umbrella he went over to
Mrs. Ford and slipped on the gangplank coming out of the plane and of course
everyone around them was denouncing the photographers. And Ford says,
“Well, of course, they took it. If they hadn’t, they would’ve lost their jobs.”

O’Donnell: Right.

Smith: That Eagle Scout quality.

O’Donnell: I was at the ramp at the top on the plane with him and I was warned that it
was wet and slippery out there and I had the steward ready to hold the
umbrella and walk down behind the President and Mrs. Ford so he could
have, like a good sailor, one hand for himself, one hand on the railing, and he
took the umbrella. He didn’t want the steward carrying the umbrella, so he
didn’t have a hand for himself and took that fall at the bottom. I mean, it was
a very embarrassing thing. But isn’t that interesting, because he didn’t want
the appearance of someone doing his job for him, he didn’t want to look like
royalty or something like that with somebody carrying the umbrella.

Smith: Perfect.
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this. What does it feel like to be back in this office?

Matanich: Nostalgic. I have a lot of great memories in here and it brings back a lot of great moments.

Smith: How did you come into the service?

Matanich: Well, in 1983 I was a hire from Hinckley’s assassination attempt. The service hired about two hundred folks after that. I was in that wave and so I started the career in 1983. Didn’t get involved with the Ford detail until about ’91. I left Chicago to come out here and did about two and a half years out here with President Ford, and then left to go back to D.C. to do some headquarters time back in Washington. Then I had an opportunity to come back out in 2003, and I finished out out here, did about four or five years. As soon as he passed I retired.

Smith: How do agents get assigned? Do you have any say in that?

Matanich: Well, we all have dream lists when we come on the job, and headquarters has a division that handles manpower and planning. So they kind of take a look at what the agents would like to do, and then they punch it into where the needs are. Both times I came out, I asked to, which was kind of the normal. There weren’t too many agents who came out here that didn’t ask to come out here. The fact that he bounced between Beaver Creek and Rancho Mirage wasn’t a bad factor.

Smith: Geography is a factor?

Matanich: That helps, yeah. Plus, especially early on, it was a good life. A lot of travel – single guys liked it, so that was helpful.

Smith: He did love to travel, didn’t he?
Matanich: Yes, when he was younger he didn’t sit still much.

Smith: One sensed that around his ninetieth birthday - whether the doctors, at some point said, you’re not going to be able to do this - it was like a turning of the page. All of a sudden, he was ninety – but he didn’t seem to be, up until that time.

Matanich: Right. He was very resistant to slow down. Towards the days when he was starting to decline in his stamina, he would go out to play golf, and he was apologetic that he couldn’t finish eighteen holes of golf. And I used to tell him, “Sir, if you look around, you won’t see many of your peers here.” Now, they not only couldn’t last eighteen, but they wouldn’t have tried it. So he would, even at ninety, he would be out there and get in fourteen, fifteen holes, and he’d give it everything he had, but at the end of the day he just couldn’t finish. And that was problematic for him. He had trouble accepting the fact that he couldn’t get it in.

Smith: And he continued to swim?

Matanich: Yes.

Smith: As long as he could.

Matanich: Absolutely. He was something to see in terms of determination.

Smith: He was a very self-disciplined guy, wasn’t he?

Matanich: Absolutely. The most self-determined man I’ve ever seen.

Smith: Let me go back. You said ’91. Now at that point he was still pretty active, he was probably still doing a lot of speaking.

Matanich: Yeah, took some foreign trips and he was very active.

Smith: What kinds of places would you go abroad?

Matanich: Well, I went to the Ukraine, went over there for about ten days. Did a yacht trip from Kiev down to the Black Sea.
Smith: This would have been post-Berlin Wall falling.

Matanich: Yes. We were said to have been the first American vessel that went into the Black Sea and stopped at the Russian naval station there.

Smith: Did he ever go to Poland?

Matanich: Not with me. I didn’t go with him.

Smith: We used to joke - because when you get to the museum, it’s so characteristic - no other president I know of would have the staircase of the American embassy at Saigon as a central exhibit, and in the ’76 campaign display a screen endlessly repeating the Polish gaff. And the gag was, you weren’t wrong, Mr. President, you were just ten years ahead of your time.

We were talking about playing golf late in life – of course, he and Bob Hope were great buddies, and there are stories that Hope, toward the end of his life, would let it be known that he wanted to play a hole or two. The president would go with him, come back while Hope rested, and go back again. Does that ring a bell?

Matanich: Well, you know, Hope may have done that – but President Ford, that I’m aware of, never did. I don’t think he could have done that. He wasn’t like that – he would go out and give it his all and then he’d be done.

Smith: I was told that Hope would rest between holes, and the president, on at least one occasion, would, out of politeness, and friendship, accommodate Hope – that he would come back to the office, and then when Hope was ready to play the next hole he’d go out.

Matanich: Oh, yeah – in that way, it wouldn’t surprise me.

Smith: In determining the size of a team, to be blunt, is age and activity a factor?

Matanich: You mean in terms of staffing?
Smith: In terms of the Service assigning permanent folks.

Matanich: There is a concept of acceptable risk with any protectee we have, aside from the president and vice president, but when it comes to formers, they pretty much have a standard package in terms of what assets are allotted. That’s all changing, though, depending on the intelligence that’s derived and security situations where they travel. So nothing is ever static, it’s always kind of a situational staffing issue. The nice thing is, politics never enter into the equation, which was always a huge thing for me. I was thankful that we never had to play any of the games of whether you are on the in or out; it was always done in a very professional manner. And President Ford knew that and was unusually good about being security conscious.

Smith: Having been the target of two assassination attempts, how did that factor into his awareness of security?

Matanich: We never had any conversations specific to that, but he always was very conscientious of what we did and why we did what we did. And I think of the twenty-four years I was in the Service, of all the folks we protected through the years, he was as aware and as professionally courteous to security as anybody I’ve seen. He didn’t like inconveniencing people - didn’t like the fact that we did on occasion, in his travels. But through the years, obviously, there was a great understanding of when we did things, and why, and he had us around long enough to know when we were out of character.

Smith: Tell me if this is intrusive - the whole issue of the relationship. Obviously it is a professional relationship, but clearly if you’re around people long enough, a kind of personal relationship develops at well. You work Christmas, Thanksgiving, presumably, it’s a 365 day a year job. How is that adapted – how did this first family address that?

Matanich: I think there has been so much water under the bridge with this family and the Service – the fact that we were with them so long - we were
pretty much, it seemed to be, I don’t want to say an extension of the family, but we were just an appendage to them. We were something that they knew was always there and in that regard I think it was, for me anyway, for my time here, it was a great relationship because they always knew what they could count on us for, and especially towards the last few years in his declining health. There is a very fine line between security and safety and public health, and we diverted a lot of potential problems by having a mutual understanding on where the Service fit into the picture.

Smith: That’s well phrased. Penny and I had any number of conversations around our concern, one that a lot of other folks shared, at some point, they really both needed some help. The Secret Service has functions and they are not these functions. And there are wonderful stories…Bess Truman famously wouldn’t have her agents inside the house. I think there was a garage outside the house, the Truman home, across the street. Mamie Eisenhower, on the other hand, had agents who would fix the washing machine when it broke down. That sort of thing. I’m sure there are these stories within the Service. Is it that clearly defined, or does it depend somewhat upon the particular individuals and situations?

Matanich: Yeah, there’s no defined documents. The problem is that there are just so many different components to it that as soon as you make a rule, within a month you’d have to circumvent it. So I think more than anything, it was just a general meeting of the minds on concepts – security concepts and the difference between care giving and taking care of. And so we had our own distinct rules here that some of the details in the Service historically haven’t had. I was very proud of the fact that the family was respectful to the agents here, in terms of having – they get into this job for a reason, and their hearts are all in the right spot for the right reasons. And if you take them out of their role of what they’re doing and you put them in a care giving role, aside from the morale issues and potentially some discontent, everyone here was aware of not pushing the edge on that kind of
thing. It was understood and the lines, I think, were pretty distinct and held pretty firm.

That said, there was always cases where the agents were asked, on occasion, to do some things that normally they wouldn’t do. And all I asked them to do was do what their conscience directed. And if they felt like it was something that was beyond what they could handle, then just to let me know. And I never had a complaint.

Smith: I left out one large element here. I assume he resisted, as long as he really could, acknowledging that such needs existed.

Matanich: Yes. He was a proud man.

Smith: The very quality you talked about - playing fifteen holes of golf and wondering why he couldn’t play eighteen.

Matanich: He was a very proud man. One of his qualities that I really appreciated was the fact that he was old school in many ways, and yet thought younger.

Smith: That’s interesting. What do you mean?

Matanich: Well, by thinking younger, I mean, he appeared to have certain philosophies that folks his age didn’t have. He had a broader philosophy on world affairs and he was incredibly up to date on things – even to the end - that most folks wouldn’t have dealt with.

Smith: And a real news hound – the stories are legend about how he could be happy if he had a half a dozen newspapers to read.

Matanich: Yes.

Smith: And presumably that was something he maintained as long as possible.

Matanich: Yeah, he was very current. It was always great just to – I mean, we didn’t have a lot of sit down chats – that’s not something we did as a rule – but on occasion when we did, it was just pretty incredible for
me to have an opportunity to sit and talk to someone who went back as far as he did and could tell stories of folks that I’ve only read about in books. And so it was quite interesting to listen to him.

Smith: One of the banes for any former president, and I suppose for lots of celebrities, is the autograph seeker.

Matanich: Oh they were there. Till the end, they were there. Yes.

Smith: And how did he handle that?

Matanich: Generally well. His problem, I think, came from as most nowadays - he didn’t like to see the same people coming back twice, putting it on eBay. He was okay if he thought it was for personal consumption. But if he thought somebody was doing it for moneymaking opportunities, that was a problem for him.

Smith: Did he know was eBay was?

Matanich: Oh, yeah. He knew how they could sell these. And that was the only concern he really had – if somebody was using them for commercial values.

Smith: There are funny stories about – I’ve heard from Penny – to what extent he actually became computer aware – cognizant as opposed to computer proficient.

Matanich: Oh, I’m not sure he did much buying on eBay or selling, but I know he knew it was out there. He just knew it existed and someone obviously told him what the value of autographs could be on the internet.

Smith: I know they went to New York fairly frequently, of course, he had board meetings and the like – were there places they particularly enjoyed to travel?

Matanich: They seemed to. For a while they went every year, to New York; South Central Park is where they always stayed there. And the
Christmas type season, they enjoyed their time there for several days shopping and just vacationing.

Smith: I heard they saw Lion King and I think they saw The Producers. I was told they enjoyed theater – they enjoyed New York. Each of them had spent, as young people, quite a bit of time in New York.

Matanich: They seemed to enjoy it every time they went. I think, in the years I went with them there, aside from the board meetings, there was some charitable thing they did where they went there for some silent auction. They would bid on that, so they obviously wanted to go back there.

Smith: It’s no secret, he took some grief, particularly early on, for “commercializing” the former presidency. But people never really took into account the amount of charity work that he did.

Matanich: Right.

Smith: Or the campuses that he would appear on.

Matanich: Right. He was extremely active in that. There was a reason, aside from the locale of where he was at, that brought me back. I must say from a personal note, I was detailed over to the Department of Homeland Security when it was first set up from the Secret Service, and I spent a little over a year there, and so when this opportunity came up, I mean there was more than the location that brought me back out here. It was just the fact that I always respected him for his – just the way he conducted himself, and his humble nature, and his professionalism. He was one of the few – I wasn’t a real protection agent – my personal interests lie in investigations for the most part, in which I spent most of my career. But the protection side intrigued me mainly because of the people. And when I had the chance to come back out here and spend, what seemed to be his last several years, that was a big part of why I came back. Just because of the kind of person he was.
Smith: More than once, it was almost an annual event for a while, he would get back to Michigan, usually around the time of the Ohio game. Did you ever accompany him on any of those visits? The reason I ask is, by numerous accounts, when he would go out there and give a pep talk, there was a sort of untapped vein of eloquence that people didn’t associate with Jerry Ford. There was something about that place and that event that he – almost out of the movies sort of thing.

Matanich: Oh he was always very comfortable around college football players. I went with him to Notre Dame and Michigan and I think those were the only two, but he gave pep talks to the players both places, and the kids were always just enamored with his reports of the days when he played and some of his stories. He enjoyed it and the kids seemed to enjoy it as well.

Smith: The Bush’s had him to the White House for his ninetieth birthday. Were you on that trip?

Matanich: No, I didn’t make that trip. I came in 2003 when he was still quite active, still traveled, still went to Beaver Creek, still swam, still played golf, but shortly thereafter is when you could start to see the decline.

Smith: What was his daily routine like at Beaver Creek? I remember being amused, it must have been Penny who said, he’d go pick up the mail. He wanted his mail and he would go and pick it up himself.

Matanich: Yeah. He stayed busy up there, but it was always either, pretty much reading, writing, and just doing work in his office and the house. Didn’t get out a lot out there, but up until his last year up there, he stayed pretty active. Went out to eat a lot.

Smith: They were both pretty visible around town?

Matanich: Yes.

Smith: I take it they have facilities named after them up there in Vail.
Matanich: Yeah, he has an amphitheater, an outdoor amphitheater up there where they have concerts and various music and plays, and both of them would frequent that place quite a bit.

Smith: And the routine here? Sort of the same thing? Spent a lot of time in the office?

Matanich: Yeah, most of his time was just spent here in the office. And up until the end, he was pretty active out in town – going out for dinner and going to McCollum – the theater. Played golf, hit balls.

Smith: The last couple of years I used to be getting calls with annoying frequency from ABC, with whom I was under contract, reporting the latest rumors – and they were usually just that. And sometimes they weren’t. Was there a sense that at least some elements of the media were out there, I suppose doing their job, but in a way that was almost ghoulish?

Matanich: Well, I don’t know what drives them to be as assertive as they are on that kind of thing, but it was kind of like our headquarters would inquire on any trips to the hospital. And my response, at some point, was, you really don’t have to worry about our trips to the hospital – it’s the trips home because, knowing President Ford like we did, the last thing he wanted was to pass in the hospital. So I said, it’s when he comes home after the hospital that you need to be concerned about logistics. Not that it couldn’t happen, but it’s just that that’s not what would have been his wish. And he usually got what he wished for.

Smith: Was it tough for Mrs. Ford to accept the fact that they needed help?

Matanich: I think so. I’m not sure that it was any more than anybody else. I think that they were just both very proud people and they were not folks to give into anything lightly. And so, they were both going to give it all they had, and she didn’t want to make it easy on anybody because I think she knew how he was, and the bottom line was, they just were going to go down fighting. And that’s what they did.
Smith: A specific example: I remember that last summer when they insisted on going up to Vail, and I remember having the conversation, and she obviously had it with a whole lot of other folks, trying to persuade them that maybe that wasn’t a great idea. And the response that she had was, “At our time in life we’ve had the quantity of life and now we want the quality of life.” And even though it was a rough summer, one has the sense that they wouldn’t have done it differently.

Matanich: No. His response to that was they’ve told him for the last three years not to go up to Vail and he did and he had a great time. So he was just going to continue to roll the dice.

Smith: What was it about Vail that made it such a kind of special place for them?

Matanich: I think just the history of their family up there. The memories they had every time they went up. Like I said, I only was involved from ’91 on for my years, but they obviously had just countless years of memories there in that house and the town. And they enjoyed seeing it grow - Beaver Creek growing. The memories, I think, kept drawing them up there.

Smith: That makes sense. I think I know the answer to this, but, did he have a sense of humor?

Matanich: Sure. We had some fun. He was never what I would have called a cutup or somebody who took things lightly. He was just a very professional man who, when the moment struck him, he saw the humor in a lot of things. But it had to be in the right spot at the right time.

Smith: Would you call him a workaholic?

Matanich: I don’t know about his early years, but for his later years, he worked as hard as anybody I’ve seen in that age.

Smith: Your memories about the funeral: were you surprised? I was wearing two hats that week. I was with ABC the first part of the week and
then up in Grand Rapids with the family later on, and I can tell you, the media were astonished at the response, and particularly at the number of young people. And my sense was, these people were being introduced to him for the first time. And they were sort of comparing it with what they have grown up with and he looked awfully attractive. Someone who spent his life in politics, but who could rise above it – above partisanship, if you will. And that seemed pretty attractive two or three years ago.

Matanich: Well, just from my own personal perspective, I think a lot of people are craving his type of leadership. I’m not sure how much that played into the funeral or any of the activities, but I know in Grand Rapids, that was where it struck me more because it was to me a Norman Rockwell scenario – to go back and to see the folks and how they differed from the California situation as well as D.C. And the at-home feel of that whole situation up there just struck me as to the different dynamics of each site, California, D.C. and Grand Rapids and the sense of what you felt in Grand Rapids for him and the feelings that those folks had that went back years with him.

Smith: It really did feel like a homecoming –there’s a warmth there which wasn’t missing in Washington, but so much in Washington is official.

Matanich: Yes. You’re not quite sure in Washington if it’s heartfelt or if it’s just expected. So you kind of play that in. But up in Grand Rapids, I think it was pretty much heartfelt.

Smith: She was amazing that week. We’d been told at the network, from St. Margaret’s on, “Don’t be surprised if you see Mrs. Ford in a wheelchair.” But clearly she was going to defy that. Someone told me this story –after she got back, someone remarked to her how impressed they were, particularly at the end, by her walking all that way to the gravesite. And her response was, “That’s what my husband would have wanted.” Which rings true.
Matanich: Sure. They were both, in my eyes, each other’s biggest cheerleader in terms of pushing themselves to do what they had to do. It was interesting to watch their longstanding relationship.

Smith: Several people have said to us, whenever he was on the road, the day never ended without him calling her. And usually a call in the morning and a call at night, whenever they were apart.

Matanich: Yeah. Extremely close.

Smith: For people who had never been around the man, who just saw the name in a textbook or just saw the clips that we’ve all seen a hundred times, what would tell them about Gerald Ford that would flesh him out?

Matanich: I probably think of the qualities that just took me the most into these times is his constant stance on integrity and honesty. You didn’t need a dictionary to know where he was coming from. He was very direct and succinct and, I just don’t see that a lot today and so I think those qualities are, aside from being admirable, are qualities that the youth of today should know can exist and do exist in successful people, and that it doesn’t have to be an old world philosophy.

Smith: It’s funny because the word decency is used over and over. Some people use it almost as a euphemism – almost with a trace of condescension – that decency in lieu of sophistication. And decency certainly applies, but I also sensed that he was more sophisticated than those critics suspected.

Matanich: Yeah, when it comes to sophistication, I looked at him as the type of person that you didn’t need to – he just seemed to be able to deal with the folks no matter where we were. No matter what level of society we were dealing with, he was comfortable. I always felt he was comfortable around pretty much any segment of society out there and that was impressive to me. A lot of folks, and I don’t know if you call that sophistication or lack of, but I think he was, aside from being just decent to them, I think the fact that he could individually speak to
folks and have them find commonalities - because I guess he came from humble beginnings and that probably helped in that regard.

Smith: He never forgot where he came from.

Matanich: Exactly, and I don’t take that lightly. I think that’s quite a nice quality, and another one that I was glad to see in him.

Smith: Quickly, my favorite story which goes to that. The Nixon’s left the White House so abruptly that it took several days to pack up, and so the new president commuted for a week. Well, the first day he was actually moved into the White House, he walked in to the West Wing and there was a Marine standing at the door saluting, and he walked over and says, “Hi, I’m Jerry Ford. I’m going to be living here. What’s your name?” Well, that’s a Congressman, on one hand, but it’s also Ford. To be totally comfortable in any situation and try to make the other person equally comfortable.

Matanich: Yeah. I would not say pretentious was in his vocabulary – at least not that I ever saw.

Smith: Is it really true that he was an addict of butter pecan ice cream?

Matanich: Absolutely. Yes.

Smith: His one weakness.

Matanich: We all have our quirks.

Smith: Would he go in a restaurant and sort of consciously try to lead a normal life?

Matanich: Yes.

Smith: And, what would you do?

Matanich: He wasn’t big at asking for private rooms or special treatment or any of that, so, of course, we kind of tried on occasion to steer him where the situation was best for our concerns in terms of being able to cover the event he was at. So we would get in a position close enough that if
someone did go up and was over zealous, or whatever, that we could intercede and he always understood when we were sitting close by.

Smith: It was somewhere, I believe it was in New York, I remember reading the story the next day – a wire story – someone, I think it was in a restaurant, happened to have a gun on him. There was no connection except that once a reporter found out that Gerald Ford was in the same place – does that ring a bell at all?

Matanich: I wasn’t there at that incident, but I do remember the story. Those kind of things happen more often than they are reported. But often times we don’t make them public because if there was no connection it wouldn’t be public necessarily.

Smith: Finally, what do you do on Christmas Day?

Matanich: What did he do?

Smith: Christmas Day, birthdays – again, I guess it gets to that relationship between the agent…

Matanich: The agent’s job is the same no matter what day it is. They’re here, they’re posted around the house or, for Christmas, most times he was up in Beaver Creek and so the agent’s job up there is the same situation as it is anywhere else. Usually the supervisors have off on holidays, so that’s nothing different. But it wasn’t like our involvement with the family was any different, necessarily on holidays – other than he would go up and do the annual Christmas Tree lighting up in Vail, and had certain holiday activities they did just historically. But, other than that, it was another workday.

Smith: And – this may be over the line – do you have a final memory?

Matanich: Not one in particular. I look back and see many different – and as we talk I remember a lot of things that I had forgotten about. It was just the total package with him that was a pleasant memory. I don’t have specific instances that I found appealing. It was just the package.
Smith: Were you on duty when he passed away?

Matanich: Yes.

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

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

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

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

I can remember in the spring of 1975, he took a trip to Hawaii with his friend Bill Whyte and Peggy Whyte, who I believe, at the time, was the Washington rep for – I want to say Ford, but I know that’s not right – US Steel, or somebody like that. W-h-y-t-e, and he was very embarrassed because he took reporters and we were giving him a hard time about wasting taxpayers’
money playing golf on the big island of Hawaii and staying at the Monaki(?) Hotel, still one of the great hotels of the world – no longer a Rockefeller resort, but that’s where he went. And he was really kind of rueful about that. He said to me that he had cut the trip shorter than he had intended, and if he had not been vice president, he would done it for a few more days, but he was being sensitive for all the obvious reasons. He didn’t want to look like a big spender. He was never a big spender, but he didn’t want to look like one.

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

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

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

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

Smith: Was he unapologetic about that?

DeFrank: Totally unapologetic. One of the maddest I can ever remember him with me was a couple years after he had left office and I started gathering information about all of his financial dealings. It took me about a month to get what I felt was a pretty good understanding of all the various things he was into. I learned, for example, that he wouldn’t go on a corporate board without the
board agreeing to give him a separate deal, a separate consulting contract, and I think that one of them was in the six figures, which thirty years ago was a lot of money. And he had consulting deals for every corporate board he was on. I think at the time he was on eight. And he was into shopping centers and radio stations and Jack Nicklaus and Leonard Firestone and others. I wrote a little story about this. He had talked to me about it and was very unapologetic.

Smith: What did he offer as his rationale?

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

In other words, it’s not an ill-gotten gain, it was – to use the text jargon – this is my language, not his – it was earned income, not unearned income, and in his own mind he really made a distinction between earned income, which he had earned for doing something, and unearned, which is “We’ll give you a hundred thousand dollars just to put your name on our letterhead.” Which he didn’t do. But his real rationale was, it’s nobody’s business, and he really got his back up on this, and I will always remember in this same conversation,
him pounding the desk and saying, “God damn it, Tom, it’s the free enterprise system at its finest.” And that was Jerry Ford. He believed it. He wasn’t going to be persuaded otherwise. He had no problem.

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

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

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

Smith: I also wonder if he – because we sort of danced around this subject – clearly it was not something he brought up. Whether either then or later, he convinced himself, factored in the fact that he had to raise all this money to build a library. I always thought that what Ford and Carter discovered they had in common was that as soon as they left - they had the responsibility of raising the money. And, to Ford, who never spent anything in his campaigns, the museum was nine or ten million dollars. The library building was five or six – a pittance today – but to Ford, that must have seemed like a pretty formidable mountain to climb.
DeFrank: Well, I think he was truly shocked that a guy that spent 200 days a year on the rubber chicken circuit was going to have spend at least 100 days a year back on the circuit raising money for himself and for his legacy. I mean, for a long time he didn’t have a problem with it, but it was not part of his calculation. And he did find, while he had an easier time raising money than Carter, he did have a difficult time, and I think it bothered him.

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

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

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

DeFrank: It never healed. It never healed and I don’t care what the revisionists say, he never forgave Ronald Reagan. He was convinced that Ronald Reagan had lost the ’76 election for him by not campaigning in Mississippi and Texas. And he was also extremely bitter - which I didn’t know until years later – he was extremely bitter that Reagan didn’t step aside in 1980 and let Ford try again.
Jerry Ford wanted a rematch with Jimmy Carter. He was convinced that Carter was a disaster to the country, was convinced that he could easily beat him, and was also convinced – and he was wrong about this, of course – that Reagan could not beat incumbent President Jimmy Carter. Ford wanted Reagan to step aside and let Ford have another chance, which was poor judgment even to think that that could happen. I don’t know what Ford was thinking about that; why he thought that might happen. But the Ford people, of course, looked at it from the other side of the coin. The Reagan people thought that Ford had kept Reagan from being president in 1976. That it was Ford that should have stepped aside in ’76 and let Reagan beat Carter then.

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

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

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

Smith: He’d say, “For twenty years, wherever I go, people asked the same question. And since the award, they don’t ask the question anymore.” The whole bizarre episode in 1980 of the vice presidential nomination…over the years it’s fuzzy how much of that was Kissinger and Greenspan, and people looking for an entree back, and how active was Ford. What I’m trying to get at is - and you would know this better than most - I always thought that of Ford had a
weakness, there was a certain passivity. He could be persuaded to do something, but he wouldn’t have thought of it or taken the initiative on his own.

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

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

Smith: That’s fascinating on many levels. It raises this very large question: he had this reputation for being without guile – whatever that means. And yet he clearly was not without ambition. Was he as innocent as he appeared?
DeFrank: I think he was essentially innocent, essentially guileless – like the Detroit convention incident we’ve been discussing. I think there was a little healthy lapse into guile there. He was no dummy; he knew how to play the game, and he knew how to pull certain levers, but I think for the most part, he was about as guileless as you get.

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

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

Smith: How would you describe his mind?

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

I remember the story - most of the time when he was vice president, he was on this little twin engine Convair 580 prop jet. He was entitled to a nicer
airplane, he was, in fact, entitled to the backup Air Force One, a four engine Boeing 707. But Kissinger liked that plane and wanted it. I asked Ford one day – someplace, I can’t remember where, it was on a trip – and I said, “Mr. Vice President, why do you fly this piddling little airplane? I know you sometimes go into airports where you need a smaller plane.” Nixon even used that plane once to fly into a small airport in West Virginia. It was Air Force One for one trip. But I said, “Most of the places you go, big cities, you don’t need a plane this small.” So I said, “Why don’t you do it?” And he said, “Well, Henry asked me if he could have that other airplane and I said sure, no problem.” So I was on a big airplane with Gerald Ford as vice president maybe a half dozen times – when he went to Hawaii, when he went on longer trips – but most of the time it was this tiny little airplane. To a certain extent, it showed his lack of ostentation, but it also showed the sway and the thrall that Henry Kissinger had on him.

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

DeFrank: I think it was both. I think he got a larger dose of Kissinger every day as president. And I don’t think he was thinking about the arc of history, but I think somebody, and it probably was Don Rumsfeld, and to a lesser extent Dick Cheney, put the idea in his mind that you probably would have more independent judgment if you had a secretary of state here and your own national security advisor. And that it was fine to have a holdover secretary of state, maybe you shouldn’t have a holdover secretary of state and a holdover secretary of defense and a holdover national security advisor. So I think that was a conscious decision helped along by others with more ambition than Ford. But I think it was basically Ford’s view. Ford once said to me
sometimes you need small doses with Henry. And what that meant was, Ford could see through some of the flattery, he could see through probably all of the elbow throwing and the special agenda and special pleading; and I think he thought it would be better for the institution and better for himself to have Kissinger split from both hats.

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

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

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

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

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

DeFrank: Well, years later he said to me, “I came out of that press conference and I said, ‘Is this the way it’s going to be for the next two years? Am I going to be dogged at every press conference with questions about Nixon and a pardon, and should he go to jail, should he stand trial? If he’s convicted, should he go to jail? What about a pardon?’” And he said, he was just convinced that he would never be able to govern in the normal definition of the term, governing, as long as the specter of Nixon was hanging over his head. He said to me, and this was only a couple of years before he died, he said, “I was convinced that
Nixon would be indicted, he would go on trial, he would be convicted and he would be sent to jail. And this would take three years at a minimum, and that would just take me through ’76 and beyond.” And he said, “That’s when I called Phil Buchen in,” his former law partner and his counsel to the president, and he said, “Start researching this for me.”

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

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

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

But he was adamant, and he was not going to behave like that. He thought it would be cowardly, and of course, as you well know, Richard, the argument was, well, it will just reinforce all those millions of people who think that there was a deal for the pardon. And now you are going to go see the guy. And he said, “I don’t really give a damn what people think. The guy is sick, he may die, and I’m going to see him.” End of conversation.
Smith: It’s interesting, because in some ways it is representative of a frame of mind. We determine presidential success, the Rooseveltian model, as doing whatever the situation requires. And those are really admirable traits in a human being. It raises the question of whether a president can afford to be that uncalculating, because, let’s face it, if they’d lost thirty seats instead of forty-seven, or whatever they lost that year, it might have contributed in some small way to a successful presidency.

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

Smith: Really?

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

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

DeFrank: No, it never recovered. Ford said to me once that they had an understanding – it wasn’t on paper – but they had an understanding – they’d given the pardon,
it was probably best that they not show up at things, even after Ford was out of office. And I know that aides to President Ford would routinely look at guest lists at parties to see if Nixon was going to show. Sometimes they got together – for instance, there was a USO dinner honoring Bob Hope once, and every living former president came. So there were rare instances like that where they were around. But they did not go out of their way to see each other, and they both understood, according to Ford – Ford told me they both understood that even after they were both long gone from the White House it was not smart for either of them to be seen hanging around much with each other.

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

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

Smith: Speaking of admitting when you are wrong, stubbornness was certainly a Ford trait and it really haunted him after the Polish gaffe. And it’s amazing – presumably in today’s twenty-four seven news cycle, there’s no way that a week would go by without – and clearly even then, people were scrambling to try to undo the damage. And yet we talked to people who literally, watching
the debate at the time before the echo chamber kicked in, didn’t see it as a pivotal moment in the campaign. Within twenty-four hours that began to change.

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

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

**Smith:** Yeah. You wrote at length in your book about the slip of the tongue that he made, I guess, on one of his vice presidential trips that really stood out because it was, in fact, the most explicit acknowledgement that there might be a Ford presidency. And he sort of caught himself, it’s been a while since I’ve read it, but clearly he tried to swear you to secrecy.
DeFrank: Well, there were two things I remember. He was in Palm Springs in the spring of 1974, and Betty Ford was running late as she often did.

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

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

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

But the fact of the matter is, it was not a surprise to me because that was the same fateful trip in which I had a conversation with him in which he blurted out that he knew that he was going to be president. Now the official version of events has always been that he didn’t know until a few days before the resignation when Al Haig called him and said, “There’s going to be some Supreme Court tapes issued. It could be difficult and you need to prepare yourself.” And that led to the famous incident where he and Mrs. Ford went up to the Chief of Naval Operations residence at the Naval Observatory,
which was going to become the vice president’s residence and they were
going to be the first VP and Second Lady to live there. They were going up to
look at carpets and fabrics and stuff like this. And so they go up and they go
through the routine where they are shown samples of these drapes and this
carpet and this wall treatment, and all this stuff, and Ford, going back to his
office in the limo, says to Betty in a very low voice, “Betty, we’re never going
to live in this house.”

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

So I dumped my bags in the room and I went over to his staff office where he
was going to see me. He came right in from the golf course, I still remember
he was wearing white socks, kaki pants, and a light blue Munsingwear golf
shirt with a little Munsingwear penguin above the left shirt pocket, and he was
flustered, he thought he had played very poorly, he was cranky about that, but
he was very nice. He was always gracious to me, and we were talking – it
wasn’t even an interview. I took some notes, but I was just trying to catch up
– what have I missed, what’s going on? He was very solicitous. He said we
were worried about you, we heard the pregnancy was very difficult and glad
you’re okay. Typically gracious.
So we were talking and it was just a kind of a make me feel better that I was back in the game. It was the best game in town at the time. So I get up to go and he said, “Put your notebook away, I want to show you something.” And he showed me a column written in the *New York Times* a couple days before by William Safire, one of Nixon’s real loyalists. And I think the headline upset him more than anything else. The headline was *Et Tu Gerry?* Misspelling his last name – spelled it with a G not a J. And by coincidence, I had put together a reading file to read on the airplane coming out and that was one of the stories that I had missed because of the birth of my first child. And I had just read it on the airplane a few hours before. He said, “Have you seen this?” And I said, “Yes, I just read it.” He said, “What do you make of this?” I didn’t want to go down that road, so I tried to duck and I said, “Well, the first thing I noticed was they misspelled your name.” He said, “I want to know what you think about this. Why did Safire do this?”

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

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

**DeFrank:** Well, a vice president who has a good chance of being president – I just think he wasn’t thinking clearly. And he was by himself, he probably had a martini – this was on an airplane. So he was just speculating, but it was just poor judgment. He said, “Why has he done this?” He said, “Bill Safire knows that
I’ve been damned loyal to Dick Nixon. I’ve gone out of my way to be loyal to Dick Nixon.” He kept calling him Dick Nixon. And he said, “Why would he do that? I want to know what you think, why did he do this?” It’s not my job to give advice or opinions to people I cover. It’s usually not a good idea, but he was really leaning on me and he was really agitated. It really struck at his core because he thought he was an extremely loyal guy, and for somebody to suggest in the New York Times that he had behaved poorly really got to his own sense of self. And he was really agitated.

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

He quickly recovered and recognized the enormity of what he had done, and he came around the table, and he said, “You didn’t hear that.” And I, without thinking said, “But I did.” And I think he took from that, I think he inferred from that that I was going to use this. When, in fact, what he should have inferred from that was that I was scared out of my mind. I was twenty-eight years old, still a journeyman reporter, and the vice president of the United States had handed me the biggest story of my young career. So I knew what I had there, but I was just scared to death, because I also knew that Gerald Ford
was my meal ticket to the White House, which I still report on thirty-seven
years later. More than that – forty-some – whatever, I’m still covering the
White House most days of the week. And so I can remember saying to
myself, this is great, this guy is basically threatening me – he’s basically
saying if you print this, you’re mud. You’re done for. And, of course, I was
very ambitious as well, and that made me very nervous. But basically, it was
an imposing guy. He had about eight inches on me and he was towering over
me.

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

Now, today I kick myself. Today I say I should have negotiated, I should have
been able to work out some arrangement where I could have used something
from it, not saying that it had come from him. Some formulation like, some of
President Ford’s closest confidents, are increasingly believing that the end
game is coming, or something like that. But I was so relieved to get out of this
bind that I just unconditionally surrendered. And I said, “Okay.” He stuck his
hand out, we shook hands, and we didn’t mention that incident again for years
– like maybe fourteen years, something like that. We walk out – the other
thing I should have mentioned is his press secretary, Paul Miltich, had gone
out to take a call and had fallen asleep on a sofa in an adjoining room. So it
was one of those – everything aligned – there was no handler to say uhhhh,
let’s don’t go down that road. It was just the two of us. He liked me, he
trusted me, and he was really irritated about this column and he knew I had
just come in from Washington, so he was wanting to see what the mood from Washington was. We walked out the door and it was like it never happened. “Nice to see you, Tom. I’m glad your wife is doing okay. I’m glad the baby is doing okay.” All these things he said before, “Coming with us to Monterey tomorrow?” Just like it never happened.

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

Smith: He had amazing stamina.

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

One of the things he said was, that he was concerned about the fact that as the Watergate crisis continued while he was still defending Nixon, he was
concerned that the discord and the chaos, which was not his word, but just the
disruption to orderly process of government, could at some point begin to take
a toll on America’s ability to conduct successful foreign policy. That
diplomats and foreign ministers and people in other capitals around the whole
would begin to wonder what was going on. And that concerned him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And for somebody like Bush ’41, who was so astute, it showed a surprising naiveté about the realities of journalism, but in this case, just political realities. That’s the way it happens. And so, over the years there has been a wariness that has grown. I suspect, and I don’t think it has anything to do with
me, but I suspect, and know reporters are not going to have the kind of access
to a future president or vice president that I was very fortunate to have with
Gerald Ford. The press secretariat now is designed to keep the boss out of
trouble. The press secretary in the modern presidency and the modern
Washington political culture – the press secretary is somebody whose job it is
to keep problems from happening. The press secretary is no longer a
facilitator; he or she is a roadblock.

Smith: Not even an honest broker.

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

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

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

Smith: Was it a good idea?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Smith: Was he in denial for a long time?

DeFrank: He was. I think he was.

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

DeFrank: I think he did feel a certain element of guilt. He was gone while bad things were happening to her. And, of course, the breast cancer, I think, exacerbated his feelings of guilt about being gone, but the good news there was that they were in the White House and she had the best medical care she could have gotten anywhere. But I think the mastectomy fueled his sense of guilt that he was AWOL for her and I think it did bug him. And I think that’s one of the reasons why he quit drinking. He said to me once, years later, he said, “Well, it just wasn’t any fun drinking by myself, so I stopped.” But I also think it was more of a principle decision on his part, too. She couldn’t drink, and he wasn’t going to aid and abet. I think part of him said, I probably had something to do with this because I was never there and I’m not going to repeat my mistake a second time.
Smith: Today we take it for granted, but thirty-five years ago the notion that the First Lady of the United States had breast cancer – the word breast was never mentioned on television. It really does seem like things have evolved in terms of public awareness.

DeFrank: Well, obituaries would say things like died after a lengthy illness. And now in obituaries you have to have a reason not to have the cause of death listed. But everything was so much more in code in those days, and for a First Family or First Lady, even more so. It’s hard to believe how primitive by contemporary standards discussion about things like that were. It was shocking, and it was shocking because it was just not spoken about. And I give Betty Ford a great deal of credit for wanting to go public – making sure that people knew about it and knew about treatment and early detection and all of that. I think she provided a great national public service.

Smith: There is a school of thought that says she enjoyed the White House.

DeFrank: Oh, she did. She loved the White House. There is a famous David Kennerly picture of her dancing in bare feet on the Cabinet Room table. She loved the White House. For the first time in her life she had help. She had people.

Smith: She had help and she had a stage.

DeFrank: Yes, exactly.

Smith: She had been a performer. And you often wonder – again – you could never crawl inside a marriage, but at what point did resentment fester that he was off making a name for himself, and she…

DeFrank: was wrapping bandages with the Senate ladies for the Red Cross. But that all changed because the White House, as you say, was a stage for her. For the first time in her life, she didn’t have to worry about carpooling the kids or cooking tuna noodle casserole, or being out of his liverwurst for his
sandwiches – which she hated for him to be eating. Especially after he left the White House.

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

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

My enduring memory of the summer of ’74 is going by the White House, in and out day after day after day, early morning, middle of the day, late at night, and you’d hear the horns honking all day long. And I often wondered whether Nixon could hear that because it was a cacophony of horns being tooted. And I always like to say that on August 8, 1974, the honking stopped.
And I think that was part of Ford’s mission. He thought it was time – not only to bind up the political wounds – but just to bind up the wounds of a nation that was angry at itself over Vietnam, over Watergate, over the pardon, over lots of things. I’ve often said, in this superheated partisan atmosphere of today, where’s Jerry Ford when we really need him? Because we really need that kind of humanity. We really need that kind of personality. I think he would be able to make all of this better. So I think he saw this healing mission in a grander context than just merely winding up the Nixon wounds.

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

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

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

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

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

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

DeFrank: Well, Ford was much more in the Arthur Vandenberg school about foreign policy stopping at the water’s edge. He said a zillion times, “I think people can disagree without being disagreeable.” That was part of his philosophy. There was a time, I think in the ‘70s, you didn’t always have to have a clear a winner and a clear loser. There was a middle ground. There was less polarization. There is just incredible polarization in this town right now. And even though both sides behave a little bit better right now, it is still very polarized.
Smith: Isn’t it possible that one of the factors that created this, in some ways artificial, consensus was the Cold War? For forty years the number one priority, enough to make people at critical junctures forget their purely partisan identification, was staying alive.

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

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

DeFrank: Right.

Smith: Which is what it’s all about.

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

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

DeFrank: Fourteen years plus.
Smith: Okay. So you were not around when the famous headline…?

DeFrank: No, I was at the National Press Club that day when he gave that speech, but I was not here.

Smith: In the course of the Rockefeller research… a lot of Ford’s speeches involved tug of war between competing speechwriting teams or philosophical arguments, or whatever. That one clearly did. Bill Seidman told me how his camp, which included the vice president, and Bob Hartmann, thought they had written the last draft. And, to their astonishment, the Bill Simon/Alan Greenspan camp got their fingerprints on the final draft. And you wonder how much of this was defensive, with the Reagan challenge looming – you want to throw something to the right. And how much of it was Ford’s orthodox economics - if we bail out New York, what precedent does it set?

DeFrank: It had to be both. But he was very adamant. I did a long interview with him about that years after he left office – about New York – after I came to the Daily News. I knew that was a story I’d be able to print for this paper some day. And he just basically said the same thing you just said. If we let New York off the hook, the unions will go crazy, it will never be able to fix New York and we’ll have to do it again in Boston or Philadelphia, or someplace else. And we had to draw the line someplace.

Smith: Hugh Carey told me once – he may have just been politic - but he said, “I never thought Jerry Ford got the credit he deserved because of his tough love approach to New York, without which no change would have been possible.”

