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A Dialogue With Ford

'It's Sort of Got My Adrenalin Going Again'

By Saul Pett

ABOARD AIR FORCE ONE, Oct. 26 (AP)—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 summitry 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 his predecessor were 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 economy, 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."

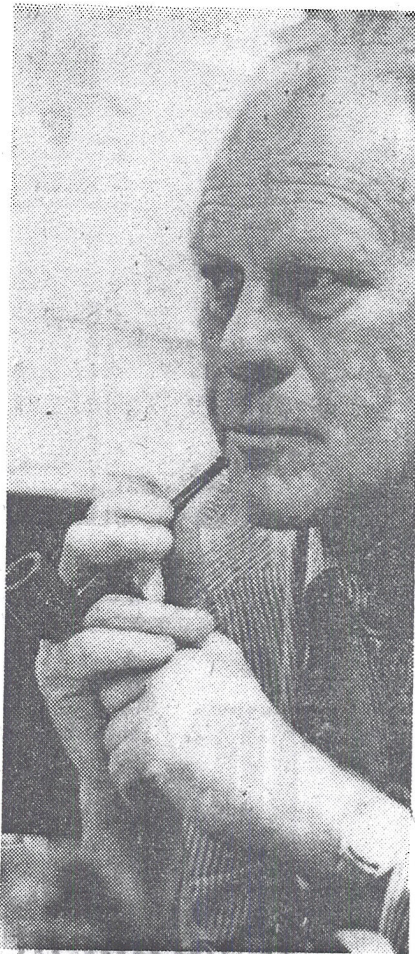
He talked about the national state of skepticism, and said he views it as a "self-destruct attitude" among Americans which "we've got to lick." Gerald Ford does not tend to blame Presidents for the national funk.

He talked about the pardon, and, answering detailed questions not asked by Congress, said there was no "conceivable" way—"none whatsoever"—that Richard M. Nixon's chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr., could have gotten the impression that Mr. 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

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On Mexico crowds: "These things still thrill me. They really do."

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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 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 himself, 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.

Also present were Donald Rumsfeld, White House staff director, and press secretary Ron Nessen.

The President was exhilarated. He said he loves his job because of its challenges.

"I feel great. Every day, from the point of view of focusing in and meeting the problems, I think we're doing better. That doesn't mean we've solved all the problems, but we're better organized to meet them."

A year ago, after 25 years in the House, nine as 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.'"

"Have you had to learn a lot in a hurry, Mr. President?"

"No." He said his 25 years in Congress had prepared him with more exposure to national problems than most people realize.

Despite his change of address, the President said he still sleeps well. "I don't stay awake worrying. I work 12, 14 hours a day. But when I finish I can sleep. When I get up, I get going." Gerald Ford is not a brooder.

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 lobbing the Democrats for spending too much."

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

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

"On the general question of whether the power of the presidency has grown too large and a balance with Congress must be restored..."

"I think the balance is pretty even right now."

A week after the cesarean section that resulted in the birth of the Ford presidency, 71 per cent of the people interviewed in the Gallup Poll thought the new man was doing a good job. Six weeks later 50 per cent thought so—the sharpest, fastest drop of any President in any Gallup Poll.

"I think it's understandable," said Gerald Ford, looking out the window into the night. "I made some pretty hard decisions that were controversial. The pardon, amnesty. I knew exactly that they would cause difficulty.

"But I don't think that they were fully understood at the time. Amnesty has turned out to be fair, and when better understood will be accepted. The pardon . . ."

He said the pardon uproar would have grown worse without his appearance before the House Judiciary Subcommittee. "With it, I hope it's better . . . There was no way of explaining it with the pressure that was on without doing that."

"On another level, Mr. President . . . With all that the country has been through in recent years—Vietnam, assassinations, riots, Watergate, inflation—the public seems to be skeptical about everything and everybody these days. How does one get them to believe anything any more? And what's your view of your own credibility so far?"

"The thing that does worry me is this . . . There is a self-destruct kind of feeling among Americans. I don't point the finger at the press or anyone. But you look at it. It sort of started when they were giving Jack Kennedy hell. You know, in the last days before the assassination . . ."

"They? The press?"

"Well, no. People in political life. I wouldn't say the press in that case, but there was high criticism of Kennedy. And then it began really in an uphill crescendo toward LBJ, and they drove him out of office, literally. Then, there was sort of a hiatus with Nixon. Then, because of Watergate, it just burst forward . . ."

"And that's what we've got to overcome. There is no reason why it should be. I don't blame the press. I don't blame partisanship. Somehow, we've gotten that attitude, that we're condemning ourselves so much. We're hurting ourselves when we should be doing just the opposite."

It is a thesis that suggests that the American malaise grew out of a vague masochism, not from the seeds of wrong policy or leaders who misled. It is a refrain reminiscent of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, who said that what the country needs is to talk less about what's wrong with America and more about what's right with America.

"As Vice President-designate you told Congress you wouldn't run for President in 1976. As President, you say you probably will run—"

"Probably."

"Probably. What changed your mind?"

He said the statement was made not just to get more clout with Congress than would normally accrue to a two-year lame duck.

"A two-year presidency," he said, "was not sufficient to do the things . . . that had to be done. We need continuity in foreign policy, continuity in domestic policy."

"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 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 employees, 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."

"Are you philosophically opposed to wage and price controls as something to be used only as a last resort? What would persuade you they were necessary?"

"Outside of an international crisis of major proportions—"

"You see no reason to have them?"

"It has to be a very major international crisis . . . I don't see anything domestically that would precipitate it."

"Mr. President, you show a great deal of faith in voluntary methods. I'm trying to recall another time when voluntary methods got us out of a real economic crisis. Did you have something in mind?"

"I think this is a unique situation.

There's no war. War seems to have been the catalyst in the past . . . This is so unique domestically that I think you can relate it to a wartime situation."

It seemed an appropriate time to turn to the pardon. The President had told Congress how stunned he was Aug. 1 when staff chief Haig told him about new and devastating Watergate evidence and that Mr. 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 engines. "Al came to see me late in the afternoon. I had a date with Betty to go out to the Massachusetts residence [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 confidence, 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 skeptical 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 answers [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 Gen. 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 specifically 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 Gen. 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 James D. St. Clair), who had listened to or read the transcripts . . . of the critical June 23d tape. . ."

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

"None whatsoever."

The President took a long sip of his drink. In the silence, he looked out the window.

"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."

Five additional paragraphs in same article carried by SF Examiner, filed W/gate, same date.