

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Mike Ford
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this.

Ford: Thank you for doing this.

Smith: This milestone must have all kinds of meaning for you and your siblings. I've heard the story that they at least, and maybe you, have your own memories of Statuary Hall.

Ford: Oh, sure.

Smith: Tell me about that and the connection to this [dedication].

Ford: We knew the U.S. Capitol quite well – all the back rooms and alleys because as children we would go with our father when he was on the Hill there, and also Minority Leader. He would go in on Saturdays to do two things. He'd get his hair cut. They had a barber there; I forget his name, but every couple of weeks he would get his hair cut. And then he would go to his office and work while we would kind of be wandering around on the Hill. We would get some of the guards and security people to call him and say, "Congressman Ford, your children here..." – it was Jack and I who were the ones who were out and about, usually – and they would have to get us back to his office. And then he would always stick us in front of a typewriter and let us practice our typing and we'd type a letter to Mother.

Smith: Really?

Ford: That was our practice each Saturday that we would go. We'd hunt and peck and tell her what a great mother she is and how hard Dad is working. We'd type it up and he'd proof it and give us some feedback and he'd have us sign it so we could take it home to Mom.

Smith: Let me ask you - you just opened the door - it's a wonderful juxtaposition between sending the letter to her and the fact that he is working. Obviously, every marriage has stresses between home and work. One senses, particularly as he rose the ladder, that he was away a lot. She has written about this, and other people have talked about it. As children often are more aware, most instinctive than maybe they are given credit for, did you sense - was it an issue? Was it a problem?

Ford: Yeah, exactly, as he rose in the ranks of the Republican leadership, he was traveling more and more. He was out trying to elect more Republican representatives. And so that was - it got to the point I think, and you can check this in your records, but I think one year when he was Minority Leader, he was actually on the road, I think it was 294 days. In the high 200s. And obviously, that takes its toll on a family. He struggled with that himself. He felt, I know, the responsibility of being the father and caring for and being there for the children and for Mom. But this was a time in history when he was called to represent his political party and philosophy. Things were changing, the party was on the rise. He did aspire to be Speaker of the House. That was his personal vision and it was getting closer and closer into the late 60s, early 70s there. So he was really working away a lot. As the oldest child, I didn't see the tension between Dad and Mom. There wasn't, like, this conflict. But I saw it in just Mother - her health was failing. She was beginning to get more dependent on her medications, and the alcohol started flowing.

Smith: Do you think she internalized some of the resentments that she felt?

Ford: I think that's what we noticed. She trusted him implicitly. She was his greatest fan, and believed in the cause, and was a loyal soldier and as a spouse and partner. But it was something that she was taking on and trying to manage or deal with in some unhealthy ways. And so I think that's where she was feeling a lot of pain and medicating some of that pain.

Smith: Steve remembered for all the time that your dad was away, that there was this routine where he would call from wherever he was on the road. Tell us about that - he obviously was making an effort to be as involved as he could.

Ford: And that's exactly right. We didn't have cell phones back then, or even Skype or Internet. Particularly Sunday nights, he was usually home on Sundays, I guess. In the evening, after dinner time, he would check in and would always call. And I think he called twice. He called to talk to us before we went to bed as kids, and then he'd call and talk to Mom, just the two of them. He kind of called to say that he was sorry he was gone, he missed us. Checking on how the football was going or the school work, just those kinds of things. And then he'd say, "Take care of Mom. Do what Mom says. Be good for Mom." He always would end with take care of Mom because I think he wasn't there to kind of take – so he kind of counted on us to be as helpful as we could. But that was our regular conversation with Dad.

Smith: I don't mean to dwell on this, but do you think there was a time when he felt some degree of guilt for some of the problems that she had?

Ford: I think so, when she got so ill. I remember – this was after the White House and things really started spiraling down with Mom. I was off in graduate school.

Smith: Was that part of the problem? I mean, she must have thought we're finally going to be retired...

Ford: And have time to ourselves.

Smith: Exactly, and then, of course, the reality is you and your siblings are basically grown up and you have lives of your own. So you weren't there and he was traveling as much, at least as much as ever.

Ford: Maybe not quite as much, but he still was – he went to about 250 different colleges. That was really enjoyable for him to go for two or three days to a school and do some seminars or teach. And other philanthropic events; he was involved in different forums.

Smith: He could fill every day with events, and one senses that her calendar...

Ford: Well, you have to understand my dad. My dad, the way he is wired is you don't sit around. I think until later in his life, when he really realized some of

the things he'd lost with Mother and with the family, productivity was in his DNA.

Smith: Workaholic.

Ford: Oh, yeah. It just was there, and that created great achievements, but it also was his blindside. And it was a weakness that I think contributed to some of the pain we experienced as a family. And, as you said, when the White House was over and he was still out there traveling and fulfilling this kind of personal drive that he had, Mom was left with an empty house and with no spouse around. So, the guilt really came, I think, for Dad when she collapsed. We did the intervention and he said we have to address the alcohol dependency.

Smith: I understand that there was a spiral, that there was this condition that clearly existed and was getting worse, and had to be addressed. Was there a physical manifestation? Did it become acute in the sense of endangering her life?

Ford: There wasn't any one collapse incident that I'm aware of. Susan has a better take on this than I do because she was the one who finally spoke to Dad. And then Dad called us because we were in Pittsburgh. But there had been a series of episodes where she was slurring her speech, where she was falling asleep at dinner, where she was shuffling and tripping. She fell in the bathroom and chipped her tooth.

Smith: Does the family sort of pretend that this is not happening?

Ford: Oh, yeah. We were in denial. Our family was the all-American family and so we didn't think this could ever happen to us. And at the same point, we were enabling the whole process in that we would say, "Oh, Mom – she is just getting older and she needs her medication." So, whatever it takes.

Smith: And she had a pinched nerve and she had physical problems.

Ford: She had legitimate pain – it was physical pain, so we needed to medicate that. So while we were kind of endorsing the treatment plan, when she would drink we would kind of turn our head the other way.

Smith: Isn't it safe to say - one of the things that has come up in this project over and over again, but you get a sense of forty years ago how much more people drank.