DeFrank: Well, that was Ford’s point. He always said that they paid back those loans, and it worked out. And it wouldn’t have worked out if I hadn’t beaten them up. So he felt very proud about that and he didn’t like the drop dead cover. He said to me about the headline, he said it should have been “I Saved New York.”
Smith: We didn’t know that at the time.

DeFrank: No.

Smith: Do you think he grew into the presidency?

DeFrank: He did.

Smith: Did he master the job?

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

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

DeFrank: No.

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

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

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

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

DeFrank: Often times.

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

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

Smith: Since you saw so much of him after he left office, I’d be interested in your views on this. I mentioned in the eulogy the cliché that we get more conservative as we have more to conserve, or nostalgia takes over, or whatever – we get more cautious. And Ford certainly remained the most orthodox of fiscal conservatives. I suspect he was horrified at the deficits. That said, in many other ways, he seemed almost marooned in his party long before he died. And it wasn’t just abortion – gay rights – things that you don’t
associate with a conservative Republican president. Granted, conservatism itself is being redefined. But I wondered whether Mrs. Ford was an influence on this, plus the experience of going through the intervention with her and then building the Betty Ford Center; being part of that project, and seeing good, decent people – friends, corporate executives, who had a weakness, or had a problem – whether it all came together and sort of pushed the compassion button. He seemed to become more open.

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

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

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

Smith: Was it awkward for him, having so many of his people – Paul O’Neill, of course, Cheney, Rumsfeld – in the second Bush Administration. One senses
on the personal level there was never any diminution of his regard or respect or affection. But you just wonder if he felt any degree of awkwardness. You talked about being liberated, in some ways, having them there was the opposite of liberating him to speak out.

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

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

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

Smith: I was wearing two hats – I was with ABC the first part of the week and then with the family the second half – and as an outsider parachuted into the
network operation it was fascinating to watch this reaction, particularly among younger journalists, who weren’t around during the Ford presidency.

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

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

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

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

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

Smith: People have tended to forget…Obama came in facing a terribly difficult situation, but at least he had the legitimacy of being elected. Look at what was on Ford’s plate when he was pitch forked into this office, for which he hadn’t
really been able to do a transition, whatever he might have thought privately. Did there hang over the Ford presidency this question of legitimacy?

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

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

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

Kauper: Almost by indirection. I actually was appointed in the Justice Department by Richard Nixon.

Smith: At what stage of the Nixon administration?

Kauper: Well, I was in the Nixon administration twice. The first time it was not a presidential appointment, I was one rank below that in the office of Legal Counsel at Justice. So I was there, really, at almost the beginning – 1969. And in the office of Legal Counsel I was giving legal advice to the White House, which meant I was dealing with people like Haldeman and Erlichman.

Smith: Let me ask you, is there something we don’t know about John Mitchell that we should know?

Kauper: I don’t know what you know. My impression, he was a very smart, very able guy, who had, I thought, a very good sense of the role of the Attorney General. Actually I had more dealings with people in the White House than I did with Mitchell, but he had a very good notion of what he was supposed to do vis-a-vis the Justice Department. He knew he was the buffer between the department and the White House, and he was really quite good at that. Now, he did play a political role that is part of what got him in trouble.

But I always found him very supportive, always up to date on things. I had one wonderful episode with him when we were asked to give an opinion on a piece of legislation that was pending, that would have allowed the changes in a number of what we thought were statutory rules, by a process that did not involve the President. It would simply go into effect if the Congress didn’t act, and there was no role for the President. And so we had put out an opinion this was clearly unconstitutional. And I got summoned to Mitchell’s office. He said, “Hey, I just had a call from the Chief Justice and who was this
whipper-snapper who was claiming his bill was unconstitutional?” And Mitchell heard me out. He hadn’t seen the thing before it went out and he picked up the phone and called Chief Justice Berger while I was sitting there and said, “Warren, your bill is unconstitutional. We’re not going to support this.” So in that sense, he had done his homework, he knew what it was about. He was a pretty good administrator.

Smith: This was also the time, obviously, when Nixon was trying to remake the Court.

Kauper: Oh, yes.

Smith: And you had the Haynesworth and the Carswell episodes.

Kauper: Yes, I worked on the first one of those.

Smith: And it’s interesting how history does tend to sort things out. My sense is that in retrospect a consensus has formed that Haynesworth was probably badly treated, and that he would have been a perfectly adequate, if not distinguished, member of the Court.

Kauper: I believe that’s true.

Smith: Whereas Carswell was…

Kauper: Carswell would have been a disaster. In fact, I told my boss - the assistant attorney general happened to be Bill Rehnquist - that I wouldn’t work on the Carswell appointment. I just thought that was – it was almost like it was spite.

Smith: Carrying the southern strategy to the extreme.

Kauper: And he just didn’t have the credentials, he didn’t have the temperament and it would have been a very bad appointment, I think.

Smith: Would Mildred Lily or Hershel Friday have been any more distinguished?

Kauper: Probably not. But I remember when I left the office of Legal Counsel - I was there two years; I was on leave from the law school here - and I went in to see Rehnquist and said I was going back to Michigan, as I had told him I probably would do after two years. I said I don’t want to be involved with the people I
know at the White House during the upcoming election. So, in some ways, I left for the right reason. But I also sent a memo to the White House saying if you were looking for somebody to put on the Court, you ought to think about Bill Rehnquist.

Smith: Did you really?

Kauper: Yeah.

Smith: Did you discuss that with him?

Kauper: No. No, I didn’t.

Smith: What was it that made you see in him a potential court appointment?

Kauper: He was a quite remarkable character. He could be quite partisan sometimes, but not in that role. And he was working with a staff of lawyers, probably at that time about twenty lawyers. I would say 80% of them were Democrats. They absolutely adored working for him. He heard everybody out. He never bypassed anybody’s opinion. He was just a warm kind of personality, and I think you saw that when he went on the Supreme Court, and his ability to work with other people with very different views. It didn’t surprise me at all.

Smith: You may have already just answered my question; you made reference to the people you knew at the White House, at least expediting your decision to come back to Michigan. Were you surprised by what eventually transpired?

Kauper: No. I’ll tell you a story about that. I actually was back in Washington by the time of the election. My appointment as the assistant attorney general in the anti-trust division actually became effective in July of that year. So I was actually there for the election and I had come down ahead of time to work a little bit with the fellow who was going out of the office before my appointment actually became effective. I had to come back to Ann Arbor for my sister’s wedding. It was on June 17, 1972. And I got up the next morning and the local paper had a little story about that long that there had been a break in at the Watergate complex. And my wife has never forgotten, I turned around and said, “There’s going to be a lot more to that than might be apparent.”
Smith: It’s interesting - you’re reaction, I remember talking to Pat Buchanan. I said, “Do you remember where you were when you read…?” And he said, “Oh, I didn’t read about it; I heard about it. And then I got a call,” and he said, “My first reaction was, that’s got to be our guys.” Because he said we were routinely getting material from inside the Muskie campaign.

Kauper: Just having been around those people - and it’s not that they weren’t smart - but it was a very different experience for me and I just wasn’t quite sure where they were going.

Smith: I assume we’re talking about more than Haldeman and Erlichman – the Colsons and the Magruders and those folks?

Kauper: I worked with them, too. I worked with one younger fellow who got swept up in the whole thing, ended up going to prison – Egil Krogh, who was a really good guy. It was really unfortunate.

Smith: Do you have a theory? Are there things we don’t know about Watergate?

Kauper: I don’t know that there are any of the facts of Watergate that we don’t know.

Smith: For example, who ordered the break in?

Kauper: Well, I don’t have any very good sense of that. I don’t think we ever will know that.

Smith: You think it might have been something Mitchell took to the grave with him?

Kauper: It’s possible.

Smith: There is a theory that Haldeman played a vital role in knowing instinctively when to take seriously Nixon’s rants or off the wall comments, or directives to ‘get’ someone. And a Colson or a Magruder, someone lacking that knowledge, sophistication or just eager to curry favor, might have passed along something.

Kauper: That’s certainly possible, but I was not at a level where I was going to have any clear notion of it. All I know is what everyone else knows from that point
on. But, by the time the whole thing really started to break, I was back at the Justice Department.

Smith: Was Saxbe then attorney general?

Kauper: Oh, I went through an amazing array of attorneys general.

Smith: Oh, because Richardson…

Kauper: I started with Mitchell, then Kleindienst, then Richardson, Bob Bork as the acting attorney general, William Saxbe and…

Smith: The Saturday Night Massacre?

Kauper: Oh, I sure was.

Smith: What was the atmosphere around the place?

Kauper: Well, I don’t even know the words to describe it. It was an evening I will never forget. We were at home, there was a local television station ran a program called Agronsky and Company, and we were expecting some company for a quiet evening. We had been trying to get together for some time; they were coming at 7:30. The show was on at 7:00, and somebody just walked right out across the camera and handed Agronsky a note and he read off the note that the attorney general had been fired, that the deputy attorney general had either been fired or resigned soon enough to not be fired, and that Bob Bork had fired the special prosecutor. And it began a very long evening, to say the least. I came out of that evening really as – I didn’t have the title, but I was trying to run the deputy attorney general’s office as well as the anti-trust division.

Smith: Thirty five years later there is still debate over exactly what Richardson’s role was and what the White House thought it had in terms of an understanding with Richardson.

Kauper: Elliott Richardson was a consummate politician. I’ve never known how much he actually knew in advance of what happened that Saturday night, but knowing him, it would have been clear that he was going to come out clean. He was going to act so that he came out clean. Bob Bork never forgave him.
Bork thought that he had been set up, that he had not been kept informed of anything that was going on. When he got the word initially, he was writing a letter to a high school student about some values in the Constitution, and suddenly this order comes. So I was on the phone with him probably within twenty minutes after it happened. And then the evening went on.

Smith: And there was never any question about Ruckelshaus also simultaneously resigning, which left Bork to do the dirty work?

Kauper: Yeah, he was left in charge of something he had not been privy to at all; that had been going on with the special prosecutor, and made the decision to go ahead and fire him. I think what would have happened in the Justice Department had he not, would have just been dreadful. There was no established order of succession among the assistant attorneys general. So if Bork had said no, they would have started down the list. There was one who would have probably done it with a certain degree of glee, but I’m not sure the White House knew that. And they could have wiped out the whole group of assistant attorneys general, too. All but one, if Bork had said no, all but one would have also said no.

Smith: Take it for whatever it’s worth, but my sense is that Al Haig went to his grave believing that he was double crossed; that he thought he had an understanding with Richardson and, for whatever reason, it blew up.

Kauper: It would not surprise me at all. So it was an interesting evening. I gave a speech that next Friday at an anti-trust institute in Boston. I had called the entire top career staff of the division in for a meeting on Sunday morning after the Saturday Night Massacre, because they clearly wanted to know what I was going to do, and made it abundantly clear that if I resigned, they would all do the same. And I finally decided no, I wasn’t going to do that, but I used the speech, part of it, to be very critical of the White House. I think it was the old Washington Star ran a column saying the President must be really weak because he didn’t do anything to this guy who went up to Boston and was very critical. And as you know, he was very weak at that point.
Smith: Indeed, you could argue his selection of Gerald Ford testified to his weakness. We talked with Jerry Jones, who at that point was reorganizing the personnel office for Haldeman. This would be the spring of ’73, and he [Jones] gets a call one day from Haldeman wanting to know how many staffers worked for the vice president. He does some mental math and says about fifty. And he [Haldeman] said, “Okay, I want undated signed letters of resignation from all of them.” Which raises two intriguing theories; one is that it’s a hangover of the post-’72 Nixon wanting everyone’s resignation; but the second, more intriguing is that they knew well in advance of the Wall Street Journal story, that appeared in August - that Agnew could have some problems. Is it logical to assume that the White House would be aware of an investigation going on in Maryland?

Kauper: I think so. I think they would have known. I don’t know for sure, but I think the odds are they would have known.

Smith: Do you think Richardson did the right thing on the Agnew resignation? I assume he was point man for the notion that resignation was sufficient punishment.

Kauper: Yeah, I think he probably did. I always get very uncomfortable with any notion you’re going to prosecute people at that level. I think it does not do the country any good in the long run.

Smith: Was there a point in all of this where, at least internally, people began to think the unthinkable – that the President might be next?

Kauper: Yeah, sure. I don’t know that I can put a time on it, specifically, but there was a real sense of inevitability that began to develop – that this just couldn’t go on.

Smith: Presumably the tapes were a significant contributing factor to that?

Kauper: They were. Sure.

Smith: Were you surprised when their existence was revealed?
Kauper: Not entirely, no. It almost seemed to me like something you’d expect. I don’t know that you’d expect everything to be taped, but the notion of taping, it didn’t come as a big surprise.

Smith: What about the argument, which is kind of ironic in a number of ways, the argument that politically what hurt Nixon was less the fact that he taped, than the language that people heard on the tapes?

Kauper: I think that’s true. I think the language really hurt, and it revealed a Nixon that I think people hadn’t been particularly aware of. I think those of us who were around were aware of some of it, but not to the degree it showed on the tapes. I was in and out of the White House a lot when I was in the office of Legal Counsel, and some of the staff would pass some of that on.

Smith: Really?

Kauper: Although, as you know, Nixon didn’t see a lot of the staff very often. It was a very tight White House, almost uncomfortably so. In fact, I’ll take the word almost out of it. We’d send something over, a legal opinion over, and we never knew in what form it finally got up the ladder. Everything would get shorter and shorter and shorter. It never was very clear who he was talking to about things – and some of them were problematic, so you’d expect he’d be talking to somebody.

Smith: I only heard President Ford speak disparagingly of two people, and the worst thing he could say was, “He’s a bad man.” That’s the ultimate epithet that he could come up with. One was Gordon Liddy.

Kauper: Now selling gold.

Smith: And the other was John Dean.

Kauper: Yeah. I think I would not disagree with either of those. John was a very competent lawyer, but you remember the title of his book, which was Blind Ambition. He at least characterized himself well. There was a lot of bad feeling about Dean. Liddy I never had much to do with. But I can imagine Ford’s reaction.
Smith: I don’t know whether it was naiveté, but there were times where you sort of wondered, for someone who had been around Washington for twenty-five years, he was genuinely shocked that Nixon lied to him.

Kauper: Oh, I’m sure that’s true. Yeah.

Smith: And he was equally shocked by the language on the tapes. And the third thing almost more viscerally than the first two - he was deeply offended that Nixon would send his own daughter out to, in effect, perpetuate the lie.

Kauper: Yeah. Well, there was so much that went on that was so strange during that whole time. You asked me when we began this, you said, “When did I first encounter Ford?” I didn’t really know Ford in Michigan at all. He just got sort of stuck with me. I was heading the anti-trust division, he didn’t come in and just sweep things clean. So essentially, I was a holdover.

Smith: That raises a larger question. Rumsfeld urged him to clean house early. To be ruthless. And it does raise a question of whether you can be too nice as president. On the other hand, I think it’s fair to say he didn’t want to tar the vast majority of Nixon appointees who were innocent. Two, he valued continuity, just from a practical standpoint. Plus there were a lot of very competent people in the Nixon administration. But he resisted the political advice to symbolically start over.

Kauper: He also had the history that Nixon had sort of tried to clean house. Nixon demanded resignations right after his second election that went way down the departments. I had to call for the resignation of a lot of people that were not protected by civil service, who were GS16, 17, 18.

Smith: And what did that do for morale?

Kauper: It was terrible, obviously. And I finally said, “You know, if we hold out, if I don’t get those resignations, it’s really going to come down on the division across the board.” And I believed that. We had a new deputy attorney general who would have carried it out without any difficulty. So they all complied and one of the great things that Kleindienst did, the night that he was fired, he sent back each of those resignations with a personal note. And Kleindienst was an
interesting guy. He’s been kind of vilified over time. I thought in many ways he was the best attorney general I served under. He got the short end of the stick in a number of ways. But that was a very typical act.

Smith: What was the charge? What was the allegation against Kleindienst?

Kauper: Well, it went back to the AT&T cases. It was very interesting. The belief was that he was going to be charged with perjury before Congress because he had indicated that there had been no contact between the White House and the Justice Department about the settlement of those cases. Whereas in fact, there was, at least as far as I know, there was. He actually was charged, as I recall, with contempt of Congress. He called me the night he pleaded guilty to that charge, and I said to him, I said, “Dick, you can’t plead guilty to that charge. You’re not guilty of contempt of Congress.” That was a statute I’d spent some time with when I was a Supreme Court law clerk, because of a couple cases we’d had. I said, “You are pleading to a false charge.” And he said, “I have to. If I am charged with perjury, and if they were to get a conviction, I’d lose my license and that would be a felony. I can’t do that.” The violation of the contempt of Congress statute, and I still even remember the number, it’s 2USC1992, as a misdemeanor. So he felt he was just in a terrible box, but what he was actually charged with went back to the AT&T settlements – anti-trust cases.

Smith: Just to get it on the record, you said you clerked at the Court; who did you clerk for?

Kauper: Potter Stewart.

Smith: Did you enjoy the experience?

Kauper: Oh, that was a great experience. I clerked with him for two years. He staggered his clerks, so he brought one new in each two years, and that was a great, great experience. He was a wonderful guy to work for. Sometimes he wrote a little too well. He had a great knack for hiding an issue just by turning a phrase. I know he always worried that one of his phrases was going to end up on his tombstone. The line which said, “He couldn’t define pornography,
but knew it when he saw it.” But he did that. He had that ability to sometimes cover things up a little bit.

Smith: Use the vernacular.

Kauper: He was a terrific writer. He didn’t ask his clerks to do drafts of anything. Everything he wrote, he wrote himself. He was just a very personable guy to work for and also an extremely good judge. So that was a good experience, too.

Smith: So Ford becomes president. Where are you on the morning of August 9th?

Kauper: You know, I don’t even remember that. I was in the office, but I don’t remember anything particular about it.

Smith: One of the things that we’ve been told, gets to this larger issue of meshing disparate cultures. After the swearing in there was a receiving line and then a reception in the State Dining Room. And several people who were there have observed you could watch the Nixon people peel away – which under the circumstances is understandable. But it raises the question of how successful or otherwise was this meshing of a holdover culture, with the Ford people from the Hill, with some additional people from outside?

Kauper: Well, the anti-trust division was kind of immune from the whole meshing process. After the AT&T case the White House was terrified to admit that they even knew who headed the anti-trust division. I mean, I can remember that long atrium in the Kennedy Center. We were there for a concert shortly after I came down to head the anti-trust division, and that long corridor – it was during intermission – and here was Peter Flanagan coming down from the other way. Now, I had done a lot of work with Flanagan and this, of course, was still during the Nixon time. He just turned his head and he wouldn’t even look at me. I mean, they were scared to death, I think, of any thought of a contact with the anti-trust division. So, I hadn’t had much to do in that time with the White House at all. So the meshing problem wasn’t terribly acute.

Smith: What’s your estimate of Bill Saxbe as an attorney general?
Kauper: Oh.

Smith: He sounds like a bit of a character.

Kauper: He was a bit of a character, there’s no question about that. And he was given to very quick decision making. I’m not sure why that’s so. I’m not sure whether it was just a short attention span, or what it was. But I had several things with him where decisions were made very quickly, and perhaps not always correctly. I knew that he basically sent us out to do our thing, and he backed us up. He was the attorney general when we filed the case to break up AT&T, which was a day to remember because it was Saxbe who just stunned us that day. We were not planning to file the case that day. He forced our hand.

Smith: Is Nixon still in the White House?

Kauper: No, Ford is in the White House. And I’ve never been altogether clear what Ford knew about that case in advance. I asked the archivist here to get me any documents from that day about the case. And as it happened Phil Areda was one of the counsels to the President. Phil Areda was an anti-trust professor at Harvard. I’d know him for years.

Smith: And he fell afoul of Nelson Rockefeller?

Kauper: Yes. But we found in the archives out here a couple of memos from Phil to the President which would indicate to me that Ford knew absolutely nothing and that Saxbe had not briefed the White House at all. I am quite confident that Elliott Richardson had briefed Nixon, but that was one of those pieces of information I think that just died. So we had this, what I’m sure was a bit of a shock, here comes this lawsuit to break up the nation’s telephone company. And Saxbe – I don’t know what he was thinking that day – I haven’t been able to sort it out. I had set up a meeting with AT&T’s counsel for them to present their views to Saxbe, and I’d sent a note up to him. Saxbe had the whole fact memo we had done and the complaint, which were ready to go. But it was normal in a situation like that that the counsel for the company would ask to meet with the attorney general before any final decision was made. And so I set it up. I sent him a memo saying they are coming in, this is
just to hear them out. And he walked into the big conference room in the attorney general’s office and said, “Gentlemen, I want you to know we are going to file suit to break up AT&T.” And I mean he had just given away the biggest piece of insider information probably ever given out. And moreover, it was clear he’d made up his mind before he ever even heard them. It was a very embarrassing moment for me because I had told them he would hear them out. We had to immediately deal with the SEC, trading was suspended of AT&T stock.

Smith: Now, was this very early in the Ford presidency?

Kauper: This was in November of ’74.

Smith: Okay.

Kauper: I thought to myself at the beginning, boy, how could he have done something that dumb? What was going through his mind? And then the more I thought about it, I thought, boy, he is one shrewd customer. He knew that the President was in Kyoto; not reachable; he was getting on a commercial flight – the attorney general was getting on a commercial flight – to go somewhere, I don’t remember where. He was not reachable. And now the wheels were in motion. And I, to this day, think maybe he thought he could avoid any interference by just directing us to go ahead.

Smith: It’s a pretty breathtaking assumption.

Kauper: Well, I don’t know. I may have read that all wrong.

Smith: But what made him feel so strongly that this was necessary?

Kauper: I learned much later a bit more about his background when he was the attorney general in Ohio. And he had built a kind of aversion, I think, to the telephone company.

Smith: Really?

Kauper: I don’t know that for sure, but there are hints of that from time to time. He may have just thought it was the right thing to do - to back up the anti-trust
division. I just don’t know. But the case got filed that afternoon. It was off and running.

Smith: What kind of contacts did you have [with the White House], either personal or in policy terms during the Ford administration?

Kauper: We didn’t have much contact coming out of the Nixon administration. There was a group called the Economic Policy Board, which met almost every morning over in the Roosevelt Room.

Smith: With Bill Seidman.

Kauper: Bill Seidman. Simon usually presided over the meetings. We were by that time beginning to be into the whole deregulation movement. And our office was playing a good sized role in that.

Smith: By the way, I’ve been told from someone in the process, the President didn’t like the term deregulation. Regulatory reform?

Kauper: Yes.

Smith: Which is actually smart.

Kauper: The Nixon people would talk about deregulation sometimes. But the airline thing was really just getting underway. And so because we were involved in that, I would be invited over to those meetings once in a while, because the administration as a whole was trying to get a position fixed. And in Nixon’s day, you’d go over there and you’d sit in the anteroom of the Roosevelt Room, and when your item was on the agenda, you would be summoned in. I believe it was within one week after Ford became president, that if you had something, if it was an Economic Policy Board group – I’m not sure it had the same name, but it continued - and the environment was 180 degrees different. You’d go over, you were entitled to speak on anything that was on the agenda, and you were in there for the whole meeting. It was just a 180 degree flip. And it was the difference between being closed and open. And to me it was the most obvious manifestation of that.

Smith: Did the President sit in on any of these?
Kauper: No.

Smith: I remember talking with Bill on a number of occasions. One sensed that there were two camps; there was Greenspan and Simon and the purists, quasi-libertarians. It really came to the fore in the New York City aid crisis. And then you had Seidman and the Vice President as the pragmatists or moderates or whatever you want to call them.

Kauper: I think that’s probably a fair statement. And you kind of sensed that there were quite different philosophies when you were in a meeting like that.

Smith: But regulatory reform seems to have been universally embraced.

Kauper: Yes, and I think there might have been some difference in how you went about it. But I think there was a commitment, certainly in the Ford administration, to going ahead with the airline stuff, in particular.

Smith: And what prompted the movement at that time?

Kauper: I don’t even know that I can answer that. In the Nixon years there was this very strong sentiment that business was just over regulated. And at some point they began to focus on not just removing day to day regulation, but of doing things something more basic than that. The airline thing had been coming along for some time because the airlines kept up this series of agreements, with the approval of the Civil Aeronautics Board, on fares and capacity and so on. And it was very easy to criticize that. So I’m not surprised that became almost the starting point. But I’m not sure of the point at which it actually crystallized. I had the feeling when Ford came in that that commitment was made. That was nothing that we were re-examining. We just went on ahead.

Smith: I’ve often thought about it, even talked about it a little bit in the eulogy - the popular notion is to see the Ford presidency as a coda to the Nixon years. Whereas, I think in many ways, it’s actually a break. It foreshadows more than it recapitulates. And the classic example is deregulation.

Kauper: Oh, yeah. I agree with that. I think treating it as a coda to the Nixon administration is both inaccurate and unfair to Ford. I never sensed it that way.
Smith: Were there discussions in the hallways or around the water coolers or whatever, before the pardon, about the possibility?

Kauper: Yes. I think that possibility really surfaced for conversation within the Justice Department probably the day after Ford was sworn in. That was always a possibility. And I think the department lawyers were like everybody else, they were divided. There certainly were some who really wanted a full-scale prosecution. Others who I think thought that would be very unwise. It probably mirrors the public at large. But, yes, those were common discussions. What was going to happen next? What was going to happen to Nixon?

Smith: We talked to Mel Laird. It will come as no surprise, Mel Laird loves Ford, but nevertheless, resents the fact that he didn’t wait and do what Laird envisioned him doing. Laird thought he could bring a bipartisan delegation from the Hill to petition the President to pardon Nixon. The problem that I have with that scenario is, under the intense political climate of that time, it’s hard to imagine how any trial balloon could have risen above the trees without being shot down. You can war game it all sorts of ways, but it’s difficult to see, if you’re going to do the pardon, it’s difficult to see how you “prepare” the country under that environment.

Kauper: I can’t imagine that. I just can’t imagine that. Ford so clearly, to me, did the right thing. It was his decision. He wasn’t urged by people to do it. He took responsibility for it, and certainly in terms of his long run legacy, he’s come out very well for it.

Smith: What was the reaction in the department?

Kauper: Well, there were certainly some that I think viewed it as a kind of intrusion into the prosecutorial process. I’m trying to think exactly when the pardon occurred.

Smith: September 8th.

Kauper: See, I was out of the department by then. I knew what was going on at the department, I hadn’t lost my contacts, but I’d come back here to Michigan at
the beginning of September. So the pardon actually, technically took place
after I had left. But I know that there were some, because I’ve talked to a
number of people about it; people who saw it just as another political
intrusion into the prosecutorial process. Lawyers are very sensitive to that. So
there were going to be some who would see it that way. But I think the
majority of people that I’ve talked to, admittedly most of them are not people
from the criminal division, but I think most of them felt that it was handled
well.

Smith: You came back here in September. Did you have any later involvement?

Kauper: No. I discovered, as many people do, when you’re out, you’re out. And
contacts tend to dry up after a while. Now, I was in and out of the department
a fair amount, just because I was working at some anti-trust matters as a
consultant from time to time. And I still know a lot of the people down there.

Smith: I guess you never worked for him, but would you agree that Ed Levi…

Kauper: Oh, I did work for Ed Levi.

Smith: You did?

Kauper: Oh, yeah. I have a wonderful story about Ed Levi.

Smith: Tell us about Ed Levi.

Kauper: I first met Ed Levi when I was a senior in college and I think at that point he
was the dean of the law school at Chicago. At the last moment – and it must
have been April or May of my senior year – I learned about a scholarship that
was available to go to law school and it was available to people who went to a
“Chicagoland” law school. It was from the money of Colonel McCormick and
he had created this foundation, named the Kirkland Foundation, in honor of
his personal lawyer. And so I applied for it and I went over for an interview. I
walked in and there were, I think, three people, and Ed Levi was one of them
doing the interview. And he had my transcript. I had gotten a B in English I at
the university. It was the only B I got in four years. And Ed looked at me and
he said, “Can you explain to me why you got a B in that course?”
That was back eons ago. He’s named attorney general and now I have to go up for my first meeting with him. I walked into his office and he said, “You never did tell me why you got that B.” Ed was a wonderful guy. He was clearly the smartest of all the AGs I dealt with. And the only times he got me sort of in trouble with some of the staff was, he couldn’t quite let go sometimes of being a law professor, and the result was that once in a while staff wasn’t sure which position they were supposed to take because he would just argue. He’d always take the opposite view. But I really enjoyed working with him.

Smith: There are those who say that there was a downside, that there was a brittleness – not condescension - that would be rude - but a kind of brilliance that went beyond not tolerating fools.

Kauper: Well, he didn’t tolerate fools, that’s for sure. Maybe because I came out of a law professor’s background, too, I didn’t find him the least bit difficult to deal with. I know there were other staff who did, and who did what they thought they had been told to do, only just to be raked over the coals for not doing the right thing. But I’m not sure that’s a bad thing. I thought he was very effective. Unlike a lot of law professors I know, he was quite capable of making decisions. He didn’t hesitate.

Smith: And it was presumably part of his mandate, to de-politicize the department, restore its credibility.

Kauper: And he was always well-prepared. There is a close relationship between the division and the attorney general’s office on a lot of matters. And he was always well-prepared. It didn’t take him very long to be well-prepared, I mean, he was very quick. And he really was a very warm, friendly person. To really appreciate that you had to see him with Kate, his wife. And it was like watching this couple who just played off of each other. And you could spend a whole evening in stitches; they were really very funny people.

Smith: I’ve often thought the Levi appointment is the Ford administration in microcosm. Because it is an unlikely choice, a very distinguished choice, but it also tells you something about Ford’s comfort level with people who were
more obviously, or in a more articulate way, brilliant. Beyond the big egos, he had the Kissingers and all those folks, around whom he was perfectly comfortable. In fact, he was very proud of that appointment.

Kauper: Well, he should have been. It was a wonderful appointment.

Smith: And presumably Levi played some role in the John Paul Stevens selection.

Kauper: I assume so. That was in a part of the division that I wasn’t in anymore.

Smith: I assume around town there must have been chatter about why is Bill Douglas still hanging on?

Kauper: There was that chatter when I was a law clerk. That was a long time before that. Because he was really much more absorbed in writing his nature books than he was in the work of the Court. Which is not surprising. When you think about it, yeah, he was appointed in the late ‘30s, as I recall. I was there in 1961 and ’62. By that time you would have thought about an awful lot of problems that were maybe not directly involved in a given case, but tangential to it. So I think when somebody is around that long, they really already have a fixed view on a lot of issues that technically the Court hasn’t decided yet. But he was very quick, a very smart man and things came very fast to him. His law clerks used to rush in to get into the office on Saturday morning, because if he was assigned an opinion on Friday, he would have written it and sent it to the printer by Saturday.

Smith: He was not the most personable of men.

Kauper: No. Clearly not.

Smith: Now later on I assume you had a lot of contact through the Foundation with President Ford.

Kauper: Yeah, he would always wait until the end of the dinner when the speech was over, and I don’t how many times he would come up to me right at the very end, when most people had left. So yeah, I had contact with him. I think I only had contact with him formally, other than a couple of social things at the White House. While he was President, only once.
Smith: Really?

Kauper: He had signaled a veto on a bill that I had testified in support of, or I testified in support of part of. We had sort of negotiated a deal with Phil Hart that we would support two or three provisions in this one hundred page bill. I testified supporting carrying out that deal. And then Ford signaled a veto. So I got summoned to the White House and we went on for a very long time. It was a long bill. I think we originally had a half hour scheduled and that was extended and then it was extended again. And I just left in awe. I mean, he knew that bill inside out and upside down. I was flabbergasted. But it also said something about Ed Levi because – I don’t remember everybody who was in the room – but I know Levi was there because I went over it with him and Dick Cheney was there and I don’t remember who else might have been there. And we got all the way to the end and Ed Levi hadn’t said a word. So Ford turns to Levi and he says, “Well, Ed, what do you think?” And Levi looks at me and he says, “I don’t agree with a single thing he said.” But he said, “Mr. President, you politically cannot afford to veto this bill.” And as we were going out, I went out behind Ford and then Levi was behind me and Cheney was behind Levi and I heard Cheney lean over to Levi and said, “Ed, you sure have got a hell of a way of supporting your people.”

Smith: Was this discussion almost a debate over the merits of the bill?

Kauper: Yeah, well, I wouldn’t call it a debate. It was just an extended conversation about what the bill was about, whether it was good, bad, or otherwise. In fact, he ranged over into a couple of subjects that weren’t even going to remain part of the bill. And that’s what really surprised me; that he’d gotten into that much of it. And it was a very difficult bill for him to deal with, because this was the Phil Hart memorial bill. Everybody knew Hart was dying of cancer. This was his bill, this was the great anti-trust improvements act that had everything in it but the kitchen sink. And we’d gotten it down to three things; and it was one of the three that somebody had gotten Ford’s ear and that was the issue. But we talked about all the rest of it, too.

Smith: Last thing. How do you think he should be remembered?
Kauper: I find that very hard to put in words. I was always very struck by a colleague of mine a couple of years ago whose father died. A bunch of us had sent him notes and things. He sent around an email and all he said about his father was he was a good and honest man. And I thought, you know, that sort of says it all, doesn’t it? And I think of Ford that way. I never questioned his integrity; he was smarter than people gave him credit for, a lot smarter than people gave him credit for. And serving in that administration as a holdover, the difference was just so dramatic. It got to be fun. It was not in the Nixon years. You knew from the time I took over in the anti-trust division that this trouble was coming and this sense of everybody’s got the wagons around in a circle. And that just disappeared.

Smith: Perfect.
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Smith: First, the obvious question is, when did your paths first cross with Gerald Ford?

Korologos: When I worked on Capitol Hill for Senator Wallace Bennett, I didn’t have any dealings with him, but I knew of him. The Senator was a strong pro-defense senator during the Vietnam days and actually before in the ’60s. I went to Senator Wallace Bennett in 1962 and I can’t remember - what was President Ford at the time?

Smith: Well, at that point he was still just a Congressman from Michigan. I think that was the year, it was ’63 when he took on Charlie Hoeven from Iowa for that number three job in the House leadership.

Korologos: Yes, so I just came across him just reading the Capitol Hill gossip sheets, that’s about all. But then I really came to know him a lot better and more when I went to the White House on April first, 1971. He was in the leadership at the time and he used to come to leadership meetings. I’ll never forget that one picture where it was Mansfield, Ford, Scott, all smoking pipes in the leadership meetings. And they would smoke them right in the meeting and nobody ever said anything. Now, I guess, they’d faint.

We had some dealings with him then and he was a strong supporter and then suddenly Watergate broke out.

Smith: Do you know where you were when you first heard about the break in, or how you first learned about it?

Korologos: I didn’t pay attention to it. I don’t know that it wasn’t a two-bit burglary. It probably was at the beginning, but I have no memory of it. But pretty soon it started getting louder and louder. So it was nothing when it first happened and I can’t tell you the exact time that I thought, “Hm, I wonder what this is.” But then it started getting louder. So I can’t tell you when I first heard.
Smith: Was there a point at which you were beginning to get questions from the Hill, from people like Ford, saying, “My members are wondering what’s going on,” or a kind of restiveness on the part of the troops?

Korologos: There was some restiveness in my office, especially, because Senator Wallace Bennett’s son, Bob Bennett, had bought the Robert R. Mullen Company from Robert R. Mullen, the PR firm that was over on – 17th Street in a fancy office. The Robert R. Mullen Company had PR clients around the world. One of their biggest clients was the CIA. The Mullen Company was a front in its offices around the world for agents to go and be undercover – to show that they didn’t work at the embassy. We had a bunch of those in Belgium when I was ambassador there. If I asked, they could tell me, and I didn’t ever want to know, but they were there. [They] worked at airlines or worked at restaurants and elsewhere.

One of the characters that worked with Robert R. Mullen was Howard Hunt. Howard Hunt was an employee, in effect, of Bob Bennett’s and so we got a little bit into that when Howard Hunt started appearing and Bob Bennett being associates with a CIA agent. So it kind of got bigger and bigger when the Watergate committees and all those started appearing and people started interviewing and started asking questions.

Bob and I used to talk all the time about what’s going on. He came to me with tales of how now they have invented - that bottle cap there on the Coke - a microphone that is that big, and you can put it under a desk and people can hear you talk. And he said that’s probably what they were trying to do. He insisted he didn’t know anything about the break in. I remember during our White House days that Charles Colson was the political genius and guru that Nixon and everybody liked, and he was the savior of all. My assistant at the White House in those days was Wally Johnson who came over from Justice. We only had two. The White House Senate liaison job is a 1.5 person job. Now they’ve got twenty. So I also was a terrible leader because I never gave Wally anything good to do. I took all the good stuff and gave him the dredges. And he still complains about it.
But Wally became close to Colson, and they used to have these round-and-round meetings on Watergate. Once or twice I went over to Wally or Colson or somebody, and I said, “Hey, what the hell is going on here? This is terrible, we’ve got to stop this. What is happening?” And they used to say don’t worry about it.

I remember going home to Utah to campaign for Senator Wallace Bennett, Bob Bennett’s father. I was with the Senator for nine years, and every two years we’d go to Utah and campaign – either for him or the House race or to help the governor or somebody. I was the Library of Congress, in effect, because I had all the data. I used to take huge crates of information about Utah and all the candidates would come to me and say, “What’s this about? What does this mean?” So I had the background, as it were. I’d dig through a file, because somewhere along the way we’d done it before.

And people would always talk about, “What’s this Watergate stuff? What’s going on?” And the thing that drove me, and even I used to tell my wife and neighbors, “Nixon and Mitchell are too smart. They did not have anything to do with this. It was a bunch of rogue guys trying to figure out something.”

The other thing that was funny – I don’t know if it’s funny – when the campaign began - Mitchell came to my office in the White House one morning. He was the attorney general, the closest guy in the world to the president, and he came over to see me! It was before the ’72 election campaign. [He] closed the door. I was shaking, I didn’t even know he knew me. And he came in and he sat down and he said, “You’re one of the few people in the building who has been through political campaigns.” And I had…every two years since ’60, I’d done something in campaigns.

“We want you to come to the Committee to Re-elect, and be the “opposition person.” In other words, we want you to put on a campaign - I suppose we knew it was going to be McGovern that early - like they are going to run against Nixon. Because you know what’s going to come up. So you be the opponent. You be the guy, when we do things, we want you to be the guy – the response person. I want you to be the mock responder.”
I remember saying, “Mr. Mitchell, that’s an honor to have you ask me to do that. Frankly, my strength with the president is my relationship with the Southern Democrats, and the other Democrats on the Hill.” At the time we were in the middle of the Vietnam War, we were in the middle of all kinds of bills and things, which needed Democrats to pass, we only had thirty-five or forty Republicans, whatever the number was. And so I had to go find conservative Democrats from the South, who are all today Republican, and get them to vote for our bills, especially on those Nixon really cared about – which was the war and national security.

You could tell when Nixon didn’t give a damn about things by how fast he used to give the State of the Union address on the domestic issues. [fast, garbled words]. It’s like those fast talkers you hear on the radio, and then he’d get to national security and the Russians and the Chinese, and defense and Vietnam and he’d now slow down [speaking slowly] and emphasize and work on his themes. Somebody else had written that domestic portion and you could tell he didn’t much care.

So, I said, “My strength in helping the president is with the southern and conservative Democrats who give us all their support – the patriots. And if I go to that campaign, I am suddenly tainted as a partisan running against them.” Case in point: I had taken Senator Jim Allen a strong supporter in to see President Nixon. Well, Senator Allen had some Cotton Queen he wanted to bring in. We had Congressional half-hours when we used to schedule members to spend two minutes with the president with their queen or with their whatever.

And so I brought Jim Allen down with somebody, and we did our photograph and Nixon held me back and said, “Tom, just a minute. Jim, Jim, hang on here.” And he looked at me and he said, “Jim Allen is a supporter of ours. Jim, I want to thank you for the support you’ve given me. I know about how you are doing,” and he turned to me and he said, “Now, Korologos, you listen to me. You tell Dole, I don’t want any Republican running against Tim Allen in Alabama. You got that? You understand that? We don’t want anybody taking on Jim Allen, you hear me?” And I said, “Yes, sir. Yes, sir.”
Smith: And that wasn’t just for show?

Korologos: That was not a show. He meant it. So I went back to Dole and sure enough, there wasn’t anybody running against Tim Allen. The guy that would run against him would be a conservative Republican from Alabama rather than a liberal. So Nixon didn’t want Allen hurt. So, I went to Dole and Dole said, “Holy Cow, okay,” or whatever he said.

So the point is, that’s my strength with the president. I didn’t tell Mitchell that story, but that’s what I was alluding to. I said, “I don’t see how I can help the president. I can’t help the president going to the campaign. You’ve got other guys, I’m not much of a – I’ve just been on the fringes of campaigns.” He said, “Well, I understand.” He left and then after he left I got to shaking, and I said, “My gosh, I have turned down John Mitchell. That’s the end of me.”

Wally Johnson came in asked, “What was that about?” I told him, and he said, “You turned down Mitchell? You realize what you’ve just done? You’re finished! You might as well go to Salt Lake and open a gas station.” I said, “Oh my word.” Well, having said that to you, I’m such a loyalist, I would have been in Watergate with a flashlight that night myself, given whatever those guys were doing. So, as luck would have it, I didn’t do that and I did survive the campaign.

Smith: Do you think Mitchell took secrets with him to the grave?

Korologos: Oh, I’m sure. Yeah.

Smith: Do we know, even now, who ordered the break in.

Korologos: Well, everybody kind of second guessed it. Have you read that new book by whoever it was – Rosen?

Smith: No.

