

Interview with

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by

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Q: I know that your association with the president goes back to your pre-WWII law partnership in Grand Rapids and also that you served on the senior staff in the White House. Can you fill me in on your relationship with Ford during his congressional career? Were you employed in some official capacity on his congressional staff? Also, what can you tell me about Ford's first campaign for Congress?

A: "Jerry used to come back to Grand Rapids quite regularly and his congressional office was right next to our old law office so I saw him quite frequently. In the later years, his law office was still next to a new office I occupied. I was not part of his congressional staff but we always talked politics together. The only official capacity in which I helped him during that period was when he asked me to join a delegation negotiating an international satellite communications agreement. That was in February 1969 which was right after Nixon came to office. It seems that the existing delegation was headed by LBJ's communications lawyer and was made up entirely of Johnson appointees. Ford phoned me and said that he had received a phone call from the White House asking for his help in finding a Republican to come down and be part of the delegation. I became the Republican spy on the delegation. Of course, the entire group knew why I was there. It was a lark as I was not exactly an expert on satellite communications, but I enjoyed it very much.

When Jerry became Vice-President, I gave him about 3 weeks of full-time effort on a voluntary basis to help him with his confirmation hearings. A while later, President Nixon put Jerry in charge of a commission to examine privacy rights. Jerry made me the executive director of the commission because he didn't want a staff from the Nixon White House running the operation. An executive director would be in charge of the staff as well as the final product and Jerry wanted to work with someone he understood. At that particular time, Ford was more than a little concerned about getting too tied into what was going on in the Nixon White House.

As for that first congressional campaign back in 1948, we were just very fortunate to have an open primary which allowed crossovers so that we could get the votes of a lot of labor people from the auto plants in Grand Rapids and other Democrats. The McKay machine was built on its control of the party machinery. The machine, and particularly McKay himself, had high access and nearly complete control over jobs at the state level. McKay owned an insurance agency which had served the state. He owned a tire company which monopolized the state's business needs in that area. He also ran a liquor distributorship which quite naturally did the bulk of its trade with the state of Michigan. I don't think you should put complete emphasis on the effect of the Home Front in beating a machine to accomplish Ford's nomination. The McKay machine was a state and local machine. Mr. Jonkman was a McKay man because when he was first elected you couldn't be a Republican in Kent county without incurring substantial debts to the machine.

Mr. Jonkman's predecessor was Carl Mapes. Mapes served for something like 20 years and he was very well liked in the district. Jonkman was his administrative assistant so he inherited the mantle of power without much opposition. Jerry Ford's victory was mostly a case

of a young non-Dutch person defeating an old-timer. Ford won because of the open primary and because Republican control was so complete in Kent county at that time that the Democrats and union people knew that they couldn't elect one of their own Democratic candidates. They could crossover without penalty because they couldn't even elect people in the lower contests such as in the sheriff's race. The high turnout in the primary was unquestionably due to the Democratic crossovers. The UAW, in Mr. Reuther's time, was a very internationalist group and Mr. Jonkman was a classic isolationist. Jerry came along with an innovative campaign and a commitment to the internationalist's approach to foreign policy matters. Jerry's campaign was a part of a generational change in politics. This was the same thing that got Nixon elected two years earlier to the House. You had these young energetic ex-servicemen who found a new way of campaigning. They pushed every doorbell and worked their tails off."

Q: Everything I read and hear about presidential staffing suggests that the senior White House staff is usually a reflection of an individual president's strengths and weaknesses. My understanding is that the Ford staff was initially designed in a collegial fashion with 9 advisors having equal and unfettered access and no chief of staff per se. Can you talk a little about how collegial the staff was and the advantages and disadvantages of such a system from your perspective as a participant?