Ford: And smoked.

Smith: How routinely to excess, to modern eyes, people did both.

Ford: I can remember growing up in our house that Dad and Mom would always have an evening drink together. And they would go to cocktail parties a lot. And they were a part of the Chowder and Marching club, with Jack Burns and Walt Norblad and we would go along as kids and there was a lot of drinking going on. And that was just the norm. I'm sure there's a lot of people who had problems and were keeping it behind closed doors. I didn't know at the time my mother's family history, because her brother died of alcoholism and her father died of alcoholism. They were both bad drinkers.

So, I think when we finally faced this issue and got some medical help and went back into the family history, then it all kind of made sense that Mom was predisposed to it. It was something that was genetic, something that she would have easily fallen into, and she did. Then we had to intervene.

Smith: The word compassion comes up a lot talking about your dad, and I don't want to over exaggerate it, but I thought there was a real contrast between the fact that most of us - however you define the term - become more conservative with age. And God knows he remained the ultimate fiscal conservative. But he also seemed to be surprisingly open. And I wondered if part of that was the very personal experience of going through the intervention, which then opened the door for the rest of his life to being involved with the work of the Betty Ford Center.

Ford: Absolutely.

Smith: And seeing all these folks of his milieu, good people, accomplished people, who had a problem. It may just have reinforced a pre-existing compassion...And then the party moved so far to the right. But they were almost marooned in terms of where they were on the spectrum.

Ford: The party left them.

Smith: Yeah. You wonder how much of it was her influence, how much of it was having children and grandchildren and having their input.

Ford: Well, I think you touched on something that true, that as the aging process takes place, and I think I saw that in my dad, that he became more of a sensitive person in an interpersonal way. He was always very considerate and respectful. But I think he didn't really listen to people at a deeper level, personally, until the intervention, and that started opening some of his own family history, my mother's family history, and their relationship together changed dramatically through that time, that intervention. And I think it gave him that heart of "I really love this woman deeply. She has made incredible sacrifices for me and for our children. And she is at a point of great vulnerability and life threatening. How can I be a healer here, too? Just as I tried to heal the nation in Washington after the whole Watergate mess. I've got my own family and I need to be a leader in this, too." And that I was very impressed with and grateful because he stepped up and said, "This is not Mom's problem, this is a family problem, disease. And we as a family will get well as a family." He was seventy-seven years old.

Smith: You can teach an old dog new tricks.

Ford: He was great in the change, and a sense of compassion did come through in a new way.

Smith: Tell me about their faith, because that was not something that they typically wore on their sleeve. But I think it was one of the things that reached even the casual viewer during the week of the funeral. I think, first of all, they realized what a love match it was between your parents. And I think this was a kind of subsidiary part of the story. You would know better than us.

Ford: Right. And that, too, was an evolving process, and I think when I saw it as a teenager it was more of a structured, established kind of religious practice.

Smith: Inherited?

Ford: Inherited. Good Episcopalians, they were not just Sunday morning, they actually were Sunday school teachers, and they kind of took us through the communion process as children. But it didn't go very deep in terms of a personal connection to God, I think, until – when I first saw it kind of come alive for Dad was actually in Congress. He was a part of a group on the Hill – the Prayer Breakfast, Congressional Prayer Breakfast with Al Quie and Mel Laird, Mark Hatfield, and some others. There was another congressman from Illinois. And they would get together regularly to share their faith, study the Bible. And so that was going on. Then when I came out of college and I went to theological seminary and it became a very important part of my professional and personal life, and we talked more about it. And I was able to give him some things to read. We shared more as father and son about our relationship with God and how God is a part of history and He expressed himself in His son Jesus Christ. And so that was happening during his vice presidency, actually. And then when he was sworn in, that was a very kind of sacred time. He realized there was a huge responsibility that he could not carry just by himself. So he looked to his family, the ones he loved, to give him support, but also his relationship with God. So the passage that he always treasured was that Proverbs 3, 5, 6 – Trust in the Lord with all your heart, lean not unto your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and he will make your path straighter – direct your path. And he prayed that all the time. I think that was something that was very personal to him.

When Mom had her mastectomy, that was in the fall of '74, and man – I saw my dad cry three times in my lifetime. And that was one, when she was going through that diagnosis and then the surgery. And, again, looked to God to sustain him, sustain and heal her, and his faith was very much a part of that time. He didn't want to hide this. They wanted to let the world know that this is a real disease and we have to trust God to help them through that.

Smith: The other two I'm guessing, was one the death of his mother?

Ford: Yeah. That was another one, exactly right. I was home when he came home. I was sixteen years old, in my teens. He was pretty shaken because his mother had a strong, strong influence on his life.

Smith: I was going to say, did he get the workaholic from her?

Ford: I think so.

Smith: One sensed that. The famous story about when she died in church on Sunday, and they found her calendar booked for the next whatever – several weeks.

Ford: Yeah, she died with her boots on, so to speak. But she was the matriarch of that family.

Smith: What was she like?

Ford: Well, she was – you really felt loved by her. I mean, we would go and visit Grandma.

Smith: And she was imposing, too?

Ford: She was. She was a large lady; she had a routine. You would come to the table at a certain time and you would be dressed. You'd go to church. It was very somewhat regimented.

Smith: And he inherited that.

Ford: Yeah.

Smith: It's almost as if, in some ways, he spent a life first dealing with that, and then outgrowing it.

Ford: Yeah. But he loved her so much because of her own rough life with Leslie King and having been abused there, and coming home and having to start all over again.

Smith: Did his Christian faith allow him to forgive his father?

Ford: You know, that's a really good question. There is that great story that you probably know about his father, Leslie King, showing up at the restaurant.

Smith: It's hard to imagine a more traumatic experience for a kid.

Ford: And trying to give him money, too.

Smith: It was probably the only time he tried to give him money.

Ford: Exactly.

Smith: At a time when he could really use some.

Ford: He had abandoned Dad's mom. He had abandoned Dad, and finally he's in high school, working at a soda shop or something, and he just appears out of nowhere. My dad was really resentful of that. I'm not sure that my dad totally ever forgave him for that.

