

Rare interview with Gerald Ford

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ABOARD AIR FORCE ONE — The day had been long, 17 hours from dawn over the south lawn of the White House to near midnight over the mesas and mountains of the Southwest, 2,800 miles by presidential jet, helicopter, car, bus, foot. Altogether a noisy, sweaty blur of unchic summity from the humid city hall of Magdalena, Mexico, to the sodden golf course of Tubac, Ariz.

In the darkened middle compartment of Air Force One, a Secret Service agent was whispering in the code of his trade, into an air-to-ground phone: "Red Baron advises that . . ."

Most people aboard, advisers, agents, speechwriters, secretaries and reporters,

were now asleep or wearily on the edge. One furthest from the edge was the big man in the forward compartment, who sat at a table and talked ebulliently in his shirtsleeves, collar open, tie loosened, bourbon and branch water in hand.

Over the back of his chair hung a blue Air Force One lounge jacket. The name tag said: "Gerald Ford." The name tag on the jacket that his predecessor wore said: "The President."

The 38th President of the United States, in office 10 see-saw weeks, talked of many things during an exclusive interview, his first, on Monday night between Tucson and Oklahoma City.

He talked about "tougher measures" if necessary, to reduce American dependence on Arab oil and said, "We could really put an embargo on foreign imports which would have a much more severe impact on availability and supply." He said this might be necessary if Congress or the public failed to respond to his present program.

He talked about the econo-

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my and said he would consider wage and price controls only in the event of a "very major international crisis."

He talked about being President and said, "I love it," and, "It's sort of got my adrenalin going again."

He talked about the pardon and said there was no "conceivable" way — "none whatsoever" — that Richard M. Nixon's chief of staff could have gotten the impression Ford might favor a pardon.

He talked of his "wobbly" marriage with Congress and said he thought it would improve after the election despite his hard campaigning.

He talked in poignant detail of his last days as vice president. He said he was so stunned to learn he'd soon be President he couldn't tell his wife immediately. Instead, he went through the charade of looking at furniture with her for the vice president's house, which he knew they'd never live in.

He talked of his last fateful meeting with then President Nixon, one man on the way down from the pinnacle, the other on the way up, and came to the edge of tears in the telling.

Close up, Gerald Rudolph Ford comes across as a big, warm man whom you want to believe; you'd feel somewhat shabby if you didn't. A friendly, happy man you'd want to play golf with, a man of no intellectual pretensions but apparently a willing learner, a town

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booster, a Rotarian out of Main Street if Sinclair Lewis had been benign, a man with a big, hearty laugh who likes to laugh, a man unabashedly at home with him-

self, his job and his countrymen, a genuine gregarious middle American in ways that Richard Nixon, in his imperial solitude, might espouse but could not practice.

He quickly addresses his visitors by their first names and, unlike the way it is with most politicians, you don't resent it. You quickly feel like an old friend without knowing why. The only problem in talking to him is to resist the temptation to call him Jerry.

We talked in the President's private compartment. Near his right hand, on a ledge under the windows, was a white phone which connects him with the cockpit and the plane's communications center, which connects him with the White House switchboard, which connects him with the world.

A year ago, after 25 years in the House, nine as Republican minority leader, Gerald Ford was getting a "little bored." He was planning to run for one more two-year term and then quit politics.

"Now," he said, "the old adrenalin is going. After a day like this, how can you help it? Weren't you impressed with the crowds in Mexico? Well, these things still thrill me. They really do."

He said he has found the burdens of the Oval Office tougher than his view from Capitol Hill had prepared him for. He now gets a "much more in-depth understanding of the complexities of the problems, particularly in international affairs. Also in domestic affairs. In some ways it's easier to make decisions. In other ways, it's more difficult.

"... When you're a legislative leader, you've got 180 or 190 people to meet with, talk with. When it gets down to the Oval Office, it's yes or

no. As Harry Truman said, 'the buck stops here.'"

The President interrupted himself.