Korologos: Rosen has a book out on Mitchell that’s very good, people tell me. I haven’t read it. I think Watergate was an operation run amuck, that ran a little too far, and Mitchell might have said, “Yeah, let’s go find out something.” And I can see how Nixon, knowing him a little bit, would have yelled, “Why don’t we
know what they’re up to? Where’s McGovern going? See what you can find out about these campaigns – what’s his schedule next week?” So they planted guys to get answers and try to get information.

Smith: There is that school of thought that Nixon may have been popping off one day and Haldeman’s job, among other things, was to filter those orders. At least the sort of off the wall ones to make sure that they weren’t carried out, and that the Colsons and the McGruders of the world didn’t have that judgment.

Korologos: I agree.

Smith: And that it could have been something as simple as that.

Korologos: I agree, you’re absolutely right.

Well, fast forward, pretty soon Watergate collapsed around our ears. Oh, wait a minute, we’ve got to go back to Agnew.

Smith: I was going to ask you because we did an interview with Jerry Jones who had a fascinating story – a number of fascinating stories. But one of them was at that point - this was the spring of ’73 - Haldeman is still at the White House and Jones is sort of reorganizing the personnel office for Haldeman. He gets a call from Haldeman one day wanting to know how many people worked for the vice president. And Jones does some figuring and it’s about fifty. He says, “Fine. I want undated letters of resignation from every one of them.”

Korologos: Wow.

Smith: Jones’ interpretation, after the fact, is that Haldeman, and presumably the president, knew well before the Wall Street Journal story broke that Agnew could have problems. Does that seem possible to you?

Korologos: Yes, except for an ingredient you’d probably have to put in there. I don’t think Nixon and the White House guys liked Agnew, period. They put him on just to appease the Rockefellers, the Rockefeller wing. He was Rockefeller’s campaign manager, wasn’t he?
Smith: Well, he had been a Rockefeller supporter. Then remember, Rockefeller didn’t call him the day he announced he wasn’t running, so he was humiliated. He went over to Nixon.

Korologos: That’s right. So Nixon put him on the ticket, it was a surprise. When everybody says Agnew’s the vice president. I said, “Who?” I remember my sister telling me, “He’s put a Greek on the ticket!” I said, “Holy Cow! That takes care of that vote.” But my point is, there was a leadership meeting one day early on, and Nixon was talking about revenue sharing.

But what happened is, they said, “Here’s our revenue sharing plan,” and they had the charts and maps and whatever, “and here’s what we’re going to do.” And Agnew said, across the table, “Mr. President, and others, I look around this table, I’m the only governor here.” They had the Republican leadership. It may have been bipartisan, it may have been Republican leadership. “I’m the only governor here. I know how states work, I know how that happens, and that isn’t going to work and yackedy-yak…” and he dumped on revenue sharing.

Smith: Really?

Korologos: Well, that was the end. They went to him, Bryce Harlow told me one time, they went to him and told him, “Never say another word in a leadership meeting again.” He was to come to those meetings and never say another word. He was petrified and he got scared away by that. The other thing that I know firsthand, that I was there and I did it. One day there was speculation about what’s Nixon going to do on television tonight. What’s happening? My gosh, he asked for prime time, big secret. It was the China thing. And so, they said to me to go to the Hill and tell our leaders to be sure and watch TV tonight, and be sure to tell Goldwater, Dominic, and others. And the House guys were to tell – people like Walter Judd and other China hands.

Anyway, they went to tell the equivalent Goldwater-Dominics who had the China syndrome in their heads. And I was to tell Agnew, who was presiding over the Senate that day for some reason to tell him to be sure and watch television that night. “I’ve been told to tell you,” I’d known him fairly well. In
fact, I was helping a couple of guys in an Agnew for president drive – there was a little campaign going around with Walt Moat and some of those guys to make Agnew president. And I even went to a Greek thing in New York. I remember speaking in Greek about Agnew at a big Greek Church function thing, and I said, “I bring you greetings from the president,” and then I said in Greek, “and by golly, by the next time I’m here I’ll bring you greetings from a Greek President,” and I spoke in Greek.

Well, so, Agnew and I were pretty close – I knew him fairly well, and I said, “I’ve been told to tell you to be sure to watch TV tonight.” He said, “What’s happening?” He asked me what’s going on. I said, “Damned if I know, but here’s who I’m talking to, so it’s got to be something with China.” Goldwater, Dominic, Walter Judd in the House, and the foreign relations guys – it’s got to be some China thing. He said, “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Well, and then we got to chatting and Agnew was visibly unhappy that he had been cut out. He told me how, apparently after the Cabinet Room incident, he had been told by Haldeman, and Bryce had sort of confirmed it, he wasn’t ever to talk – well, it was kind of dumb to dump on the president’s plan. But God damn it, somebody should have told him, here’s what we’re doing. Send a briefing paper around. He was the number two guy in the U.S. You ought to tell him what we’re doing, at least with that revenue sharing thing. So nobody told him anything again. And he was worried that they were going to do some violent thing to him. So he was not an insider.

Then he was chased out by the scandal. I was on the Hill when he sent his resignation to the Secretary of State and to the secretary of the Senate because of his job at the Senate.

Well, pretty soon, we were trying to find a new vice president. They started this process of “who shall it be?” And they had – I don’t know if Timmons or I did it – have you talked to Timmons about all this?

Smith: No, not yet. We wanted to get you first. We want to get to him.

Korologos: Timmons or somebody had me go around, I guess orders from the president and others, to get suggestions from Senators on who should be vice president.
I have in my gut the absolute incontrovertible view that he wanted John Connally. Loved him. Connally used to come back and forth to the White House from Treasury.

Smith: Was it Connally’s kind of brass-plated assurance that appealed to Nixon? What Nixon didn’t have himself.

Korologos: Successful. Yeah.

Smith: He completed Nixon.

Korologos: Completed Nixon. He loved him. I remember the first – I was down in the White House sharing an office with Ken Belieu, I was talking on the phone to my friend Ralph Mecham who was at the University of Utah. He brought me to Senator Wallace Bennett’s office and then left. I asked him one time, “What did you show in your administration? I passed Truth in Lending and got rid of this one secretary we all disliked.” He sent me a telegram back and said, “I hired Korologos and got rid of myself.”

And so Ralph and I were good buddies. I was bullshitting with him on the phone, and I heard this, “Agh, what’s going on here?” I turned around and there is Nixon in my office in the East Wing. And I said, “Ralph, the president just came into my office.” And he said, “Yeah, Tom.” Later he said, “I think I heard him.” So we hung up and Nixon was in there yakking away, on his way over across the street to see Connally at the Treasury. He kind of wandered around to go see Connally. He loved Connally and he wanted to make Connally vice president. I’m convinced Rumors and things circulated that Connally was going to be on the list. So I went around Capitol Hill to get letters –I remember Senator Scott gathered the letters in his office in a stack this high. I don’t know how many there were, it was a four or five inch stack of letters from Senators with suggestions. I remember running into Senator Robert Byrd in the hall. And he said, “Tom, what’s going on?” And I said, “Well, I was a liaison,” and Byrd was good to me and I was good to Byrd. Byrd was good to Nixon because Byrd thought Nixon was the best president since Truman. I can tell you stories about that. Do you want me to tell you a Byrd story, too?
Smith: Sure.

Korologos: One time Byrd had a judge in West Virginia that he wanted to put on the bench. He sent the name down and he was unqualified, said the Justice Department, turned down by Mitchell. I went to Nixon and we were seeking votes in support of the Vietnam war, God – once a week there was an end the war vote. And Nixon would say, “Don’t let them vote on Friday, we can’t have it Friday,” and I couldn’t figure out what the hell that meant. But Kissinger and Le Doc Tho were cutting deals in Paris, and Nixon knew that if we voted, it would undercut Henry’s posture over there.

So I’d go to Byrd and he’d delay it for us. Byrd was stronger for us than Mansfield, who was his leader. And so Nixon said to me, “You tell the Justice Department right now we’ll put that judge in there, right now. You understand that?” One finger again. [tapping] So the judge got in there. So Byrd thought Nixon and I were doing it. Byrd actually thought Nixon was considering him for the Supreme Court when we went through a new justice of the week thing with Haynesworth/Carswell, and all that. And he actually thought about it and I don’t know if Nixon did or not, but we didn’t ever disabuse Byrd. And Byrd was very loyal and supportive. And so Byrd did a lot for us.

I’m really fast forwarding now – Nixon is now former president in New York, Senator Lawton Chiles of Florida had an amendment to an Appropriations Bill to ban pensions and security for former presidents funding for offices or whatever it was. All former presidents. Well, there happened to be one living former president, you know – maybe I’m wrong on that.

Smith: You’re right.

Korologos: Was Nixon the only living former president when Ford was president?

Smith: Yeah.

Korologos: Who was the former president?

Smith: LBJ had died.
Korologos: So Nixon called me and he said, “I’m going to fax you something,” this was before emails, “you take a look at this, and what can we do about it?” I took a look. It was a House-passed appropriation bill and also in it was a Senate-passed appropriation bill that was not in conference. I said, “Mr. President, it’s in both bills. I don’t know what we can do about it.” He said, “Well, see what you can do. Talk to Byrd.” So I went to Byrd and showed it to him and I said, “Senator, look at this.” He looked at it and didn’t say word. He looked at it and he nodded, and – fast forward again – a week later, it disappeared out of both bills – after it passed both the Senate and the House.

I called Nixon and I said, “You need to call Byrd,” and thank him. Also, every time Byrd cast a tenth thousandth vote, the five thousandth straight day, the twenty-fifth year, the fortieth anniversary of his wife, pick all that stuff, I would call Nixon and say, “Call Byrd.” I often would call Nixon and say, “Here are the five guys running for leader on the Republican side, or the five guys running for leader on the Democrat side and I’ll call you with the results.” Thus the first phone Byrd would get was from Nixon.

Byrd was going to Russia one time. He gave a speech on this after Dole had put together a 25th anniversary, or 20th or 15th or something of the swearing in of Nixon at the capitol steps. Nixon came to it in the LBJ Room and Byrd stood up and said, “I want to tell you a story. I was going to Russia one day, and I needed background, and I want you to know that I called President Ford to say what advice do you have for me for my trip to Russia. He’d been there. And, you know, President Ford gave me a little bit of something. And I called President Carter and I got a little more. And then I called President – who’s next? Somebody – then I called President Nixon and he gave me the most succinct one, two, you tell Gorbachev, one, two, three, four, five, just because there’s a new president doesn’t mean this or that. And he said I was writing notes so fast, I thought that he knew I was going to call him. I thought he knew about my calls.” Well, Nixon got up a little while later and said, “Bob, I gave up bugging people a long time ago, so I didn’t know you were going to call me about.” Laughter in the room.
So the point is, Byrd was very close to Nixon. Byrd said to me, getting back to my original story, “Tom, I hear that Connally is on the list.” And he pointed to the Senate door as we were standing there by the Ohio clock, and he said, “Tom, if he names Connally to be the vice president.” Under the Constitutional amendment requiring confirmation by the Senate and the House for the new vice president in the event of vacancy - he said, “Tom, there will be blood coming out underneath that door, if he names Connally to be vice president. You just pass that on.” And I said, “Yes, sir.” So I took my stack of letters, took them down to Timmons, and I said to Timmons, “You’d better tell somebody what Byrd just told me.” And he said, “Whew, Holy Cow.” And I guess he told somebody and Nixon knew, politically, that Connally could not fly.

Smith: There is a story, which may not have happened, but some variation of it I think happened. Where supposedly Nixon - I think he actually had Rockefeller in the office, this was after Ford’s confirmation - and Nixon says, “Can you imagine Jerry Ford sitting in this chair?” And whether exactly that happened or not, there is a sense that Nixon looked on Ford as his insurance against being impeached, which was a total misreading of the situation. The fact that he might not have seen Jerry Ford in that chair, didn’t alter the fact that Congress was perfectly comfortable with the idea of Jerry Ford in that chair.

Korologos: Okay, I saw and heard – that the story was loose in the land, except a couple of incidents that I had firsthand may add to it. Nixon was so fixated on Cooper, Church, and Mansfield and bringing the Vietnam troops home, and also bringing the troops home from Europe and Asia, shutting NATO down, all those amendments and he really was in on that. He cared. He cared about that all the time. He never asked me anything about any of the other stuff. One day there was a particular vote coming up and we were in the leadership meeting in the Cabinet Room. And Nixon was sitting right here where I am, Jerry Ford is on his right, Hugh Scott is on his left and I’m sitting right here behind him. Scott said, “Ah, Mr. President, oh gee whiz, I don’t know. Gosh, it’s tough. Golly, how are we going to do this?”
The White House forever suspected Scott of leaking stuff to columnist Jack Anderson because he would take notes on the little pads that were about this big and you’d hear (tearing sound) and he’d give them to Jack Anderson. And every time Jack Anderson wrote a column it was how great Scott was, and it protected Scott from negative columns. So, they suspected Scott of leaking.

So Nixon didn’t like him at all at the beginning, so he was sitting like this, and he said, “Well, okay Hugh, I understand. I understand, Hugh,” put his hand on his shoulder, turned around in the great big chair, pulled the chair, moved it up, and went like this…and turned his back on Scott. “Hugh, I understand the problem, yeah, I understand.” And he started talking to President Ford about the problems and the issues. You know, here’s Hugh Scott sitting there and Nixon is turning around just sticking it up Hugh Scott’s rear end every time he had a chance of getting Leader Ford to help him with one of the “end the war” issues. And so my point is, that puts a little chink in the business of Nixon didn’t like Ford.

Smith: Or didn’t see him, maybe didn’t take him seriously, maybe condescended, is the word. They clearly were friends. They’d been allies. But Ford was put - once he became vice president – Ford’s in a very awkward position. There must have been people – well, we’ve talked to a number of people who said, there were folks in the Nixon White House, not surprisingly, who wondered how come he’s out of town all this time. Why isn’t he here? Sort of defending us – it was a very awkward position that he was in.

Korologos: It was awkward as hell.

Smith: The Admiral Stockdale defense. You will have a chance to look over the transcript.

Korologos: Can I take anything out?

Smith: You can put any restrictions on it you want. And none of it will be released before 2013 at the earliest. It will go to the Ford Library. Yeah, you’ll have an opportunity to review all of this and do whatever you want.
Korologos: Because I’ve done an oral history at the Senate for the Senate historians. I don’t know how deep I got on a lot of this, but I said everything up there because they are exempt from the Freedom of Information Act.

Smith: And it’s important that you also know, by the way – this is not today the property of the Ford Library. It is the property of the Ford Foundation. And they are exempt from the Freedom of Information Act.

Korologos: Why? Why are they exempt?

Smith: It is a private foundation, it’s not a government agency.

Korologos: Oh, yeah. I see.

Smith: So the point is, we’re collecting all these – the assumption being, at some point, they will be deposited at the Ford Library, and then they become, if you will, public property. But even there, anyone can put restrictions on it, whatever they want.

Korologos: My restrictions at the Senate, I don’t know, I signed some letter ten years after I die…well, like my Reagan-Bush recollections. After those guys are gone, it doesn’t matter.

Smith: Once you look over the transcript, you can put whatever restrictions on it you want.

Korologos: Okay. Where was I?

Smith: Well, we were talking about the awkward position that Ford was in as vice president.

Korologos: Okay, so I guess there were questions of where he was. There is loose in the land, that, look, how did Ford get to be leader?

Smith: No, the first one was Charlie Hoeven, and then it was Charlie Halleck.

Korologos: Charlie Halleck. And who was behind all this? Les Arends, Griffin, Ford, Laird – Laird who creates a – he’s like that guy in Peanuts with the cloud, he collects dust no matter what he’s doing.
Bob Dole had a great line. He said, “Laird always struck me as a guy who put the poison in the river a mile up, and then runs into town to save everyone.”

Okay, the great conspirator. And that led to the theory that there was a coup, that Ford and those guys were staging a coup against Nixon throughout the whole thing. And I heard it more than once in the White House; at the mess, at sessions, and so on. So onward. So Nixon and Ford were buddies and what have you, I brought the letters down, people were recommending guys all over creation, off the wall stuff. I never looked at the letters, but I gave them to Timmons.

Pretty soon rumors were flying over who was going to be vice president and we went to a White House event. There is another thing I should mention during all this. Hugh Scott had got it into his head, and I don’t know where or how he did, but Nixon would not pick Scott or Ford. Have you heard that?

I remember vaguely Scott saying that and it seemed like an odd thing to say.

It was an odd thing to say. And he had it that it wasn’t going to be Ford or it wasn’t going to be Scott. And it could have been Nixon and his good old Nixon conspiring or some way of putting Scott off so he doesn’t start a campaign or something. So we’re down there and I remember – nobody knew who it was going to be – and Scott kept saying, and others kept saying, look for the wife, look for wives. And we looked around and there were no wives that we knew. Soon Nixon started talking and he started talking and Max Friedersdorf was sitting next to me – have you talked to Max?

Yes.

He said, “God, it’s going to be Jerry!” I said, “God, you’re right!” And so it was Jerry - out come Jerry and Betty. At which point they did whatever they did and then I got involved in the confirmation – both the House and Senate. Went to the House first, didn’t it?

Yeah. He was the most investigated man in American history. They couldn’t find anything.

There was one thing in the hearing on some loan. Do you remember that?
Smith: Yeah, vaguely.

Korologos: Some loan thing he had done and how did he get it. It came up in his hearing, and he answered it well. Of course, the lawyers and Hartmann and all those guys were around and did a lot of the confirmation.

Smith: I take it that confirmation was a lot easier than Rockefeller’s.

Korologos: Yeah, I think you’re right. I remember a lot of people saying, for the first time I’m a Democrat and I’m voting for a Republican that’s likely to be president. We went through Watergate, too, don’t forget.

Smith: When you got Ford confirmed, did you think you were working with the next president? Or was there a sense that Nixon could somehow tough this out. The tapes hadn’t come out…

Korologos: Tough it out. No, I didn’t think Nixon would quit. In fact, he was very close to Senator Stennis and we’d bring Stennis down a lot and Stennis would say, “Ah, Mr. President, you’ve got to stick this out. You ain’t going to quit here. You gotta continue to be president.” “John, don’t worry about that. No, never!” And I believed him. And I think he had it in his head never. Then we went through the agony of once a week some new screwball thing would come up on a Friday – everything happened on Friday – the eighteen minute gap happened on Friday, the smoking gun tape happened on Friday, everything happened…

Smith: Do you have a theory about the eighteen and a half minute gap?

Korologos: No, except there must have been something on it. Somebody erased it. I don’t know what was in it.

Smith: We talked to Mel Laird, who said when he came back into the White House, within less than a month, he got a call from Fred Buzhardt. Buzhardt had been his counsel over at the Pentagon. And so he called Laird in the nature of warning him. “Listen, I’ve been listening to these tapes and Nixon’s in this up to his neck, so be careful.” And Haig subsequently told us, I always assumed that Haig at least listened to the smoking gun tape and Haig denies it. He said
“Fred Buzhardt gave me some very good advice,” which was, “Never be alone in a room with a tape.”

Can you think of a time, a specific event that convinced you that maybe this wasn’t going to be successful? That maybe this presidency was going to end prematurely?

Korologos: I was a hold out, and my first indication of that was the Friday – the day they released the smoking gun tape.

Smith: Oh, basically, it was telling the CIA or the FBI – having one of them tell the other to stay out of the investigation.

Korologos: Well, it was worse than that. It was we can raise money to quiet them down – something worse wasn’t it?

Smith: I think we’re talking two separate tapes.

Korologos: Well, what prompted Scott and Rhodes and Goldwater to come down?

Smith: Alright, that’s the “smoking gun” tape, the June 24th tape. It’s obstruction of justice.

Korologos: Well, what happened on that is, I was going around – I have a paper and I was going to give it to the Nixon Library. It had a vote count on it as to who was still with us. Before that thing came out, I had thirty-five, forty votes, solid, on impeachment. We could beat it in the Senate. Because the Southerners were with us, all those old Bulls that we had been working with, and the Republicans were fairly good, except some of the liberals. We had thirty – forty, we could have beat it. Then that thing came out and I started nosing around again and even guys like Russell Long said, “God damn, Tom, even the rats are leaving the sinking ship.” Because Long was one of our supporters and Herman Talmadge was a supporter because of what happened to his dad when they threw him out of the Georgia thing. Bennett, Cotton, Curtis.

Another item comes to mind involving Rabbi Korff [who] had organized a star spangled banner sing in the Rotunda of the Capitol. I was talking to one of the cops who said they were instructed by the chief to go arrest the rabbi
for disrupting. And he said, “I’m not fixing to arrest anybody singing *The Star
Spangled Banner* in the Capitol of America. They can fire me!” Well,
anyway, all that was going on right in the middle of all this. Anyway I started
making vote counts and found we’re down to about six or eight. I’ve got the
names on a piece of paper. There was Bennett, Cotton, Curtis, Eastland.
Eastland would have never voted to impeach. Eastland got pissed off at
Nixon, “@#$%, I’m not going to vote for him anymore.” I said, “What’s the
matter with you?” He said, “Well, he fouled up the soybean subsidy.” I said,
“Mr. Chairman, what are you talking about?” “Well, look, he did this to
soybeans and he shouldn’t have done this!” And that’s going to make you
vote to impeach the president? Well, we had a little chortle.

But there were about six that hung tough. And I went down and told Timmons
that I think we’re down to about six or eight. Because I was under the
impression, from Haig and Lehman and others – are you going to interview
John Lehman? You might should.

Smith: No, I haven’t, but that’s a great idea.

Korologos: He was close to Jerry, close to Haig.

Smith: Oh, Jerry Jones.

Korologos: John Lehman was close to Jerry Ford.

Smith: Really?

Korologos: I think so.

Smith: Okay, that’s great.

Korologos: Anyway, we were down to six or eight, and it was not looking good at all, and
it prompted him to say in his speech, “I have lost my political base,” which is
what he said in that meeting when we had them all down to the Cabinet Room
to tell everybody it’s all over and he was going to resign tonight, and what
have you. At which, they told me to invite the leaders, including Senator
Griffin. I recall during impeachment we were hustling impeachment votes – I
was talking to Cotton, I was talking to our guys, shoring up all the base vote.
There were only two Congressional Affairs persons in the history of the United States ever counted impeachment up to that time – me and the guy that did Andrew Johnson’s and he’s dead. I used to say that. I used to say that a lot. I said, “Let me tell you something Senator,” just in a jocular way, as only Korologos can get away with, “the last guys who voted with impeachment are dead. You saw what happened to them.” And ho ho ho. So I’d say that to these guys and pretty soon we had lost our political base. I remember we invited people down to the day, or whatever day it was that he announced that he was going to resign that night. We had a leadership meeting in the Cabinet Room. So I invited Griffin, during the time of all and he said to me, and to Wally, “Hey, fellas, look, I’m Senate whip,” and we used to do whip counts together. We’d counted things together all the time in his whip office. “It would be wiser for you not to come to this office during impeachment counts because I don’t how….this is a big Senate issue.” So we started hanging out in the vice president’s office. In other words, he didn’t want us around helping Nixon. Put that down as another conspiracy theory episode.

So Nixon set it. They all come down. Griffin said, “Jeez, if he wants me down there, I guess I’ll come,” implying that Nixon might have known what Griffin was up to. And sure enough, they all came, sat around the Cabinet table and Nixon said what he said. I remember well, he got out of his chair. He almost broke down in tears. And he pulled his big chair back like this, this side – I was sitting right there – and he got up and he stumbled, and I went and grabbed him so he wouldn’t fall down. He turned around and went out behind the chair like that, and left the room and said, “Well, tonight I’m going to be on television.” And that was the last we saw of him until he went into the East Room the next day that was where he put on his glasses, the first time I’d ever seen him in glasses, and said goodbye and went to the plane and went like that and that was it.

Smith: Were there tears in that room?

Korologos: Oh, God, tears like crazy. It was awful. Okay, now let me tell you the rest of what happened to me. So Nixon was gone, in the plane, just terrible. Down the carpet, in the helicopter, off he goes. Resignation effective noon, and noon
Tom Korologos  May 21, 2009

was coming while Nixon is in mid air over Iowa or someplace, and now Warren Burger, on the spot, swears in Jerry Ford.

Smith:  Yeah, the 9th of August.

Korologos:  When did Nixon leave?

Smith:  He left that morning. At noon, Ford is sworn in.

Korologos:  Okay, so we’re now swearing in Jerry Ford, President Jerry Ford. Well, let me say some other stuff about Vice President Ford, can I go back? How much time have we got?

Erik:  Seven minutes.

Smith:  We’ve got another tape, or we could always come back and do more later.

Korologos:  Well, I’m in the middle of a project downstairs that’s making me a little nervous.

Smith:  Let’s just finish this tape and then we’ll schedule another time.

Korologos:  Okay. Well, before that, Jerry is now vice president. They finally put a gym together about this size of this room over in the EOB and I go over there all the time and take some steam and jump up and down like a workout. Vice President Ford was there all the time – used to bullshit with him all the time. Became fairly close to him on Senate stuff and brought him up to the Senate a lot, he presided. I can’t tell you of any close tie votes – the darn thing was, we’d bring the vice president up to break a tie and the damn vote would be eighty to twenty, and yeah, good count, Tom.” So, we hit it off pretty good and so fast forward. Now Jerry Ford is president of the United States. Before that we had said we’re going to bring leaders down to meet the new president right after the Nixon helicopter left. So we’re now in the Blue Room – is that the middle room?

Smith:  Yeah.
Korologos: We’re now in the Blue Room, and I’m standing there talking to President Ford like I’m talking to you. Behind President Ford, now president five minutes, are the leaders Mansfield, Scott, and others.

Smith: Carl Albert.

Korologos: Carl Albert. I’ve got to go back and tell another Scott story. Scott and some of his staff bitched to me, “What is this stuff when Jerry became vice president that wasn’t going to be Scott or Ford,” I said, “I don’t know where that came from. One of the problems with Nixon and leaders and even your leader, Scott, and all of them is – you know what happens? They get in meetings and talk like Casey Stengel. Nobody knows what the hell they are talking about or what they mean. And guys like us have to interpret it. So you can take any interpretation out of that you want. That’s what I think happened to Scott.” He took some long convoluted conversation, interpreted it into that it wasn’t going to be Scott or – because Scott was pissed that it was Ford. A little bit, but it could have been him. And a little bit that he thought that Nixon didn’t tell him.

So, we’re now – God, I’m mixing up sixteen stories at once – so now, I’m talking to President Ford, and over there are the leaders, twenty-five yards away waiting to come and shake hands with him. Mansfield’s the first in line. And I said, “We’ve got the leaders down to come through a receiving line, now Mr. President. Mr. President, congratulations. We’ve got the leaders now to go through a receiving line and to say to you good luck or whatever it is to say. You know them better than I do.” And he said to me, “Tom, I want you to know you are the only Senate creature I have around here.” Creature. “And don’t you let anybody talk you into leaving. I don’t know the Senate. I was there for a little while as vice president, but you understand that, you will be my Senate guide, my Senate liaison.”

To my knowledge, he didn’t talk or see anybody between the time of the swearing in and the time he walked to the Blue Room, I was the first person President Gerald R. Ford of Michigan hired in his White House. So now I’ve got a job. Hell, I didn’t know – I had two kids, I didn’t know what was going
to happen. Everybody is going down the dumps. I’m in there bawling five minutes ago as Nixon leaves, and now I’m elated.

Smith: We were told by more than one person, that you could watch – everyone was invited down for a reception or whatever in the State Dining Room, and you could watch the Nixon people just peel away.

Korologos: That’s right. They peeled away.

Smith: Which is understandable.

Korologos: Yup. And the reception occurred and they peeled away. Later I went to the White House mess and the Nixon guys were in there daubing down in their soup, with their heads bowed, and I said one of the most obnoxious things in the history of the United States, in a loud voice, “You Nixon guys are in a heap of trouble. The president just hired me.” Isn’t that terrible?

Smith: That’s a fantastic ending.
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Smith: You warned Ford about not going to a party.

Korologos: Rumsfeld was involved in this, but my version of it is that President Ford and I were taking some steam together over in the EOB, putting on our black ties to go to a birthday party for Tip O’Neill? Tungsun Park was giving at the Georgetown Club.

Smith: Ford had become President at this time?

Korologos: Ford was President.

Smith: Okay.

Korologos: Ford was President. So, we’re in there getting ready, washing our hands and face and the phone rang and the President went to the phone and said, “Oh, yeah…yeah…yeah,” and came back and said, “We’re not going.” I said, “We’re not going? Why not?” He said, “Because that was Tip and he said I shouldn’t go and he’ll tell me why later,” or something. He didn’t quite say why.

Smith: A little mysterious?

Korologos: Mysterious. So, I think, “Geez, thank goodness I get to go home.” Come to find out a short time later, Park got indicted for whatever he got indicted for. And, I’ll be darned, Tip O’Neill showed you what kind of a guy he was and what kind of a town we lived in in those days. He tipped off the President not to go to this party to protect the President and his friend, Jerry Ford. And I put that in my head as an example of what was then and what is now. Because the difference that has happened and the comity in those days.

Smith: It’s a great story. Can you expound at all on the Ford-O’Neill relationship because it seems to have been pretty close?
Korologos: Golly, Richard, I have no personal – see, I did the Senate --

Smith: Of course he’d been in the House all those years. Did he have any friends in the Senate?

Korologos: Who?

Smith: Ford. Were there people in the Senate who he knew?

Korologos: Hardly. They could’ve been some of the appropriators when he was on those conferences and he was on Appropriations and it could’ve been – he was vice president for how long?

Smith: About nine months?

Korologos: You could barely make way to make friends in nine months, but he was close to Senator Griffin from Michigan. And I can’t remember specifically any other personal friends he had in the Senate. If I saw a list, I could probably come up with somebody, but I don’t know.

Smith: That went on for a long time.

Korologos: Quite a bit.

Smith: Did you ever think you were going to lose or that he would withdraw?

Korologos: No.

Smith: No?

Korologos: I don’t know why I had said that so fast, but I never think I’m ever going to lose. Maybe that’s what’s wrong. But, no, I have no reaction to, as I remembered in that thing we did last time, there were other names that were considered before President Ford was nominated for vice president. Nixon considered, but I don’t have any knowledge of other names that President Ford considered for vice president.

Smith: The best evidence is that he also looked at George Bush and he looked at Don Rumsfeld at the time that he nominated Rockefeller. And his view was that, while both Bush and Rumsfeld in effect represented the future of the party,
Rockefeller’s experience, his international credibility, his reputation for attracting talented people, all of that recommended him. And given the unique set of circumstances that Ford found himself in, he went with Rockefeller. And I think Bryce Harlow was recommending Rockefeller and I think Mel Laird was as well.

Korologos: Did Baker’s name ever come up? Howard?

Smith: That’s interesting. I don’t think it did at that time. It did at the ’76 convention in a major way, a serious way. But once Rockefeller was off the ticket at the ’76 convention, Baker was one of a handful of people who were seriously considered. Now, you stayed at the White House for how long after Ford becomes President?

Korologos: I guess it was a year. When did Ford become President?

Smith: He became President in August of ’74.

Korologos: Golly, then we left in January or February of ’75. Yeah, so we stayed six months.

Smith: What were the issues? What were the kinds of things you were dealing with during those six months?

Korologos: I’d have to look at some dates. There were things in the Appropriations committee. The President is now President and one of the first things that we did was to bring in chairmen to meet the new President. Of course he knew them, shaking his hand and talking to them, but there were some issues they had to sit down and talk to the committee chairmen about and others. Things were moving. There was a tax bill. And one of the memories that I have that was quite remarkable was we brought Senator Long Finance Committee chairman down because there was a tax bill – there’s always a tax bill – and I went up to him and he said the same thing to me then that he later said to President Reagan, fast forward however many years. I went to him and I said, “We’re putting a program together to have President Ford meet you and others to come down and discuss issues kicking around.” And I don’t know what prompted me to say it, but I said, “Make a list and come on down and
talk to him.” And Russell Long said, “Tom, I never make lists.” I said, “Why not?” He said, “Lists have ends to them.” And the funniest thing in the world is, when I took Long down to see President Reagan, he said the same thing. I had forgotten it and it reminded me.

So we brought Senator Long down and it was President Ford Senator Long and myself in the Oval Office. And Long was the kind of a guy that kept moving his chair closer to the President. And the President was sitting there where presidents sit and Long was in the chair on his left and I was in the chair on the right taking notes. And I kept trying to take notes so I could write the report for the historians and Long’s chair kept moving, kept moving closer and closer to President Ford. And it was a great big chair. I mean, it was not just a little chair, it was a serious chair.

And pretty soon I looked up and he has moved that chair a good eight or ten feet to President Ford and I’m not sure, but I think President Ford’s chair had also moved – it was on wheels, Long’s wasn’t – and his chair had also moved closer to Long. Pretty soon Long’s got his knee on Ford telling him what we’re going to do. “Here’s what I’m going to do”, “We need to do this on the tax bill”, and he’s banging on President Ford’s knee. “Here’s what you need to do”, “Here’s what you’re going to have to do”. And President Ford was nodding and nodding and I say to you that I got very nervous that here’s this new President, been President now a very short time, a week maybe, and Russell Long is in there being Russell Long, as only the chairman of the Finance committee can be, beating up on the President, telling the President what he was going to do, and what we were going to have in the next tax bill.

And I had to come to the experience with Nixon when we had the mental attitude of “Up Congress” and here’s President Ford who is a creature of the Congress, down here willing and ready to talk and do whatever needed to be done to solve whatever the issue of the day was. And I got a little nervous that maybe word’s going to spread on how Long went down there and got what he wanted out of Ford, by golly. And my attitude has been and is that I was on the Hill for nine years and in the Executive Branch for five and I’m sorry, Hill, I’m an Executive Branch creature. Congresses do two things best:
nothing and overreact and sometimes both at the same time. And I’m a strong Executive Branch person and this bothered me.

The President, right after that session, went to, I don’t know where it was, somewhere in the Caribbean, the Virgin Islands, as I recall. A G8 or G20 or whatever those things would’ve been in the Caribbean. And off he went and, they came back from that and he wanted to see Long again. And it had only been two or three weeks after we’d seen Long, so we put together the briefing papers I brought Long back down. And I’m here to tell you that in that short period of time, Jerry Ford had become President. He was telling Long what he, Jerry Ford, wanted to do. And Long was backing down. “Now, Russell, here’s what we’re going to do” and “Here’s what I want to happen on this.” And I was so impressed and I came away buoyed up by, “Hey, this guy’s going to be alright.” And it was a remarkable story that I saw before my eyes.

Smith: There are those who believe, whatever they think about him personally, politically, subsequently, who nevertheless believed that Don Rumsfeld played a very significant role in in effect coaching Ford, teaching him the difference between Capitol Hill and the executive position.

Korologos: I’m not surprised. Yes, that doesn’t surprise me and thank God because that was a good lesson. I didn’t know that Don had done that. Have you interviewed Don?

Smith: Yes. He also says, by the way, that he believes that the President made a mistake in waiting as long as he did to make some of the significant changes in the cabinet and that he strongly urged him earlier rather than later to, in a very substantive and symbolic way, make it clear to the American people that this was a different administration even if that meant clearing out people who had done nothing wrong.

Korologos: It was. It was a new administration. He was right. Another time I remember prior to this trip and when I saw this metamorphosis occur, there were two or three things happened. I know the Nixon advance guys and the Nixon schedulers were still around – Mike Duvall and a bunch of them. And they wanted to look at the President’s schedule and what he may have committed
to as Vice President. Well, that secretary that President Ford had, who’s a nice little lady who’s name I don’t remember, --

Smith: Mildred Leonard?

Korologos: Yes, exactly. Brought in a calendar like I have on my desk with flipping dates and times and places, but penciled in this, this, and this and this. And they were aghast that this was so elementary scheduling rather than going through the process and what’s in it for the President and why and wherefore and yet the audience and so on.

Smith: Is it the difference between how a congressman would handle his schedule?

Korologos: Amen. Absolutely. And they found things that he had committed, fundraiser in Michigan, a Rotary speech in Toledo. And they would go, “But what is this?” “Well, I don’t remember but they must have told somebody to go there and give this speech.” So they were running around trying to get a handle on that because he’s now President. And the other thing that happened that was remarkable is that he was a former congressman and I walked by the Oval Office one time and I looked in there and there were two or three guys with their legs draped over the handles of the couches, standing there talking or sitting, and the President was at his desk and it was a congressman’s office again. And I thought, “My goodness has this place changed.” And I almost went in, but I didn’t out of fear and a little more remembering the Nixon thing when the place was as quiet as a church and I didn’t have any reason to go in, but people wandered in and out of there.

Smith: That’s fascinating because it was in those first few months that he had what had come to be known as the spokes in the wheel organization. And indeed Rumsfeld made it a condition of his coming back that they would get rid of that. That was very much how a congressional office functioned.

Korologos: That’s right. I was on the Hill nine years. I know what that means.

Smith: Why would it not work in the presidency?

Korologos: You have to have a much more discipline. You have to have, I hate to say this, but presidents say things and do things that have impact. Congress
doesn’t have impact. Congressmen and senators can say things morning, noon, and night and they do not have an impact on the market, the international exchanges, war, peace, foreign affairs, trade. Presidents go “Boo” and the repercussions world-wide are enormous. Congressmen go “Boo” and who gives a rat’s ass? So, what you have is the transformation from a congressional person to an executive branch person where comments and decisions matter and we’re seeing that today with some of the Obama stuff. Those guys still think they’re in the House poking around, but they’re probably going to get better. I guess they all do. I should tell you another thing. I have no memory of it. It got into a Cheney book that somebody wrote here a year ago. Who wrote the Cheney book? It was a favorable book.

Smith: Steven Hays?

Korologos: Could’ve been.

Smith: Conservative?

Korologos: Yeah, I think it was unauthorized. Well, Joulwan, George Joulwan, later NATO commander, was Haig’s deputy at the NSC. And Haig stayed as Chief of Staff for awhile and Cheney -- what was Cheney in those days?

Smith: He would’ve been Rumsfeld’s deputy.

Korologos: Okay. I can’t remember exactly what it said or what happened, but it’s in Cheney’s book and it must have happened but I have zero memory of it. I sent a piece of paper to Joulwan that Cheney was doing something with President Ford that I thought was kind of strange. And I sent Joulwan a piece of paper that said it was on the President’s schedule that day with a circle around the Cheney thing that said “Can you believe this shit?” Well, fast forward twenty years, Cheney’s book comes out and it’s in there. Korologos said about Cheney and I went to him at something and said, “What the hell was that all about?” And he said, “Yeah, you did that.” And I said, “No, I did not.” I said, “No, I went to Joulwan and he said he has no memory of it.” And he said, “What are you talking about? I know I saw the piece of paper.”
So I started an argument with him about whatever this thing was and we had a good laugh, I hope.

Smith: How would you differ in terms of Rumsfeld’s style of running the place and Cheney’s? We’ve talked to a number of people who have indicated they thought that there was a clear difference in style.

Korologos: Oh yeah, Rumsfeld was a master sergeant, I mean, by the numbers. Remind me to tell you something about Cheney and Kissinger, would you?

Smith: Sure.

Korologos: Yeah, Cheney was a good leader, but Rumsfeld was a drill sergeant. “One, two, three…” And he was that way in Defense when I worked for him. He was that way at Searle. And that was Rumsfeld being Rumsfeld. He’s that way today. Ask my wife. He was on the Kellogg board with her. And people to this day, Gordon Gund who was on the Kellogg board with him and I’ve been with Rumsfeld when Gordon and all of them talked about, “Old Rumsfeld never changes, does he?”

But Cheney was more quiet, steady, never raised his voice, but important, you knew what he was doing. My one memorable thing that comes back to me about that is that Senator Eastland, chairman of the Judiciary committee, had prevailed upon us during the Nixon years to get him a plane for the Special Air Mission over at Andrews to go to Mississippi a lot. And Eastland being Eastland, chairman of the committee, used to confirm all of the judges and all of the Supremes and we had made it a policy of Eastland gets anything he wants. So he came to me one Friday and he said, “I need a plane.” So I came down and went to the military office and said, “We need a plane for Eastland. The usual.” Well, President Ford is now President. Cheney is in there. When did Rummy leave the White House?

Smith: Well, remember, it was the end of the year massacre, end of ’75, when Rockefeller is dumped and Schlesinger is replaced by Rumsfeld and Cheney becomes Chief of Staff? End of ’75.

Korologos: So it’d only been three or four months from August.
Smith: And that’s ’74. This is a year later.

Korologos: Okay, then for some reason Cheney was the guy I talked to that this piece of paper ended up with and he said he called me in and said, “What’s this?” And I said, “It’s a plane for Eastland?” And he said, “Do we do this all the time?” I said, “Yep, we do this all the time. He’s chairman of the committee.” He said, “Good grief” or something. He was puzzled and amazed by it. There was a guy that ran the military office, Sergeant Gulley, that wrote a book on all this, too. And Rumsfeld asked me about the book sometime later. “Did you read it?” I said, “Yeah, I sure did. There’s sure a lot of fiction and a lot of revisionist history in there to make this guy look good.” And Don said the same thing that a lot of that stuff was self-serving.

Smith: For example, Dorothy Dowton, the President’s personal secretary, chose her words carefully, but indicated that Rumsfeld had tried to replace her. And by contrast when Cheney took over, people felt –

Korologos: Comfortable.

Smith: Yeah. Not relaxed. No one is ever relaxed

Korologos: That’s Rumsfeld. I’m not surprised.

Smith: Tell us about Ed Levi, because there’s a classic example of when a President begins to remake the cabinet. Presumably, as with the later nomination of John Paul Stevens, with this kind of necessity to go outside the usual political bounds. The Justice Department is super-sensitive and it’s, fairly or not, perceived to have been at the heart of the problems during the Nixon presidency. So you have to find someone cleaner than a hound’s tooth, to use Ike’s phrase, and he comes up with Ed Levi. I think it was in place of Bill Saxbe?

Korologos: Okay, it was.

Smith: Now, did Saxbe decide on his own to leave?

Korologos: I don’t know.