Smith: The story, at least as I understand it, has been that she married and found out she had made a terrible mistake – that he was abusive and that she finally was driven to leave. But implicit in all that was the word abandoned. I mean, did he make any effort to try to heal?

Ford: No, not that I know of. My understanding, and you may have better information, is that she actually left. He got her to come back one time, and then it just continued – the abuse. And finally, I think, her father and mother came and rescued them and got them back to Grand Rapids. And that was the last that she saw of him. He was quite well-off, a very affluent businessman, making not in the millions, but thousands and thousands of dollars.

Smith: More than Gerald Ford, Sr.

Ford: Yeah. And none of that ever came back to Dad's mom or himself. That was a hard one. Because she was a tough woman and was very bonded to Dad. And so when she did pass away it was devastating, it was hard for him.

The third time that I saw my dad cry was, I think, 1996 when they retired his football jersey at the University of Michigan/Michigan State football game. Half time of the game. So they bring him out to the center of the field, and the big house is a hundred and some thousand people – it's all blue and green because of the rivalry between Michigan and Michigan State – and they have his jersey 48 in this big framed thing, and they go on to announce that they are retiring his jersey and that he is a great leader of the nation, great leader of the University of Michigan and so forth. And he just got overwhelmed. The family was there and he just kind of broke down a little bit. And the thing that I think was touching for him was, it was on the same exact field that sixty

years before, he was playing for the University of Michigan. On that same field. And here he was surrounded by a hundred thousand people, arch rivals, but they were all giving him a standing ovation because he was their native son – Michigan. It was powerful, it was palatable to see the emotion in him.

Smith: Let me ask you the single most surprising thing I think I've learned, and I'll ask you to confirm it or deny it or modify it. I get variations in both conversations with Susan and Steve - was the conversation that you *didn't* have, while all over America people in the summer of 1974 were talking about this unfolding, unprecedented scandal, and how it might end. That conversation seems not to have occurred in the Ford house. I mean, to an outsider it's just hard to imagine. You didn't talk about any...

Ford: Anticipating the events?

Smith: Yeah, it's suggested that teenagers at least, don't pay all that much attention to political news. But you wonder whether your parents consciously tried to compartmentalize, or maybe they just didn't want to confront the unthinkable. What are your memories about that period?

Ford: Well, I remember very well, because Gayle and I were engaged to be married, and we were scheduled to be married in August, the middle of August. And there was not much conversation about how Watergate and also the impeachment process was progressing. Except they finally said to us, "We need to consider moving the wedding up because if things are continuing on course, we may have some problems with the wedding." And so we did move the wedding up. We moved it to July 5th.

Smith: Was that something that both of your parents discussed.

Ford: Both Mom and Dad talked with us about it. It was a wedding, it's pretty major. But I think part of what was going on was my father was the vice president to Richard Nixon, and there is a certain dimension of loyalty and sense of – it's not denial – it's more I am serving the President. And even though these things as they are unraveling are looking more and more like there is impeachment impending here, I'm not going to start talking about it to the family at length.

- Smith: I'm certain it was the last thing your mother wanted to hear.
- Ford: Yeah, right. She was overwhelmed enough for him to be vice president – to think that maybe she was moving towards being a First Lady – she did not want that to happen. But, again, they were a team, together. And she was right by his side.
- Smith: Do you remember the first time that you were told that you'd better prepare yourself?
- Ford: Yeah. It was pretty late – it was real late – it was like the end of July.
- Smith: We've tried to find out what's the event that sort of put this out of reach? The Supreme Court ruled unanimous that the tapes had to be turned over.
- Ford: And everything was going to become public.
- Smith: It was just a question at that point, really of when.
- Ford: Yeah, obstruction of justice and the whole thing...yeah, it was in July because Gayle and I were preparing – we'd been married July 5th. And so we were preparing to drive ourselves in a U-Haul up to Massachusetts to get settled.
- Smith: Cornwell?
- Ford: Gordon Conwell. We had a second floor apartment. We actually asked Mom and Dad, should we go? Now we're talking like August 6th or 7th. We said, "This is looking like it's the end game here. Should we go?" And they said, "Yup, you should go." So we got in the van and it took a day and a half to get up there, and by the time we got up there, they'd called us. They couldn't find us because we didn't have cell phones. So they said, "You've got to come right back. He's going to resign," and be sworn in. We flew back and got there on Saturday. It was the 9th [Mike, a Friday – RNS] when he was sworn in, but the day before we got back and spent the night.
- Smith: And what was their mood?
- Ford: Well, they were a little shell shocked, I think. They were kind of like this kind of happened and we've got to...Didn't plan on this. As you know, my dad,

it's all about duty. It's all about I've been prepared for this responsibility, I will do it to the very best of my ability, I will serve my country, I will serve the people, and I'm ready. He was very much ready to take it on.

Smith: How much, I wonder, was he concerned about her being thrust – it's one thing saying my name's on the ballot, but, in fact, it's the wife and kids who find themselves along for the ride, whether they want to or not.

Ford: Yeah, I think he was very concerned about her wellbeing, because she was not that particularly well at that time. I think her pinched nerve and all of the wear on her from him being away, she was not very strong. And I think he was concerned, but it was not like you can change this.

Smith: There is a story, and I believe it, but I don't know how to confirm it. On the way back from the helicopter, when supposedly he just sort of leaned over and told her, "We can do it." LBJ's finest hour, in some ways, was that weekend in November when he had to reassure the country and, in effect, establish his own legitimacy. And your dad didn't always get credit for being the most articulate – it wasn't just what he said - but the fact that he brought in the Congressional Black Caucus and George Meany and all these folks who, frankly, had not been invited to the White House for a long time. It didn't mean he changed his politics, but he understood the politics of symbolism, particularly under circumstances the country had never been through before. And that was something that had to come from within. People didn't tell him to do that.

Ford: Well, I think there are two things that he really always considered, he and my mom as a team, as a parent team in raising the children, and as a team in the White House and in public life, too. And so that was really important to him he didn't want to think of this as dragging her into this task. And I think that's why he would reassure her and say, "We can do this. We're together." So I really think he got a lot of strength from her. And I think he gave strength to her as well.

