

**The original documents are located in Box 1, folder “Buchen, Philip - Interview, 2/25/1994” of the Yanek Mieczkowski Research Interviews at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.**

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INTERVIEW WITH THE HONORABLE PHILIP BUCHEN  
FEBRUARY 25, 1994  
WASHINGTON, D.C.  
Yanek Mieczkowski

Mieczkowski: I thought I'd start out chronologically and ask about the summit conferences on inflation in September 1974. I've been reading lots of editorials and newspaper comments on them and a lot of them are highly critical of them, saying that they were just a waste of time, consensus building and all this. I was wondering what your opinion was.

Buchen: I didn't really get involved in them because it wasn't really in my area. The reports I got back from the field were quite good. But they were prejudiced, they were from people from inside of the Administration. But I know that that fight against inflation "laid an egg," so to speak, because the timing was so poor. And the newspapers were very critical. I think that it was too bad that Ford had to pick that issue and go at it in a very simplistic way.

Mieczkowski: When you say the timing was bad, do you mean in terms of Ford being caught right at the beginning of a recession?

Buchen: Right, yes.

Mieczkowski: Do you think that, or did you get a sense that, Ford benefitted from the summits in terms of his knowledge of what tactics to use in his fight against inflation?

Buchen: I doubt it. I assume he got a detailed reported, probably in the files someplace, summarizing the effect of the meetings.

Mieczkowski: What did you think of the WIN program?

Buchen: Well, that [chuckles] seems a little farfetched that that could have an effect, and the remedy signified by the slogan was to stop consumer consumption and it comes at a time when it became necessary to stimulate that consumption or curb the recessionary tendencies. So it was just an unfortunate incident.

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Mieczkowski: Did it cause much--I know a lot of advisors were vehemently opposed to it, and basically it was Bob Hartmann and



Paul Theis in the speechwriting team were some of its proponents. Did it cause much internal dissension in the Administration at all?

Buchen: I don't think so. I don't think that the economic team was well organized at that time. That was very early in the Administration, and the Seidman group that was written about by Roger Porter wasn't really functioning as it came to later. I think if the Seidman group had really been in mature operation at the time, that would have been better handled.

Mieczkowski: And probably or perhaps not even born?

Buchen: Maybe not even born. You might ask Bill Seidman about that when you talk to him.

Mieczkowski: I've read parts of his book too, and he seemed highly critical of WIN in his book. He wanted to put it down for the record. In terms of these economic advisors, I was wondering whose advice do you think Ford valued the most.

Buchen: I think Greenspan.

Mieczkowski: Really?

Buchen: Yes, he had a lot of respect for Greenspan.

Mieczkowski: Why do you think that was?

Buchen: Well, Greenspan is a charmer. He was very persuasive and very appealing. And a sound thinker. I think everybody respects his judgment.

Mieczkowski: I was wondering if you thought [it] was an embarrassment or humiliation to the Administration that Ford came out with this proposal that was essentially stillborn, that he didn't even get a chance to fight for it.

Buchen: Well, the country was really anticipating a lot from Ford at the time and they probably generally felt let down that he didn't take hold of them more rapidly.

Mieczkowski: A lot of the criticism of that speech in October of '74--the WIN speech--centered around Ford's not proposing more stern





measures like wage and price guidelines and things like that, and then relying so heavily on voluntarism. I was wondering why you felt Ford, first of all, felt so attracted to the idea of voluntarism, and secondly why he didn't come out with more stern measures.

Buchen: Well, all his life he's been concerned to minimize the role of government. He's been very consistent in that, and it would be quite contrary to him--to his whole philosophy--to have the government take an active part. And he was very much opposed to price controls and government mandates in the field of the economy. That was the respect in which he was most conservative. I think you just have to trace through his whole life as a congressman and you will see that.

Mieczkowski: In the fall of '74, as the recession started to get worse and unemployment started to rise, there was a lot of criticism that Ford wasn't willing to call it like it is and just admit that we're in a recession and call a spade a spade.

Buchen: Well, no President ever is. They don't want to contribute to the psychology of what's happening by lamenting it. I think they have to put the best interpretation, making the most of the favorable data and minimizing the unfavorable. That's just inherent in the job.

Mieczkowski: Was Greenspan or any of the other economic advisors urging him to stick with the anti-inflation policy and the surtax?

Buchen: Not that I know of, no.

Mieczkowski: Were you present at the planning meetings at Vail in Christmas of '74?

