

POOL REPORTS #13

Sarasota Shrine Hall to Austin Complex, Tampa

February 29, 1976

Tampa, Florida

After shaking hands for about 15 minutes following his speech, the President drove to Sarasota Welfare Home. There were small knots of onlookers along the 10-minute drive, perhaps 200 in all. The welfare home is a 200-bed charity, non-profit nursing home for low-income residents of Sarasota. Its only federal funds come from Medicare and Medicaid payments. Because the pool was not allowed within the garden area, nothing can be reported about what the President said nor identification of those he met. There were about 50 elderly persons, most women, and about 10 in wheelchairs. The President murmured softly and was overheard saying "thank you" and "nice to meet you." Mrs. Ford several times took him to meet a patient with whom she had chatted. The President was flushed and visibly uncomfortable in the heat. As he stooped to shake hands with a wheelchair patient, a bead of perspiration formed on the tip of his nose. "We'd make a good couple," he said, as he posed for photos with a woman patient, his arm around her shoulder. At Sarasota airport, the President was introduced to Sister Mary Francesco, principal of Cardinal Moody High School. He gave her a pair of cufflinks which the school will auction during a fund-raising event this month. A group of boy scouts gave the President a petition signed by more than 500 persons who attended their recent scout fair. It was a petition reaffirming dedication to the Declaration of Independence.

At Tampa Airport, the President shook hands with 15 members of the 6th grade from the Academy of Holy Names. They were classmates of Mary Austin, daughter of Al Austin who owns the building complex where the President later spoke. He chatted with members of Rowdies, a professional soccer team from Tampa and received a soccer ball and Rowdies shirt. Only audible Presidential words: "I used to handle the oblong-shaped football pretty well!"

Demands for closer access at the welfare home were stonewalled by members of the advance party on hand. Your pool objected loudly.

Bill Broom

The President entered the courtyard of the Sarasota Welfare Home at 2:45, to scattered applause from the 60 elderly, low-income, and occasionally infirmed residents. The Home is a dormitory style arrangement with 200 beds, a third of which are for intensive care patients; the rest need only intermediate care. The home receives federal funds (Medicaid and Medicare) but no-one knew how much. The local Kiwanis Club also chips in.

On arrival the President called out loudly, "Thank you!" He and Betty made rounds of court, making small talk ("How are you? Nice to see you, etc.") and shaking hands. The press contingent was kept behind a fence about 25 yards from Ford's general area, (although he did at one point get within five feet) and was thus unable to hear if anything of substance was said. Official sound and camera were able to follow closely, along with a very fat man in an orange jumpsuit, whose presence was not explained.

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The President signed an old lady's Bible, told two wheelchair bound women not to get up, turned an elderly woman around "so the people from the press" could take pictures (it sounded to this reporter that there was undue stress placed on that word, which seemed to show in the President's face), wiped his face with his handkerchief (in contrast to the Shrine Hall working of the fence, when two or three women wiped the considerable sweat from his face with their fingers), and shook hands with the 15 or so nurses aides and R.N.'s who were the only blacks there (13 of the 15).

On his way out the President stopped, waved, and told the crowd they were a "wonderful group of people," and that he was "very grateful" for their being so "warm and friendly." He and Betty then shook a few more hands before leaving at 3:06, at which time they received stronger applause than that which greeted their arrival.

There were occasional clusters of people along the route, especially at the secured intersections. The motorcade kept a steady 40 (speed limit: 45), passing a grand total of 500-600 people, many of whom waved.

The fence working had been equally uneventful, but was also marked by conflict between press and security/advance forces. Again, none of the pool could hear what was said beyond a stray pleasantry, and the press photographers were kept in a rather handicapped position. As far as we could learn, the President did not keep his promise of stopping to taste the delicious barbeque.

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