I think the symbolism thing is exactly right. He realized that the very first thing that he needed to do was send a message to the nation that the imperial

White House was all over. Those days were gone, things were going to be open, and he was going to bring the Jerry Ford, Midwestern friendship and openness into the White House. And he was going to be himself. He realized he couldn't pretend to be something he wasn't. And so I think to his credit, he invited people from across the aisle to come and talk – and let's try to solve these problems. And then he tried to get out to see people.

Smith: And he and Tip O'Neill really were good friends, weren't they?

Ford: Yes. They played golf and enjoyed bantering back and forth. They enjoyed sports. The Boston rivalry with Washington and different sports teams, they were philosophically good combatants, but they could also put their arm around other and have a good story and a good laugh, and the genuineness of their friendship was very, very true.

Smith: What was the hardest thing to get adjusted to? Granted, you didn't live in the White House.

Ford: I did not, no.

Smith: My sense is that your parents both very quickly decided that they liked the place, and would like to stay there for a while if they could. And your mother, one senses that, first of all, she saw more of your dad.

Ford: Right, that's exactly right. She had a little more control over his schedule, and even though it was a demanding schedule, she always knew and could get in touch with him quickly. And there were times when she could walk down to the Oval Office or whatever, and just kind of see him. Instead of him being thirty minutes away on the Hill. That was a nice change for her.

I think the other thing that my mom liked, she's always been a woman of style. Given her background as an interior designer. She danced with the Martha Graham Dance Troop in New York. She is a woman of grace, and the White House kind of feeds that.

Smith: We did a project for the White House Historical Association. We interviewed, videotaped all fourteen living White House Social Secretaries. It was a fascinating group of people. And there were things that never changed over

fifty years. And there are things that do. But it was very interesting in talking to Maria Downs, in particular, how much your mother enjoyed entertaining.

Ford: She enjoyed the State Dinners. And bringing in certain entertainments that had never been in the White House before.

Smith: Clearly there was a unique, uniquely close relationship with Pearl Bailey. Was that something that started in the White House?

Ford: No, it happened before. Again, Susan knows a little more of that history, but they had a friendship that was before the White House.

Smith: Let me ask you, because you talk about the party of Lincoln, and he had a strong record on civil rights. But just on a personal level, how was race dealt with in the Ford house? Clearly, Washington was a southern town in a lot of ways, and your housekeeper was...

Ford: Clara Powell – she was a member of the family. She worked for us for twenty-three years. She and her husband Raymond never had their own children, so she became very close to us. We were like her children in a sense. So Clara really won the hearts and trust of us. She had never finished high school herself, but my parents, when they would travel together, they would go to Europe or even on vacation together or something, and Clara would move in. She would stay. Normally she was there from around eight in the morning until four in the afternoon as kind of a housekeeper. But she would actually move in for a weekend. And she was wonderful. She was a disciplinarian. My parents gave Clara permission to actually use her slipper on us, and she did when it was justified. She only had to use it once or twice and then she would just grab her slipper and we would comply.

But she actually would move in and stay in Mom and Dad's bedroom, and sleep there. And one of the funniest things - Clara would always, when we were younger, come in and put us asleep. And she would sing lullabies to us. And then we would go to sleep and we'd wake up in the middle of the night and be scared or whatever, and we'd go in and get in bed with Clara, and sleep with Clara. So she was wonderful. And when Mother was getting more and more ill with her pinched nerve and taking more medication, she was not

able to maybe make the meals that she was used to making, so Clara kind of came in and did a number of things. Clara knew what was going on in terms of Mom's alcohol and starting to spiral down. And so Dad talked to Clara a lot about how can I help? What can I do? He had a special relationship with her because he loved Mom and hated to see what was going on, and Clara was just very street smart. She knew how to take care of people, and so she and Dad, in a sense, helped Mom through some difficult times when we were younger.

And I remember Clara's funeral, a good black Pentecostal service, about a three hour service, people were...

Smith: Getting in the spirit of the occasion.

Ford: Yeah. And here we were...

Smith: White Episcopalians.

Ford: We were ready for it. So we each got to give our own testimony and my dad got up and just loved on Clara, just talked about what a wonderful, beautiful woman of God she was and how she cared for the family. And each of us – I'm not sure if every one of us.

Smith: Did she live to see you go to the White House?

Ford: She did, yes. And she was a part of the intervention with Mother in 1980. She was in the circle, so she got to see.

Smith: Did she ever come to the White House?

Ford: I think so, yeah. I'm sure she did. The other thing I remember about race, and just how we were as a family. Mom kind of set an example: my older brothers, Jack and Steve and I, we all went to public high school. We lived in Alexandria and we went to TC Williams High School - and that's the movie, *Remember the Titans*. So we played sports and TC Williams was the first integrated school – this is in 1966 – there was an all white high school, Francis C. Hammond – I was a freshman there. There was an all black high school, George Washington, downtown. They brought the two together and

made TC Williams. Ours was actually the second graduating class. So, going to an all white high school, and then my tenth grade year – and I kind of said wow. And my dad sat down and said, “Son, this is America and this is what we are proud to have - ethnicities, all races. You know Clara...” I was going through an adjustment myself.

Smith: Typical of the age, obviously.

Ford: I was a fourteen year old. And so he walked me through that a little bit. I remember one of my greatest, most favorite teachers was George Webber who was in world history, and he was an African-American. And so I got he and Dad together, and they just hit it off. In 1968, I graduated from high school. And that’s in April when Martin Luther King – April 4th, I think – he was assassinated.

Smith: And Washington went up in flames.