A: "I can tell you that the collegial system worked. Rumsfeld may not have had the title of chief of staff but that was because we had no intention of operating along the lines of the previous administration. He had control of the paperwork going into the President. He would be sure that the option papers were in hand as the timetables and deadlines drew near. He weeded out papers which were not critical for the moment. His job consisted of managing the paperwork in order to get the president focused. For example, in the early days and in all matters throughout the period, Rumsfeld focused on appointments which had to be made and he saw to it that the President had the necessary documents in front of him to make completely informed and timely selections. Rumsfeld was very good at his job. No one felt that Rumsfeld was getting in the way of their access to the president. He might say things like 'wait until next week or what are you bothering the President with this right now for', but rarely did he ever prevent anyone from eventually taking up their particular issue with the President.

Implementation is always a critical problem and the people on Rumsfeld's staff were awfully good at never letting a presidential decision or options paper circulate. In the Carter administration, these documents with Carter's initials and comments got leaked to the press. Whenever President Ford wanted something done, the options paper which he had reviewed was given to the Cabinet Secretary for permanent inclusion in the President's files. A separate note would go to the appropriate cabinet secretary or staff person saying only that we had selected option number three from the previous memo and we wanted it implemented.

It was all right for someone like Ford to operate with nine people coming at him. That's how he worked in the Congress where he utilized an open door office. He was used to being pestered. Such a system obviously would not work for others to whom Ford's background was an alien experience. Reagan couldn't operate this way at all. His biggest problems in the first term came from trying to survive a triumvirate. This new Regan one-man chief of staff type of

White House system is good for Ronald Reagan. The collegial system was good for Ford because of his background but it clearly can't be a model for every future president."

Q: There seems to be a bit of a paradox with regard to the way Ford's relationships with the White House staff are portrayed. On the one hand, he is portrayed as a decent, genuine, and straightforward person who dealt with people largely as equals rather than subordinates. On the other hand, I am constantly reading that bickering between various staffers (Haig & Hartmann) was rampant and that Ford was reluctant to deal with the nitty gritty of managing a staff. Can you comment on this and possibly indicate how Ford's congressional career and experience may or may not have left him well prepared for the tremendous administrative responsibilities of being a president?

A: "Ford had a real problem when moving to bigger jobs and being accompanied by people who had been around him in his lesser jobs. When he moved from being the Congressman for Michigan's 5th district to being House Minority Leader all of his staff, except for Bob Hartmann, were from the old days. They were not issues oriented. They were accustomed to constituent casework and did very little to shape Ford's thinking on major issues, plan his schedule, or take routine tasks off his hands. When he got to be Vice President these same people went with him and became even more overemployed on your basic 'Peter Principle.' He put Hartmann in charge of the vice presidential staff, and Bob was no more an administrator than Jerry Ford was. Hartmann was an astute political observer and a talented speechwriter but there just wasn't an administrative bone in his entire body. Hartmann had no organizational charts or descriptions of the various job responsibilities for others to function from. I had a friend named Bill Seidman who was a managing partner in a national accounting firm. I went to Jerry and told him that Bill Seidman was exactly what he needed for his office to fill the gaps in administrative experience and Jerry was all for it. Bill Seidman ended up running into roadblocks because Hartmann didn't want to surrender much of his authority as Vice Presidential Chief of Staff.

Then Jerry got the biggest administrative job in the world. He not only had to assert himself with his own staff who expected to be held over and not demoted but he also had to deal with the non-Watergate-tainted Nixon staffers. His tremendous feel for people caused him to believe that immediately firing the Nixon people would result in a public belief that they were Watergate-tainted. He tried to meld the the two staff factions together so that the Nixon people would have the time to seek jobs in the private sector. The Hartmann-Haig squabble was a natural. The Ford staff resented the White House staff which had snubbed them from the outset by excluding them from certain privileges and by keeping them from being fully informed on developments within the Nixon administration. We had to bring Rumsfeld in on top of this awkward situation in order to remedy it. Rumsfeld knew what kind of a mess he was inheriting and he was initially reluctant to take the job."

Q: As a key White House staffer of longstanding acquaintance with the President you must have great familiarity with Ford's habitual style of decision making. Is it true that Ford was an operational decision maker rather than an ideas man? I have in mind here the notion that he characteristically preferred airing out all the options in staff meetings and that he frequently made competing assignments to different staffers. Can you confirm this style of decision making or perhaps enliven it with additional details?