Smith: Okay.
Korologos: But Saxbe, the contrast that you mentioned was remarkable. Saxbe was from Ohio and chewed tobacco and had a jar like you put jelly in, underneath the front seat of his car. I used to ride back and forth to the Hill with him. And every once in awhile, he’d pull this jar out and pop the tobacco juice into the jar. It was swirling around in there. But he’s a great guy. I liked him, but then suddenly Levi appears with a bow tie from the University of Chicago, this brilliant legal mind that could quote law to you from the beginning, but he didn’t know anything about politics. And the rumor was that he came from Chicago, Rumsfeld - Chicago, “Ah ha!” So somehow or other that Rumsfeld must have found Levi and put him in there.

So suddenly it’s time for Levi to be confirmed and word is announced and they did it wrong as I remember. They did not go to the chairman first, that was one of the first appointments that they made, I think. And they didn’t go to the committee chairman and they didn’t tell me or I would’ve said, “Let me tip off Hruska and Eastland and other leaders” like you do any time and then announce it. Tell them at ten o’clock in the morning and announce it at noon. Didn’t happen. So they announced it and Hruska and Eastland were taken aback when people started doing research on him and found out he was from Chicago. He was liberal. He was for something or other. He could’ve been for something very liberal that I have no memory of what it was except somebody discovered that he had gotten in trouble for bugging a jury. And, my goodness, it was kind of funny, but the Republicans who had a reputation for bugging everybody – remember Nixon, Kissinger - you know. And now they’re raising hell because Levi had bugged a jury.

So, come to find out it was when he was a Dean of the University of Chicago Law School. Brilliant, one of the best of the nation. And he had a class or something on the psychology of juries. I’m making that up because I think that’s what it sort of was. And they were trying to find out what goes on in a jury room. And he indeed put a bug in a moot court class jury room. The story they told me when it came out was that it was a moot court class jury in the school. That they had a moot court trial and indeed had a jury and indeed put them in a room to decide on the case and they bugged the room to see what thought processes went through a juror’s mind as he deliberated. Well,
Eastland and Hruska were now madder than hell and I’ve got to bring them down to see President Ford.

Smith: And their anger is rooted in the fact that they weren’t tipped off.

Korologos: That was the root of it. And when that happens, you can find out a hundred reasons why you don’t like him, but if they’d have known about it, they would’ve “Hmm, we’ll take a look at him” and it wouldn’t have been – but that annoyed them from the start. And then the bugging thing came out and then his record came out and then he wore a bow tie. Eastland even mentioned he wore a bowtie. He told me, “Who’s this bowtie?” So, we brought him down and we’re waiting there in that room where the secretaries are, not the Roosevelt Room, to go in there -- and what was President Ford’s daughter’s name?

Smith: Susan.

Korologos: And Susan had the big red lab in there. The dog’s name was -

Smith: Liberty.

Korologos: So Liberty is down there sniffing Eastland’s crotch and Eastland’s getting nervous, probably had a few pops, both of them. God, I said to myself, “What else can go wrong?” And Eastland’s trying to shoo the dog away and I’m trying to shoo the dog away and finally Liberty goes away and we go inside and they have not sat down yet or anything and Eastland said to President Ford, “This is a terrible appointment.” And Hruska said, “I agree with Jim, Mr. President. This is a terrible appointment.” And I thought, “Oh my word, how bad this has gotten.” We sat down and they talked it over and the President was persuasive, made his case. He did quiet them all down. They were silent.

Smith: Did he apologize for not telling -?

Korologos: Oh yeah. “We mishandled that.” I took a little blame for that, but I didn’t know either. We told them, “You should’ve known sooner” and “We’ve learned.” And “Let me tell you about this business of what his record is and who he is” and they had cited all this brilliant stuff that Levi had done and
also the issue of bugging the jury and what that was about and so on. And they kind of went away mollified and alright. And I kind of said, “Whew, I think we’ve dodged one.” But then it came time for Levi to get confirmed and they had not met Levi yet. So it came time for me to take Levi up to meet Hruska and Eastland, so we arranged a breakfast up in the Senate Dining Room. And we went in and sat down and Eastland looked at the bowtie and he kept staring at this bowtie. And I didn’t recognize it at the time, but later he had mentioned that “that fellow wearing a bowtie”. And I thought, “Oh God” and we’re not going to change his bowtie. That would’ve been confirmation conversion. So we sat down to breakfast and Eastland ordered for all of us, me and Levi and Hruska and Eastland. Is Levi still alive?

Smith: No, he died several years ago.

Korologos: The waitress lady came over and he said, “The usual for all of us.” So, I didn’t know what we were going to get, so here came bacon, scrambled eggs and grits and toast. And she put it down in front of us and Levi looked at this breakfast and I looked at it and I knew immediately it was grits and he kept eating all around it. And Eastland pulls out the Worcestershire sauce and he pours it on his and Hruska’s and mine and Levi’s. Now we’re sitting here with grits and Worcestershire sauce and I’m not sure Levi had ever seen grits, let alone eaten them, let alone eaten them with Worcestershire sauce on them. So, somehow or other, Hruska and Eastland were distracted by somebody who came to tell them about something on the floor and I knew Levi was frowning and he said, “What’s that?” And I said, “It’s grits.” And I mumbled, “You want to get confirmed, you’d better eat them.” And that poor guy nibbled on them as did I. But we got him through and that was in the days when it was easier to get people confirmed than it is today. I didn’t handle any other confirmations, I don’t think. Were there others?

Smith: Yeah, well, let’s see. I think they probably tended to come in after you left.

Korologos: When did we do Kissinger?

Smith: Because, again, it was Rumsfeld who himself only came on board I guess in December full-time. Had urged the President to sort of clean house
immediately and instead it was sort of staggered. You know, people like Bill Coleman and Carla Hills and other folks came on later in ’75.

Korologos: I don’t remember that. Henry stayed on, didn’t he?

Smith: Yes.

Korologos: Now, I’m not clear in my own head. Did Henry have to be reconfirmed?

Smith: No.

Korologos: No, neither did Gates last time, did he?

Smith: No. Now, let me ask you because maybe it’s an urban legend and maybe it’s not…when the pardon took place, members of both houses rushed to the cameras that day to publically make their displeasure known. But that supposedly, behind the scenes, there were calls, some of them were actually sort of privately telling Ford, “You did the right thing.”

Korologos: “Atta boy.” When did the pardon occur?

Smith: One month into the presidency. It was September of ’74. Does any of that ring a bell with you?

Korologos: Yeah, because what happened on the pardon was, and there was a photograph of it, we’re all called in to Timmons’ office and it was Hartmann and Ford and Timmons and me and Haig. We’re standing around and Timmons was on the phone, phoning people on the Hill and phoning around and Haig and the President were listening and they gave me a couple of assignments to go talk about the pardon and I remember I was elated, personally. I recognized immediately what a nightmare we would’ve had. Good for him. And then everybody fainted, the New York Times and all of them says it’s a terrible thing, and it cost the President the presidency I’m sure, with a lot of votes the way they played it. Today, he’s like Harry Truman who was a great hero and we found out for doing this, but yes, I think there was some calls and some “Whew, we don’t have to go through that.” Remember Congress’ Law, Congresses does two things: nothing and overreact. And there was an example. There were please to do nothing and they were overreacting at the
same time that they did not have to go through the agony of the trial of a
President. I can’t tell you names of who might’ve called, but Timmons might
know. Clark MacGregor died, didn’t he?

Smith: Yeah.

Korologos: He might’ve known. Too many guys have died. You’re too late.

Smith: Let me ask you a generic question the Levi thing brings to mind. You have
vast experience in this area. How impressed or persuaded are members of the
Congress by sheer brilliance/credentials? If you bring a candidate to them
who anyone outside would recognize as eminently qualified, is that enough?

Korologos: No, it’s just part of the equation.

Smith: What else does it take?

Korologos: Well, if you’re Secretary of the Interior, you’d better be from the West, you’d
better wear a cowboy hat, you’d better know what grazing rights are and if
you’re going to be Secretary of Agriculture, you’d better know the price of
soybeans last week. And if you’re going to be Attorney General, look at the
Attorneys General we’ve nominated. Was Saxbe a brilliant scholar? No.
Was Meese a brilliant scholar? No. Who else is over there? Holder had a
record as a U.S. attorney or whatever Holder was. Was Bobby Kennedy a
brilliant scholar? No.

Smith: Before I forget, what was your impression of Elliot Richardson?

Korologos: He was a sophisticated, used to talk in sentences written in paragraphs when
sentences would do, good guy. I knew him fairly well. We got him
confirmed. That was Rumsfeld’s Attorney General of the week. That was
another time. Who appointed Richardson? Nixon?

Smith: Yeah.

Korologos: Well, they appointed Richardson as Attorney General and for some reason I
got in the car with Eastland to go to the Hill after Nixon told him it was
Richardson or somebody told him it was Richardson. And I’m in the car with
Eastland going to the Hill and there’s Elliott Richardson walking back to the
Justice Department on the street, on Pennsylvania Avenue. And I said to Eastland, “There is Elliot Richardson, the Attorney General. Should we give him a ride?” And he said, “No, drive on.” So we drove on. He wouldn’t give Richardson a ride. I find that the funniest thing in the world.

Smith: When the whole Saturday Night Massacre took place, do we even now understand? I mean, we’ve talked to a number of people and it seems so convoluted as to whether Richardson in fact had given the President his word in terms of removing Archibald Cox, whether the White House believed in fact that Elliot was on board and Richardson subsequently - for whatever reason - changed his mind? Do you have any sense of what transpired?

Korologos: No, except that Richardson wasn’t a political person. That’s perfectly understandable what Richardson did. He was not a Rumsfeld; he was not a Washington insider that knew.

Smith: And he was certainly not a Nixon man.

Korologos: Yeah, he was not a Rahm Emanuel. He’s an intellectual. He’s a Levi. Nice guy, smart, brilliant, could recite Homer to you. Is that what you really want as your Attorney General?

Smith: Yeah. Tell us about Earl Butz.

Korologos: Earl Butz had a joke a minute. A funny guy. A great guy. That got him in trouble for telling an off-color story, wasn’t it?

Smith: Yeah.

Korologos: He was confirmed for agriculture secretary that somebody, John Whitaker, I guess, found him, wherever he was. We got him through and Senator Miller of Iowa voted against him for some reason. Iowa, a big farm state. It was a remarkable thing that a farm state Senator Miller would vote against Butz. The story - that Butz tells that Miller came down there one time asking for this and this and this and this and this for Iowa and Iowa that and Iowa this and Iowa that in a long meeting - Miller never was one to be reticent - or went on forever. He talked forever and demanded all these things for Iowa farmers. At which point, Earl Butz got out of his chair, walked around in back of the
desk or the wall where the vote count long sheet was with the senators names, every name on it on how they voted. I don’t know if it was the original, it could’ve been. I got the original on my confirmation. It’s kind of fun to hang. My wife Ann has hers as Secretary of Labor.

As Butz tells this story, he went down this list and says, “Here it is, ‘Miller – Nay’. And what do you want to talk about Jack?” And that’s an impressive story. But Butz was a good Secretary of Agriculture because he told it like it was, he was blunt, he didn’t mince any words, he knew the stuff, I don’t know what his background was, but he knew what he was talking about. He was the combination politician, the smart guy, Mr. Congeniality. I went dove hunting with him one time in Virginia somewhere. I went with Admiral Zumwalt in Zumwalt’s Defense Department car and Butz was already there. Butz said, “I’ve already shot my dove for the day.” He had been on some talk show, it was on a Sunday, where they were talking about the Vietnam war, so he was politically into everything that went on.

Smith: During those six months when you were there, I know no openings came up on the court until later when Justice Douglas resigned, but were there any advance discussions? Any attempt to sort of take stock of where the court was? Or was it more reactive?

Korologos: Not to my knowledge.

Smith: Were there ever any overall discussions about replacing members of the cabinet or was that again done on an individualized basis?

Korologos: Not to my knowledge. I didn’t get involved in any of that. There were rumors all over the place of why people survived.

Smith: Did you sense the Ford-Schlesinger non-relationship?

Korologos: Schlesinger’s a hard guy to - I mean, he was kind of a mean-spirited guy on some days. And I didn’t sense any - they were two different kinds of people, I felt and I don’t know what their personal relationships were.

Smith: One senses that Ford thought Schlesinger condescended.
Korologos: Yeah, that. You bet.

Smith: That kind of, almost a caricature of the professorial manner, suggesting that Ford who’d, after all, been on the Armed Forces committee all those years and knew a lot about the subject, was somehow not up to Schlesinger’s intellectual level.

Korologos: There was a little of that. You could tell. Even today, Schlesinger’s being Schlesinger. It’s like Rumsfeld’s being Rumsfeld. Yeah, I can believe that.

Smith: When you decided to leave in six months or whatever, what prompted that?

Korologos: Well, Timmons and I, and Stan Abner who was counsel in OMB, were fixing to leave after a while. We had been in the White House now four plus years and we wanted to open a lobby firm and do some things called “Lobbyists Unlimited.” There were tax firms, there were trade firms, there were other firms. We wanted to do it all and take clients and look at the issues that come up. Everything. All of us do everything. So we went into sessions and meetings. What are we going to do? What are we going to call this? We kicked around titles. We kicked around pieces of paper to make a brochure. And we had let it be known that we wanted to go and one of the ulterior motives was we wanted to stay with President Ford for as long as we could to get through the Watergate syndrome.

Smith: That’s fine. Now, you came back to work on the ’76 convention.

Korologos: Let me tell you one more Ford story.

Smith: Yeah.

Korologos: There was a bill kicking around, a treaty that we wanted. The State Department wanted, NSC wanted, I’ve long since forgotten what it was. All the NSC guys and state guys, “Oh my gosh, we’ve got to talk Chairman Sparkman about this.” And I couldn’t find Sparkman, or something came up, and it became crucial to get it done before some recess, so the President let me in his office. I’d see him in the halls and we’d talk. And he asked me, “What’s the story on that treaty?” And I said, “We have a mess on our hands and I can’t get hold of Sparkman.” He said, “Call him.” So the President and
I walked into the Oval Office and the phones over there in the corner and I picked up the phone and the operator came immediately and I said, “Hi.” And she said, “Mr. President?” And I said, “No, it’s Tom Korologos.” I thought she was going to call the cops. And she said, “What can I do for you?” And I said, “The President would like to speak to Senator Sparkman” and “Here’s his number” and sure enough Sparkman came on and I said, “Mr. Chairman, hang on, here’s the President.”

The President talked to him and I headed straight to the Hill afterward and Sparkman had it done. And, in fact, Sparkman got in trouble with Byrd over this thing because he went out on the floor and I had cleared the bill with the Republicans, on Foreign Relations at the time. And I said, “Hey, we really need this and the President has talked to Sparkman and he said fine.” So Sparkman went out and asked unanimous consent and voice-voted the treaty. Bang. Done. Well, Byrd came out, heard this on the speaker thing and he said, “We can’t do that. We’ve got to have a vote. This is a treaty. This is important. You can’t do this on your own.” And chewed everybody out. And Sparkman and whoever the Republican was said, “Let’s vote.” And they voted and bang. Passed it. Again. And the President, being from Congress and knew Congress, picked up the phone and, “Hi, John.” And I’m not sure whether John said, “Hi, Jerry.” But that was the relationship that he had. You know, don’t forget something: President’s bring in the job they had before. You know, President Ford was a Congress creature for twenty-five years and he knew what made them work. Carter was a nuclear physicist. What do they do? They have to touch everything. They assign the tennis courts and parking places.

Smith: Let me ask you. Remember Rockefeller early on got in trouble in the Senate for some rulings from the chair. But ultimately, out of that came the 60-vote rather than the 2/3 necessary for cloture. But he apparently really alienated some of the southern Republicans, especially people like John Tower and others. Did you remember what that was?

Korologos: Yeah, that’s been written and you’d better get the details of it if you really want it good from some of the Rockefeller books because it’s a technical
thing that I don’t want to get wrong. But he did make a ruling on a motion as Vice President without paying attention to the parliamentarian. You must pay attention to the parliamentarian, but a lot of it is at the VP discretion. He made this ruling that, by golly, when you make a ruling in the Senate from the chair, that’s it. I mean, it is a real mess to try and undo, even by unanimous consent and somebody objects. It really created a furor and it created a firestorm over his doing that that grew into the consequences that we face today on a lot of issues. But that’s too technical for my memory.

Smith: What was your role in the ’76 convention?

Korologos: I was at the official proceedings. I was underneath the podium doing official proceedings, orchestrating the speakers and orchestrating the Star-Spangled Banner and the prayers. I used to call them the preachers and patriots. The preachers were the prayer people. The patriots were the Star-Spangled Banner and the colors. And all the parliamentary official proceedings to get a nominee.

Smith: How bitter was that convention?

Korologos: It was fairly bitter because the war was on and Kissinger was there.

Smith: Remember Ford let the Reagan people have the platform on the foreign policy plank - in effect conceded to avoid a fight.

Korologos: Yeah.

Smith: And Kissinger was not happy.

Korologos: Kissinger was unhappy as hell and I got quoted in Cheney’s book again, because he must’ve been standing there and heard me, because Henry came into the hotel where the big rally was to see Ford or somebody and he came to me and he said in a loud voice - it was a plank on Russia and détente and Henry was a détente-nic and the conservatives didn’t want anything to do with the Commies, except Henry did. And so he said in a loud voice, “I will resign.” See, we were counting votes. There was a key vote going on. And the question was whether Ford was going to get the nomination over the Reaganites.
I’m digressing again. This is fun. I’ll never forget. We Ford guys in ’76 beat the hell out of Reagan in that convention and I’ll be darned, four years later, we Reaganites beat the hell out of Ford for Reagan. We got it good both ways, don’t we? So Henry went by and said in a loud voice, “If this plank passes, I will resign.” And I said in a loud voice back to him, “Henry, will you do it now and do it loudly? We need the votes.” Well, Cheney remembered that and put it in his book and every time he introduces me somewhere, he tells this story about “Korologos tells Kissinger to resign”.

In fact, Cheney did it at a Jerry Ford alumni thing when they were honoring Henry up at the Capitol Hill Club and Rummy was there. Cheney stood up and thanked everybody. And Cheney introduced Henry. Cheney went and told this story about Korologos over there and I’m ready to crawl in a hole because Henry was pointing daggers at me and Henry denied it. “Oh, that did not happen.” As only Henry would do. Yeah, that was a fairly bitter convention. Is that when Rockefeller ripped the phone out of the wall and held it up high?

Smith: Yeah.

Korologos: He was raising hell at the convention and you can’t have chaos at the conventions when we’re running the convention. We had to have the timing right because in those days – the good old days – the nominating speech and the keynote and all of that had to happen at five minutes, thirty seconds after the hour to get them to the TV and we didn’t want any alternate things happening to screw up our time. Well, here’s Rockefeller holding the phone up, ripped out the phone, saying “they cut my phone off” I’m sitting up there in the box and Senator Tower and Tower said, “We’ve got to go down there right now. We’ve got to stop this. Look what’s happening.” And I said, “You’re not going down there. You’ll get in a fight.” I said, “I’ll go” because they could throw me in the river and nobody knows. “I’m going down.” So, I get down there and I thought, “How am I going to do this now that I’ve gotten myself into this job?” I broke my way through the crowd and there’s Rockefeller and he knew me and there was – what’s the guys name? Canzeri?

Smith: Oh, Joe Canzeri.
Korologos: Joe Canzeri and a lot of those guys were there and I went up to him and said, “Governor, Governor, Tower and the boys are in the back room and want to talk to you. We’ve got some stuff going on.” And he said, “Oh, yeah?” And I said, “Yeah.” So, he brought his phone and we went off the floor and I had to pass a lot of people. See, delegates couldn’t get to the back rooms where we were. So I had a pass and we got in the back and he said, “Where are they?” And I said, “Well, I guess they disappeared.” In the meantime, other things had happened in the convention. I had broken up this big fight that was brewing and I said, “Gee whiz, I’ll have to find him.” And never came back. Well, Canzeri stopped me a short time later and said, “I saw what you did and don’t you ever muscle us again. You muscled Nelson Rockefeller.” And I said, “Well, I’m sorry. I couldn’t find Tower” crossing my fingers. And he was mad and he saw exactly what I had done and it quieted it down.

Smith: Rockefeller went to his grave convinced that when he got to speak they cut the sound. Did you hear that?

Korologos: Oh, yeah.

Smith: He didn’t age well is how I put it.

Korologos: Yeah, good point.

Smith: That was not his finest hour.

Korologos: Well, Rockefeller, too, was a guy who was in charge of everything. I mean, he was the kind of a guy that would go into a convention and redo the hall before the speech that night. And I found that a lot. So, here all of a sudden he’s been dumped off the ticket for whatever reason and then they picked Ford and then we were up there -

Smith: Dole.

Korologos: Er, Dole. And we were up there in the hotel and I for the life of me thought it was going to be Howard Baker. Bryce was up there and they were in the meeting and I was in the back and they discussed Howard Baker. The rumors came back that one of the reasons that they didn’t pick Baker was that Joy Baker had been an alcoholic and that would’ve been bad. They decided on
Dole and the reason they decided on Dole was that he was former RNC chairman. He could hit the ground running. Knew the issues. Didn’t want to mess around. Had campaigned for everybody in the world. Knew every politician in the country. Very logical and brilliant choice, because I remember during the platform of that year, I went to a platform meeting and I was sitting next to Dole, who was my buddy, and I was pointing at something and somebody took a picture of us and it got on the cover of Parade Magazine. And the story in Parade was ‘Is This the New Vice President?’ They’d printed it a couple weeks ahead.

[Tape 2]

Smith: ’76 convention, going into that convention?

Korologos: You know who’d be good at that is Timmons.

Smith: Yeah, we talked to him a little about it. But, I mean, was it your sense that it was still up in the air, the outcome of that convention when it began?

Korologos: For Reagan?

Smith: Yeah.

Korologos: Yeah, you bet. That one vote, remember. What’s the guys name from Mississippi?

Smith: Clark Reed.

Korologos: Yeah, Clark Reed.

Smith: Tell us about Clark Reed.

Korologos: Clark Reed screws up every convention I’ve ever went to just by standing there. The other guy that screwed up every convention I’ve ever went to and I’ve been to every one since ’72 was Percy. Senator Percy had always had something going and Clark Reed too. He was holding the Mississippi delegation back for whatever the hell reasons and Clark Reed had something going and we didn’t know what was going to happen. The Reagan people were hustling around, getting votes, the conservative Ernie Wilkinson, the
delegate from Utah, he was the President of BYO, came to me and said, “Who would make the best President, Ford or Reagan?” And I said, “Ford. Four years from now, come and ask me again.”

Smith: But we’ve been told for example, the thing that really sent Reed into the Ford camp, not that he didn’t try to weasel out later on, was the selection of Schweiker. When Reagan picked Schweiker to be his running mate, it really backfired.

Korologos: Pissed him off. Yeah. I had no idea how that happened, but yes that really was a remarkable – you could feel it. You could smell it in the hall.

Smith: Really?

Korologos: Yeah.

Smith: Was that at all John Sear’s doing?

Korologos: I supposed. Yeah.

Smith: When all these people now talk about Reagan in retrospect and “let Reagan be Reagan”, well, guess what? In 1976, Reagan was going to put Dick Schweiker on his ticket because he wanted to be nominated. What does that tell you about Reagan?

Korologos: You bet, he’s smarter than a lot of people thought.

Smith: And, less ideologically rigid than a lot of people thought.

Korologos: Yeah, that’s right. That’s exactly right.

Smith: When did you see Ford? I mean, was there a moment when you realized you had it won? Because there was that test vote, you know, the procedural vote. Remember when the Reagan people wanted to force Ford to name his Vice President?

Korologos: Yeah, I’ll tell you when I thought we knew he’d won and you’ll have to ask Timmons this, but we all had walkie-talkies and you could hear everything. There was a very quiet moment and I heard Timmons say to Bryce Harlow something about Reagan. I knew it was about Reagan, but he didn’t use the
word. “Has that call been made? And was it positive or negative?” And Bryce said, “Positive” which meant Reagan had agreed to nominate. Is that what happened?

Smith: Now, Reagan agreed to see Ford after the - you know, they’d worked up this deal where the winner would call on the loser, whoever it was.

Korologos: Was that what that was?

Smith: And to this day, people debate over what the ground rules were for the meeting. But I come away from all the conversations we’ve had absolutely convinced that Reagan in fact, as Cheney has always said, made it very clear that the condition he attached to meeting with Ford was that Ford not ask him about the vice presidency.

Korologos: Yeah, comes back.

Smith: And Ford wasn’t particularly eager to have him on the ticket at that point and it’s only after the fact that some Reagan people who weren’t as plugged in as they thought they were said, “Well, why didn’t Ford ask Reagan? He would’ve accepted.”

Korologos: I remember that boiling and bubbling, but I have no specifics.

Smith: Were you involved in the fall campaign?

Korologos: Yes, a little bit. Remind me. That convention was in Detroit?

Smith: No, that was the Kansas City convention. Four years later when Reagan was nominated was in Detroit.

Korologos: That’s when Baker and Dole tried to commandeer a police car and the cops wouldn’t move so they took a cab to lobby Reagan.

Smith: Tell us about that. This is in ’80 for the vice presidency?

Korologos: Yeah. The Reagan thing fell apart. The President Ford, vice president Ford fell apart.

Smith: That’s right. Was it ever serious?
Korologos: Yeah, serious as hell! Ask Timmons about that. They burned the typewriter ribbon and they burned all the paper. Meese tells you different stories about what happened. And, oh my God, that was the damnest thing.

Smith: What’s your recollection?

Korologos: My recollection of that is John Marsh went in to Reagan or somebody and said, “Yeah, we’ll take the vice presidency if we can have domestic and foreign affairs. Just the two things.” Well, somebody got wind of that and Reagan said, “Get me Bush” and they got him Bush. But when that fell apart and I heard about it, I came outside and I ran into Novak and it got in his book, too, and he said, “What’s going on?” And I said, “Well, the Ford thing just fell apart.” He said, “It did?! No, no, it’s happening.” I said, “Like hell it’s happening.” And as he puts it in his book, he was a CNN commentator and he ran around, before cell phones or anything, ran around trying to find a CNN correspondent to get on the air immediately and say the thing’s fallen apart. He couldn’t find anybody and he got scooped by somebody up in a box. Walter Cronkite scooped him and he mentioned he had one of the biggest scoops of his life “given to me by my good friend Tom Korologos.” Holy crap. Well, the Ford thing falls apart and now who’s going to be Vice President? Now, Baker and Dole of course were in the running and wanted it in the worst way. They ran out the back of the convention center and saw a sheriff or police car sitting there and they ran in and said, “We are Senator Baker and Senator Dole, take us to the” – what’s the name of the hotel, great big tall hotel right on the river where airplanes are flying underneath?

Smith: Part of the Renaissance Center.

Korologos: Yeah, one of those where Ford was and Reagan was, I guess. And they couldn’t get a car, so they had to take a cab. Went down there to try and lobby for it, but of course by then it was Bush. But that’s about all I remember of that one. Where were we before you distracted me?

Smith: Well, about ’76, the fall campaign.
Korologos: Oh, the fall campaign. Yeah, I got involved in that a couple of times. We went out and campaigned. By golly, or was it when he was Vice President? When did Carter get elected?

Smith: ’76.

Korologos: Why would I have been on Ford’s plane?

Smith: Let me back up. Did the Ford White House wait too long? Did they not take Reagan seriously enough before Reagan actually got into the race? Did they wait too long to crank up their own campaign? And did they make the mistake of not taking Reagan seriously enough as a challenger?

Korologos: I don’t know. I have no knowledge of that. I got in a plane with Ford – was he Vice President or President? Well, we went to Utah campaigning. I came out the door of the plane and Ford walked down the receiving line. There were___________ my brother and my daughter came running to the tarmac and I thought the Secret Service was going to shoot her. And we hugged her and the President met my brother Mike who said, “How do you like your new job?” And that got in the pool report, I saw the pool report that said, “Mike, Tom’s brother, asked how you like your new job.” And the President said something very good. Then we went to Colorado and campaigned there for Senator Dominick. We went to a ballpark and we’re standing on the pitcher’s mound and they had a podium – or maybe it was the home plate – but there was a podium there and all the people. And on the plane on the way out there, President Ford had had some pops. Hartmann or one of those guys that was with him, the guy from Utah, whatever that guy’s name was that was his buddy from ______, and they had gotten into the back and started drinking. Have you interviewed Terry O’Donnell?

Smith: Yeah.

Korologos: Terry will tell you this. We were out in this cowboy place and, the other thing that happened, see, we were somewhere in the ballpark in Colorado Springs or somewhere and we’re sitting there at 7,000 feet. I found this out when I got to Colorado myself, you drink a glass of wine when you get off that plane in the new altitude and it’s like drinking three. And you’d better be drinking
water and you’d better not be carrying suitcases upstairs even as old as I am. And President Ford had a few pops and he gets out to the stands to talk about Dominick, he’s got his speech on the stand and the wind comes up and blows his speech away. And there’s paper flying all over hell and Terry O’Donnell and I are picking up pieces of paper and trying to put them back for the President. It was God awful. Somebody, it may have been Cheney or Rumsfeld, raised unshirted hell with those guys in the back room giving the President something to drink and letting him be alone with those guys before an event like this.

Smith: Hartmann really was a polarizing figure in that operation, wasn’t he?

Korologos: Yeah. Yeah, he was large and in charge. The other thing that happened on that is, on that same trip – God, I can’t remember whether he was vice president or president – on that same trip, we went to Portland which was Kennerly’s – have you interviewed Kennerly?

Smith: Yeah.

Korologos: That was Kennerly’s home port. We went to San Francisco and went to Portland and we go to this hotel and, God dang, it’s now eleven o’clock at night which is two o’clock in the morning, East time, and we’d been flying all across country. We’d stopped off in Kansas and here and there and everywhere and we’re now in this hotel and everybody’s tired as hell. And Kennerly had prevailed on the President to do a function for him with his buddies from Portland. And, honest to God, we’re sitting there and there must have been thirty young ladies, good-looking as hell, even in those days, brought in flowers and roses and little tribute things for their buddy Kennerly to stand in the line with the Vice President or what to say ‘hi’ to him and talk to Kennerly. That occurred shortly after we went to a Portland Trailblazer’s basketball game somewhere up there. President Ford and I and a couple of others – the team was on the bench and we were on the next seats over at the basketball game. Then went to Kennerly’s thing which is now at 1:30 or 2:00 o’clock in the morning East time and I can’t possibly imagine how Kennerly got away with that? So the discipline was not good.
Smith: Yeah.

One last thing. Do you remember where you were on election night in ’76, the night of the Ford-Carter election? And did you think by the end of the campaign that as the polls suggested, he just might pull it out?

Korologos: I can’t remember where I was. Yes, I thought we could pull it out because to this day – well, shortly after, somehow or other, I remember President Ford saying had they gotten Delaware, they could’ve won. What did we lose by? Three or four electoral votes?

Smith: A little more than that, but it was close.

Korologos: I don’t remember where I was. I can’t remember. That’s funny. But I thought we could win. Oh my gosh, yes. Shortly after - not shortly after – Nixon, I was on his call list and I became Washington guy for Nixon after his presidency, just being down all the time to see Dole and we did stuff in Dole’s back room and did seminars and things. I was at a dinner last night with Linda Robb’s husband, Chuck Robb.

Korologos: He reminded me that I had brought Nixon up to the Democratic caucus and he’d given a tour of the world. One time Nixon called me to wish me Merry Christmas - December time - and he said, “How are you doing?” And I said, “I’m very nervous. We’ve just opened our firm. We’re a Republican firm and the Democrats have just won the presidency and I don’t know how we’re going to be able to survive this.” And he said, “Now, you listen to me,” he said, “Republican firms flourish in Democrat administrations. When the Republicans are in, Corporate America thinks it has great friends in Washington.” He said, “It isn’t true, but they think they do, so they think they don’t need Washington. So, when the Democrats come in, they come running to Washington to save them from all the evils of the Democrats.” And Nixon was right. That’s how we broadened our business.

Smith: Did you ever hear Nixon talk about Ford in those later years? Did you get a sense at all?
Korologos: That’s interesting. I was around Nixon a lot. Yes, we were in New York one time and I used to take senators to see him - freshman senators, we’d go to this place and somebody would cook Chinese and Senator Larch Faircloth of North Carolina who was a pig farmer. The group started talking about the Kitchen debate and everything else. I don’t know how we got into it but at one point Nixon took umbrage over Ford getting on corporate boards, using the presidency to further his own bottom line. He was not happy at that at all. That’s about the only time I recall anything about Ford from Nixon. Did President Ford get on a bunch of corporate boards?

Smith: He went on several. Yeah. His view, of course, was he had no money when he left Washington and a family provide for. But, yeah, it certainly has come in for criticism.

Korologos: But did he -

Smith: But, I mean, Ford was never window dressing. He only went on boards where he was really involved and felt that he could really make a contribution. We’ve talked to a number of people who served with him on various boards.

Korologos: Who was President when Nixon died? Carter?

Smith: Clinton.

Korologos: Clinton?

Smith: Yeah.

Korologos: So Bush had already been President. So he was really furious at Bush also for going around and getting $1 million honorarium including one in Japan from somebody.

Smith: Well, Reagan had gotten $1 million from Japan.

Korologos: But Nixon had died then.

Smith: No, because Reagan’s out of office in ‘89.

Korologos: Oh, yeah.
Smith: See, Reagan left first.

Korologos: See, Nixon took umbrage with Bush and Reagan for the $1 million honorarium.

Smith: How do you think Ford should be remembered?

Korologos: Well, that pardon thing was the greatest sacrifice that a person could possibly make. It quieted the country down. It did end a long national nightmare and had that not happened, who knows what would’ve happened. Politically, the precedent of doing in presidents, not only for some high crime and misdemeanor, or whatever Nixon did, but there could’ve been a political decision, another Andrew Johnson thing. Just because we don’t like your policy on Iraq, we’re going to impeach you. Boy, I tell you.

Smith: Or because you had an affair with an intern.

Korologos: Or you had an affair with an intern, yeah. I tell you, that was quite remarkable what Ford did and it took a lot of guts. Did you find out in your thing or do I have to read the history about how all that transpired in his head?

Smith: Yeah, I think one thing about Ford is sometimes Ford was perfectly willing to let people think he was more naïve than he was.

Korologos: Yeah, I got that a lot. Yeah, you’ve broken the code.

Smith: And I think he had a pretty sophisticated grasp of the options. He didn’t need Al Haig or anyone else to outline for him what the options were. I think it’s interesting that it was Bryce Harlow who he listened to, who said in effect, “You’ve got to go back to Al Haig and make sure he understands that there’s no quid pro quo here, for the record.” But I also think that even as that was going on, he had a pretty good grasp of what was in the public interest. I think there were probably some things that he probably took to the grave with him.

Korologos: I agree. You know, you said Bryce. Bryce was a great savior of the presidents. What a historical contribution he has made. But what a shame that we didn’t have the Ford presidency another four years.
Smith: Yeah.

Korologos: Golly. I have a theory, I’m semi-religious, that the Constitution was divinely inspired and somebody looks after this place except I get nervous once in awhile depending on the kind of people that get elected. Somehow, we muddle through.

Smith: I don’t know if I told you this story already. If I did, stop me. What Rex Scouten said to him on election day? Rex told us a great story. It’s about 2:30 in the morning and they’re up of course in the family quarters and, you know, it’s not over, but it’s not looking good. And Ford says, “I’m going to go to bed. We’ll know in the morning.” It was pretty clear it wasn’t going the way they wanted it to go. So, Rex follows him across the hall, wanting to say something consoling. And he says, “You know, Mr. President, who knows what will happen. If you don’t make it, it’s terribly unfair. No one deserved more…” and such and such. “Maybe you should just look at it this way: You’ve given your whole life in service to this country, whether it was military during the war, all those years on Capitol Hill and these last incredibly difficult years” and so on and so on. And he says, “Maybe, Mr. President, it’s just time for you to take a well-earned rest.” And Ford says, “I don’t think so.” Rex gave it the old college try.

Korologos: Way to go, Rex.

Smith: It’s interesting. Ford told people, in the days after, because, you know, he was down, he would say to people, “I can’t believe to a peanut farmer.”

Korologos: He was right.

Smith: Well, I do think there was some buyer’s remorse on that election.

Korologos: One more story. It was time to get Haig confirmed for Secretary of State and the pardon came up. “What was his role in it?” “What did you do?” And we muddled around with all kinds of answers and questions on that. And, to this day, “Was Haig in on a deal?” and “What was happening?” and a lot of questions and answers. I’d have to go back to the hearing to see how he answered it, but Haig was a nervous Nellie on that. Ford gave a reception,
didn’t he, when they had that meeting in the East Room where ‘our long national nightmare is over’? We met the leaders and everyone went our separate ways and later that night, there was a reception to meet the new president? And I went, of course, I’ve got a job, you know, Ford just hired me. And I ran into Haig the next day or somewhere and I said, “Where were you last night?” And Haig said, “I don’t dance on dead men’s graves.”

Smith: That says volumes.

Korologos: Yeah.

Smith: That’s perfect. Thank you.
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this. You have a unique perspective. Certainly we’ve talked to of your grandfather’s contemporaries, but I don’t think we’ve talked to anyone…

Berlanga: The grandchild.

Smith: Yes, which is very distinctive – different, I assume, from children.

Berlanga: Oh yes, because we get spoiled way more.

Smith: First of all, what were they like as grandparents?

Berlanga: Incredible. Well first there were the five girls, so we were Grandpa’s five little blonde angels and we literally were his angels. My mom Susan had me and Heather and then Uncle Mike had Sara, Becca, and Hannah, in that order. And whenever we’d go to Beaver Creek Grandma would always get us matching outfits and take our picture and we would put on shows for them. Regardless of the fact that Grandpa was a former president, he was just a really caring grandpa. The times with him were always magical. He and Grandma always made holidays so special. I think my husband thinks I’m nuts about Fourth of July, but we’d always go and spend Fourth of July in Vail and Beaver Creek, go to Pepi and Sheika’s, do the fireworks. They always made the holidays magical.

Smith: And you have an ice cream named after you.

Berlanga: I do. The Sara Tyne.

Smith: Yes, how did that happen?

Berlanga: I believe Grandma and Grandpa were at a restaurant, I know the name…

Smith: It’s called the Left Bank.
Berlanga: Yes, and my mom had me when Grandma and Grandpa were there, and I guess they got the news, or that was the day, and so the chef named the ice cream after me and Sara. He was so cute at the funeral, he came up to me and I know I had met him before, but I had grown since then. It had been a while and he came up to me in his sweet French accent, “You are Tyne! You are Tyne of Sara Tyne! I have the ice cream!” He’s so sweet and it’s really flattering to have an ice cream named after me. I have to take my daughter there one day to go have the Sara Tyne ice cream. I mean, you don’t realize it at the time, but Grandpa made sure we knew how to swim because that was important to him.

Smith: Is that because he swam every day?

Berlanga: Because he swam. So every time we’d go out to visit him, he’d take us out to the pool, just him and you, and he’d say, “Okay, show me your laps.” And you’d go and do your freestyle swimming and then you’d do your breaststroke, and then you’d do your backstroke. It was kind of that special thing you had with Grandpa. And it was important to him that you could ski, so he made sure we had skiing lessons. We didn’t know that it was any big deal, but every morning Grandpa would walk you to ski lessons and he’d carry your skis on his shoulder. He didn’t even make Mom take us; he just took us to ski lessons every morning.

Smith: And this was after he’d stopped skiing.

Berlanga: Yes, after he’d stopped skiing. So he’d be up, he’d have his breakfast, he’d read his papers and then he’d take us to ski lessons. That was just a special time to have with Grandpa and it was just great on a grandpa level; but you don’t realize until you’re a grownup that he didn’t have to do any of that stuff with us. It was really important to him that the things he loved, he instilled in us as we were young, and now they’ve become things that we love to do. And it was full circle moment that my daughter, Joy, when we were out visiting my Grandma for spring break, figured out how to swim in Grandpa’s pool. So when we were there visiting Grandma at Rancho Mirage, she learned how to swim.
Smith: That’s wonderful.

Berlanga: It was very cool.

Smith: Let’s back up first because there were the two houses.

Berlanga: Yes.

Smith: And how were things different in each?

Berlanga: Well, Beaver Creek was pretty special because the granddaughters had the loft. They took an attic and just made it into a space that, maybe at the tallest, was five and a half feet tall. So it was perfect for little granddaughters. There were six twin beds and the ceilings were arched, so if you sat up too quickly you’d get a wall in the face. But for us, it was perfect and we loved it. So we’d have our little floor to ourselves and no one would really ever come up to the loft to bother us. They would just stand there. But Beaver Creek you would go for holidays; for the Fourth of the July, for Christmas and that’s where everyone would congregate.

Smith: The house was big enough that all of the kids had their own rooms.

Berlanga: It fit everybody. All the kids had their own rooms and all the granddaughters got to stay together in the loft. Once Jack had his boys, the granddaughters were old enough; we’d all kind of spread out. But now Jack’s boys stay in the loft and the granddaughters have been moved to the adult bedrooms. It was fun because with cousins you could play and make noise and it was good that we’d be away from the house. I remember our Christmases. Christmas morning they’d always make us wait at the top of the stairs while the grownups were downstairs getting everything ready. And then Grandpa would say, “Alright, come down,” and we’d all run down the stairs to the Christmas tree, and of course, it looked like the whole neighborhood’s presents were under our tree, the way they spoiled us. But, that house was just fun. It’s where everyone congregated. The dining room table was big enough that we’d have big Pictionary games, boys against the girls. Grandpa can’t draw a lick, so he would always be looking over to see what girls were drawing and steal from us.
Smith: And he never really mastered computers, did he?

Berlanga: No, he didn’t.

Smith: I think he learned to play Solitaire.

Berlanga: Solitaire and maybe Bridge on the computer, but that was about it.