Ford: Oh, my gosh. All across the country. But in Washington there were riots. And so we had planned, as a senior in high school, a senior talent show. This was an end of the year thing and it was all going to be thrown out the door because our class was about 35% African-American. At that point our team was integrated, we were all doing well together until the assassination, and then everybody got up in arms. And so there was a question about whether we were going to have this talent show or not. And my father talked to me and, I think, other parents, and said, “This is the most important thing you can do to bring people together, is to have this integrated talent show,” which was about two weeks later, after the assassination. And we ended up, my white friends, Denny Hearst and Chuck _____, we became the Four Tops. And we got our Zoot Suits and went up and sang one of their songs, and Melvin Watson and Herman _____, he’s the mayor of Alexandria now – five of our black friends, they became the Beach Boys. And so they had jeans on with surfboards. It was just part of the talent show, but it was something that my dad and other parents said...for the good of TC Williams and the good of our country, you have to show leadership and come together as American citizens.

Smith: That's a great story.

Ford: And I think that was kind of what he, in his heart, knew was the importance of equality among races now.

Smith: There is a story you wanted to tell.

Ford: So, as you well know, my dad represented the district of Western Michigan, and so in the summertime my father would take us as children on the campaign trail around his district. And he had this silver streamlined RV that he would travel in. And on the side, you've probably seen pictures that say, "Jerry Ford, Your Congressman." And it was his mobile office and he would go from community to community and have a "Day with Jerry Ford."

And so I remember going to Holland, Michigan to the Holland Tulip Festival. And we'd spend a day there. He would be with his constituents and listen to their concerns and take pictures and do all that. Then we'd go over to Wyoming, Michigan, to the Wyoming Rodeo, and that whole scene and spend a day there with his constituents. And then we'd go to Cedar Springs to Red Flannel Day and spend the day. And that left an indelible image in our mind because I saw a man who truly loved being with his constituents. It was not really a job for him. He loved interacting with people on the street and just listening to them, and trying to help them and hear their concerns. He enjoyed the uniqueness, the idiosyncrasies of his constituents and had stories. I also saw someone who was really about giving to the community, too. Just this public service sense of "I want to take care." And so that, I think, always stuck with me as part of the man that he was.

Smith: It is astonishing, the speed with which the vice presidential train left the station. There is almost no time between Agnew's resignation and your dad's designation. And basically you were told to be at the White House in a couple of hours. Was there any more build up than that? Clearly, Agnew was in trouble for some time before he resigned. But was there speculation at all of him becoming vice president?

Ford: No, that was a bit of a surprise, I think. As you go back and think about why my father was chosen by Nixon, it makes a lot of sense because of his great

reputation and the tremendous respect that he had in the House and on Capitol Hill. That together with – he had a friendship with Dick Nixon. They came into Congress about the same time. They worked together on a number of committees and so forth. So there was that trust. I think Nixon was looking for someone he could trust, who would be loyal, and who had good relationships with the Democrats on the Hill. And someone who was well versed in the matters of appropriations and defense and those matters. So it makes sense that he was chosen. But he wasn't your star figure that some of the other names that were – was it Connally?

Smith: About whom there were great doubts whether he could be confirmed – Connally, in particular. Rockefeller and Reagan were each at the other end of the party.

Ford: He was a safe choice.

Smith: Because that's really the first time, as a family, you were thrust onto the national stage.

Ford: It was. It changed overnight because then you started having Secret Service around and the press showed up to 514 Crown View Drive.

Smith: It was a very small lawn.

Ford: But, at that point, even as Minority Leader, he was somewhat invisible. There were lots of people around us in Virginia, who were working for the government. We had other congressmen living in the neighborhood. So it was not like we were royal citizens or anything. We were just kind of regular people. And then it did happen so dramatically and so rapidly, the change.

Smith: Did you have any discussion with him at all before the pardon?

Ford: No, I didn't have any discussion with him. I know that at the theological seminary I was very personally frustrated by Richard Nixon's actions and his cover up. And my big mistake – and I don't know if you remember this – but I came out publicly and said I believe that there should be a total confession by President Nixon of his involvement with the Watergate. And I really

believed that. Now, the mistake I made was I sent it out to the public and immediately I got crucified by all the Nixon supporters.

Smith: Did you hear from folks?

Ford: Yeah, they actually asked my father – this is a statement your son Michael has made about a total confession. And my dad said, “Well, I’ve always encouraged my children to speak their mind. And I’ve never required them to get my approval beforehand. And I don’t expect that to change.” So, he may have thought to himself, and I think he did say to me, “That wasn’t very smart of you to go out and call for a total confession by Nixon.” But he never publicly challenged me.

Smith: Was your statement before or after the pardon?

Ford: My statement was before the pardon. But we didn’t have any conversation about the pardon.

Smith: Some people used the term almost condescendingly, but there really was an Eagle Scout quality in your dad – such that I found believable he was genuinely shocked that Nixon lied to him.

Ford: Yeah. I truly believe that.

Smith: And even worse, that Nixon sent his own daughter out, in effect, to perpetuate the lie.

Ford: Right. Maybe there was a naiveté there, or some sense of denial, but he was truly shocked that President Nixon was as deeply involved in this conspiracy as it turned out to be. Because I could see the change of attitude to me when one moment he’s there saying, “I need to support the President, he’s under a lot of…” and the next, when it all came crashing down, then it was like my friend has just stabbed me in the back or put me out there to hang. And that really hurt him, but also made him mad, too.

Smith: I assume their relationship after the pardon was never the same.

Ford: Never. He finally, and I think this is where his Christian faith really come to maturity, was dealing with the pardon. There were two things going on. And

we talked about this a little bit even afterwards. One was, he was overwhelmed by the issues he was faced with as president. The economy, Vietnam, all the things that day to day he had to give full attention to, be on point, organize his advisors and team. He had to govern the nation. And this thing was a distraction. It was taking at least 25% of his time, the legal considerations and if he is going to be charged. That was one thing. The other thing is he felt terribly sad for the man. And there was this certain sense of – and this is, I think, Christian compassion at work saying – this man is a broken man, and he has been vilified and will be vilified by the nation. He's sad because he felt like the President had accomplished a lot of great things, particularly in foreign policy and with China, and some others. And all of that was going to be lost. And there was this sense of, "I just don't want him to suffer anymore," and there is a certain sense of needing to forgive or to let go and move on. So those two things – the practicality of "I'm going to be the best president I can be," and this other is, "This is terrible."