A: “Given his congressional experience, Jerry Ford was accustomed to sitting and listening to lots of people. On any major or complex problem he expected the staff to do a first rate job of airing out the various options. He did one thing his successors did not do. He usually called the key people into his confidence before they worked on a particular problem and laid out generally what he wanted. Carter, on the other hand, would let his staff toil endlessly on something and then he would just cut them off at the pass. President Reagan holds back his own views until the senior White House staff is in absolute ferment about the issue. The key with Ford was that he was able to express his views on the subject at hand as a preliminary form of guidance to his staff. President Ford, for example, would never let the Secretary of the Treasury develop a broadly based tax simplification plan and then just walk away from it as Reagan has. Ford would call in his key staffers and say that he was for tax simplification provided they could devise a plan that met certain preliminary criteria. Carter let his people fly blind on policy options. Once the options came in and hasty choices had to be made, Ford sometimes had a problem with airing out the remaining issues for too long in various staff forums. At the same time, everyone felt good about such procedures because there was no question that they could get an ample chance to be heard and the system left them free to disagree so long as they united behind the final decision.”

Q: To what extent were you involved in the development of the Ford energy program and can you describe where the initiatives on energy issues came from in terms of the senior White House staff?

A: “I wasn’t very involved at all but I can tell you that Frank Zarb spent more time inside the White House than any other outside administrator. Zarb was his own liaison to the President. Energy was an issue that went to the staff of the Domestic Council. The Domestic Council staff, you may recall, had its own unique set of problems. Initially, it was headed by a Nixon holdover, and the staff needed rebuilding and fresh minds.

Nelson Rockefeller wanted to be head of the Domestic Council but the Council was a creature of statute. The Vice President couldn’t have the position under law but he could name those who would head the staff. Rockefeller chose Jim Cannon to be his man at the Domestic Council. In fact, the idea of involving the Vice President so deeply in domestic policy was one that ruffled some feathers. The Senior White House staff got taken out of the loop on some issues. Rockefeller was gung ho on synfuels and government financing of bold new ventures. In the end, the energy program was largely Zarb’s baby. He had to spend a lot of time selling it at the White House. In the Counsel’s office we got hold of Zarb’s comprehensive energy reform bill and found it to be troublesome from a legal standpoint. The bill was clearly within the preliminary policy guidelines that the President had set. Our job was to whip that bill into shape on the President’s deadline. We eliminated what we thought was impractical and smoothed out the legal quirks. Ford’s one big initiative in energy was a tax on oil imports.”

Q: Did President Ford ever actually sit with you and tell you his conception of what he expected from a presidential counsel or did that develop on a day to day basis as he assigned you various things? Perhaps it was already obvious what he wanted from your longstanding working arrangements over the years.

A: “I didn’t even know I was going to get the job as White House Counsel. I served on the transition team. One day some newspaper reporter asked the President how long he was going to keep Nixon’s White House Counsel, Fred Buzhardt, around. The newspapers were climbing all over Mr. Buzhardt for his role in the tapes controversy. He was doing his job and, at that time, his job was to defend President Nixon’s position in withholding the tapes. I don’t think Jerry had even thought about it before he was asked because his reaction was, “Oh my God. Phil, you better be White House Counsel.” I don’t think President Ford knew what a White House Counsel was supposed to do.

I learned that two men named Morgan and McCabe from the Counsel’s Office in the Eisenhower administration were in Washington. The first thing I did was to call them up and I asked them three questions. What is the Counsel’s job? How do you staff this office, and would you two screen the applicants? They dropped everything they were doing and did a first class job of getting me oriented. They got me a deputy named Phil Areeda, who had been with Ike and he really gave my job some of the content that it seemed to have been lacking. Ford and I never discussed the job and he never specified what kinds of duties I would be undertaking.