Buchen: No.

Mieczkowski: I was wondering why Ford decided to concentrate solely on anti-recession and energy in his State of the Union proposal, as opposed to any new programmatic initiatives.

Buchen: Well, those were the most critical, and he was not a great one for initiating a wide variety of programs. He limited his so-called "agenda" to what really concerned him, and to what he thought government had the opportunity to do something about. He was a minimalist as far as the government was concerned.



Mieczkowski: I read your essay in Kenneth Thompson's collection, 22 Intimate Portraits of the President, and there you said that one of your regrets in terms of the Administration, the overall picture, was that the Administration ended prematurely. And the Administration had things on the docket, was going to propose new initiatives, and I was wondering what some of the reasoning behind Ford's limited agenda was. Did he want to keep his legislative success rate higher by concentrating on just a few number of new initiatives, or was he afraid of divisive battles with Congress?

Buchen: No, he just didn't want any proposal that expanded the role of government. He was very much worried about the deficit financing that was beginning. The deficits were just beginning to rise, although they were modest by comparison with what happened later. And that's why he took to vetoing so many bills. No, it's just the nature of his outlook on the role of government in this country.

Mieczkowski: Do you think if he had had a second term he would have come out with--

Buchen: No, I think he wouldn't have launched something like you see now, where you've got lots of initiatives going. He probably would have been most active in reducing the role of government.

Mieczkowski: Coming back to the State of the Union address, and his anti-recession and energy proposals, they met with a lot of criticism, not only from the public and the press but from Congress, even on the night he proposed them there was very sparse applause. Did Ford anticipate that at all, the adverse reaction or the lukewarm reaction?

Buchen: Well, yes, he knew that the Democrats were in control and he knew what their approach to government was, and he didn't expect to get a lot of applause from that side of the aisle.

Mieczkowski: His energy proposals in particular met with a lot of resistance, like the oil import fee proposals and of course decontrol, and I was wondering why Ford was willing to propose proposals that would generate so much resistance, why he was willing to go out on a limb and propose programs that he may have known from the start-



Buchen: Because the alternatives weren't consistent with his philosophy. He had to propose what he believed in. There was no point in proposing something and getting a favorable reaction if the reaction wasn't what he wanted.

Mieczkowski: I read one analysis behind Ford's thinking behind this that said Ford was very strongly entrenched in the idea of separation of powers: One reason he was willing to propose programs that stood little chance of passage was that he firmly believed that a President should go ahead and propose initiatives regardless of congressional reaction, and if Congress didn't like them it was incumbent upon them to propose alternative programs. Is that consistent with Ford's thinking?

Buchen: Oh, yes. That would be quite typical of Ford's outlook, even though he was a man of Congress.

Mieczkowski: Another analysis I read, having to do with Ford's proposed \$16 billion tax cut, said that Ford signalled too early that he was willing to compromise on the \$16 billion figure, telegraphing flexibility just a matter of days after the State of the Union address. This analysis maintains that by doing so, Ford in effect gave Congress the go-ahead to meddle with his \$16 billion figure. I was wondering if you thought Ford gave up his hand too early?

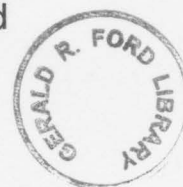
Buchen: Well, it's hard to fault him in his relations with Congress. He knew the Congress so well. And there was nothing magical about his figure. All he thought was that there should have been a substantial cut and that he had to pick out some <sup>figure</sup> fire. It was no magic to stick by, it wasn't a matter of principle. And so he was perfectly willing to be flexible.

Mieczkowski: Were you ever worried that Ford was too disposed to compromise?

Buchen: No.

Mieczkowski: Do you think Ford's tendency toward compromise was a congressionally acquired trait or a recognition of the power realities?

Buchen: It was congressionally acquired. As a minority leader, he had to keep a rather disparate set of Republicans together. He had





the conservative and liberal Republicans to satisfy. And I'm sure in developing positions that the minority party was to stick by, he had to accommodate conflicting interests and had to compromise. That's from his experience in Congress.

Mieczkowski: Do you think it might have been a recognition of the power realities of his situation, as an unelected President facing a heavily Democratic Congress?

Buchen: No, I don't think it was the fact he was unelected--it was the fact he was a Republican facing a Democratic Congress.

Mieczkowski: Did Ford ever express to you any kind of frustration with his former colleagues, that they weren't acting fast enough, or they were proposing, for instance, a tax cut well beyond his original figure, or they were so resistant to his energy program in slowing it down?