Smith: That explains it well. We talked to Mel Laird, and Mel Laird has a scheme for everything. Laird loved your dad, but he thought he could go to your dad and put off the pardon. And Laird would bring a bipartisan Congressional delegation to the White House to petition him. Forty years later that sounds perfectly reasonable, except they were not perfectly reasonable times – and it's hard to believe, given the supercharged atmosphere, that you could have any kind of trial balloon. There was almost no way to prepare the country for it. Because the first time you tried, the trial balloon would be shot down before it cleared the trees.

Ford: Right. Never in the history of the United States has a president, literally lied to, not only his aides, but to the whole nation. How can you go through a legal process fairly? And if you tried, it would go on for four or five years.

Smith: We've been told that Jaworski was passing word to the White House that it could very well be two years before there would be any trial - assuming that Nixon could get a fair trial in DC. And for all that's been written about the political price that your dad paid, we can only speculate as to what kind of price he'd pay if he spent two years with Nixon obsessing the country.

Ford: I think it would have shown – if that would have dragged on – poor leadership in the sense of indecisiveness, or lack of real moral courage. I don't know. So it did cost him lots and perhaps, we don't know, the '76 election. But it was the right thing to do. I know he did it for the right reasons.

Smith: And he lived long enough to know that most people had come around. Time was good to him. And the Profiles in Courage Award was the imprimatur.

Ford: I think that was incredibly meaningful to him. I wasn't there in Boston when it was given to him, but we talked about it. He felt vindicated because JFK and his legacy, which was not his people, saying you did the right thing for the nation, and history applauds you or recognizes you for that. And that was very meaningful to him. So I'm glad he was around to receive that.

Smith: How sensitive was he to the whole Chevy Chase thing, the whole clumsy acy – which was a euphemism for this guy's not bright enough to be president.

Ford: Actually, he wasn't that sensitive. I would have been a lot more upset.

Smith: Was your mother upset for him?

Ford: Yes. Mom was really – how can you be doing that? This is not the man I know, he's the greatest athlete to ever be in the White House, and this is unfair. Dad would say, "Hey, it's just fine. It's just humor." He was just very comfortable in his own skin. It didn't bother him.

Smith: One of the things we've been told by a number of people - that your mother has a somewhat more ribald sense of humor than he did. That people would have to sometimes explain the jokes to him.

Ford: She picked it up pretty fast, and maybe some of that was that he just didn't listen to it or let it affect him. They did that special program on *Humor in the Presidency*, and he loved that. It was not only about him, but just about humor and all the presidents.

Smith: He had a great sense of humor.

Ford: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Let me ask you, when your mother did the famous *60 Minutes* interview, how much of that was an issue with the family? People always fight the last war – so the immediate reaction among the good, grey political advisors in the White House was, “Oh my God, what has she done?” And then the polls started coming in and the country was changing. And, ironically, for an administration that defined itself through openness and candor, she advanced that.

Ford: Yeah. She also was a woman of candor who spoke her mind. And I think that with the family it wasn't a big issue either. We laughed about it. We knew Mom. That's the way she is. She just kind of tells it like it is and speaks her mind. As long as Dad was okay with it, we were fine with it.

Smith: What would make your dad lose it? Because he famously had a temper. And spent a lot of time controlling it – mostly.

Ford: Yeah, he did.

Smith: What would make him lose his temper? We've been told it was like a summer thunderstorm. It would come out of nowhere, and then it would go.

Ford: And then it would just go.

Smith: Exactly. Someone said he was 98% teddy bear and 2% grizzly bear.

Ford: Yeah.

Smith: And you never quite knew when the grizzly was going to show up.

Ford: I think what would get him at times, as a child – and it is also my life and also my children, his grandchildren – if he would give an instruction like go out and cut the grass. And he'd tell me not to cut this area or not to do this. He'd be very explicit about instructions. And for whatever reasons I didn't follow them, and he'd let me have it. Again, “Michael, did you...?” He never physically did anything, he just really came on, and then it was over – just like that.

Another example is when our daughter, Becca, when we were in Colorado – we laugh about this because they had a pool in the back of their house, his lap

pool. He loved to swim. There was a cover over the pool. He instructed his grandchildren how to take the cover off and put it back on. So Becca goes out there and she lets the cover – she breaks the cover, basically. It gets stuck. He comes down and says, “Who broke the cover?” And for three or four minutes he just really went off, and then the next minutes he’s holding Becca. She’s crying. So it’s just that kind of ...

Smith: One of the granddaughters pulled him into a pool once.

Ford: Yeah. That got him upset, too. I think it was Tyne or Heather.

Smith: It was Tyne.

Ford: He didn’t like that very much. Everything was fine.

Smith: And the workaholic never left him. It’s funny talking to Penny. They went in on Saturday – once a congressman, always a congressman – to do the mail. Had to answer the mail.

Ford: Right.

Smith: Post 9/11 and the anthrax scare occurred, they weren’t delivering mail on the weekends. And he didn’t understand why. And it was agents or people on the staff were sent down to the post office and they put on those crazy suits, and literally went through the mail so he would have his mail.

Ford: I’m not surprised. He was a person of routine, too. Incredible routine and that served him well with his health. He was not a person who got much sleep because he was early to rise and stayed up. But he would always start his day the same way. The first thing he would do was go out and get the newspaper, literally. Get that newspaper because he...

Smith: Multiple newspapers, wasn’t it? Because he was a newspaper addict.

Ford: He was. And he carried them around with him all the time. And then he would take a swim and he’d get his breakfast and take the dog out. He was just a man of routine and habits. And then he’d come home and go back to the routine again. Very disciplined.