Smith: And the story was that he could receive emails, he just couldn’t send them.

Berlanga: No. And I think he tried. Mom and Vaden, I think, really tried to get him to learn how to use the computer, but to no avail.

Smith: But your grandmother, she was computer literate?

Berlanga: A little bit. I think so. I mean, you could send her emails. There was a time that you could send emails, but I think for the most part, they preferred the written letter. But Palm Springs was always fun because you had the pool, the house around the pool, and usually when you went and visited them in Rancho Mirage, it was just you because the house isn’t really big enough for all of us.

Smith: That house was all on one level.

Berlanga: Yeah. All on one level, kind of built in an L-shape around the pool. It’s fun because it’s kind of like a compound. They’ve got the tennis courts and I remember Grandpa would let me drive his golf cart and I crashed his golf cart.

Smith: Do you remember how old you were?

Berlanga: Probably – maybe ten, if ten. But it backs up to the golf course and there’re the orange trees and citrus trees and I remember Grandpa going out and picking kumquats and eating them right off the tree. It really just felt like a resort.

Smith: Beats Michigan in the winter.

Berlanga: Yes, it does.

Smith: Have you been in Michigan in the winter?
Berlanga: Only for the funeral. That was the only time and from what I hear, it was pretty mild. We spent a week there at the beach in the summer and I thought, hey, Michigan’s pretty nice, and Mom said, “Well, you’ve never been here in the winter.” But I think the desert’s always fun because it’s kind of one on one with Grandma and Grandpa. You don’t have to share with anyone else. It’s just warm and beautiful. They sure know how to pick the places to live, that’s for sure.

Smith: What was the routine like?

Berlanga: Well, Grandpa was always up before everyone else. He was always up, usually sitting - they have these great big chairs, super comfy - he’d be sitting there reading his paper in the mornings, drinking his cup of coffee. Grandpa’s the one who got me hooked up on grapefruit because he would have his little half grapefruit in the morning and when I’d go to Grandpa’s house I’d always have the other half of grapefruit that he didn’t eat. So you’d have a little time with Grandpa, and he’d eat his breakfast and he’d go swim, and right about as he was swimming was usually when Grandma emerged.

Smith: She’s not a morning person.

Berlanga: No, she’s not. Grandpa’s a morning person, Mom’s a morning person, and so am I. And then, it’s funny because Mike’s got Grandma’s sleeping in and so all of his girls sleep in like Grandma does. Grandpa’s always up in the morning. You knew if you woke up before Grandpa, it was time to go back to bed.

Smith: And not just on Christmas morning.

Berlanga: No. And even then, if you were caught down the stairs, you’d get in trouble. We always had to wait for Uncle Steve to wake up Christmas morning, too. Uncle Steve would always say, “Well, I don’t know if I’m going to wake up.” Anyway, he liked to give us a hard time.

Smith: Talk about opposites attracting, because he was such a stickler for punctuality.

Berlanga: Oh, my goodness.
Smith: Tell us about that.

Berlanga: Well, we’re always downstairs – in the bottom of the Beaver Creek house you’ve got the mud room, the coat closet and we’re all usually bundled up, probably to go do the Christmas tree lighting and we’re all waiting downstairs, the agents are outside, cars are running and Grandpa going, “Betty!” And no matter how many times he asked, she always came on her schedule. Even at the funeral, I think, we still probably had to wait a little bit. But Grandpa was always five minutes early, and Grandma was always five minutes later. I don’t know how they worked it out.

Smith: Did you ever discuss it with her?

Berlanga: I think she just understood that if she was going to look as beautiful as she always did, then he would just let it be.

Smith: That’s interesting because I’ve often thought part of it was a kind of perfectionism.

Berlanga: Yes.

Smith: And tell me if I’m wrong, I’ve been told it and then I saw it, that for someone who had been in the public eye as much as she was, she still got butterflies before going on stage or to give a speech. Which is another side of perfectionism, and actually, if you ever stop worrying, that’s when you should worry, because you obviously want to be at your best.

Berlanga: You care. Exactly. I think she always cared how people appeared, how her granddaughters appeared. I mean, she cared that we looked appropriate, she really didn’t want – when it’s casual, it’s no big deal – but I don’t think she ever wanted someone saying anything bad about her family, how they looked because she didn’t impart what being appropriate is. I think something that I really learned from Grandma is appearance, class, decorum, how to act like a lady.

Smith: Which is not stuffiness.
Berlanga: No, it’s not, because she’s as modern as they come. But there is something about being a modern, sensible woman, but still not walking around looking like you don’t care about your appearance. And I think that was really the interesting part about Grandma; she’s a classy lady, but she’s not stuck, she’s not stuck in the old days. She’s pretty with it.

Smith: She’s fascinating because one senses that maybe he was a little bit more of a traditionalist.

Berlanga: Yes, absolutely.

Smith: Even in another context, I remember saying in my eulogy that most of us tend to get a little more conservative as we get older, and they didn’t seem to. And in fact, maybe part of it was the party went so far to the right on a number of things. Whether it was the whole abortion issue or gay rights or things that you don’t really associate with a conservative Republican, or even a former president; I’ve often wondered how much of that was her influence on him; how much of it was having children and grandchildren bringing up new ideas and new ways of seeing things.

Berlanga: I think that is a lot of it. I think part of it is Grandma coming from an arts background, dancing with Martha Graham. I think she was always kind of poking at him a little bit. But I also think Grandpa had just – he followed his gut, no matter what the party said. If he felt it was right or in terms of equal rights, I think he just listened to his heart. And when it all comes down to it, he’s a good guy. I think he and Grandma weren’t loud and proud about anything; I think they just quietly knew what was important to them, and I think Grandpa’s faith had a lot to do with it. I think he felt we were all created equal in God’s eyes and I think that was something he really carried with him.

Also, I think, as grandchildren we tended to stir the pot a little bit. But I guess Jack was a wild child, but then became the most conservative one because Uncle Jack and I got into it one day about – I think I was talking about gay rights – and it always seemed like Beaver Creek – the big table always turned to politics somehow. I was an art student at SMU and it was probably my most liberal time of my life. I was talking about gay rights and Uncle Jack
was talking about how Republicans are persecuted just as much as gay people are and I pretty much laughed at him. But Uncle Jack and I got into it a little bit. Grandma pulled me aside after dinner, I think she could tell I was a little defeated and pretty ticked off. She said, “You know, he used to be my most wild boy. I don’t know what happened to him. But it’s really nice to hear different opinions around the table.”

Smith: Really? What an encouraging thing to hear.

Berlanga: It is, and no matter where you came from, and even with Grandpa – Grandpa, again, when I was at SMU – Grandpa and I got into it. I got onto him about how America doesn’t give enough to the arts; how we don’t fund it enough in the schools; how compared to countries in Europe, the United States is lacking in its arts funding. And Grandpa kind of got onto me about every year we give more, and da, da, da. And me still being a mouthy teenager, said, “We don’t give enough…” Well, about two weeks later at my college apartment, a big packet was sent to me. He had requested, and I can’t remember from what congressman, but a copy of the budget and the numbers for the past five years of how America has increased their arts spending.

Smith: It sounds like he took what you said seriously.

Berlanga: He took what you said seriously, and you were never ashamed or made to feel bad for your opinion. They really encouraged discussion. It was just open and polite, we never really said anything hurtful, but roundtable – let’s have at it and the granddaughters always stirred the pot with their concerns. I think Grandma and Grandpa kind of sat back and appreciated that they had raised a strong minded family. And I think had we not expressed an opinion, had maybe where they would find ________________. I think, if nothing else, they just wanted us to have a strong head on our shoulders.

Smith: I also wonder in a large sense if the seeds were always there. But I also wonder if, for him, the experience of going through the intervention and then becoming really a part of her work at the Betty Ford Center, just brought out the compassion that existed; sort of institutionalized it because obviously their lives were really caught up in a lot of what was going on and they saw friends
of theirs, good people, decent people, who had a weakness. That’s got to be a lesson in and of itself.

Berlanga: I never saw Grandpa – I know he can be a tough guy…

Smith: Did you see his temper?

Berlanga: Of course, he has a temper. Yeah. Yes, Grandpa has a temper.

Smith: What would set it off?

Berlanga: Oh, you know – Grandma would be late, tended to be something – you know he doesn’t like lateness. He doesn’t like bickering. Now, discussion is fine, but he really doesn’t like bickering.

Smith: We were told early on, I think, maybe it was Penny who said it, at one point he had mostly women in the office. And he politely, but firmly, made the point that he wasn’t interested in backbiting, gossiping, all of those things that take away from the work.

Berlanga: Yes. With your parents and your aunts and uncles, you show respect. He really doesn’t like the sass, and he shouldn’t have to put up with it. I don’t know if you’ve heard this story before, but I think I was about six, maybe five, maybe a little younger, and I had just learned to swim without my floaties. I think we were at Rancho Mirage and we were in the pool. It was Uncle Jack’s birthday and I was in the pool; Jack was on one side of the pool and Grandpa was on the other. Grandpa had just come from the office, so he was in his suit – this was still a man who was “retired” but would put on a suit most times just to go to the office. And so he had come back from the office; he was in this gorgeous suit and nice shoes, leather belt, and him and Uncle Jack thought they would tease me and they were throwing the ball over me and pretending that they were going to throw it at me. And – oh goodness – I got really nervous and so I decided to push my Grandpa in the pool. And so they were doing something and I pushed Grandpa in the pool and I think the pool started looking like a Jacuzzi because he got so hot. He came up sputtering, and I immediately went in between my mother’s legs and hid there. You could tell he was upset, and he just kind of, “Now, Tyne, you
shouldn’t be doing those things,” but you could tell he was so mad. He had lost his temper, but he wasn’t going to lose it on his granddaughter.

Smith: That’s a great story because one senses that it was a lifelong effort that he made – almost always successfully - but it required an effort.

Berlanga: And I think the fact that I was hiding behind my mother. I knew that I had messed up really bad; that it wasn’t quite as funny as I thought it was. But to a five year old, you don’t understand a nice suit and a leather belt and shoes. It’s one of those things that you don’t really get in trouble with Grandpa unless you’ve done something really wrong. He had a lot of understanding and compassion for his grandchildren.

Smith: What would it take? You’ve opened the door…what would it take?

Berlanga: I don’t think I really got in a lot of trouble. My sister got in trouble. She lived with him for a summer and didn’t come home at curfew and she got in big trouble for that. But I think for Grandpa, it’s got to be big. You don’t really see him – he really doesn’t lose it that often.

Smith: You mentioned the suit. His fiscal conservatism expressed itself in a number of ways, including the fact that I guess he had closets full of suits older than you.

Berlanga: And they are still there.

Smith: And I guess one of Mrs. Ford’s jobs was to make sure that he didn’t go out in public in them.

Berlanga: Oh, yeah. She always made sure we all looked good. You had a feeling that Grandma probably picked out what he was wearing and he just put it on – as probably the smart man that he is, because she had a great sense of style.

Smith: Was she a disciplinarian?

Berlanga: Yes. I would say Grandma probably was the iron fist in the house, if anyone. The grandchildren ate in the kitchen. We didn’t eat in the dining room unless it was like a special occasion. There were a lot more rules. You made sure you took your shoes off when you entered the house.
You only make Grandma ask once. But now, it’s funny, with great-grandchildren? All the rules are out the window. I brought Joy to see her – this was before Cruz was born, and I was talking to Mom, “Well, I don’t want to put the highchair in the dining room, I don’t want Joy to make the dining room a mess.” And we’re sitting there having lunch at the dining table and she said, “Well bring Joy’s highchair out here so she can eat with us,” and she was letting Joy eat crackers and juice in the dining room and giving crackers to the dog. And I kind of looked at Mom like “are you kidding?” Apparently great-grandchildren just don’t have any rules.

Smith: It skips a generation.

Berlanga: It does, it absolutely skips a generation. She lets Cruz eat her robes, just those things don’t seem to bother her, or aren’t as important anymore. It’s nice and Joy loves going to GG’s house – that’s what she calls Grandma – GG. And so she loves going there and she loves picking the fruit from the trees and swimming in GG’s pool.

Smith: Isn’t it nice that she’ll have memories?

Berlanga: Yes, it is, it’s really nice. And she asks to go there, so that tells me she does remember visiting her. And she can pick both their pictures out. We picked up some presidents flashcards and she really doesn’t understand the concept that Great-Grandpa was a president, but she did tell Grandma, “Well, Great-Grandpa played football, and he swims, and sometimes he was a president.” That’s what she told Grandma. She gets it, but she doesn’t really understand what that means.

Smith: How old were all of you before you understood what it meant?

Berlanga: I don’t know.

Smith: Was it something in the background or did they talk about their days in the White House?

Berlanga: Well, Grandpa would more tell stories before the White House – when he was a Ranger at Yellowstone, the bear story. The bear story was always – now you have to get Uncle Steve to tell the bear story because Uncle Steve tells the
bear story the best. But I would hear the bear story and he would like to tell stories about Grand Rapids and his mom, because I never met Great-Grandma Ford. He likes to tell how he courted Grandma, how Grandma knew that she was going to marry Grandpa because one night – I guess Grandpa might have been waiting for her when she came home with another beau – and after the beau had escorted her in, I think Grandpa took him aside and said, “Now what are your intentions with Betty?” And she heard Grandpa asking. I think that’s when Grandma knew that that was going to be the man she was going to marry.

Smith: Really?

Berlanga: He more told those stories. We would have to ask about the White House stories.

Smith: He clearly was very close to his mother.

Berlanga: Yes. And from what I can tell, she was a spectacular woman. Grandma talks highly of her, and so does Mom. Everyone loved Grandma Ford.

Smith: She died in the church pew, and when they went back home they found her appointment book full for the next month. Does that sound like a family trait?

Berlanga: Yeah. I think Grandpa really – he was his mother’s son.

Smith: And one sensed, too, that he really had in a lot of ways advanced views about what women could do because first of all, he’d seen what his mother had been put through, and how she came through that. One sensed that he always felt that she had been victimized in a number of ways; but refused to be a victim.

Berlanga: Yes, exactly. And then he went and married another strong woman. He was raised by a strong woman and then married another strong woman. I think it was important to Grandma that she raised a strong daughter as well as strong granddaughters. I think it was very important to Grandma and to Grandpa that just because we were girls, that didn’t mean we shouldn’t speak our mind.

Smith: Politicians are notorious for being in a bubble, and in a curious way, maybe in the White House more than almost anywhere else. I remember Bob Dole,
when his daughter was in high school – this is ’64 or ’65 – and he heard her talk about this musical group. And so he wrote to the British embassy to see if the Beatles could come and perform at Robin’s school.

Berlanga: Oh, no. Had no idea?

Smith: No idea. Politicians tend to get very absorbed in what they are doing.

Berlanga: I think they find that stuff just not as important – irrelevant. And I think that’s part of, too, why Grandpa didn’t like cattiness or bickering.

Smith: He wasn’t a gossip, was he?

Berlanga: No, he wasn’t a gossip and if it wasn’t relevant, I don’t think he really felt like he should waste his time on it. I just think he had done so many important things and had lived such important stuff, why waste your time on something that wouldn’t do or someone else any good? And I think that was really his attitude towards it all.

Grandma loves Dancing with the Stars, that would be the only thing. She loves when Dancing with the Stars is on. But I think the pop culture…

Smith: Did he know that MTV existed?

Berlanga: No, I think he thinks they were silly shows, kind of trash on TV maybe? News was always on in the house. In the evening he watched the news. I think Grandma may have read a People magazine here and there. He loved going to the movies. I saw, I think it was Apollo 13, and I think that was really neat to watch with him. It came out at Christmas time and I think we all went as a family to go see it.

Smith: How would people react when this group of Fords came into the theater?

Berlanga: A lot of times, they’d just have two rows blocked off and then right before the trailers started we walk in and sit down. But I know Grandpa would love a good bag of popcorn. He’d love his junk food. In California even, towards the end of his life he’d still ask for an In and Out Burger and a chocolate milkshake.
You’d always hear the whispers and then usually at the end of a meal when we’re leaving is when people would usually clap and shake hands and stuff.

Smith: At some point did the light bulb go on?

Berlanga: Yeah, it was weird and it was really sweet. It was incredibly sweet. And people were typically very respectful – let them enjoy their meals with their grandchildren and children – and usually would wait until the end. Kids - he would always shake their hands and sign something for kids. I think you do feel when you’re out that people were looking and staring. But then after five or ten minutes you just kind of get used to it.

Smith: Autograph dealers were a bane to his existence.

Berlanga: Yes. He didn’t like that, no. But I think like anyone, I’m sure he appreciates – he worked hard.

Smith: It’s nice to be noticed.

Berlanga: It’s nice to be noticed and as long as it was done in a respectful way and not disruptive; they were always really pretty good sports about it.

Smith: And my sense is, that they were beloved in Vail.

Berlanga: Oh, yeah.

Smith: They weren’t just visible.

Berlanga: That was not their hometown, but it’s their town – they own Beaver Creek. It’s Grandma and Grandpa’s town.

Smith: We’ve been told that they, more than anyone else, put the place on the map as a year-round destination.

Berlanga: Oh, yeah. And that’s where I have the most memories – in Beaver Creek. That’s where I consider the extended Beaver Creek family – the Pepi and Sheika’s and all of them. Those are people that would just be in your heart forever. And just be part of making all those memories. Steve Jones up in the stables. And probably, too, because we got all of these wonderful
extravagancies while we were there, and were treated so special. But it’s really a magical place.

Smith: At some point you realized your grandfather was the one that they had turn on the Christmas lights.

Berlanga: Yeah. It’s pretty cool. It’s very cool. You know, he didn’t turn on the Christmas, he let his granddaughters turn on Christmas lights. When I moved to Frisco and I heard they were doing the Christmas tree lighting, I just let them know who was really – I had a resume full of light switching. But it really is pretty cool. It’s pretty cool to know what he did, I think. Growing up though, I’ve just now started going back and learning the history – I think I purposely shied away from learning the details of the time when he was president before and after. But I did know kind of hazily about Watergate and him pardoning Nixon. And I kind of knew that it was a very polarizing decision, but I think when you are in your teens, I think you really didn’t want to have an opinion on it, I think you didn’t want to hear people’s opinion. I think I just knew he was president then and that was fine and it was very cool. I didn’t want to have to get into a discussion about it, or give my opinion on it. He was my grandpa and he was president then. I think now, my stepdad just recently sent me something about the wreath laying at his birthday and there was a woman who had evacuated from Vietnam and I realized as a grownup, that I really have no idea about history at that time. And I think I shied away from really learning about it. And so now as an adult with some perspective, I’m going back now and kind of learning the history leading up to his presidency and afterwards, to kind of understand the scope of everything that he went through.

Smith: Did you ever hear him talk about Nixon?

Berlanga: No. I think he was a good man. That’s pretty much – you know, Warren Commission, I think I asked him about that once, and he said – JFK – that movie made him really mad.

Smith: I think he was on a plane and he was a captive audience.
Tyne Berlanga  July 24, 2010

Berlanga: I have never really heard him say, to ask us specifically, but I feel like he specifically asked us not to go see that movie, I think it made him so mad. I think I asked him about the Warren Commission and he said those conspiracy theories are a bunch of crap, something along those lines. And the Warren Commission – what we found is correct and so I think all that stuff made him pretty upset.

Smith: I only heard him disparage two people, and the worst he could come up with was, “He’s a bad man.” And one was Gordon Liddy and one was John Dean, and I think a lot of people would probably second his opinion. Did you ever hear him talk about it?

Berlanga: No, he really doesn’t speak badly about people. And I think he really does, with everyone, try to look and find the good in people. Even with Nixon I think he felt like he was a good man who just got caught up in a bad situation. And I guess, from what I’ve learned about Grandpa and from what I’ve learned about politicians in general, is even though they might have politics I don’t agree with, or they have opinions that I don’t think are right, they are still people and for the most part have all been friends to my family. So I find it really hard to just cross a line through someone or to disparage someone. Because no matter what they do or if they make a mistake, they are still a person and I think that’s what I learned the most about Grandpa. Yes, he has the title of president, but he’s still a person and I think they’re all just doing the best job that they can do.

Smith: It’s fascinating to see the relationship with the Kennedys because, as a young congressman, he had an office across the hall from Jack Kennedy.

Berlanga: Which I just learned.

Smith: When the Kennedy Library gave him the Profiles in Courage Award, it was such a turning point; and to see Senator Kennedy and Caroline that day and their interaction, it was just such a privilege to be a fly on the wall. And, of course, the friendship with Jimmy Carter, which I think still surprises people.

Berlanga: Yes, I had no idea. To see that friendship and Jimmy Carter’s eulogy was just so touching. He came up to me on Air Force One; I was holding my daughter
and it was one of those things where I was whispering, “What do you think? Think we could maybe get a picture of Joy with President Carter?” And without anyone saying anything, he just saw me walking by and he goes, “Well, let me hold that baby.” He just took Joy out of my arms and I think you don’t realize with the news bites and the speeches and everything, that these are just people and they are not in this business, for the most part, to make a lot of money. They really do have good intentions and especially with Grandpa’s time, they were all buddies. They all lived in DC. I think you miss that these days.

Smith: A very different culture.

Berlanga: Yeah. And what you can learn from Grandpa is that the man who defeated him has become a close friend. He could have been a sore loser, he could have turned his back, but he did everything in his power to let President Carter become a successful president. I think there is a camaraderie with the presidents that a lot of people don’t realize, because there are not a lot of people in that club and everyone knows it’s kind of a thankless job. I didn’t realize the friendship between the Carters and my grandparents until the funeral, and it’s really pretty special.

Smith: It is. Were birthdays a big deal?

Berlanga: Yes. We love celebrating Grandpa’s birthday and usually we would go out for Fourth of July and just stay through until his birthday. So we’d stay in Beaver Creek for two weeks in the middle of July.

Smith: And of course, the Fourth of July, they always reviewed the parade in Vail.

Berlanga: Oh, yes, and sometimes we got to ride the fire trucks in the parade. So birthdays were a big deal. Grandma didn’t like celebrating her birthday as much as Grandpa, but birthdays were a big deal. I’ll never forget – maybe he was 88 or 89, for some reason I sent – I just had my days mixed up – and so I sent his birthday card for June 14th instead of July 14th. And then on June 14th I picked up the phone to call my grandpa on his birthday, and, “Happy Birthday, Grandpa, how are you? Miss you…” And he was so sweet and let me go on, and he goes, “Well, thank you for your sweet card, but I think
you’re a month early.” And I said, “Really?” And he said, “Yeah, it’s July 14th and not June 14th,” and I went gulp. But he was so sweet and he was like, “Well, you’re the first one to wish me a happy birthday.” He never made you feel bad about it. He just thought it was sweet that his granddaughter was a month early.

Smith: It’s not a secret that she had a somewhat more ribald sense of humor than he did.

Berlanga: Yes.

Smith: Ann Cullen tells a story about how she and her [Mrs. Ford] would be in there roaring with laughter, and he’d poke his head in and it just sort of went right over.

Berlanga: And Grandma is still in on the joke. Grandma just gets it and ah, I’m sure she’ll kill me for saying this, but…

Smith: I can probably tell you an even better – but you tell yours and I’ll tell mine.

Berlanga: My husband Hector, he and I moved in together before we got married, and Hector came up with me for Fourth of July, and for some reason Mom and Vaden couldn’t come, but all my uncles were there, and Uncle Steve and Uncle Jack specifically – well, first of all when we were younger they were the tickle monsters, and now they just kind of put all the granddaughter’s husbands through the wringer – give them a hard time – you’ve got to initiate them somehow. And so somehow Jack kind of gets wind…so Hector and I probably weren’t going to really broadcast that we were living together before we got married. We just – you know. Somehow Jack kind of got onto it and got wind that we were living together and was giving both Hector and I a hard time at the dinner table, in front of Grandpa and Grandma. And poor Hector, he’s just sitting there trying not to make a bad impression and say the wrong thing, and Grandma finally pipes up and says, “Well, you’ve got to try the shoe on before you buy it.” And that just shut everyone down.

Smith: Talk something about her that might surprise people.
Well, besides her sense of humor... well, everyone was giving me a hard time that my husband, he is a ballet dancer, not that they don’t know that she’s a dancer, but, you know, growing up they said the boys were going to be football players and the girls were going to be ballet dancers. But I think she was really proud that I was in theater and my husband was in dance, and that was important to her, I think. Keeping the arts alive was very important to her.

Well, that’s interesting because I think she was clearly the one – Martha Graham got the Medal of Honor.

Yes, and she was behind that, I’m sure.

And Alexander Calder, the sculptor, who did what has now become Grand Rapids’ symbol.

The red thing?

Exactly.

Yes.

The irony of ironies – your grandfather got the federal funding, and it was one of the first big National Endowment for the Arts projects. I’m not sure he was a big Calder fan beforehand, but he was responsible. And subsequently, he didn’t want a statue of himself in front of the museum and they settled on the spaceman because of his interest in the space program. But he did say to someone, “Whatever you do, make it representational art.” He did not want another Calder.

Grandpa.

One senses your grandmother might have a little bit broader approach to the arts.

I would say Grandpa is a simple, Midwestern man. I would say Grandma is more of a city girl.

Maybe that’s what part of the opposites that attracted.
Berlanga: Yes, and I think that’s what brings them such a good balance, is they balanced each other and taught each other. Like most successful married couples, they said they never went to bed angry. I even asked Mom, I said, “Grandma says her and Grandpa never got into it, did they?” And she said, “Oh, I’m sure they got into it, they just…” but I guess they never let the kids see it. I think they were really smart about how about they handled things.

Smith: She obviously went through a period back in the Sixties – you’re mother has written about this – where she was really representative of a whole lot of women of her generation.

Berlanga: Yeah.

Smith: Who were trying to find a role in this emerging, ill defined culture. I’ve always thought your grandmother was a remarkable combination of the traditional and the visionary in some ways. She has a foot in both camps.

Berlanga: Yes.

Smith: But that’s not always easy to live that way. Did she talk about it?

Berlanga: Women would come up to her and say, “Thank you for changing my life, you’ve done so much.” And Grandma would say, “What thing have I done?” Because she’s done the alcoholism, she’s done equal rights for woman, she’s done breast cancer, and I guess I should probably ask her who instilled in her the courage to not be told no – or to not bite her tongue.

Smith: Did she talk about her parents?

Berlanga: Not too much. She talks about worrying that Grandpa Ford, Grandpa’s dad, would be wary of Grandpa marrying her because she was a divorcee. And that was not looked well upon.

Smith: In West Michigan, generally, in the whole Dutch Reform Church, there was a very different kind of attitude in those days. There was this uncertainty about her dad’s death, and whether it was in fact suicide or an accident, and she’s suggested in passing, I think, in one of her books that it was probably suicide.
That’s a trauma under any circumstances, and you don’t know what people take away from it.

Berlanga: She really doesn’t talk too much about her parents to us. And I think it might just be – I think she still tries to shelter the grandchildren a good deal.

Smith: Does she still have a political interest? The ERA never passed, but…

Berlanga: I think she just likes to know what’s going on. I think when President Obama won, she said, “It’s good to see a black man in the office.” I think she just is happy to see the nation moving forward; not necessarily Democratic or Republican, but just kind of opening the mind of America to all the possibilities of who could lead our country.

Smith: I would love to get her and Michelle Obama in the same room.

Berlanga: I think it would be very interesting. They are two like-minded, forward thinking, can’t be put down, women. And I think my husband himself being a Hispanic man, I think he probably was a little intimidated by the fact, but they never even blinked. Even my grandmother said, “It’s finally nice to have someone with brown hair in the family.” My daughter has curls and she just puts her hands in my daughter’s hair and says, “Finally, we have someone with curls.” I never saw any prejudices from them or from anyone in my family. We were just raised that everyone is equal.

Smith: He loved to travel. And he was really in good shape until around his 90th birthday, and I think one of the doctors probably said to him about then, you’ve really got to cut back. And that must have been really tough for him to accept.

Berlanga: Yeah.

Smith: Because among other things, it’s another sign of your mortality and limitations and all of that.

Berlanga: Well, and not being able to go to Beaver Creek was very hard for him. I really do believe that was his favorite place to go and spend his time.
Smith: And they insisted on going that last summer, even though everyone told them you shouldn’t.

Berlanga: It was just important to them. And I think that house has so many memories and that place has so many memories and I think he just loves the valley and all that means to him and all that big community. He brought up the valley and he would still go out and fill the birdfeeder out the window because they’ve got a big bay window where he sits and reads his papers and he loved to see the birds out there eating the bird food. And every now and then, maybe once every five, ten years, you’d get a bear out there, you’d get a porcupine. But it was just important to him and I’m glad he got to go that last time.

Smith: It had to have been difficult. The Secret Service are not trained to provide medical care, and your grandmother really didn’t want to bring outsiders into the house.

Berlanga: Yes.

Smith: First you want to deny that the need exists, it’s just human. And then you want to make it clear that I’m taking care of my husband. How did that play out?

Berlanga: I think she’s still dealing with the fact that she has nurses. I think for the last part of his life, Grandma was making sure that Grandpa was okay. I think that’s what her focus was, and even with as many people that were there – housekeeper, chef, Grandma and Grandpa liked their privacy, they liked to take care of themselves. They weren’t someone who just kind of sat there and let people wait on them. So I think bringing that in and giving up control – Grandma is a little bit of a control freak – that runs strong down Mom’s and my line as well. She likes things done the way she likes them done, and if they’re not done that way, then it’s not okay. And I think bringing anyone in, especially if they don’t know how we like things done around here, it’s going to be more of an annoyance than anything. So I think once Grandpa did pass, I think having the nurses – I think Grandma finally took a breath and then realized that maybe she wasn’t in as good as shape as she thought she was in. But I think now they are good companions for Grandma, too. Just to have
someone. You have the same set of nurses coming in and I know the faces
and they’ve seen my children grow up.

Smith: I think maybe it was your sister who said, according to your grandmother,
saying, “This getting old is not easy.”

Berlanga: Yes, she tells you that, it doesn’t feel good to get old. I think that is frustrating
to her because they both were so active and not only active, but athletic.
Fitness was part of their daily routine and being healthy. Not that she’s not
healthy; but her body just doesn’t work like it used to. You’re 92. But her
mind is still there and I think it frustrates – the aches and pains – that can’t be
easy. And I think she misses her sweetheart.

Smith: She said when people asked and wanted her to do something, she said, “Tell
them I’m retired.” At 92 you can be retired.

Berlanga: Exactly. That’s exactly right. And she spends her days now with her close
friends and her family. And I think all that other stuff is great and fine, but I
think her time now is very precious to her.

Smith: Anyone who gets to be 92, one of the problems is that you tend to outlive a lot
of your contemporaries, your friends.

Berlanga: She still has a few friends that will come visit, and I know she talks on the
phone a lot. I think, as a family, we all just try to make a point that someone is
out there, if not every month, every couple of weeks, so that her days aren’t
long. I can’t imagine being married to your best friend for over fifty years and
then you spend the end of his life taking care of him and then when he’s
gone…

Smith: Does she talk about him?

Berlanga: Oh, yeah, with pride and love, and she misses her sweetheart. I can’t even
imagine what that would be like. But she loves to tell stories about him, and I
try to get her to tell me – I ask her every time, “What was the favorite trip you
took?” And she tells me that India was the favorite trip she took. I guess they
saw the Taj Mahal at night and so the moon was reflecting. So I try to get the
tidbits out of her while she’s giving us these stories.
Smith: You mentioned his faith and that’s interesting, because we all know about the Carters – I think lots of people during that week of the funeral – first of all, they were reintroduced to the family.

Berlanga: Yeah.

Smith: Secondly, they realized – again, everyone knows about the Reagans – they realized what a love match existed between the Fords. And then, maybe more subtly; this element of faith. Describe that.

Berlanga: He was never a man who wore it on his sleeve, but it was the strength that he had. It was where Grandpa derived most of his strength – was his faith.

Smith: Did it come from his parents?

Berlanga: Yeah, I think so. We always grew up going to church with them. We’d go to church on Sundays and one of my last visits with Grandpa, my husband and I went out there. I was pregnant with my daughter, and he was trying to remember a Psalm and I pulled it down – if I’d go back and look at the Psalms – but it was about just having faith. And I really do believe that he was never afraid of dying. He believed that God had a plan and he instilled that faith in us.

He made sure we prayed at every meal. Also, before dinner we’d always say, “Who’s going to get the prayer? Who’s going to get the prayer?” You know he likes you if he asks you to do the prayer, and two nights in a row he asked Hector to do the prayer and Hector was only planning on one, because here’s the deal: Grandpa is probably going to ask you to say the blessing one night before dinner. You need to go over…you don’t want to go too long because any time you ask Uncle Mike to do the blessing he pontificates. He gives a sermon. And even then, you can see Steven and Grandpa kind of wrapping it up to Uncle Mike. Keep it quick, keep it nice, say you appreciate you are here. So two nights in a row he asked Hector and Hector kind of looked at me like a deer in the headlights; like, I only had one prayer ready to go – and Grandma goes, “Honey, you asked him last night, why don’t you have Jack do the blessing?” On Christmas Eve and we tell the story of Christ being born and the nativity. It was never shoved down our throats and was just who we were
as a family. And it was just a quiet faith that you really didn’t have to question, you just knew it was there. It’s how we were raised.

Smith: I’ve read in a number of places that your grandmother loved Christmas.

Berlanga: Yes, yes: the decorating, the sweaters, the Christmas tree – the ten foot Christmas tree that they would bring in. It was always a big deal. She would wait until the grandchildren came and then we would all decorate the Christmas tree together. And the house – every single corner had a decoration and the mounds of things that people would send to the house. We must have had five buckets of popcorn with three different flavors, and the chocolates, and we would always have ribs for Christmas Eve dinner. Well, sometimes not ribs. We would have ribs at Christmas time, we’d also do it at Fourth of July, because Grandpa loved his ribs from Cleveland. I like to think she did it for the grandchildren, but she just loved it. Every little thing you could make special, she made it special. And she made, not a production out of it, but she heightened it. She heightened whatever she could.

Smith: A classic life-enhancer.

Berlanga: Yes. Absolutely.

Smith: But she is also very smart. I was talking to her about I want to do this for Joy and I want to do this and I want to take her to the Nutcracker, I want to do this…she said to me, “You don’t have to do everything every year, because if you do it every year, then it’s not special.” So she still had a way of renewing it. She’s very smart in how she did things. It’s kind of like she set these boundaries, but still allowed you to flourish. She’s just magical, that woman.

Smith: Did she ever talk about her own problems?

Berlanga: I think with drugs and alcohol she talked about it a little bit. She realized that she had a problem. She talks more about getting better and sobriety, but not too much. And I guess it’s not something that I pry into too much – so Grandma, you want to talk about that last cocktail?

Smith: A teenager reaches the age where it’s a potential issue and her own experience would be relevant in some ways.
Berlanga: I think she still giggled when I would say, “Oh, we had a wild night,” when I was in college. I think she thinks that. I guess now, having her as a grandmother, I guess I try with all that stuff just to make sure everything is in moderation and to recognize my history. And you also want to have respect for the fact that Betty Ford is your grandma and you don’t want to end up at her Center.

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

Berlanga: The last time I was supposed to see him was in Michigan, there when they opened the School of Public Service at the University of Michigan? That was when I was supposed to see him. I think the last time when I saw him reading the Psalm was, because I was pregnant and then I had a newborn. And so Joy was ten weeks, maybe twelve weeks old when we came out to Michigan and that was when I was supposed to see him and for him to meet Joy. And then, pretty much from then on, Grandma was very protective of who saw him. And all of my cousins and my sister, they got to see him towards the end – well, more recently than I had. When he passed, because he passed December 26th and I was planning on coming out right after New Years, I had a trip planned. I was really upset that I hadn’t just dropped everything and I was like, you have a newborn and you couldn’t do it, and I remember Becca saying, “You know, when I saw him last, you might just be grateful that you didn’t see him like that.” When I saw him he was walking, he was sitting up, he was very coherent, and so my last time with him it was really nice. So I did regret that he never got to meet Joy, but I do make it a point of Joy knowing who he is and how important he is to me.

Smith: What do you remember from the funeral? It must have been an overwhelming experience.

Berlanga: It’s a fog. Not only that, but I was traveling with a six month old baby, so I wasn’t sleeping.

Smith: Were you surprised by the amount of reaction?

Berlanga: Yes, absolutely. I think DC was the one where it was the most overwhelming, because it was night time when we came into the city.
Smith: Going to Alexandria.

Berlanga: Yes, and turning the corner and seeing the throngs of people standing out in the bitter cold, waving flags, holding signs, and just to catch, not even the casket, just a glimpse of the limo that was carrying my grandfather’s casket. It was so touching and to know – you hear that, oh your grandpa was a great president – oh, he touched so many lives. But for these people to take time out of their holiday, no less, this is Christmas time where all you want is to be bundled up at home with your family in front of the fire. To come out and take some of the precious time they have with their family to come stand there and show their support, it was really incredible. Stopping in front of the World War II memorial, and hearing them blow the whistle; that was really powerful.

Smith: And your grandmother, I’m told, was really impressed by the numbers and response.

Berlanga: Absolutely. And the people through the night would just go to pass by his casket in Michigan to get a chance to pay their respects. I was really touched and grateful. Because I think it really lifted up Grandma to see all of Grandpa’s hard work was realized. All of us went out at some point to shake people’s hands. Oh “that was so nice, that was so wonderful.” But I don’t think they realized how grateful we were to them that they would take their time to come pay their respects to one of our family members.

Smith: Had you been to Grand Rapids before?

Berlanga: I had when I was younger. When they rededicated the museum…

Smith: In ’97.

Berlanga: That was the last time I was there before the funeral. And then we’ve gone back since then, since the funeral. But it had been a while.

Smith: Nothing prepares you – that line stretched for two miles.
It was remarkable – absolutely. You just can’t imagine how many people he affected and touched. I remember one of the billboards said, “Gerald, O U R Ford.” And to know that he was coming home. So that was very cool.

She did. That woman is a trooper, you can’t tell her what she can’t do, because then she’ll tell you what’s what. She managed to get through it. It must have been the hardest time. She was very - again with us granddaughters - she is very protective of us, and so we got to see her a little bit, but I think she was going through such a hard time that she didn’t want us to see her suffer and having such a hard time. Because she knew we were all going through losing our grandfather, but I think it would have been really hard for us to see how much she was hurting.

There is that scene – that last long walk. She got out of the wheelchair and I think Steve and General Swan…

General Swan, yes.

And the story was, when she went back to the desert the next week, someone was complementing her on that and expressing amazement. And she said, “I just did what my husband would have wanted me to.”

Yes, exactly. She said, “This is what your grandpa wants me to do, and I’m going to do it for him.” I think that was what was so incredible about their marriage and what made it so strong – is they were honoring each other throughout their marriage.

It’s interesting because she got the Medal of Freedom before he did. She got a lot of recognition, and he seemed so proud of her. He just beamed.

He never needed the accolades. He was just proud of his wife, and that’s how he was with everyone in the family. Every year on your birthday card, he would tell you how proud he was of you. And he never let you forget. He was the leader of the free world, but he was proud of you and he wanted you to know it.
Smith: Every year the Betty Ford Center does an alumni weekend, and a lot of people come back. And he could be seen grilling hot dogs.

Berlanga: Exactly. He never let the fact that he was president effect who he was as a person. He did, he loved to grill. In Beaver Creek, we’d go out to the patio and he’d grill by the pool.

Smith: Really?

Berlanga: Yes. And I guess in the framework of people who think, “Well, your grandpa is a president,” I think people put it on you that it was special. And yes, you knew that it was special, but people put it on you. And you want to go, “But, yeah, he’s my grandpa and if you saw him, you’d say he was just like everybody else’s grandpa; just a really good grandpa and a really normal guy.” And I think the discrepancy of it is, he was supposed to be President of the United States, but he was just a guy who put on the apron and went and grilled out hamburgers in the backyard, and enjoyed it.

Smith: Was he a role model?

Berlanga: Oh, absolutely. I think between the two of them you are kind of intimidated by what you have to live up to. But I think what I derived from them the most is putting family first. Being there for my kids, telling my kids how proud I am of them. Giving them every opportunity that they can have because that’s what they did for Mom and that’s what they did for us. It’s to really make sure we had a chance to excel and to thrive and to live the life we wanted to.

Smith: A couple of quick things and we’ll let you go. I wondered about the whole Chevy Chase thing – the whole notion of a clumsy…Given his athletic background and everything, did he ever say anything?

Berlanga: No. He always got a chuckle out of it. I think Grandpa could laugh at himself. Grandma didn’t ever say anything about it, but I can imagine that it might have ticked her off a little bit. Because it’s kind of like, I could say something about my husband, but don’t you say something about my husband. They’ll give each other a hard time. Grandma will turn over to Grandpa and be like, “Jerry, put your napkin in your lap.” But if anyone else were to tell Grandpa
to put his napkin…you’d get the look of death, “Don’t you tell that to my husband.” Grandma never said anything, but I can imagine that…She can laugh at a good joke, but I’m sure she probably doesn’t like people poking fun at her husband.

Smith: And the movies, we were told by someone, she left an hour before Titanic ended. They went to see Titanic.

Berlanga: Yeah.

Smith: But she didn’t want to see the ship sink.

Berlanga: Ohhh, Grandma. That’s such a romantic notion.

Smith: But then a wonderful story, I don’t remember what the movie was, some Matthew McConaughey kind of romance or something, and the President came back and told everyone in the office, you’ll really like this movie, it’s a chick flick.

Berlanga: Did he really?

Smith: It seems very incongruous, the phrasing coming from him.

Berlanga: They loved going to the movies. They loved watching movies; they loved doing all that stuff.

Smith: Did they watch old movies as well?

Berlanga: Yeah, they’d watch old movies, and they loved reading, too. That was something, I think, that really they instilled in us. They loved reading, they loved reading good books and we’re all readers now.

Smith: That’s great.