Buchen: Well, only in the sense that he showed it by vetoing so many bills, and I think he was a little mystified that so many of his friends were so cordial and accommodating to him personally, and yet they were completely heedless of him in terms of what kind of legislation they delivered.

Mieczkowski: I actually had a question about that, whether you thought that Ford was able to parley his really warm and good personal relations into legislative successes.

Buchen: No, I doubt it. Maybe what he would have gotten would have been even worse if not for that good relationship.

Mieczkowski: Why do you think that was? Why do you think he was unsuccessful in translating that personal popularity?

Buchen: Well, difference of philosophy. That's where the battle was fought ever since the 1930s.

Mieczkowski: I read one analysis that said that Ford was getting the worst of both worlds, politically. His rhetoric and policy proposals were pretty conservative, which angered liberal Democrats, and he would end up compromising, which angered conservative Republicans.





Buchen: I think there's no doubt that he was not the favorite of the conservative element of the party or they wouldn't have put up Ronald Reagan as competition.

Mieczkowski: Do you think that aspect of Ford's political behavior impeded his developing a national political following?

Buchen: No, it's just that he lost the most coherent element of the Republican Party, which is the conservative bloc. He won in the sense that he kept Reagan from getting the nomination.

Mieczkowski: Do you recall the Revenue Adjustment Act at the end of 1975, for matching \$28 billion budget and spending cuts and a \$395 billion cap on the budget?

Buchen: Well, I remember he spoke about demanding an expenditure, dollar-for-dollar with any tax increase.

Mieczkowski: Was Ford really satisfied with the compromise language that was written into it?

Buchen: I doubt it. I doubt it. But he couldn't be totally negative.

Mieczkowski: I had a question about Ford's "vision." Do you think he was able to articulate effectively or clearly where he wanted to take the country?

Buchen: Well, he's not a visionary, by any means. In terms of his own powers of communication, he was not an eloquent man. But I think he had some strong convictions on how the country of course should take part in affairs of the world. His internationalism was very profound and far-reaching. And I think his contribution in the signing of the Helsinki Accords indicated a visionary idea, that people didn't appreciate at the time but I think that since, his idea was sowing the seeds for the decline of the Soviet Empire.

Mieczkowski: Do you personally get a sense for where Ford wanted to take the country? Or what Ford wanted to do in a second term?

Buchen: Internationally, yes. But I think he was for the future, he was more determined to get the country into healthy economic conditions, with a minimum of government involvement. But I don't think he sense that he had to "remake" the country in any sense. I



think he found the basic ingredients were there and didn't have to be changed.

Mieczkowski: If you had to characterize Ford's economic policy, how would you describe it? Was he a laissez-faire purist, or a laissez-fairist who was willing to make compromises, or slightly adulterated?

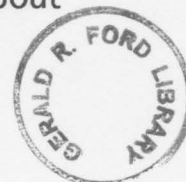
Buchen: Well, he certainly wasn't a laissez-faire purist, but he was very conservative in ways that some of his successors were not. Namely, fiscally very conservative. Namely, the idea of running these very large deficits that were later accepted by the conservatives were an anathema to him. But I think that is the fallacy of the right-wing conservatives.

Mieczkowski: Everything I've seen and read of Ford shows, really, a very solid understanding of, and interest in, economics and the budget. Yet Ford often wasn't able to convey that. Ford had some real image problems, not only in terms of not appearing as a cerebral thinker in economics and other matters, and then his supposed susceptibility to gaffes, and his image as a supposedly compassionless person who didn't sympathize with or understand the problems of unemployment, or things like that. Why do you think these image problems dogged Ford so much?

Buchen: Just because he wasn't a particularly articulate person. And in certain settings, where he had to hold news conferences about the new budget, he did superbly in describing the budget, and what his thinking was and what went into it.

Mieczkowski: One thing that's been mentioned to me by a number of people was Ford's ability to generate very vigorous and broad-ranging discussions. Barber Conable said that this was one thing that impressed him about Jerry Ford much more so than other Presidents.

Buchen: He was very careful to let people speak their minds, up to a point. Later White Houses--there were sometimes undirected staff work done that was wasted and caused problems, where Ford always set some parameters as to what would be acceptable. But within very broad parameters he was quite ready to hear discussions. He preferred the verbal contest in that respect, over just getting reading material to handle. And he was remarkably tolerant about lengthy discussions.