"Is it cool in here?" he asked, groping for the thermostat.

"Well, I guess I can turn it myself. I'm learning these things."

"Sure you didn't push the eject button?"

The Commander in Chief roared. With most Presidents, a casual visitor does not try small jokes.

"In your first speech to Congress, you said you were not so concerned with a honeymoon as with a good marriage. What's the marital status now?"

"Except on the continuing resolution which contained an effort to cut aid to Turkey, I think we've had good relations. Oh, I vetoed a few bills (nine) but they knew why and I don't think they condemn me for it. But on the continuing resolution we had the paradoxical situation where the Democratic and Republican leadership were all with me. The troops on both sides of the aisle defected in large numbers.

"... The leaders come from relatively safe districts or they aren't up for election. Everybody else is and that makes a hell of a difference. The leaders wanted to be helpful because they thought I was right... I think the marriage will be better after the election."

"Even after your campaigning?"

"I haven't said anything unkind about any individual member."

"You've been clobbering the Democrats for spending too much."

"Yeah, but they know they're guilty," Gerald Ford said, laughing. "You proba-

bly ought not to put it that way. They know what the record is."

"A few questions about the economy. When does a recession become a recession?" (The President has said the country is not in a recession.)

"Well, here's something I think we have to raise. This is a matter I discussed with Alan Greenspan (chairman of the President's Council of Economic Advisers) the other day; Experts, economists and others, develop labels for categorizing something

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if one, two, three, four, five things happen.

"If those things happened in the traditional sense over the last 10 years, you could say this was a recession or this was something else. Most economists today agree we're in the most unique circumstances where, you've got double-digit inflation and yet a certain softness in the economy.

"And to use the same labels for unique circumstances is inaccurate. We either have to —well, we probably should get some new labels to meet new circumstances. Now, that's hard to develop in a political year . . ."

The President said some traditional criteria of a recession now exist in rising unemployment, a developing inventory backlog and a "cutback in consumer confidence." He continued:

"On the other hand . . . you've got extreme shortages; where they can't get materials, they can't get employes, they're begging for both raw materials and labor. So you've got this pulling and hauling that's too unique at this time to use the same labels. It's kind of out of style. And that's what we're trying to do with our program. We had people saying you can't go too hard, you can't be too soft . . ."

"What would it take in the economy and energy situation to bring on those tougher measures you hinted at?"

"In energy we could really put an embargo on foreign imports which would have a much more severe impact on availability and supply."

"What would it take to do that?"

"The failure of the Congress or the public to respond. Congress, if it failed to increase supplies, and the public's failure to conserve."

It seemed time to turn to the pardon. The President had told Congress how stunned he was Aug. 1 when Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr. told him about new and devastating Watergate evidence and that Ford was likely to become President very soon.

"What were your thoughts then? How did you sleep that night?"

"Let me just tell you something." Gerald Ford said over the roar of the jet motors. "Al came to see me late in the afternoon. I had a date with Betty to go to the newly designated home for vice presidents to spend an hour with her to make some final decisions to find furniture for us to live there.

"I went through this routine for an hour and she had all these plans where this piece of furniture was going here and that was going there. Then I went back to the office. Then I went home and while we were changing clothes for dinner I said, 'Betty, the probability of us living in that house is very remote.'

"And I told her what had happened two, three hours

before. I took a half hour to tell Betty that everything she had planned and worked for was probably out the window. Because it wasn't going to happen . . ."

On the three following days, Aug. 3-4-5, Vice President Ford continued publicly to express confidence in President Nixon's innocence although he knew better.

"You continued to say these things because you couldn't be in the position of seeking to effect his resignation?"

"For my own personal benefit," Gerald Ford said, nodding.

"Well, that was one priority. And yet here you were clearly about to become President of a very skepti-

cal nation. So another priority had to be your credibility. Was that a priority?"

"Well, I had to weigh those priorities. And I put things on the scales, and one outweighed the other. And it did affect my credibility."