Berlanga: I think that’s something we grew up seeing and we’d all talk about the books we were reading and what’s good. Grandpa always tended towards more historical novels and stuff, but Grandma loves a good book. It could be a softy book, it could be a mystery. Grandma loves a good book. And so every now and then I say, “Grandma, have you read this? You should really go pick this book up.”

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Smith: Does she still read?

Berlanga: She does. She does as much as she can.

Smith: Her eyesight is not a problem?

Berlanga: No. She’s good. And I think we started getting her on audio tapes, too.

Smith: Okay.

Berlanga: I can’t imagine having all the time and not reading. And she still, like Grandpa, reads the paper every morning. And the paper is sitting there, waiting for her, when she gets her breakfast. It’s reassuring. I think the day there’s not a newspaper on Grandma and Grandpa’s table will be a sad day.

Smith: He was a voracious newspaper reader.

Berlanga: Yes. And I think he appreciated – like having Tom Brokaw, but before Hugh Sidey passed away, I think he appreciated a real journalist and recognized their position – their relevance in what he was doing and to the world. That’s why we have the journalism award. He appreciated a good journalist. They are hard to come by these days.

Smith: It’s even harder to come by a president in the modern era that appreciates journalists and regards them as friends.

Berlanga: Yes, exactly.

Smith: That’s rare.

Berlanga: Yeah.

Smith: This has been wonderful.
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Smith: When did you come into this family, this picture?


Smith: Was there anything intimidating?

Vaden Bales: No, I think it’s probably a little bit amazing that I wasn’t intimidated. I just had never been around that sort of thing, and she was just a cute and fun girl. I remember when I first met President Ford, I drove over to Beaver Creek from Aspen and everybody said, “Oh, aren’t you nervous?” And I said, “Oh, he’s just a person.” And I really wasn’t - I was that clueless. But then when I drove up to the house in Beaver Creek on the circle there and parked the car that I had rented, and got out and walked to the front door these guys met me with earpieces and said, “Are you Vaden Bales?” And I said, “Yes,” and they showed me in. All of a sudden I realized I was about to enter into a world that I hadn’t even thought of, and I had a bad case of what I think actors call flop sweat.

Smith: And I assume they put you at your ease?

Vaden Bales: Immediately. I had had one interesting conversation with him before that, that you may find interesting. After Susan and I had been dating below the radar, so to speak, I got a call from some friends of mine about whether I was up for a federal judgeship or something. And I said “No, I’m not. Why do you ask?” They said, “Well, Joe Williams called me.” And then I got three or four of those calls from friends of mine. Well, as it turned out, Joe Williams was the head of a big pipeline company in Tulsa who sat on the board of the American Express Company with President Ford. President Ford at some board meeting had turned to Joe Williams and said, “My daughter is very serious with this lawyer in Tulsa named Vaden Bales. Do you know anything about him? And
he said, “Well, I know him a little bit. He’s with a good firm, has a good reputation,” and that was the extent of the discussion.

Well, evidently Joe took it on himself to do a little more investigating. Since he was also the head of the judicial nominating commission that vetted federal judge candidates in Oklahoma, that’s why all those people got concerned about the call from Joe. I mentioned this to Susan and she went ballistic. She said, “He shouldn’t be checking up on you,” and she evidently called out to California or Colorado, wherever her parents were, and read him the riot act. A day or so later, my assistant walked in and said, “I don’t know which one of your friends this is, but somebody named Penny Circle is on the phone claiming that former President Gerald Ford is on the line holding for you.” I said, “Put him through.” I had kept the fact that I was seeing Susan from her, from my assistant.

So I get on the phone and it’s President Ford. We said hello, and he said, “I owe you an apology.” I said, “You do?” and he said, “Oh, yes. I understand Joe Williams…” So he went through, and just basically said, “I just asked Joe if he knew you, and he took it on himself to go forward.” But he said, “Susan and her mother are just all over me.” And I said, “Well, you don’t owe me an apology because if I were you, I would do the same thing.” He said, “Well, will you please call Susan and tell her I apologized because if I don’t get that call and her mother doesn’t get that call - it’s just that I’m paying hell for it right now.” So that was my first encounter with him before I had actually met him.

SFB: Let’s remember, I was thirty years old. We weren’t sixteen.

Smith: Parenthetically, that is nothing. Nelson Rockefeller went to J. Edgar Hoover and had the FBI investigate his prospective sons-in-law. You got off easy.

SFB: I guess he really didn’t love you, honey.

Vaden Bales: And back to the Fourth of July thing, when I went over there, even though I was nervous, within thirty minutes, you know how he was – I was relaxed. He actually, I think, made efforts to make me relaxed. He asked me about Page Belcher, who was a guy he had served with in Congress for years and was
from Tulsa. Asked me about what he called the ditch, from Oklahoma and Arkansas down to the Gulf of Mexico, which is the Kerr McClellan Arkansas River Navigator Channel.

**SFB:** Carl Albert.

**Vaden Bales:** Carl Albert. So I was very relaxed again, but I did have about a fifteen minute episode of terror.

**Smith:** Let’s back up. Tell us a little bit about your background, your life before you came to this juncture.

**Vaden Bales:** I grew up in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Went to college; went to law school; practiced law most of my life up until I met Susan - mostly corporate and some commercial real estate. My father came to Tulsa to go to law school. My dad was a lawyer; my mother was an advertising executive. I had been married before. When Susan and I got married I had three sons from my first marriage and she had two daughters from hers, and I was a busy, active, never going to get married again lawyer.

**Smith:** Political at all?

**Vaden Bales:** Well, yes, I was. But I was on the dark side. I was a Democrat.

**Smith:** Did that give rise to some conversations?

**Vaden Bales:** Yeah, it did. I was active in the sense that when I was younger I worked on Jim Jones’ campaign, who was a congressman from the Tulsa area.

**Smith:** I know Oklahoma Democrats are not exactly like Massachusetts Democrats.

**Vaden Bales:** Yes, he was a moderate. And then active in the sense that I supported people financially some. In fact, that was kind of a family joke. After three or four years – you know we had these huge Christmases at Beaver Creek, and politics inevitably came up. After everyone expressed their opinions, I was always the last, and President Ford would look at me and say, “Now, Vaden, what would Democrats think about that?” So, at some point I went down and changed my registration and when we went out there the next Christmas, I showed him that. He said something like, “I knew you’d see the light.”
Smith: I have to ask you before I forget, when you gave up smoking and he gave up
smoking, what was the background to that?

SFB: It was a bet. And Vaden gave up smoking, too. When we started dating, we
both were smokers.

Vaden Bales: It was interesting, when we first got married, the whole family would be at the
Beaver Creek house, and even though her mother didn’t smoke, she tolerated
all of us, Susan, me, Jack at that time smoked, Steve smoked and the rest of
them didn’t. President Ford smoked a pipe and I don’t even know how it came
up, but we made a bet that the first one to smoke again owed the other $100
and that was the beginning of – you know, once he set his mind to
something…he’s the most disciplined person I ever met. I thought about that
when the bet came up, but it was also good accountability because I knew he
wasn’t going to be the first to break down.

Smith: As I understood it, he gathered up all of his pipes and sent most of them out to
the Library.

SFB: He did. Now, you know it’s interesting, I actually have one of his pipes that
he used and it sits in an ashtray on my coffee table in my living room. That is
one of the ways that I remember him, because most of my life he did smoke a
pipe. Tyne has a pipe and Heather has a pipe. My girls remember sitting in his
lap as children and him reading bedtime stories while he had his pipe in one
hand and them in the other. Mother was a smoker for years and years and
years, too. I remember him with a pipe, and to this day, I will walk someplace
and if I smell a pipe, my head will turn. It is strictly – that’s my dad.

Smith: Was there a particular brand of tobacco? Or was he a connoisseur?

SFB: Field and Stream, which I don’t think – you smoked a pipe for a while, not
when we were around, but I guess Field and Stream is not like real high
quality.

Smith: I was going to say, I think that was a fiscal conservative’s tobacco.

SFB: It was a baby blue can with a stream on it. It’s funny how you just never
forget some of those things.
Smith: So you felt very much accepted in the whole family?

Vaden Bales: Yes, he was very welcoming, and I’m sure he was cautious at first, but he was very welcoming. I’m sure he had some reserve; but as long as his daughter was happy, I was okay.

Smith: Did anything about either one of them surprise you initially?

Vaden Bales: I really didn’t have any expectations, so looking back, I would say just what the proverbial normal they were, considering where they came from. That he was the leader of the free world and she was obviously a very public First Lady, but my first exposure to them was in the family setting in Beaver Creek. So it seemed like just a normal American setting, except that the surroundings were quite elegant.

Smith: Let me ask, the question of his temper and the fact that - again, the discipline you referred to - he spent a lifetime controlling it. But there were times, and reputedly you were present to observe, if a football game didn’t go the way he wanted, that you knew it.

Vaden Bales: I saw the temper and it was – one of his aides described him best, which is that he was 98% kola bear and 2% wounded grizzly, and you never knew what was going to bring the wounded grizzly out, although Michigan losing a football game was a good one. The one I think that Susan must have mentioned was, we were up in Beaver Creek in the fall for one of the Gramshammer daughter’s weddings and Colorado and Michigan were playing. Kordell Stewart was the quarterback, Michael Westbrook the receiver. Anyway, it was a really good football game. We were down in the basement there where the big TV was and Lee Simmons had set up a big table. President Ford had been signing stuff during the whole game; footballs, pictures, and it was kind of a seesaw game, but then Michigan got the lead right at the end, and it looked like it was over and Michigan would prevail and then Kordell Stewart threw a Hail Mary to Michael Westbrook and it was a touchdown. It was the end of the game, it was over.

He stood up, took his glasses off that he’d been using to sign things, and bounced them off the table, he uttered a profanity, and I immediately decided
that it would be a good time for me to go up and get on the Nordic Track. He occasionally would exhibit a temper, but mostly in that area. I would say, his ability 99% of the time to keep it in, where I would have lost mine, I think that’s what probably made him different – he was one of those people who could keep his head while those about him were losing theirs.

Smith: You mentioned the autographing. People have no idea, because there is no job description for former presidents; they have no idea how much time a former president could spend just signing his name for deserving types, let alone the collectors. And I remember there was a great big table in the conference room out in Rancho Mirage, and maybe once a week he’d sit down to his stack and he would sign them all, and he’d say, “Now, come on Mother.” One had a sense that she might not have done it if he hadn’t goaded her into it. But that was part of the job, wasn’t it, of being a former president?

SFB: It is part of the job, and you’re right as far as Mother is concerned. She hated doing that stuff. Yeah, it’s not fun. I mean, I still get requests here and there, and it’s not fun and the problem is now, are you going to see it on eBay? There is so much of that stuff sold on eBay. Back then that wasn’t an issue.

Smith: It’s interesting – you saw in Grand Rapids, there were people who would be regulars and adults who would push their kid forward - that kind of thing; really cynical. And he’d know it.

SFB: That’s true, but it is part of the job and that’s just the way it goes. On occasions I’ve said no to people in crowds because part of it is, if you do one, it starts this wave and there was one this last June. We walked out of the Press Club after the luncheon and Tyne was with me, and there was somebody standing outside and I said, “No, not at this time.” And Tyne looked at me like “Mom?” And I just went, “I don’t want to start the wave, I don’t have time to start the wave.” And I feel bad because I really am pretty good about it, but you can really start something that there’s no end to.

Smith: My sense is that people in Vail and out in the desert, too, were really pretty good about leaving them alone. Was that your sense - that they could walk through public areas and not be besieged?
Vaden Bales: Yes, but you had the occasional drunk, or something. But people were respectful of them. You talking about that reminded me: one time I was in New York with President Ford and we walked through the lobby of the Waldorf-Astoria and people stood up and clapped. And the next time I was in the Waldorf-Astoria, I was with some of my colleagues and we walked through the lobby and I said, “How strange.” And they said, “What?” And I said, “The last time I walked through here people stood up and clapped.” They looked at me like I was crazy, and I said, “Well, maybe it had something to do with the fact that I was with President Ford.”

It was always interesting, particularly when you were out at dinner; when we were the first there or if new people came, you could watch people. When you’re out and you see someone famous and you’re not expecting to, and you see someone and then the recognition gradually – and then they’d go, “That’s Gerald Ford!” But most of them would just acknowledge him. A few times there were some people, one of whom was a client of mine from Tulsa, who’d had too much to drink out in Palm Springs. They finally had to ask him just to not come over anymore. And that was where the Secret Service was helpful.

I know President Ford told me that when he flew commercially, he always put an agent on the aisle. He said, “I don’t know what it is, everybody wants to talk to me. And sometimes I’m just all talked out.” And I said, “Well, I have a belief that maybe the reason they want to talk to you is because you are a former president.” And he laughed. In Vail especially, but even in Palm Springs, they clearly, in both places, there was this sense of ownership of them, but in a beloved sort of way, because when we went out to restaurants that were well known in both places and people were just very respectful 99.9% of the time.

Smith: I’m jumping around, but that’s the nature of the beast here. It’s improbable, and yet when you start to think about it, unavoidable – the stories that we’ve been told after 9/11, especially when the anthrax scare occurred. Of course his work ethic was such that he would have had people in there working on Sundays if they would have shown up. And they did, I guess, work on Saturdays.
SFB: Well, they had to get the mail.

Smith: And he didn’t/couldn’t/wouldn’t understand why he wasn’t getting Saturday mail. Attempts to explain it were unavailing, and it got to the point where, literally, there were members of the staff who would put on these crazy anti-anthrax suits and go through the mail so he could have his Saturday mail.

SFB: It’s kind of like the newspaper. He loved his newspapers, and if his newspapers were not there when he got up in the morning, it really could start a very bad day.

Smith: We talked to Mary Fisher, who among others things, was the first female advancement man in the White House.

SFB: Right.

Smith: And she said the only time he ever was short with her was on a trip where he didn’t get his newspapers. That was the drug of choice – newspapers.

SFB: His newspapers were very important to him. And like I said to you, it was a quick explosion, once it was resolved, it was over with.

Smith: Was he a television viewer of news?

SFB: He and Mom watched a couple of shows, I remember growing up and watching the World of Disney on Sunday and Wild Kingdom was on Sunday, I think. Of course, I watched football. Back then there was one TV in the house. Ours was in the den. Now, Mother and Dad had a black and white TV upstairs, so there was a black and white upstairs and a color downstairs. But other than that, yes, we watched the news. Maybe, probably in the White House days they got more into some of the serial type shows. They watched Dallas and Dynasty.

Smith: They appeared on Dynasty once, they made a cameo appearance. Wasn’t Marvin Davis a friend of theirs? Somehow he was involved.

SFB: And then who was the female actress that Dad thought – she was in some cop show.
Smith: Angie Dickinson?

SFB: Thank you. Now, she caught his eye.

Smith: Well, she caught Jack Kenney’s eye before she caught his eye.

SFB: I can’t remember what the show was that she was on.

Smith: *Policewoman*.

SFB: He liked that show. But they watched a couple of them together. For news though, no, he read the newspaper because “TV news does not tell the whole story.”

Smith: Really? That’s interesting. So he thought it was biased?

SFB: Yes. It wasn’t biased; they didn’t have enough time to do the whole story. In a print newspaper, you read the whole article.

Smith: Walter Cronkite said the same thing. He said, “Twenty-two minutes every night – that’s the equivalent of the front page of the *New York Times*.” So he said, “Read the paper, in addition to watching.”

SFB: That was Dad’s theory, too.

Smith: He liked reporters, didn’t he?

SFB: He did like reporters. They were his friends. They had been his friends, and I’m sure you’ve talked to most of them. Some of the stuff that went on during the vice presidential days was just over the top – the crazy stuff that went on. But he liked the press because I think he used them as much as they used him. He told the story and that’s the only way the story was going to get told was talking to the press.

Smith: Plus, in a larger sense, from a very early age, he made a conscious decision, and I don’t know whether it was influenced by his mother, or whether it was something he came to on his own, but a conscious decision to see the good in everyone. And he concluded that most people were mostly good, most of the time. People sometimes talk of Good Ol’ Jerry – Jerry’s an Eagle Scout. And one of the things we’ve been grappling with in this whole thing is: Bob
Hartmann is a great example – or being genuinely shocked that Richard Nixon lied to him, or that anyone would lie to him. Where does that admirable quality of wanting to impute good to people - where does that end and a kind of naiveté about people’s motives begin? Maybe that’s too stark a choice. Was he naïve at all about people’s motives?

Vaden Bales: I don’t think he was naïve. I think you captured it when you said earlier he started out with a sense of people were innately good, and I just think people may attribute naiveté to the fact that he didn’t blow up a lot and all that. He did seem to have a capacity for forgiveness. Susan has talked about once he lost his temper, it was over, and it really was. Obviously, if it was a crime or something, no. But I think that he maybe was naïve in the sense he thought everyone else was as good as he was. But when you think of some of the tough decisions that he made, that really cost him politically, he does show a toughness. I think he’s like anyone in that, I will put up with behavior from someone who I believe in and like and have a history with, that I won’t from someone else. I think you look on the current political scene and if a Democrat does it, certain people throw a fit. When a Republican does the same thing, well, there’s a reason.

Smith: Sure.

Vaden Bales: But I think he was forgiving up to a point; but when you crossed this moral line of his, then it was over.

Smith: We were talking with Dick Cheney; the president sometimes has to be ruthless for the good of the country; and the question of whether ruthlessness is not a quality that one associates with your dad. I remember asking Cheney, “How difficult was it for him to fire people?” And he said, “He really enjoyed firing Jim Schlesinger.” And he went on to relate the circumstances. He couldn’t wait. But that’s a relationship where Schlesinger was not just professorial, but condescending.

Which raises a question about your dad’s sensitivity to what we talked about earlier; the whole intelligence thing. He’d been on the House Appropriations Committee, the Defense subcommittee; he knew the Pentagon budget as well,
or better, probably than Schlesinger did. Is Schlesinger a type who would push his buttons? It’s one thing to be genial, and to see the best in people, but in reality, there are people you run up against all the time…

SFB: There were people he chose not to be with. He would say people that felt they were friends of his or acquaintances of his, that would ask things of him, that he didn’t like their character. And without having to say, “I don’t like you and I don’t want to be around you,” that’s I guess the beauty of a staff. You just never become available. You just do things like that. Yeah, there were people he did dislike.

Smith: I only heard him speak disparagingly of two people, ever. One was Gordon Liddy and one was John Dean. And in retrospect, he had pretty good judgment. Were there people he was vocal about?

Vaden Bales: Oliver Stone when JFK came out.

SFB: He was very vocal about that.

Vaden Bales: He was as angry as I’ve ever seen him. And he was angry because he thought it was…I remember on the plane, it was around Christmas time that all the came out, and there was a Newsweek magazine, the cover was JFK – History as Fiction. I handed him that magazine when I got to Beaver Creek and he said, “Boy, that’s the truth. It is fiction.” And he was really angry about it and he said, “Plus, I’m trying to be up here with my family and enjoy the holiday, but I’m the only surviving member of the Warren Commission and it is my duty to give a bunch of interviews and all that and back up the Commission findings.” He was really angry about that.

Smith: It’s interesting that he saw himself as having, in some ways, a historical obligation to defend the Commission.

SFB: And I think that some of it is that the majority of the kids that went to see that movie - I’ve never seen the movie; I’m like forbidden to go see that movie - would not do the research to know what is fact and what is fiction, and the whole thing. To them it’s a movie and that was Dad’s greatest fear – that they are not really given the true side. He really did feel a duty to constantly
defend the decision that had been made. And most of the generation – I don’t know what the percentage is today, of kids that are alive who don’t know who my dad is, weren’t even alive when he was president. And to me, our job as family members is still and will always be, to continue his legacy, so people know who he is and what he did.

Smith: Did he talk at all about the Profiles in Courage Award? I know he said, “Everywhere I’ve gone for twenty years, people always ask the same question. After that award, they stopped asking.” Which tells you something about the power of the Kennedys; in effect, the imprimatur of the Kennedys. Did he talk about that experience?

Vaden Bales: Yes. You ran the museum for a while; you know that this is a guy who has been getting awards his whole life. And of all the things that he ever got during the time that I was around him, he was the most proud of the Profiles in Courage award. He talked about it in the sense that it was really – it gave the imprimatur – everybody, all of a sudden, jumped on the bandwagon – well, he did what was right when it cost him. But the fact that it was so visible and who gave it, and he said to have Ted Kennedy up there in a press conference with the TV cameras rolling, saying basically, he was right, we were wrong, meant a great deal to him. He didn’t use the words, but just, again, the level of his happiness and all that – it meant as much to him as any award that he got.

Smith: I was going to complete your sentence for you: I can’t think of him using the word vindication, but he was vindicated. And I wonder, for example, if your mother had a more intense personal reaction, because I knew for a fact when I was tipped off to it, that he didn’t want to go.

SFB: Right.

Smith: He literally didn’t want to go. When he died Newsweek had a story, and buried in it was this notion that he had somehow cultivated liberal historians, because this would redound to his benefit. And I can’t think of anyone who spent less time cultivating historians, or anyone else, in terms of consciously shaping his place in history. That’s what the rest of us had to do because he
wouldn’t do it. And the classic example - he initially didn’t realize the incredible symbolism of this event. And my sense is, that other people had to…

SFB: Coerce him.

Smith: Yes, including I assume, your mother.

SFB: That, I don’t know, and I only wish at the time we would have known more about it because we could have gone to see it. It’s just one of those things – it’s an after the fact moment of, gee I’m sorry I missed that one.

Vaden Bales: Yes, we were on the list, at one point, to go and something came up and we said, “Oh, well.” We didn’t realize what it meant. And that was before the Congressional Gold Medal Award, in which you had a lot of people, some current, some from those days, getting up and talking about he was right, we were wrong, the courage – you remember all that. And that meant a lot to him.

Smith: But it’s also true that with a lot of those awards – she got the award first.

Vaden Bales: Yes.

Smith: She got the Medal of Freedom first. And one sensed that he was just so proud of her. There was no competition in terms of recognition.

SFB: There was never competition between the two of them. They were so proud of each other and their teamwork – I think they were unbelievable soul mates. And not that there weren’t rocky roads – hey, we all know marriage is one of the hardest jobs you have in your entire life, and theirs wasn’t perfect but they worked really hard at it.

Smith: There are stories about the Betty Ford Center alumni event with him on the grill cooking hot dogs.

SFB: Our Memorial Day cookouts. Yeah, he would sit there and help cook on the grill or pass out the pop. That was her thing but he was right there holding her up and supporting her the whole way.
Smith: How traumatic was the intervention? And how long had it been in the imagining?

SFB: Not long in the planning. It kind of was an overnight thing because I talked to Dr. Kruz(?), and once I talked to Dr. Kruz and he kind of put us in touch with the people that we needed to be in touch with, it began to work very quickly.

Smith: You were the chief spearhead?

SFB: I was the chief spearhead that put it all together. I’m the one that went to Dr. Kruz and first said, “I have a friend whose mother has a problem.” By the end of the time in the car, he said, “Susan, you don’t have a friend who has a problem; you have a mother who has a problem.” My mother was his patient and I was his patient, also, so he was not talking out of school. I don’t think we had HIPPA then, but just to be sure. So he’s the one who helped get us in touch with Dr. Kursh(?), and Pat Benedict and all of the people that we needed to put it together. And then I went back and kind of reported to Dad and I said, “Dad, I spent a very interesting day,” and kind of filled him in on it. He said, “That sounds great. What do we do next?” And so once we got the things working, Mike and Gayle were living on the East Coast, Jack was already in San Diego, maybe Steve was up in San Luis Obispo by that point. But trying to get a day that we could get together and pull it off was the challenge. And once we realized that that day was like five days away, things start happening.

Smith: Had he been in denial?

SFB: Oh, absolutely. We all had. We all had been in denial. And I would not say that I was in denial, I didn’t know what it was. I was nineteen years old and Dr. Kruz was actually the one who put a name to it. He said, “Your mother is an alcoholic.” I had been raised in a house where your parents have a drink at night and so did all my friends’ parents have drinks at night. As we all know, it affects different people in a different way. In that sense, it happened very quickly and part of it was, once she left and went to Long Beach, we all took a big sigh of relief and went, “Ahhh, it’s all fixed.” Well, what we didn’t realize
was we all had to be fixed. We were as sick as she was, and that was very much of where we were.

Smith: How so?

SFB: We were enabling her. I went to functions with my dad because she wouldn’t get dressed and go to functions. We’d say, “Oh, her back hurts, her neck hurts.” I was covering for her and I shouldn’t have. I didn’t confront her. The stories go on and on and if you read her book, they are all there. We didn’t bring friends home because we didn’t know what kind of shape she would be in. She would fall asleep at the dinner table. Things like that. We needed to become transparent again. We needed to stop our behavior. Our behavior was as bad as her behavior.

Smith: And it has been suggested that there was nothing automatic. When she went into Long Beach, it was rough.

SFB: Oh, yeah.

Smith: It tends to be sort of lost in the triumph that ensued just what hell she must have gone through.

SFB: I’ve never been through treatment, but when you read her stories about it and things like that – it’s hell. It’s not fun, it’s not a spa by any means. And Dad went to family and I went to family and we all got help and we helped her and the biggest thing that we all learned was that it is her sobriety. It’s not ours and it’s not our job to manage it; it’s not our job to fix it; she has to do it on her own and we have to fix ourselves and she has to fix herself. But it was the most incredible experience for our family and it’s the best thing that ever happened, because we truly became transparent again.

Smith: Let me ask you something, let me ask both of you; again, this is speculative, but I often wondered – I think I even mentioned in the eulogy – people tend to get more conservative with age. And in their case part of it was that the party went way to the right. But it wasn’t just that. He seemed to be extraordinarily open minded, compassionate, understanding, on a whole range of issues that you don’t automatically associate with a “conservative Republican,” former
president, whatever. If he changed or evolved or whatever, how much impact did she have.

Of course children and grandchildren bring their generation’s perspective. In the larger sense of the word, and maybe the hardest to quantify, I wonder how much the experience of going through the intervention, and everything that followed reinforced an existing compassion and ability to understand and empathize with those who were good people, but who were different, or people who had a weakness. You know what I mean? Rather than imposing moral judgments or ideological certitudes on human behavior. He’s still the only president who ever signed his name to a petition for gay rights, which is a pretty remarkable thing. Obviously, there was the abortion issue.

Vaden Bales: My observation in the time I knew him, and got to know him was that he was evolving. I don’t think it was a big change. I think, if you think about his presidency, one of his styles was to get people who were at the complete opposite ends of the spectrum, let them make their best arguments, and he would listen to both. That’s the thing I hear from Carla Hills, Cabinet members, that they really respected about him is that they didn’t always win, but they always got a fair hearing. And I think that’s how he approached some of these issues that people now would call liberal.

The one issue that I can remember that surprised me back when same sex marriage first became an issue, and I’m talking ten years ago at least, and I asked him what he thought about it and I said, “Do you feel like maybe at least the civil union contract and all that,” and I thought he would say yes, or something further to the right and he said, “No, it’s going to happen. We need to just short circuit all the damage that’s being done to people and just let it happen.” And that really surprised me. I think the intervention had an impact on him; I think Mom had a big impact on him because she really stayed current with what I would call more trendy stuff. He knew what was going on in the world, because he read four newspapers a day.

Smith: That’s a very interesting distinction.
Vaden Bales: I think she had a real influence on him on what I would call – now trendy probably sells her short some – but I’m just saying changing sociological trends.

Smith: And the popular culture.

Vaden Bales: Yes, and I’ve seen her step up to the plate for her granddaughters when one of their uncles would say, “Well, you really shouldn’t be living with this person,” and Mom would say, “Well, what’s different about her than you? You’ve done the same thing.” Because that was more her interest and the arts, and she was a free spirit in that sense. But because he valued her counsel so greatly – you know this as well as anybody – she was, in my opinion, his number one advisor, political and otherwise. So I think his constant openness to other points of view – I think that was in his DNA. It’s why I think, even though he was a heck of a partisan, who were his best friends off the floor? Carl Albert, Tip O’Neill, it just goes on and on. So I think it was in his nature.

Smith: I also wonder, though, if in some ways, the Reagan challenge alerted him, sensitized him – when he would talk about the hard right, there was kind of a code word – these people who were trying to take over his party, trying to redefine conservatism.

SFB: Well, to back up what Vaden said, I would say he was probably one of the best listeners I’ve ever been… I mean when you, as a kid, were pleading your case to get off the “I’m disappointed in you,” which is the worst thing your father…you hated to hear that.

Smith: That was the worst form of discipline?

SFB: That was the worst. “I’m disappointed in you. But I’m willing to listen.” And that’s what he did. He truly listened for you to plea your case. Whether I ever changed his mind on my discipline, I don’t know, but I felt fairly heard. And I wouldn’t say he made judgment on it or anything else, he just said, “Well, this is how we’re going to deal with this.”

Smith: By the way, this may be more applicable to your brothers, were spankings ever administered?
SFB: Oh, yeah. I would not say by him, that I can remember. Now I don’t know if this is the father/daughter relationship, but I can tell you my mother spanked me and Clara spanked me. I was spanked and I spanked my children. Child abuse.

Smith: Clara was sub-contracted to discipline.

SFB: We were spanked.

Smith: What was different about the pace of life in the desert versus Vail? He was in the office every day, I’m sure.

Vaden Bales: His routine wasn’t that much different because he got up – he was an early riser most of his life – he got up before her. He came down, fixed his breakfast; I usually had breakfast with him at either place while we were visiting, and he would read the newspapers. Well, the first thing he did was take a swim, both places. Then he would go down, fix his breakfast, read the newspapers, and then he would go to the office. The Beaver Creek office was physically in the house, as you know, and then in Palm Springs it was about a fifty foot walk. And he’d spend a couple of hours over there.

More activity, in terms of either place, happened at Beaver Creek at Christmas time, because we were all there. There were sixteen or seventeen people in this house; we were skiing; you had kids from infants to teenagers; and we were all there, but he didn’t change his routine that much. And we all had family dinner at Christmas time, at a certain time Christmas Eve we went to the four o’clock service, and God help those who didn’t show up on time or miss the bus from the ski slope, but his routine didn’t really vary. You know, when he was in his office in Beaver Creek, you had to walk by it to get to the other parts of the house if you were on that floor. He didn’t shut the door, but when he had his head down at his desk and had the pencil or was reading, everyone knew that unless you had some compelling reason to go in, in which event, he was available, he was working.

Smith: Did you have the ski tow that went behind the house?
SFB: Behind the house. The other thing I would say that was different between Palm Springs and Beaver Creek was they had a heavier social black tie schedule in Palm Springs. I mean, there are weeks where they went to two and three black tie events a week in Palm Springs. Which is just unbelievable, but that’s the way they do it. Beaver Creek, there was no black tie. There was no formal, it was a polo shirt and maybe a sports coat, occasionally a suit.

Smith: And what about your mother’s day?

SFB: Well, my mother is not a morning person, has never been a morning person. And so he was in the office by the time she usually came. He would come back over to the house, especially in Palm Springs, while she was having breakfast and he might sit down with her and go over the day’s schedule that they were doing together. But her day consisted of making calls, going to the Betty Ford Center, going for hair, nails, all that kind of stuff. She had events. She had friends, she had women’s groups that she met with. And she had a desk and an office that she worked at. But lunch they normally had together unless he was on the golf course, and they always had dinner together. Rarely did she do anything at night. Sometimes if he did something in the evening, he would go and show up and then come home and have dinner with her, especially if it was a local something in the desert. But Beaver Creek was way laid back, and they would go to Ford Park and hear the symphony and do things like that and have dinner with friends. So that was truly a vacation for them - to go to Beaver Creek in the summertime.

Smith: How tough was it for him to get old?

SFB: He complained about it – “Oh, I’m getting old, these knees are getting old.” Didn’t really seem to affect him. You know, Richard, he traveled and did _________.

Smith: Yeah, in fact, I’ve often thought – really he was in great shape up until about his 90th birthday. And when the doctors told him, “You really have to cut back or stop traveling,” that was a kind of death. Because it had been his life; he loved it.
SFB: And the thing is, he used to be able to sleep anywhere. Sleep on a plane, sleep in a car. I did get that trait which I’m so thankful for, but he wasn’t sleeping well on the road. He didn’t like the pillows, he didn’t like this – and I would say it was into his 90s. There wasn’t the joy, there wasn’t the exhilaration, and it took longer for him to recover, would be the best way to put it. I think it was harder on us to watch him get old than him.

Smith: Was your mother reluctant to acknowledge the need for outside help?

Vaden Bales: Uh, if she was reluctant – that was an understatement. It was just her generation. They pulled themselves up by their bootstraps. She considered it a moral failure on her part to even think about it. But at some point, as his mobility was less and less and she’s a very tiny, formidable, but tiny woman, and we finally were able to get help. We started it, “Let’s try it part-time.”

SFB: It was part-time only in the evenings from like ten at night until ten in the morning.

Vaden Bales: It took a concerted effort from all of us. Because she was deteriorating just from exhaustion, and I think when they came in, it was surprising how well she adapted to it. She didn’t want people – I heard it from my mother when my father started having problems – she didn’t want someone in her house. She was perfectly able to take care of her husband. So she was a hard sell, but she came around.

Smith: What about him?

Vaden Bales: I think he adjusted to it pretty well.

SFB: We had some personality issues with some. Part of it is figuring out the right people for the right thing, and until you get that adjusted…

Smith: It’s like adjusting drugs – literally.

Vaden Bales: I think he knew he needed it and I think he saw what was going on with her. I would say he generally, if we talk about how accepting he was of different views and things, he would say things like, “I just can’t recover like I used to.” And I remember one time I looked at him and he said, “I don’t know
what’s up with that.” And I said, “You might want to go look at your birth certificate.” And he laughed. But I would say he pretty much aged majestically.

Smith: That’s well put. I would get calls from the press, and one of them was from Tom DeFrank, “What was the cause of death? What was the cause of death?” I said, “Tom, he died of being 93.” It’s called old age.

Vaden Bales: But the fact that we went to Mayo Clinic when we did, tells you – even though he was not thrilled with the diminished capacity that you have as you age – he was willing to go at 93 and possibly have open-heart surgery because he loved his life so much. We were shocked when he made that choice.

SFB: We would not have told you that was going to be his decision. Never would have said that.

Vaden Bales: We met with the Hospice people before we met with the doctors because we knew he was going to say, “I don’t want to go through that.” And I’ll never forget – there are things in your life that you can play on a video, and we had a cardiologist and his primary physician at Vail there, and we had a guy from Mayo Clinic on the telephone and we probably had an hour long discussion. And we got done and they said, “Well, what do you think?” And he looked around the room and he said, “I’m inclined to proceed.” And there was this deafening silence. And he looked and said, “What do you think, Mother?” And she said, “Well, I’ll support whatever you want to do.” And then as he did – it was eerily like when we were in Philadelphia and he had this problem with his tongue after he had the stroke where he went around the room and asked us what our opinion was.

Smith: Was there a corresponding sense of disappointment on his part when he got to the Mayo and found that for a number of reasons they couldn’t do the surgery? Had his hopes been raised in a sense?

Vaden Bales: Yes, he was disappointed, but he had seen – he didn’t know because he wasn’t really aware of the impact the sedatives had on him with minor procedures, meant that the heavy duty stuff they would have given him, had they put him on the table - we didn’t know - and he seemed to accept it and
understand it. He didn’t, in front of me or Susan, I think, emote greatly, but I’m sure he was disappointed because he made the decision to go to Mayo in the first instance. Before we went, they talked about if this worked, what it would be like, what his life would be like. He asked that question. “Is it going to be more of this?” “No, if we’re able to do it, this and this and this,” and these people had a fairly remarkable history of doing this procedure on elderly people. I’m sure he was disappointed. But at the end of that, when we knew where we were going, this will sound – it gave us time to say goodbye in a nice way. Often you lose people unexpectedly. We knew it was coming so all of us got to meet with him and the last six months of his life I spent a week a month with him. So we got to say what we meant to each other.

Smith: Quality time.
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Smith: Thank you very much for doing this. The obvious question at the beginning is how did your paths first cross with Gerald Ford?

Ehlers: I really don’t know except that I recall once getting on an airplane here in Washington. I was here for a physics meeting, got on the plane, and he was sitting up in first class reading the newspaper. I just introduced myself to him and he said, “Hello,” and was very polite. And just to show how impressive he was at remembering names and people, the next time I saw him, I don’t even remember where it was, he got that puzzled look on his face and a few light bulbs went on, and he in fact made the comment something about, “Ah, Professor Ehlers!” And that’s impressive given all the people he meets.

Smith: The mark of a good congressman?

Ehlers: Yes, he was much better at remembering names that I was.

Smith: You came into politics through a very unconventional route.

Ehlers: Yes.

Smith: Tell us a little bit about that.

Ehlers: Well, I’m a nuclear physicist by training and never intended to get involved in politics. I had been teaching at Berkeley, had received my Ph.D. there, and was asked to stay on the faculty. So I taught and did research at Berkeley for six years after the Ph.D. Then Calvin College – an excellent, excellent liberal arts college in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and my alma mater - asked me several times if I would come and help them build a physics department and teach at Calvin. And I said ‘no’ several times, but my conscience started bothering me, so I finally decided to do it.

We moved to Grand Rapids in 1966. It’s all kind of complicated and even a little hazy in my head at this point, but that was at a time of great national
distress due to the Vietnam War - I was at Berkeley - so of course, I watched all the related student activity. I was not involved in demonstrations, but I interacted with students and faculty and watched carefully. I’m a good watcher. And I watched what was going on and who was doing what, saying what, and how it was going. Initially, it started through this very idealistic effort to change policy of the nation, but it turned violent after a few years, by the time I left. I went back for three summers to do research after I’d moved to Michigan, and each summer was progressively more violent, even to the point of a student getting shot by a National Guardsman. This was before the Kent State event. It was not a fatal shot, but it was a remarkable step of course.

Smith: Do you find it difficult to communicate to people today who weren’t there just how intense, even violent, the political feelings had become, not only on campus but in the broader culture?

Ehlers: The difficulty is most people don’t even know it happened. Today, when you talk to them, they’re just astounded. And when we’d moved to Grand Rapids, there’d been race riots there just a few weeks before we arrived. Compared to Berkeley, it was small scale stuff, but still pretty serious for the city Grand Rapids was. My wife and I are both devout Christians and we went searching for a church and we chose one, particularly because it was only two blocks from where the race riots were. We thought maybe we could be of some help to that community, plus we had some friends who already belonged to that church, people I had known from Calvin. Even though we had ended up at Berkeley and they had ended up at Columbia University, we ended up back at Calvin.

So my wife and I decided to join Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church and that suddenly put me in the midst of the maelstrom because the church was trying to be a positive force in the community. We started Baxter Community Center - I’m sure you’re familiar with that - which was a big factor in stabilizing the community there. We started Project Conserve which was to restore housing, and that became the Inner City Christian Federation, which rebuilt hundreds of decaying homes in the inner city. They rented them
or sold them. I was teaching courses on how to maintain and insulate your house, and it turned into sort of a Habitat for Humanity before Habitat for Humanity was around. I was active in helping that get started. And later, it became ICCF, but also had a portion for humanity of development. We had two programs going.

Smith: One of the themes of this project is to examine the culture of West Michigan and the environment that produced Ford and that elected him over and over again. We’ve heard wonderful stories of the influence of the Christian Reformed Church – how for years people would buy a Sunday paper on Saturday night, but they wouldn’t read it until Monday. How has it changed and how has it not changed?

Ehlers: It has changed considerably in terms of participation in the political arena. I was one of the first. There had been some others from the Christian Reformed Church who had served publically, but they were not considered leaders in the Dutch or Christian Reformed community. I wasn’t either when I started, but as I said, I came into our church, and later our church formed a social justice committee and I was asked to chair that. That immediately put me in touch with a lot of other churches in the city, non-Christian Reformed, that were doing the same thing. Denny Hoekstra and his wife Jeni went to the same church. Both of them are masters at localizing a community, so we worked with them and became close friends with them. Also, Howard Rienstra, who would later become a city commissioner, is also a faculty member at Calvin and many of the Grand Rapids activists were at Calvin College.

Smith: This flies in the face of the stereotype of West Michigan, and particularly the Dutch community, as an inherently conservative group.

Ehlers: My mother was very upset when I got involved politically. She sort of justified it when I got elected to the county commission. She justified that as long as I was still teaching at Calvin and part-time in politics, that was okay, because - in paraphrasing what she said - any damage done to me in the county building by my colleagues there was undone by my going back to Calvin College to teach the same day.
Smith: So, it was less an ideological aversion than a cultural rejection of political involvement?

Ehlers: Yes, I would say it’s certainly more the latter. And my mother never really fully adjusted to the fact that I was politically involved. Whereas my dad, who was a pastor in the Christian Reformed Church, was quite proud of it. He thought that was the right thing to do. In fact, it’s kind of funny because my sister liked to prod my dad occasionally and when he retired, he moved to Ohio where my sister was. He became active in the United Way, treasurer of the local United Way and things like that. One day, he was sitting at the kitchen table counting money and so forth and my sister walked in and says, “Dad, you’re going to the dogs. You used to preach against the Boy Scouts and now you’re collecting money for them,” which sort of epitomized the change. But in my case, I didn’t have any of the hang-ups.

I had been at Berkeley and I had seen that side of the world and their reaction. But my friends and I, you know, the Hoekstras and Rienstras and so forth, recognized that a good deal of the problem with Grand Rapids was a lack of good leadership in the city commission, so that’s where we started. At least, that’s where Rienstra and I went on the County Commission. We were working through different channels, but always with the same objective. We simply decided we needed better leadership and so we would try to pick the person who was running for the city commission who showed the greatest understanding and the greatest promise of doing something and we would help that person get elected. We basically became a machine without even trying to be.

Smith: Imagine: a good government machine.

