



Interview with
L. WILLIAM SEIDMAN

by

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FINAL EDITED Transcript of an Interview with L. William Seidman,
former Assistant to the President during the Ford administration
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Q: Roger Porter describes you as an 'honest broker' who had the task of coordinating the input to meetings of the Economic Policy Board. I take it that means that it was your responsibility to assure that competing viewpoints and policy alternatives were adequately represented to the key decision makers. Can you describe the title and nature of your duties at the EPB? Was the EPB an important institutional innovation? Can you contrast the EPB with economic policy making arrangements in the Nixon administration?

A: "The fundamental job that I undertook at the Economic Policy Board was to represent President Ford with respect to decisions on economic affairs. We constructed the Board so that we would have the capability to run through economic issues that got raised to the level of the White House. Our job was to try and spot economic problems before they occurred and prepare a rational response for each situation. It was very much akin to the contingency planning which is often associated with military problems. The concept of an Economic Policy Board was put together by Alexander Haig. Haig's experience in the Nixon administration had convinced him that there was a need for more balance between the senior White House staff and the cabinet people.

The EPB was a major institutional innovation. It was a cabinet level body that met on a daily basis. Its decisions were formed a direct conduit to President Ford. This is the first time in the history of the modern American presidency that a cabinet level body has been engaged to run the economy. We had upwards of seven cabinet level people meeting to thrash out economic trends and decisions on a daily basis in the Ford White House. You get a better understanding of how truly innovative that approach to economic affairs was by comparing the EPB with the directions taken by other presidents. In the Nixon White House you had Haldeman and Ehrlichman in control of the economic data flowing to the president. In the Reagan administration, at least during the first term, you had the Baker-Deaver-Meese triumvirate operating in a similar fashion."

Q: Your background includes considerable managerial and administrative experience and training. There are some indications that Ford was uncomfortable with personnel matters. Phil Buchen suggests that you were brought into the White House to provide administrative expertise. What is your assessment of Ford's managerial capabilities?



A: "I was first called in to work with Ford when he was Vice President. They felt Ford needed someone to help organize that office. My job at that time was to pull things together by making the basic decisions concerning who to hire, how to handle the mail flow, and how we would go about writing his major speeches. Bob Hartmann was Ford's chief of staff at that time but his background was as a newspaper reporter. Ford was inexperienced in personnel matters. He had no practice at all in running any type of large concern. His congressional staff was miniscule compared to the numbers you deal with in the executive branch and they had acquired an extremely mediocre political reputation. His congressional office was run for twenty years by a totally non-political guy who took care of the folks back in the 5th district in Michigan.

Ford was what I would label as the 'perfect gentleman' type of manager. He cared about people and he really knew politics. He was a good manager in the sense that he provided considerable opportunity for people to participate in decisions. He had his own set of management tools. He was quick to reward people and he liked an open committee system for debating issues. My early service to the Vice President was as a manager whereas my later service when he became president primarily involved my economic expertise."

Q: You participated in the drafting of the transition team report. That report supposedly recommended a number of changes in the senior White House staffing arrangements in order to help differentiate the Ford team from the staff of the Nixon administration. How important was it for the Ford White House to appear to be different from the Nixon White House? Was the goal of differentiation personally important to Ford?

A: "It really mattered a lot to Ford because he wanted to restore the credibility of the presidency in the minds of the American people. He was really pretty open to our advice even though he had not authorized any kind of transition team during the Vice Presidential period. He was accustomed to the way that Hartmann ran things but Hartmann wasn't an operator. Hartmann wasn't a day-to-day manager. Haig was still there from the final months of the Nixon administration. He wanted to continue in the chief of staff role. You had a built in source of conflict between Hartmann and Haig but we also felt that you needed to show people that the Haldeman-Ehrlichman model would not be followed under Ford. We strongly urged the rejection of such a system and stressed a collegial spokes of the wheel format. That was a first



order effort to show people that top level changes were underway at the Ford White House."

Q: One of Ford's stated objectives was to restore the influence and prestige of cabinet style government. The Economic Policy Board can be viewed either as a threat to cabinet style government (because it is White House centered) or as an asset (because of the participation of so many cabinet members). Do you think the prestige of the cabinet was enhanced during the Ford administration? Do you think the EPB contributed to that?

A: "There is no room for doubt. Ford was immensely successful in restoring the prestige of the cabinet. We made it clear from the very start that any cabinet member was free to participate in the daily meetings and discussions at the Economic Policy Board. Since the staff at the Economic Policy Board consisted of Porter and myself, we were very dependent on people at the undersecretary level in the various cabinet departments for help. Everybody in the executive branch wants to know where the action is and it became very clear that Ford was absolutely serious about both cabinet style government and the Economic Policy Board.