"But if you will read some of those questions and an-

swers in those three days, I was less enthusiastic than I had been. . . . But how you could change dramatically without being depicted as a seeker of the office was the hard one."

"This question arises about your talks with General Haig Aug. 1 and 2: Did you consider him at all as any kind of an emissary from President Nixon or the Nixon White House?"

"No, I did not. Not at all. Periodically during that whole period but more spe-

cifically in the last several months, he (Haig) would come over to the office and keep me posted, bring me up to date. Admittedly, this was . . . totally startling and stunning. But I had that morning a meeting with him, which seemed rather routine, at about 8:30 or 9, Aug. 1.

"But then about noon or between 1 and 2 o'clock he called and asked if he could see me on an emergency basis. . . ."

"As the general told you of the options being considered at the White House — and I gather that's all he said — being considered at the White House. He didn't say the President was considering them?"

"No. He said the White House."

"As he went through the options and got to the question of a pardon of Mr. Nixon by Mr. Ford, did you have any reason to feel this was kind of a probe or feeler?"

"No. There was just the option that somebody over there — I don't know who —"

"Just another option?"

"Right."

"That somebody over there was considering? Whether that somebody was

Mr. Nixon you didn't know?"

Gerald Ford shook his head.

"When Haig brought up the option of a pardon of one President by the new President, did you make any other specific response other than to ask about the pardon powers of a President?"

"As I said in my testimony," President Ford said patiently, "after we'd gone through this five- or six-option situation, I said to General Haig, I wanted to talk the next morning . . . I said two things. 'Number one, I've got to talk to Mrs. Ford' — because he put it very bluntly to me. He said 'Are you ready to take over the presidency?'"

"I said, 'This is a total shock to us. Number two, I think I ought to talk to Jim St. Clair' (White House attorney) who had listened to or read the transcripts . . . of the critical June 23rd tape. . . ."

"Was there any kind of spontaneous, off-the-cuff reaction on your part in your meetings with Gen. Haig that could conceivably have left Haig with the impression that you might be favorable to a pardon?"

"None whatsoever."

"Can you say now, Mr. President, what your view is of your predecessor? How do you explain him in your

mind?"

There followed a long, seemingly painful pause. Then he said, softly, "I really don't think I ought to go into that."

"Can you tell me about that last long conversation you had with the President on Aug. 8?"

"He was the most controlled person. I wondered how anybody could be that controlled under those circumstances. And as I recollect the first statement, he said to me, 'Jerry, you'll do a good job.' What do I say then? I asked for any suggestions."

The 37th President and the 38th President then had a "very practical, very helpful discussion . . . about foreign policy, very high level." Nixon, extolling the abilities of his secretary of state, "strongly recommended" that Ford retain Henry Kissinger.

"Did you have much to say?"

"No . . . He thanked me profusely for defending him."

And now, at the end of our interview, came the longest of pauses. Gerald Ford silently shook his head side to side and seemed on the edge of tears. Finally, he said:

"He was strong . . . What the hell do you say in those circumstances?"



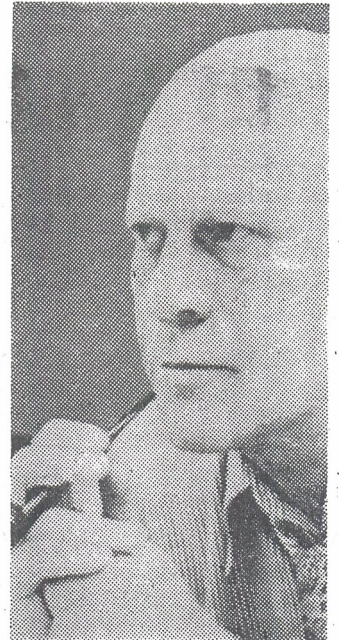
President Ford was getting "bored" in Congress . . .



. . . But now, "The adrenalin is going" again.



"When it gets to the Oval Office, it's yes or no"



Richard Nixon was "a most controlled person"