Ehlers: A good government, idealistic in approach, and you know, you’ve been in politics, you know how hard it is to get volunteers to help. You drag them in kicking and screaming to get them to write and put stamps on letters and all that stuff. Howard Rienstra and Jeni, Denny Hoekstra and I, along with Norm DeGraaf, who was a forward looking insurance salesman, we just put this little machine together and we’d pick who the best candidate was, go to that candidate, and knock on that door and say, “We think you’re the best. We’d
like to help you.” To have volunteers, experienced volunteers, appear out of
the gloom and say, “We’re here to help you” had a major impact. But also, it
grew in the sense that, if we felt none of the people running were good, we’d
go out and recruit someone. We recruited Lyman Parks, who was the first
African-American on the Grand Rapids city commission. We recruited him
to run for city commissioner and he was more than willing to do it. He later
became the first black Mayor in Grand Rapids.

Smith: It’s interesting because, as you talk about this project, I’m thinking back to a
precursor of sorts, back when President Ford’s dad and others were trying to
overthrow Frank McKay and bring decent government back to Grand Rapids.
So, in some ways, history repeats itself.

Ehlers: Well, that’s very true. The differences, of course, that McKay, whether it was
true or not, had the reputation of being a shady character. Not just McKay,
but all the people he surrounded himself with. In our case, we were trying to
change government to recognize the needs of society, particularly the poor
people.

Smith: In some ways, it’s a tougher thing to do.

Ehlers: Yes, it was, particularly in the shadow of the race riots, which shocked the
people of Grand Rapids. They couldn’t imagine.

Smith: ‘It can’t happen here.’

Ehlers: Yeah. So, anyway, that’s how I got involved, never, never intending to run
myself. I learned enough about politics and what people look for in a
candidate. You know, a strong chin is worth two points, the right nose is
worth one point, and so forth.

Smith: Hair helps.

Ehlers: It does. I learned early on that an unattractive, bald-headed man like me
doesn’t have a chance, but that’s not why I decided I wasn’t interested in
running. I just wasn’t interested in the job. I was interested in changing
society, but not doing all the grunt work for any political office.
Smith: When did you first run?

Ehlers: In 1974, I ran for the county commission and the reason I was persuaded to, I had become active in the environmental movement. You’re familiar with the West Michigan Environmental Action Council, which I think is still one of the best in the country. We started that about ’68 and I was in on the ground floor. I was not a key player in that at all, I just thought it was a great idea. I had become very aware of the environmental problems and Michigan had the right atmosphere to make changes, so I joined the West Michigan Environmental Action Council. In fact, fairly quickly I ended up on the board of that organization. So, when we had a terrible solid waste problem and Kent County opened dumps with leachate flowing into the rivers and creeks and saw headlines in the paper every day, friends said, “Look, Vern, you’re a scientist, you’re an environmentalist, you’re the guy to deal with this.”

So I ran for county commission. It was a thankless job. The county commission was still the good old boys club, very much so, and literally with the emphasis on boys. There was not a single woman in twenty-one people. I still remember in my first month there, after a county commission meeting, I was looking around, chatting with some of my fellow commissioners and said, “You know, this is awful. It’s all men. I’m going to go out and recruit some women to run.” And a member of the county commission said, “Ah, the last thing we need is a bunch of pushy broads in this outfit.” The press reporter was standing right next to him and he didn’t even report the story. I asked the reporter afterwards, I said, “You heard what he said?” He said, “Oh yeah.” I said, “I thought that’d be a big story.” He said, “Well, no, everyone in the city knows what he’s like.” I said, “So, if I had said it, it’d be a story?” “Oh, yeah.” I said, “You have a different standard of news than he does.”

But, at any rate, in the meantime, I had met Jerry Ford and then I met him again and as I said, he remembered my background. The next time I met him, he knew my name. He was incredible on names. And I remember times when I was walking down the streets of Grand Rapids with him and it was a real revelation to me that I knew scarcely any of the people walking down the street and he knew them all and called them by name. I remember one time,
we walked in what was the Pantlind Hotel before the remodeling and I was with him. By then, he was presidential rank. I think he was vice president. We walked in together, Secret Service and all, and he was shaking hands with people and mostly calling them by name and I noticed an African-American man lurking in the background kind of off to the side. It was clear he wanted to meet Jerry Ford. So I tapped Jerry on the shoulder and said, “Jerry, I think that gentleman over there wants to talk to you.” He looked at him and said, “Oh, yeah, I got to say ‘hi’ to him.” So, he walks over and says ‘hi’ to him and says, “How’s your mother? Is the cancer gone or is it still progressing?” And I thought, just what an amazing guy. Here’s a guy one step from the presidency of the United States and he remembers his roots, he remembers the illness in the family of that man.

Smith: I remember hearing him tell later on, not to pick on any one in particular, but he sort of used Guy Vander Jagt as an example of someone who was enormously talented yet, in some ways, forgot his roots. Clearly, Ford never really had a seriously contested race after his first one and it’s amazing how much time he spent in the district, even after becoming a national figure. He used to say that he thought things had gone downhill since the staffs had expanded. Part of that was his fiscal conservatism, but I think part of that was also a sense that maybe they didn’t simply reflect, but in some ways contributed, to the pell-mell growth of government.

Ehlers: Yes.

Smith: Did you talk to him about the House and housekeeping issues when you were first elected? Did you have any conversations?

Ehlers: Not really. Well, when I was first elected to the county commission, he complimented me. In fact, I played somewhat of a role in the county contribution of the Ford Museum and it was like pulling teeth to get money out of the county commission, which normally never appropriated money. Their job was just to keep the county running, so to give money to something like the Ford Museum was a real change. One time, Jerry and I were there looking around. I think by then I probably had become chairman of the

Not Released
Smith: I was going to ask you. From time to time, we ask people, did you ever see the temper? Because it existed and he spent a lifetime controlling it.

Ehlers: No, I never saw him lose his temper, but clearly he was angry in that instance. The one time I saw him really angry, and it tells you a lot about what kind of a man he was, was at the time of Watergate. I have to tell you an interlude here. I went up to the University of Colorado at Boulder for a year on sabbatical and did research on atomic and nuclear physics. It was a great year. And, while I was there, I went to the national meeting of the American Physical Society, which was the physicists’ association. A speaker was Congressman McDermott from Washington, who was a chemist and worked at the Hanford facility, and he said, “All of you should get out there and get in touch with your member of Congress. A lot of scientific issues come up in Congress and most of them know nothing about science. See if you can offer to help them.”

I thought, “Good idea”, so I got back to Boulder and sat down and wrote a letter to Mr. Ford to suggest that, if he was interested, I would put together a group of scientists from West Michigan and we would be happy to meet with him and advise him on science matters. I dropped it in the mail and my thought was that I would get one of these thank-you-for-your-letter type of letters in response that said ‘We’ll keep it in mind’. And, instead, two days later, I get a call from Mr. Meyer, Jerry’s Chief of Staff. He called me and said, “Hey, got your letter and Jerry really thinks it’s a great idea and he’d like to have you put that together.” And I said, “Good. I’ll be in Washington in three weeks for a science meeting. I’d be happy to meet with him.”
So, I came and met with him and it was interesting. It was in what now is the Speaker’s office under Madam Pelosi with a beautiful view down the mall between the monuments and so forth. It was pretty heady stuff for a punk scientist from Grand Rapids. At any rate, I had a series of questions. How did he want it run? Who did he want on it? Et cetera, et cetera. It was very interesting because I posed the question “Do you want me to restrict it to Republicans who are scientists?” And Frank Meyer immediately spoke up and says, “Of course we would want that.” And Jerry took a puff on his pipe and said, “Well, I don’t see why. We want scientific advice, not political advice.” And so that gave me a clear signal of how he operated. So, we scientists would get together with Jerry about four times a year. He’d come to town and I would set up a meeting. We had about five or six scientists. I’d prepare an agenda ahead of time, so the scientists would be able to get some background on it and we advised Jerry. That’s what led to my getting politically involved on the national level.

Smith: Did he ask questions?

Ehlers: Oh, yes, lots of questions, good questions. The only time we really had a disagreement was when he was gung-ho to build the supersonic airplane and we all advised him against it. We said the cost was going to exceed the benefits and the program wouldn’t fly, literally.

Smith: Did you ever have a chance to remind him of that in later years?

Ehlers: I think I did at one point. He still fought the battle, but he lost the battle in the Congress, though not because of anything we did. I remember clearly one thing which gave me some real insight into how Congress works, but I never fully appreciated how true it was until I got here myself. I talked once after one of our science meetings and said, “You know, Mr. Ford pardon me for asking this, but I’m a little puzzled because, here you are, an extremely busy congressman; you come back on the weekend; you meet with constituents; and then you come meet with us and spend an hour and a half or two hours with us and you seem to enjoy it. That’s really surprising to me because you’re so busy. How do you find the time for it, first of all, and why do you enjoy it?” And Jerry was a pretty big guy, he puts his arm around me and
says, “Well, Vern, you’ve got to recognize one thing. You’re the only people I meet with who meet with me for the purpose of giving me something instead of asking me for something.” He says, “All day long, I sit in that office and people come in and ask me for favors and you come along and you’re here to help me.” He said, “That’s great. I really enjoy it.” And he did, he really did enjoy meeting with us, partly because he didn’t understand science and we were able to explain these issues in very simple terms.

Smith: That raises a great question. Tell me about, for lack of a better word, his intelligence, his mind.

Ehlers: Well, I had heard all the stories, too. He was very slow of speech, slow to react, and that, I think, was what killed him in that one debate where he said he’d got himself in a little box and instead of realizing how bad the box was, he just kept plowing.

Smith: Plus he was stubborn.

Ehlers: Stubbornness, too, perhaps. But he was a thoughtful guy and much, much brighter than his constituents realized and certainly much much brighter than the press corps realized. I found him to be very bright, very astute.

Smith: But it’s interesting, the curiosity factor strikes me. A subject that he didn’t know a lot about and he wanted to know more about it.

Ehlers: Right and it was very good, but it was also very practical and pragmatic. For example, I got a call from him one day. He said, “Vern, I don’t know what to do. We’ve got a bill coming up” on banning open pit mining for coal or something related to the mining of coal. And he said, “Vern, I have a telegram from Detroit Edison and they say if this bill passes, they’re going to increase the cost of electricity in Michigan by x percent.” It was a pretty sizeable percent. He said, “Is that really true or not?” and I said, “I don’t know anything about it, but I’ll see what I can find out.”

I knew it was a big controversy in Montana at the time, so I called some of the people involved in it in Montana and asked a bunch of questions. Pretty soon, I was talking to people all over the country about it. I put together a position
paper for him and he appreciated that. But a lot of the questions were something that our committee couldn’t answer right off. We had to do some research. The one thing that happened that really gave me some insight into his character because, as you know, he didn’t use profanity, not unless he was really angry.

Smith: The worst thing was a “God damn it”. Penny (Circle) says once in a while you could tell this was going to be a “God damn it day,” but that was it.

Ehlers: At the end of one of our science meetings, we were all pretty curious about Watergate and what he knew and so forth. So, he told us what he knew. I think it was John Mitchell that he was angry at, but he made the comment about him, and then he got angry, just pounded the table. He said, “I was standing this far away from John Mitchell and he looked me right in the eye and he lied to me. That damn guy lied to me.” He was just so shook up that anyone would lie to him at that level of government. I think he was ready to kick Dick Nixon out right then.

Smith: That’s an admirable character trait that you just described, and yet there are people in this town who would say, “Well, how naïve can you be?”

Ehlers: Yes.

Smith: That’s the Boy Scout.

Ehlers: Yeah, he tended to believe people. If they told him something, that was it.

Smith: Did you ever debate the pardon with him or discuss it?

Ehlers: Yes and no. I never brought it up with him. He brought it up with me a few times and not just with me, sometimes it was a group of people. But he said repetitively he had absolutely no regrets about having given the pardon. He saw no other way of bringing the nation back together and getting on with business than to do that. And he told me very directly that he knew that very likely that would be the end of his presidency. Now, that may have been easier to say after the fact, but I really think he looked at that. I think what really bothered him a great deal was when terHorst resigned. They had a lot of respect for each other and I don’t quite know why terHorst resigned unless
he was just peeved that Jerry did it without telling him, so he was totally unprepared when the media called.

Smith: Well, Ford’s explanation was, first of all, he didn’t want to put terHorst in a position where he was lying to the press by denying it before it happened and he certainly didn’t want people to know about it before it happened. Mel Laird, characteristically, talks about how he had a plan - he was going to bring a bipartisan delegation from both Houses down to the White House to ask the President to do this. The problem with that is, given the supercharged political climate of that time, could you really have floated a trial balloon without it being shot down?

Ehlers: No.

Smith: I once spent two and a half hours in a hotel in Grand Rapids war-gaming it with the President. I went in a skeptic and I came out convinced that really there wasn’t another way to do it. There’s no easy way. There’s no politically safe way to do it. And the other side of this story, of course, because it never happened is, what would it have been like for the Ford presidency had he not pardoned Nixon and the country for the next two and a half years had remained preoccupied by Richard Nixon’s legal status? I mean, you can say that it cost him the presidency. It probably did. But if he hadn’t done it, it might have also have cost the presidency.

Ehlers: Yes, you’re right. I think the only thing he could’ve done which might’ve put a better cast on it entirely would be to announce it and at the same time announce he was not going to run for reelection. But that might also not be the best thing for the country by the time the election came around. Who would know who would be running, et cetera.

Smith: He always remained a true fiscal conservative.

Ehlers: Yes, except where his allowance was concerned.

Smith: The exclusive trade union, as Herbert Hoover once called it, of former presidents - whenever they needed anything, they went to Jerry because Jerry had friends.
Ehlers: The funny thing is, as time went on and his friends disappeared, he called me more often when they were in danger of losing or having a reduction in the funds allocated for Presidential retirees. One time he called me, and he was very concerned, “I may have to let two people go in my office,” he says. “I can manage okay but 100,000 people a year will write wanting a letter from me and they won’t get a response.” He said, “You do what you want, but that’s the fact.”

Smith: Once you were in Congress, when you got together, what sort of things did you talk about? Was it current events? He made a real effort to stay very much on top of things, to be as contemporary as possible.

Ehlers: The statue looks spectacular. The pictures are wonderful.

Ehlers: It’s very good.

Smith: I can’t imagine any honor that would’ve pleased him more than that. He really regarded this as his home.

Ehlers: Not Released

Smith: Not Released
Smith: You were also instrumental, I believe, in seeing that the Congressional Gold Medal went to both the Fords.

Ehlers: Yes, that was my own project out of necessity because you need, I think, two-thirds of the members of the House to personally sign the bill, and I couldn’t just contact their office and have someone fake a signature. They had to personally sign it. Then I had to personally go around and ask for their signature. That’s just the way it is. They just don’t want people willy-nilly giving away gold medals, although, lately I don’t think the standards have been as high. But I remember very clearly the little buttons that said “Vote for Betty’s Husband” and I said, “There’s no way I’m going to leave Betty out.” There’s been some criticism of me for that.

Smith: Really?

Ehlers: Yes.

Smith: Of including the two of them?

Ehlers: Yes, because we’ve never done that for a president’s wife before. This sort of thing.

Smith: People have forgotten a lot of history.

Ehlers: I just said, “That’s the way it’s going to be.” And I got the signatures and we did it.

Smith: It was a wonderful event, a great event.

Ehlers: Yeah, it was. Thanks, especially, for the speech you wrote for me. I think that’s the only time I’ve ever used a speech someone else had written.

Smith: I’m glad it went well.

Ehlers: It was very good and there are some tough critics around here. Remember Hal Rogers, who likes to play the role of the grumpy southerner? He came up to me afterwards and said, “Vern, I never thought that you had it in you. That was a superb ceremony and an absolutely superb speech.” And I said, “I wish I could take credit for it. It’s the first speech in my life I’ve ever read.”
Smith: Well, you did a great job. Everyone did. It was nice of President Clinton to be there. Again, like the funeral later on, sometimes the official trappings can almost drown out the personal element. There, it was the opposite. I mean, it was a grand setting and a great occasion of state, but it felt like a family event.

Ehlers: Yes, and everyone loved Jerry. I recall several years after that, he came around, and I think it was his last visit to the Capitol. I got word, I don’t even remember how I got it, but with about ten minutes warning that Jerry wants to walk across the floor of the House. That’s where he started. So, I said, “Okay, I’ll meet him in the cloak room and I’ll take him around.” So, he showed up. He first had to kiss Helen, who ran the little food concession and have a picture taken with her. I think it’s still hanging there. I was asked to try to get him through quickly, so I brought him through the cloak room to the floor of the House, and the word had spread a little bit that Jerry might be coming in, but then someone spotted him and started applauding. That’s the first time I’ve ever seen the floor of the House stop business totally for

Not Released

Smith: I assume he saw as many Democrats as Republicans.

Ehlers: Yes. It was a great time and they all just applauded until he walked out the other side of the chamber. Continuous applause and, actually, it’s one of the few times I’ve seen members of Congress fighting to get in line to shake someone’s hand.

Smith: That’s great. Was that the last time you saw him?

Ehlers: No, I saw him in Michigan a few times after that, but I think that was his last visit to Washington. Then, I found out interesting things, too. Todd Plaats came over to me, he’s a Representative from Pennsylvania, a young man, good guy, he came up to me and said, “Vern, thanks so much for bringing him here. Do you realize Jerry Ford is my hero? I wouldn’t be in Congress if it weren’t for Jerry Ford.” I said, “How’d that happen?” He said, “Well, when
he ran for president, we had a teacher who wanted us to be interested in the
election, so he let us pick our candidates and then he would choose someone
to be the candidate and then others to work on the campaign. I was Jerry
Ford’s campaign manager in my 7th grade class. Boy, I worked so hard on
that and I was so brokenhearted when he lost, but he’s been a hero to me.”
So, the next week I went home (I go home every weekend), and I went to the
Ford Museum and bought one of those blankets they have that said Gerald
Ford and brought it back and gave it to Todd. He was crying when he
originally told me about his grade school Ford campaign, and when I gave
gave him the blanket he started crying again and said, “Vern, this means so much
to me.” It’s still hanging in his office.

Smith: That’s great. You know, people get so cynical about this place and they
assume everyone in it is cynical.

Ehlers: Actually the level of cynicism here is very low. It’s certainly lower than the
public at large. And it’s not a good old boys club, either, anymore. I think it
used to be.

Smith: I know he was appalled at campaign spending, what it cost to run for office.
Did you and he ever have that conversation?

Ehlers: No, not really. I was aware of his feelings. I think he was upset about various
things. Upset is not really the right word, but a little bit concerned. When I
was elected, he talked to me and I still remember clearly one of the things he
asked because I wasn’t sure what he meant. He said, “Vern, where are you
going to live?” And I said, “We’ve got a nice house here. We’ll continue
living in this house.” He shook his head and said, “When I was elected, we
backed a moving van up to the house, loaded up everything we owned, drove
to Washington, bought a house and lived there. I only came home twice a
year at first, for the August recess and the Christmas recess.” He said, “It’s so
different now.” I said, “Yes, I get to come home every weekend.” And I’ve
used that story many times in speeches because I’m constantly asked about
the civility or lack of civility and I used to say, “Some of our lack of civility is
because we never are together on weekends, because almost all of the
Members go home on weekends. At the state level, it’s because of the
freeway system so everyone drives home. Same in the state legislature. In Washington, it’s because of the jet airplane.”

Smith: Absolutely. Alan Greenspan told us the same thing. We asked him once about what had contributed to the problem and he volunteered that the leading cause was the jet plane.

Ehlers: In fact, I have constituents who’ve been angry at me because I won’t come home on a Wednesday night to give a speech. And I said, “I’m sorry, I come home every weekend. I’d be happy to give a speech then, but during the week, I’m supposed to be in Washington voting.” “Oh, they won’t care if you miss one bill!” But the people do mind!

Smith: You’ve spoiled your constituents.

Ehlers: Right.

Smith: I think you were the one who told the story, a wonderful story…the first day when President Ford began living in the White House, as opposed to being out there in Alexandria where he lived and commuted to DC, he went up to the door of the West Wing and there was a Marine there who saluted. And the President sticks his hand out and says, “Hi, I’m Jerry Ford. I’m going to be living here. What’s your name?” Again, that’s the Congressman, isn’t it?

Ehlers: Yes, and I did tell you that story. The person I got it from is no longer alive, so we have to trust my memory.

Smith: I trust you.

Ehlers: But it was Maury De Jonge from the Grand Rapids Press and Maury was in his glory, of course, because he always had a close relationship with Jerry and always treated them well, too, which is another factor. So, Maury got invited to all the events when Ford took over. And Maury was walking behind Jerry Ford when that happened. The real coup de gras, maybe you didn’t hear of this, was when Maury went and talked to the Marine afterwards and said, “What did you think of that?” He said, “I thought that was great. I’ve been standing here and opening the door for the President for over a year and
President Nixon never even once looked at me.” Maury made a little story of what a difference that was between Nixon and Ford.

Smith: Were you surprised by the amount of public reaction when he passed away? He’d been out of the public eye for a while.

Ehlers: No, by then, I think the general public had put in perspective his pardoning of Nixon. And I think they had recognized, not as totally as you and I have, but recognized that it really was for the good of the country. They didn’t quite believe that Ford did it knowing that it would likely cost him the presidency. Ford had said it often enough. Who’s the old guy on NPR?

Smith: Daniel Shorr.

Ehlers: Last question - I realize it’s totally speculative. The way the party has changed, could Jerry Ford get nominated in the Republican primary in West Michigan today?

Ehlers: Yes, easily. I think what he stood for is still what most of the people in West Michigan stand for. It’s what I stand for and I’ve gotten elected quite handily close to ten times. I get compared to Jerry quite a bit, not so much back home, but around here I do.

Smith: Really?

Ehlers: Yes.

Smith: And I’m sure it’s a complimentary reference.
Ehlers: Yeah, and not so much in the way that I could be president or anything like that. It’s just that what I stand for is what Jerry stood for. Honesty, integrity, not being willing to play the games that get played around here. People still remember that about Jerry. Some of them almost implied that I act the way I do because I’m trying to imitate Jerry.

Smith: Maybe that tells you something about West Michigan.

Ehlers: Yes. Well, it’s the values of West Michigan and it’s a great place to live. I was very proud to represent them and I’d be very happy to represent them for another twenty years. A different story. This may sound funny to you, but when I got to the State House and I saw some of these old men doddering around and being generally fairly useless in the legislative process, they were the old timers. They knew all the good stories and so forth, but just not making contributions anymore. I remember saying, “Lord, please give me the wisdom to quit before I get that way.” Now, that was at the State House and then I found the same thing at the state Senate and also here. People staying too long. I may have quit too early. I don’t know. From that standpoint, I think I easily could’ve gone another two or four years and still been very productive.

Smith: I suppose, in retrospect, is it better to quit too early than too late?

Ehlers: Not Released

Smith: Will you miss it?

Ehlers: Yes, I will miss being at the center of action. I will miss being able to say, “I think we should do this” and start working towards that. Now, I still have that opportunity because I’ve been approached by enough organizations and people who want me to continue doing things like that, but I also don’t want
to be a hanger-on and I don’t want to be a lobbyist. In fact, a reporter, when I announced that I was not running again, said, “Are you going to be a lobbyist?” I said, “Nope. Well, let me correct that. I may be a lobbyist, but I won’t charge anything for it.”

Smith: That’s a novel approach.

Ehlers: I said, “It may be a little hard for me to keep my mouth shut when things need to be said and I’m not above talking to colleagues about what I think they should do, but I don’t want to get paid for it.”

Smith: This has been wonderful. I can’t thank you enough.

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Smith: First of all, thank you very much for doing this.

I have to ask you, what does it mean to be back in this room?

Hoffman: Well, I’ve been a frequent visitor with the president in this room for going back since it was built. I know it’s nostalgic in some ways but it’s common to me. I know right before he died, I had a long visit with him here.

Smith: Did you?

Hoffman: Yeah, so I’m familiar with [it] and we’re old friends of both Betty and President Ford going back a lot of years. Forty years.

Smith: Well, that’s the perfect place then to go. When did you first become acquainted?

Hoffman: It was back when he was minority leader. In fact, maybe even before that when he was in the Congress. But I was appointed by President Nixon before his Watergate times to sit on a businessmen’s panel to examine ways in which the government could use normal business techniques to improve the way in which the government was run. I was on that for about two years. I was running a company here in Los Angeles, the Flying Tiger line and Tiger International. I ran into and had business with President Ford, or at that time, Congressman Ford on and off very casually. From then, we had a home in Eldorado Country Club, just a weekend thing for us.

One day, Leon Parma, whom you’ve talked to - I had dinner with him and his wife last night at the theater - Leon called me one day, this was probably 1971 maybe ’70, and said, “Jerry Ford’s coming in and wants to play a little golf and I wondered whether he could use your home.” I said, “Fine” because he knew we didn’t stay there except to come in and out over the weekends and so on. So they came two or three times, usually over Easter, and would stay in
our home. And we got to know Betty and the president before he got involved with all the things that followed.

Smith: What was your impression of them then?

Hoffman: I got to know them well enough to know that his reputation, particularly talking about him, was exactly honest and a wonderful person to negotiate with. Totally trustful and considerate. They both proved to be that throughout their life. And, of course, after he retired and moved here, we had a home here and have one now. We’re Vintage Country Club now, which is our principal home, but we live half of the year in Del Mar when it gets hot. But anyway, we then had a much closer relationship that expanded. And we got to know Betty well because I was on the board of the Eisenhower Hospital for many years and she was also on the board. So, I gained knowledge and experience with her in what I call her business capacity.

Smith: What kind of business woman was she?

Hoffman: She was, of course, the founder of the Betty Ford Center and very interested in it given her own experience. She was the chairman and founder and she actually ran that thing, not day to day, but she was the chairman of the board and she saw that they had the proper people working and building the things she wanted done.

Smith: She was hands-on?

Hoffman: She was hands-on, very much so. And, also, I enjoyed learning so much about her instinctive abilities in the business area.

Smith: And this was all new for her now, wasn’t it?

Hoffman: Well, it was brand new. It was an idea that was brought on by her own problems, in her case, with alcohol.

Smith: Where you aware of this, by the way? When you knew them earlier, was that something you were aware of?

Hoffman: We were not aware of that at all until the papers started reporting on this and so on. Early on, we didn’t, and as I got to know her, we never discussed
anything but the business side of her operation, but I knew the history of it. I’d come to the conclusion that Betty was sensitive to unfair criticism of President Ford as he was moving into this maelstrom of Watergate. I think she was always a lady and always very pleasant and also worrying to do the missions and the work that the First Lady needs to do. But you couldn’t help but see, when you got to know her, how the pressure was affecting her. And so, when Watergate was over and the president’s term in Washington was over, Leonard Firestone had this piece of property here and he fixed it up so that they could build a home here.

So, when she did that, I don’t know when the decision to start the Betty Ford Center actually emerged, but I know the whole family was involved in sitting her down, as her book said, and saying, “Mother and Jerry, you’ve got to face the problem that you have here.” And they were the ones that got her started in her own treatment. I’m a great admirer of her, my wife and I are friends going back and she’s one of the strengths that the president had through his difficult journey during difficult times, and that followed on until the day he died. And I know that the president’s death has affected Betty in ways that you would normally expect, but much more so because they were very, very close.

Smith: It’s interesting that you say that because a lot of people didn’t realize that. And when he died and people saw Mrs. Ford, it was impossible not to be moved by the fact that she wasn’t well herself at the time, and yet she was resolved to go through that whole punishing week-long ordeal, in front of cameras, no privacy. Toward the end, remember she got out of the wheelchair and she walked all the way down to the gravesite. Someone expressed their admiration to her and she said, “Well, that’s what my husband would have wanted.”

Hoffman: Yes.

Smith: They were incredibly close, weren’t they?

Hoffman: They were, and for the public and the United States, this was a very educational experience to see all this happen on the television because his
reputation will increase as they get more and more into it. The thing that the
president regretted so much was that he was not elected. Not because of any
personal feeling that he deserved it, but that he had learned so much and he
had gotten into so much that was important and he wanted to finish it. And
that would’ve cemented in the minds of many of the scholars in later years
their assessment of his presidency, because he had that kind of personality we
needed at that time, whereas, for example, President Carter did not. And the
whole country had changed.

Smith: And yet, of course, they became good friends.

Hoffman: They became good friends. Jerry was the kind of person that could set aside
any, what he called ‘minor things’ and think in terms of people and what
they’re trying to accomplish in life. It’s all of the ex-presidents who are alive
and I can’t tell you how many congressmen and so on, there was never a bad
word about the president, President Ford. And that makes him very unique,
because in politics, as we saw in the last campaign, a lot of hatred comes to
the front amongst the voters and everything else, but that never was the case
with President Ford. I’m not sure he ever really understood how much people
appreciated him. One of the reasons is, his roots were in pre-World War II
and he knew and understood a lot of the important things that were happening
in the Cold War. And then Ford was able to take us up to the point that he
could eventually resolve all these very strong, dangerous, and common
arguments that existed between the Soviet Union and the United States. He
had a tremendous experience.

He was a great football player. In fact, as you know, the history of that at
University of Michigan, which was very much sports oriented. And then he
went to Yale, was a coach there and sort of worked his way through on
scholarships and graduated from their law school. He was in World War II
early and was on a Jeep carrier that almost sank in a horrible storm during
some battles around the Philippines, and his vessel almost sank. There was a
huge fire on the vessel and the captain was a young sort of Reserve-type
captain. This wasn’t the real Navy, this were the guys that were running these
additional ships that were built and thrown into the battle. But they did
marvelous, marvelous work. There’s a book out on this as you’re familiar with, and a recent book that President Ford had suggested not be published until he died and other such information has broadened out the public’s knowledge of what kind of a great human being he was. And then the open way in which Betty and he treated her own problems. You know President Ford liked to have a drink and he smoked a pipe and things like that and he stopped doing any drinking at all in support of his wife and so on.

Smith: Did he reminisce about the war? Did he talk much about it?

Hoffman: He never talked about it. He talked to me about it. Before I read this book on Halsey that had a whole important paragraph about President Ford in it, I didn’t realize other than sketchy that he was a Reserve officer and was in early and so on. But it turns out that he was very close to being killed or dying in that battle, very close. In fact, he was trying to put out the fire in a huge storm and he’d slid off the carrier deck and was hanging by his hands in a huge storm on the side of the vessel trying to get back on board. If he’d gone into the water, it’d have been goodbye.

But he and I and Laura, my wife, and Betty were at the local restaurant here with Leon Parma and Barbara, just the six of us, going back as I’m describing and somebody, I think Leon said, “You know, I’ve often wondered how we were able to put sixteen million people under arms.” And suddenly, in fact just before the attack on Pearl Harbor, we had an army that was the seventeenth largest army in the world, 117 thousand people or something like that, 170 thousand. And yet when we built all those ships and created all those divisions and so on, the greatest number of junior and mid-rank officers were just right out of civilian life and so on. Some went to ROTC, as I did, and went off to get trained. But the interesting thing is that we did and as rapidly as we did, you know, building fifty thousand airplanes a year and getting people to know how to fly them, these complicated big airplanes and fighter planes and bombers and so on. And people, some of them late teenagers and so on.

So at this dinner over in town here, Leon said, “You know, I’ve often wondered how we got sixteen million people suddenly brought into the Army,
the Navy, the Marine Corps, the Air Corps and all that – how they got trained, how they learned to do what they did,” talking to me and to the president. And I said, “Well, I’ll give you a fast answer. A lot of the training was very superficial and a lot of the knowledge that was gained to lead to our later success was on-the-job training. And, you know, it sounds like you’re making a joke, but this is true.” And that’s the first time the president began to talk about his days on the Jeep carrier. And he told a story about how they were on a Jeep carrier, it was a carrier that was a converted older naval vessel, usually a large one, and they converted them to small and therefore called them Jeep carriers and they could carry about half of the airplanes of the big carriers, but nevertheless there they were.

There were a lot of them out there and we were building them. And as we went along, we had a huge naval collection of modern carriers as well as these Jeep carriers. The Japanese and Germans began to suffer because we had command of the world’s oceans along with the British and so on. But, [about] the on-the-job training, the president at this dinner said, “Well, I want to tell you a little story. We were on board and I happened to be up in the wheelhouse with my captain who was a young guy,” maybe three years older than Jerry and Jerry had handled all the sports efforts on the vessel and all the crews. He had other relationships with the crews, but he got to be the number three officer as I recall that they had on this Jeep carrier. And they got a call on the radio from a cruiser that said, “We’re dead in the water. We’ve got to get towed out of here.”

It turned out that it was a cruiser and the Japs didn’t have any cruisers, but they had a lot of destroyers, much smaller guns with less range. But by continuously charging at this cruiser, they had damaged it as they say ‘Dead in the water.’ It was only a matter of time before the Japanese got in there and sank that vessel and there’d be a couple thousand men, eighteen hundred people, on that would just be in the water and so on. So anyway, he said they’re up in the bridge and they get a call that said, “Anyone in position close to get to us, please get out here and tow us out of here.” They looked and found they were close, so they kept on-the-job training and the captain said, “Well, I wonder what we’re supposed to do.” And President Ford said
he said to him, “Hell, I don’t know. Can we tow a cruiser? Are we big enough to tow a cruiser?” And [there’s] a big storm going on. So the captain said, “Well, I don’t know. Anyway, let’s get going.”

So they took a heading and got close by. Then, embarrassingly, they had to get on the radio and the cruiser captain was very anxious and said, “Well, how do we do this?” meaning how do we hook up with this. “We’ll send a little boat out with the ropes and then you tie it up and you pull us out of here as fast as you can.” So, they did, they got them out of there and saved them. And, of course, when they got them with other vessels to protect them, they were able to do whatever they did.

I didn’t follow up on that story, but I thought that this is a powerful story that I’ve never seen in print. I know it’s true, every word of it and that they were all endangered and under fire as they did this work. And they’d never done it before and they didn’t know how to do it, how to actually get down there in the water and hook up and tow them out of there. And they were embarrassed to talk to the regular Navy captain of the vessel who said, “Tie a line to us and get us out of here!”

Smith: It’s also good training, I suppose, for on-the-job training as president.

Hoffman: Yes, but you know, the side thing we said here talking time and again about military things and so on is that he had this background and he never raised any issue alluding to bravery or anything like that and he never gave the public an understanding of how much he really knew, how much he’d learned as a young man before he got into Congress.

Smith: That’s interesting. Tell me about his mind, his intelligence.

Hoffman: Well, President Ford had great judgment. His brain worked at a very high level on matters involving judgment. And you know the brain has hundreds of different areas and it’s an amazing thing the human brain, but he had this ability. And there’s more to intelligence than what’s your score on an IQ or you’re brilliant enough to go to Harvard at eleven and all that. But this is different.
Smith: Plus, often, glibness, verbal facility is equated with IQ whereas they may not be related.

Hoffman: And a lot of people didn’t realize, the political tactics were to make fun of him. There were pieces in the paper about how he stumbled and he’s clumsy. Actually, he was the best athlete we’ve ever had in the presidency.

Smith: Did that perception that some people had bother him, you think?

Hoffman: He was very sensitive, as Betty was, to unfair criticism, but he never reacted the way people did, the way you or I or somebody else might do. He was able to evaluate what was happening, what people were saying and minimizing conflict. One of the reasons he was so successful as minority leader was that he could work with both sides of the aisle. And he had friends and I knew some of them, the majority leader in the House and so on, that used to come out here and play golf with him and they were very close. It was on that level, those kinds of people. Yeah, I think, to answer your question directly, he was sensitive to this.

Smith: Do you think it bothered her even more?

Hoffman: Well, I can’t evaluate that, whether it was more or less, but I know it bothered her. It always bothers, I think, the First Lady more than it does the person being ridiculed and criticized and so on because their loyalties are what they are and they can’t respond.

Smith: Did you see them while they were in the White House?

Hoffman: Yes, yes. Just as an example of that, a lot of years ago now – I’m eighty-five years old. When I was fifty-three years old, I had a heart bypass and they weren’t all that common in those days and it was something that’d come up fairly quickly. I was chairman of my company and before that had been the number two man as a very young person of the Vanderbilt companies in New York and so on. And had a lot of early experience in business and so forth and Jerry and Betty would come visit us in our home and play golf and I’d set up games with him with Bob Hope and people like that. They really enjoyed
it, usually over Easter, but his attitude was always sound, and he didn’t change. You knew what you saw was what you got.

He wasn’t the best speaker in the world, except when you, as I did – I attended a meeting with the city council of one of the towns we have here and we were trying to get some dollar help for the theater. I was on the board and he was on the board, we used to sit together on the theater. Almost from the days it was built, they got involved through our association and later, when it was built and so on, Betty was interested and on the board of the hospital and he was sort of the person from the former White House who was more interested and asked to do more with the theater. And we had gone to the meeting of the city council and I was impressed.

He got up in the audience and there were a lot of controversy and we, the theater, were asking, “Look, the theater is in your area. It was built all with private money. We never asked for a dime, but isn’t it time, now that you have this wonderful facility – we’ve provided entertainment for children, we bring all this good entertainment for the members of your city and so on. It’s just time you came up and recognized we need money. We raise money every year, two million dollars every year. We go to the people that have the money and we say, ‘You know, we need two million dollars’ and after a while, you’re going year after year after year, you’re going often to the same people. When do we get some help from you people?”

There were people with signs saying don’t and blah-blah and were walking around. And he was standing there and in a quiet way – there were newspapers there and so on – and he sold them on the idea that politically, even if you don’t believe in this, you’d better start thinking of getting some money. And he got five million dollars from them, and since then we’re getting about ten million dollars or fifteen million dollars from people every year from the various little towns that benefit from having the theater. And this is what I call intelligence, judgmental skills, people skills, all of which he and Betty both were on a very high level and they didn’t pretend to be intellectuals. They didn’t masquerade in any way and they took the beating that they took when he stumbled and didn’t do well in a speech when he had
to use it in the White House. So, in a long way of saying, yeah, this bothered him but again, he rose above it.

Smith: Did they tell you why they decided to move out here when they left Washington?

Hoffman: I think partly, maybe largely, it was because of these wonderful visits they were having here. The interesting thing was, when he got to be vice president, he called me and he said, “We can’t use your home.” We had a nice home. We had a separate pool house, and they could use four or five bedrooms, it’s not an elegant place, but just a nice place. They had a very good country club and they had a good golf course and so on and that’s what we were interested in, in those days. We were a lot younger and that was absolutely vital, but I got the surprise of my life when he said, “We can’t go to the Hoffman’s anymore.” And I said, “Why?” And he said, “Because we’ve been out there, we’ve sent our security people out there and we can’t set up the kind of security we want for the vice presidency, for the vice president and his wife.”

So I laughed and he laughed and it turned out the Annenberg’s have this beautiful place, have their own golf course, and some of our friends said, “The vice president would like to come out” and so when he got to be president he came out, always to the Annenberg’s. And their great friend and also a wonderful person was Firestone, Leonard Firestone, who had a home, it’s still there, but Leonard is dead and the Firestone’s don’t live in that particular home now, but they were there.

They were walking this piece of land, actually, so when he retired from the presidency, I think Leonard said, “What would you like to do?” They wanted to be in Vail or someplace near there and they wanted to be here and this was the way they wanted to make their life. And Leonard was very helpful and said, “We’ve got a piece of land right there, adjacent, bigger, it’s right off the fairways of the country club there. And here’s a piece of land. Go ahead and build a house on it and so on.” And then he helped them that time also at Vail. And then they fell in love with both places and, of course, they were
here and then when the weather got hot, really hot, then they went to Vail. And, of course, they had children who would come and visit them and so on.

I got past the question you asked, but I had surgery on the very day that he lost the election. That’s on a Tuesday in November of 1976. This surgery was very difficult and is still difficult. You feel like a truck has rolled over you. I had this done at Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles. And, about three days later I’m out of surgery and in my private room at the hospital and the nurse came running in bug-eyed. She said, “The White House is on the phone! The White House is on the phone!” You know, just in a state of panic.

Well, I had been on this White House committee and the White House telephone set-up included this large office building next to the White House and I get many calls from people, always the phone set-up said, “The White House speaking for Mr. Hoffman” and so on. You’d ask, “Who is it?” And some cabinet member or assistant or whatever would be on the phone. So I said, “Go back and find out who it is.” So, you know, she couldn’t believe it so she turns right around and she comes running back and she says, “It’s the president! It’s the president!”

I pick up the phone and he’s at the Oval Office. It’s nighttime. He’s already thinking in terms of, “Okay, I’ve lost the election.” He’s got his feet on the desk and he said, “How’re you doing?” And I said, “I’m doing fine, Mr. President. How’d you find out?” He said, “Well, I called your secretary. I’m coming out and I want to set up a golf game”, which we did that way. And I said, “How’re you feeling? How’re you doing?” And he said, “Well, I’m feeling awful, but I’m through with this. And, by the way, what happened to you? How are you doing?” Of course, I knew from reading the papers. And, again, in his own way, as I remarked to my wife, his comment was, “Well, you know, we were running behind and we almost overtook.” He said, “Four votes and I would’ve been in the White House.” Never a word of censure or criticism about the bitter campaign or anything like that. The person that he resented the most throughout this thing and I think he felt he lost the
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presidency because there was the interference he got from our president, the movie star.

Smith: Ronald Reagan.

Hoffman: Reagan. When he first tried to gain the nomination and then they had a lot of interference and he was apparently very unhelpful as far as President Ford was concerned. And I remember sitting here about two years before he died and he had been telling this reporter that he had been getting over the years that the person that he really holds responsible and he just can’t have a warm place in his heart for is Ronald Reagan. And I sat there talking about that with him later and I said, “You know, this is the first time I’ve ever heard you criticize somebody.” And he said, “Yeah, I guess that’s right.” So, there were people, but the public didn’t know that.

Smith: I only heard him disparage two people and the worst thing he could think of to say about someone was, “He’s a bad man.” That was the worst epithet he could come up with. And one of them was John Dean and the other was Gordon Liddy. And you could understand where he was coming from.