Mieczkowski: Do you think this contributed to his goal of having an open, candid presidency, and having open, candid discussion?

Buchen: Yes, probably.

Mieczkowski: One thing I've read about both in Bob Hartmann's memoirs, and then a chapter in Ron Nessen's memoirs, and in other assorted places, is the internal dissension and backbiting within the Administration, the friction between Nixon holdovers and Ford loyalists. Was it as bad as, for instance, Bob Hartmann said?

Buchen: Well, Bob's is somewhat an exaggerated point of view. I think that one of Ford's problems was certainly that he didn't move in and replace people fast enough. We would've had a smoother working team early on, earlier, if there hadn't been holdovers kept around the White House.

Mieczkowski: Were any individuals in particular a source of contention in and around the White House?

Buchen: Haig was the number one, because he wanted to just keep running the government. But after his departure, and that came fairly early, actually, I don't think there were any open clashes. But there were too many people around that were loyal to the programs of Nixon and weren't about to depart without trying to carry out some of their ideas that really weren't in Ford's interest.

Mieczkowski: Throughout Ford's Administration, or just early on?

Buchen: Oh no, no. Early on. He was very sympathetic to the people who weren't involved in Watergate. He felt that an abrupt termination would leave them suffering, with an implication that a departure came early because of some misdoing, rather than the fact that he had just wanted people of his own there. If he'd asked for written resignations from the beginning, that might have been easier.

Mieczkowski: I had a few more general questions. What would you say was the most important factor, or some of the most important factors, in Ford's losing the election? Was it the performance of the economy at that moment in the fall of '76, or the lingering of the pardon issue, or the disaffection of conservatives?





Buchen: Well, I think, the major one was the fact that Ronald Reagan sat on his hands and didn't work as he promised. Because if he had been active in support of Ford, he could've carried Texas for him, and that could've put him over. So I think it was largely the betrayal of the party by the conservative element.

Mieczkowski: Do you think that Reagan was able to capitalize on the legacy that Ford left, or the foundation that Ford left?

Buchen: My idea was that he sensed that if Ford had been elected, he never could have become a candidate [in 1980], that his candidacy depended upon running against a Democrat, and a Democrat who didn't do a very good job, and that if Ford had continued we wouldn't have had either Carter or Reagan ever in the White House.

Mieczkowski: So you don't think for instance, the lingering of the pardon issue or the unemployment--

Buchen: No, that wasn't decisive. They may have lost him some independent votes, but that certainly didn't lose him the conservatives. The Republicans, many of them, were still loyal to Nixon.

Mieczkowski: What do you think the legacy of the Ford Administration is?

Buchen: Well, I think the legacy has to be understood in terms of the troubles that the country was in as a result of Watergate. And Nixon treated his colleagues in government and the public in complete disdain in Watergate. And how unsettled the country really was, and how ineffective government had become while Nixon was trying to fight impeachment. And given that condition, Ford's great contribution was to restore the faith of the American people in their government and equally important, to maintain the leadership and importance of this country in international affairs.

Mieczkowski: What do you think Ford's greatest weakness as President was?

Buchen: Well, maybe weakness was lack of showmanship, let's put it that way. His leadership was not something that came easily to him.





He wasn't out in front on a lot of things that people expected him to get out in front on. Much more a spokesman for what he believed in.

Mieczkowski: When you say out in front, do you mean in terms for projecting a vision, or just being more articulate?

Buchen: Yes, more articulate. There wasn't even a slogan, except for Whip Inflation Now. If he could've had a few more slogans that people could've responded to...

Mieczkowski: What are you most proud of in terms of the Ford Administration in general, or your contribution to it? Or do you have a greatest regret about it?

Buchen: I think we did something that was much needed at the time--was really clean up the government. There were so many evil outcomes of the tactics used by the Nixon Administration influencing government, turning the IRS onto people, using lots of unacceptable tactics. And we really ran a tight ship in terms of the behavior of the Ford appointees in respect to the rest of government, and in respect to the rest of their role in public.

Mieczkowski: Do you have a greatest regret?

Buchen: The defeat. And partly that was because the campaign got off to such a weak start. He didn't have a strong campaign staff to start with.

Mieczkowski: Bo Calloway?

Buchen: Bo Calloway was a disaster. And Rogers Morton stepped in, poor Roger was months away from dying. Ford just got off to a backward. Carter got off to a tremendous lead. It was quite remarkable that he did so much to cut back so it was a virtual tie at the time.