When John Dunlop came on board as Secretary of Labor one of the conditions he set was that he be allowed to participate in the discussions at the Economic Policy Board. The Board was most clearly an asset to cabinet style government. Porter's study of the Economic Policy Board provides all the evidence needed to conclude that cabinet members did not view the Board as a threat. The bottom line is that it became very clear that decisions were going to be made at the Economic Policy Board and that is how Jerry Ford wanted it. With the exception of the final tax cut, I can't remember a single important economic decision that wasn't made at the Economic Policy Board. The Economic Policy Board was a cabinet level group which met every day."

Q: Ford's senior White House staff structure underwent several changes while he was President. The transition team recommended a spokes of the wheel system based on a collegial framework. By the time of the 1976 campaign it seems that the White House was back under a single chief of staff system. How did the structure work while you were there?

A: "It is correct that the structure of the senior White House staff changed over time. Anybody who has been in Washington

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working with the White House tends to react against a chief of staff type of arrangement. Unless you are the chief of staff you tend to see it as something that interferes with your access to the President. The decision of the transition team to recommend a collegial spokes of the wheel arrangement was predicated upon the need to make the Ford White House appear vastly different. It was also important to find something that Ford would be comfortable with. The collegial diagram was geared toward the recognition that Ford had the congressional mindset. Ford's years in Washington had convinced him that chiefs of staff at the White House were far too powerful. He felt the same way about chiefs of staff in the offices of various members of congress. When we talked to Ford it was clear that he just didn't like the idea of having one guy in charge of everything.

Actually, Rumsfeld was a chief of staff. You really didn't need to look at the spokes of the wheel diagram to figure that out. It was a natural development over time in the White House atmosphere. Rumsfeld had control over the allocation of office space, scheduling of the President's time, and money. Those are the managerial resources of a chief of staff. They are the very same elements which make others so resentful of a chief of staff. Such a person is a necessary element in the White House regardless of what particular title you may choose to give him."

Q: My central thesis is that Ford's 25 year House career greatly affected the way he conducted himself as President. Can you describe Ford's decision-making style and do you think his congressional habits were important features of his presidency?

A: "To state it bluntly, Ford's congressional experience was the key to understanding the way he operated as President. You could see that in the way that Ford approached problems. He liked to take on each issue separately. That was a congressional habit--formed out of the tendency for congressmen to air out each problem in a lengthy congressional hearing process. Ford did not view political problems from the viewpoint of any particular philosophy. His achievements don't fit into any single programmatic thrust. That is why you don't have the Ford presidency being portrayed with grand labels like the New Deal or the Great Society. Ford was very pragmatic. He would focus all his energies into solving one particular problem. He felt that was the best way to work and it was the way that he had learned to do things in his congressional career.

The veto strategy is yet another reflection of the way



in which Ford's congressional experience affected his outlook. From Ford's viewpoint, it was just a part of the bargaining process that he had learned while leading his party in the Congress. Ford knew that he would need to use a different approach than most presidents. He wanted to approach the Congress from a position of strength because he knew that was the way to get things accomplished. He had learned when to compromise and when not to. The veto strategy was the most pragmatic way of dealing from strength given the political realities facing Ford.

You could also see the congressional imprint in terms of the notion of having a central theme for the Ford administration. Most congressmen are not espousers of a political philosophy which coherently attempts to link several issues. Ford just wasn't a theme type of man. He wasn't someone who attempted to sell things by packaging them for the media. A Congressman tends to act on a bill based on his knowledge of who wants it and who is voting for it. Ford fit that approach exactly. He was issue reactive. He wasn't an initiator.

Ford also had an edge in dealing with the press. The job of most press secretaries is to explain what the politician means after he gives the speech. The media had very little trouble understanding what Ford meant. I think you would also find that Ford had less leaks in his administration than most recent presidents. He had been in Washington so long that he knew how to read a column like Evans and Novak and understand where the leaks came from. If he read the same column a week later and they were giving credit to some White House staff guy then that guy would be called in for a chat with the President for an explanation."

Q: Energy and the economy are two issues that became linked in the Ford administration. Can you describe who the key energy actors were and provide any kind of a backdrop to the debates over energy and economic policy?

A: "The key guy was Frank Zarb at the Federal Energy Administration. Initial decisions went through the Economic Policy Board because of the links between the oil price shocks and the inflation rate. Problems arose because Zarb was not in the White House. There wasn't the type of genius in balancing the White House staff with the cabinet that Haig had intended when the Economic Policy Board was created. Eventually they decided that decision making could be improved by creating the Energy Resources Council which was run by Rogers Morton and Zarb. It was modeled after the Economic Policy Board."