Hoffman: Oh yeah, and those were people he didn’t trust. If anyone demonstrated that he was not honest and predictable and true to his word, then he got on the quiet list, but he didn’t talk about it. He didn’t go out of his way to criticize people, but yeah, he had what you and I and normal people would say are enemies were people that he didn’t like or didn’t like him, but you didn’t know it. And over time he got out of it.

I tell this little anecdote. They were heading for the Anwar…

Smith: …the Sadat funeral.

Hoffman: The Sadat funeral. And there were four ex-presidents going and President Carter was sitting next to him. And then we all got, his close friends got this photo of all these ex-presidents together that are alive and so on. And he called me and he said, “I want to give you something.” And he gave me this and I said, “How’d your trip go?” And he said, “You know, I sat with Carter,” they were in a military airplane, and he said, “I can not, I can not get
to like him.” It was that light of a comment and I was surprised he was making this effort successfully. That of all the people, ex-presidents, that I would expect to hear make the kind of wonderful speech that Carter made, Carter that would be very low on that list. But he had worked to get over that. This man was not an enemy. He was somebody he didn’t like, but…

Smith:Yeah, but they became good friends, didn’t they, over the years?

Hoffman:Well, not really friends. Not really friends, but not enemies.

You know, I didn’t mention this, but in 1980, this was after he had settled down and had his home built here and so on, I said, “You know,” and it was in this office, I said, “I’d like to ask you if you’d like to join my board.” It was by that time, we were a large Flying Tiger line and we flew over all the oceans, had the best route structure for cargo in the world and we had a number of companies. The holding company was our company that had the outside directors. And I said, “One of the reasons I’m asking you – I want to be honest – is that you had experience that’s important to us in evaluating certain situations. Everything we do turns political. We’re always looking for routes. We’re handling a lot of government business and so on. And, if you accept, we’d like to be able to use you on the QT as a consultant. We’ll publish that that’s what you are, but we won’t go into the details.” So I said, “Think about this.” He was then doing a little of this. And he called me back and he said, “Yeah, I’d love to do this.” And so we did. I retired in ’86, ’85 actually, but I continued to have an official title as chairman and so on. He stayed on the board until our people, including the board that he was on, sold that entire entity to FedEx. FedEx had no international routes at all. All their routes were domestic. Now they have the best route structure in the world and, today, believe it or not, bar none. We’re not talking passenger versus cargo, they’re the largest airline in the world and they make more money than anybody in the world.

Smith:Do you remember what you paid him as a director?

Hoffman:Well, what our directors’ fees were, when you look at what’s happening these days, that was before that insanity, but, you know, a director would get maybe
fifty or sixty thousand dollars and we expected them to work. When they came to board meetings, they had read the data and so on. And then we paid them a figure for consulting, I think it was about fifty thousand dollars and we had a helicopter and so, to ease for him, we would bring a helicopter and land right over here and pick him up and land him on our office building in Century City. So, then, when the board meeting was over, we’d fly him back in the helicopter, so we spent money on him that we didn’t do for the other directors. But to give you an example of some of the things that he did, he was very obviously well-read up on everything and he didn’t make questions that are more speechifying to the other guys on the board or anything like that. He asked questions that made sense and you had to give him answers that made sense. He was a good director and everybody got to know his quality.

One time, we were sitting in the boardroom for our board meeting in Century City and my secretary came in and said, “Mr. Hoffman, Mexico is calling.” We had a division, not of the airline, but of a company that we owned in Mexico City. And I sort of wrinkled my brow and I said, “I’m in a board meeting. I don’t take telephone calls.” She said, “Well, you’d better take this one.” So, I knew this was something so I told the board, “I’ve got a phone call I normally wouldn’t take, but I’ve got to figure out what it is.”

He said, “The president,” it was a young guy by the name of Spencer, they were calling from our company, he said, “He’s disappeared and some bystander saw him. He was driving down la Forma(?), going home from the office, and a couple men jumped out with shotguns in front of the car and stopped the car, dragged him out of the car, and he’s gone. We don’t know where he is.” And so I said, “Have you talked to the police?” And he said, “Yes.” But, you know that may be the last people you want to talk to and so on. So I could see we had a complex problem, but I said, “What do you mean you don’t know where he is?” He said, “Literally, we don’t know where he is. We haven’t been able to talk to him. Nobody will tell us where he is.” So I went back to the boardroom and I said, “Jerry, you’re a consultant and I’ve got something I want you to work on for me.” So, he said, “What’s that?” I told him the story and he said, “Well, listen. When we’re through with the board meeting here, let me get a hold of the Attorney General of the state of
Mexico. He’s a man I know well. He and I get along well. He speaks good English” and so on and so forth.

So at the end of the meeting, he called him and he came in after his call and he said, “Well, here’s what he said to do. He wasn’t aware of the situation, but he said that he would find out where he is and get back to us.” And on the QT, this is the retired president of the United States of America. And that’s exactly what we needed to know. So, anyway, shortly, he called and came back here and he said, “I heard from him and he’s in a prison in a huge ward with eight rapists and bank robbers and murderers and one guy in there is a captain and he’s the guy that protects everything. You know, you have to give him handouts” and so on. So I said, “What’d they charge him with?” He said, “Apparently there’s a business dispute that’s resulted in litigation.” And, unlike our situation, of course, Spencer, our president had spent many years in Mexico, he knew Mexico well, we didn’t know Mexico that well.

But he said, “I’m going to give you some advice. I know the judge that this matter will be brought [before].” And this is outside Mexico City, somewhere far away. “And I’ll talk to the judge and he will set a bail session for your man. When he does, you pay the bail and then skip bail, go back to the United States and then this situation will be handled. You can handle it from there on.” So, this is what we did. Here’s a young man with a young wife, got four kids and so on and he had a home there and had been living there for years. So, that was one example of the efficiency with which he could get something done. We didn’t call him in and say, “We’d like to consult with you on we’re trying to get into Russia.” We didn’t get into anything that was political or which we could handle better than to bring him in. But he was there and knew it to help us and wanted to help us where his unique insight and contacts and so on in a proper way. Don’t ever go to him and try to beat somebody else out of a flight pattern or bilateral decision as to who gets a route. That’s not what he wants to do and he won’t do that.

Smith: Where did he come by this range of contacts?

Hoffman: Well, as the president, this would be not at all uncommon for him to go down and visit and meet these people. Certain people would seek him out and he’d
seek them out. He’s a lawyer and highly regarded. He’s president of the United States, so knowing the Attorney General was just happenstance that worked in our favor. Otherwise, as you know, this country is not governed by the kind of laws that we are.

Smith: I just want to ask you to step back a bit because the president took some criticism for being on boards, was part of a larger criticism directed at the so-called commercializing of the presidency. What’s your reaction to that?

Hoffman: Well, again, if everybody were Jerry Ford, you probably wouldn’t have that criticism. Now days, I can’t believe how much money President Clinton has made where his wife had twenty-one million in her bank account she could throw into a campaign. Jerry never did that. He did things that he would enjoy, would keep his mind active and so forth. But I think there’s good reason to be careful that there’s some oversight here, because this can be abused and this present situation we’re in now, which is a very serious situation, won’t be over very fast. We’ll make some corrections in some of this huge money that flies around.

But I’ll give you another example of his activity in the business world. The government owns an entity called Aerospace Corp. And that was a company that had six thousand people working for them, half of whom were Ph.D. and master’s degree levels in various sciences and so on. They were involved in top secret work in launches and so forth of satellites, and other such things the government was involved in. They had a board of about twenty-one people that was made up of four or five business men, and then they had people from the academic world, usually, and they had people from the military, four-star generals and whatever, and naval officers. Bob Gates who was on the board and people like that.

I was on the board in point of, not age, but in point of service. I wound up when I retired as the senior director in the company, so I was involved as a business man and so on. Every year, we would lose people from our board and we wanted to have good people. They had to be conscious of security. They had to be able to pass the security tests and so forth, and they had to be the kind of people you could trust and so on. This was very, very high level
stuff. For example, when Powers was shot down, the government - I can tell you this, there’s a lot of stuff I was involved in that is still classified – but one of the things we were working on that’s been declassified was launching satellites that would operate in stationary orbit over certain places, and it eliminated the need for flying these missions across. We had satellites that you couldn’t shoot down, and the various people that these were being used to obtain information from it didn’t have the capability to shoot them down, didn’t have the capability to build these kinds of things and so on.

So anyway, we had a number of security clearances and all the board had to have security clearances and so on. Every year we were looking for somebody, and somebody said, “You know, we need some people from the government,” which was part of the group. And I said, “As I sit here, let me ask you a question? What about President Ford?” now retired. And they said, “Well, what about him?” I said, “Well, he might be interested.” And, of course, they thought that was a great idea. And so I came here and I said, “Would you like to do this?” He could get paid a modest director’s fee and that was it. But you sat in on meetings, very important meetings, and so on and so forth.

A little bit amusing anecdote. He joined the board, and I’ve got a picture of him here, you don’t need to see it, that has him on the board. You see he’s in the picture and all of our directors. We had a couple of meetings and we got into a meeting where they were going to discuss a codename clearance. A lot of people think ‘top secret’ is the highest, but that isn’t the way it works. They have “on a need-to-know basis,” they have all kinds of different levels and they only bring in “in codename clearances,” if, for example, you might have six people on that under a codename and that’s all they needed and wanted. It goes on under the correct analytical conclusion that the more people that know about it, the less secret these things become.

So we’re sitting in a board meeting and we get to the agenda and the chairman turned around and he said, “Do you have the codename clearance?” The president said, “No.” He said, “Well, we’ll have to ask you to leave the room.” Along with him, of the twenty-one, sixteen of them left the room.
There were a number of us that had code clearance. And he left the room cheerful enough, came back in ten, fifteen minutes, back on schedule, and I said, “You know, I was amazed to learn that you wouldn’t be admissible to any kind of discussion.” “No,” he said, “a lot of things we were not involved in, did not want to be involved in, didn’t want to carry around, certainly didn’t want your secretary involved in and so on. No, I understand this and I understand the theory behind this very well.” I said, “We can get you code,” because one of the things we were talking about was a satellite that we had approved for launch in zero-sync orbit over Russia. We were able to read license plates on parking lots. We were able to interdict phone calls and so on. It was unbelievable what we were able to do with these things. We had a whole bunch of problems, like problems with Kaddafi and so on and we were involved in a lot of things that we knew that we, the United States, knew about. We were able to send the entire Sixth Fleet somewhere and nobody knew, the public, “What’s the fleet doing there with battleships and carriers?” and blah, blah, blah. “Don’t know.” Well, we knew and so on.

In fact, we had to get clearance if we ever went abroad. Laura and I hadn’t been to China, we didn’t operate in China as an airline. We had routes there, but we never operated there. The government didn’t want us and we didn’t want them. But anyway, we were going to go to China. So I reported to them and they called me back and said, “It’s not cleared.” And I said, “What do you mean it’s not?” I thought, “What do you mean it’s not cleared?” I said, “My wife and I are going to China. Why would you say something like that?” And he said, “Well, I don’t want to go into that.” And I said, “Well,…” And he said, “Fine. How are you on having your fingernails pulled out?” I said, “What do you mean by that?” He said, “Just what I said: How would you handle that kind of thing?” And I said, “Okay, I won’t go to China.” Because they didn’t know what I knew, but they knew that I knew it. And you just couldn’t risk it because you could just disappear and never be found and that kind of thing. But before you disappeared, they would’ve found out what it was they wanted to know.

So, he was on that board for only about two or three years because we kept rotating the board. He was a wonderful board member there. He could pick
up on things that he had been involved in. You remember that Vietnam ship that – I won’t go into all these details, but he knew a lot about all of this stuff and whether he was in on code clearances or not was really ________. For example, we had Bob Gates on our board and he had clearances that were similar to the president’s if he needed to know, or had to know, but otherwise, he didn’t have it. We’d say to Gates, “Do you have this clearance?” “No.” “Goodbye. We’ll call ya.” At that time, he was head of CIA, so you know how those things worked. So this is an example of the things that he would do, got paid for, but that’s what he liked to do where he felt he was accomplishing something that was helpful to the country. He would attend meetings, and we would have parties, and we were going to cut ribbons and so on. He would show up at things. We gave him as few of those things as we could because we know he traveled around a lot.

Smith: He loved to travel, didn’t he?

Hoffman: Yeah, he did. And especially where he didn’t have – when you become a civilian later, after his presidency, you don’t always have government aircraft at your disposal. So, he didn’t like to travel in terms of enjoying the trip itself, but he liked going somewhere and seeing people.

Smith: Did he have a sense of humor?

Hoffman: Excellent sense of humor and you could tell him anything. You didn’t have to tailor a joke or a story with him. If he liked it, he liked it. If he didn’t, he didn’t. That kind of thing. But yeah, he had a very much alive sense of humor. So did Betty! I keep bringing her up because she’s so much a part of that team and she’s now ill. She’s here, actually, as you may know, but she’s getting to the point where she just doesn’t want to go out and isn’t able to do a lot of things. She’s ninety years old now.

Smith: I know she’s told one of her granddaughters, “You know, this getting old is not easy.”

Hoffman: And when you lose a spouse… I met a girl, my wife, when I was at the University of Illinois. We were nineteen years old. It was sort of love at first sight type of thing, but I was in ROTC and they were going to pull me out
whenever they wanted to. I didn’t want to get married and then leave and have babies born back [here] and I didn’t want to do that. She didn’t either. But, we met September 24, 1942 and I got back just the end of ’45 and I was in the service until April of ’46. I went back to law school to finish law school. She came back and was teaching at the university. But in any event, we met sixty-six years ago, and I look at her now and, of course, we’re getting at an age and I look at her and I think, “What would I do without her?” So I gave her instructions when I woke up, I said, “I’ll make a deal with you, if you die before I do, I’m going to kill you. I don’t want to be left without you.” It would be very difficult.

Smith: Yeah, I think the Fords were inseparable. When you said ‘partnership,’ that’s absolutely right on. In later years, I think he almost felt some guilt about how, early in his career, he had been away as much as he had, had been on the road as much as he had, and really entrusted raising the kids to her. I think he went out of his way to try to compensate for that in the later years, both being here and with the kids, too.

Hoffman: Well, the other thing I think that bothered him was that there were a lot of things he couldn’t talk to her about.

Smith: Like what?

Hoffman: Well, anything that had any security rating, you couldn’t talk to your wife about. You couldn’t go home and say, “Gee, I had an interesting meeting at Aerospace Corp where we’ve got a satellite in geo-sync orbit over Russia.” You just couldn’t do it. So your wife felt sort of excluded from a lot of things that were important. Or she’d hear it on the television two weeks later and say, “Oh, that’s what you were doing.” “Yep.” So that was hard and then raising the kids. The children suffer badly. They’re lucky in that they’ve got a great group of children, but that’s one area that you don’t envy them at all. It’s not an easy job.

Smith: But it must be so fulfilling for her, for example, to know that Susan is taking over the Betty Ford Center.
Hoffman: Very much so. And Susan, like her mother, is a very sharp hands-on executive. Betty doesn’t go to any of the hospital meetings anymore and she had, when she was up and about, she had her meetings in her own offices there right on the campus of the hospital, but she doesn’t now. She brought Susan in at a time when she knew that physically she wasn’t able to get about as much as she used to.

Smith: In the last few years, when I mentioned travel, up around his ninetieth birthday, he was able to travel pretty extensively and then I guess his doctors pretty much prohibited it. And I wonder if a little bit of him died at that point, accepting those restrictions on your freedom. It’s something he’d enjoyed all his life. Those last few years, how would you describe his –

Hoffman: Well, I had an interesting life with him in a lot of ways. He’s a good athlete. He and I played golf when we were in our late thirties or forties. He was, you know, about a ten handicap, as I was. But he wouldn’t play much as we went along. He’d play in the Bob Hope Classic and things like that and so forth. And we played quite a bit. But then it got to the point where he really wasn’t able to play as much as he used to. And so we had, at the Vintage Country Club, and this is in this last book that was written he mentions it, so I know he enjoyed this. I called him up a couple of times and said, “You know, we have got a nine-hole group here.” And then we’d meet. In the men’s locker room, there’s a table that will fit about ten people and that’s all. You’re not out there where every time you try to take a fork full of something to eat, somebody comes up and says, “Remember when I met you back in 1918” or whatever they would say. So, he said, “Yeah, I’d like that.”

So we did this and we had a group of about ten or twelve people and we’d play two foursomes at least once a week. He really loved it because he enjoyed that and he enjoyed staying for lunch. Normally, if you played golf, he had the car there. He didn’t have lunch. He didn’t like the idea of everybody out in the dining room coming up and then he’d try to think through, “What’s their name? I know their name” and so on. Very difficult for him. But he always stayed for lunch for this.
So, one day, he called me, and a man named Tim Blixseth had built his own country club here called Porcupine, totally private, but it’s a professional layout – he’s got a long story on that. But anyway, he said, “Would you like to play nine holes?” I said, “Fine. Where?” He said, “Meet me at Porcupine.” It was a very hot and humid day, very, very uncomfortable. And I think he was then about eighty-nine. I had my cart set up. When he was playing with me, he liked to drive the cart. He could go where his ball was and he wanted to be the driver, so I set it up. It was just the two of us. And, of course, the golf course is entirely private so we’re the only two people, as it turned out, playing on the golf course.

So he shows up in his car with the Secret Service. And, by the way, Secret Service, I got used to dealing with them and after I get through with this story, I want to make some comments about that, that you don’t think of. But anyway, he shows up in the car and he gets out of the car and he sort of stumbles and he doesn’t look good to me at all. So I said, “Well, how are you doing?” He said, “Well, I’m doing fine.” And I said, “What do you mean ‘well’?” He said, “Well, I was swimming this morning,” as he did every morning, laps, and he said, “When I got up out of the pool, I got a little dizzy.” And I knew that he had doctors at Eisenhower and I was on their board and so on. And so, I said, “It’s hotter than Hell. You want to cancel?” “No,” he said, “let’s go.” So we get out there and we hit off on the first tee and so on. And, second tee, he’s going toward the green and he stumbled and he’s on his knee.

The Secret Service are there and so I didn’t want to hurt his feelings, so I said, to him, “Do you want to continue? It’s hotter than Hell and I don’t think we’re going to do nine holes because I don’t feel up to nine holes. What about you?” He said, “Well, let’s play another hole.” We played another hole and then I got a hold of one of the Secret Service guys that I knew and I said, “Call the doctor. Do you have his doctor’s number?” “Yep.” “Call his doctor. Don’t call Betty because there’s nothing she can do at this stage. Just call the doctor. Tell her you’re on your way.”
And so he went there and I later called him at home to talk to Betty to see how he’s doing and she said, “He’s here. You want to talk to him?” So it was one of those things, it was really caused by some medicine he was taking and so forth. But the press carried this story. All over the world, there were stories that the president… I could tell then that they were on a death watch, so to speak.

Smith: And did he know that, too?

Hoffman: Yeah, he knew that, but it was amazing how, first of all, the first person that gave this story was, whoever was called said that it was very hot and we think that this may have been heat exhaustion of some kind. And, of course, I knew what it was.

But he enjoyed those things and we played. I think that was the last effort at golf that he had and I was glad I was there because it could’ve been dangerous and so on.

But, talking about the Secret Service, early on, when he got to be vice president, we had him around. And Eisenhower used to come and he’d be playing on our golf course. He had a home there that he used and there’d be Secret Service guys behind the trees and so on. And when I first started dealing with that with President Ford, I said to him, “You know, we’re going to have some lunch. Now, what do we do about the Secret Service?” And he said, “I’m glad you brought that up. We never provide for the Secret Service. As far as we’re concerned, they can starve to death. We don’t care. We don’t think that they’re behind the tree.”

Well, we know they are out of your mind and particularly, when we’d have events at our house, we used to have them as guests, they’d show up as guests. Of course, Secret Service would be out a couple of hours before that. They’d look over everything in the house and so on and then they’d be there. And I knew them and they knew me, but we didn’t make any provisions. We didn’t tell them to have a drink or some food or anything like that. And that was the protocol. They took care of themselves and didn’t make a nuisance.
They had all their communications, they were there, they had the vehicle, and that’s where he got the benefits.

Smith: One sensed, just from some of the agents I’ve known, that they were fond of them both.

Hoffman: Yeah.

Smith: And I don’t think that’s universally the case.

Hoffman: No. Well, you know some business man made this statement that when talking about evaluating people for new employment, he said, “I always take the high-end candidate out to dinner, just the two of us. And when they’d say, ‘Where should we go?’ I’d say, ‘What’s your favorite? People that know you.’ ‘Fine. I’ll take care of it.’ ‘I’ll pick up the tab and so on, but you do that.’” And then he watched how he handled the wait staff. And he said, “You cannot believe the number of people that automatically went off the list because of the way they handled the people who were waiting on them.”

So I followed that advice, because there are people that become Dr. Jekyll and Hyde. They begin to want to throw their weight around, or whatever it is, and that’s not what you want out of a president or somebody who’s in the news and so on. And President Ford was, again, very – a bad meal, he never had. You know he did, but he never had a bad meal. And he was always polite and he always tried to remember their names.

We were at Jillian’s last night and June Trubee, she and her husband own the restaurant. His favorite place was Jillian’s to go to, so we used to eat there a lot. They had a fish that he loved and so on. Of course he knew everybody there. They were all very circumspect. You could go in there with the president alone or with six people, sit down there in the middle of the dining room, and nobody ever made a big deal because they saw a lot of him and so forth. But this was part of his character. You’d be surprised, or maybe not, how many very top people wouldn’t pass that test. Simple test.

Smith: You’re absolutely right. It’s an absolute litmus test of character, how you treat people “above” or “below” you on whatever scale you set up.
Describe for me this place, this whole community, in the 80’s or even in the 90’s for people who haven’t been here. My gosh, you had Bob Hope, you had Sinatra, Spiro Agnew was around here. You had all these folks, Hollywood stars, and the Fords were clearly part of all this. What was it like then and is it essentially over?

Hoffman:  Do you mean with respect to the Fords?

Smith:  I mean that whole sort of generation is gone, but when they were here, what was this place like?

Hoffman:  This is a strange community, but what’s happening that is worthwhile observing is how the place is growing. This is becoming one of the largest cities, take all of it, will be one of the largest cities in the United States. They’re talking about a population of 500,000 people. We’re already up to 300,000 people. And when I first joined at Eldorado, the roads that lead in and out of Eldorado were dirt roads except for one street. Empty lots everywhere, empty properties that are now being filled. Changing dramatically. Traffic, unbelievable. We never had any traffic here, you know. And people, more and more people that are regular people, live here. By that, I mean they have jobs and they come and go and they have their own place to play golf and they enjoy life as anybody would. But then there’s lots of social structures that you’ll find everywhere.

Smith:  Was Sinatra very visible around here?

Hoffman:  Oh yes. And Barbara particularly because she had a center for children, the Sinatra Center, right next to Betty’s Center. And we’d see her at board meetings she’d be invited to join and so on both before and after he died. And he had a very large home at one of the clubs here, so he spent a lot of time here.

Smith:  So, he would cross paths with the Fords as a matter of routine?

Hoffman:  I don’t really remember the Fords spending a lot of time with Sinatra. I didn’t either. He was a sort of a different person. Wonderful act, beautiful voice, wonderful to watch him. I still like to hear him. But he had special friends. I
Wayne Hoffman  December 4, 2008

would say this about the desert that it has not changed much. For example, at
the hospital, over seventy percent of our business is Medicare business. We
have people from Canada, people from Europe, people from all over have
homes there at Vintage now and has become much more worldwide and I
think all for the better.

Smith:  Spiro Agnew lived out here, didn’t he?

Hoffman:  He came out here during and after his problem. And so his social life was, I
think, impaired a bit by that.

Smith:  Did you ever see him and Ford together?

Hoffman:  I’d never seen them together, but they might have been.

Smith:  The last time you saw him, when was that?

Hoffman:  The last time was really the time I mentioned earlier when he opened up about
his service and Leon and Barbara Parma, the six of us, were at Jillian’s. He
came in with a cane. He was then ninety-something, -two. I think it was a
year or less before he died, but because of his athleticism and his habits, you
would’ve thought he would’ve outlived Betty. Betty had problems and I
considered him to be the luckiest man alive or dead because he went so long.
You know, you just fall apart. You don’t realize why or maybe you do, but if
you look at it, you’d be surprised at how many of these long-married couples,
when one dies, the other is gone in three or four months or whatever.

But Betty -her whole life has changed - is there, but Jerry’s not and everything
to do with life was the two of them. So, there’s nothing you can do about
that. We sent her some flowers for her birthday and Laura, my wife,
remembered that she loved coral roses and so we picked out some nice
flowers and brought them out to the gate out here. Betty wrote us a long letter
and said, of course Laura knew, but she said, “I love those flowers.” But it’s
a hard life.

Smith:  Final thing:  What do you think, for people who never knew him or for whom
he’s just a name in a textbook or an old film clip, what should people know
about Gerald Ford?
Hoffman: Well, I would like to have, and it will happen, somebody said one time it takes forty years to get a piece of history. History, when you read the general’s first book after World War II, it’s not accurate. First of all, I was a student of reading and so on and I’d been in the invasion of Normandy and fought with an elite division called the First Division. And so I’d fought all the way through war, was wounded a couple of times and I knew what this was all about. So I have our baby and I’m in law school. So I start reading these books and, boy, these generals, they really knew what they were doing. One of the things I never knew until twenty-two years later was that they’d broken the German code. And so they were reading the German’s mail and listening to them, in effect, on the telephone. And that never showed up when they talk about their judgment to do this and that. So now as you read a book as you do that happens to be on one of our big generals or whatever, now you get an honest piece of history.

But I think, to answer your question directly, I think that history will reward Ford. The perception will be more honest. [inaudible] isn’t looking for somebody to tape over something. The same thing that happened to Truman. Truman was really considered to be a very weak president, being shoved around by his general in the Korean War and so on. And kind of a dumbbell, but, as it turned out, he was a very good president, but it took about thirty-five or forty years to figure that out.

Smith: That’s perfect.
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Veit: His political being is extinct.

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

Veit: Not a chance.

Smith: And why is that?

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

Smith: He was a true fiscal conservative.

Veit: Exactly.

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

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

Smith: It was no accident that at the funeral in Washington Cathedral, one of the eulogists was a journalist. Originally it was going to be Hugh Sidey, and then
he passed away, so Tom Brokaw took his place. But a message was being sent.

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

Veit: Mine?

Smith: Yeah.

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

Smith: Did you really?

Veit: And the whole operation intrigued me.

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

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

Smith: Okay.

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

Smith: Arthur Vandenberg was still around.

Veit: Oh, yes. I worked for him.

Smith: Did you? Really?

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

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

Smith: That’s fascinating.

Veit: My view was pretty narrow.

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

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

Smith: Now, the President’s father was part of that. And, in fact, Ford’s campaign in ’48 presumably was in some ways at least an offshoot of that. Although it was
clearly the issue of internationalism versus isolationism drove him against Jonkman.

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

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

Veit: Among that powerful group.

Smith: For whom divorce was a sin.

Veit: Yeah.

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

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

Smith: Roughly, when would that been?

Veit: 1958. So the first thing that happened was eight Christian Reform ministers showed up at my desk. Knelt before me and prayed for my soul because I was the worst kind of sinner because I caused other people to sin. It wasn’t so much my sin as I was causing other people to sin. I was somewhat taken aback, didn’t know quite what to say. I finally said, “Well, thank you very much.”
Some of the other interesting things that used to happen: there was a carrier, a newspaper carrier, in the suburb of Granville, which is heavily Dutch, changed hands. Somebody else took over. And in the process we finally learned why it was that of all the several hundred news carriers that the newspaper had, this kid took two or three times as long to deliver the paper as it took anyone else. And what had happened was that he had a book of instructions on where to place the paper – behind bush X, or behind barrel Y. They were all neighbors hiding from one another that they were getting delivery of the Sunday paper.

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

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

Smith: Really?

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

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

Veit: And did.

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

Veit: Sure. I’m not sure he was without guile, or perhaps he was without guile, but he was certainly a skilled politician. There’s no question about it.
Smith: I have a theory which has been somewhat strengthened after doing 120 interviews. I’ll put it in someone else’s mouth. We talked to Lee Hamilton recently. Hamilton was kind of refreshing because he admired Ford, he liked Ford, but he said something very interesting. First of all, he said Ford was much more ambitious than people thought, but he was smart enough to hide his ambition, which in Washington is rare. And the sense one gets is that he knew there were people out there who – the polite word is underestimated him – and he used it. He was not above using it. That’s a form of guile, certainly. It’s certainly a form of calculation. When you say he was a skilled politician, how would that manifest itself in the district?

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

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

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

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

Veit: I think one story illustrates how much he was interested in remaining, even after he became President. About two weeks, something like that, into his presidency, I don’t remember exactly the timeframe, I was then the editor of the Grand Rapids Press and I got a phone call from Jerry terHorst, who was still his press secretary. He said, “Werner, the boss wants his paper.” I said, “What are you talking about?” He said, “Well, we’re not getting the paper anymore.” I said, “Well, that’s odd. Let me check into it.”
I called our circulation department and he said, “Well, yes, we cut him off. We haven’t been paid.” I said, “You cut off the President of the United States?” “Well, you once told me you wouldn’t carry your grandmother past 30 days.” But with all the things that were going on, he was still concerned that he wasn’t getting his local newspaper. I think what Jerry told me, “Betty’s been a little busy.” Neglected to pay the bill.

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

Smith: Did you comment on the pardon?

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

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

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

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

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

Smith: Did you know his parents at all?

Veit: No.
Smith: Did you have much contact with Mrs. Ford?

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

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

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

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

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

Smith: Locally.

Veit: Locally, yeah.

Smith: Had you seen evidence of it?

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

Smith: Of course.

Veit: She just had a serious problem.

Smith: But you found her a sympathetic figure?

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

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

Smith: It just wasn’t talked about.

Veit: It was a taboo subject. But she eventually became open not only about breast cancer but about alcoholism. And I think a lot of people admired her for that, which wasn’t really typical then.

Smith: That brings up a couple of things. First of all, let me go back. During those congressional days, as being House Minority Leader and especially Watergate, the vice presidency; was there a kitchen cabinet? We’ve gotten conflicting reports. Some people claim to be part of it who have asserted that before Ford became president there were conversations in which people told him you’ve got to be prepared for this eventuality. Was there an informal, or self-appointed, group of advisors, or whatever you want to call it, that he would call on, particularly for sensitive counsel?

Veit: If there was I never heard about it.

Smith: Okay.

Veit: In fact, this is the first time that I heard anything like that might have happened. It sounds somewhat un-Ford-like.

Smith: In the sense that he tended to keep his own counsel?

Veit: Exactly.

Smith: That’s an interesting thing. Again, the popular notion of this big, genial, friendly, outgoing, uncomplicated, guy; and one learns that there are depths within everyone. And he was very good at keeping secrets.

Veit: You can’t become Speaker of the House, never mind anything else, without having a pretty firm grasp on reality.

Smith: How did the district change? He was there for a quarter of a century. During that period, how did the culture change? When I first came to Grand Rapids, my acid test was to ask people – when, if ever, could you imagine Elton John performing a sold-out concert in Grand Rapids? It was just a litmus test.
Veit: That’s an interesting test. Probably not. In the first place, his sexual orientation probably would have kept people in that district at arm’s length.

Smith: Yeah.

Veit: Number two, even the arena – I think the town was really too conservative to spend money on a large arena. So the chances are, yeah, it probably would not have happened. Although, the district did change very rapidly once all the other changes happened in society. I could imagine today – of course geographically the district is different today, too – somewhat more in his favor really because its gerrymandered to some degree to be Republican. But I could at least imagine that a Democrat could take this district. And one did.

Smith: In ’74, he did. Was that purely a reaction to Watergate?

Veit: No. It was certainly a reaction to Watergate, but it was also – Dick Vanderveen was a highly respected, very active Dutch personage.

Smith: One of us.

Veit: Exactly.

Smith: Had he run against Ford. Had he ever run before?

Veit: No.

Smith: Was this the only time he ran for office?

Veit: Exactly. And he told me how relieved he was when he was defeated.

Smith: Really?

Veit: When he ran, he thought that he would be interested in being a congressman, but once he got there and realized how little impact one of 435 would have for many, many years, he lost interest in a hurry. Because he thought of himself as a loyal Democrat, he agreed to run. But he spent almost no money to get re-elected and he didn’t work very hard. He was very relieved, he told me. Dick was part of a group that still exists and that I’m a member of. We meet once a month to discuss politics. It was started by a federal judge who felt that it would be unseemly for him to talk too much about politics, but he still had
things he wanted to get off his chest. So he gathered a little group of Republicans and Democrats. This was not a Democratic thing.

Smith: Off the record conversations?

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

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

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

Smith: What is the story of that?

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

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

Veit: Not only that, but I never had any notion that he had any interest in art, particularly contemporary art. There were a number of people who, in this town, made fun of the Calder because of its modernity. Although by today’s standards, it’s not all that radical. But it was thought to have been and then a) have Jerry Ford, the great fiscal conservative push to get money for it; and b) for a piece of modern art just astounded us.
Smith: I know the coda to that story which confirms your astonishment because there were two things he said about this place. You may very well know this, but he didn’t want a statue of himself here, and the spaceman was the substitute. But he said make sure it’s representational art.

Veit: I did not know that, but it’s certainly…

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

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

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

Veit: That I didn’t remember.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Smith: Mike took over those – how long did you do those?
Veit: I think I did it about four years and then Mike took over.
Smith: So through the Carter years?
Veit: Yes.
Smith: Were you surprised when they became friends?
Veit: Yes, very much so. But I was pleased because I thought that was showed a development of his character – that his character was still developing.
Smith: That is an interesting observation. That at that point in his life, age-wise and experience-wise, that you thought his character was developing.

Veit: The first couple of years he was bitter and resentful.

Smith: Really?

Veit: The change was salutary, certainly.

Smith: Bitter toward Carter?

Veit: Yeah. And we never got into it all that deeply, but it was pretty obvious. I think he wanted to avoid my saying anything about that in the obituary.

Smith: Did he talk about Nixon and their relationship?

Veit: I tried to get him to talk about Nixon, but he reminded me the ground rules were that we would talk about what had happened since I was there last.

Smith: Well, but Nixon’s comeback was part of that.

Veit: Yeah.

Smith: There was a formula about the pardon – I heard it a hundred times. I’m sure you could recite it, too. Did you ever hear anything other than the set piece?

Veit: No.

Smith: Did he tell you anything that surprised you in the course of those?

Veit: I don’t think so, not that I recall, anyway.

Smith: And you said about four years; that would also have covered the period of Mrs. Ford’s hospitalization. Did that come up?

Veit: What came though always was his admiration for her, not only his love for her, but also his admiration for her. That came through very strongly.

Smith: Getting to 1980, it’s hard to know – clearly there were meetings, there were discussions, there was talk about him possibly running. Did he talk about that at all – the possibility of running again in ’80?
Veit: No. And I would have been surprised. I think he was – at least when I talked to him – he was in the mood to reflect on the past.

Smith: Was there resentment locally that they didn’t come back here?

Veit: Some, not a lot.

Smith: Was he aware of that?

Veit: Yeah. And I think the reason he was aware of it is because he was a little defensive about it. He would bring up the subject.

Smith: Really? And his explanation was?

Veit: I’m not sure that it made any sense. I think what he would talk about was how often he would come back here for specific events. That’s what he liked to talk about.

Smith: He took some heat, particularly early on, for attempting to ‘commercialize the ex-presidency. And in particular for going on boards and lending his name to some things. Did any of that ever come up?

Veit: Well, it did, but I think he reminded me as he reminded others, that the money that he earned went to the Foundation. And I think he was truly interested in political science scholars that would visit the library.

Smith: That was part of his legacy.

Veit: Exactly.

Smith: It seems again, very much the act of a congressman or a Solomon, to split the library and museum.

Veit: Yeah.

Smith: It was a terrible idea. Did anyone try to dissuade him at the time?

Veit: No, because we – Grand Rapids – were afraid we’d lose the whole thing, so we were happy to get half the loaf.

Smith: Yeah. And how much of a catalyst was this for what’s happened since.
Veit: I think it was an important catalyst. I think it certainly encouraged the rebirth of the hotel, which then led to other things. Urban renewal in Grand Rapids was a disaster. There were many places torn down, some historic places. And monstrosities put in their place, and it really didn’t accomplish anything. But the rebirth of downtown, which is now pretty lively, was really started with the museum and the hotel. They were simultaneous. They opened on the same day.

Smith: I guess Fred Meijer had some land on the outskirts that he was perfectly willing to donate. And my instinct was that Ford felt pretty strongly about wanting to have this downtown.

Veit: Yeah, there was a committee and I was one of them on it – a site committee. And I think despite Fred Meijer’s popularity, on the committee there was a strong feeling that it should be downtown. And our ace in the hole, of course, was Jerry Ford, who after all, should have had the last word.

Smith: And I think he agreed with that viewpoint. Was the burial place always part of the package? Did anyone discuss that with him? It had to at some point enter into the conversation.

Veit: As I recall, it sort of came in almost casually when the architect started work on a site plan and I think he just – I think Jerry just worked with him right from the beginning. Let’s put it over here or whatever.

Smith: We’ll be talking to Marvin later.

Veit: If you talk to him you’ll probably get a much better sense.

Smith: This is a dramatic building. Were there different designs that you went through to get to this?

Veit: Never saw one. It’s a dramatic design, but it is not so avant garde to make it un-Ford-like. I think it’s a very clever design.

Smith: It’s not a Calder.

Veit: Exactly.
Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Veit: Actually, the biggest thing that stands out is Lady Bird Johnson, not Jerry Ford. I went to pick her up at the airport. Everybody who came in was a big deal. Lady Bird came walking off the DC8, carrying her suitcase, and I was really struck by that. And then she wrote the loveliest personal letter
afterwards and it included a check. There must have been a lot of residual expenses from people, I guess. I was just so totally taken with it.

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

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

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

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

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

Veit: Is that right?

Smith: And that was December of ’75 – almost three years after Roe v Wade.

Veit: Isn’t that interesting.

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

Veit: Yeah, and I think it’s wrong to say that he was a liberal Justice. I don’t think he would have disappointed Ford. There may have been individual decisions that he may have disagreed with.
Smith: For the twenty-fifth anniversary of the inauguration we did a lecture series. We brought a number of people out here and one of them was Justice Stevens. Ford came all the way from California to introduce each of these people and it turned out Stevens had always wanted to play golf. I checked, and I could be wrong, but we believe this is the only time in history that a former president, in fact, introduced a justice whom he put on the court. And after the program, they went out and they played golf and had a great time and it was really kind of poignant.

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

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

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

Smith: Ford?

Veit: Yes.

Smith: Really?

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

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

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

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

Veit: That is what struck me the most – is the lines. And the Democrats that turned out. There was a lot of affection for him here.
Smith: People had gotten over the fact that he didn’t come back.

Veit: Exactly, and by this time never thought about it. And he is back in a sense.
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Smith: The reason we really wanted to talk with you was to get a sense of how Congress operated in the days when Jerry Ford was there, in whatever capacity. And then, obviously, trace the story beyond there. When did you arrive in Congress?

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

Smith: Pre-Goldwater.

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

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

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

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

Smith: Charlie Halleck.

Brock: Old and of the old school.

Smith: Define old school.

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

Smith: Were you at the ’64 convention?

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

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

Brock: Yeah. Not a good thing.

Smith: Yeah. But spontaneous.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That was very hard for me, and I’d just say, “A case where somebody is wrong,” and he was wrong. Then he came out against Social Security. Holy cow, you take on everybody that’s getting power, everybody that’s old, and everybody that’s black, and there’s not a whole lot of people left. I don’t know how he got 35%. But I loved him because he just laid it out on the table. He believed. He said, “Win or lose, this is me. I’m not going to con you and then change my stripes because you have a difference of opinion with me.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Smith: Were there other candidates considered?

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

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

Brock: Absolutely.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Smith: It’s not about him.

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

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

Smith: Did that include people like Les Arends?

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

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

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

Smith: And did you have company by that point?

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

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

Brock: Probably.

Smith: Makes sense.

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

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

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

Brock: Now you’re testing my memory.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Smith: They almost deserve each other.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brock: He would never admit it.

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

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

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

Smith: Yeah, with no ice.

Brock: So it looked like water.

Smith: Tricks of the trade.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brock: Jerry?

Smith: Yeah.

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

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

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

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

Brock: That was Haldeman.

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

Brock: Really? Wow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Smith: He lied to you.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brock: We had meetings in the EOB.

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

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

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

Brock: No. I was not in that meeting.

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

Brock: Yeah.

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

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

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

Smith: Was part of it the language?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brock: Yeah.

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


Smith: How should he be remembered?

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

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

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

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

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

Smith: What was the mood like at that point?

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

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

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

Smith: You said you met Mrs. Nixon?

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

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

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

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

Seale: She came back on a bike everyday.

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

Smith: What was that?

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

Smith: What do you mean by that?

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

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

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

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

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

Smith: Do you have mixed feelings about Harry Truman?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Smith: Could a president do that today?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Smith: Have you read Edmund Morris’ third bio?

Seale: Yes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Smith: Goading.

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

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

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

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

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

Seale: The “Wonders of America,” yes.

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

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

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

You want to hear a story about that mural?

Smith: Yes, absolutely.

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

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

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

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

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

Smith: How so?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Smith: Really?

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

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

Smith: It didn’t work.

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

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

Seale: Oh, I remember all that.

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

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

Smith: Shades of San Simeon.

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

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

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

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

Smith: And some smoking, too.

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

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

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

Seale: Oh, yeah, I can imagine that.

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

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

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

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

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

Seale: They do.

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

Seale: It would.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Smith: Really?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Seale: I was around, but I didn’t…

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

Seale: I don’t remember.

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

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

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

Seale: Oh I think so.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Seale: And to an extent today.

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

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

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

Seale: Ford?

Smith: Yeah.

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

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

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

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

Smith: Perfect.
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