- Smith: Yeah. Were there foods he was partial to?
- Ford: Well, the two things that he loved to eat, and you probably heard this from our siblings. On Christmas and New Year's, he'd come down in the morning and you'd have strawberries and sour cream on waffles. He loved his waffles with strawberries and sour cream. That was the feast. And he had some bacon. For the holidays. And the second thing is, when he was working so hard and he would come on Sundays. Sundays was his sacred day and he would be very good about being home for church and play golf on Sundays. He would sit down and have a Bermuda onion sandwich. Just big old Bermuda onions, and he'd put some mayo on it. Because he didn't have to go out in public, he could have his bad breath and everything. He just ate that Bermuda onion sandwich.
- Smith: One of the great stories – there was a Secret Service agent who was very discreet, but told us a wonderful story. The last time he left the Eisenhower Medical Center, it wasn't long before he passed away. And they picked him up, of course, and were going to drive him home. He said, "No, I want to go to In and Out Burger." So he goes to In and Out Burger, stands in line to get his burger.
- Ford: I wasn't there when that happened, but I heard all about it. And Mom, she loved it, too. I think the other thing that I would say is the relationship that my father and mother, the love relationship, is like very few that I've seen. In fifty-eight years of marriage the trials and tribulations that they went through were huge. And they didn't always make the right decisions. They were faithful to each other, but they didn't – I think he realized that after we did the intervention, that he needed to be there 100% for her, and he was. But he just loved kind of doting on her, buying things for her.
- Smith: Clearly, she's not noted for her punctuality.
- Ford: Oh, gosh, no.
- Smith: I've suggested, to be consistent, you really ought to start her funeral about fifteen minutes late. She would appreciate it. He would, too.

But talk about opposites attracting.

Ford: That was true, because that drove him crazy at times. He's very punctual, he wanted people to be punctual, but she was not. And so there were some points he had to grit his teeth.

Smith: You wonder how much of that on her part is a kind of perfectionism? My For all that she had been in the public eye, she had butterflies before speaking. And you just wonder, she wanted to be perfect. And maybe if you'd take another five minutes, you'll find the right jewelry. It's a kind of getting ready for your public.

Ford: I think you are exactly right. As I know my mother, she always had another thing to do, and there's another option. And so that was true. But I think a part of it, a little bit, is that it allowed her to have some control. For all the times that he was gone, and she had to trail after him, for all the late meals, he showed up late and everything, when she could say, "Jerry, it's going to be another ten minutes," that gave her some power. And I think that's part of what was going on.

Smith: That makes perfect sense.

'76 – at the end of the campaign, you knew you'd caught up, did you really think you were going to win?

Ford: You know, I didn't think we were going to win until that last day or two when the momentum – everything you were hearing was Ohio's swinging this way, and New Mexico – and it's like almost a little bit of a fantasy kind of thing. We were so far behind, can this really come around? But people were very – you see the numbers changing, and so you did feel like there was a momentum swing that could possibly happen. So I was there with the family and some friends, and Joe Garagiola and all of them. And we were kind of saying, "Let's wait and see." So it was a little bit like: this could happen.

Smith: What was election night like?

Ford: It was a great sense of relief because all of us were tired and exhausted and we realized we didn't have to go out and do it anymore. We, as a family, took

different parts of the country. So when my father had our family meeting and said, “You know, I really believe for the best interests of the nation that I should run,” he actually kind of polled us on it. He asked us, “How do you feel about this?”

Smith: Were there differences of opinion?

Ford: No, everybody was supportive and of common mind. But this was way back before the Republican Convention. So I was the New England guy because I was in school up there. And Steve was out west, and Susan was down in the southeast. So we, as surrogates, we would travel and do our campaigning. So we came back together on election night and we felt like everyone had done their part. It wasn't like, “You slacker,” or something. It was like Dad and Mom put their very best out there to convince the American people that another four years was the right thing. And so we all were in good spirits, we all felt united and content with the outcome.

Smith: There is a sense that it took him a while to bounce back, which you can certainly understand. First of all, was there ever any doubt about where they were going to go? I mean, had they known then that if they didn't stay in Washington, they were going out to Southern California?

Ford: No, they didn't know that.

Smith: They did not? Okay.

Ford: They did not know that. Whether they really hadn't thought about it, or talked about it too much, I think they were so consumed with the election. I know an option was for them – they were looking at Florida – that was in the discussion. I don't know if that was before or afterwards. Certainly California, Colorado as the permanent residence. But that was not a foregone conclusion. That happened – that whole decision was made well after the election.

Smith: Couple of things and we'll let you go. How awkward was it for the family to have this, what I call deathwatch, going on in the media? To know that there are people – for example, in the hospital, who would tip off the media. That sort of thing. Was that difficult for him?

Ford: Difficult for my dad?

Smith: Yeah. He must have been aware of the media's unhealthy interest.

Ford: In his own deterioration? Yeah. I don't think he was that aware of it. No. I think it was hard for my mother. She is sensitive to the media perception. Part of it was he just wasn't paying attention. I think for all of us, we were a bit annoyed by it because this is where you should allow people their privacy. Everyone loses their loved ones and it's a hard thing to do, so let us do it in God's time. So that was a bit annoying.

Smith: And they loved Vail.

Ford: Yeah.

Smith: We were out there last summer – I'd never been before – and immediately, the place made an impression. And you could see not only how much they loved the place, but how much they were loved.

Ford: My father was an athlete and he loved to ski and he loved to play golf and he loved to be outside. And that whole Vail Valley has got it all. So they took us out there fairly young. We were in middle school when we first went out there, and they got to know all the people out there from Pepe and Sheika, and just made many, many friends out there. So it was a place where they could not only recreate, but just kind of enjoy good friendship. And in thirty-some years they saw Vail also grow.

Smith: And they contributed, clearly, in putting the place on the map, particularly as a year-round attraction. At the same time, one senses that people pretty much left them alone.

Ford: Right. They respected their privacy. And they felt like this was a place they gave back. They had the golf tournament for twenty years, and he would bring lots of professional golfers and special guests in. And they raised a lot of money for the Vail Valley Foundation and all the charities. And so that was something the community appreciated, too.

Smith: He was incredibly generous. But he was a real fiscal conservative. Can you illustrate? There was some debate over what kind of tipper he was. But I wonder if it was a byproduct of growing up with the Depression. There is a whole generation who have a sense of the value of a dollar.

Ford: He saw his father, his Ford Paint and Varnish Company of his father, collapse, and basically go out of business. Or got to the point where they had to lay off everybody.