We did a lot of things to differentiate ourselves from the Nixon White House. I suppose the Buzhardt affair was part of that. A better example would be the hiring of a press secretary for President Ford. Jerry had brought along Paul Miltich from his congressional days and Paul just wasn’t up to doing that job in its White House context. The President wanted someone who, unlike Ron Ziegler, was respected by journalists and he selected Jerry Terhorst. When this subject had come up before, the transition team told the president that it didn’t care who he got so long as it was someone with very gray hair who could command some credibility.”

Q: The bottom line on my research project is that I believe that Ford’s lengthy career in the House made a significant difference to the way he handled himself as President. Do you agree or disagree with that and can you think of any specific examples which might help illuminate your impressions?

A. “Unlike his two successors, Gerald R. Ford was from the Washington political establishment. He was very much a politician’s President, well regarded by his former colleagues on the Hill, both Republicans and Democrats. The first and foremost effect of his congressional career was a truly and deeply embedded sense of loyalty to his colleagues and the institution they served in. The House, as an institution, breeds that loyalty among the old-timers. I suspect that loyalty is one of the key ingredients of effective political careers in every form.

After we lost in the election of 1976 and on the morning before his term was to end, Ford had a small breakfast at the White House with a few key staffers and the four party leaders from the Congress. There couldn’t have been more than 12 people in the room. There were no reporters. Its unfortunate that it went unreported because I think what happened was remarkable. During that breakfast, each of the four congressional leaders expressed his admiration for Ford over the years. I’ve never heard anyone, either Tip O’Neill or Senator Byrd make a more moving or heartfelt tribute and they weren’t doing it for public consumption because there were no reporters present. I would have expected this kind of warmth and affection from John Rhodes or Hugh Scott but not from the two men that Ford had been fighting tooth and nail for two and a

half years. It is fair to say that in such a relaxed environment these men were speaking from the heart.

A second effect of Ford's congressional years was the absence of a vigorous ideology. Being in Congress as long as he was softened Ford's opinions and biases and left him more flexible than Carter or Reagan who came to the office without any significant legislative service. The Viet Nam war drove many people into hard ideological positions that later contributed to adoption of extreme positions on other issues. House Republicans in Ford's time didn't face such an ideological split within their own ranks. There were, of course, liberals in the other party who were passionately committed to their own points of view. Jerry worked with the Father Drinan's of this world and black congressmen whose reason for being was to legislate away their civil rights disabilities. A lengthy career in the House softens the hard edges of opinion because the individual gets exposed to so much and has to learn how to get things done.

Thirdly, Ford was very alert to the political implications of what he was attempting to do in any particular instance. He would see the knocks coming and he would be ready to gut it out. Carter and Reagan were caught unprepared for this aspect of Washington's high politics. Ford's congressional career made him realistic about how government operated. He recognized the limits on what government could be expected to do. He knew that comprehensive legislative solutions which increased the role of government didn't always work no matter how much they contributed to the sense that Washington was doing something on a critical problem. Being on the Appropriations Committee gave Gerald R. Ford a real feel for how government went about implementing the solutions which the Congress had legislated.

A fourth difference was that Ford had absolutely no illusions about what could be accomplished in the foreign policy realm. He supported the Helsinki accords but he clearly believed that they would not change the way that the Soviets were going to treat their own citizens. In discussing the prospects for SALT II Brezhnev had grasped the President's hand as they sat on the train together but I never found Ford saying that he believed that they had made any kind of real breakthrough. He never clapped his hands together in anticipation of really getting something meaningful from the Russians. That kind of realism was the seasoning which comes from congressional experience.

The defect of his congressional experience was his weakness as an administrator. He had management weaknesses because the scope of congressional decision making is so narrow. The President plays a role where he has much more control over the actual shaping of policy. The Congress, on the other hand, is flooded with proposals so that it reaches a point where some form of compromise is the only way out. In a congressional office, the forces around you shape the policy choices for you which makes for a completely different orientation than that which occurs at the presidential level.

A fifth and final affect of his congressional background was his willingness to listen to advice from others. No one can be in the Congress for very long without taking the counsel of others. In the Oval Office, Ford entertained a constant stream of visitors with well connected requests. He always listened sympathetically even if he was not disposed to do what was being requested.”