Smith: And he worked his way through school. He was selling his blood at times.

Ford: Yeah, working at the DEK house, or at the hospital. There were no athletic scholarships back then. He rolled up his sleeves and got his way through school. And so, he always understood that you had to work hard for what you had, and you don't just give it away, and you also don't go into debt, too. He taught that to his children pretty strongly. How are you going to pay for that? Well, Dad, can I have a loan? No. So he was a fiscal conservative, yeah.

I wanted to say one other thing that I saw in my father that I think served him well, and that was he came into an enormous position as President of the United States. And in some ways people would say, "Well, he was over his head." And I disagree with that. I think he was well-prepared. As an attorney, a legal mind, as someone who had been in the military and understood our military system, and as someone who was in Congress and was in all those Congressional hearings and meetings for twenty-five years.

Smith: I think well-meaning people confused a lack of, for lack of a better word, sort of Hollywood facility. In some ways JFK had transformed people's expectations of the office and its requirements.

Ford: And I would say that my father also – I wouldn't consider him a visionary type of a person who had this grand scheme of where the country needs to go. But what he was, for the time, was a incredibly effective listener, a reflective person. And then he, understanding the different problems and challenges, he processed that very well. A problem solver, a person of intuitive understanding on things.

Smith: And presumably someone who, in the course of his life, had willed himself to look for the good in other people.

Ford: Right. He looked for the good and he also put that expectation on people so they would rise to the occasion. You can do this. As a son, I heard it time and time again. You are going to be able to make that play, or do that test. The confidence he would put in you pushed people to their very best. But the other thing that I saw is he was not afraid to surround himself with brilliant people who really were the best of the best. And many had their own philosophic views, but were people who were the superstars. And he wanted those people, to bring them together to work through the issues, the problems, and tell him what they thought. And then he would decide. He would make the very best decision, and he'd try to build consensus. He was always about building consensus.

And I think that was incredibly important and timely. For that time in history is to have that style of leadership for a nation.

Smith: Given your ministerial background and outlook, did you have a – and I don't want to pry – did you have conversations about death and what lay beyond?

Ford: We did, yeah.

Smith: Conscious preparation for the future?

Ford: We did. It was near the end – in the last month or so – even before that, I guess. I think back in August, when things were really starting to deteriorate a little more, and you could have gone on for years, but you knew that he was in the twilight of his time. And that's when we talked a lot about – you've got such a blessing to have the family we have, the memories we have, and all that. You are not leaving because you go to be with God, in God's presence, we're with you and we're being a part of that. And he got that, and he was not afraid to say goodbye and come to the end of his time on earth and stuff. So those are precious conversations. They were very special. And he needed to have Mom there, too, because we would hold hands, the three of us. And that really meant a lot to Mom, too, is that Dad is with us now, and will be with us then. And Dad would be talking and he would say, "I know that's true and we

pray.”(?) And so on several occasions, the three of us had this time about what lies ahead.

Smith: Were you surprised by the outpouring, at the time of the funeral? Because it seemed to build as the week went on – and beginning that night in Alexandria, a Saturday night, New Year’s weekend.

Ford: Things were more personal and family-oriented in California. That was a time when we truly grieved just as a family. There were lots of emotions and it was more...when we came to Washington and landed at Andrews Air Force Base, and they had the motorcade, and it came and it went through Washington, DC, and literally thousands of people were on the street with signs and flags. And that was like, “Where did that...?” That was very emotional.

Smith: Went through the old neighborhood in Alexandria.

Ford: Yeah, the old neighborhood. And then the other thing is we came on to the front of the World War II Memorial and stopped there. And there were all of these military women who were dressed in their Army, Navy, Air Force, in uniforms and they were saluting because it was in his time that they opened the academies to women. And to know that he was a World War II veteran, to remember how he had served in the Pacific and almost died on an aircraft carrier. And then to see all these women who are now in the military pay respects to him was powerful, too. And then the Capitol, when he was in the Rotunda and we took turns going over to thank people who were going through the receiving line. The things that people would share – just people who didn’t even know him – but came to see and pay respects. It was very powerful.

And then finally in Grand Rapids, the Boy Scouts, man, I’ve never seen so many Boy Scouts. And they had these little kids who didn’t know Jerry Ford from – but they were proud that he was an Eagle Scout, and they wanted to be like him, be president. So there were so many different pictures of tributes to my father which just blew us away.

Smith: That last night, the line, two miles long.

- Ford: Yes, went across the bridge and everything. Yeah, it was a really humbling tribute. And I think, just like when he gave his speech in the East Room, and assumed the presidency, “This long national nightmare is over,” people felt like a new confidence, a new pride in the White House. And it was a kind of healing thing. I think with his passing and his funeral, it again aroused a sense of great patriotism and pride – a respect and great pride in him – but in America.
- Smith: The country needed to feel good about itself about then.
- Ford: Yes, exactly. It was a sense of, “We have a great nation, and he represents all that’s good in America.”
- Smith: Obviously, she was mourning, but did this buttress your mother’s spirits?
- Ford: Oh, yes, it did. It gave her strength. She was physically really wearing out, and to see all these wonderful people express their love and respect was a great support and gave her great strength.
- Smith: Last question. If you were going to tell people something about your dad that might surprise them, what would you say? To someone who never knew him, maybe just as a name in a textbook or an old film clip.
- Ford: I think that they need to know that my father was a person who truly gave his life to his family and to his country, and believed in the best in people. He was an optimist. He was a person that if you knocked him down, or if you had a set back, he believed that the country and that people were going to be good, make good decisions. He had faith in other people. That would be it.
- Smith: If he were around, that today’s news would confirm that. [Death of Osama Bin Laden]
- Ford: Oh yeah, he would be jumping up and just saying without gloating, and I think our president did a wonderful job of announcing that last night – the tone in which it was presented. But to say, “You know, good has prevailed over evil. And this is what the values and the ideals of a humane society represents for, not only America, but for the whole world, and the Muslim

Mike Ford

May 2, 2011

world as well.” And so, that is what my father would be grateful for and thankful for.

Smith: Perfect.

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